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Introduction

The Office of Budget and Program Analysis (OBPA) oversees and facilitates the performance and strategic management activities of the Department, including development of the USDA Strategic Plan, Agency Priority Goals, the deliverables required under the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act), and Enterprise Risk Management. OBPA is led by the USDA Chief Evaluation Officer. OBPA also chairs the USDA Performance, Evaluation, and Evidence Committee and the Enterprise Risk Management Committee, both of which are comprised of representation from Mission Areas and Departmental Administration, as well as key partners, including the Chief Data Officer and the Statistical Official. These individuals bring diverse perspectives and broad technical expertise to inform OBPA's initiatives and facilitate buy-in among stakeholders across the Department. Partnership with the Chief Data Officer and Statistical Official provides valued insights and advisement on data access, data quality, and statistical methods.

Under the Evidence Act, USDA is required to produce a Learning Agenda, which describes the plans for identifying and addressing priority questions related to the programs, policies, and regulations of the Department. In accordance with Office of Management and Budget (OMB) [Memorandum M-19-23](#), the Learning Agenda includes:

- Priority questions to be answered;
- Activities that the Department will engage in to address priority questions;
- The timing of learning activities;
- Potential data, tools, methods, and analytic approaches to be used to answer priority questions; and
- Anticipated Department-specific challenges and proposed solutions to developing evidence to support leadership priorities.

The Department chose to focus on priority questions related to Rural Development, Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), and Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC). This approach was taken due to the high level of evidence-building maturity of the Agencies in this space and the degree of stakeholder engagement that has already been undertaken to develop the priority questions.

Stakeholder Engagement

Throughout FY 2021, OBPA conducted several stakeholder engagement activities to inform the development of the Learning Agenda. USDA's internal stakeholders were organized into the following standard hierarchy to ensure that all levels were appropriately engaged and to provide clarity around roles and responsibilities:

- *Strategic Direction*: Responsible for setting the Department's strategic direction (Secretary, Deputy Secretary, and Sub-Cabinet officials);
- *Departmental Operations*: Responsible for supporting strategic implementation efforts in alignment with the Department's strategic goals and objectives (staff offices such as OBPA, Human Resources, Office of the Chief Information Officer, etc.); and

- **Mission Delivery and Performance:** Responsible for aligning Agency strategic directions and resources with the Department-wide strategic directions and for delivering statutorily required missions, functions, programs, projects, etc. (all USDA Mission Areas and Agencies).

OBPA convened the Evidence Act Working Group (EAWG) to collaborate on the Learning Agenda and other Evidence Act deliverables. The EAWG was a cross-functional team that included representation from across USDA Mission Areas and Agencies and serves as the conduit between Mission Area and Agency leadership and OBPA. EAWG members were expected to inform their Mission Area and Agency leadership of the potential future impact on resources to ensure that necessary funding requests related to evidence building aligned to the priority questions were reflected in the FY 2023 budget. OBPA regularly engaged with the EAWG through a series of interactive workshops to appropriately scope the Learning Agenda and solicit feedback on draft materials.

EAWG members acted as the subject matter experts representing their Mission Areas and Agencies to ensure both internal and external stakeholders learning priorities and areas of concerns were represented in the development of the USDA Learning Agenda. Stakeholder feedback was leveraged as research and assisted in the development final questions. Throughout the development of priority questions, external stakeholder feedback was collected on administrative priorities captured through various listening sessions, requests for information, and surveys.



Rural Development

The following priority questions were developed by the Rural Development Mission Area to guide the evidence activities needed to support mission delivery. These questions align to the *Expand Opportunities for Economic Development and Improve Quality of Life in Rural and Tribal Communities* in the USDA FY 2022 – 2026 Strategic Plan and are intended to address key learning gaps and highlight critical evidence needs for Rural Development.

Rural Development is committed to improving the economy and quality of life in all of rural America through financial assistance programs that support and advance inclusive prosperity. The unique mission, programs, and set of economic and development tools of Rural Development help finance the following:

- Construction of critical community facilities that include schools, libraries, hospitals, and public safety buildings;
- Modernization and expansion of electricity and broadband connectivity;
- Distance learning and telemedicine equipment that connects underserved communities with educational opportunities and health professionals; and
- Development of clean, renewable energy and biobased manufacturing.

Rural Development promotes economic development by providing loans to businesses through banks and community-managed lending pools, while also providing communities with opportunities to participate in community empowerment programs. In addition, Rural Development provides capacity building to help underserved communities become thriving communities and is well-positioned to be a driving force for racial and spatial equity, reaching underserved communities and ensuring that rural communities have the same tools, resources, and access as urban communities. When rural Americans share the same level of infrastructure services as the country's urban areas, rural communities can make even greater economic contributions with healthy businesses and families.

These priority questions were the result of extensive internal stakeholder engagement across Rural Development, including a webinar on developing a Learning Agenda and multiple surveys across the organization. The Department plans to prioritize external stakeholder engagement when making annual updates to the Learning Agenda.

Rural Development Priority Question #1

Priority Question

What are the short- and long-term economic and social impacts of Rural Development programs, including indirect and spillover effects?

Activities to Address the Question and Timing

USDA promotes rural prosperity and economic development by financing investments in rural utilities, housing, and businesses. This question aids the Department in understanding the benefits of its programs to rural communities both economically and socially and ensuring that finite resources available to invest in rural economic development are being utilized for the greatest impact. Evidence collected under this priority question falls mainly under program evaluation. In-depth evaluations will utilize rigorous quasi-experimental methods, including matching, matching with regression, difference-in-difference analysis, synthetic matching, instrumental variable analysis, and regression discontinuity. These evaluations will also use the input-output analysis toolkit to estimate *ex ante* direct and indirect impacts of Rural Development investments on area output and employment. In this framework, the project analysts will use detailed data as inputs to simulation models to obtain estimates on employment and output for a specific regional economy.

