The Impact of COVID-19 on Experiences of Food Insecurity Across Place: A Qualitative Research Protocol

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Background/Study Justification

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of food insecurity in the United States doubled overall and tripled among households with children (Schanzenbach & Pitts, 2020). The increase was both unparalleled and disproportionately experienced by low-income, Black, Latino/a/x, and immigrant households (Lauren et al., 2021; Morales et al., 2020; Nagata et al., 2021; Wolfson & Leung, 2020).

Even before the pandemic, rates of food insecurity in the United States were unusually high compared to other industrialized countries. Although parents try to shield their children from food insecurity (Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Olson, 2005; Stevens, 2010), research shows that children in food-insecure households are aware of food shortages (Fram et al., 2011) and experience a host of negative effects, including poorer general and oral health, poorer academic performance, behavioral and cognitive problems, and depression, aggression, and anxiety (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2014, 2018; Jyoti et al., 2005; Whitaker & Moynihan, 2018).

The pandemic has revealed both the inadequacy and the potential of the U.S. welfare system. The United States Department of Agriculture’s comprehensive report on food insecurity in U.S. households throughout 2020, released in September 2021, estimates that surprisingly, the overall prevalence of food insecurity did not increase from 2019 (before the pandemic) to 2020, even though households spent more on food during the pandemic (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). Early research suggests that boosts to federal food assistance programs and other pandemic responses (such as the Federal supplement to unemployment and the eviction moratorium) may have made the difference. However, rates of food insecurity rose among specific groups, and the USDA concludes that more research is needed to understand the dynamics of food insecurity and other food hardships in U.S. households during the pandemic (Ibid.).

Before the pandemic, participant levels for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program (SNAP, also known as food stamps) were near historic highs. After cash benefits were severely cut by the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Hays, 2003), Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program has become a more central part of the safety net, and families who do not receive SNAP face greater risks (Parolin & Brady, 2019). In general, public benefits are increasingly complicated or cumbersome to get and keep (Herd & Moynihan, 2018), and critics argue that SNAP is overly burdensome, provides inadequate support, and fails to reach all of the people who need it (Dickinson, 2020; Mulik & Haynes-Maslow, 2017). Dickinson (2020) argues that SNAP incentivizes low-wage work for poor families by making it possible for them to survive (but not get ahead) in jobs that pay below subsistence wages.

The tragedy of the pandemic presents an important case study not only because of the rise in food insecurity, but also because of the unprecedented governmental response. Specifically, policies implemented in the early months of the pandemic removed many of the administrative burdens (see Herd & Moynihan, 2018) associated with receiving governmental assistance, provided direct cash payments to most families, and created more generous unemployment and food assistance benefits. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act, passed in March 2020, included more than $1 billion in funding for federal food assistance programs, including

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expanded SNAP benefits for many recipients and a new program, the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer program (P-EBT), that provided SNAP benefits to families with children who were eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Schanzenbach (2020) writes that the unprecedented increases in food insecurity “would surely be worse if not for the historic relief efforts from Congress.” But these supports do not reach all groups equally. People of color have been disproportionately exposed to the economic and health impacts of the pandemic and have fewer supports to draw from (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Morales et al., 2020; Pirtle, 2020).

The primary objective of this project is to understand how variations in policy responses to COVID-19 intersect with social contexts to shape families’ ability to cope with or prevent food insecurity. Food insecurity is strongly associated with poverty and other forms of material hardship (e.g., housing insecurity), but food insecurity is not just a matter of economic resources. Food insecurity is also tied to racism (Bowen et al., 2021; Odoms-Young, 2018). For example, Black and Latino/a/x people are more likely to experience racial discrimination in schools, workplaces, and the courts, and lifetime racial discrimination is associated with a higher risk of food insecurity (Burke et al., 2018; Phojanakong et al., 2019). Large spatial variations in rates of food insecurity also suggest that place influences people’s experiences of food insecurity, although researchers do not fully understand why.

