



Disenfranchised: How Lower Income Mothers Navigated the Social Safety Net during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Government programs and other forms of assistance act as critical safety nets in times of crisis. The federal government's initial response to coronavirus disease 2019 represented a significant increase in the welfare state, but the provisions enacted were not permanent and did not reach all families. Drawing on interviews with 54 lower-income mothers and grandmothers, we analyze how families navigated the safety net to access food during the pandemic. Pandemic aid served as a critical support for many families, but participants also described gaps and barriers. Following the argument that food is a basic human right, we identify how mothers encountered three forms of disenfranchisement: being denied or experiencing delayed public benefits, being afraid to access assistance, and receiving paltry or inedible emergency food. We conclude by arguing for an expanded social safety net that broadens access to necessary food resources before, during, and after crises such as the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic.

Keywords

social policy, family, poverty, food security, COVID-19 pandemic

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a pandemic. Social and economic upheaval ensued in the United States and around the world. More than half of U.S. families reported decreases in household employment income at some point during 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau 2021), with low-income families with children experiencing the biggest decline (Bauer et al. 2020). Rates of food insecurity soared in March and April 2020 (Schanzenbach and Pitts 2020) and remained high into early 2021, starting to decline substantially only in April 2021 (Bottemiller Evich 2021; Schanzenbach 2020).

Crises such as COVID-19 inflict immense physical, financial, and emotional harms. Crises also present opportunities to reconsider how governmental and nongovernmental institutions should support people during crises and beyond. The federal government's initial response to COVID-19 was unprecedented in scale, scope, and speed, representing a significant increase in the welfare state. As a result of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which provided cash and food assistance, the poverty rate actually fell in the first four months of the pandemic (Parolin, Curran,

and Wimer 2020). Schanzenbach (2020) wrote that the unprecedented increases in food insecurity “would surely be worse if not for the historic relief efforts from Congress.” But the provisions of the stimulus bills were not permanent, and they did not reach all families. By August 2020, after the stimulus checks and unemployment supplements had expired, poverty rates for Black and Latino/a/x families had increased to even higher prepandemic levels than before the crisis (Parolin et al. 2020). Food insecurity remained well above prepandemic levels through the summer and then rose again in the fall (Keith-Jennings, Nchako, and Llobrera 2021). A September 2020 survey found that 4 in 10 Black and Latino/a/x families with school-age children were experiencing food insecurity, almost triple the rate of white families (Gupta, Gonzalez, and Waxman 2020).

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To better understand how families have coped during these hard and uncertain times, we examine how 54 Black, white, and Latina mothers and grandmothers in North Carolina navigated the safety net to access food during the pandemic. Our interviews, conducted between May and November 2020, reveal how pandemic aid served as a critical support for many families. However, participants also described gaps and barriers as they tried to access public benefits and emergency food aid. Focusing on these narratives and following food justice scholars, activists, and organizations who argue that food is a basic human right (e.g., Alkon et al. 2020; Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Dickinson 2019), we identify three processes of disenfranchisement they experienced: being denied or experiencing delayed public benefits, being afraid to access benefits and other forms of assistance, and receiving paltry or inedible emergency food. We conclude by arguing for an expanded social safety net that takes into account these experiences of disenfranchisement and broadens access to necessary food resources before, during, and after crises such as COVID-19.

Literature

For the past few decades, the federal government has cut safety net programs and made them more difficult to use and/or more contingent on paid employment (with some important exceptions, such as during the Great Recession). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 made receipt of welfare conditional on actively seeking employment and taking any job offered (Hays 2003) and gave states greater flexibility in setting policies around eligibility and sanctions (Meyer and Floyd 2020). Welfare rolls have declined precipitously in the past two decades with these changes, with especially steep declines in southern states, including North Carolina (Meyer and Floyd 2020). In 2018 and 2019, only 7 out of every 100 poor North Carolina families with children received welfare, compared with 74 out of 100 in 1995 and 1996 (Meyer and Floyd 2020). Public benefits are increasingly complicated or cumbersome to get and keep (Dickinson 2019; Eubanks 2019; Hays 2003; Herd and Moynihan 2018; Seefeldt 2016). Herd and Moynihan (2018) argue that these “administrative burdens” are often by design, used by politicians to reduce access to public benefits. Moreover, public assistance programs are interconnected, meaning, for example, that in some states, a welfare sanction can result in the loss of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Moreover, amid proliferating discourses about the undeserving poor (Gordon 1994; Gustafson 2011; Piven and Cloward 1993) and racist tropes about welfare cheats (Hancock 2004), poverty governance has become highly punitive and carceral (Soss et al. 2011). The increasing surveillance and criminalization of those applying for or receiving public aid disproportionately affect people of color

(Arriaga 2016; Crenshaw 1991; García 2017; Schram et al. 2009; Soss et al. 2011).

Federal food assistance programs both exemplify and contradict many of these larger processes. In the wake of cuts to traditional welfare programs, SNAP has become an increasingly important source of income to poor families. SNAP has expanded, both in terms of the number of people covered and in total spending, in the past two decades (Parolin and Brady 2019). Although the conversion of the United States’ main cash assistance program to block grants (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) led to the substantial shrinking of the cash assistance safety net for poor families (Edin and Shaefer 2016; Schott, Pavetti, and Floyd 2015), SNAP remained an entitlement, meaning that anyone who is eligible can receive benefits, with no budget cap. Poppendieck (2014) argues that SNAP and other federal food assistance programs form a “food assistance safety net that is remarkably robust and extensive by American standards” (p. 276). At the same time, SNAP reflects the tenets of other forms of poverty governance. Dickinson (2019) shows that policy makers and politicians have reframed SNAP in the past two decades as a “work support” that is “being used to grease the wheels of labor exploitation” (p. 15). Instead of transforming food assistance programs to support poor families, or raising wages so that people can afford to eat and live, the social safety net has instead been designed to “subsidize low-wage work, encourage community organizations to take responsibility for poverty, and help individuals maintain work-ready bodies” (p. 15). In addition, characterizations of former President Obama as “the food stamp president” and images of Black mothers using SNAP benefits to buy filet mignon and lobster (which in turn were used to justify further restrictions) underscore the racialized politicization of food assistance. Finally, revisions to the public charge rule made by the Trump administration reflect how debates over public assistance (including SNAP) are used to perpetuate and enforce ideas of who belongs. In a rule that went into effect in early 2020 (but was invalidated by the Biden administration in early 2021), SNAP was added to the list of public benefits that could be cited in justifying the denial of permanent residency or citizenship. Although directed at immigrants applying for legal status, the rule may discourage other immigrants from accessing public programs by symbolically conveying messages about desirable and undesirable immigrants (Perreira, Yoshikawa, and Oberlander 2018).

Decisions about how to design and administer public programs affect not only people’s material resources but also their understanding of how the government perceives, recognizes, and deems them as worthy or unworthy (Eubanks 2019; Michener 2018). Soss (1999) found that welfare recipients learned in their interactions with social service providers that “government institutions are hostile places and that officials do not understand, care about, or respond to ‘people like them’” (p. 376). These forms of disenfranchisement

prevent people from seeking assistance and can prevent them from engaging in the political process because of their sense that no one “in a position of power will listen to them” (Soss 1999:376; see also Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Dickinson 2019; Michener 2018; Weaver and Lerman 2010). Michener (2018) further argues that the inequitable access to public resources across and within states (a product of our federalist system) “has political consequences because it sends messages . . . about the fairness, structure, and efficacy of our government” (p. 168).