1. *Evaluation of USDA broadband programs:* This evaluation will study the impacts of the Rural Development broadband programs on broadband availability and use, as well as on economic (e.g., property values, household income, employment) and social (e.g., population growth, healthcare access and availability, and telemedicine) outcomes. The impacts of the [Broadband Initiatives Program](#) on property values are currently being investigated, and the impact evaluation of the same program on other outcomes will begin in FY 2022 and continue through FY 2023. The evaluation measuring the impacts of the [Broadband Loan Program](#) on property values will begin in FY 2022, and the evaluation of impacts of the same program on other outcomes are expected to begin in FY 2023. The evaluation of the impact of the [Community Connect Program](#) on school quality will begin in FY 2023.
2. *Evaluation of USDA Water and Environment Program:* This evaluation will examine the impacts of the Rural Development [Water and Environment Program](#) on changes in economic, demographic, and social outcomes in program recipient communities. The study of the impacts on income growth has begun and is expected to end within FY 2022. The study of impacts on population migration patterns will begin in FY 2022 and is expected to be finalized in FY 2023. Studies on the impacts on social outcomes will begin in FY 2023.
3. *Evaluation of USDA Community Facilities Program:* This evaluation will examine the impacts of the Rural Development Community Facilities Program on rural health and education outcomes. The evaluation of impacts of community facilities on rural hospital closure has begun and is expected to end in FY 2022. Studies on the impacts on education outcomes will begin in FY 2023.

4. *Evaluation of Rural Development housing programs:* These evaluations will examine the impacts of Rural Development housing programs on measures of housing affordability and stability in recipient communities and of recipient home values. This work is expected to begin in FY 2022 and will continue through FY 2023 and beyond.
5. *Overall impacts of Rural Development programs on socioeconomic outcomes:* These evaluations will examine the overall impacts of Rural Development programs on selected socioeconomic outcomes (to be determined). This work will be completed in FY 2022 and generate additional projects that will be pursued in upcoming years.

Potential Data, Tools, Methods, or Analytical Approaches

Program administrative data from Rural Development will be used in combination with other external data available from the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, USDA Economic Research Service, and Federal Communications Commission. In addition, Rural Development will utilize proprietary data sets, such as the National Establishment Time Series and Zillow's Assessor and Real Estate Database. These various datasets will be combined with program service area information, such as service area boundaries available from program shapefiles, census tracts, and county and sub-county Federal Information Processing Standard codes. For the input-output analysis, data from published engineering cost and economic impact studies will be used along with detailed program data.

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

See *Common Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Across Rural Development Priority Questions* below for all other challenges and mitigation strategies.

Rural Development Priority Question #2

Priority Question

How effective are existing Rural Development initiatives (e.g., eliminating unnecessary paperwork, improving stakeholder outreach, providing technical assistance to applicants, etc.) in improving equitable program access to historically disadvantaged and underserved communities?

Activities to Address the Question and Timing

For USDA to fully promote rural prosperity, it must reach communities of need with its technical assistance, grants, and loan programs. USDA must employ place-based approaches to identify what works in these communities and what their capacity is to receive investments. The type of evidence gathered under this question can be categorized largely as program performance measurement and foundational fact-finding. To answer the question, analysts will use descriptive data analysis, regression analysis, geospatial analysis, qualitative analysis, survey analysis, focus groups, and data visualization platforms, such as Tableau dashboards, mapping in geographic information systems, and infographics.

1. **Conduct equity assessments** to determine the extent to which equity exists in the incidence and distribution of Rural Development programs (e.g., Equity Action Plan, Equity Program Assessments, and Equity Key Performance Indicator).
2. **Study the distribution of RD programs** to high-poverty/persistent poverty, high-distressed, high-outmigration, and socially vulnerable rural areas.
3. **Conduct an analysis** of the demand for Rural Development programs and workforce need assessments for the distribution of RD programs.
4. **Identify and assess new and innovative approaches** to outreach and technical assistance to underserved communities (initiatives are currently being developed that will be rolled out in FY 2022).
5. **Improve stakeholder engagement** to gather feedback on current initiatives and determine opportunities for refinement or development of new strategies.

Potential Data, Tools, Methods, or Analytical Approaches

Administrative RD data will be used in combination with other external data available from the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic Innovation Group Distressed Communities Index, Centers for Disease Control Social Vulnerability Index, Economic Research Service, and Federal Communications Commission. New indices and frameworks to inform this work and analysis include:

- *Re-Envisioning Rural America – Rural Community Typologies and Capacity Assessment*: Rural communities have diverse assets, capacities, and needs. Understanding various social and economic trends in rural communities can provide critical information on their capacities to absorb public- and private-sector investments, and where institution building may need to precede larger-scale investments. Policymakers and practitioners

can leverage this information to better strategize the best approaches for maximizing rural communities' existing assets. The [Rural Community Typologies and Capacity Assessment](#) will use the Community Capitals Framework (natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built) to create a typology of rural communities. Along with this typology, Rural Development will identify existing institutional and organizational capacities across all Community Capitals. This project is being conducted in collaboration with the Urban Institute and Federal Reserve Board of Governors and is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

- *Urban Institute's Spatial Equity Data Tool:* The [Spatial Equity Data Tool](#) aims to answer the question “How can communities ensure that resources are equitably distributed to all residents?” It uses data from the five-year (2014 through 2018) American Community Survey to enable policymakers and decision makers to assess spatial and demographic disparities in their data. The tool allows users to upload their own data and geocodes the dataset to a U.S. city to compare the distribution of the uploaded data with the distribution of baseline variables from the American Community Survey.
- *Aspen Institute - THRIVE RURAL Theory of Change Working Group:* [THRIVE RURAL](#) is an effort of the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group in partnership with the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute and with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. This working group is focused on creating a theory of change to answer the question “What will it take to create dynamic sustainable rural communities where all people can realize their full potential?” It aims to create a shared vision and understanding about what it will take for communities and Tribal Nations across the rural United States to become healthy places for everyone.