As patterns of food insecurity shift during the pandemic and beyond, some of these inequalities will be exacerbated and others may be alleviated. We know that people of color, already at higher risk of food insecurity, were also at higher risk of developing serious health problems from COVID-19 and losing a job during the pandemic (Garcia et al., 2021; Pirtle, 2020). The effects of the pandemic are also gendered, with millions of mothers dropping out of the workforce to care for children (Pirtle & Wright, 2021; Yavorsky et al., 2021), and food insecurity has risen to especially high levels among families with children. Finally, as a result of the fractured and federalized response to the pandemic, experiences of food insecurity are likely unevenly distributed across place. All states eventually implemented changes in federal food assistance policy like adopting the P-EBT program and expanding SNAP. But as Balasuny et al. (2021) note, state-to-state variability in implementation of SNAP and P-EBT presents a “unique and powerful opportunity” to study the impacts of nutrition assistance programs. States’ and counties’ responses to the pandemic (e.g., shelter-in-place orders and school opening policies) also varied widely. These policy variations intersect with underlying structural inequalities that put some communities at greater risk.

Our project uses qualitative research methods to examine people’s experiences of food insecurity during and beyond the pandemic and the policies and programs that are most effective in reducing food insecurity. Specifically, we are conducting semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation at two points in time with poor and working-class families in rural and urban counties in 5 U.S. states.

### Preliminary Findings

Based on a previous longitudinal study on food access and food insecurity among low-income families in North Carolina (Bowen et al., 2019) and our preliminary findings from the first phase of research from this project, we offer some initial reflections on participants’ experiences of food insecurity during the pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic, federal food assistance programs were the most critical food resources for many low-income families, and the expanded SNAP and P-EBT programs bolstered many families, allowing some to feel more food-secure than before the pandemic. At the same time, barriers to accessing these programs remain (see Elliott et al., 2021). Food pantries and other sources of emergency food helped fill in the gaps, and people expressed a sense of gratitude for the food they received but also described it as unappetizing, unfamiliar, and unhealthy (Ibid.).

As others have noted, emergency food programs are an inadequate and temporary band-aid to the broader structural issues of inequality and poverty (Dickinson, 2020; Fisher, 2017; Poppendieck, 1998). Experiences of food insecurity are tied to structural racism and to gendered inequalities in carework (see Bowen et al., 2021; Pirtle & Wright, 2021). Women of color were more likely to lose a job or leave the labor force to care for children, and people of color also experience distinct barriers to accessing food assistance. At the same time, an unexpected finding of this study was that despite the extraordinarily difficult circumstances people were facing, many families helped others by sharing food, money, and other resources, not only feeding their families but also supporting others in their community (see also Haynes-Maslow et al., 2020).

### Research Questions

This study addresses four primary research questions.

1. How do variations in policy responses to COVID-19 influence families’ access to food and their ability to prevent or cope with food insecurity? What specific contextual factors are most salient?
2. How do intersecting inequalities related to race, ethnicity, class, and gender shape how people experience food insecurity during a crisis?
3. How do poor and working-class people make meaning of state policies and responses aimed at boosting the economy, addressing unemployment, and supporting food-insecure populations?
4. What contextual conditions exacerbate or help families buffer the effects of food insecurity?

### Methods

Building on a tradition of qualitative, comparative sociological studies of people’s daily lives (Abdi, 2015; Andrews, 2018; Desmond, 2016), this study draws on semi-structured interviews...
and photo elicitation with a diverse sample of caregivers in five U.S. states. By including states that have been relatively proactive and generous in implementing pandemic-related food assistance programs and states that have been slower, more restrictive, and less generous, we can examine how food practices and experiences of food insecurity are tied both to particular contextual factors and to inequalities linked to race, ethnicity, gender, and immigrant status. In addition, although other studies have examined experiences related to food during the pandemic (Isaacs et al., 2021), our project is a bit different in that it adopts an asset-based framework that asks people to identify the assets, and possibilities they see in their families and communities (in addition to the challenges).

### Cases

Our research takes place in one urban and one rural county in five U.S. states: North Carolina, Michigan, Mississippi, South Carolina, and South Dakota. The midwestern and southern United States are both relatively understudied in the literature on food insecurity and unequal food access; even though the most food-insecure counties are disproportionately rural and located in the South, most ethnographic studies of food insecurity focus on urban counties in the northeastern or western United States (Carney, 2015; Dickinson, 2020). The states in our sample are selected to vary according to the severity of COVID-19 outbreaks and the proactiveness of the state response to the pandemic.

### Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

We began recruiting participants in September 2020. Building on lessons learned during a previous project (Bowen et al., 2019), we used in-person networks and social media to recruit participants. We worked with academics and extension specialists in each state to identify community-based and governmental organizations who could assist in recruiting participants, and we used social media (in particular, Facebook groups) to recruit participants.

