

Original Paper

Southern Exposure: Lived Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc and disrupted the lives of low-income individuals and families throughout a state in the southeast region of the U.S. Many of the disruptions were shared by all, including isolation-induced mental health issues, adjustments to safety protocols, and financial challenges. Some lost jobs. Some left jobs to protect family members. Some had major housing issues. Those with school-age children had multiple challenges, including access, reliability, and cost of broadband to support virtual learning; the inability to maintain or return to work because of children at home; and loss of free-and reduced meals at schools. Attitudes about vaccination varied considerably, with some adamantly refusing to be vaccinated, while others acknowledged uncertainty, but hesitatingly sought the vaccines. Others were eager to be vaccinated. Despite personal exposures and familial losses, study participants demonstrated great resiliency, creating ways to keep food on the table, supporting family and friends, finding the positive in having more time with children and other family members, and continuing to search for a way forward throughout the pandemic.

Keywords

COVID-19, isolation, depression, vaccine hesitancy, community action agencies

1. Introduction

Quantitative data chronicling the disparate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people of color and low-income households are readily available from ongoing monitoring of statistically representative samples of the population in the U.S., other advanced nations, and a host of developing countries (Sanchez -Paramo & Narayan, 2020). Monitoring surveys provide valuable quantitative insights into the magnitude, geographic manifestations, and social demography of coronavirus infections, hospitalizations, and deaths (Johnson, Bonds, Parnell, & Bright, 2021); and into the economic, social-psychological, and

emotional hardships the spread of the virus has imposed on individuals, families, and small businesses (Parker, Horowitz, & Brown, 2020; Wozniak, 2020; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; United States Census Bureau, 2020a, 2020b).

Systematic inventories of the voices of the people behind the numbers are equally important but, less prevalent (Simpson et al., 2021; Verhoven, Tsakitzidis, Philips, & Van Royen, 2020; Rahman, Tuckerman, Vorley, & Gherhes, 2021; Teti, Schatz, & Liebenberg, 2020; Ratcliff, Galdas, & Kanaan, 2021; Fisher et al., 2021). Documenting the lived-world experiences of people and communities affected -directly or indirectly- by the virus can provide valuable qualitative insights regarding strategies, tactics, policies, and practices that can be deployed to contain the current crisis (Anthes, 2021). Such documentation also may serve as a dose of reality for those who believe the Covid-19 pandemic is a hoax or those ignoring recommended safety precautions due to coronavirus pandemic fatigue (Williams, Armitage, Tampe, & Dienes, 2020; Ali et al., 2020).

2. Purpose and Research Design

We were asked by a statewide association representing Community Action Agencies (CAA) to assess how the COVID-19 pandemic was affecting their efforts to combat poverty and facilitate self-sufficiency in low-income communities throughout a state in the U.S. southeast region (Note 1). To do this, we conducted focus groups with individuals served by the CAAs in five communities across the state (Lupton, 2020). We worked with the statewide association and local CAAs throughout the state to recruit focus group participants.

The focus groups explored five themes that align with the questions posed in the Census Bureau's Pulse Survey, which provides quantitative indicators on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a).

- Behavioral responses to recommended protective measures
- Hardships and economic fallout
- Coping strategies
- Adequacy of relief measures
- Perception and beliefs about COVID-19 vaccines

Given COVID-19 safety precautions, we conducted focus groups over Zoom© (Lupton, 2020; Teti, Schatz, & Liebenberg, 2020). Designed to last no more than 90 minutes, the focus groups were conducted in the evening, from 6:00-7:30 PM, using a semi-structured research protocol. Focus group participants were given a \$100 gift card in appreciation.

Most of the participants were women, with a few men, single and part of participating couples. In three communities, most participants were African American and Hispanic; in two communities, most of the participants were white. Many were parents with children in their homes. Some lived with families and extended family; others lived with unrelated housemates or alone. Most worked at least part-time or were

looking for work. Some participants worked for the CAAs, usually in child development and childcare jobs. All participants had low incomes and lived in poverty as defined in the Federal Poverty Guidelines. We digitally recorded the sessions and used a professional transcription service to transcribe the digital files. We then conducted a detailed content analysis of the diverse perspectives and viewpoints expressed in the focus groups, which generated eight key takeaways. Supporting evidence for each of the key takeaways, extracted directly from the transcripts, is presented below.