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

See *Common Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Across Rural Development Priority Questions* below for all other challenges and mitigation strategies.

Rural Development Priority Question #3

Priority Question

How can Rural Development more effectively partner and leverage its resources to increase investments in rural communities from other government entities, the private sector, and philanthropies?

Activities to Address the Question and Timing

This priority question will help facilitate more investments in rural America through better understanding of how to best facilitate partnerships with the public, private, and philanthropic sectors. The type of evidence gathered under this question can be categorized generally as performance measurement and foundational fact-finding. To answer the question, analysts will use descriptive data analysis, regression analysis, geospatial analysis, qualitative analysis, survey analysis, focus groups, and data visualization platforms, such as Tableau dashboards, mapping in geographic information systems, and infographics.

- *Develop performance indicators:* Rural Development will develop performance indicators to measure the extent to which USDA leverages funds, stimulates public-private partnerships, and engages in collaboration to build rural infrastructure, including broadband, community facilities, safe and affordable housing, and health services and facilities.
- *Create the Rural Workforce Innovation Network:* This is a forum for public and private partners to help increase access to workforce opportunities across rural America. This network provides foundational information for Rural Development to consider in serving rural businesses and improving program delivery.
- *Implement the Rural Partners Network:* The Rural Partners Network creates a new collaboration of federal agencies to enhance access to federal resources. These agencies are dedicating specific staff to serve as key points of contact for rural communities, providing more focus on rural strategies, and enabling greater visibility and attention to rural issues. The Rural Partners Network will also put federal staff on the ground to support specific, economically challenged rural communities. Known as Community Liaisons, these federal employees will provide local leaders and residents with the technical expertise needed to navigate federal programs that turn local vision into actionable projects. They will broker relationships and help identify other partnerships and resources needed to get the job done. As this work progresses, the lessons learned will inform future federal rural policy development and investment strategies and tools.
- *Conduct analyses of philanthropic investments made in rural America:* One such potential analysis includes continuing and building off a [study](#) conducted in 2015 by the Economic Research Service on foundation grants to rural areas. This is a study update utilizing current data from philanthropy 990 forms, which are required by the Internal Revenue Service annually. The findings will be used to inform Rural Development’s strategy in philanthropy partnerships to increase funding in rural communities.

- *Develop a placemaking guide for rural communities:* The guide will provide an asset approach to community economic development that is focused on the unique characteristics of rural America. Placemaking is the process of creating quality places where people want to live, work, and play. Ultimately, the goal is to create greater social and cultural vitality in rural communities aimed at improving people’s social, physical, and economic well-being. Placemaking invites greater interactions among people and helps foster communities that are more socially, physically, and economically viable. The guide builds off the work under the Rural Development grant program known as the Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC). The RPIC is a technical assistance and planning process for qualified entities to support rural community leaders to create places where people want to live, work, and play. This initiative is intended to provide planning support, technical assistance, and training to communities to foster placemaking activities in rural communities. The RPIC operates under the following concepts:
 - Creating livable communities is important for community developers and practitioners who implement these strategies in rural communities and areas. Placemaking practices include both innovative and adaptive strategies, as well as established technical processes and solutions;
 - Partnerships are a key element of the RPIC and must be developed with public, private, and philanthropic organizations to establish new collaborative approaches, learn together, and bring those learned strategies into rural communities; and
 - Placemaking contributes to long-term investment and therefore supports a community’s resiliency, social stability, and collective identity.

The guide is in the planning phase and additional work is planned for FY 2022 – 2023. The RPIC is currently in its second year of funding. The guide will help inform both program implementation and other ongoing outreach and technical assistance provided by Rural Development.

Potential Data, Tools, Methods, or Analytical Approaches

Administrative data available from Rural Development will be used in combination with other external data available from the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Foundation Center, and other sources of community-level data.

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Barriers to funding alignment or administrative constraints with potential partners may pose a challenge for this evidence-building work. It is critical that USDA identify and cultivate relationships with potential partners across multiple sectors and facilitate a network with a shared vision for rural prosperity and equitable community development to address this challenge. Rural Development is working to build these relationships through a variety of channels, including stakeholder engagement, creation of networks, and cross-Agency workgroups (e.g., USDA Equity Commission, Tribal Listening Session, Justice40, etc.).

See *Common Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Across Rural Development Priority Questions* below for additional information.

Common Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Across Rural Development Priority Questions

- *Accessing administrative data:* Accessing the necessary administrative data is a critical challenge to any analysis or evaluation work. Significant investment is needed in IT modernization, data warehouse reconfiguration, data cataloging, development of a data dictionary, and additional mechanisms to facilitate better access to data.
- *Linking program data to external data sources:* In some cases, there is a lack of publicly available data to measure individual characteristics of program recipients to be studied. Analysis can be done with publicly available geographic area data, such as counties, tracts, and zip codes with administrative program data. More refined analysis may be possible with access to confidential Census microdata. USDA could collaborate with the Census Bureau to develop a process for using Census microdata.
- *Lack of shapefiles for program data:* A shapefile is a geospatial data format that stores the geometric location with specific boundaries and information on attributes of that location. The lack of shapefiles needed to delineate service areas for certain programs is a challenge. Service area analysis of projects is critical to the measurement and analysis of benefits derived from infrastructure projects. It is also an important component of Rural Development’s place-based analysis and equity assessment. The solution to this problem is to create shapefiles retroactively for the RD-funded projects that currently do not have shapefiles. Having more robust service area geospatial data will allow for better attribution of programmatic impacts.
- *Agency and Mission Area silos:* Successful evidence building at the mission level requires buy-in from programs. To break down silos which hinder Agencies and Mission Areas across the Department, USDA will promote collaboration among Rural Development program areas and improve communication to field staff.

