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Food insecurity during COVID-19: a place-based understanding of Fresno, California

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ABSTRACT

One's surrounding political, cultural, policy, and societal environment can influence food security status. These multiple, varied levels of contextual conditions within a location interact with each other, facilitating or impeding one's ability to be food secure. This case study offers place-based insights into food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic in Fresno, California, based on qualitative data. Results revealed nine themes that shaped the 12 participants' food security status during the pandemic, with specific place-based insights. Analysis highlights the complexity and interconnectedness of said themes onto food (in)security and links these understandings to better our place-based understanding of food (in)security. Further reflections include how policy and food insecurity responses could be bettered through place-based understandings, including in a future pandemic.

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Introduction

Food insecurity increased in the United States (US) during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wolfson and Leung 2020) and is a complex issue with many interconnecting factors and outcomes. The term food insecurity is defined in various ways. The United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organisation's 1996 definition is commonly employed (FAO 1996, 1):

Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Food insecurity is often discussed in terms of issues of affordability and accessibility and is connected to various areas including health issues and chronic illnesses such as diabetes (Gregory and Coleman-Jensen 2017), reduced quality of diet (Cooper and Dumbleton 2013), housing status (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk 2011), and further areas, including those around the social determinants of health (Smith and Thompson 2023). These intersecting arenas linked to food insecurity in one's life, such as housing status and diet, present and evolve in particular ways depending on one's location or place (e.g., Blumenberg et al. 2021).

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The conceptualization of place-based research is gaining trajectory and interest in the food insecurity space, such as that by Carter, Dubois, and Tremblay (2014). Here “place-based,” referencing Sonnino, Marsden, and Moragues-Faus’s (2016) understanding, refers to viewing place fluidly as a social construction, with various actors and infra-structural forces working vertically and horizontally at multiple levels, in this case shaping food (in)security. There is a growing body of food insecurity research utilizing some form of a place-based lens, such as Chung Yan and Sutherland’s place-based approach in Downtown Eastside Vancouver (2019), Lever et al.’s work in Kirklees, West Yorkshire (2022), and Sandover’s work in Exeter, England (2020). Including this lens of place-based investigation moves food insecurity work beyond location-based case studies into a realm of meaningful mapping and consideration of the multiple cross-cutting influences and experiences food insecurity engages with. Understanding how and in what way food insecurity is shaped and constructed in a location can not only develop better knowledge of the issue but creates a pathway for more meaningful preventative and resolution-oriented policy.

This paper employs a place-based lens toward case study qualitative data from the city of Fresno, California. This work engages with research questions around what contextual conditions within a place – in this case Fresno – have on a person’s food (in)security and how those conditions interact and intersect with each other; if some conditions matter more than others; and given the timing of the research how the contextual condition of COVID-19 specifically affects food (in)security. The results of these place-based understandings of the contextual conditions influencing food (in)security can then be taken forward into policymaking and future pandemic preparedness.

Fresno is a major city in the Central Valley of California, one of the biggest agricultural hubs for the US. Feeding America estimates, considering fully accurate estimates of food insecurity are difficult to achieve, 13.6% of those in Fresno County were food insecure in 2021, totaling 136,560 people, with a child poverty rate of 19% (Gundersen et al. 2023). Food insecurity prevalence, again estimated by Feeding America, varied by race, with rates of 24% for Black residents, 17% for Hispanic residents, and 8% for white, non-Hispanic residents (Gundersen et al. 2023). Previous food insecurity studies in Fresno include Wirth, Strohlic, and Getz’s (2007) study of food insecurity amongst farm workers in Fresno, which found that 45% of their respondents were food insecure, and 11% were considered food insecure with the sensation of hunger.

While reliable local statistics linking food insecurity during COVID-19 are not yet readily available, data is available as to how Fresno County was impacted by the pandemic. Based on California Department of Public Health data, The *LA Times* COVID-19 tracker reported that, as of June 7, 2023, Fresno County had 333,721 confirmed cases (one out of every three people having tested positive within the county) and 3,032 deaths were at least in some part connected to COVID-19 (Los Angeles Times Staff 2023). As of June 2023, 71.4% of residents in the county had had at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, with 64.4% receiving both doses of the initial vaccine (Los Angeles Times Staff 2023).

The policy and health landscape in Fresno and the US more generally altered significantly due to COVID-19. In brief review, so that the context Fresno operated within can be assessed, national-level legislation included: the 2020 Families First Coronavirus Response Act, the CARES Act 2020, the introduction

of Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfers (P-EBT) for children, child tax credits, stimulus checks, expanding unemployment benefits by \$293 billion, the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions Act, and the 2021 American Rescue Plan, amongst others (IMF 2021; Kim-Mozeleski et al. 2023). These pieces of legislation impacted the generosity of benefits, both financially and in relaxing of rules and regulations, as well as created new benefits such as the stimulus checks. These policies had an influence on household incomes and food insecurity.

California issued state-specific COVID-19-related legislation and policies such as multiple stay-at-home orders, mask mandates, and school closures (Procter 2023). California relief measures included the Golden State Stimulus program for low- to middle-income 2020 tax-filers and the California COVID-19 Supplemental Paid Sick Leave program (The Controller's Office 2022; Kamal 2022; Office of Governor Gavin Newsom 2022). Via the Families First Act, California used emergency authorization to increase CalFresh allowances (California's administration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) to the maximum benefit level possible over multiple iterations, ultimately concluding in February 2023 (Legal Services of Northern California n.d.). The Consolidated Appropriations Act increased CalFresh allocations by 15% until September 2021, with households already receiving the maximum given at minimum an additional \$95 per month (Legal Services of Northern California n.d.). Children in receipt of reduced-price or free school meals in California were targeted with additional funding associated with the Families First Act through the P-EBT program (Legal Services of Northern California, n.d.). Food-specific support included a program designed for elderly persons in partnership with local restaurants for up to \$61 worth of free meals per day to those who qualified (KABC 2020).