3. Key Takeaways

“It’s all a learning experience. You’ve got to roll with the punches. If not, it will be really hard. It’s a lot of learning.”

“We have [gone] to food banks. And we have a really good community, so neighbors helping neighbors—I’m sorry if I’m emotional.”

Despite the “glass is always half full even when it is half empty” mentality and strong sense of community cohesiveness expressed by focus group participants, low-income families in this southeastern U.S. state faced major obstacles and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Takeaway #1: The COVID-19 pandemic exacted a disproportionately heavy toll on low-income families, especially in terms of both exposure to and deaths from the coronavirus.

Some participants explained that they were COVID survivors, others were both survivors and burdened by COVID casualties within families, and others were not affected by the virus personally but identified family members who succumbed.

Two survivors explained their ordeal with the virus.

One said,

I personally was affected with COVID. My grandparents...volunteer at a food bank every week and someone at the food bank had it, didn’t know, and then they bought me ice cream and cake for my 22nd birthday and I was infected on my birthday. It was horrible...I’m...very fortunate to be alive and everything.

The other noted, “I was hospitalized with COVID for six weeks. They sent me home with oxygen...I’m done with occupational therapy, but I’m still doing physical therapy. My life was normal before COVID.”

A third explained how she and members of her family contracted the virus from wearing a friend’s mask.

You know ... actually, what got us COVID was wearing a friend of ours mask and she did not know that her parents had COVID. So [she] contracted it from her parents and then we contracted it from her because we wore her mask.

Several participants described family members or relatives who contracted COVID, and in some instances, died.

One said, “I’ve had two family members that were hospitalized for it, but nobody’s passed away.”

Another noted,

During the holidays, both my grandmother and grandfather...had COVID. I've had an uncle to pass away from COVID. Actually, another one of my uncles that was in the nursing home...had COVID. And I've had an aunt to pass away from COVID. So it has really, really, impacted my family. Three people diagnosed and survived COVID and two people that I know passed away from COVID.

Key Takeaway #2: Above and beyond disparate exposures and deaths, the COVID-19 pandemic created major employment challenges and forced low-income households to make difficult decisions regarding work versus personal safety and the health and wellbeing of their families.

Some participants described employers who went to great lengths to accommodate their needs,

I was working 20 hours a week, making pretty decent money for the area. But my son has respiratory issues, so he cannot attend school physically, so he's doing virtual academy. I didn't qualify for FMLA, but my supervisors were amazing and accommodated my schedule.

I actually got offered another job while I was on FMLA that allowed me to bring my kids to work with me. So, at the end of April, I switched jobs so that I could continue to work again.

For most participants, work was immediately disrupted. Some remained employed, but hours and pay were cut. "I'm currently employed, but...they can only have so many people in the warehouse, and I can't go there."

For others, job loss was swift, "I was with [company] for six years prior to the pandemic, and the next day we didn't have a job."

Other participants voluntarily left jobs for safety reasons or were fired for refusing to ignore safety precautions and increased the risk of exposing their families. The commentaries are instructive.

A wife explained,

...my husband...was working as an engineer and lost his job due to COVID because our daughter was in an extremely high-risk category. They did not allow him to socially distance. He had FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act), but it didn't meet the guidelines for him to be able to have any time off or do any work from home. So he got fired because he couldn't be around—and there was active COVID cases in his workplace with people that he would have been in contact with. So he lost his job because of that.

A caregiver noted,

I was in retail. I had just celebrated six years. I noticed that some of the cleaning and things that the company had put in place to mitigate risk weren't being followed, noticed quite a few of my coworkers coughing and things like that and let them know that I was fearful of returning for work, especially given my mom and grandmother's condition, so I told them that I'd like a leave of absence. They didn't grant it but said that it was fine for me to stay home, and then several months later, released me for not coming back after my leave of absence.

A logistic worker stated,

[B]efore the COVID hit, I was working at [company], but when they wouldn't confirm how many positive cases they would get, I had to leave because my best friend was pregnant at the time and I had to take...her concerns [into consideration], because she was pregnant, and I had to leave that job.

