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# “WE LIVE ONE DAY AT A TIME”

## Families’ Stories from the Early Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic

**T**his brief describes how the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and its related economic and policy changes affected the economic circumstances and emotional well-being of nine families with low incomes from one rural and two urban localities in the United States. It describes these families’ experiences during the first six months of the pandemic and provides a snapshot of how the families were faring in September 2020, when the research team conducted interviews with them. At that time, there had been more than 6.9 million COVID-19 cases and there had been over 200,000 deaths from COVID-19 in the United States.<sup>1</sup> This brief adds important context to the nationally reported aggregate statistics about the pandemic and its effects on families and children.

### BACKGROUND

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in spring 2020, the government began imposing restrictions on businesses and individuals, and people began changing their behavior, isolating at home to avoid exposure to COVID-19; job losses soon followed.<sup>2</sup> In September 2020, when the research team interviewed families in the study, the national unemployment rate was 7.9 percent, an increase of 4.4 percentage points from a year earlier.<sup>3</sup> The official poverty rate in 2020 was 11.4 percent, an increase of 1 percentage point from the previous year.<sup>4</sup>

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, signed into law on March 27, 2020, provided cash payments for eligible families and individuals, as well as

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- <sup>1</sup> World Health Organization (2020).
  - <sup>2</sup> Ansell and Mullins (2021); Kochhar (2020); Nicola et al. (2020); Shrider, Kollar, Chen, and Semega (2021).
  - <sup>3</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures (2022).
  - <sup>4</sup> Shrider, Kollar, Chen, and Semega (2021).



institutions, through a stimulus check and expanded and increased unemployment insurance.<sup>5</sup> It also included a freeze on evictions, which helped people keep their housing.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Department of Agriculture increased Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, giving families and individuals more resources to buy food.<sup>7</sup> Public and private organizations (for example, food banks) also helped by increasing their assistance for these groups.<sup>8</sup>

The stimulus checks pulled 11.7 million people out of poverty and unemployment insurance stopped 5.5 million people from going into poverty.<sup>9</sup> Three-fourths of adults who lost a job during the pandemic reported in a nationally representative survey that they received support in 2020 from unemployment insurance, Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program, SNAP, rental assistance, or a charitable food program.<sup>10</sup> However, not all households could access these benefits (for example, because they had family members with an undocumented immigration status), and families still experienced material hardships.<sup>11</sup> Adults in households with members who experienced job loss in 2020 were more likely than adults in households where no members had lost a job to report food insecurity, difficulty paying utility bills, and difficulty paying their rent or mortgage.<sup>12</sup>

Families with younger children faced additional pressures. As schools and childcare providers closed to slow the spread of COVID-19, demands increased for families to provide caregiving and learning support.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, parents worried about their children in the face of additional stressors: family members’ death and illness; not seeing friends, teachers, classmates, and extended family; hearing terrifying news stories; and seeing their parents stressed and afraid.<sup>14</sup>

## About This Brief

This brief is based on interviews the research team conducted in September 2020 with nine adults from families with low incomes who in 2019 had participated in the larger Childhood and Family Experience Study (referred to in this brief as the “original study”; see Box 1).<sup>15</sup>

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**5** As part of the CARES Act, the U.S. government gave stimulus checks of \$1,200 and \$2,400, respectively, to individual tax filers who had an adjusted gross income of up to \$75,000 and to married couples filing joint returns earning up to \$150,000. For people who had higher incomes, the government reduced the stimulus amount by \$5 for each \$100 earned above these thresholds. Families with dependent children under age 17 also received up to \$500 per child. See Internal Revenue Service (2020); U.S. Department of the Treasury (n.d.).

**6** McCarty and Perl (2020); U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2020).

**7** U.S. Department of Agriculture (2020).

**8** Zach et al. (2021); Ziliak (2020).

**9** Fox and Burns (2021).

**10** Karpman and Zuckerman (2021).

**11** Harrington (2020).

**12** Karpman and Zuckerman (2021).

**13** Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, and Tertilt (2020); Donohue and Miller (2020); Garbe, Ogurlu, Logan, and Cook (2020).

**14** Hoffman and Miller (2020); Patrick et al. (2020).

**15** TANF Office Culture project. More information, including a review of the qualitative literature on the experiences of parents and children living in poverty, is available on the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation website: [www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/understanding-poverty-childhood-and-family-experiences-and-tanf-office-culture-2016](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/understanding-poverty-childhood-and-family-experiences-and-tanf-office-culture-2016).

This follow-up brief describes interviewed families' stories about persevering amid the pandemic from March to September 2020 and addresses the following research questions:

- 1** How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the families' economic circumstances?
- 2** How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the families' emotional well-being?

This brief adds important context to the nationally reported aggregate statistics about the pandemic and its effects on families and children.

## Sample

In the original study, the research team interviewed 31 families living in Los Angeles, New York City, and South Central Appalachia, comprising a demographically diverse population that reflected the communities.<sup>16</sup> At the time of study recruitment, all families were receiving public assistance benefits, the adults were not working or were working but with low earnings, or they indicated they were struggling financially to get by. For this follow-up study, the research team selected three families from each location. Because employment circumstances may affect how families experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic repercussions, the research team selected one family per locality in each of three employment categories (chosen based on adults' reported employment status during the original study), as indicated in Figure 1.

## Methodology

This follow-up study used qualitative research methods to capture and understand families' experiences during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research emphasizes how individuals make meaning of, value, and interpret their daily experiences and interactions.<sup>17</sup> Qualitative methods are well suited to eliciting and elevating participants' perspectives and experiences—central aims of the current study. In addition, qualitative methods work well when investigating less well-researched topics, constructs, or phenomena for which strong survey measures do not exist, as is the case for the current follow-up study

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**16** The research team recruited study participants from smaller communities within the three larger areas of Los Angeles, New York City, and South Central Appalachia. This brief refers to the larger areas, and reports statistics from them, to maintain the confidentiality of study participants. "Los Angeles" refers to the City of Los Angeles. "New York City" refers to the five boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island. At the time of the original study, "South Central Appalachia" included 85 counties in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia; and seven cities in Virginia, as specified by the Appalachian Regional Commission. In November 2021, Catawba and Cleveland counties in North Carolina were added to the South Central region.