The case of the pandemic offers an important opportunity to examine the meanings people give to social assistance programs because social assistance has changed so dramatically during this time. After mostly cutting safety net programs and making them harder to use, the U.S. government implemented “a massive increase in the size of the US welfare state” with the passing of the CARES Act and Families First Coronavirus Response Act in March 2020 (Parolin 2021). The federal government provided additional cash and food assistance and relaxed many potential barriers to participation, potentially blunting the impact of exclusionary, punitive, and burdensome social policies on families. But these changes were not permanent, nor did they reach all families equally. In this article, drawing on interviews conducted with 54 diverse lower-income mothers between May and November 2020, we examine how people made sense of various forms of assistance (particularly related to food), how they accessed (or experienced obstacles to accessing) assistance, and how social inequalities infused their experiences and meaning-making. Our findings provide insight into the symbolic and material role these programs play in families’ lives. This information is necessary to understand better ways to support families during future social and economic crises and in noncrisis times.

Background: Food Insecurity and Social Assistance during COVID-19

Food insecurity, broadly defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a lack of “enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members,” generally rises and falls with changes in the economy but has fluctuated between 10 percent and 15 percent since the USDA began tracking it in the early 1990s (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020). In 2019, 10.5 percent of Americans experienced food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020). Rates of food insecurity doubled overall in the early months of the pandemic, tripling among households with children (Schanzenbach 2020; Schanzenbach and Pitts 2020). They remained high throughout the fall and winter, falling only in April 2021 (Bottemiller Evich 2021). Prepandemic patterns in rates of food insecurity reflect broad social inequalities, with Black and Latino/a/x families twice as likely as white families to be food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020); studies find that these disparities persisted during the pandemic (Morales, Morales,

and Beltran 2020; Schanzenbach 2020; Schanzenbach and Pitts 2020; Wolfson and Leung 2020). Before the pandemic, the counties with the highest rates of food insecurity were disproportionately rural, were located in the South, and had large shares of people of color (Feeding America 2019). Surveys indicate that rates of food insecurity during the pandemic have been especially high in the South (Fitzpatrick et al. 2021; Gundersen et al. 2020).

To address rising rates of poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity, the CARES Act and Families First Coronavirus Response Act, both passed in March 2020, enacted substantial boosts to the federal safety net. The CARES Act provided one-time payments to families below a certain income threshold and a temporary supplement to unemployment benefits (Parolin et al. 2020). With more than \$1 billion in funding for federal food assistance programs, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act allowed states to make it easier to apply for or receive benefits, temporarily boosted benefits for some families, and removed or reduced certain restrictions. All states eventually implemented modifications to increase flexibility and boost benefits. Three food assistance programs were especially critical for families with school-age children, like most of the families in our study. First, the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program provided SNAP benefits—in North Carolina, a maximum of \$370 per child, paid in two installments in May and June 2020—to replace the National School Lunch Program free or reduced-price breakfasts and lunches students no longer received after schools ceased in-person instruction (Koné Consulting 2020).¹ Second, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act allowed states to temporarily boost SNAP benefits to the maximum threshold for households that had previously received less than the maximum (approximately 60 percent of SNAP recipients, as estimated by the CBPP [2020]). All states used this option.² Finally, a majority of school districts across the country continued distributing food during the pandemic through waivers issued by the federal government that allow schools to distribute to-go meals.

Although SNAP and other federal programs are by far the most important forms of food assistance, not all families who need them are eligible, and the benefits are not sufficient for all households (Enriquez and Goldstein 2020; Johnson-Green

¹All states eventually offered P-EBT programs for the end of the 2019–2020 school year. The rollout of the P-EBT program for the 2020–2021 school year has been slower, but most (but not all) states also eventually had P-EBT programs for the 2020–2021 school year (CBPP 2021). In addition, the Biden administration announced a 15 percent increase within days of the inauguration, as well as a P-EBT program for summer 2021.

²The USDA regularly estimates the costs of feeding a family of four according to federal nutrition guidelines. This estimate is known as the Thrifty Food Plan, which the USDA defends as a “national standard for a nutritious diet at a minimal cost” (Carlson et al. 2007).

2020). Charitable food assistance programs such as food pantries and soup kitchens act as critical stop-gaps (Dickinson 2019). However, food pantries and food banks have been heavily strained during the pandemic (DeWitt 2021; Morello 2020), potentially blunting their shock absorption capacity. Previous studies find that food-insecure individuals sometimes eschew charitable food assistance because of concrete barriers (such as long lines or a lack of information) as well as the perception that accessing these services is demeaning and a threat to their dignity (Fong, Wright, and Wimer 2016). These symbolic and material barriers may have increased during the pandemic (as food pantries have had to quickly increase capacity during very challenging circumstances). However, with many people going to food pantries for the first time during the pandemic (Morello 2020), people's feelings of stigma and shame about accessing charitable food may have decreased.

Method

This research is part of a broader longitudinal project about food access, poverty, and family life. In the larger study, researchers collected data over an eight-year period (2012–2020) with 124 caregiver-child dyads in low-income households in North Carolina. The study incorporated a range of methods and included interviews with both mothers and children about their food beliefs and practices, as well as their experiences with food insecurity. This article draws predominantly from 54 interviews conducted from May to November 2020 that focused on how families were coping in light of the pandemic, what resources they turned to, and what the pandemic and resultant local, state, and federal responses meant for their food environments and practices. Nearly half of the interviews were conducted in May and June 2020 ($n = 26$).

The study took place in two rural and one urban counties in North Carolina. We specifically recruited female caregivers because research consistently demonstrates that women do a bulk of the food work in U.S. households (DeVault 1991; Taillie 2018) and often serve as the primary buffers of food insecurity in households with children (Martin and Lippert 2012). To be eligible, participants had to report a household income at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line (\$22,350 for a family of four in 2011), be the primary caregiver of at least one child between the ages of 2 and 8, and do at least half of the food work for the household at the start of the study. Grandmothers who fit these criteria were eligible to participate. The original sample in year 1 included 10 grandmothers and 114 mothers. Fifty-two identified as Black, 41 as white, 30 as Latina, and 1 as mixed race/other.

We conducted in-depth interviews in years 1, 3, 5, and 8. Of the original sample, 90 percent participated in year 3 ($n = 112$), 73 percent participated in year 5 ($n = 90$), and 44 percent participated in year 8 ($n = 54$). A team of Black, white, Latino/a/x, and Asian American women and

nonbinary researchers across a variety of class backgrounds conducted interviews in English or Spanish, depending on participants' preferences. In each wave, interviews generally lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and almost all took place in participants' homes, with the exception of year 8, when interviews were conducted over the phone or by video call (Zoom) because of restrictions on in-person data collection. The year 8 interviews were designed as focused "check-in" interviews to reduce participant burden and lasted 30 minutes on average.³

We engaged in critical, reflexive analysis about the research process throughout the project (Elliott, McKelvy, and Bowen 2017), and researchers wrote memos after each interview, which we discussed in weekly team meetings. This ongoing reflection and analysis led us to adjust research protocols each year, such as pursuing emergent themes that warranted additional exploration (e.g., experiences of domestic violence, discrimination, immigration and deportation fears, and religious practices and beliefs). Interview topics thus shifted in each year, although food work and the food environment remained central.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms were applied. A team of researchers coded year 1, 3, and 5 interviews for key analytic concepts using qualitative coding software (NVivo and Dedoose). The authors coded year 8 interviews by hand on an ongoing basis as interviews were conducted. Analysis for this article followed an iterative process of coding, writing memos, and discussing until we reached consensus. Extensive memos deepened the analytic process by elaborating on our insights and linking them to specific pieces of data (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). In the article, we draw on our cumulative knowledge of participants' experiences during the eight years of the study but focus mainly on the interviews conducted during the pandemic.