Food and Nutrition

The following priority questions were developed by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) under the Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) Mission Area. These questions align to the *Make Safe, Nutritious Food Available to All Americans* strategic goal in the USDA FY 2022 – 2026 Strategic Plan. The questions also support the FNS’s FY 2021 Research and Evaluation Plan, as well as the priorities of the Secretary and the Administration.

FNCS works to harness the Nation’s agricultural abundance to end hunger and improve health in the United States. It administers Federal domestic nutrition assistance programs while linking scientific research to the nutrition needs of consumers through science-based dietary guidance, nutrition policy coordination, and nutrition education. The priority questions below are intended to address key learning gaps and highlight critical evidence needs for FNS.

In all cases, the priority questions and related activities and studies were the result of collaboration and engagement with a variety of stakeholders across the FNCS Mission Area. The policy team and program partners, including the Office of Policy Support, collaborated on designing the FNS Agency Priority Plan, which establishes the Agency’s priorities for the coming fiscal year. The Office of Policy Support then worked with program partners to develop an Annual Research and Evaluation Plan, with input from the Research, Education, and Economics Mission Area.

In May through June of 2021, FNS conducted a series of 27 listening sessions to inform the investment of WIC funds received through the American Rescue Plan Act. Data gathered from these listening sessions were used to prioritize investment strategies and determine strategies for reducing health-related disparities and for improving equity in the delivery of WIC and WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program. Furthermore, FNS also published a Request for Information in November 2021 to inform the development of a Center for WIC Modernization and Delivery.

Food and Nutrition Priority Question #1

Priority Question

How effective are FNS programs in addressing the food hardship crisis caused by COVID-19 and supporting the transition to post-pandemic nutrition program operations?

Activities to Address the Question and Timing

FNS will conduct program evaluations, as well as data analyses and policy analyses, to examine whether the temporary pandemic-related program changes implemented in the last two years 1) have resulted in improved responses to pandemic hardships over the core programs, and 2) support a transition that will improve crisis response and mission accomplishment in a post-pandemic environment.

The Agency will deploy child nutrition programs that support return to school, school food finances in uncertain environments, expanded participation, and healthy eating, including Emergency Operational Costs reimbursement programs.

The Agency will conduct studies in support of its programs. These research efforts include the Child Nutrition Waiver Study and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Waiver Study.

FNS will utilize funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to support post-pandemic nutrition program operations, including the WIC 390 Fund, the Emergency Food Assistance Program Reach and Resiliency Grants, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) modernization, and Pandemic-EBT.

Potential Data, Tools, Methods, or Analytical Approaches

FNS's work will employ a number of data collection strategies, including using extant data and engaging in primary data collection. Extant data may include program administrative data or other Federal and non-Federal Agencies' data collections, such as the Census Bureau's PULSE survey, the American Community Survey, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES).

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

See *Common Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Across Food and Nutrition Priority Questions* below.

Food and Nutrition Priority Question #2

Priority Question

To what extent is racial equity incorporated into internal FNS operations and the design and administration of Federal nutrition assistance programs?

Activities to Address the Question and Timing

FNS will conduct foundational fact-finding, program evaluations, data analyses, and policy analyses to examine whether programs are designed in ways that perpetuate or alleviate racial disparities, particularly in access to nutrition assistance programs and nutrition education.

- *Evaluation of WIC 390 Fund innovations:* The American Rescue Plan Act provides \$390 million for FY 2021, to remain available through FY 2024, to carry out outreach, innovation, and program modernization efforts, including appropriate waivers and flexibility, to increase participation and redemption of benefits. The Act is applicable to both WIC and the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, both of which are authorized under Section 17 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 ([PL 89-642](#)) ([42 USC 1786](#)), as amended. Of note, the waiver authority provided under the Act does not apply to the content of the WIC food packages or regulatory nondiscrimination requirements. The Department is eager to move forward with an unparalleled initiative in support of the Act to benefit WIC State and local Agencies and, most critically, participants.

FNS is currently developing plans to manage WIC and WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program outreach, innovation, and modernization efforts. Furthermore, FNS is working to set forth overarching priorities for the use of the funds. The Supplemental Nutrition and Safety Programs and the Office of Policy Support are collaborating closely to ensure that key innovations are evaluated for impacts and desired outcomes. The FNS FY22 Research and Evaluation Plan includes projects focused on the evaluation of activities funded through the outreach, innovation, and modernization initiative. One project will summarize information and key measures reported to FNS by contractors and grantees implementing the innovations. Another project will implement and evaluate WIC, SNAP, and/or Medicaid data matching efforts.

- *Serving SNAP applicants and participants with limited English proficiency:* SNAP State Agencies are required to translate materials related to all aspects of program administration (e.g., applications, notices, charge letters, informational documents) into languages other than English to serve the needs of their clients with limited English proficiency (LEP). States also may provide LEP services through their SNAP Education and Training (E&T) programs. FNS has limited information on the breadth (i.e., which languages) and depth (i.e., what types of documents) of how State Agencies serve their clients with LEP, or whether they offer LEP services through their SNAP E&T programs. This study will survey all 53 SNAP State Agencies to catalog which languages State Agencies offer for which types of documents, and whether they offer LEP services through their SNAP E&T program. The study will ask States how they determine which languages should be offered and how they manage the translation process; it will also ask if they offer any SNAP E&T LEP services and, if so, what services they offer.