**17** Creswell and Creswell (2018); Miles and Huberman (1994); Saldaña (2013).

## BOX 1

### CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY EXPERIENCES STUDY

In 2019, when data collection for the Childhood and Family Experiences Study began, approximately 10.5 million children—about one out of every seven children—in the United States lived in families that were experiencing poverty. Considerable research evidence links childhood experiences of poverty to harmful effects on physical and mental health; social and behavioral functioning; and cognitive, academic, and educational outcomes. Yet little is known about how children and their parents view their daily experiences of living in poverty and their interactions with social safety net programs, or how they perceive wealth, poverty, and economic inequality.

To address this gap, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, contracted with MEF Associates to study the perspectives of children and their parents who experience poverty.\* MDRC, a subcontractor to MEF, conducted the study in partnership with MEF.

The research team used qualitative research methods to elicit the perspectives of parents and their children ages 7 to 17 in three communities located in urban and rural areas of the United States. The team conducted in-person, semistructured interviews with at least one child and one parent in 30 families from July 2019 through January 2020. Key findings include the following:

- Parents valued and recognized the important role that public assistance benefits played in easing their family’s experiences of material hardship (that is, unmet basic needs, such as food, housing, and health care).
- Children’s and adolescents’ understanding of the benefits their families received was limited, except for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- Parents worried about but were resourceful in dealing with economic hardship. They placed a priority on basic needs such as rent and food, and tried to meet their children’s needs and wants.
- Children and adolescents were aware that their families struggled financially and could not always afford to meet all of their needs and wants. They knew that their parents worried about finances but did not describe their families as being “poor.”
- Children and adolescents described poverty as having few material possessions and experiencing difficult circumstances, but did not refer to their own circumstances when describing what it means to be poor. They described wealth as having an abundance of material possessions and access to resources and opportunities, and the middle class as “normal.”

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NOTE: \*This study was conducted under the Understanding Poverty: Childhood and Family Experiences and TANF Office Culture project. More information, including a review of the qualitative literature on the experiences of parents and children living in poverty, is available on the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation website: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/understanding-poverty-childhood-and-family-experiences-and-tanf-office-culture-2016>.

The research team developed a semistructured interview protocol, drawing from (1) the original study’s interview protocol; (2) an interview protocol researchers pilot tested and used to interview mothers in a study of home-visiting programs conducted around the same time period as this follow-up study; (3) past research; and (4) consultation with experts in the field. The interviews covered the following topics:

- employment, economic circumstances and material hardship, and assistance and benefit receipt
- childcare and schooling
- parents’ and children’s well-being
- the home environment
- social support
- other challenges and unexpected positive outcomes

The interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were audio recorded and then transcribed. The research team coded the transcripts using the combination of a deductive and an inductive approach.<sup>18</sup> The team developed initial codes based on the protocol and refined the codes after reading the transcripts.

This brief presents interview data in two ways. First, it presents the themes that emerged across the nine families. It uses the following terms to report the number of families being referred to in these findings:

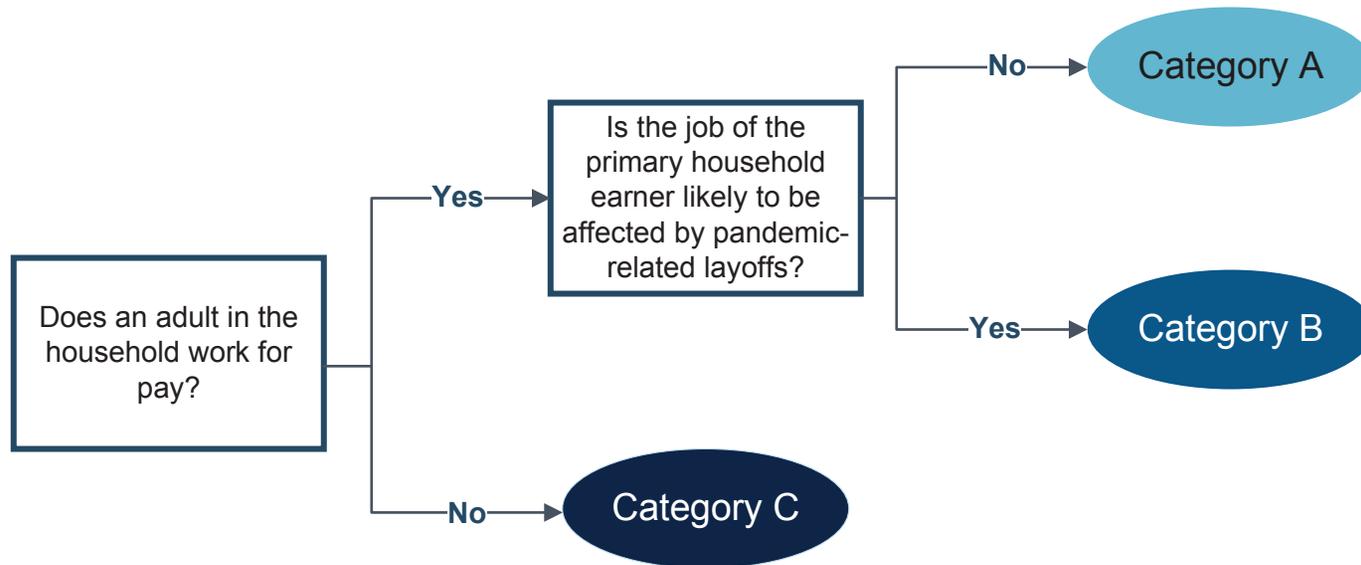
- **“few”**: one or two families
- **“some”**: three or four families
- **“many”** or **“most”**: five or more families

Second, the brief presents the data through the experiences of three parents—**COURTNEY**, **NATASHA**, and **ELENA**—from each of the employment categories shown in Figure 1 (category A: primary household earner’s job was unlikely to be affected by the pandemic; category B: primary household earner’s job was vulnerable to pandemic-related layoffs; category C: none of the adults were working):

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**18** A “deductive” approach to qualitative coding describes one in which the research team determines the analytic codes and their definitions prior to beginning coding, as a way to test a specified hypothesis prior to beginning analysis. An “inductive” approach to qualitative coding describes one where the research team determines the analytic codes after reading the data; this approach allows themes to emerge from the data. See Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013).

