The Impact of Childhood Nutrition Assistance on Child Health and Well-Being: Lessons from WIC

Author(s): Marianne Bitler; Lisa Schulkind; Barton J. Willage

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is one of the most widely used food assistance programs in the U.S. On a cohort basis, nearly half of infants participant in the program. WIC is aimed at ensuring that low-income children and pregnant women have access to healthful food. Despite a great deal of previous research, evidence about the causal effects of this program on child outcomes remains limited. In this paper, we use a regression discontinuity approach to estimate the causal effects of WIC on child health and nutritional outcomes. We estimate regression discontinuity models that leverage sharp changes in program benefits and eligibility in order to examine effects of the program on a wide range of health and nutrition outcomes including self-reported food and nutrient consumption (from food diaries), objective health measures from biomarker data (blood and urine draws, height and weight) and the incidence and type of hospital visits. Our research focuses on previously understudied questions such as the effects of WIC on infants and children (most studies focus on the effects of WIC on birth weight and other birth outcomes); on spillover effects from targeted children to other family members who are not directly eligible for the programs; and on the effects of changes in the composition and delivery of program benefits.