Food insecurity-related studies are emerging from this region timed during the pandemic. A COVID-19 era food insecurity study of the San Joaquin Valley of California (where Fresno is located) examined school districts, highlighting the complexities of offering pandemic school support (Jowell et al. 2023). Challenges in distributing food support included needing dual-language promotion and communications, and logistical issues that are location-related (e.g., avoiding the hottest time of day for food distribution) (Jowell et al. 2023). Payán et al.'s (2022) research of rural California counties with immigrants facing food insecurity during COVID-19, including Fresno County, found issues around a wide array of connected contexts with food insecurity such as food availability, accessibility, and consumption impacts due to school closures and reduced incomes. Barriers to support to formal and informal benefits were identified specifically for immigrants, such as those requiring IDs or registrations, with some such as P-EBT being more accessible (Payán et al. 2022).

Given the emergence of COVID-19 and the rapid policy and landscape shift, reviewing experiences from residents in Fresno, California during this period will offer important insights into food insecurity in the pandemic. With this place-based understanding that is to be employed, these lived experiences can be tied into a place-based understanding of their constructions and how it fits in with the policies and landscape outlined above. More specifically, a place-based understanding of food insecurity in Fresno could generate insights that could be used in future pandemic situations as to how to address food insecurity at a local level.

Materials and methods

This paper relies on online surveys and interviews with twelve participants from March–December 2021. Participants all self-identified as adults (seven females, five males) struggling to afford or access food over the past 12 months and live in Fresno. Two participants were recruited through the author emailing organizations in Fresno that may have interested participants, e.g., a local university food bank, while the other ten were recruited by a recruitment company. The use of the recruitment company was necessary due to the pandemic and the recruiters were asked to follow the same eligibility criteria as used for the organic recruitment.

Five participants had children, seven participants had a person with a disability in their household, and several mentioned or alluded to their Mexican heritage or Latin Hispanic family; the survey nor the interviews asked participants to disclose this, thus there is not a quantitative figure supplied. Self-disclosed age range varied from early 20s to over 60. This data was originally derived from the author's thesis work of two cases, Fresno and Leeds, at the University of York, approved by their ethics protocols. All participants signed necessary consent forms and had the study explained to them in full.

Participants prior to the interview completed an online survey in English, which included the US Household Food Security Survey Module: Six-Item Short Form (USDA 2012), with additional question styles including open-ended, ranking, and multiple-choice questions based on previous food insecurity studies. Additional survey questions were derived from secondary data, sourced from five databases including the UK Data Service and Harvard Dataverse amongst others to bolster trustworthiness. Topics discussed in the survey include food shopping during and prior to COVID-19, diet, housing status, health and disability, benefits, finances, and family structures. Participant survey answers, along with the topic guide informed by the food insecurity literature, were used as the basis for the semi-structured interviews (Fielding and Thomas 2015). The goal of the questions asked was to ascertain what contextual conditions affected a person's ability to become or remain food insecure in a particular location, with consideration of whether some contextual conditions matter more than others.

The topic guide and survey answers also fed into an interview guide which acted as a supportive tool in the interviews and interview preparation (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2020; Robson 2002). Interviews therefore were tailored to each individual building upon their survey results while remaining broad enough to cover topics they may not have explored in the survey. Zoom interviews were conducted in English with the author and recorded, lasting between 30–60 minutes, then were transcribed following each interview. All interviewees were given the choice to select their own pseudonyms, or were assigned one if they were declined. All data in this paper have been anonymized.

This study sought thematic saturation, which focuses on the emergence of new codes or themes in analysis (Saunders et al. 2018). This research, being constrained by COVID-19 and funding issues, was not able to employ a formal base number of participants in the hopes of achieving saturation prior to analysis. Furthermore, it was not possible to return to recruitment should any form of saturation not be reached during the analysis process. While this was of concern, the data proved cohesive with clearly marked repeated themes. While new sub-codes may have emerged with further interviews, there was satisfactory overlap in the overarching theme, providing sufficient trustworthiness (Carminati 2018).

Although some authors suggest that saturation is essential to qualitative data, equating it often with a large number of interviews until no new data emerges (Low 2019; Saunders et al. 2018), this is not a universally held view. Boddy argues sample sizes of one (if appropriately justified) and like population groups as low as twelve can still be high quality (Boddy 2016). Similarly, Hennink and Kaiser's systematic review found in public health research, empirical studies tended to range from nine to seventeen participants or four to eight focus groups reaching saturation in targeted, narrow studies (2022). Thanks to the large overlap in overarching themes, sufficient trustworthiness was achieved.

Data underwent thematic analysis, utilizing Nowell's et al. (2017) understanding of thematic analysis, in part based on Braun and Clarke (2006) with six phases: 1) data familiarization; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming the themes; and 6) producing the report. While feedback was solicited from peers at every stage of the methods and analysis process, i.e., from survey design, piloting surveys, soliciting feedback on the analysis structure, peer feedback on interview technique, interview transcripts were not double coded by multiple researchers, given this is derived from an individual thesis project. This lack of formal consultation and inclusion of another researcher, thus, is a limitation to be acknowledged.