**Figure 1**  
**Employment Categories for Adults in Sample Households at Time of Interview for Original Study**



Key	
Category A	primary household earner's job was unlikely to be affected by the pandemic
Category B	primary household earner's job was vulnerable to pandemic-related layoffs
Category C	none of the adults were working

NOTES: The research team selected nine families from the original study's sample to interview for the follow-up study, based on the family's employment status at the time of their interview for the original study and their location. For each of the employment categories, three families were selected, one from each locality – Los Angeles, New York City, and South Central Appalachia.

Data in this brief are presented by the themes that emerged across the nine families, as well as through the experiences of three parents whose perspectives and experiences illustrated themes that emerged from the data analysis. The three parents each represent one category and one locality – Courtney (category A; New York City), Natasha (category B; South Central Appalachia), and Elena (category C; Los Angeles).

- **COURTNEY** (category A): In September 2020, Courtney lived in New York City with her three children (ages 9, 18, and 21). At the time of the interview conducted for the original study, Courtney reported working in the education sector and making approximately \$37,000 a year. She had also received the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), was participating in Medicaid, and had recently reapplied for SNAP after her benefits expired.
- **NATASHA** (category B): In September 2020, Natasha lived in South Central Appalachia with her two children (ages 15 and 17) and reported being the only parent living in the household. At the time of the interview conducted for the original study, Natasha reported working full time at a factory and earning \$9.60 an hour. She also received the EITC and was participating in SNAP and Medicaid.
- **ELENA** (category C): In September 2020, Elena lived in Los Angeles with her husband, Felipe, and their two children (ages 7 and 18). At the time of the interview conducted for the original study, Elena reported that neither she nor Felipe was working, and that they were participating in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, SNAP, and Medicaid. Elena shared that prior to the initial interview, Felipe had worked as a day laborer, but health issues forced him to stop working; he hoped to resume working once he was in better health. Elena also mentioned that she planned to look for work once their youngest child started school. Interviewers did not ask about their documentation status directly, but Elena volunteered that her household included both citizens and undocumented individuals.

The research team selected these three families because their perspectives and experiences illustrated themes that had emerged from data analysis. Qualitative studies often use this approach of including “thick description” (that is, a description that illustrates how individuals are interacting with their context) of a subset of participants.<sup>19</sup> Centering these families’ voices throughout the brief allows for a more holistic portrayal of the lives and experiences of the families in the study. All references to participants in this brief are pseudonyms, used to protect their identities.

Data collection took place from September 9 to September 22, 2020. Though COVID-19 case counts and deaths continued to rise and a vaccine was not yet available during this time period, the numbers of new cases reported each day were generally lower than the month before, allowing for a sense of optimism.<sup>20</sup>

## **HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECT THE FAMILIES’ ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES?**

Before the pandemic, many of the study families were struggling to make ends meet. Parents worried about having enough money to pay for their families’ needs and couldn’t always pay all of their

<sup>19</sup> Deutsch and Tolan (2018); Duncan, Huston, and Weisner (2007); Goodnow, Miller, and Kessel (1995); Yoshikawa, Weisner, and Lowe (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022); Food and Drug Administration (2020); World Health Organization (2020).

bills. They supplemented the income they received from their jobs with public or private assistance, including from SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, and local charitable organizations.<sup>21</sup> Because their economic circumstances were tenuous before the pandemic, the families' financial stability was especially at risk when employment declined and prices of household staples increased during the early months of the pandemic.<sup>22</sup>

## Scarcity of Food and Household Necessities

Parents described that when the pandemic began, there were closed stores, scarce household supplies and food, and increased prices for necessities. These experiences reflected what households across the United States experienced in the spring of 2020.<sup>23</sup> Parents in New York City and Los Angeles described having these experiences early on in the crisis most frequently. New York City was an early pandemic epicenter: In spring 2020, infection rates rose so quickly that hospitals ran out of beds, ambulatory staff became overwhelmed, and the city rapidly shut down, shedding jobs and increasing the unemployment rate by over 10 percentage points from March to April 2020.<sup>24</sup> New York City residents who were Black, Hispanic or Latino/a, or who lived in neighborhoods with high poverty experienced the highest rates of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and death.<sup>25</sup> For many of the parents who participated in interviews, these stressors added on to what they had already faced before the pandemic; the new scarcity of supplies and increased prices made it difficult for them to continue planning purchases carefully and to try to buy the least expensive items that last the longest.<sup>26</sup>

**ELENA** described standing in long lines to get into stores in Los Angeles to get household staples such as rice and toilet paper, only to find empty shelves and increased prices for the products that were available. Paying higher prices made it harder to afford other necessities. As she explained: “We needed laundry soap...[but] we were in want of money, and couldn't even afford laundry.”

The situation was similar in New York City. **COURTNEY** reported standing in long lines and traveling miles on foot to stores in other neighborhoods than her own to find household supplies because she did not have a car and did not want to use public transportation because the trains and buses were very crowded. And when she finally found these supplies, she also found increased prices: “There was definitely some price gouging going on...toilet paper, paper towels, the cleaning supplies, the hand sanitizer... Even eggs went up.” Courtney also noted that she was spending most of her money on pandemic-specific supplies such as masks and extra cleaning products.

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**21** Mistry et al. (2022).