Starting in September 2020, we aimed to recruit 15 participants in each county ($n = 30$ per state, $n = 150$ total). All participants were required to (1) have a 2019 household income within 250% of the poverty line, since this group is most at risk of food insecurity; (2) be responsible for at least half of the work of shopping for and preparing meals in their households, and (3) have at least one child between ages 5 and 18. We focused on households with school-age children because they are at increased risk of food insecurity and because of the distinct challenges in coping with food insecurity that these families face (i.e., loss of school meal programs). In recruiting participants, we aimed for diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, family composition, and employment status.

Although we planned for each participant to complete two interviews in the first round of data collection, some participants dropped out after completing one interview. In some cases, this was because of life experiences (e.g., giving birth, contracting COVID-19, and being evicted). In other cases, participants did not disclose why they no longer wanted to participate. In addition, although we aimed to recruit 15 participants from each county, we found that recruiting participants in more urban areas was easier than in more rural counties. In total, in Phase 1 of the study, we conducted 240 interviews with 128 participants. The total number of participants per county ranges from 4 to 17. We began conducting interviews for Phase 2 in June 2021.

### Data Collection

Because experiences of food insecurity and coping strategies likely vary over time, the project has a panel design. First, between September 2020 and early June 2021, we conducted semi-structured interviews and collected photos of participants’ “foodscapes”: “the places and spaces where people acquire food, prepare food, talk about food, or generally gather some sort of meaning from food” (MacKendrick, 2014). The first round of interviews included two interviews with each person. First, we asked participants about their general experiences during the pandemic (for example, related to

| Location       | Interviews | Participants | Description                                      |
|----------------|------------|--------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Halifax (NC)   | 30         | 15           | 15 sets of two interviews                        |
| Wake (NC)      | 31         | 18           | 13 sets of two interviews and 5 single interviews |
| Alpena (MI)    | 24         | 13           | 11 sets of two interviews and 2 single interviews |
| Wayne (MI)     | 31         | 16           | 15 sets of two interviews and 1 single interview  |
| Noxubee (MS)   | 18         | 9            | 9 sets of two interviews                         |
| Hinds (MS)     | 32         | 17           | 15 sets of two interviews and 2 single interviews |
| Pickens (SC)   | 28         | 16           | 12 sets of two interviews and 4 single interviews |
| Allendale (SC) | 8          | 4            | 4 sets of two interviews                         |
| Minnehaha (SD) | 25         | 13           | 12 sets of two interviews and 1 single interview  |
| Campbell (SD)  | 13         | 7            | 6 sets of two interviews and 1 single interview   |
| **Total**      | **240**    | **128**      |                                                  |
employment, caretaking, and mental and physical health). We also asked participants to share their perceptions of pandemic policies and describe the policies or programs that would best help their families. (Participants also completed a short survey that included questions about demographics, employment, participation in social assistance programs, and the USDA’s 6-item household food insecurity survey.) After the first interview, participants were asked to take photos representing their pandemic foodscapes, including places where they acquired food (e.g., stores and food pantries), home food environments (e.g., pantries, refrigerators, and gardens), and meals. The interviewer collected the photos by phone or email and then conducted a second interview about a week later, using the photos to discuss how families’ access to food had changed as a result of COVID-19, their experiences of food insecurity before and during the pandemic, and the strategies that they had adopted. Participants received an honorarium for their participation ($50 for two interviews).

Other studies, including our own, find that because food is a relatively “safe” topic, discussions of food can help researchers gain participants’ trust and uncover important aspects of people’s daily lives (Bowen et al., 2019; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Devault, 1991). In our previous research, we found that the open-ended format allowed us to explore topics that we did not anticipate, but that emerged as central to participants’ experiences around food, including the moral values they attached to feeding their children, the surveillance they experienced around their food practices, and their emotional reactions to receiving food assistance. Photo elicitation methods offer opportunities to analyze not only the concrete realities of people’s lives, but also how people make sense of their world (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Thomas et al., 2013). Harper (2002) argues that photo elicitation methods evoke information, feelings, and memories that traditional interview methods could miss. In our project, we found that the photos helped us build rapport with participants and served as an effective tool for generating more specific stories, often in surprising ways. The photos also seemed to generate emotions (both positive and negative) in participants that added another important layer to the data.