Others—mainly women—were forced to quit their jobs to be at home with children when school systems shutdown and shifted to virtual learning. COVID-19 exacerbated existing childcare issues that historically have served as barriers to securing and maintaining stable employment for low-income families, especially single mothers.

A dental hygienist described her situation,

I had done dental hygiene for 13 years and the last seven-and-a-half years I worked at a community health clinic... And then once school stopped last March, I had to stay home with the kids. After about two months...the company I worked for closed because...we did dental care, and what I did was considered preventative. I did get unemployment for about six weeks. And then once I was offered my job back in June, I didn't have childcare because summer camps were closed, so I left that position.

A clerical assistant said,

I was working prior to the pandemic... I actually was terminated... because I had to remote learn my children. But, fortunately enough, they put that in my termination notice so I was able to use that whenever I went to a new job and was able to obtain what I needed for the kids to go to school and stuff.

Another--a retail employee--reported,

Prior to COVID, I was working...When COVID hit, of course, [I], like many people... was forced...out of work because of my children being at home...some of them [weren't] doing what they [were] supposed to do, so I had to...stop working to be able to get my household in check...

Key Takeaway #3: The shift to remote learning during the pandemic shed new light on structural issues related to availability, access, quality, and cost of internet services for low-income families.

The pandemic made the need for affordable access to broadband in homes urgent. Some needed broadband access for work. For most, the primary use of the internet was for school, including participant students at universities and community colleges, taking classes online. Many participants had school-age children in virtual learning. Internet access was generally adequate for those living in a city or larger town, but quality of access varied, and was expensive.

Only one participant rated her internet service highly for quality and cost, "Internet is solid. I have great internet, honestly. It's like \$80 a month."

Others were far less complimentary and some extremely critical of internet service. One reported, "It's a little slow, a little unstable sometimes...Everybody's on it, so the bandwidth is slow."

Another stated reflectively, “Internet access is just like everybody else, you have your good times and you have your bad times. You’ve just got to be in the right spot in the house and pray.”

A third commented forcefully, “I live with...my five ... school-age kids, and the internet sucks. It buffers all the time. It goes out and they get knocked out of class.”

Those living in rural areas complained about limited access to broadband—and the cost when available. One noted, “The internet here where I stay is kind of hit-and-miss, and it’s very, very expensive. I pay almost \$200 (a month) just for internet alone.”

Registering a similar complaint, a second vocalized, “... as far as internet access, we’ve been—I don’t want to say “stuck” with [name of the company], but unfortunately, it’s the only one we can get here.”

Describing her children’s experiences, another said,

They can connect, but it’s hit or miss because ... we’re on satellite internet, so we might get prioritized, we might not get prioritized. They may get knocked off, they may not get knocked off. We have good days, we have bad days.

Noting how poor internet services made virtual schooling more difficult for parents and children, a fourth participant painted a picture of the challenges.

It’s been a couple of struggles. Especially like you know how internet on the phone is—the hotspot is limited. So, we try to do the most we can online... When we can’t, we try to go, like, to the library or somewhere to get Wi-Fi. Sometimes we can’t go. But when we can, we do go.

Key Takeaway #4: The pandemic heightened personal and familial stress and anxiety posing, in the process, major socio-emotional and mental health challenges for low-income individuals and families.

In addition to loss of work, childcare, and broadband issues, participants explained how isolation at home led to loneliness and created or exacerbated feelings of anxiety and depression.

One said,

I suffer from depression, anxiety, and stuff like that. Being isolated at home for many months, it hit me bad. It got to a point where I needed to go out. I didn’t care if it had to be [retailers], anywhere. I needed to go...see somebody face to face. Because having three kids at home all week and then with not socializing with somebody else, I mean, over the phone is not the same as socializing with somebody in person. So it did affect me bad, I can say.

Another reflected on how the combination of COVID and cold weather made matters worse.

COVID came basically when it got really cold...And I think when it gets cold everyone has a bit more sadness because you stay in the house more. And then the pandemic on top of that just made—probably anyone with depression, it made it worse. Because I struggle with that myself and it definitely worsened it. I think that if anyone did have depression or anything like that, it would have made it worse for you because the cold always brings that on for me, at least. And then on top of it, there was a pandemic. So, I think it would mess with anyone’s emotional state, honestly.