**22** U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020); Mead, Ransom, Reed, and Sager (2020).

**23** Hamilton (2021).

**24** On New York City being a COVID epicenter, see, for example, Flores et al. (2020); Nischan (2020); Thompson et al. (2020).

**25** On New York City COVID rates, see, for example, Thompson et al. (2020). The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) specifies that ethnicity should be reported as “Hispanic or Latino.” This brief uses the term “Hispanic or Latino/a” as an acknowledgement that many of the study participants are female.

**26** Mistry et al. (2022).

Cities weren't the only localities experiencing this shortage of household supplies: **NATASHA** drove far from her home in South Central Appalachia in search of household necessities. As she explained, “We were going way [out of our way]...trying to find these products [toilet paper, cleaning products]. And we weren't even stockpiling—we were just trying to get [enough for] our ordinary weekly life.”

These families' experiences of the scarcity of food and supplies, combined with increased prices, reflect the experiences of most of the interviewed families. They did not have stockpiles of food or supplies. Parents described feeling that stores took advantage of people's heightened needs for certain products by charging higher prices for those products. The closing of stores and “ransacked” shelves made it difficult to get household items and added to the stress. One parent described her escalating concerns as stores ran out of different necessities: “We were worried about food first. And then...there was no more [toilet] paper. And then we needed diapers. We went everywhere, and they'd run out. And we got more concerned because they're needed every day.”

The rising costs associated with staying at home contributed to parents' concern about their families' finances. Parents reported that their electricity bills doubled, “food purchases went skyrocketing,” and they spent more on cleaning products. Subsequently, most parents reported falling behind on paying the bills and worrying about money. These increased prices, difficulty in finding food, and rising costs intensified families' sense of food insecurity.

### **Job and Income Instability**

As described above, the research team selected families for a follow-up interview in September 2020 based on the kinds of employment they had reported during their initial interview for the original study. The kinds of jobs parents held at the start of the pandemic contributed to whether they experienced pandemic-related job loss or a reduction in work hours and, as a result, income changes.

Among the three families in category A (Figure 1), in which the primary household earner's job was unlikely to be affected by the pandemic, all described still having their job through at least the first few months of the pandemic. **COURTNEY** continued working full time and receiving the same income in the education sector: “Thank goodness I still had a job,” she said. She worked from home for the spring and most of the summer and was in the process of returning to working in person at the time of her September 2020 interview. Another parent continued working in law enforcement, though his income decreased for one month when his employer reduced his schedule from five to four days per week. A parent in the third household maintained his construction job through the first few months of the pandemic but shared that his employer laid him off about two months prior to his September 2020 interview and he was beginning to search for a new job.

Among the three families in category B (Figure 1), in which the primary household earner's job was vulnerable to pandemic-related layoffs, all reported a reduction in work hours or losing their jobs temporarily. **NATASHA** lost her job temporarily in the spring: “We first really noticed [the COVID-

19 pandemic]. . . in March. . . [but] we were expecting to get through it. And then, just one day out of the blue everybody was laid off. The whole factory shut down.” She went back to work part time when the factory reopened over the summer and resumed working full time by September 2020. Parents in the other two households in this category experienced job instability, including losing their jobs at the very beginning of the pandemic, getting new part-time jobs and then leaving those jobs, and having their hours reduced at different points in time.

Among the three families in category C (Figure 1), in which none of the adults were working at the time of the interview for the original study, most were not working at the time of the follow-up study interview either. **ELENA** shared that both she and Felipe had gotten jobs right before the pandemic began: Felipe as a day laborer, and Elena as a house cleaner. But they soon lost these jobs as the pandemic set in. Elena shared how the job loss affected their family:

There was [no] work so there was no income, and that still keeps us stressed. . . . By June we couldn’t make rent. And then we had the phone bills. We had the Internet bill. . . . and we had to ask the landlord if he could wait for payment. . . . I can’t say I have \$50 to my name. . . . We live one day at a time.

At the time of the second interview, Felipe had started picking up new work as a day laborer.

## Support from Public Assistance

At the time of the September 2020 interviews, many families reported participating in public assistance programs through the CARES Act, SNAP, or other cash assistance from local charitable organizations (Figure 2). The CARES Act benefits for families and individuals included a stimulus check, expanded and increased unemployment compensation, mortgage forbearance, and a freeze on evictions.<sup>27</sup> The first stimulus check was a one-time cash payment of \$1,200 for individuals making \$75,000 or less annually and of up to \$500 per child under 17 years old.<sup>28</sup> The CARES Act expanded unemployment insurance coverage to up to 39 weeks and provided an extra \$600 a week through July 2020.<sup>29</sup>

Families reported that this assistance helped them to keep food on the table, pay their bills, and have a sense of economic security. They also described receiving support such as food and rental assistance directly from organizations such as food pantries, churches, and schools.

Increased SNAP benefits helped many of the families interviewed. One parent said, “That’s why I’m okay, because thank God when all this happened they didn’t close the SNAP, because if they would have then I would have been struggling. . . . the food got more expensive at that time.” For three

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**27** McCarty and Perl (2020); U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2020); U.S. Department of the Treasury (n.d.).

**28** Internal Revenue Service (2020).

**29** U.S. Department of Labor (n.d.).

months, **COURTNEY**'s SNAP benefits increased from \$75 to \$1,100 per month. She also applied for an interim recertification through the New York City Housing Authority's COVID-19 Rent Hardship Policy and received \$4,032 for rent.<sup>30</sup> She reflected, "I'm able to save more money now. . . . I opened up a . . . savings account. So the money that I wasn't using I put to use somewhere else. . . . I've actually been doing better now than I [was] before the pandemic."

