

RESEARCH BRIEF: Traditional Foodways, Strong Family Support, Helped Rural Native American Families Protect Child Nutrition During Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Key Findings

Between 2020-2022, pandemic lockdowns and store restrictions presented new food and water access challenges and exacerbated pre-existing challenges for Native American families with young children living in reservation-based Southwest communities.

In response to the challenges, families leveraged coping strategies and resilience factors that helped them protect their family's nutrition during a critical time of their young children's development in a global crisis.

Household food and water insecurity are widespread among Native American families and negatively affect early childhood nutrition and lifelong health

The limited and uncertain availability of healthy foods and inconsistent access to safe drinking water, food and water insecurity, are known risk factors for chronic disease, including obesity and type 2 diabetes, and disproportionately affect Tribal communities¹⁻³.

Early childhood feeding patterns are critical in establishing health and chronic disease risk across the lifespan⁴. Sugar sweetened beverages are of particular concern in childhood feeding patterns because they are the largest source of added sugar in US children's diets and play a key role in early childhood obesity⁵.

This study was a qualitative analysis with a sub-sample of participants from an original parent study which was an evaluation of an intervention called Family Spirit Nurture⁶. The parent study was a 5-year randomized controlled trial that began in 2017 and was disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences of rural Native American (NA) families with young children related to child feeding patterns, food access, and water access. We also explored specific cultural strengths and resilience factors employed by caregivers. In depth interviews included 53 NA mothers across three reservation-based NA communities in the Southwestern U.S.: two communities on the Navajo Nation (Fort Defiance, Arizona, and Shiprock, New Mexico) and the White Mountain Apache community in Whiteriver, Arizona.

The pandemic forced families to be strategic, proactive and adaptable to access food and drinking water

Shortages of foods, price increases, traveling long distances between stores, restrictions limiting who and how many people could enter stores, lack of childcare, and Tribal community curfews and lockdowns made food shopping extremely challenging during the pandemic.

“It was kind of difficult because we had to travel farther, and at the time we had the old truck and it depended on how much money we had to put in for gas and who was going to watch baby for us. We couldn't take her into the store. That's where it kind of got difficult. ... it just kind of slowed things down to where there was one person that had to go inside [the grocery store], and then after that, the next person would have to go inside. It would have to switch because the food was limited. It was just hard to get as much food but try to be very cautious on what was going on.”

Families found strength in cultural values, sharing resources, and traditional foodways

Specific social and cultural resilience factors included: family support and childcare, family sharing resources, value of helping others, living in multigenerational households,

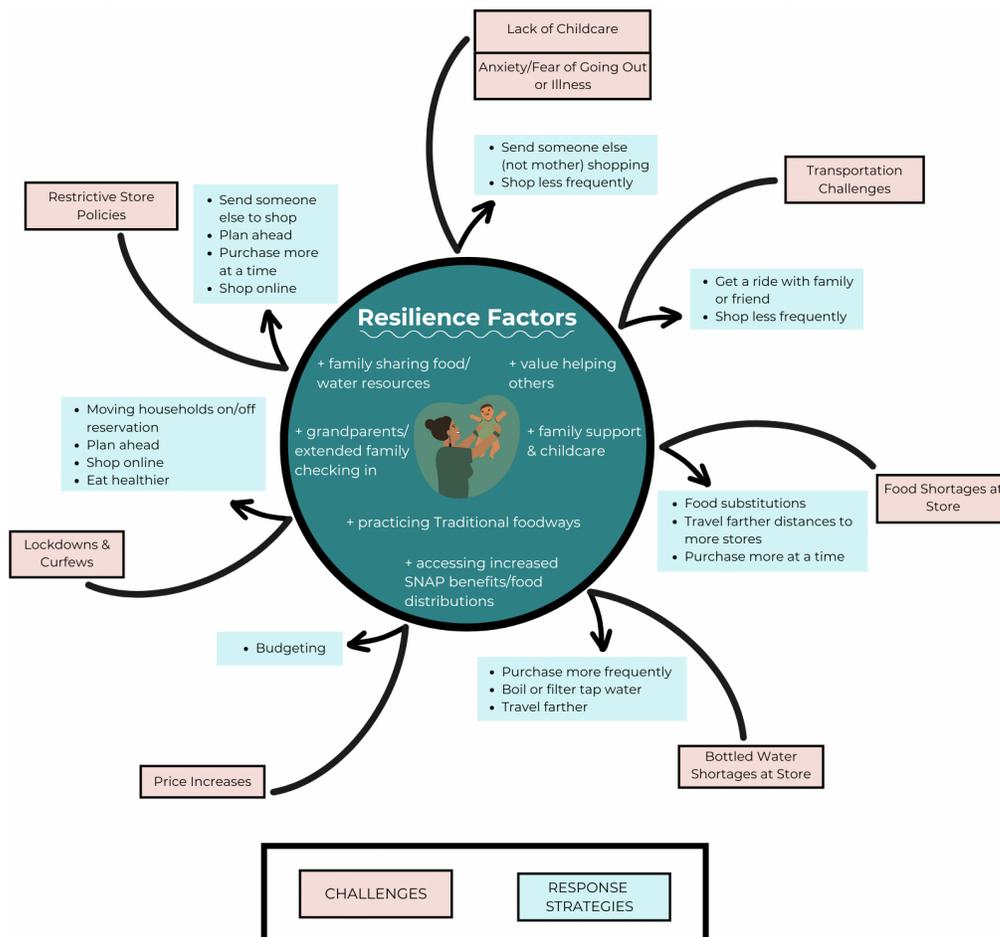


Figure 1. Resiliency framework illustrating the challenges and responses affecting food and water access during the pandemic. External challenges (shown in salmon colored boxes) related to the pandemic elicit response strategies (shown in turquoise boxes) shaped by NA resilience factors (center circle).

practicing traditional foodways such as hunting and growing food, accessing increased SNAP benefits and food distributions, and being previously accustomed to traveling long distances for food and drinking water.

The importance of Tribal community food sovereignty and robust local food systems are highlighted by pandemic disruptions.

This study's findings support addressing food and water insecurity for NA communities, recognizing the protective factors of resilience from a NA perspective, and furthering work in NA food sovereignty. Especially as food insecurity rates among NA communities remain the highest in the US, and federal funding to nutrition programs may be unreliable, our recommendations focus on building sustainable local Native food systems that incorporate Traditional foodways based on the resilience factors and strengths-based coping strategies illustrated in this study's interviews.

About the Authors

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