Results

Within the data, there were the nine themes related to food insecurity and which influenced one's ability to be food secure in Fresno. All themes had notable overlap, with each theme interwoven with at least one other theme, demonstrating the interconnected experience of food insecurity. Each theme is highlighted below, then followed by a discussion of how these themes engage with each other and then against a place-based food insecurity lens.

Overarching impact of COVID-19: inescapable and pervasive

Due to the timing of the data collecting being in 2021, COVID-19 was still actively at the forefront of people's lives. All participants discussed lockdown restrictions and mask mandates that were enacted in the region at various points in the pandemic. Annalise summarized, "There was just the suggestion of flat out, stay home, don't go anywhere. Don't be around other people, isolate – or if you have to go out, wear a mask. It felt like you were wary of even your neighbors." Annalise placed a laminated sign on her house indicating she would not open the door for any person unless they were masked.

Participants outlined the emotional stress of COVID-19 and how this varied per person, Elizabeth stated:

In my 57 years, I've never had to deal with anything like this . . . It's been really, I won't say life-changing, but it's been quite stressful. I am not a hypochondriac, so . . . I was never overly alarmed. I just said, "Well, you know, if we follow the guidelines and we do what they ask us and wear a mask, then I'm going to be OK." But I know that some of my own family members have, in my opinion, gone over the edge.

The theme of COVID-19 is interwoven elsewhere throughout, as it was impossible to separate it fully from the themes below. The saturation of COVID-19 within the other themes in part promotes the notion that time-specific elements of place matter in food insecurity. It also points to local COVID-19 factors, such as infection rates, vaccination rates, and local COVID-19 rules of a location, influencing food insecurity and affirming the value place-based understanding of food insecurity.

Food acquisition strategies and dietary compromises

COVID-19 severely influenced participants' ability to obtain food and influenced what sources and means were available. This theme of food acquisition and diet aims to focus on the act of how food is obtained, the act and ability to shop, and what ultimately was consumable then consumed. This theme has notable knock-on effects onto the subsequent themes acting as a base issue for things such as budgeting. In Fresno, participants adapted to a lack of stock available and "panic-buying" during the pandemic's outbreak – although what is panic-buying versus making rational decisions based on uncertain circumstances is debatable (see Benker 2021). Participants identified numerous hard-to-locate foods including fresh and frozen meats like chicken, flour, ramen, fresh vegetables, items such as toilet paper, and generally culturally appropriate foods. Miri described having to turn to culturally specific grocery stores to find pantry staples such as beans and rice. She and her coworkers would meet up to share local knowledge of what could be located where and trade information to improve acquisition. Participants described stocking up on food when they were finally able to locate it and sharing resources and items amongst their friends and families, linking to the theme of support structures.

Many participants switched shopping strategies due to COVID-19, including online shopping, either via delivery services like DoorDash or Uber, on grocery store websites, or Amazon. Participants established multiple intersecting issues with online shopping, i.e., price versus stock versus safety trade-offs and considerations. Precious ultimately decided online shopping was not cost effective once accounting for delivery fees and reduced stock options which resulted in purchasing name brand products rather than the affordable or own-store brand versions.

Others altered their in-person shopping habits, changing stores and the frequency of food shops. Strategies varied and often were contradictory between participants, some only having a singular "big shop" a week to reduce COVID-19 exposure while others prioritized searching multiple locations to find the items required at an affordable price point. The differing strategy reflects the individualization of approach. Similarly, one's location may affect strategy practicality, i.e. a big shop may be possible if you live near a well-stocked, varied, affordable grocery outlet while for others this may not be a possibility. From a more macro-level place perspective on availability, Danny spoke to the irony of being in a plentiful farming region of the US commenting, "... you'd think of all the places where you should have vegetables, fresh vegetables, you would think you'd be in the Valley?"

Interviewees were acutely aware of variable pricing and were able to recall price changes off-hand. Elizabeth rattled off price changes of Lunchables, jalapeños, and multi-pack of meats which had spiked in costs. Meat consistently was cited as having inflated in cost, with most swapping to less expensive cuts or varieties of meats, even when it went

against their health requirements; this linking to the wellbeing theme, and taste preferences. These swaps often came in part of buying from places such as FoodMaxx compared to Costco, where meat and breads had less quality, less options, and poorer value per item. Participants also traveled farther to store locations in more affluent areas of Fresno where variety was more available and things were not locked behind glass or screens as, “they trust people here.” The act of acquiring food centered availability first, then pricing – if it was not available, the price did not matter.

Diet was inextricably associated with food prices for participants – what participants could afford limited what could be included in their diet. Participants commonly spoke of a variety of food categories and having to shop for the most affordable options possible cost options even if they hadn’t previously. Other participants noted difficulties in finding the food they traditionally preferred and increased costs when they did find them made their previous and preferred diets out of reach. What households considered traditional or typical was reflective of the region’s demographics, an example being Mexican foods such as burritos being viewed as the norm in some households but not others. Actual diet preferred versus the diet participants had were not the same, and what trade-offs in diet preferences versus consumption varied by participant. For one mother, with food prices becoming so expensive, she only purchased the foods that the kids liked rather than ingredients for cooking, affecting their diets and compromising nutrition needs for cost savings.

Participants cited that their diets had changed during the pandemic and expressed health concerns around these changes. They tied this toward their disability needs as well, showing a connection between these themes. Susie, for example, mentioned her inclusion of frozen ready meals in her diet, as the Atkins diet meals from Walmart helped meet her complex health needs around carbs and insulin levels and are covered by CalFresh benefits, making this an achievable option to make sure her health needs are met. In all, cost superseded health and disability-related dietary concerns and changes/choices in diet were made out of necessity due to pricing and COVID-19 rather than as preferred or required.