Description of Year 8 Sample

Participants are described in Table 1. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The year 8 sample included 5 grandmothers and 49 mothers, with an average age of 42 years. Almost half of the sample was Black (46 percent [$n = 25$]), a slightly smaller share was white (41 percent [$n = 22$]), and 13 percent ($n = 7$) was Latina. Six mothers were immigrants from Mexico; all disclosed that they were undocumented. All of the other participants were born in the United States. All participants had been primary caregivers of at least one child between 2 and 8 years old when the study began. However, three participants no longer had custody of their children in year 8. The sample therefore included 51 households with children and 3 households without children. Just over half of participants (56 percent [$n = 30$]) were

³Because of a recorder error, we did not have audio for one interview.

Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics.

Pseudonym	Race	Age	Number of Dependent Children	Occupation	Benefits
Adriana	Latina	41	5	Fast-food worker	None
Alberta	Black	36	3	Teacher	None
Angie	Latina	32	2	Restaurant worker	None
Annabelle	White	54	1	Stay-at-home mom	SNAP
Annie	Black	50	1	House cleaner	SNAP
Beatrice ^a	Black	54	2	CNA	None
Becca	White	48	1	Delivery driver ^b	SNAP, WIC
Becky	White	34	5	Unemployed ^c	SNAP, WIC
Brianna	Black	36	4	Cashier	SNAP
Bridgette ^a	White	58	1	Mail carrier	None
Carletta	Black	36	2	Unemployed	SNAP
Chaniqua	Black	40	2	Student	SNAP
Ciara	Black	31	2	Medical technician	None
Clara	Latina	47	1	Unemployed	SNAP
Clarissa	White	63	2	Unemployed	SNAP
Cristina	Latina	36	4	Stay-at-home mom	SNAP, WIC
Daniella	Black	33	3	In-home caregiver ^c	SNAP
Easter	Black	33	2	Medical technician	SNAP
Elsa	Latina	46	4	House cleaner	None
Emmy	Black	55	1	Customer service employee	SNAP
Fiona	White	34	3	Construction worker	None
Flavia	Latina	35	4	House cleaner ^b	None
Gladys	Black	57	1	Unemployed ^d	None
Heather	White	37	0 ^e	Fast-food worker	None
Heaven	Black	41	1	Cleaning service employee ^b	SNAP
Jackie	White	52	1	Retail sales associate	None
Jada	Black	49	2	Unemployed	SNAP
Janice	White	50	2	Retail sales associate	None
Jarissa	Black	38	2	Restaurant worker ^b	SNAP
Jordan	White	32	2	Food delivery driver	None
Kathy	White	48	2	Church administrator	None
Kelly	White	31	0 ^e	Agricultural worker	None
Kimberly	Black	34	1	Customer service employee	None
Lisa	White	48	2	Unemployed	None
Makenzie	White	34	6	Self-employed online sales	SNAP, WIC
Mandy	White	46	2	House cleaner ^b	None
Melanie	White	42	1	Teacher	None
Michelle	White	32	4	CNA	SNAP, WIC
Miranda	White	41	2	Retail sales associate	SNAP
Nichelle	Black	29	2	Restaurant worker	SNAP, WIC
Nicole	Black	36	2	Unemployed	None
Patricia ^a	Black	65	2	Unemployed ^d	SNAP
Paula	Latina	31	3	Unemployed	WIC
Robin ^a	White	60	4	Grocery store staff	SNAP
Ruth	Black	50	2	Stay-at-home mom ^d	None
Sahara	Black	39	3	Stay-at-home mom	SNAP
Serena	Black	35	2	CNA	SNAP
Sharon	White	44	2	Secretary	None
Shawna	Black	42	1	Unemployed	SNAP
Stephanie	White	40	2	Hospital support staff	None
Tamika	Black	34	3	Unemployed	SNAP
Tricia	White	37	3	Teacher	None
Trinity	Black	28	0 ^e	Unemployed	None
Winifred ^a	Black	77	3 ^f	Unemployed	None

Note: SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

^aGrandmother

^bUnemployed because of coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic.

^cStudent.

^dDisabled.

^eDoes not have custody of children.

^fChildren live in home part-time.

working at the time of the interview. Those who were employed tended to work in “essential” job sectors, including health care, retail, and food services. Forty-three percent of participants ($n = 23$) were not working at the time of the interview. This included 14 unemployed participants and 4 stay-at-home mothers at the start of the pandemic, as well as 5 participants who lost their jobs because of the pandemic. One participant was a student with no other job. Forty-eight percent of participants ($n = 26$) were receiving SNAP; 6 of these people were also receiving Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits. One person reported receiving WIC benefits only.

We used the USDA’s measure of adult food insecurity throughout all four waves of the study. Fifty-one percent of participants were classified as food insecure in year 1 (63 of 124 people, with 60 classified as food secure and 1 with missing data). When we look at changes in the group of 54 people who we interviewed in year 8, 50 percent were food insecure in year 1 ($n = 27$), mirroring the larger sample. Rates of food insecurity fell in years 3 and 5 for both the larger sample and year 8 participants, reflecting changes in the economy.

Somewhat surprisingly, food insecurity rates continued to fall in year 8; just under a quarter of participants (22 percent [12 of 54]) were classified as food insecure according to the USDA’s 10-item adult food insecurity scale, down from 29 percent of participants in year 5. This finding was unexpected given national surveys indicating that rates of food insecurity rose during the pandemic. Although we cannot say definitively why the prevalence of food insecurity in our sample was lower than expected, we note that most of our interviews were conducted in summer 2020, when P-EBT benefits were available and national food insecurity rates had fallen from their highs in the first weeks of the pandemic. Most participants had school-age children, making them (potentially) eligible for P-EBT. And although our sample includes some groups at high risk for food insecurity (e.g., single-parent households, Black households), other high-risk groups are underrepresented (e.g., immigrant households, who represented 6 of 54 households, and households with adults who are not formally employed or caring for children).

In previous waves of the study (years 1, 3, and 5), we asked only about adult food insecurity, to minimize participant burden. In year 8, given reports that child food insecurity had specifically increased during the pandemic (Schanzenbach 2020; Schanzenbach and Pitts 2020), we administered the USDA’s 18-item food insecurity scale, which includes questions to capture child food insecurity. On the basis of this scale, 32 percent (17 of 54) of households were classified as food insecure, meaning that they were categorized as having low or very low food security. All 17 had dependent children in their care. Most (12 of the 17 participants classified as food insecure) had reported food insecurity in previous years of the study as they weathered hardships

such as unemployment, eviction, health conditions, medical expenses, domestic violence, and loss of benefits. Six (about one third of food-insecure households in year 8) were classified as food insecure throughout all four waves of the study. Nationally, about a quarter of food-insecure households experience persistent food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020), an indicator of marginalization and extreme poverty (Edin and Schaefer 2016). (Participants’ food insecurity status across the four waves of data collection is available as a supplementary file.) In addition to the 17 households classified as food insecure, 13 households were categorized as experiencing marginal food security according to the 18-item scale, indicating their food security was precarious. Combined, more than half of the participants (30 of 54 participants [56 percent]) faced concerns about maintaining their food supplies. In the findings, we sometimes note participants’ classifications on the basis of their responses to the USDA’s 18-item scale, but we also acknowledge the limitations of this measure for fully and accurately capturing the range of experiences of food insecurity (Johnson et al. 2021). We offer this information for descriptive purposes to provide more context for participants’ narratives.