- *Strategies used by food distribution programs to reach underserved populations:* Congress directed the USDA to conduct a study on the challenges that the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), as well as other food distribution programs administered by the Secretary, face in reaching underserved populations, emphasizing homebound and elderly individuals unable to travel to a distribution location. The purpose of this study is to conduct a quick-response survey of all Indian Tribal Organizations and State Agencies administering FDPIR to determine strategies and flexibilities used to distribute food to underserved individuals who are eligible for FDPIR, specifically homebound and elderly individuals. The study will also examine the use of proxies to reach participants, challenges encountered in distributing food, and potential improvements to the program.
- *Stakeholder meeting on WIC participation and maternal mortality:* Congress directed the USDA Secretary to conduct a review of existing evidence and develop a plan to build new evidence on the impact of the WIC Program on reducing maternal mortality among specific populations with the highest maternal mortality rates in the U.S., which include African American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Indigenous (i.e., American Indian and Alaskan Native) mothers. Emphasis will be placed on the needs of disadvantaged communities of color. Through a FY 2020 interagency agreement with the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, FNS is currently conducting a systematic review examining associations between WIC participation and maternal health outcomes, including maternal mortality. FNS will plan and hold a stakeholder meeting to discuss the results of the review and plan future studies and actions.

Potential Data, Tools, Methods, or Analytical Approaches

FNS's work will employ several data collection strategies, including using extant data and engaging in primary data collection. Extant data may include program administrative data or other Federal and non-Federal Agencies' data collections, such as the Census Bureau's PULSE survey, the American Community Survey, or HHS's NHANES.

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

See *Common Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Across Food and Nutrition Priority Questions* below.

- *Literature review on subsidized employment and work-based learning:* The Agricultural Act of 2018 permitted subsidized employment and work-based learning as allowable components of SNAP E&T. Under subsidized employment, SNAP E&T funds can be used to pay a portion of the E&T participants’ wages, thereby reducing the cost to employers. Work-based learning provides E&T participants with work experiences where they can develop their skills and enhance their employability. There is considerable research on these two areas in other contexts, mainly Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Department of Labor programs, but less is known about how they may be implemented in the context of SNAP E&T. For example, the SNAP E&T programs would need to be designed so that the income earned from subsidized employment or work-based learning does not make the E&T participants ineligible for SNAP. This study will conduct a literature review on subsidized employment and work-based learning, summarize the findings, and suggest ways that they could be applied to SNAP E&T. This information will also be used to inform the rulemaking process to implement these components in SNAP E&T.
- *School Meals Operations Study, School Year 2023 – 2024:* FNS conducts an annual study to collect and analyze data on select operational aspects of the child nutrition programs. This includes a wide range of descriptive information from the State and school district levels, as well as data on special topics of current interest, such as the level of State and local subsidies beyond Federal reimbursements, nutrition education and promotion in schools, policies regarding unpaid meal balances, professional standards and training requirements, and compliance with the Buy American provision. Results are used to inform child nutrition programs management and policy development.

Potential Data, Tools, Methods, or Analytical Approaches

FNS’s work will employ a number of data collection strategies, including using extant data and engaging in primary data collection, as applicable to the research questions. Extant data may include program administrative data or other Federal and non-Federal Agencies’ data collections, such as the Census Bureau’s PULSE survey, the American Community Survey, or HHS’s NHANES. Primary data collection may occur through listening sessions with stakeholder groups, survey data collection, case studies, interviews, or other data collection methods, as applicable to the research questions under consideration.

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

See *Common Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Across Food and Nutrition Priority Questions* below.

Food and Nutrition Priority Question #4

Priority Question

How effective are FNS's programs in improving nutrition security through access to nutritious foods?

Activities to Address the Question and Timing

FNS will conduct foundational fact-finding, program evaluations, data analyses, and policy analyses to examine whether programs are designed in ways that improve participants' access to nutrition assistance programs. FNS will also assess changes to programs to determine if they are achieving their goals related to program access. These evidence-building activities are expected to support the following initiatives:

- *Thrifty Food Plan*: FNS reevaluated the Thrifty Food Plan and will continue to collect evidence to determine the cost of a nutritious, cost-conscious diet;
- *WIC Food Package rule*: FNS will be updating the rule detailing requirements for WIC food packages, guided by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine and Dietary Guidelines for Americans;
- *Child Nutrition Meal Standards rules*: FNS will publish a rule on meal standards for the National School Lunch and National School Breakfast Programs;
- *SNAP Nutrition Education*: FNS will establish a long-term vision that significantly enhances the use of public health approaches and strengthens nutrition security for low-income people;
- *Team Nutrition*: FNS will collaborate with school food authorities, child and adult care providers, and other child nutrition program operators to provide resources that help school districts purchase, prepare, and serve meals that align with school meal standards and are appealing to students;
- *WIC nutrition education and referrals*: FNS will provide nutrition counseling through WIC clinics, both online and in person, to help participants use their food prescriptions to supplement a healthy diet; and
- *Food distribution programs*: The FDPIR Food Package Review Work Group will continue to meet quarterly to identify modifications to the FDPIR food package.

Specific activities to address the priority question include:

- *Understanding the Relationship between Poverty, Well-Being, and Food Security*: Research has shown that the economic circumstances and geographic location of households are closely correlated with food security status. However, not all households with similar circumstances experience the same food security status; other factors can be important determinants. This study will identify measures of poverty and well-being associated with household food security status among SNAP-eligible participants and non-participants in persistent poverty counties, defined as counties where 20% or more of their population lived in poverty in the last four decennial Censuses. Moving beyond household income, policy-actionable elements of well-being and material deprivation

such as mental health, depression, health-related quality of life, disablement, medical expenditures, alcohol or opioid addiction, place of residence, and unequal sharing of resources within the household may impact food security status and SNAP participation. This project will conduct county-level representative surveys of household food security, well-being, and material hardship measures in at least six persistent-poverty counties to help identify factors other than income that impact food security status. The study will also conduct in-depth interviews with a subsample in six counties to provide additional context for the survey findings. Counties will represent a variety of spatial types (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural) and other policy-relevant characteristics. Collecting representative data at the county level will also enable improved estimates of county-level food security status, since official data at this granular level is unavailable.