Web of support structures: formal welfare benefits, community resources and informal family support

For all participants, intersecting formal and informal support structures were vital, and using multiple sources was integral toward obtaining enough support. Three forms of formal support emerged: CalFresh, unemployment benefits, and P-EBT. With CalFresh, California’s version of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, many participants reported an increase from their original benefit amount, ranging from \$20 to \$40 per month to \$150 per month. Not all participants felt this uptick, as it simply offset the increased food prices and food budgets and the uncertainty around CalFresh increase led to concerns about how to rely on them. Relaxing the CalFresh rules to include online shopping was viewed as meaningfully supportive in the pandemic by Susie, who used it to avoid COVID-19 exposure. This points to how some benefit structures and rules directly engaged with pricing and food acquisition toward food security status; albeit not all benefits nor benefit structures made COVID-19 accommodations.

Participants that cited unemployment benefits were viewed as complicated but vital. Jayden described this, stating, “It took me like almost 4 years of my job to make it as much as I got in [unemployment] the last 10 months . . . I probably received \$10,000 in benefits, and I say that I was only making maybe \$3,000 a year. COVID-19 was kind of like a financial blessing to us.” For Francesca, the unemployment rules of needing paperwork from the former employer meant that her fiancé was in limbo, as he was out of work, but the employer would not fill out the necessary forms. This left Francesca’s fiancé without support. Others spoke as to how the benefits when combined capped out before additional substantial support could be received, such as with Vonn. These experiences further point to the personal-level impacts of benefits schemes and how their structures and interactions are crucial considerations for policymakers

P-EBT cards were highly praised by parents. P-EBT cards were a program where school-aged children were allocated debit-type cards, aligning with CalFresh, to ensure their parents could provide the child enough food during the pandemic. Both Precious and Miri noted that benefits were very helpful for parents to stock up on needed items, freeing up what would have been spent on groceries for other bills or costs. Depending on the school and school district, some also offered in-kind meal support, such as Vonn’s son’s school. This combination of support was appreciated by parents and, although some original hoops were placed, e.g., requiring the children to bring ID; eventually these rules were dropped, making in-kind food support and P-EBT more accessible. Schools generally acted as a positive institution in the community during COVID-19, acting as an asset for food support for families.

Outside of these support streams, other program avenues of support included Susie’s ability to access Veteran Association (VA) services which helped with housing, health-care, and other needs. Susie stated the high quality of the VA in Fresno is what keeps her in Fresno. Other schemes participants accessed included free AC installations, Elizabeth stating this was offered due to her disabilities, and solar panels being installed by the city which lowered her bills. Vonn received Section 8 Housing rental support and free car insurance through a state program. These schemes provided either basic services or reduced bills, creating more space in the budget for food and freeing up resources and time for food acquisition. COVID-specific schemes included the seniors’ free food parcel scheme, where for months seniors could receive fresh produce and groceries. Precious and Annaleise discussed the program’s high quality, long duration, and how it allowed neighbors to build informal support networks with each other, e.g. sharing the food parcel food with other neighbors. These programs freed up finances that would be used to offset the increased costs of food or circumvents the issues of access by buying more expensive alternatives.

Food charity was accessed by numerous participants as a form of support. Actors included education institutes such as Fresno City College and Fresno State’s food pantries, charities like Catholic Charities and the Salvation Army, and churches. While there were discussions about the positives of food charities and aid, e.g. how Precious’ church gave out fresh foods and cooked meats, many commented on the negative aspects of this support, Jayden worried about the safety and quality of foods donated, particularly about out-of-date food. He said, “just because we’re poor and hungry doesn’t mean we should be getting food that’s [gone off] you know?” With the foods received, they did not always promote a health and nutritious diet, linking to

further themes. Additionally, food drives in Fresno were often structured as drive-thru's meaning participants such as Rose, who did not have a vehicle, could not receive support.

Informal support networks of friends and family was also important to the participants. Nearly every participant was offered support by friends or family and offered it themselves when possible. These forms of support, including loaning money and giving food and groceries, were both materially and emotionally valuable. As reported earlier, knowledge sharing around what foods and resources were available where and sharing of said goods when found was an important interaction between both persons and the specific Fresno landscape. These informal networks often acted as the glue between the formal support mechanisms, making them workable in practice.

Money and budget: cutting costs was not enough

Budgeting was commonly discussed as both an issue and a coping strategy. Positively, with the increase in CalFresh and unemployment benefits some like Annaliese were able to stock up on freezer items – a food-centric rainy-day fund. Multiple participants worried about when the increases and pandemic support would conclude, meaning they took budgeting calculations to combat the uncertainty around program durations and extensions.

While budgeting strategies were employed, often this was not enough. Elizabeth missed numerous bills, including TV and phone bills – her phone was deactivated for 2 months, making her only contactable on Facebook. This in turn disconnected her from resources and community, an asset identified throughout as vital toward coping with food insecurity and COVID-19. Elizabeth took in her son's father, her ex, in the pandemic as a roommate who helped toward bills, describing this as vital given that PG&E (Pacific Gas and Electric Company) costs and related bills were “skyrocketing.”

PG&E was a commonly cited concern. Precious increased her swamp cooler and fan use during periods of high heat, which cost her more than usual over the last year – the bills being the highest in her 10 years of living in Fresno. To afford this, she used her food budget to make up the increased costs. Francesca explained how in her area there were power outages that were potentially connected to the wildfires elsewhere in California. She described the “nightmare-ish” scenario stating although it was not uncommon, it took much back and forth with the company and she was not fully compensated for the services lost. The knock-on effects of the outage included that they “. . . had to throw out over \$100 worth of food . . . that really was what made us take a huge hit . . .” This concern over PG&E, relating it to wildfires and temperature, all relate to a place-based experience of food insecurity; concerns like this may not be expressed in other places.