Some families reported that the income from public benefits replaced their income from lost jobs, while a few others reported that the expanded unemployment insurance was greater than their previous income. Some families used the increased income to catch up on their bills or to fix their car, and a few other families put it into savings. **NATASHA** received unemployment insurance when the factory where she worked eliminated her job, and the amount she received exceeded what she had earned working full time. Along with a stimulus check and increased SNAP benefits, Natasha's income was higher than before the pandemic. As she explained:

With the COVID, we got unemployment, and we got that bonus unemployment. So we were able to take a family vacation and enjoy it at the end of June. . . . [T]he unemployment did help. I wish I'd have saved more now that it's gone. But the family vacation was worth it, 'cause we haven't had one in ten years.

**NATASHA** described the challenges of returning to work part time: Her pay was less than it had been, and she no longer received unemployment benefit payments. However, by the time of the September 2020 interview, she had returned to full-time work and her economic circumstances were similar to what they were before the pandemic.

Families who were not working before the pandemic were not able to access unemployment insurance. And families with members with undocumented immigration status did not receive a stimulus check or unemployment insurance, because CARES Act benefits required each family member to have a Social Security number.<sup>31</sup> **ELENA** was unsure why her family's application for cash assistance through the Angeleno card was not approved, though she thought they were unable to receive unemployment insurance because they had "no papers."<sup>32</sup> Their expanded SNAP benefits and cash assistance from a charitable organization were crucial to helping the family stay afloat. Elena described that the SNAP case manager "spoke to me sometime in July and asked how I was doing, how I felt. . . . [T]he worker. . . gave us the [electronic benefit transfer, or EBT] card with the stamps for the children at school. That also helped us a lot."

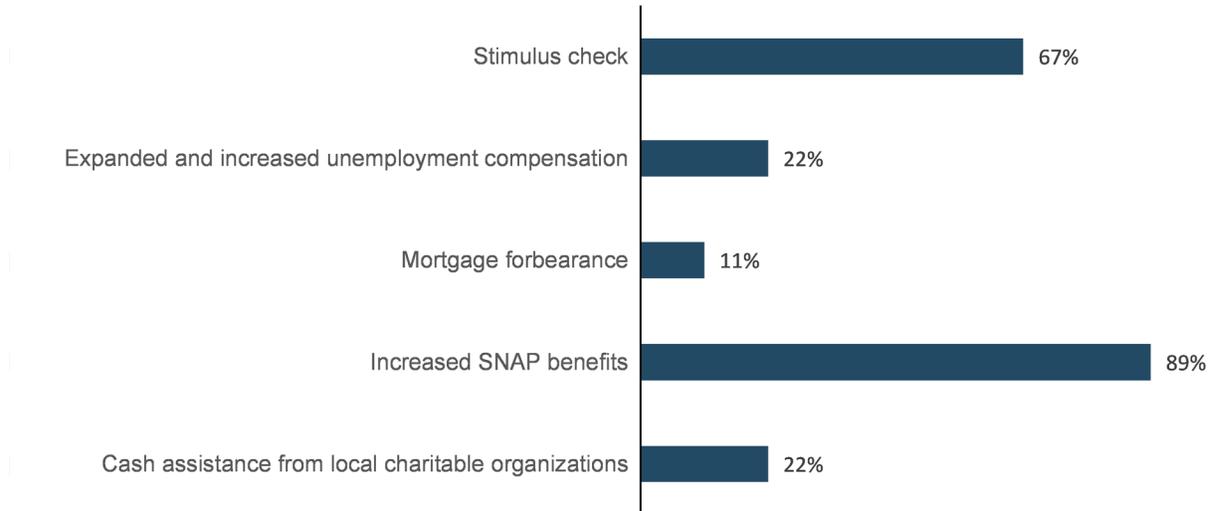
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**30** New York City Housing Authority (n.d.).

**31** Harrington (2020).

**32** The Angeleno card, provided by the Mayor's Fund for Los Angeles, was a prepaid debit card that could be used to cover the cost of medical aid and assistance, food, clothing, and rent. The following groups were the intended beneficiaries of this direct cash assistance: undocumented migrants, recently incarcerated individuals, individuals without banking accounts, and individuals with self- or seasonal employment. See Mayor's Fund for Los Angeles (n.d.). The interviewer asked Elena for clarification on what she meant by this statement but did not get further information.

**Figure 2**  
**Families' Reported Participation in Pandemic-Related Benefits (n = 9 families)**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations taken from interview data collected for the Childhood and Family Experiences Study follow-up study.

NOTES: The stimulus check, expanded and increased unemployment compensation, and mortgage forbearance were benefits offered through the CARES Act. "Cash assistance from local charitable organizations" includes cash assistance from the Angeleno card. The Angeleno card, provided by the Mayor's Fund for Los Angeles, was a prepaid debit card that could be used to cover the cost of medical aid and assistance, food, clothing, and rent. The following groups were meant to be beneficiaries of this direct cash assistance: undocumented migrants, recently incarcerated individuals, individuals without banking accounts, and individuals with self- or seasonal employment. See: Mayor's Fund for Los Angeles, "Angeleno Card," website: <https://mayorsfundla.org/program/angeleno-card/>.

## HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECT THE FAMILIES' EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING?

During the interviews conducted during the original study before the pandemic started, parents described having stress as a result of financial insecurity, material hardship, and frequent worries about being able to provide for their families.<sup>33</sup> When the research team interviewed them again in September 2020, all nine parents reported increased stress, uncertainty, or worry regardless of their employment status before or during the pandemic. Their feelings reflect findings from a nationally representative study in which more than one-fourth of parents reported that their mental health had declined since the start of the pandemic.<sup>34</sup> The pandemic brought changes—such as new health precautions that altered families' routines and modifications in childcare and schooling—that affected the emotional well-being of interviewed parents and their children.

<sup>33</sup> Mistry et al. (2022).

<sup>34</sup> Patrick et al. (2020).