Findings

With the abrupt start of the pandemic, families found themselves buying more food to feed the people who were now home all day. At the same time, food prices increased. Federal food assistance programs were critical supports for many of the families in our study. However, families faced barriers to accessing pandemic aid, including having benefits denied or delayed, being afraid to access food and other assistance, and receiving insufficient emergency food. These barriers are not unique to the pandemic, but the pandemic provides a unique case given changes that removed administrative burdens and made programs more generous.

Living on the Margins: “Everything’s Gone Up but the Pay”

The pandemic disrupted participants’ budgets by increasing household expenses and, for some, decreasing income. As Miranda put it, “Everything’s gone up but the pay.” Those who received stimulus payments typically said the money went toward bills. Mothers nearly unanimously said that their household bills had increased with more people home all day. They mentioned increased light (electric) and water bills, along with the increased cost of food. Becky said that her children seemed, “to eat all day long.” Robin lived in a rural area and had always kept a large garden and laying hens, but found she couldn’t keep up with her grandchildren’s appetites: “They’re eating more everything. Everything! Whether it’s homegrown stuff, whether it’s, you know, it’s everything. I know my chickens can’t keep up with the amount of eggs that [they] go through.”

Mothers were well versed in what it took to put food on the table and expressed a gritty resilience and determination in the face of extraordinarily challenging circumstances. However, pandemic conditions made it harder to enact the strategies they had previously relied on to make their food stretch. Before the pandemic, they had routinely shopped at multiple locations to get the best deals (MacNell et al. 2017), but most shifted to trying to do all of their shopping at once, as quickly as possible, to reduce their risk for exposure. At the store, they felt compelled to purchase what was available, even if it was more expensive than they were used to paying. With disruptions in agricultural supply chains between March and May 2020 (Chenarides, Manfredo, and Richards 2021) and widespread stockpiling early in the pandemic (Ellison et al. 2021; Lusk and McCluskey 2020), staple foods became hard to find, and the prices of some foods increased. “The price of beef has skyrocketed,” Becca explained. “And beef and chicken are the main meat, the main proteins that we [eat]. . . . So it’s a lot of meals that we have to get creative with.” Some stores stopped offering deals during the pandemic that mothers had previously relied on. For example, one store stopped selling a popular value “meat box” that many participants had purchased regularly. Informal sources of food, such as exchanging produce, eggs, or other foods with neighbors, were also disrupted by the pandemic.

In this context, the additional SNAP benefits (both P-EBT and the “expanded” SNAP) were vital (Enriquez and Goldstein 2020). Asked in mid-July about what grocery shopping had been like during the pandemic, Miranda replied, “The last couple of months have been a lot easier because, you know, they did the P-EBT.” P-EBT was a new program that had to be rolled out during the pandemic. Even though North Carolina was the third state in the country to have its P-EBT program approved, families did not begin receiving this assistance until May, even though schools closed in March. In many states, including North Carolina, P-EBT benefits (and expanded SNAP benefits) were delivered directly to recipients, with no action required on their part. Direct dispersal of benefits was helpful given ongoing confusion over what aid was available and who qualified (Kapur 2020). In addition, likely because the benefits came automatically, some mothers seemed to view them as universal entitlements that the government had made available to assist families in a time of crisis. Elsa, an immigrant from Mexico, had decided not to apply for SNAP in the past, but said she had received a P-EBT card with \$300 in the mail in June, with no action required on her part. She believed that these cards were distributed to “all the children” in the school. P-EBT was for children receiving free or reduced-price lunch only—in the counties in our study, it did not go to all children—but Elsa’s sense that it was universal may have made her feel more comfortable receiving it. Although Elsa and her husband were undocumented, their U.S.-born children were

eligible for SNAP. However, in previous interviews, she talked about not using SNAP because of the stigma attached to it and her sense that people should try to make it on their own. In previous interviews, other Latino/a/x immigrant families in our study described being reluctant to apply for SNAP or other federal benefits because of misinformation or because they feared exposing their families to additional surveillance or even deportation (see also Bovell-Ammon et al. 2019, Kaushal, Waldfogel, and Wight 2014, Menjívar and Abrego 2012). In this case, because Elsa thought that the P-EBT benefits were available for everyone, she did not seem to feel the same stigma about accepting the support during the pandemic.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act also expanded SNAP by raising all households’ allotment to the maximum level. For households with incomes that had been close to the cutoff, who were previously receiving the minimum level of benefits, the increases were substantial. Emmy maintained her job at a software call center during the pandemic and said that her finances actually “changed for a little bit of the better . . . because they gave more SNAP benefits. . . . We’ve only been getting \$15 [per month] in food stamps for the last like four or five years since I started working this full-time job.” Some low-wage households experienced food insecurity in the period before they received the expanded SNAP benefits. Easter, who worked the third shift as a medical technician, was food insecure until her SNAP benefits were increased to the maximum. When we interviewed her in June, she was doing better, but she worried about how she would keep food on the table when the extra benefits were taken away. Researchers and policy analysts argue that SNAP increasingly functions to subsidize low-wage and unstable jobs (and the employers who hire workers in substandard working conditions) by making it possible for workers to afford food (Dickinson 2019; Keith-Jennings and Chaudhry 2018).

Federal food assistance programs were not always sufficient. Carletta expressed gratitude for the additional SNAP benefits she received but said that she had shifted to shopping at cheaper stores and relying on less expensive food, such as cheap meals like Hamburger Helper, to stretch her food budget. “I find ways to make it,” she said. Beatrice said the P-EBT benefits and stimulus check had helped but were not enough. Describing her situation, she said, “We ration what we have. You know—I make sure the kids eat first and we have meals that we can stretch.” Previous studies have documented how mothers sacrifice to feed their children, with negative consequences for their own health and well-being (Gundersen and Ziliak 2014, 2018; Hanson and Connor 2016). Low-income mothers also have to assess the cost of food on the basis of the sticker price while taking into consideration how long it will last, how much food might be wasted, and how satiating it will be (Daniel 2020). Not factoring in these “hidden costs” underestimates the real-world cost of feeding a family. Robin, introduced

above, was thankful to be receiving SNAP benefits at the onset of the pandemic as a result of a job change the year before that had reduced her income, but it did not make up the gap and she was spending more money on food. She said, “I’m thankful for the food stamps to help. . . . It doesn’t help everything, but it helps.”

Processes of Disenfranchisement: Navigating Barriers to Assistance during the Pandemic

In addition to describing the importance of expanded food assistance programs, mothers also discussed challenges in accessing aid. In what follows, we focus on three processes of disenfranchisement in mothers’ narratives: having public benefits denied or delayed, being reluctant or unwilling to access aid out of fear of the virus or distrust in the government, and receiving inadequate emergency food. Not all participants described these barriers, but for families that did, barriers often presented themselves in tandem.