In a similar vein, Vonn described the stress of budgeting and bills, articulating:

It's been a struggle trying to, you know, trying to figure [out] what's more important – food or paying the PG&E? Am I able to miss the light bill one month or cable? And because my kids do home-schooling, I mean, my son was home-schooling and both my nephews, we have to have Wi-Fi, and in order to have Wi-Fi, you have to have cable . . . We've been stuck trying to balance every other month, which we all have to skip a PG&E or a water bill to pay in order to make sure that the kids are able to go to school, and to pay my Wi-Fi bill.

Annaliese used payday loans to afford bill payments, which she described as being “so hard to get out of” and she wasn’t sure how she’d be able to exit the cycle of loans and repayments. The US Government’s stimulus checks were not mentioned as an ongoing or prominent form of support but were appreciated as a positive influx of income. This points to the notion that not all relief mechanisms employed had similar impacts or perceptions of impacts in Fresno. This lack of mentions of the stimulus checks as a helpful financial support signals toward the need for future research as to why this support measure was not associated with an impact on money or budgets.

Work precarity, unemployment, and insufficient wages

Participants were highly engaged in the gig economy to afford food. Chris was informally working for his friend at a 7-Eleven, working occasional shifts under the promise of a permanent post soon. In part, Chris participated in this precarious job arrangement as his job options were limited. He said:

I’ve been off and on [working full time] . . . I was going through temp agencies and just getting hired on to them. To be honest, it hasn’t been the easiest for me to get work because I do have a past where . . . [in my] delinquent years to young adulthood I got in some trouble with the law. So my record . . . it turned kind of ugly, you know, because of past mistakes. So . . . jobs are very seldom.

Jayden similarly had employment issues following an arrest, saying previously “I worked before [for] 32 years at the [government agency] but something happened where I made a mistake and lost my job, and I lost my retirement and everything.” After this Jayden did janitorial work, which discontinued due to COVID-19. Jayden instead earned money through small jobs on Craigslist, filling out online surveys and interviews for gift cards, and working as a cleaner at one-off events like marathons to afford food. The interconnection between societal norms of what constitutes acceptable job roles for those with criminal records or engagements with law enforcement and the laws placed around this shape the options around income for food security.

Before COVID-19, Danny worked “off the books” which greatly increased his income, saying his on-paper income hasn’t changed, only just over \$1,000 of disability benefits, but his actual income drastically reduced. The work he did as a sound and tour manager brought in \$20,000 yearly, but due to COVID-19 was paused for the foreseeable future.

Annalise, Miri, Precious, Susie, and Rose were all not employed due to physical and/or mental health disabilities, not having the option to work off the books as Danny did. However, this ties into larger analysis regarding what is considered work, e.g., unpaid caregiving, how work should be counted, and who is valued based on economic output, noting specifically the undervaluing of women – see Criado-Perez (2019).

Family and children: intergenerational households and families

Most participants did not have school-aged children, including Chris, Susie, and Jayden. Who was considered “family” was a layered conversation, as many had close ties with non-immediate relatives and lived in intergenerational households, such as Vonn and

Elizabeth. This understanding of family reflects the literature around who is “kin” and what do we mean by the term – see Allen, Blieszner, and Roberto (2011) for more on the delineations and definitions around kinship inclusions. It also further called into question who is kin, in what spaces (i.e., inside or outside the household), and to what extent. These lived experiences of how family and kin interact within each other’s lives may not be reflected in how policy or benefits are structured, creating implications where relief intent does not match the intended audience in a location such as Fresno – see Geronimus (2023) for related insights.

For those with children, during the pandemic, many homeschooled their children or grandchildren. Vonn homeschooled her son as her daycare business closed, then her school gave him the option of returning to in-person lessons or continuing remote learning. Precious summarized the experience saying, “I had to become the teacher and then do the [rest] . . . but it was constantly – it was more the eating [that was difficult].”

Elizabeth homeschooled her 11-year-old grandson during the pandemic, which altered meal preparations. She explained:

He was here with me, basically 24/7. [His] mom said, “Well, why am I going to bring him every morning at five o’clock?” when she has to go in . . . and he’ll just spend the night. So I was feeding them breakfast, lunch and dinner and snacks. And so that was an extra impact on me to provide those meals for him . . . When it was just me and he was in school, if I didn’t want to eat lunch, I didn’t cook anything; I’d eat a frozen burrito if I wanted or a Cup Noodles. But when he was here, it was the obligation by me . . . I didn’t want to just feed him a bag of chips; I would make him something.

Parents or caregivers either directly teaching or facilitating the learning of children in the pandemic struggled with the adaptations in eating habits of children being home more. As Francesca offered in summary, having children home meant that the meals previously covered by schools or after school programs were stripped and not fully replaced. Even when school support was offered, parents or caregivers still had newfound labors to make those meals possible, such as driving to the school to pick up the meals or finding time to prepare the snacks and meals.

Danny, while not having children, discussed caring for his brother with mental developmental issues saying how he’s taken on a parent role, but it is difficult as he is not granted conservatorship status. Again, these examples touch upon the notion of family, kinship, and household. Who has responsibility and bears the financial and social costs of caring for persons may be defined by who is considered family, kin, and/or a household member. While again this is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that these personal relationships and expected responsibilities will vary for each participant.