## COVID-19 Precautions and Changes to Family Routines

Parents described doing everything they could to protect their families from COVID-19 and feeling frustration that it was not always clear what they should be doing, as guidance about how to minimize the risk of getting COVID-19 changed over the course of the pandemic. For example, the U.S. surgeon general posted a tweet on February 29, 2020, advising the public not to wear masks, but on April 3, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control recommended that Americans should wear masks.<sup>35</sup> Many of the parents described doing what was under their control to prevent their families from contracting the disease: keeping their family inside as much as possible and not allowing outside visitors into their homes. These new precautions and changes to household routines were a new source of stress for parents.

In some families, only the parents would leave the house during these early months of the pandemic, and only when necessary to get household supplies. Parents expressed distrust in cleaning procedures in facilities outside of their homes and were unsure what places were safe to visit. As a result, these parents (and, as reported by parents, some children as well) were afraid to leave their homes: “It’s just nerve-racking that. . .I can’t do things for my kids, basically. I can’t take them to the park. I could, but I’m nervous. . .you’re touching something everybody else is touching.”

Some parents explained that staying at home all the time was an abrupt departure from their typical routines before the pandemic, when they would spend time outside the home for work, school, running errands, visiting family and friends, and partaking in leisure activities. At the same time, some parents expressed concern about keeping their children at home: “You can’t go out anymore, you are afraid. . .you can’t get the children out, and they always have to be locked up. And things also changed a lot for them, because [before the pandemic] . . .I took them everywhere.”

**ELENA, COURTNEY, and NATASHA** all suggested that their families were active in the community or spent time with friends and family before the pandemic but that with the pandemic they changed their routines and rules. Elena did not allow visitors into her home and kept her family inside to stay healthy. Courtney kept her children at home but worried about her children experiencing “cabin fever” from being stuck inside. Natasha stopped her daughter’s sleepovers and reduced the number of visitors she allowed into her home, explaining: “We didn’t want friends coming over too much. I didn’t want them [the children] going nowhere. So it was. . .a difficult little process there for them. ’Cause they were so used to freely going here or there, bringing friends over. . .all that changed for a whole bunch of us.” Parents from Los Angeles and New York City also reported increasing their cleaning routines, washing their hands, changing their clothes upon returning home and before hugging their children, and wearing masks. These precautions were less frequently reported by parents from South Central Appalachia.

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<sup>35</sup> Asmelash (2020); Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (2020).

## Childcare and Schooling

All parents reported a period of time in spring 2020 when their children's schools closed for in-person activities, and these abrupt school closures were major contributors to all of their increased stress.

**Childcare.** Many of the parents did not need to find childcare during this time. For some, such as **ELENA** and **NATASHA**, school closures coincided with job losses, allowing them to stay at home with their children and not seek assistance caring for them. The remaining families had an adult or older sibling at home who could watch the younger children. **COURTNEY** was able to monitor her 9-year-old son (with the help of her older children) during his virtual learning while she worked from home in the spring. However, she felt stressed about finding childcare in the fall once she went back to working in person. She explained:

Working families need more support. . . . Like, you don't know whether you can go to work today. . . . Do you have to quit your job and do home schooling? I mean what are you supposed to do if you had a single parent home? Like I thank God that I have older kids. Because if not. . . I would have to be calling out every single day because I don't know if [my 9 year-old son] would be able to be somewhere.

She looked for and applied for childcare through a program for essential workers.

**Virtual Learning.** Although only the parents in New York City and Los Angeles reported "chaotic" virtual learning experiences, all of the parents reported difficulties accessing their children's schools virtually or monitoring their participation. These challenges reflected those challenges that were reported nationally about virtual learning: difficulty with accessing children's online classes and coursework; with managing new technology; with connecting to the Internet, especially when there were multiple users working simultaneously; and with making sure children were attending their online classes and doing their homework.<sup>36</sup> This current study found that difficulties with virtual schooling increased parents' sense of stress and worry, aligning with national reports of how the pandemic has affected parents' mental health: A nationally representative survey found increased mental distress among parents of children who had a hard time with virtual learning.<sup>37</sup>

Many parents described having trouble helping their children connect to virtual classes, either because they did not have computers or because of slow Internet connections. One parent had to drop out of her online college course because her children needed to use the computer for virtual schooling, causing her to fall behind in her coursework. **NATASHA** had to take a day off from work to find and pick up a computer for her son after she tried unsuccessfully to call the school to find out how to access the computers they were providing students. While she searched for a computer for her son,

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Horowitz and Igielnik (2020); Education Trust (n.d.).

<sup>37</sup> Davis et al. (2020).

the school marked her son as “unexcused” from his classes and it was unclear whether it would allow him to make up the work. Some parents described feeling extra pressure to monitor their children to make sure that they were paying attention, participating, and understanding the content.

A few parents described situations where completing virtual classes required their children to follow complicated instructions and be savvy with technology, which made it difficult for their children to keep up. Virtual schooling was “so chaotic, so all over the place. These programs were not organized at all,” one parent shared, explaining that her children’s school followed a clunky process for completing virtual classes that required opening many windows online and following multiple minute steps: “In...class, they have to click this window to open up the screen for this...and download it from here, and copy from here, paste it to here...hopefully it gets submitted. Because if not, you may have to [do] step seven and nine over.” **COURTNEY** further described these technology difficulties: “[Virtual schooling in spring 2020] was absolutely the worst... [My son] is 9 years old... He didn’t know anything about typing... [I]t was like [the children] became IT [information technology] people.” The technology challenges expanded beyond the school day for Courtney and her son, as they struggled to figure out the processes for turning in his homework online.

Some worried about the quality of the education their children were receiving. **ELENA** expressed concern that her children’s education was going “downhill,” as virtual learning involved a different style of teaching and it was difficult for teachers to monitor students’ work and provide immediate support. Parents were also concerned about how much education their children were getting, as school districts struggled with the abrupt change to full-time virtual teaching and, as a result, had to reduce the school day (at least initially). One parent lamented, “[Virtual school] affected [my children] a lot, at least the young one... And now, instead of going forward, she’s going backwards, because she’s already forgotten what the teacher taught her before.”