Denied or Delayed Benefits: “The Caseworker Absolutely Refused to Make the Change.” Some participants described feeling excluded from various forms of pandemic aid, typically by being deemed ineligible or experiencing delays in receiving benefits. For example, because the revisions to SNAP and other food assistance programs did not increase eligibility caps, they did not help people whose incomes were just above the threshold, even when they faced pandemic conditions that stretched their budgets or led to temporary drops in income. To look after her daughter when schools closed at the onset of the pandemic, Kimberly took three weeks off from her customer service job without pay. She was still struggling financially to make up for the lost wages and reported very low food security when we interviewed her in mid-June, but her income made her ineligible for SNAP. Tricia said that when she had applied two years ago for her children to receive free or reduced-price lunches at school, they had “missed the cutoff by maybe like, \$50 or something.” Because of this, she said they were ineligible for both P-EBT and to-go meals provided by the schools. (Many schools, including at our study sites, made to-go meals available for everyone, but mothers were not always aware of this.) “If your child was on free or reduced lunch at school, they sent you a card [with P-EBT benefits]. My best friend received that,” Tricia said.

And I know they would distribute lunch every day, I think at certain locations for parents to pick up. . . . That’d be nice if they did that [for] everybody. . . . I have three kids at home to feed and I didn’t get anything because I missed the cutoff by a little bit.

Tricia described feeding her children “basic and simple” midday meals such as peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or

instant ramen noodles, noting “we don’t have the money for giant lunches.” She said the stimulus bill had overlooked families like hers who were denied public benefits: “I feel he [Trump] needs to do something for families that are right on the border. The ones that missed the cutoff for assistance are the ones that really struggle.” Like Tricia, some mothers expressed a sense that they had been overlooked. Serena said people in positions of “power” were not sufficiently supporting lower income families because “they’re not experiencing the things we’re going through.” Although SNAP is an entitlement and expands and contracts with the economy, making it particularly important during crises, as Moffitt and Ziliak (2021) argued, the program needs to be adjusted to better support families on the margins during economic downturns. This could include things such as automatically suspending the limit on household assets to qualify for SNAP or adjusting eligibility caps in times of crisis (Moffitt and Ziliak 2021).

Participants also struggled when not all members of their household were eligible for assistance. Many lower-income households have family configurations that deviate from the standard North American family (Grady 2016; MacDonald, Hayes, and Houston 2018), as people double up or pool resources to get by, yet these families are often deliberately unacknowledged by social services (Meyer and Floyd 2020) and deliberately targeted through coercive policies that aim to uphold two-parent, cis-gendered, heteronormative family systems (Roberts 1997). Like several families in our study, Clarissa had informal custody of her grandson, in her case because his father, her son, was incarcerated. But Clarissa said she did not receive the \$500 child stimulus payment for him “because he’s my grandson and not my child.” Similarly, Becky was caring for her nephew informally and so did not receive SNAP benefits for him.

Some participants did not receive benefits they thought they were eligible for during the pandemic and did not know why. Becca said she had not received the emergency expanded SNAP benefits, even though she was receiving “only \$50 a month” at the onset of the pandemic, far less than the maximum. She explained, “Some people have gotten like their food stamps increased to the maximum. But they didn’t do that at all or anything [for us].” She did not know why she had not received the automatic increase, but throughout the eight-year study, we observed how administrative errors affected families’ access to benefits (see also Dickinson 2019; Seefeldt 2016). Although some errors are inevitable in the administration of any program, Dickinson (2019) found that SNAP administrators often viewed their job “as policing the boundaries between those who genuinely deserve help and those who are trying to defraud the system” (p. 41). Dickinson describes how “case workers often conducted meetings with clients as interrogations, asking for specific information and entering it into their computers as quickly as possible without explaining what was happening or why”

(pp. 62–63).⁴ In Becca’s case, she said her SNAP caseworker had “absolutely refused” to adjust her benefits even after both Becca and her husband lost their jobs. She phoned her caseworker in July to explain the situation. “[The caseworker said], ‘It’s coming up [for review] in October, we’ll just do it [then],’” Becca recounted. In the meantime, the family was experiencing extreme financial precarity and very low food security (according to the USDA definition). Becca’s husband was never approved for unemployment. Becca did not know why this happened, but North Carolina is known for having one of the worst state unemployment systems. Only 9 percent of unemployed people received benefits in 2019, the lowest share in the country (Porter 2021). Becca received unemployment benefits when she lost her job in July, including the \$600 per week federal supplement to state unemployment checks, for three weeks until the program ran out at the end of July. (The government did not renew this program until December 2020 and did so at a lower amount.) Starting in August, Becca received \$88 a week in unemployment. Further exacerbating things, Becca’s 20-year-old daughter, who lived with them, had mental health diagnoses that meant she could not work or go to college. Before the pandemic, Becca had completed the required paperwork to get her daughter on SNAP, but the application was denied: “[The caseworker] gave me a form for the doctor to fill out. The doctor filled it out. I brought it and they still didn’t put my child in the system.” Becca perceived the bureaucratic intransigence that she experienced—when “they still didn’t put [her] child in the system” even after she followed all of the rules—as inexplicable (Soss 1999).

Some mothers who did not receive aid spoke resentfully of undeserving others whom they perceived as benefiting when they did not. These sentiments were especially prominent among white mothers, consistent with research showing that opposition to welfare is higher among white Americans and has risen in tandem with white racial resentment in recent decades (Wetts and Willer 2018). Without explicitly invoking race, some white mothers drew on widely disseminated discourses of undeserving recipients of government aid that have racist underpinnings (Gordon 1994; Gustafson 2011; Hancock 2004; Piven and Cloward 1993). Miranda was frustrated that she had to continue working at her food service job without hazard pay while others were

never worked a day in their life. Their kids never worked a day in their life. And they all received that \$1200 [stimulus payment].

Miranda’s sense of disenfranchisement from pandemic aid in relation to unworthy “other” beneficiaries who “never worked a day in their life” is reflective of the individualistic, bootstrap ideology that pervades U.S. political culture (especially among rural white Americans) and silences public calls for collective supports and more inclusive policies (Hochschild 2016; Metzl 2017).

Finally, some participants did not receive benefits because they were explicitly excluded. Public assistance programs have long excluded categories of people on the basis of “discriminatory eligibility rules” (Eubanks 2019:29). Pandemic policies disrupted some of these patterns and upheld others. For example, because the P-EBT program provided food assistance to all families eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, including undocumented immigrants, it quickly directed additional food resources to immigrant families who may have been ineligible for or unwilling to use SNAP. At the same time, the first stimulus checks were not sent to households with any “unauthorized” immigrants (unless the head of household had served in the military) (Narea 2020). Elsa, an immigrant from Mexico, was disillusioned that she did not receive “assistance,” despite paying taxes for more than 20 years: “That does seem a bit unfair, no? Because we are paying taxes, we are doing everything the government wants, and we are not [helped]. They [US government] omitted us altogether.” (“Eso si se me hace como un poco injusto, no? Porque nosotros estamos pagando tasas, estamos haciendo todo lo que el gobierno quiere y nosotros no. Nos omitieron del todo.”) (As discussed above, P-EBT, which was available to all families eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, was an exception). Elsa’s comments both resist and reflect a broadly held discourse around food centered on deservingness (rather than framing food as an essential human right; see Chilton and Rose 2009). When food is framed as something that some people deserve (because they are employed, work hard enough, or share a certain status or identity), not a right to which everyone has a claim, some people will be disenfranchised from the food and services they need, even when they are “doing everything” the right way (Dickinson 2020).