Starting in June 2021 (6–9 months after conducting the first interview), we began conducting another wave of semi-structured interviews with all participants. To reduce participant burden, we are conducting only one interview with each participant in this phase of the study, and we are not collecting photographs. We begin each interview by asking participants to reflect on the most significant or important things that had happened in their lives since the previous interview. By doing so, we aim to shift power dynamics to focus on what participants find relevant or important, instead of centering what we as researchers want to study or understand. We are also employing asset-based visioning exercises—asking participants to describe how their community has fared during the pandemic, what resources were particularly helpful (and should continue), and what they felt needed to be changed. These visioning exercises help participants look back to reflect on their community’s COVID response while also looking forward to what the future will look like. Finally, at the end of the interviews, we are also offering to share findings from the study with participants, if they are interested, and asking them to reflect on these results and whether they align with their experiences. Participants receive an honorarium for their participation ($25 for one interview). We expect that interviews will be complete by early 2022.

Data Handling and Analysis

With participants’ permission, interviews are being recorded, de-identified, and transcribed. Our research team has engaged in critical, reflexive analysis about the research process throughout the project, writing memos and discussing our research process in regular meetings with the research team. After each interview, researchers write detailed thumbnail sketches, reflecting on key analytical themes and their feelings after processing what can be intense conversations with participants about experiences of food insecurity, poverty, and the pandemic. Our ongoing reflection and analysis allow us to adjust research protocols to account for new or surprising findings, respond to important changes in the social context (as we did in previous team-based qualitative projects, see Elliott et al., 2017), and adjust procedures when they become too emotionally burdensome for participants and/or researchers.

We are using the software Dedoose to code and analyze transcripts and fieldnotes. We employ an abductive approach (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014), an inferential process aimed at generating new theories by paying close attention to surprising research evidence. To develop the codebook, we are relying on prior knowledge and theoretical concepts. We started by holding a series of coding meetings in which researchers read through multiple transcripts to generate key themes that emerged in the research. After reading and reviewing these transcripts, a small group of researchers (project PIs and graduate research assistants) developed a draft codebook, which we shared with the entire research team at a coding workshop. During the coding workshop, researchers worked in small groups to propose edits to the codebook. Once we reached consensus on a preliminary list of codes, project PIs and graduate research assistants tested the codebook with a small set of transcripts. We then revised the codebook based on these experiences and have started the coding process with the phase 1 transcripts.

Our analysis will be guided by the methodological tenets of intersectionality. Misra et al. (2020) argue that intersectionality is both a theory and a method; furthermore, methodological practices and analytical frameworks are conduits for intersectional theorizing (P. H. Collins, 2019). Misra et al. (2020) describe five core ideas of intersectionality that should inform methodological choices: oppression, complexity, context, comparison, and deconstruction. In line with these tenets, we will pay attention to instances of power and inequality in our data (oppression) and to how experiences...
reflect the complexity of people’s socially constructed positionalities and are grounded in particular historical and spatial contexts. We will continually engage in comparison between cases and at the same time identify the inherent instability of categories (deconstruction).

Finally, we will take a strengths-based approach to analyze the data, paying particular attention to instances that reveal the organizations and programs that families value and trust (Jakes et al., 2015), as well as the cracks in the system that prevent families from accessing resources. By centering the voices and narratives of poor and working-class families, our analysis will provide insight into how social conditions and policies and programs shape people’s experiences of food insecurity and their coping strategies and responses. Our strengths-based approach will extend the survival narratives often assumed about poor and working-class families to put forth more nuanced stories of strength, hope, and resilience during the pandemic and beyond.

Ethics and Reflexivity

The research team includes an independent scholar and researchers, extension staff, and students from five institutions. Conducting research during a global pandemic has introduced new challenges, and in what follows, we reflect on how the pandemic has altered our research process and also contributed to new insights.

Protecting the identity of everyone who participates in our research was paramount, especially given that some participants have concerns about being surveilled or sanctioned by governmental authorities. In addition to using pseudonyms to replace the names of people and identifiable locations/organizations, we focused on cultivating open dialogue, listening to and engaging with participants to build trust. For the most part, researchers were from or had research ties to the areas where we conducted interviews. We assigned interviews this way to try to establish rapport through knowledge of the area and a shared lexicon of the food system in each of the counties. Our research team included parents and non-parents, people who had experienced poverty and food insecurity, people who had never experienced financial hardship, and people of varying ages, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities. These varied and intersecting identities shaped whether, how, and when we were able to establish trust with participants and the way we conducted the interviews.