- *Farm-to-School Census*: Farm-to-School activities aim to strengthen knowledge about agriculture, food, and nutrition through hands-on learning; increase the availability of local foods in the child nutrition programs; increase opportunities for farmers and other food producers; and support local and regional economic development. This census and data analysis will provide information on the magnitude of local sourcing procurement and the prevalence of other farm-to-school activities during SY 2022 to 2023. The study will also examine disparities in access to local foods and participation in other farm-to-school activities, as well as the barriers causing such disparities. Data collection will take place in SY 2023 to 2024.
- *2021 Summer EBT for Children*: This study will document how the Summer EBT expansion projects awarded in FY 2021 are implemented and administered from 2021 through 2023 by four experienced grantees: Cherokee (food package model), Connecticut (debit card model), Missouri (debit card), and Oregon (debit card). The study will also describe the experiences of EBT processors, participants, and retailers with Summer EBT in these States and Indian Tribal Organizations. The study will collect and analyze EBT data from the grantees in order to describe and assess participant benefit use across the three summers. The study will also describe how the introduction of Pandemic-EBT impacted the implementation and administration of Summer EBT. Receipt and use of Pandemic-EBT will be explored through focus groups with recipients of Summer EBT.
- *WIC Breastfeeding Policy Inventory II*: Since its establishment, USDA has supported breastfeeding within the WIC Program through a number of legislative and programmatic initiatives, such as providing State and local WIC Agencies tools and training resources to support breastfeeding and funds to establish and support breastfeeding peer counseling activities. This overall project will provide an update to the first WIC Breastfeeding Policy Inventory, published in 2015, yielding a comprehensive description of breastfeeding statistics, policies, procedures, and practices at the State and local WIC Agency levels, including the implementation of peer counseling programs, staff training on breastfeeding, utilization of the National breastfeeding campaign, and best practices to improve breastfeeding initiation and duration rates and reduce disparities. The study will also examine equity in the availability of breastfeeding supports and explore methods for routine collection of information on the number of WIC breastfeeding peer counselors. The project deliverables will support the development of a comprehensive sampling plan, the development and pretesting of survey instruments, and other required supporting materials.

Potential Data, Tools, Methods, or Analytical Approaches

FNS's work will employ a number of data collection strategies, including using extant data and engaging in primary data collection, as applicable to the research questions. Extant data may include program administrative data or other Federal and non-Federal Agencies' data collections, such as the Census Bureau's PULSE survey, the American Community Survey, or HHS's NHANES. Primary data collection may occur through listening sessions with stakeholder groups, survey data collection, case studies, interviews, or other data collection methods, as applicable to the research questions under consideration.

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

See *Common Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Across Food and Nutrition Priority Questions* below.

Food and Nutrition Priority Question #5

Priority Question

What program innovations are most effective in strengthening Federal oversight and management of Federal nutrition assistance programs to further improve integrity, accountability, and customer service?

Activities to Address the Question and Timing

FNS will conduct foundational fact-finding, program evaluations, data analyses, and policy analyses to build evidence to strengthen controls over improper payments and financial management within all Agency programs. Initiatives include updating the Child Nutrition Program Integrity rule, providing SNAP payment accuracy technical assistance to State Agencies, improving regional data analysis capacity, awarding grants to States to implement the SNAP Fraud Framework to bolster efforts around recipient integrity, and conducting retailer compliance activities. Specific activities to address the priority question include:

- *2021 Child and Adult Care Food Program Meal Claims Feasibility Study:* To comply with the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Improvement Act of 2012, this study will test an alternative method for calculating meal claiming error for meals that are claimed but not served in Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and family day care homes (FDCHs). It will look to identify and test proxy measures for actual FDCH meal counts on particular days and for particular meal services. Data collected from sampled FDCHs will be used to identify the best proxy for the day of observation meal counts, the measurement error introduced by using such a proxy that accounts for the natural day-to-day variation in participation, and whether the proxy can be used to determine a reliable National rate of FDCH meal claiming error. If the alternative measures are reliable proxies for observation day meal counts, they can be compared to the meal claims submitted to the State. This will allow for the estimate of National meal claiming error and the dollar amount associated with the error.
- *2021 CACFP Assessment of Sponsor Tiering Determination:* This study will assess and report on the assignment of CACFP FDCHs to incorrect meal compensation tiers and the dollar value of those errors. The methodology will be similar to the CACFP tiering assessments conducted by FNS from 2005 to 2015. These assessments quantified the number and the total value of improper payments due to CACFP homes paid at the Tier 1 (higher reimbursement) rate when eligible for the Tier 2 (lower) rate or, conversely, homes paid at the Tier 2 rate when eligible for Tier 1. The study relies on multiple data sources, including provider income documentation, census block/tract data, and school boundary information to verify eligibility for the classification of FDCHs into Tier 1 or 2 reimbursement rates.
- *Challenges for SNAP State Agencies in Implementing Corrective Action Plans:* SNAP State Agencies are required to develop Corrective Action Plans (CAP) if the State's payment accuracy or timeliness measures do not meet certain thresholds compared to other States. States also must develop CAPs in response to audit or Management Evaluation findings. CAPs are step-by-step roadmaps of State activities and initiatives to improve

the measures or resolve issues identified in findings. This study seeks to understand the challenges and barriers that State Agencies face when trying to develop and implement CAPs by conducting case studies in nine States to identify common themes. The study will provide best practices or guidance for implementing CAPs that could be shared with State Agencies.