A third talked about how limited interaction with family exacerbated her feelings of isolation.

So COVID's definitely put...a bigger gap between me and my family, and I guess that's why I've been experiencing a lot of loneliness, because it's just me and my son here.

Some participant parents expressed concerns about the pandemic's psychological effects on their children.

One opined,

My oldest, I think, probably suffered the most from the loneliness and from that feeling of missing out on something that she really enjoys. And then as far as my husband and I, the emotional effects that it took on us was mostly from watching our children go through things.

Confirming the potential adverse effects on young people, a college senior said,

I definitely feel lonely...I'm a senior this year... I just feel kind of lonely. I'm not as social as I was before. I'm a huge people-person but I know... I can't be that, just to make sure that other people are safe, and I keep myself safe. So, it's sad and it's, like, depressing...

Some participants acknowledged the possible adverse effects of isolation on mental health, but also indicated opportunity in the pandemic.

One male participant said,

I don't think the isolation was that bad. I tend to stay by myself anyway, so you get time to reflect and to think about life and meditate and you know, see where you want to go right now. Because obviously life is valuable and short and you've got to make the best of it.

Another asserted he benefitted from having time with family, especially his children, which enabled him to fend off the potentially adverse effects of isolation.

I was pretty good at keeping myself occupied. I just stayed in the yard and played with the kids a lot and it was the most time I've ever got to spend with my kids one-on-one, ever, I think, because I didn't have to worry about work. Not because I didn't want to work, but because I couldn't. It was the first time I think I've ever got to spend an extended period of time with either one of my children in their entire lives because I worked full-time. To be honest, I feel like maybe it's actually made my family have to be a bit closer because we—in the very beginning, we had very busy schedules. The pandemic definitely slowed all that down.

Key Takeaway #5: Government social safety programs were an important lifeline but fell short of addressing the range of assistance low-income households needed during the pandemic.

Nearly every participant praised the stimulus payments, as the following commentaries illustrate.

- [T]he stimulus helped a lot because it was extra income that we would not normally have on a normal basis.
- I received the stimulus and it helped me get caught up on most of my bills or pay some of them ahead.
- The stimulus every round, all three have just paid the mortgage, got groceries on the table.

- We got it [during] that two weeks that [my husband] had lost his job and then, like I said, it took a whole month for unemployment to come in, so when that stimulus check came in, it's what helped keep us afloat during that time period.

Others reflected on stimulus checks in combination with other safety net programs.

- The stimulus checks did help a lot. And then with being in early childhood education, the state also gave us bonuses separate from the stimulus check. We got four different bonuses throughout the year also, just for being in education. So that helped also.
- Stimulus checks 100% helped out big time. The unemployment that [I] received helped me immensely. And for a little while there, I was able to take some of my student loan and withhold that for a few months there.
- I get EBT, too, thank God for that. As far as family, all of us was kind of like in the same boat, so we [weren't] able to even help each other.

However, after praising benefits received from various social safety net programs, multiple participants expressed concerns about economic challenges they will likely face once those benefits were reduced or ended. For example, one stated,

I have been able to receive the unemployment, but then again, when I first received the unemployment, I got max unemployment along with the additional \$600 [stimulus check], which was nice, because ... that's what I brought home every week as my regular pay. But once they dwindled it down, it has been a struggle.

Some participants hastened to point out that they did not receive or qualify for unemployment payments and/or other types of available assistance. Two talked specifically about not being able to secure unemployment.

One noted,

I was not qualified for unemployment. I didn't get stimulus checks because I was a student. The only thing that I did have help with besides (the local CAA) and my own funds was we got, like, I guess, CARES Act funding from the university ... It was like \$325, which I was so grateful.

Referencing himself and his spouse, the other said,

Neither of us were approved for unemployment. I tried to contact them and I have no idea why. It just says like "pending resolution." I applied for a small business loan in April and I still haven't heard anything back.

Another participant reported challenges trying to deal with the bureaucracy to obtain support for a family member.

I have a mentally challenged nephew and...he can't answer any of their questions, so they won't let me talk because...he just turned 21 on Christmas. But I can't get any of the services because he can't answer their questions, and I'm his guardian, and ... they have proof of me being his guardian ... and still, because he's 21, it's a HIPPA law or something ... he'd have to be there to answer their questions but he don't know how to.

