

In May 2020, the Vermont WIC program surveyed active WIC households for feedback on services during the COVID-19 public health emergency. The survey link was texted to 6,910 active WIC households who accept text messages (approximately 94% of active households) with a reminder text sent one week later. The survey was open for two weeks. The survey garnered 1,000 responses - 850 responses were complete and 150 were partial. This represents 13.6% of the Vermont WIC actively participating caseload.

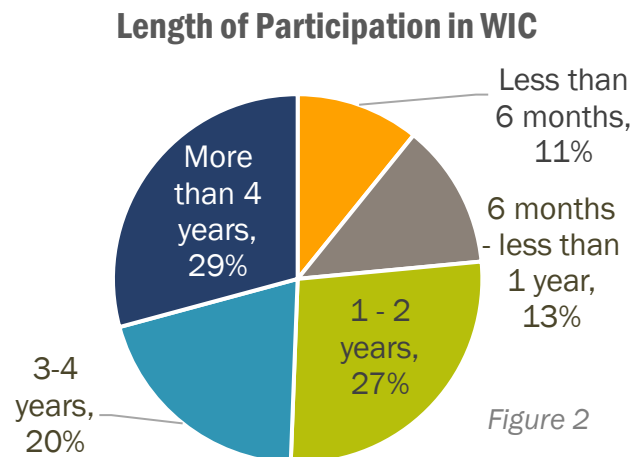
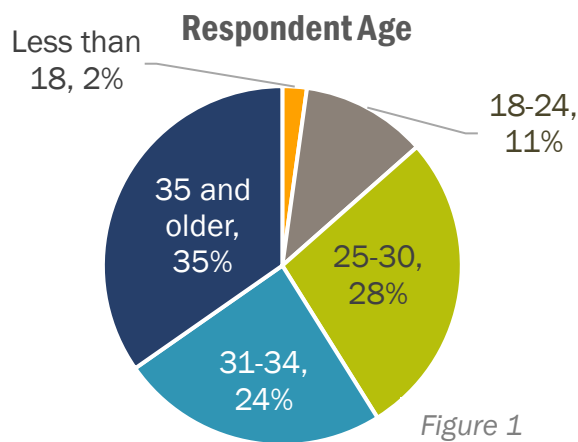
The survey included questions on remote (telephone) appointments, grocery shopping, and interest in online nutrition education. This brief focuses on grocery shopping.

### KEY POINTS

- **60% of respondents took fewer shopping trips during COVID-19**
- **Respondents stated that online ordering and advanced orders placed by phone/email would be helpful**
- **Even with expansions in some food categories, specific food items were hard to find**

### Respondent Age & Length of Participation

Twenty-two respondents were less than 18 years old and were opted out of the rest of the survey. The remaining respondents were mostly 25 years and older, with 11% between 18 and 24 years old. Three quarters (77%) of respondents have participated in the WIC program for one year or more (Figures 1,2).



### Grocery Shopping

COVID-19 has impacted the way families are grocery shopping, including for WIC foods. Over half of respondents (60%) reduced the number of trips to the store to avoid exposure and almost half (46%) bought more than they usually would to avoid multiple trips (Figure 3). Several respondents noted in the open comment that shopping has not changed for them in response to the public health emergency.