Although COVID-19 introduced challenges to building rapport, the context of doing research during a pandemic and the virtual format also provided opportunities to disrupt power dynamics and build relationships and trust. Boivin and CohenMiller (2018) argue that digital methods (in their case, videos recorded by participants on their smartphones) provide opportunities for researchers to intentionally “break the fourth wall of research” (adapting Diderot’s concept of the fourth wall in theater, the invisible barrier between audience and actors) to co-construct knowledge with participants. Compared to previous studies (see Bowen et al., 2019), we observed how the adjustments we made to do research during a pandemic also disrupted some of the expected or usual boundaries between participants and researchers. Some of these were intentional; we asked participants about their resource needs (e.g., whether they needed information about food assistance programs or help scheduling vaccine appointments) and sent follow-up resources. Our intention was to avoid just collecting information from participants, but also share what we knew and had learned from others. Related, we realized that many participants were struggling with the photo elicitation element of the study because it seemed like a box to check off instead of a way to share their experiences. One researcher suggested that we share a photo of our own as an example. While we did this to clarify our methods to participants, it also meant that we were sharing images from our own lives (of our houses, meals, and loved ones) with participants.

In other cases, we were struck by how virtual methods allowed us ways to practice reciprocity with participants in a way that is hard to accomplish in a face-to-face interview. For example, although the fact that we were not able to go into participants’ homes was a limitation, the virtual format sometimes allowed for disruptions in the typical ways information is exchanged between researchers and participants. When we did video interviews, we saw a snapshot of participants’ lives, but they also saw a snapshot of ours — literally seeing into our houses and hearing kids, pets, and other interruptions in the background. While this sometimes made researchers uncomfortable, it was also an opportunity to reflect on how participants feel when researchers enter their homes and spaces. In sum, shared experience of the pandemic made it harder to do the interviews, but also provided opportunities to reflect on power dynamics and reciprocity in research.

Despite these attempts to build and maintain trust, it is often difficult for people to discuss experiences with food insecurity. These challenges are exacerbated by the added layer of discussing (and experiencing) life during a pandemic. We designed and revised our study protocols to reduce the burden on participants, encourage conversational flow, and recognize and alleviate some of the emotional burnout many people were experiencing at the time of the interviews. When possible, we used a strengths-based frame to craft interview questions, giving participants opportunities to reflect on, for example, how they had offered help to others during the pandemic or the things that give them hope for the future. Even so, our focus on people’s experiences during the pandemic left some participants with negative feelings that inhibited further conversation. One participant described the survey, which came at the end of the first interview, as being especially burdensome. A mother from North Carolina shared her frustration with her interviewer near the end of the survey:

This is probably the hardest $25 I’ve ever made....it’s a lot, it really is, for people that are already struggling, to ask them to put
in a lot of time. It’s a lot of mental thought… You’re really digging into their life. It’s not just a little, or some time. We’re not talking about easy questions here; you’re really needing into their life. So I feel like better compensation should be provided… I wouldn’t have done it for $25, I can tell you that now.

This feedback, and subsequent discussions with the research team, pushed us to change the research protocol. We eliminated many of the original survey questions and instead tried to capture them in the open-ended portion of the interview. The result was a shorter survey instrument and a new question at the end that asked participants to give us feedback on the research process. In addition to altering our protocols, we also adapted to specific situations and participants’ needs. For example, we offered a modified structure to participants experiencing time constraints, eliminating the photo requirement and/or offering a shortened second interview, focusing only on the most critical questions. We also adjusted the compensation structure to more adequately acknowledge participants’ time and labor, paying half of the amount after the first interview and half after the second interview, instead of giving one larger payment at the end.

Conducting sensitive interviews during a pandemic was difficult for researchers, and we also tried to address burnout and fatigue among our researchers. Logistically, it took more time and effort to correspond, coordinate, and schedule interviews with participants than we initially anticipated. We tried to offer maximum flexibility to researchers, who were often put in a position of adjusting their own personal commitments to meet participant needs. Although we tried to have the same person do both of the interviews, we used a team approach to cover interviews, encouraging researchers to rely on other team members to fill in when they were unavailable. The heaviness of the interviews, which often focused on intense hardships like the death of loved ones, financial challenges, food insecurity, and participants’ mental health struggles, weighed on researchers (Averett, 2020). To reflect on the emotional weight of this process, the research team appended a “How I felt” section at the end of the interview thumbnail sketch. In this section, interviewers reflected on the feelings that arose during the interview and how their own circumstances and histories shaped their interactions and observations during the interviews. As we continue with final data collection and analysis, we will continue to find ways to adjust procedures to support the emotional well-being of researchers on the project, many of whom are graduate students juggling the competing demands of coursework, teaching, and research on top of the emotional intensity of collecting data.