A small business owner reported the frustration of being self-employed and trying to get assistance beyond stimulus checks.

So, all we've gotten are the stimulus payments. We don't get anything else. I feel like it's harder than it should be to get help. I tried to apply for PPP, provided tax records, and for some reason, that's not enough. They want actual business records. So, I'm kind of on hold with that because I'm not exactly sure what that even means...it's been tough, even to just get help.

Key Takeaway #6: Beyond government support and private sector assistance, residents have pursued a wide array of coping strategies, tactics, and practices to survive the pandemic.

Faced with limiting and diminishing resources, low-income individuals and families found ways to raise money or save money. Participants volunteered that they sold assets.

- Like you know how kids [outgrow] their clothes very easily, so we would sell clothes.
- So, we ended up selling my car to help pay utilities.
- We [had to sell a car], because we're in the process of getting my husband's green card, we're not allowed to ask the government for anything, so I didn't draw unemployment. We didn't get the stimulus checks. So, we had to come up with money on our own.

Leveraging their entrepreneurial instincts, another participant revealed that she and her mother began a catering business to raise money to sustain their family during the pandemic.

Also, whenever I could, I would sell food from home. I would take lots of orders. I would ask people if anybody wanted to buy ... chicken with rice and beans, or enchiladas, or tamales, or anything we could make. Sometimes it would be me and my mom...we would sell food in order to get a little bit of income, whether it would be for that week's groceries or a light bill or a water bill or anything.

After the pandemic began, others indicated that they coped with housing related challenges either by moving in with friends or bringing family members into their households. Emblematic of these types of coping strategies, a college student said,

I stay with my sister and my best friend. I go to college. I mean, it's all right. It could be better, but I mean, it gets me by.

And another participant revealed,

We're currently renting this house, hoping to own it before too long. Currently, I have my mother and grandmother living with us. We got married just over a year ago, so—but my grandmother's been having some health issues, and we had some issues with my mother's housing arrangements, just due to some familial issues as well as some pandemic issues, as far as money, things like that.

Several participants acknowledged looking forward to living independently again but accepted the need to share housing to reduce housing costs at least during the pandemic: "I'm just praying for the opportunity to come my way to start working again to get my own [place to live]."

Shifting to other coping strategies, several participants reported returning to school or training to change careers after COVID.

- I did welding and fabrication and maintenance at a factory...and I got laid off at the beginning of the pandemic. [W]e were in shutdown, and then when they opened back up, that's when I joined the barber college and started to change my career.
- Before COVID, I was a carpenter's assistant ... Right now, I'm in school doing something else. Trying to broaden myself in the construction field.

Key Takeaway #7: Augmenting personal resiliency, nonprofit organizations were instrumental in creating a therapeutic community for the most vulnerable families, providing much needed supports—financial and socio-emotional as well as basic-necessities such as food—during the pandemic.

Focus group participants were quick to acknowledge the pivotal role local community action agencies (CAAs) have played in helping them navigate and survive the pandemic.

- You know, all the bills went up but the income didn't go up. [The local CAA] was able to help out on several occasions, which was a blessing.
- The house that we moved into was not wheelchair accessible. And the money that we had laid aside...to build a ramp...when we weren't able to use that money for that, [the local CAA] came in and helped us...to be able to get our daughter up the driveway and into our house safely. That was a really big blessing.
- I was behind on rent and my lights for a few months and I received help through the [the local CAA] where I'm obtaining my GED.
- I actually started [working] at [the local CAA] because my lights and water got cut off...They helped me get my lights and my water back on...[and] I was offered a job [the day] I came in [for assistance].
- I mean, if it wasn't for the local community...I don't know where we would be. I almost lost my car, which I worked really hard to get. I couldn't make the car payment. And (the local CAA) helped me with that because that was our main mode of transportation.
- Well, the same source [the local CAA] Thanksgiving, they gave us a food voucher or a gift card and we were able to put food on the table for Thanksgiving.
- [The local CAA] ... since they didn't have summer camp...actually brought our children food every week and that probably saved us. It was amazing.

