

# The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Household Food Sourcing and Food Security in Rural Appalachia: A Qualitative Study

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## Background

The **COVID-19 pandemic** and related economic impacts precipitated numerous **challenges for households** across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Various studies have explored how these circumstances impacted households, particularly with regard to food insecurity, but **rural communities remain underrepresented** among this literature.

## Objective

To understand how the constellation of pandemic-related ‘shocks’ (e.g., job changes; daycare and school closings; food supply disruptions) influenced households’ food sourcing strategies and food security dynamics in rural Appalachian Ohio.

## Methods

**Setting:** Athens County of Appalachia Ohio

**Sampling:** Adults were invited via a mailed postcard to complete an initial diet, health, and food security survey with quarterly follow-up for one year.

A purposively-selected sub-sample of respondents representing diverse food security trajectories were invited for in-depth semi-structured interviews (n=16, May-June 2021)

**Qualitative Analysis:** Iterative rounds of general inductive coding were conducted to discern key themes using NVivo 12.

## Results

### 1. Intersecting Food Security Influences

Federal food assistance and other pandemic-era resources influenced food security, but also housing stability and other basic needs.

“When that [COVID-related job loss] hit, so we had no money...Luckily, we had the SNAP [food stamps] for the food so I thought, ‘Well, we won’t starve, and we won’t get kicked out of our house’.” – T158

“It would be more of like, ‘Oh I have...’ Like, if I had a list, I’ll be like, “Karen, you need to have a list and you need to go by this list,’ as compared to, if I go to the store and I don’t have any list at all.” – T204

### 2. Household Foodwork Exacerbated

The (often gendered) task of navigating household food resources was more difficult in the context of the pandemic.

### 3. Novel Food Sourcing Strategies

Households leveraged new and creative strategies for meeting their food needs during the economically-challenging period.

“That’s why I got them [chicken, for eggs] but we bought them as chicks and they’re only about 2 months old. So they’re not gonna lay till they’re 4 months old.” – T238

“We live off grid, off water grid. It’s like, I don’t know. It’s kinda been...We’re not preppers but the move towards self-reliance has been a theme for years and years, even before this.” – T275

### 4. Existing Food Sourcing Influences

Households already driven by cultural values of frugality and self-sufficiency continued to lean into existing food sourcing practices.

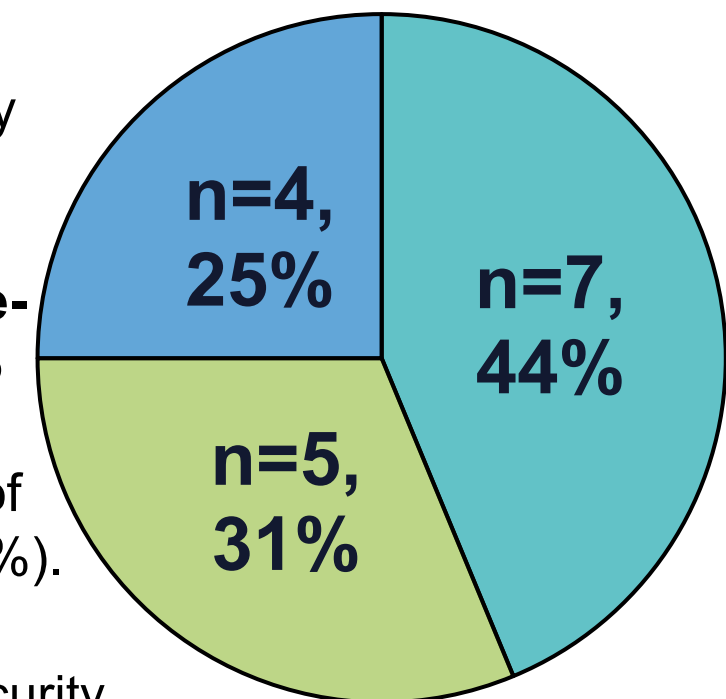
### 5. Silver Linings

Pandemic-era circumstances encouraged healthy behaviors for some households.

“I will say that during COVID, I have been getting out a little more so I do tend to go on walks and we have been exercising a little bit more...” – T562

## Sample Characteristics (n=16)

The sample was primarily **white** (93.8%), currently **employed** (62.5%), **married** (62.5%), **middle-aged** (mean=49, +/- 14.5 years) **females** (87.5%) who had at least 1 year of **college education** (100%).



■ = Persistent Food Insecurity  
■ = Episodic Food Insecurity  
■ = Consistent Food Security

## Conclusion

This ongoing study highlights the role of **existing values** and **coping mechanisms** in equipping households for unexpected shocks to resources and routines.

It also reveals how **rural households demonstrated resiliency** and **experienced positive outcomes** despite the disruptive nature of this period.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Nutrition and Obesity Policy Research and Evaluation Network (NOPREN). NOPREN is supported by Cooperative Agreement Number U48DP006374 funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity and Prevention Research Centers Program. The findings and conclusions in this presentation are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of CDC or DHHS.