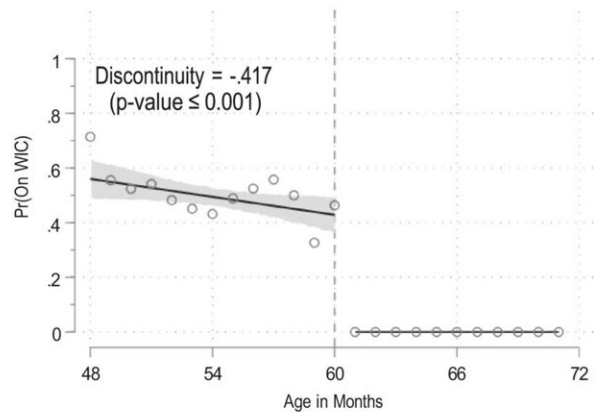
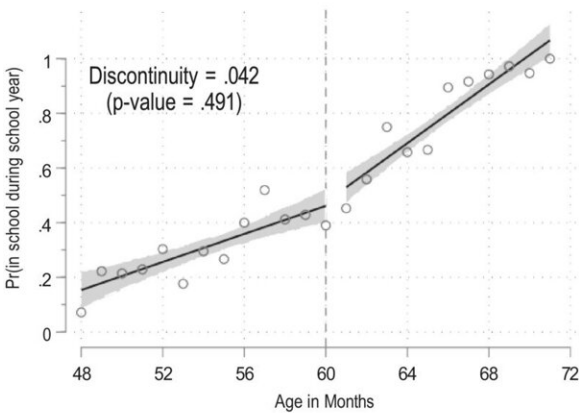


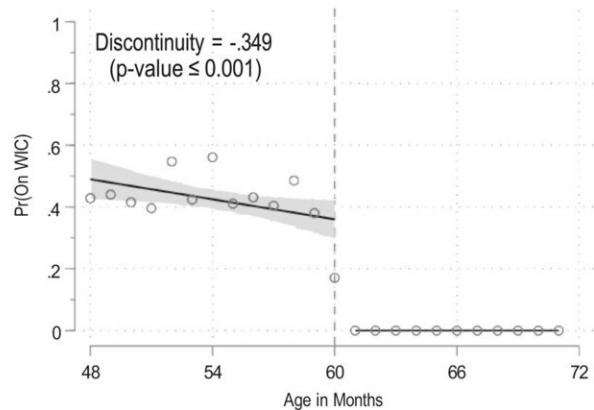
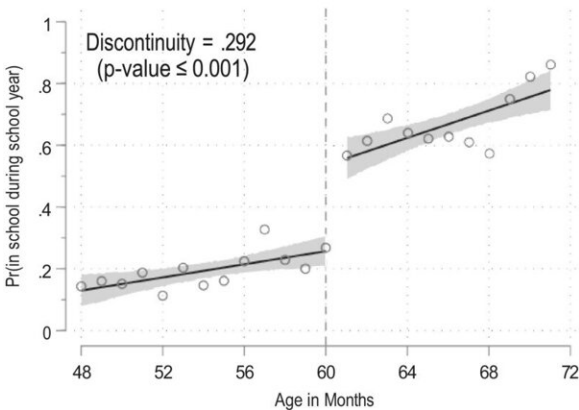
Study shows kids who lose access to WIC lose nutrition

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(I) Nov-Apr Sample



(II) May-Oct Sample



Discontinuities in the probabilities of WIC participation and school attendance during the school year by age in months. The probability of school attendance during the school year is based on the affirmative response to the NHANES question: “During the school year, does [child] attend a kindergarten, grade school, junior or high school?” asked of children 4 years and older. The left

column shows the probability of school attendance is not continuous around age 5 for the May–Oct sample. The right column shows, in both Nov–Apr and May–Oct samples, the probability of WIC participation among the eligible declines at age 61 months. Credit: *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* (2023). DOI: 10.1111/ajae.12410

A one-year gap in access to WIC can have a significantly negative effect on the quality of some 5-year-olds' diets.

A new study from the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences found that when children age out of WIC after their fifth birthday, many families are left without [food](#) assistance support for up to a year. Until the child enters kindergarten, the nutritional quality of their diet takes about a 20% hit, according to the study.

"We were surprised to find that there was this large of a reduction in nutritional quality," said Travis Smith, author and associate professor of agricultural and applied economics. "But our results show that this program really does work to increase the quality of children's diets. Now we know that when parents lose access to WIC, they make sure their kid can eat the same amount of food, but they switch to a lower quality of food."

WIC—the U.S. Department of Agriculture's special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants and children—is geared toward nutritional foods such as whole grain breads, 100% juice, cereal and other supplemental foods. Pregnant and postpartum women, infants and children under 5 years old qualify.

"The focus of food assistance programs in the United States has shifted

from simply providing calories to providing higher-quality calories. Both components are still part of what we would consider the big umbrella of food security," Smith said. "Without WIC, you see a switch from free whole grains to buying refined grains, or from fresh fruits and vegetables to canned, where you might have syrups or additives."

The study utilized data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, a decades-long survey that is conducted by medical professionals. Parents are asked to recall what their child has eaten over the course of 24 hours, and that information is translated to a dietary score—the Healthy Eating Index—accounting for quantity and quality of food.

"As you get closer to each component's recommendation—say, meeting the daily requirement for fruits or vegetables—your score gets higher and higher," Smith said. "We saw kids whose Healthy Eating Index score fell by 10 points, which equates to a 20% reduction."

This is a significant dip, especially at such a young age, Smith said. At a young age, it is important for kids to form healthy eating habits and to have access to foods that might combat any picky eating. This can be referred to as "nutritional knowledge." Essentially, it takes time and effort to get kids to enjoy some healthy foods, such as broccoli, but an aversion to foods can arise very quickly.

"If we care about helping kids eat better, and we have programs that support that goal, but we also have an arbitrary rule where kids get kicked off WIC and have no food assistance for several months or a year, we could be stepping back," Smith said. "Then all this progress you make with an individual kid could be wiped away in a relatively short time."

A bill enabling states to enact a "kindergarten-roll-off" policy for WIC

was proposed in the House and Senate in 2021. In 2022, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service also proposed a rule change to WIC, which would increase the cash-value of the produce voucher and account for additional personal and cultural food preferences.

Using the program costs specified in those proposals, Smith and his co-author calculated the cost of expanding WIC past the age of 5 and until kids are enrolled in elementary school.

WIC cost \$5.7 billion total in [fiscal year](#) 2022, according to the USDA, and a kindergarten-roll-off would increase costs by an average of \$115 million per year over the next five years under current rules—about 2 percent of program costs. With an increased produce voucher, that would go up to an average of \$145 million per year over the next five years—about 2.25% of program costs.

Smith hopes this study shines a light on the [potential benefits](#), and relative affordability, of providing WIC to children for a little longer.

"It turns out that the lowest cost participants in WIC are the 4-year-olds; the most expensive are newborns because of the infant formula," Smith said. "And even then, about 40% of program costs come through administrative costs, having the agency run and paying employees. So if you think about that additional cost, in terms of government spending, it's a drop in the bucket."

More information: Travis A. Smith et al, Aging out of WIC and child nutrition: Evidence from a regression discontinuity design, *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/ajae.12410](https://doi.org/10.1111/ajae.12410)

Provided by University of Georgia

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