Home and location: feeling of home, security in one’s home, and where one’s home is

Home and location were commonly discussed by interviewees. Many cited having moved either right before or during COVID-19 either in and out of Fresno or within the city, for example Susie moved to Fresno where her parents are from after being at a mental health

rehabilitation center in Palo Alto and Rose moved into county-supported housing due to her mental health status. Rose on paper pays less in rent (\$74 rather than \$150) than he did to her father whom she previously lived with, but inclusive of all fees and bills she now was left with \$88 a month for living expenses, including food. Francesca, her fiancé, and her daughter moved to the more expensive side of Fresno, closer to her university, from the downtown Tower District – increasing rent by \$450. These insights point to the interdimensional and geographical elements of place within a city, in this case; place being personal and moveable rather than static.

Precious cited how her landlord was particularly strict on receiving rent, even during COVID-19 when she was struggling to make ends meet. She said, “I had to make sure I pay my rent, or he wouldn’t even wait through COVID-19 and everything; he would have tried to serve me [eviction papers].” Counter to Precious’ experience, Vonn’s family had a positive relationship with her landlord. She lives in the mother-in-law’s suite in the back house with her family, without electricity, while her mother is in the main house. While the landlord relationship was good and the rented property very much felt like their own home, as other participants did, she expressed fears of homelessness due to her lack of paying full rent payments. Numerous participants were actively grappling with fears of homelessness, expressing feelings of always been on the edge of losing their home, and in turn losing “everything.”

There were other various home arrangements. Chris rented a room for free in exchange for acting as a carer for his disabled roommate whereas Susie prior to her Section 8 housing allocation secured through the VA stayed at various Airbnb’s as her main source of accommodation. Not all participants were renters though, as Annalise was a homeowner and Danny owned three properties with no mortgages and was a landlord. Yet, despite their homeowner status they still experienced food insecurity, depicting that the insulation layer of secure housing in fact was not full insulation from food insecurity. For Danny, his food insecurity was linked to his reduced income due to losing work from the pandemic and increased caring and financial responsibility for his friend that moved into his home. His mortgage-free status was not enough to offset the financial shortfall and only would have proved beneficial if he sold his property or properties.

Culture, politics, and trust: culture within families, communities and Fresno; politics of the regions; and trust in politicians and the system

In Fresno, culture, politics, and trust were all intertwined when in the context of food insecurity. Fresno’s positioning as a city within an agricultural region means much of the culture and wealth that does exist in the area is based on rural ideals and agriculture despite the city setting. The wealth and income in the area being deeply unequal, with 32.5% of households living below a living wage (University of California Merced Community & Labor Center 2021). Calmatters described as “one of the most economically distressed and unequal regions in California” (Foy 2023, 1). Fresno is further influenced by 18.9% of the population being foreign-born in 2021, with US Census Bureau data showing 91.1% hold citizenship status – lower than the 93.5 national average in 2022 (Datausa n.d.). In 2022, 50.5% of those in Fresno identified as either white (Hispanic) or Two+ (Hispanic), only 25.4% identifying as white (non-Hispanic)

(Datausa, n.d.). These data points steer the culture, both of the city and within households and communities, e.g., immigrant families maintaining cultural practices from their country of origin, and the divide between the population with embedded mistrust, due to economic inequalities.

Engagement with the State within a legal context impacted participants “trust in the system.” Two participants turned to the legal system to obtain benefits. Annaliese hired an attorney after being rejected for disability benefits and Rose being denied multiple times, and still was not yet approved. These legal engagements equated to lost time and resources, affecting food budgets and acquisition, and increased disheartenment with the State. Legal systems and their interactions with the benefits systems, timings, and backlogs of the courts, and specifically the disruptions to court proceedings during COVID-19, all interacted toward one’s ability to be food secure in Fresno. These legal interactions shaped their views and trust over whether the State would truly care for them in times of need.

Political motivations and politics came up frequently at the local, state, and national levels. These ideas tied in with conversations around trust, such as Francesca not trusting the news of whether there would be more California stimulus checks. She said, “I’ve seen like that same article for like over a month now, and it’s just like, ‘oh yeah, well, here are the steps if it’s going to get this approved.’ So a lot of people are probably banking on that, but I’m not sure how reliable certain news outlets are . . . you definitely have to do your research.” Some connected their distrust of government to their doubt in whether COVID-19 programming will continue, such as Annaliese:

I think [supplement support will end] next year, the governor’s position is up for re-election . . . So if he is not re-elected, a lot of that, the vast majority of everything we have, I feel, will go . . . You get a Republican in office, and there’ll be major cuts for lots of things and that’s scary. That’s really scary, when you barely have enough to live on.

Political certainty and transparency in programming emerged from these findings as important to participants. This sat against the landscape of COVID-19 being politicized in the Central Valley, with Trumpism and conservative talking points being heavily featured in Fresno – one participant offering conspiracy theories of the government causing COVID-19. This dynamic of not trusting politicians and the State to continue programming, seeing something as severe as the pandemic politicized, and not trusting systems such as the benefits system to work as intended influenced what Fresno participants felt as real options, in terms of support and relief, for them.

This said, there was a credit where credit is due attitude with the local government. Miri stated Fresno County as being supporting with her benefits enrollment, saying, “I’m very impressed with their workers, and they’re willing to help. I’ve lived in another county, and that was more of a ‘let’s try to figure out how you’re not eligible.’” Another trust-building initiative was the seniors COVID-19 food parcels previously mentioned, restoring trust based on the quality of the scheme. This bright spot demonstrates that trust and politics is possible in Fresno but trust in the political system is not inherent but rather earned.