## How has COVID-19/Stay Home Stay Safe changed how you grocery shop?

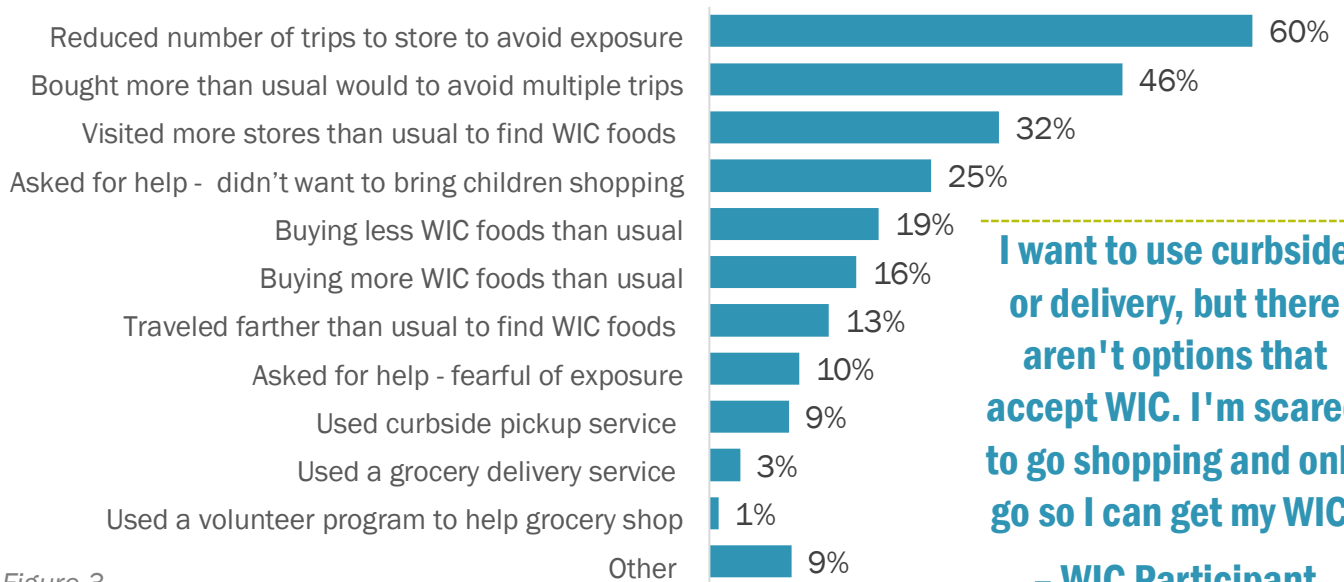


Figure 3

**I want to use curbside or delivery, but there aren't options that accept WIC. I'm scared to go shopping and only go so I can get my WIC.**  
**- WIC Participant**

About one-third, 31% of respondents reported not having trouble finding any WIC foods, a drop from 39% when the same question was asked in our Annual Participant Survey from August 2019. Respondents in the August 2019 survey represented a similar age distribution and length of time participating in WIC as this survey. The top 5 hard to find foods in order were: whole wheat bread, eggs, yogurt, milk, and 48 oz. juice.

The Vermont WIC program received federal waivers to expand some food categories beyond what is typically allowed under current regulations. The program used several mechanisms to inform families of these food list expansions, the most effective being a text from WIC. Thirteen percent had not heard about the expansions (Figure 4).

## How Participants Heard About Expanded Food List

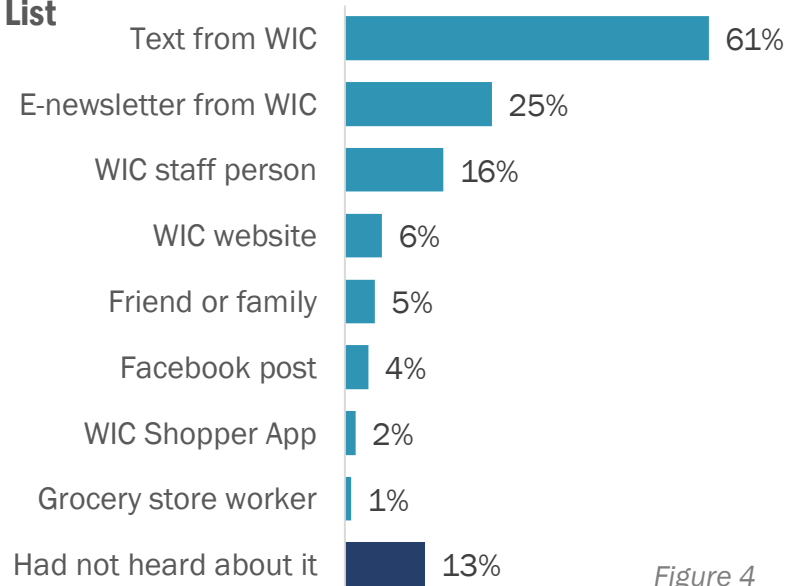


Figure 4

Just over three-quarters of respondents are satisfied with the foods currently available from WIC (Figure 5). When asked to rank four shopping supports that would help with WIC shopping, they were ranked in the following order (Figure 6):

1. WIC orders done by grocery delivery services
2. WIC grocery orders called in or emailed to the store in advance
3. WIC transactions done over the phone, including giving PIN to store staff
4. Help finding someone to shop for me