A few parents pointed out positive aspects of enforced virtual schooling. For example, **NATASHA** mentioned that her children’s grades went up during virtual schooling. Another parent shared, “They learn...better at home [on] the computers, because I notice my daughters’ grades going up. And they are more comfortable. There [are] no kids to tell them things or bully them... They can learn in their own pace.”

***Choosing Between Virtual and In-Person Schooling.*** Parents reflected on virtual schooling’s challenges during the 2020-to-2021 school year and the few positives as they decided whether to send their children back to school in person or to continue with virtual learning. They had concerns about the challenges with virtual schooling and the lack of social interaction, but they felt that in-person schooling presented risks, too. In-person schooling resumed in South Central Appalachia and New York City at the start of the 2020-to-2021 school year, but not in Los Angeles.

All three families in South Central Appalachia chose to send their children to school in person in fall 2020, though they had the option to continue virtual schooling. One parent sent her children back to school in person—despite her husband’s reservations about health safety at school—because her

children missed going to school and seeing their friends. Another parent expressed concern about his children's socialization skills if they continued to stay at home: "I think the kids need to be in the school with other children so, that way, they can have a social life with other people and not be scared to go outside of the home when they get older all because of this."

The decision to send their children back to school in person, however, came with other fears—that their children would contract COVID-19 there and bring it home and infect the rest of the family. As **NATASHA** described: "There's so many children there. I mean, there [are] shared bathrooms. There [are] shared hallways. . . . I'm really worried that, you know, one of them could bring home the COVID." One parent also expressed frustration with her school's policy of only informing parents that a child has tested positive for COVID-19 if the affected child is in the same grade as theirs. This parent explained:

It's just a little more worry with them going back to school. . . .they may be the next ones [to get COVID-19]. I know that's what I signed up for when I put them in traditional school instead of virtual, but. . . .when there is a [COVID] case it doesn't matter what grade it's in, all parents should be notified. We had a case in the school. . . . We didn't even get [notified].

In New York City, the chaotic nature of the spring 2020 shift to virtual learning continued into the start of the 2020-to-2021 in-person school year. One parent expressed frustration with the rapid change and lack of communication: "I don't even know what to think of what's happening now with the [school] reopen. They said. . . .September 10th, and then all of a sudden, it was September 16th, with no huge broadcasting about it." When given the choice between a combination of in-person and virtual learning (a "hybrid" model, where children attend school in person on some days and take part in virtual learning on other days) and complete virtual learning, two New York City families chose the completely virtual option. Despite their challenging experience with virtual schooling the previous spring and their concern about their children spending too much time at home, these parents expressed that keeping their kids at home and safe from COVID-19 outweighed the stresses that virtual learning caused. **COURTNEY**, however, opted for the hybrid model: The virtual-learning technology challenges and having her son spend all day at home were too stressful. As she explained, "He got frustrated, I got frustrated. . . . This is why I put him in [in-person] learning this time."

### **Children's Missed Experiences**

Most parents shared that their children missed going to school in person during the period when school was virtual. They expressed concern about their children staying inside too much and not being able to do activities. Though this could affect both the physical and mental health of their children, most parents emphasized concern over the mental health aspects. Both parents of children who were graduating from high school felt "heartbroken" that their children couldn't go to graduation.

Parents described doing what they could to provide fun experiences for their children while they were at home, such as painting their nails, having movie nights, and celebrating birthdays. As the pan-

demic continued and parents began to relax their pandemic rules, they described a dilemma: whether to allow their children to see friends but risk COVID-19 exposure or to instead keep their children safe but risk their children missing out. A few parents allowed their children to see their friends but limited the number of them they could see, or limited the interactions to the outdoors, while other parents only allowed their children to talk virtually with their friends.

## Children's Emotional Well-Being

Many parents reported that their children were acutely aware of the pandemic and the dangers it posed and that they saw stress and fear develop in their children. One parent explained: “They began to learn about the symptoms [of COVID-19], that people were dying. . . . And then they got scared.” **ELENA** described her 7-year-old son’s fear of COVID-19, which started when he got sick in the spring and had to get a COVID-19 test. The test was so painful for him that he started to refuse to go places with his mother because he was scared of getting sick again and needing to take another test. She quoted her son: “I’m going to catch coronavirus and I don’t want them to do that [COVID-19 test] to me. . . . I want coronavirus to stop. I don’t want this anymore.” Another parent described how her 9-year-old son was afraid to go to the hospital because there were patients with COVID-19 there: “[My son] had a full-blown panic attack. . . . He was crying hysterically. . . . I had to hold him all night so he wouldn’t be scared. It’s been a rough one.”

On top of the increased fear parents felt of themselves and their family getting sick, most of them noticed that their children were angrier and more easily aggravated. One parent shared that “every little thing makes [my daughter] very angry.” Another parent expressed concern about how the pandemic will affect children in the long term, noting that her children are young and unable to understand why they have to make drastic life changes.

Finally, one parent described how he sought to teach his children how to deal with their emotions and to stress the importance of staying calm:

When they said everybody had to have no more than 10 in the family at the home and they closed down the parks. . . .the family couldn’t go out. . .it put a damper on my kids’ social life. . .it would break their hearts. . . .<sup>[38]</sup> And that’s. . .almost depression. . . . [W]e need to show them [the children] that hey, we’re still here as a family. . . . Even though there’s a crisis going on in the United States, we need to show them that they still are very important to us as kids, as family.

With the start of a new school year in the fall of 2020, **COURTNEY**’s 9-year-old son was “super excited” to go back to the school building; in fact, he was so happy about being back in the building that he promised to never complain about school again. Similarly, a few parents from South Central Appalachia who sent their children to school in person in fall 2020 reported that their children had wanted to go back to school in person and were “happier” now that they were back.

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**38** In 2020, to stop the spread of COVID-19, some states banned private gatherings of more than 10 people inside a home. See Gershman (2020).