Conversations turned to culture, both of Fresno and wider cultural events, including how Thanksgiving and Christmas were not as vibrant during COVID-19, and how the price of foods for the holidays had increased exponentially. Speaking specifically of Fresno, Susie offered:

There just isn't culture in Fresno. And one of the main driving problems of Fresno is it is led by the farming community that continues to destroy basically the entirety of Fresno . . . It's also a small, small, uneducated mindset.

Others mentioned how the culture in Fresno is changing for the better, with Annaliese commenting on how the downtown and Tower District areas have been rejuvenated. Optimism about place and what it could offer feeds into options for how food-related relief and trust can be established, building upon upward cultural momentum. There is also the consideration for internal community and family culture within Fresno and how those cultural experiences overlap and intersect with one another.

Wellbeing: health, disability, and emotional positioning

All interviewees had a disabled person in their house, with five identifying themselves as disabled. Mental health issues were common among the participants. Ricardo expressed his ongoing issues with anxiety and depression, Elizabeth discussed her school-aged cousin's development of Tourette's during the pandemic, Chris discussed his mental breakdown earlier in the year, and Susie talked about the intersections of her complex PTSD and bipolar disorder from her time in the military, where she suffered from sexual assault. Susie expressed the difficulties with food issues and food insecurity with her health conditions. Her physical health issues in sync with her mental illnesses meant she needed to adhere to a very limited diet with a required meal or snack regularity. This both came at a financial requirement, i.e., limited choice in what she can consume making it so she had to pay for whatever fit within the parameters, and a requirement on her time. Susie planned on returning to the workforce soon and joked she would need to go on "cucumber breaks rather than smoke breaks."

While not all were as complex, other participants had comorbidities and compound-ing health concerns, such as Elizabeth who struggled with claustrophobia (worsened by mask-wearing and COVID-19) alongside her diabetes and heart condition, affecting her ability to grocery shop. As to food acquisition this meant she sometimes went without rather than make the needed grocery shop or incurred delivery fees she couldn't afford. Danny's girlfriend had stage four breast cancer, affecting what foods Danny cooked in the home both in meal choice and as their households funds were directed toward medical care instead of food. The COVID-19-specific health concerns were most closely tied to food insecurity, noting food acquisition was "high risk" for health and disability. Pertaining to food insecurity and place-based understandings, health and disability affected every household, thus disability policy, healthcare costs, and support all connect with food. Given food plays such a dynamic multidimensional, bidirectional role with health and disability (Friedman 2021; Pryor and Dietz 2022), placing lived experiences of people with health issues and disabilities is essential toward thoughtful policymaking in places like Fresno.

As to emotional wellbeing, Fresno participants juggled multiple emotional hats and attitudes during their interviews. Susie and Francesca highlighted what areas in life they felt “lucky” about to counter the negativity in discussing food insecurity – Francesca highlighting her vehicle purchase while Susie expressing her luck for her VA support. Similarly, many expressed how “blessed” they were, including Jayden, Precious, Susie, and Ricardo all positioning their struggles against a positive in their life.

Counter to this, there was shame and judgment about benefits. Susie articulated that she was too proud to apply for CalFresh when she originally needed them but eventually signed up once the form was online rather than in-person. Annaliese explained she also avoided support and stated, “. . . it’s kind of just like humiliating in a way . . . I hate going somewhere to get free things . . . [I go when] I know nobody’s there because it’s just weird to be painted in like the poverty light . . .” Rose commented on CalFresh, saying:

The stigma that is attached to having food stamps has been a bit harder since the pandemic . . . I want to say that how I look also causes issues, too; because I’m overweight, they’re like, “Oh, like, look at that lady. She’s got food stamps. She must be lazy, must not work, must not, you know, whatever. And I bet all she does is buy junk food.” So I’ve had plenty of people [be] like, “Shame on you leeching off the government . . . how dare you?”

These shame and stigmatizations align with the literature, where people in poverty often internalize and reproduce narratives of stigma for requiring support (Purdam, Garratt, and Esmail 2016).

The most severe example from this theme was from Francesca, who spoke of her fiancé’s trauma, bringing it up in the context of him being out of work. She explained “[My fiancé is] trying to find work, unlike his brother, who recently was murdered in Fresno . . .” She talked about how this affected their income due to his lack of wages now being out of work (linking to the work theme), the stress of dealing with the detectives in his case, his depression affecting his appetite, and how, “the one thing that is consistent in his life right now is football . . . that’s like the only thing that he’s just like, ‘well, I know that I have this on Sunday, so I can take my mind off of it by watching a bunch of grown men play a game of football.’”

Discussion

Nine themes were identified in Fresno as either making it easier or harder with food (in) security during COVID-19. Thinking of food insecurity from a place-based lens allows us to evaluate these themes and how they engage with each other in terms of a social construction, referencing Sonnino, Marsden, and Moragues-Faus's (2016) understanding, which was evident within Fresno. This web of social construction was distinctive to Fresno, building on its existing culture, policies, institutions. Without such place-based consideration, much of the nuance that is needed for successful policymaking would be missed.

These findings aligned with other research conducted during the pandemic, e.g., Payán et al.’s work in the region (2022). With food acquisition, strategies had to be altered due to the changed conditions, such as no longer being able to buy in bulk or going to multiple stores price hunting, as found in Kinsey et al.’s US work (2020). Diet research mirrored Fresno’s findings that trade-offs away from typical food preferences

and food-related coping strategies were required, aligning with Luo et al.'s work in rural South Carolina (2022).

