

Introduction. The COVID-19 crisis caused large-scale changes to the US food landscape including food availability/prices, shopping practices, and food assistance programs. Understanding how these changes converged to affect families' food choices during and after the pandemic is critical for program and policy design to support children's healthy development. This study explored families' food choices during the COVID-19 crisis and economic recovery, including changes in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and neighborhood characteristics.

Methods. We conducted nine qualitative focus groups (7 English, 2 Spanish; n=49 participants) between April-July 2023 via videoconference, stratified by WIC participation and language. Eligible participants were caregivers of a primary care patient (≤ 4 years) at participating pediatric healthcare systems in Philadelphia, ≥ 18 years, Pennsylvania residents, fluent in English or Spanish, and their child was a current Medicaid recipient and/or used WIC. Transcripts were analyzed with both a priori and emergent codes, guided by grounded theory.

Results. Five themes emerged: 1) families incorporate complex, individualized considerations into food choices; 2) health is a priority and a challenge in decision-making; 3) families' neighborhoods do not adequately meet their food needs; 4) administrative burdens inhibit WIC use; and 5) the COVID-19 crisis added both new challenges and temporary solutions.

Discussion. Complex interactions between the food system, federal assistance program participation, and individual needs add burden to families struggling to make healthy food choices. Successful experiments in reducing administrative procedures and expanding benefits during the Covid-19 pandemic provide valuable lessons for improving food supports.