- *WIC Certification Error Estimates – Aging for Reporting for the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Improvement Act*: This project conducts the annual aging of data on WIC certification errors needed for USDA financial reports, and to fulfill the requirements of the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Improvement Act. Data from the most recent National survey of WIC participants are adjusted annually using data from the census of WIC participant administrative records contained in Participant and Program Characteristics reports, as well as other WIC administrative data.

Potential Data, Tools, Methods, or Analytical Approaches

FNS's work will employ several data collection strategies, including using extant data and engaging in primary data collection, as applicable to the research questions. Extant data may include program administrative data or other Federal and non-Federal Agencies' data collections, such as the Census Bureau's PULSE survey, the American Community Survey, or HHS's NHANES. Primary data collection may occur through listening sessions with stakeholder groups, survey data collection, case studies, interviews, or other data collection methods, as applicable to the research questions under consideration.

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

See *Common Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Across Food and Nutrition Priority Questions* below.

Common Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Across Food and Nutrition Priority Questions

- *Paperwork Reduction Act-related delays*: One challenge for FNS to gathering, building, and using evidence within the time period needed to make influential policy decisions in response to changing social and economic conditions is internal delays due to the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) clearance process. The review process within the Department is a rate-limiting step and can often add more than 12 months to the start-up process for a study. These delays, in turn, cost the Department hundreds of thousands of dollars. A mitigation strategy would be collaborating on a Department-wide process-improvement endeavor in partnership with OMB to examine where the primary delays occur and use that information to develop a tool that facilitates and streamlines the preparation of the information clearance request (ICR) package to reduce common errors. FNS is currently at the brainstorming stage of developing a "TurboTax for Information Collections" for use within the Agency. Expanding such a tool for use at the Departmental clearance stages could be mutually beneficial, ensuring that ICRs include information that is accurate and appropriate for the purpose of the information collection to

reduce clearance time and provide substantial cost savings across the Department and potentially across the Federal government.

- *Contracting-related guidance:* Because most evaluation efforts engage outside contractors, they are often hindered by contracting processes that are not tailored to the specific needs of program evaluation. Strategies to continue to build the competency and capacity of acquisition professionals to address the complexity of research contracting needs include the following:
 - Continuing to leverage an interagency agreement with the Department of the Interior Acquisitions Services Directorate;
 - Developing research acquisition knowledge assessment questions that might be considered as part of the occupational questionnaire when vacancies occur; and
 - Identifying training courses as part of the required annual professional development of contracting specialists.

Farm Production and Conservation

The following priority questions were developed by FPAC and align to the *Combat Climate Change to Support America's Working Lands, Natural Resources, and Communities, Ensure America's Agricultural System is Equitable, Resilient, and Prosperous, and Foster an Equitable and Competitive Marketplace for All Agricultural Producers* strategic goals in the USDA FY 2022 – 2026 Strategic Plan. FPAC is the Department's focal point for the Nation's farmers, ranchers, and other stewards of private agricultural lands and non-industrial private forest lands. FPAC Agencies implement programs designed to mitigate the significant risks of farming through crop insurance, conservation programs, farm safety net programs, lending programs, and disaster programs. The priority questions below are intended to address key learning gaps and highlight critical evidence needs for FPAC.

Farm Production and Conservation Priority Question #1

Priority Question
At the borrower level, what economic factors impact Farm Loan Program demand, delinquencies, and other risks?
Activities to Address the Question and Timing
<p>The Farm Loan Program (FLP) provides credit to loan applicants who cannot obtain credit from commercial lenders. An initial assessment and ongoing analysis of the effectiveness of FLP's credit activities will help FPAC develop specific credit actions that results in the greatest probability of success for borrowers to sustain and grow their operations and potentially graduate to commercial credit. This analysis will also assist Agency employees in prioritizing their activities during periods of high workload to most benefit customers. This analysis will include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Determining measures of success, with an emphasis on how other leaders in the agriculture industry, including FLP guaranteed lenders, measure success in this space;• Reviewing internal USDA data, including current and historical FLP loan activity; participating in acreage reporting; participating in FPAC, Rural Development, and Natural Resources Conservation Service programs; and reviewing macroeconomic data from the Economic Research Service, the National Agricultural Statistics Service, and the FPAC's Economic and Policy Analysis Division; and• Surveying customers. <p>Specific activities over the next three fiscal years to answer this priority question include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Design a study that will identify advanced analytical techniques and how they can be deployed to manage portfolio and borrower-level risks, with an emphasis on underserved farmers and ranchers (FY 2022);• Conduct data analysis and develop operational and policy change recommendations (FY 2023); and

- Implement recommendations and continue ongoing analysis to improve program efficacy. Results of the study are expected to lead to a better customer experience for program participants and improved FLP program outcomes (FY 2024).

Potential Data, Tools, Methods, or Analytical Approaches

The data needs for this study are significant and include the following:

- FLP-specific data and other internal data from USDA sources (e.g., Economic Research Service, the Economic and Policy Analysis Division, the National Agricultural Statistics Service, and the Office of the Chief Economist);
- University and commercial lender studies;
- Survey data from borrowers; and
- Documentation related to data governance, validation, and assessments for all data systems to identify areas and levels of impact.

Standard econometric techniques for credit risk analysis, such as proportional hazards modeling and survival analysis, will be used to identify delinquency risk factors. A randomized trial intervention for delinquency risk factors will then be deployed to assess potential effectiveness. FPAC may also hold focus groups or add targeted questions to existing USDA survey vehicles to collect additional qualitative data.

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

- *Data availability:* Insufficient access to robust data may hinder the success of these analyses, particularly with respect to borrower responses to surveys.
- *Data quality:* FLP's large data sets are spread across multiple systems, some of which are not fully integrated. Such fragmented and static data sets can make it difficult to synthesize data and detect patterns and trends. The FLP Business Process Reengineering and Information Technology Modernization plans for FY 2021 through FY 2026 are intended to retire, integrate, and update systems, which will enable additional data collection and analyses to determine the efficacy of credit activities.
- *External factors:* External factors impacting the agriculture industry and the U.S. and global economies can influence the success or failure of a farm operation, regardless of the supervised credit tools utilized.
- *Staff capacity:* These analyses will require increased internal or contracted staff capacity with the appropriate skill sets.