## Children's Access to Health Care

Most families reported being able to access health care during the pandemic when needed, though a few described delaying wellness visits. **NATASHA** expressed concern about her daughter, whose preexisting depression had gotten worse since the pandemic began. At the start of the pandemic, her daughter had been unable to access the mental health care she usually received, but at the time of the interview, she was able to get access to counseling through telehealth.

## Parents' Well-Being

None of the nine parents or their immediate family members had had a confirmed case of COVID-19, though most described knowing someone (either an acquaintance or a distant relative) who had.<sup>39</sup> When asked how they were doing, generally, since the start of the pandemic, most parents either did not mention changes to their physical health or shared that they were healthier than they were before the pandemic.

**COURTNEY** explained that she began walking more, both to avoid taking public transportation and to safely socialize with a friend. Most parents expressed experiencing increased stress, along with anxiety or feelings of sadness, such as described by **ELENA**: “I’ve been falling apart, becoming more stressed...losing a lot of weight... I’ve been feeling bad all these months. I feel nervous, desperate, stressed,...and I thought, ‘You have to find a way to survive and live.’ Because it was stressful.” **NATASHA** described having worsening mental health during the time she was unemployed and not following a regular schedule. She emphasized that being a parent during the pandemic was “hard,” explaining, “We’re all in hard times right now, so...until we get back up on our feet, it’s just hard being a mom. ‘Cause, I mean, we had so much more that...we’ve lost.”

Some parents shared that they missed their extended families, including older relatives who were at a higher risk of suffering negative effects from COVID-19 and family members who lived in other countries. One parent’s feelings were echoed in her account of her own mother’s worries:

We can’t travel...since [family members are] far away from me [in Central America], and I can’t go to them, and they can’t come to me... [M]y mom would cry, saying that it would be terrible for something to happen to her, and I wouldn’t be able to call her, or that something could happen to me, and she would never see me again.

Some parents reported other life events happening during this time that added to their feelings of sadness. One parent’s mother died in the spring, though not from COVID-19:

We [weren’t] allowed to go to the hospital, but yet I got to be with her day and night through Zoom, which...was the next best thing... I wish I would get to hold her... It was

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<sup>39</sup> Two parents believed they had COVID-19 at the start of the pandemic, before tests were accessible.

the hardest thing, because [if] the COVID wouldn't be here, we would have all been in the hospital with her.

Another parent had a cousin die on the first day that New York City shut down and had to miss the funeral because she was afraid to go into the church and risk potential exposure to COVID-19. On top of this stressful experience, this parent shared: “To this day we have no cause of death, and I think it's 'cause they don't want to say he died from COVID, because this [March 13, 2020; the day he died] was the day that they shut things down.” She went on to describe further complications—her struggle to get the final determination from the medical examiner about how her cousin died, with how backed up that person was due to all the deaths at the start of the pandemic, before the tests were available.

### Spending Time Together

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, which included parents feeling crowded in their living spaces (especially reported by the New York City families) and increased parental fighting (due to the stress of the pandemic and being at home all the time), almost all of them shared one bright spot: Spending so much time at home together allowed for their family to reconnect. **NATASHA** noted that the pandemic strengthened her family's relationships with one another, sharing, “We've definitely gotten closer.” **COURTNEY** echoed this sentiment, noting, “I think we just laugh more. It's just more of a family connection now.” **ELENA** explained: “I think it's good, because sometimes we're here, and my son goes: ‘Mom, I love you so much.’ [And I would respond,] ‘Me too.’ And little things like that; also more communication.”

## CONCLUSION

Families in this study experienced the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic with a sense of uncertainty and constant, unpredictable change. Many of the experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic reported by these families—for example, increased stress related to managing virtual school—echo the experiences reported by families at all income levels in news accounts and surveys.<sup>40</sup> National surveys also found that parents with low incomes more often lost their jobs, expressed more concern about their children falling behind in school, and more often reported symptoms of mental illness as a result of the pandemic.<sup>41</sup> These experiences also align with what families in this study reported in terms of job loss, worrying about their children's virtual-schooling experience, and increased stress. A limitation of this follow-up study—that is, the need to conduct interviews virtually instead of in person—may have excluded families who were hit even harder by the pandemic and who lacked the technology or phone minutes to participate in virtual interviews. As the pandemic evolved, families experienced multiple shifts and their circumstances changed with each development: losing

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Davis et al. (2020); Koma et al. (2020); Patrick et al. (2020).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Haley, Long, and Kenney (2022); Horowitz (2020); Panchal, Kamal, Cox, and Garfield (2021); Parker, Horowitz, and Brown (2020).

their jobs, then returning to work; not initially receiving benefits, then receiving them; and schools closing, then reopening virtually, and finally—in some cases—reopening for in-person learning.

Study parents described having continuing hardships or new material hardships during the pandemic, but they also described the importance of public and private assistance in alleviating those hardships. Their economic circumstances depended on whether they kept their jobs during this time and whether they received CARES Act benefits and increased SNAP benefits. Most parents in the study were connected to the safety net before the pandemic, and their access to benefits was crucial for staving off income loss. Study families' experiences also fluctuated over the course of the pandemic, with them facing more financial struggles at certain points (for example, when they were out of work) than at others (for example, when they were receiving expanded unemployment insurance).

Parents were afraid of themselves or their children contracting COVID-19, and as a result, they kept their family inside the home and scaled back family routines outside of it during this period. They expressed concerns about the experiences their children were missing out on because of pandemic restrictions. They also reported changes in their children's behavior and emotions stemming from the pandemic, suggesting that their children were more irritable and seemed sad. Parents also expressed frustrations with navigating virtual schooling with their children and with their children's experiences returning to in-person schooling in the fall of 2020.

Despite the stresses the pandemic brought on, parents described a few unexpected positive outcomes. One parent reported appreciating the extra public assistance, which boosted her family's financial circumstances, while another appreciated the break the pandemic gave her from her previous busy city life. Parents most often mentioned the positive aspects of spending extra time with their families and getting to know their children better.

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