In support structures, work by Raifman, Bor, and Venkataramani (2021) reaffirms the importance of the boost to unemployment insurance, finding it reduced food insecurity and halved the number of those limiting their food consumption based on finances. Other research mirrored that of what was found in the Fresno themes, including in Family and Children which examines the struggles of homeschooling during the pandemic, including how this was experienced differently by diverse socio-economic groups (Hoskins and Wainwright 2023). The Home and Location theme reflects that different regions in California experienced food insecurity differently, supporting a place-based understanding and response (Blumenberg et al. 2021). Similarly, Wellbeing aligned with Friedman (2021)'s work, showing only 44.3% of persons with disabilities who were on Medicare benefits had enough food during the pandemic, with various demographic factors, e.g., household income and race, factoring in food insecurity. Connors et al. (2020)'s report mirrored the Fresno data, finding friend and family support was an important, preferred option but asking is not always straightforward. Finally, Culture Politics and Trust aligned with the findings, looking at Latino immigrant households in Fresno County, finding concerns about legal status and trust with the State and benefit receipt (Payán et al. 2022). All nine themes found in the data engaged with each other in various ways, and therefore when thinking of food insecurity these intersecting areas, or contextual conditions as referred to earlier, need to be viewed holistically.

For Culture, Politics, and Trust there were specifically insightful findings for politicians and policymakers. As for trust, even when the state or local government offers something like stimulus checks or increased CalFresh benefits, households were unsure how or whether to engage with them or count on receiving this support. This links particularly to trust in that participants did not trust that COVID-19 support would end when the situation had bettered or resolved but rather would be based on political needs of politicians. The uncertainty indicates governments must earn the trust of households with clear intentions and follow through to make the programs effective; innovative or generous programming is not enough on its own to ensure uptake. Culture is created and devised by households so their existence within their personal culture changes and fuels it, while their actual experience and perception of the overall place culture as also being relevant. Local culture, in turn, becomes a necessary factor in policymaking to ensure policy reflects how households operate, share goals, and view their roles in community and kin. This theme overall connects to the other themes for policymakers in that the place-based connections and contexts of Fresno and, as participants identified, the politicized nature of things such as rhetoric about the pandemic and benefit support. This signifies that any attempts toward addressing food insecurity in Fresno via indirect inroads, e.g. through housing cost relief, will be marked by the place-based culture, politics, and trust issues. In sum, any efforts by government to directly or indirectly affect food security status must account for the culture, trust, and political environment in Fresno to be successful.

A key finding from this study is the plethora of non-food issues that are present for those in food insecurity in Fresno and their interwovenness. This finding shows that if one wants to explore what makes it easier or harder to be food secure in a place such as Fresno, exploring non-food topics and therefore non-food solutions is critical. Given the

interconnection and intersection of the identified themes, policymaking could be made more place-tailored via collaborating with those with lived experience of food insecurity within a location. Place-based public policy approaches, as highlighted in Klepac et al.'s (2023) Australian work, can be more fruitful in addressing complex, multi-dimensional interrelated problems compared to status quo policy settings and interventions.

Given the unique crisis point, COVID-19 introduces a time-based element to our place-based lens. This understanding of place, under constant construction, aligns with a notion that this data is a time-based snapshot into Fresno in COVID-19. The specific elements, policies, legislations, and interpersonal and multisectoral dynamics operate within a specific time in the pandemic and introduce a layered complexity to the place-based lens of Fresno. While issues around time and place exist outside of pandemic settings, given the severity of COVID-19 and potential future pandemics, keeping a narrow learning focus on pandemics is a valuable contribution to the literature.

Should another pandemic occur, learning the lessons of how food insecurity was a layered, place-based experience could allow for better policymaking and pandemic relief support. The largely top-down policy responses to COVID-19; while justifiable due to the global nature of the pandemic, as explained by Stoney et al. (2023), misses the localized contexts and adaptations to policy may prove important to local pandemic resilience and recovery. Place-based policy building could be viewed to both incorporate local voice and create agency while also ensuring policymakers are selecting policies that go to the heart of issues of their community. Collaborative community partnerships, trust building, utilization of local knowledge, and embedded learning and reflective practice are building blocks to successful place-based policy (Klepac et al. 2023; Stoney et al. 2023). As seen in Fresno, speaking to those with lived experience illuminates the needed issues to address which in turn is insightful for meaningful policymaking.

Stoney et al. identified key areas to which local municipalities are well placed for place-based policymaking and discretion for action in COVID-19, including, “local business, financial aid and relief, governance and administration, social wellbeing and health, communications, and transport and mobility” (2023, 453). The Fresno themes overlap distinctly with Stoney et al.'s areas for local action, pointing toward future pandemics localized, place-based action and approaches that may be fruitful in addressing or preventing food insecurity, given how Fresno residents identified many of these areas as overlapping with their food security status. This said, there is a lack in practical, practitioner resources for place-based policymaking (Klepac et al., 2024) which would be needed should another pandemic occur.

Conclusion

This paper is an exploration of the contextual conditions of food insecurity in Fresno during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine themes were identified which related to food security and said themes highly engaged with each other. The results provide both an important account of how food insecurity was experienced in the COVID-19 pandemic while also highlighting that place-based understandings of food insecurity are appropriate toward building understanding of how households experience and arrive at their food (in)security status. The experience and making of food (in)security holds

specific Fresno-based factors that are important to recognize when discussing food security status. A place-based lens can be used by policymakers to build better pandemic polices that are in response to the location they are seeking to invoke change and act as a mechanism to ensure local community is accounted for and included in policymaking.

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