## I am satisfied with foods currently available from WIC

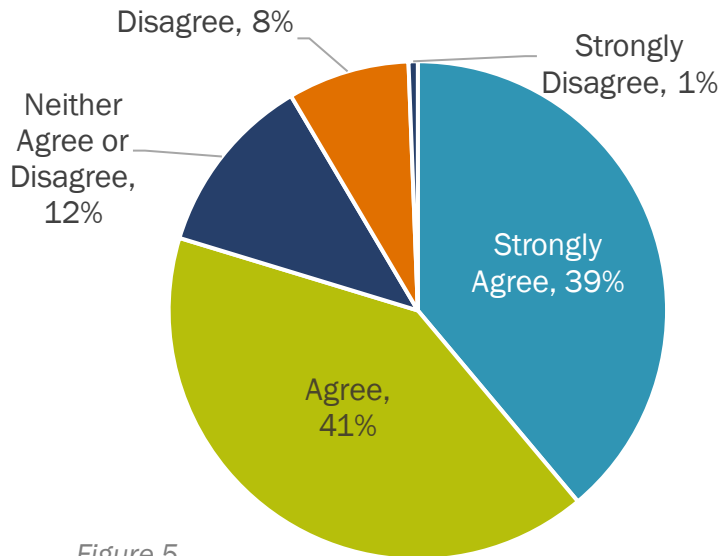


Figure 5

Several open comments of the ranking question noted they prefer to shop for themselves.

## Ranking of what would be most helpful to least helpful when WIC shopping

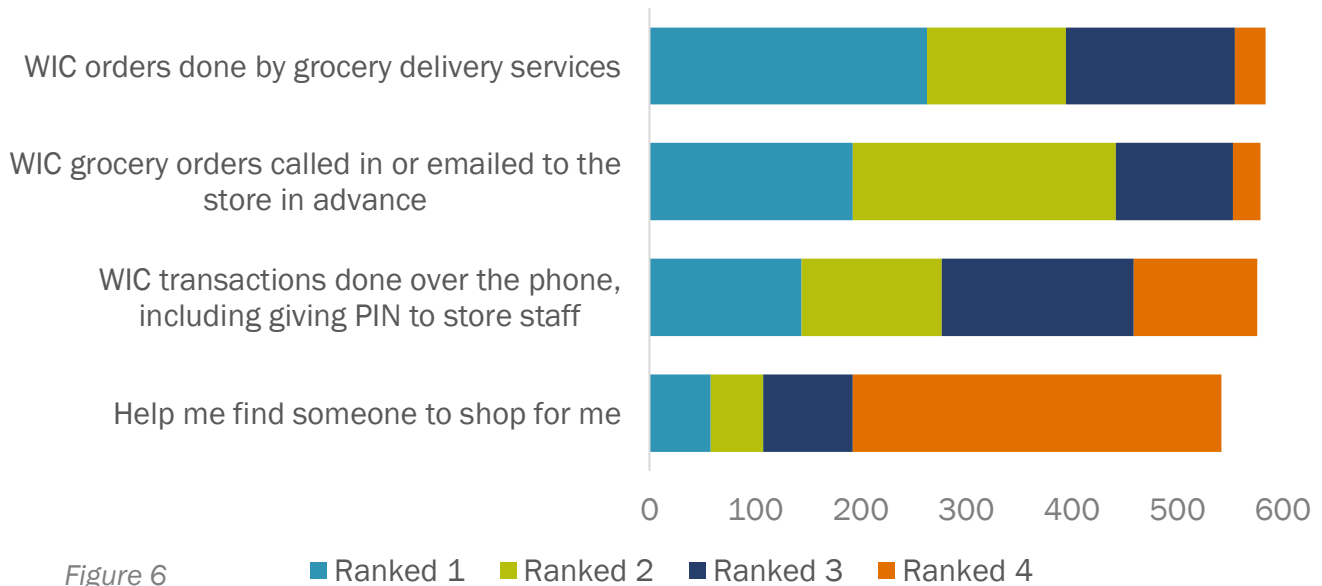


Figure 6

## Key Takeaways

Families are shopping less frequently. The Vermont WIC program, using federal waivers and State Agency options, expanded the food list to help make grocery shopping easier during COVID-19 in the food categories of: whole grains, eggs, milk, cheese, breakfast cereal, tofu, infant foods, and juice. Most respondents were aware of these expansions.

These food expansions have been well-received by families. In April and May 2020, larger whole wheat bread sizes and whole wheat rolls added under federal waivers made up 45% of whole wheat bread sales. Some expansions allowed under regulation without a federal waiver will remain. For example, newly added shredded cheese, which made up 18% of total cheese sales, will remain as a state option after federal waivers expire.

Additional supports such as online shopping and orders placed in advance would further improve and streamline the shopping experience and would be welcome by families.

**For more information:** [wic@vermont.gov](mailto:wic@vermont.gov)

**Food expansions have helped access. Online ordering and orders placed in advance would further improve access.**