Fearing the Virus and the Government Response: “You Really Don’t Know if They Are Going to Take Advantage of the Pandemic to Detain You.” Fear magnified many of the challenges families faced: fear of contracting COVID-19 and of the repercussions of relying on the government for assistance (in particular among the immigrant families in our study). Some mothers’ fears revealed that they held little trust in the government to protect and support them through the crisis. Changes in immigration policies over the past two decades have expanded the U.S. government’s capacity to detain and deport undocumented immigrants (Menjívar and Abrego

not willing to work because of this [pandemic unemployment supplement]. . . . I kind of feel like we’re being slapped in the face. We’re putting ourselves out there . . . and we’re not seeing any extra money anywhere. I have neighbors next to me that

⁴Soss et al.’s (2011) research suggests that decisions about sanctions may also display patterns of racial bias, even when caseworkers do not overtly express discriminatory beliefs. In particular, they found that welfare caseworkers were more likely to sanction Black than white welfare recipients for the same violation.

2012). For example, the North Carolina legislature passed a state law in 2006 that required North Carolinians to provide a Social Security number to obtain a driver's license. This meant that many immigrants who needed to drive were forced to drive with expired licenses or no license at all (Straut-Eppsteiner 2021). Even though she struggled to put food on the table, Angie, an immigrant from Mexico, was only comfortable going to one nearby food pantry where she collected a food box every other week. Each time she drove, she feared being pulled over and having her vehicle impounded when she was unable to produce a license. Menjivar and Abrego (2012) argue that immigration enforcement policies constitute a form of "legal violence" that pervades immigrants' daily lives, making it harder to feed their families, care for their children, and carry out other basic tasks.

Although immigrant mothers had expressed fear of deportation and surveillance in previous interviews, some worried that surveillance had increased during the pandemic. Flavia, an immigrant from Mexico, feared that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) would use the pandemic as an opportunity to detain and deport immigrants: "You really didn't know if they were going to take advantage of that [stay-at-home orders] to detain you." ("Uno la verdad no sabía que si se iban a aprovechar de eso para poder detenerlo a uno.") Fearing ICE round-ups, Flavia was limiting her outings to only the most essential. Similarly, Angie, introduced above, said her family had lost desperately needed income when her husband was forced to leave work early to avoid the possibility of being stopped for violating curfew without necessary documentation: "He would leave early so he could get home early and not have any difficulties on the road getting back." ("Se venía temprano para poder llegar a casa temprano y no tener dificultades en el camino para poder llegar.") Confirming these fears, a study found that people of color were more harshly policed than white people for violating COVID-19 public health orders (Emmer et al. 2020). Xenophobic and nativist rhetoric and policies also made some immigrant families afraid to access programs such as SNAP even when they were eligible. Neither Flavia nor Angie had applied for SNAP benefits even though they both had children who, as U.S. citizens, were eligible for SNAP.

In addition to the fears of deportation and surveillance expressed by undocumented women in the study, many mothers, in particular Black mothers, worried that the government was not doing enough to protect them and their families and said they lacked information about the virus. Patricia said, "I honestly think the federal government . . . knew before [about the virus] and they did not do anything to stop the spread before it got like this." Ciara described the federal government's handling of the pandemic as "horrible" and said, "There's a lot of mixed [information] being put out there." When asked about the federal response to the pandemic, Emmy said, "I just kind of feel like there's some things that they aren't sharing with us." Beatrice, echoing Emmy, said she thought the government had concealed

information from the public because "the government just didn't want to have a panic." Interviewed in July, Beatrice was worried about being a "guinea pig" when a vaccine became available. "All we're gonna do is be guinea pigs. They don't know whether it's gonna work or not," she said. Her use of the term "guinea pig" evokes the history of racist medical research—such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which denied Black study participants lifesaving medication—that shapes Black communities' trust in the federal government (Ferdinand 2021; Oyarzun 2020; Washington 2006). The continued disparities and traumatic losses communities of color have experienced before and during the pandemic shape whether and how people access the resources they need. As a result of systemic atrocities committed against certain groups of people by the state, many historically oppressed groups are suspicious, distrustful, or fearful of the government (Oyarzun 2020). Expressing pessimism that the government could reasonably protect people, Beatrice reflects this perception/reality, asserting that "only the strong will survive."

Mothers of color also stated that they did not plan to send their children back even if schools reopened, suggesting they did not have faith in these institutions to keep them safe. "I'm not sending them to school [if they reopen]," Chaniqua said. Some white mothers also wanted their children to stay home if schools reopened but were more equivocal. Having lost a family member to COVID-19, Miranda was more concerned than some of the other white mothers. "I honestly feel they need to leave schools closed," she said, explaining that if "certain businesses are still closed," it did not make sense to open schools. But she was not going to insist her kids stay home if schools reopened, telling them instead, "I'd rather you stay home." And although white mothers were often critical of the government's handling of the pandemic, some were ambivalent, describing public health measures, such as mask mandates and sheltering in place, as overblown and harmful to the economy. Mothers of color often stated, in contrast, that the government was prioritizing the economy over saving lives. "They're putting money before people's lives," Sahara said, explaining that the health of "companies" was the government's primary focus.

In a context of uncertainty, participants made decisions about whether to access certain forms of food assistance on the basis of their sense of how safe it was. Easter stopped participating in her children's school to-go meal program once they started requiring people to come to the school to pick up meals rather than delivering them. Serena's children's school also offered free to-go meals, but Serena had decided not to pick them up out of fear of being exposed to COVID-19. The virus "makes me not want to go anywhere," she said. "I really don't go anywhere." Like Serena, other participants made decisions about whether to participate in food assistance programs on the basis of risk calculations. Some perceived school meal pick-ups as particularly risky. As Jordan put it, "We wanted to get the school meals, but no,

we never did that. . . . We didn't want to join the crowd. Didn't think that was the smartest thing to do."

Both Jordan, a white mom, and Serena, a Black mom, had preexisting health conditions that magnified their concerns, and both also worked in low-wage jobs that exposed them to the virus. Poor and working-class people and people of color are more likely to have preexisting health conditions and more likely to work in "essential" service and care work jobs, which means that they are disproportionately exposed to both the financial and health implications of the pandemic (Bateman and Ross 2020; Belanger 2020; Garfield et al. 2020; Pirtle 2020). Serena was a certified nursing assistant at a large hospital and, when interviewed in the spring, knew at least two people who had contracted COVID-19. Jordan was a food delivery driver who said that some of her customers still wanted their food delivered the "old-fashioned, hand-me-my-stuff" way rather than opting for "no contact delivery."

Like many essential workers, Jordan and Serena didn't feel they had control over the conditions of their employment (Alkon et al. 2020). However, they could control other aspects of their lives, including limiting other outings. So although their decision to avoid collecting free school meals could be seen as a personal one, it was informed by structural conditions, including underlying health conditions that are disproportionately prevalent among members of historically oppressed groups, work conditions that increased the chances of infection while offering minimal to no benefits such as sick leave or health insurance, and an inadequate and fractured public health response. Participants were not simply opting out; instead, they were upholding their family's dignity and reluctantly forgoing services to protect their families from institutions that had harmed them in the past and a virus that was disproportionately affecting their communities stemming from legacies of discrimination and disinvestment (Wright and Merritt 2020).