Farm Production and Conservation Priority Question #2

Priority Question

What conservation practices are most effective in delivering climate benefits?

Activities to Address the Question and Timing

The primary goal of this effort is to continue the work on conservation practice effectiveness from the FY22 Evaluation Plan focused on the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) practices by expanding the evaluation into the portfolio of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) monitoring, assessment, and evaluation projects. The goal of the CRP evaluation is to monitor, measure, verify, and report on the level of carbon sequestration in soil associated with land rolled in the CRP. Additional data development is ongoing with NRCS in partnership with FSA on practice costs and benefits that will support continued work on both the NRCS and CRP conservation practice effectiveness evaluations. For FY23, this additional data development with the CRP evaluation will be used to calibrate, validate, and further improve the climate impact quantification methodologies used by USDA. The funded projects will survey, field sample, and measure over time the climate benefits of land across the U.S. enrolled in the following CRP practice types: perennial grass; trees; and wetlands, including both mineral and organic soils and both floodplain and non-floodplain wetlands. This effort will allow USDA to understand the climate benefits of CRP and to target CRP enrollment to maximize climate outcomes.

The information gathered through this initiative will expand awareness of the conservation outcomes within USDA and assist the Department in prioritizing conservation practices that have the highest impact on delivering climate benefits and addressing other critical resource concerns of private lands that affect agricultural business sustainability and the users of those resources once they leave private agriculture ground. Additional benefits could include information to make better decisions about staffing specialty needs to ensure that USDA's Agencies have the right technical specialists to provide critical services to internal and external customers.

USDA released a Request for Proposals in May 2021 and received 16 submissions. After a rigorous panel review, three projects were chosen:

- *Michigan State*: \$3.4 million in funding. The project considers the continental U.S., with emphasis on CRP hotspots of the Great Plains and the Midwest. Its sample consists of 600 fields, with each field sampled two times over a five-year project period;
- *Ducks Unlimited*: \$3.2 million in funding. The project focuses on wetland practices only, and it encompasses a 15-State region in the central U.S. that includes over 80% of CRP wetland acres. It has a sample of 250 fields, with each field sampled two times over a five-year project period; and
- *Mississippi State*: \$2.9 million in funding. The project focuses on tree practices only, namely in the six Major Land Resource Areas in the southern U.S. that include over 50% of CRP tree acres. Its sample comprises 144 fields, with each field sampled four times over a five-year project period.

The three projects will focus on soil sampling data collection, which will then be used to calibrate, validate, and further improve quantification methodologies to increase the climate benefits related to the CRP.

Potential Data, Tools, Methods, or Analytical Approaches

The primary data source is direct soil sampling and measurement. The conservation practice data will be designed for integration across USDA in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), as NRCS was lead on conservation practice effectiveness Evaluation 5.2 in FY22. There may be additional opportunities to partner with NRCS on data integration and to calibrate the results of the soil sampling with the results of their evaluations as well as the existing Conservation Effects Assessment Project data, additional NRCS conservation practice effectiveness data, land grant university studies, USDA Agricultural Research Agency data, and other private sources. Data planning will be done to ensure data integration across all data sets that includes a transparent iterative improvement cycle. Data governance and validation will be required throughout the process to ensure that data is FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable). A variety of analyses will be completed to compare outcome data and economic data and inform resource allocation decisions to improve effective delivery of service and maximize benefits to stakeholders. Data analysis will be ongoing, as external customer demand and field work is conducted year-round. The seasonal fluctuation of demand would dictate that most data collection be done in the late spring through early fall. FPAC staff and contractors are in the process of obtaining internal data. Additional coordination with other USDA Mission Areas and external partners will be required to support this priority question.

The study areas and sample sizes were selected by the project investigators to improve the methodologies and models used to estimate climate mitigation impacts in a manner broadly applicable to CRP grass, tree, and wetland enrollments. The three projects will follow the same soil carbon sampling protocol, and additional data will be collected by the wetlands and tree projects in recognition of the specific climate mitigation impacts of these land covers.

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Challenges could include regional and localized differences in impact based on conditions such as soil type, wildlife species, water supply, and water chemistry. The design of the study, which will likely be completed in FY 2022, can account for these differences. Additionally, coordination of information between partners and entities could be difficult, based on the goal of the study; however, the USDA project lead and project points of contact will be in close contact to ensure that sampling protocols and results are consistently applied. Study design must account for goals and adjust to make comparisons on equal merit.

The challenge of data integration across FPAC programs that includes cost-benefit data on conservation practices is being mitigated on multiple fronts, including an effort with the Office of the Chief Economist and the Office of the Chief Information Officer on the Greenhouse Gas Working Group dashboards, which will continue to support FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable) data designs for additional data sets. It is expected that the FY 2022 evaluation and the Greenhouse Gas Working Group efforts will continue to align and support a robust cost-benefit analysis that has integrated data across USDA.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CACFP	Child and Adult Care Food Program
CAP	Corrective Action Plans
CRP	Conservation Reserve Program
E&T	SNAP Education and Training
EAWG	Evidence Act Working Group
Evidence Act	Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018
FDCH	Family Day Care Homes
FDPIR	Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations
FLP	Farm Loan Program
FNCS	Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services
FNS	Food and Nutrition Service
FPAC	Farm Production and Conservation
FY	Fiscal year
HHS	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
LEP	Limited English Proficiency
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
OBPA	Office of Budget and Program Analysis
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
RPIC	Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
SY	School year
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
WIC	Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children