

Healthier foods available in neighborhoods

August 21 2014, by Naomi King Englar



Feeding their families healthily is a priority for many women in New Orleans. According to the Prevention Research Center, studies show federal policies to increase healthy food access for WIC participants also has made healthier foods available to other families. Credit: Mary Amelia Women's Center at Tulane University.

Changes to the federal food assistance program for low-income women and their children improved the availability of healthy foods at small and medium-size stores in New Orleans, according to research from the Prevention Research Center at Tulane University.

In 2009, the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program for the first time began offering participants fruits, vegetables, low-fat milk and whole grain options to purchase with WIC benefits. The WIC program operates in 50,000 vendors nationwide with more than 9 million participants.

"The policy to change the WIC food package was the first major change in a generation and essential to keep the program aligned with current nutritional guidelines," says Diego Rose, study author and head of the nutrition concentration at the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

Researchers examined foods sold in stores in the WIC program, as well as non-WIC stores. Findings published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* and *Public Health Nutrition* show increased availability of the new healthy foods after the WIC changes were made.

Researchers documented foods in 93 small stores in 2009 and 2010, before and after the change, because those stores are least likely to carry healthy foods. The number of WIC small stores carrying whole wheat bread and brown rice increased dramatically from 4 percent for both in 2009 to 70 percent and 93 percent, respectively, in 2010.

The odds of finding improved availability of low-fat milk from 2009 to 2010 were five times greater in WIC stores than non-WIC stores. There were also changes in fruit and vegetable availability. WIC stores added about one new variety of fruit; they also showed a small increase in shelf space for vegetables, while non-WIC stores saw a decline.

These papers document the effectiveness of policies to increase [healthy food](#) access for WIC participants as well as other residents in their neighborhoods, says Keelia O'Malley, study author and assistant director of the Prevention Research Center.

More information: Donald Rose, Keelia O'Malley, Lauren Futrell Dunaway, J. Nicholas Bodor, "The Influence of the WIC Food Package Changes on the Retail Food Environment in New Orleans," *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 46, Issue 3, Supplement, May–June 2014, Pages S38-S44, ISSN 1499-4046, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2014.01.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2014.01.008).

"Use of a new availability index to evaluate the effect of policy changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) on the food environment in New Orleans." Keelia O'Malley, et al. *Public Health Nutrition* / FirstView Article pp 1-8© The Authors 2014 DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1368980014000524](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980014000524)

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