Mothers of color sometimes spoke of worries that the government would use their receipt of pandemic aid against them in years to come. The welfare state plays a prominent role in policing and punishing poor families (Eubanks 2019), with people of color especially vulnerable to state surveillance and punishment (Gurusami 2017, 2019; Reich 2005; Roberts 1997). Nicole said she appreciated the stimulus payment she received but was worried it might "be something that bites us in the end with taxes getting raised or we have to pay it back or, you know, they find a way to get the money back from us in the long run." Other participants described family members who were reluctant to access pandemic aid out of fears of having to pay it back. Emmy's brother had lost his job early in the spring but did not immediately apply for unemployment and did not want to receive the \$600 extended benefit that was part of the stimulus bill because, as he told Emmy, "They gonna get that money back somewhere." He delayed applying for two months, and "Now it's like, almost impossible [to get]. He's on the line, and he's trying to get

through and can't get through to anyone." With mouths to feed, not all participants could turn down pandemic aid, consistent with research that finds that low-income mothers are less able to avoid state contact than individuals without children (Fong 2019), but mothers of color worried about it harming them, now or in the future. And some felt that accessing aid was too risky.

Insufficient and Inedible Emergency Food Aid: "Just Because It's Free Doesn't Mean That People Are Going to Want to Eat Garbage." A final mechanism of disenfranchisement was the indignity of receiving inadequate emergency food from school meals or food pantries. Participants relied on emergency food to fill in gaps in federal food assistance programs, but the food they received was not under their control. For example, Chaniqua went to a food pantry approximately twice a week because her SNAP benefits did not adequately cover the cost of food during the pandemic. She found that the amount of food could vary widely and it was never enough, even though she tried to arrive early. She was working to make their food last and reminding herself and her children "to be a little more grateful to eat what we got." Like Chaniqua, food-insecure participants often continued to go to food pantries despite feeling dismay about how little they received, and some described focusing on what they could control: their feelings about the food and efforts to stretch it. Food pantries have experienced unprecedented demand during the pandemic (DeWitt 2021; Morello 2020), intensifying the challenges they already faced (Hardison-Moody et al. 2015; Scola and Brown 2020; Tarasuk and Eakin 2003). Mothers described waiting in long lines at food pantries for small amounts of food. Adriana, whose family was experiencing low food security according to the USDA definition, initially resisted going to a food pantry near her home, believing that others might need the help more than she did (see also Fong et al. 2016). When she finally went, Adriana said the wait was usually over an hour and she left empty-handed.

Food pantries were forced to adapt their procedures to adhere to social distancing and safety requirements, and these shifts often had negative consequences for their clients. Becca talked about how COVID restrictions made it harder to get the food her family needed at the pantry. The food pantry had previously used a client choice model, a "best practice" in emergency food settings that allows participants to walk through the pantry and choose the foods they want and need (An et al. 2019). This meant Becca could choose foods her family liked and avoid allergens. During the pandemic, however, the food pantry had to modify its procedures to comply with social distancing and other risk reduction recommendations. Becca explained, "You can't go in the building anymore. You come wearing a mask and then show them your ID and . . . they pick out the stuff [but] they don't look at the food allergies."

Working-class and poor families not only experience low social standing but also a lack of social recognition and

dignity in unequal societies (Bourdieu et al. 1999; Sennett and Cobb 1972). The language used by some mothers to describe the experience of receiving inadequate emergency food reflected their experience of these daily indignities. What Sennett and Cobb (1972) call “the hidden injuries of class” involve the emotional toll exacted by being poor, including a sense of being ignored and devalued. Becca, for example, expressed frustration that her family could not eat much of the food they received because of their food allergies. She had also recently received a whole ham from a food pantry, but their oven was broken. Unwilling to see it go to waste, she “cut it off the bone” and cooked pieces of it on the stove. Clarissa described the offerings at a pantry in her rural area as “an insult”:

They give you a choice of one can of vegetables, and one choice of bread, and one choice of meat. One thing of anything is not going to help feed a family of three! You can't take one little steak and divide it in three. It is not going to work. That's just—that's just an insult. And most of the vegetables that they're getting, if they have any fruits and vegetables, are half rotten, and the bread when you get home is mildewed. So they're giving away mildewed food, rotting fruit, or vegetables. And it's not even worth trying to go there to get it. And this is the food pantry. Yeah.

Clarissa had previously expressed being ashamed about receiving public assistance for the first time in her adult life when she began caring for her grandchildren. She also reported low food security in all four waves of the study. Receiving insufficient or inedible food from food pantries may have heightened her feelings of shame (Fong et al. 2016). “I don't go [to food pantries] unless I absolutely have no choice,” she said. Other mothers described feeling disrespected when they went to food pantries. Adriana, introduced above, believed that the food pantry that turned her away empty-handed gave Black people preferential treatment because it operated out of an historically Black church. However, others in the study, including Black participants, also mentioned being turned away empty-handed at this food pantry, even when they arrived early. Adriana's thinking reflects longstanding anti-Black attitudes in the United States and elsewhere (Kendi 2016), but it also reveals a deep sense of dispossession potentially stemming from the xenophobic anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies targeting immigrant families such as hers.

Mothers' frustration with emergency food aid also centered on to-go meals from schools. They often reported that although their children were eligible for the meals, they stopped collecting them because their children would not eat them. Some said the way the meals were packaged diminished the palatability of the food, encouraging waste. Michelle's mother picked up school meals approximately twice a week for her grandchildren, but they often threw the food out. Michelle mused that whoever put the meals together must think,

“Oh, well, they're going to be happy with whatever they get. So we don't care how we do it. We're going to just, you know, package it and sling it in the containers anyway.” And that's, you know, just because it's free doesn't mean that people are going to want to eat garbage.

The pandemic created logistical challenges for schools trying to provide meals during closures (Jablonski et al. 2021). The fact that school meals were available, regardless of income or other eligibility criteria, mattered. However, the quality and taste of the food was a barrier that limited some families' participation and sent a message to them about their worth. Michelle recognized the feeling rules (Hochschild 1979) expected of “free food” recipients—“to be happy with whatever they get”—but refused these rules in an effort to maintain a sense of dignity for their family. She explained,

My kids don't want to eat it, because of the fact that it's all mixed together, or because the biscuit or the roll is soggy and soaking wet from the condensation on the container. No one's gonna want to eat a soggy wet biscuit. So why am I gonna make my kids eat it? If I'm not gonna eat it, they're not gonna eat it.

Mothers defended their children's dignity by not requiring them to eat school meals they did not like. Especially for low-income parents who may not be able to grant all of their children's material wishes, honoring children's food preferences holds important symbolic meaning and is an important source of emotional nourishment (Fielding-Singh 2017). Daniel (2016) also finds that poor parents often serve familiar foods to their children because they do not want to waste them. The symbolic and emotional role of food may be especially crucial during the pandemic, as rates of anxiety and depression among children have increased (Marques de Miranda et al. 2020). Michelle, who described not forcing her children to eat school meals, did not report household food insecurity, but even food-insecure families said they did not insist children eat school meals they did not like. Chaniqua picked up the meals regularly, but her children, especially her son, often refused to eat the food and asked for something else, which Chaniqua provided. To make their food last, Chaniqua ate less herself, prioritizing her children's needs over her own, a strategy often used by mothers in food-insecure households (Martin and Lippert 2012; Olson 2005; Stevens 2010). Clara, an immigrant mother, asked her teenage daughter periodically to pick up school meals she was eligible for, but her daughter resisted. Clara reported very low food security but said she did not insist her daughter pick up the meals because she did not want to force her to eat food she found unappetizing.⁵

⁵Clara did not explain why she asked her daughter to pick up school meals, but many immigrant families such as hers depend on children to navigate various institutions for them (Kwon 2015). As an undocumented immigrant, Clara may also have felt unsafe going herself.

Mothers upheld the dignity of their families by forgoing a system they experienced as dehumanizing.