Finally, we also tried to mitigate the power disparities embedded within the relationships among faculty/staff, student-researchers, and participants. Researchers talked with each other throughout the data collection process about these power dynamics, reflecting in bi-weekly meetings. These reflections led us to alter study protocols, adjust how we communicated with and compensated participants, and talk about how to be flexible and supportive to participants and other researchers. We discussed ways to be mindful about how questions might affect participants, especially when asking people to share their ideas, hopes, and fears in ways that could lead to yet another study capitalizing on historically marginalized communities’ input without giving something back that was equally beneficial. Given the simultaneous need to also achieve objectives outlined in the grant proposal, this was a delicate and highly imperfect undertaking. During Phase 2 of the project, we aim to better center participants’ priorities and experiences, conduct training sessions for researchers on how to demonstrate empathy and vulnerability in the research process and work closely with local stakeholders to share research findings and identify tangible outcomes for participants and their communities.

In sum, we cultivated reflexivity in our methods, findings, intentions, and relationships. To honor the stories being shared, researchers listened carefully in order to recognize when to slow down, offer kind words of acknowledgment, or otherwise practice empathy. Being reflexive is important in challenging one’s own stereotypes and prejudices and understanding the power researchers have over their participants (Fetner & Heath, 2018). Without reflexivity, we replicate power dynamics, conducting extractive research that over-determines what participants share with us. Throughout the study, researchers urged the team to reflect on the purpose, outcome, and methods in order to avoid creating vulnerable situations for participants without providing direct improvements to their livelihoods or personal or community well-being.

Rigor

As a part of our commitment to reflexivity and rigor in our research, the research team developed protocols for collecting data, analyzing findings, and refining our methods. Given that this was a complex, multi-disciplinary, multi-state project, team leaders conducted trainings at the beginning of the project and held workshops throughout the process, to ensure that all team members had the knowledge and information they needed to conduct the interviews, compile the data, and analyze findings. We developed interview checklists and protocols to ensure that data was collected in the same way across states, and that it was organized and labeled on the shared drive in a way that enabled collaborators in multiple sites to easily access it.

Additionally, as discussed above, we reflected regularly as a team on our process and findings. This not only allowed us to be more responsive to participants’ experiences and needs, but it also contributes to the rigour of our research through our continued shared analysis of methods and preliminary findings. Each researcher wrote a brief thumbnail sketch after conducting the interview, reflecting on key themes and questions that emerged from the conversation, as well as how they felt about the interview. The thumbnails provide important records of our
initial impressions, which researchers note offer unique insights (Emerson et al., 2011). The thumbnail sketches were shared with all researchers on the team, and researchers were encouraged to read the week’s thumbnails before our regular meetings so that we could discuss key findings and process difficult interviews as a group, and refine our methods based on our experiences. Overall, the project’s rigor draws on a collective model of scholarship, in which knowledge and analysis is generated collaboratively.

Discussion and Conclusions

As social science research continues to be shaped by COVID-19, it is critical to reflect on how the emotional burdens of the pandemic shape the experiences of not only participants, but also researchers. This study focuses on how policy, context, and community shape people’s experiences of food during COVID-19 in order to better illuminate structural and systemic inequities, support existing community systems, and co-create solutions for long-term change. We will share our findings through academic publications and also through infographics, presentations, and research reports with local, state, and national policymakers and organizations. In doing so, we contribute to a large body of work that is documenting the consequences of COVID-19 on families’ food practices (Isaacs et al., 2021) and the impact of specific policies, in order to support a more just and equitable food system.

This study has limitations. Virtual methods may inhibit participatory methodologies, because conducting interviews by phone or Zoom makes it difficult for researchers to establish strong rapport with participants. In our study, we found that rural residents were particularly hard to recruit, which is something that needs to be addressed in future research. However, this project has produced numerous insights on the research design process that are applicable and important before and after COVID-19, including paying attention to burnout, being reflexive in design and practice, and employing concepts of humility and vulnerability in the research process.

Author’s Note

Bowen and Hardison-Moody are PI and co-PI of the study. Eshleman, Hossfeld, Maaita, Muhammad, Shisler, and Solorzano are researchers who conducted and analyzed interviews. All authors contributed to the writing of this article. The names of the PI and co-PI are first, and the names of additional authors are listed alphabetically.

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