Conclusion

This research contributes to a growing body of work on the social safety net during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Bitler et al. 2020; Enriquez and Goldstein 2020; Moffitt and Ziliak 2020) by examining the lived experiences of lower income mothers and grandmothers as they navigated public and private assistance to keep food on the table in the early months of the pandemic. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 54 mothers and grandmothers, this research charts caregivers' experiences accessing social assistance during the pandemic and the meanings they gave to these experiences. Because meanings shape people's decision making and actions, they are crucial in understanding how and why people respond to their circumstances as they do, helping better pinpoint the resources they draw on and obstacles they face.

Mothers described how pandemic-related strains on their budgets, combined with higher prices, fewer bargains, and unpredictable stock at grocery stores, made it more difficult to feed their families. No strangers to hardships, they adopted strategies to make their food stretch, including decreasing their own food intake in some cases. About two thirds of the households in this study were classified as food secure on the basis of the USDA's 18-item scale. Although we cannot make inferences on the basis of our qualitative sample and share this information for descriptive purposes only, the share of food-secure households was larger than we anticipated (given national surveys showing that rates of food insecurity more than doubled in the first few months of the pandemic). We do not know why, but it was very clear that pandemic food assistance programs (expanded SNAP and P-EBT benefits) provided critical food resources for many of the families in our study. SNAP is one of the few safety net programs that functions as an automatic stabilizer during crises (Moffitt and Ziliak 2021), and expansions to SNAP and the implementation of P-EBT meant that many families' food resources increased (because they were enrolled in SNAP and the National School Lunch Program prior to the pandemic), which provided a buffer against increased food costs, strained budgets, and disruptions to household incomes. Importantly, these benefits were automatically sent to eligible households, with no action required on their part. In addition, P-EBT was available to some families that did not qualify for most other federal programs (such as undocumented immigrants). Mothers' sense of relief around receiving these benefits was palpable. At the same time, mothers discussed barriers to receiving secure and dignified assistance, revealing three underlying mechanisms: being denied public benefits or experiencing delays in their receipt, being afraid to access food and other forms of assistance, and receiving inadequate emergency food. Although these dynamics preceded the pandemic, we add an important case

by examining how mothers made sense of them in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiencing denied or delayed benefits during a time when the safety net expanded led mothers to feel overlooked and excluded from receiving assistance. These mothers described a sense that the government did not see or understand what "we're going through," as one put it.

In a further contribution, we demonstrate the ways lower income mothers actively made decisions about whether to participate in food assistance programs on the basis of concerns about being exposed to the coronavirus or the coercive arm of the state and efforts to protect their and their children's dignity. Many mothers worked in low-wage service jobs that exposed them to the virus without being offered protections like paid sick leave or they had preexisting health conditions that shaped their comfort levels in accessing forms of food assistance that required "joining the crowd," as one mother put it. Black and Latina mothers, in particular, did not feel public health orders were stringent enough and engaged in risk calculations as they decided whether to access food assistance in this context. Some were uneasy about accessing or accepting assistance because they worried about how the state might use it to increase surveillance over them or might punish them for receiving aid in years to come. Black and Latina mothers worried about how using pandemic aid might harm them now or in the future by putting them at the discretion of the state (see also Fong 2019). Their fears reflect the long-standing role the state has played in policing and punishing communities of color (Alexander 2010; Arriaga 2016; García 2017; Menjivar and Abrego 2012), which has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Emmer et al. 2020; Ferdinand 2021; Oyarzun 2020). The small number of women who were immigrants in our sample ($n = 6$) is a limitation of the study, although their ongoing participation throughout multiple years of the broader study and willingness to talk about their experiences stemming from their undocumented status is a strength. Future research should examine the experiences of immigrants across legal statuses in accessing food assistance and other aspects of the safety net.

Emergency food was an important stop-gap when public benefits were not available or enough. For those who were unable or afraid to access public benefits, or for whom public benefits were insufficient, emergency food could be a critical lifeline. Yet the foods mothers received and the way they were treated sometimes contributed to stigma and shame, consistent with prior research (Bowe et al. 2019; Fong et al. 2016; Purdam, Garratt, and Esmail 2016; Swales et al. 2020). Mothers who received expired, inappropriate, or paltry food described feeling insulted or ashamed, suggesting it served as a reminder of their low social standing and worth in society. Our analysis further demonstrates how mothers defended their children's dignity by allowing them to refuse to eat emergency food they did not like, such as to-go school meals. Although this meant that mothers had to use alternative

methods to feed their children (sometimes going without food themselves), some mothers resisted systems that offered inadequate or insulting food by foregoing these offerings and making do.

We have labeled the barriers mothers experienced accessing secure and dignified assistance *disenfranchisement*. By labeling the barriers caregivers faced as disenfranchisement, we draw attention to the processes by which lower income mothers experienced exclusion and stigma during their efforts to access social assistance in the early months of the pandemic. Pandemic policies reduced or eliminated some barriers (e.g., by making P-EBT widely available, including to undocumented immigrants) but preserved others. For example, reforms to SNAP did not raise eligibility caps or increase SNAP for those already receiving the maximum. In recognition of the inadequacy of SNAP benefits for many households, the stimulus package passed in December 2020 temporarily increased the maximum SNAP benefit level by 15 percent for six months, and as of this writing, the increase has been extended until at least September 2021. The Biden administration increased P-EBT by 15 percent and approved a summer P-EBT program for 2021. In general, the more generous food assistance policies implemented early in the pandemic (and strengthened during the Biden administration) speak to the powerful role the government can play in times of crisis, but many of the reforms were temporary or their future status is unclear. The most generous unemployment benefits expired at the end of July 2020, for example, and although all states implemented P-EBT programs covering the end of the 2019–2020 school year, many states did not approve P-EBT for the 2020–2021 until near the end of the year (and several states still had not approved P-EBT for the current school year by June 2021). To better support all families, we need new ways to discuss and frame conversations around poverty and social assistance that restore dignity and respect to those in need, reframe food as a human right, and better recognize and address the inequities and social conditions that shape access to assistance. Some argue that the \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill passed in March 2021, which included child tax credits and additional subsidies for childcare and health insurance, represents a change of course in U.S. poverty policy and could cut child poverty by more than half (Parolin et al. 2021). Our analyses indicate that poverty reduction efforts must be attentive to processes of disenfranchisement in social assistance that stem from and reproduce social inequalities (see also Parolin 2021; Wright and Merritt 2020). Moreover, to address low-income families' disenfranchisement, we must recognize food as a basic human right and food insufficiency as a violation of people's right to a healthy, active life (Alkon et al. 2020; Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Dickinson 2019). Centering human-rights language in food policy would help redress persistent disparities that disenfranchise historically oppressed groups by distributing resources inequitably, criminalizing them, and damaging their dignity.

This research contributes to the movement for food justice by putting forward the perspectives and voices of lower income women who have struggled to get by during the COVID-19 pandemic. To honor their words, researchers, activists, community organizers, and policy makers should work toward social programs, laws, and systems that demonstrate to these women that society is working for them rather than disenfranchising them. At its core, this involves creating universal social assistance programs, available to everyone, rather than determining who is and is not deserving of support on the basis of a set of narrowly defined criteria. At the same time, access for all is not enough unless it is accompanied by a social equity commitment that addresses the ways social inequalities fundamentally shape people's experiences and perceptions.

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Supplemental Material

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Latasha Williams is a registered dietitian/nutritionist and PhD candidate conducting research on the relationship between dietitians and food-insecure populations.