Focus group participants were grateful to food banks and other organizations, including churches and schools. One commented about the pivotal role of food banks,

There's months that I didn't have enough to provide food for the family...we heard about the [food] pantries that's around in the community, so we accessed the pantries and that helped a lot. We still go to pantries to help out a little bit with the food for the kids because having three kids, it's kind of difficult to feed them two, three times a day and their snacks and with them only having school twice a week. You know, kids eat a lot.

Acknowledging the role of schools in helping to feed her children during the pandemic, a single mother volunteered, “We did (have trouble getting enough food) at first... and I have three children. And the school did help... they would bring lunch every day or so...”

And a third participant offered a general observation about the role of her church and its members, “We have a good church and good church members. They have helped us out.”

Key Takeaway #8: Compliance with precautionary measures—with only a few exceptions—is high but vaccine hesitancy is widespread among low-income families and households.

Regarding government mandated safety protocols, one participant stated unequivocally, “We didn’t travel; we didn’t go anywhere; we didn’t have people over. It was straight lockdown. Isolation.”

Expressing a similar sentiment, another stated, “We took the most precautions we could, stayed away from big crowds. Right now we do go out with precautions—hand sanitizers, washing hands, masks—but prior, like, we didn’t have any problems with following everything.”

A third said, “I work in healthcare, so I definitely take precautions for myself, my patients, my coworkers, my family.”

A fourth added, “Yeah, I have little kids who are constantly washing their hands, putting hand sanitizer, making sure that everybody’s got a mask. We have no issues.”

And a fifth asserted,

“We don’t play. We don’t go [anywhere without] masks...[and] hand sanitizer...We’ve got Lysol wipes, washing clothes like every other day...because there’s germs [on] everything ... trying to keep everything wiped down.”

Among participants, there was a robust discussion regarding mask wearing. For example, one stated,

“Everybody in my house wears a mask, I literally bleach everything all the time. I don’t take my son out as much, because he is one year old and he can’t wear a mask, but I’m trying to get him to wear a mask too.”

Two participants indicated initial reluctance to wearing masks in their households.

One noted, “I was pretty hesitant at first with mask wearing... It only took me a couple days and then I started following directions. And my kids follow the directions pretty well.”

Another talked about mask wearing hesitancy among adult family members. “I just remembered whenever it first happened my brother and my boyfriend completely refused to mask. And everywhere we went they were like, ‘No, I’m not going to wear a mask. It can’t be that bad.’”

Several reported compliance issues with masking wearing protocols among children and teens. One referenced her child,

For us... my younger child is... going to turn four and he’s very, “Why should I wear a mask? Do I have to wear a mask?”, and he tries to pull it off... But everybody else just washes their hands and [practices] social distance...

A second explained the challenge in her household by noting,

The only issue that I had was with my kids, putting a mask on them was—at first I wasn't too sure about it but only because ... my littlest one has asthma so that was... the only thing that I was afraid of... at first. But my oldest daughter was just fine with the mask, but my littlest one, it was hard to tell myself to put a mask on her with her asthma. That's what I was worried about with her.

And a third described the difficulty of getting her teenager to comply,

We've been complying pretty well, although I do have a teenager in this house, ...and he thinks he can fly out of here ... without a mask or washing [his] hands...but other than that, we've been pretty good—they've been complying well.

In terms of the broader set of state-mandated pre-cautionary measures, avoiding mass gatherings constituted more of a problem than mask wearing. Two participants said holidays were a problem in their families.

One noted,

My family actually was hardheaded... They all wanted to get together still [on holidays]. Nobody wanted to cancel any event, so that's where I had problems with them ... because they didn't really ... take it too seriously when it came to just family being around ... they still wanted to get together. And I was more afraid of everybody getting together... My family did not behave, I guess you could say ...

And the other disclosed, "On Thanksgiving, that was the hardest time. My granddaughter and my son, they wanted to come over, and what happened, the son came over, just stayed outside."

Aside from violating calls to avoid holiday gatherings, some participants reported family and friends who wanted to visit them even though they were supposed to stay isolated. Describing some of her family members, one volunteered, "But I had...trouble with people feeling lonely and wanting to come visit, and I'm like, 'No, you can't. Do not come.'"

Another shared a similar story,

But the problem I've had is, people who come to my house just to be visitors, just to say, "Oh, I was thinking of you," whatever, they didn't want to be on the phone or they were passing by ...

She further explained that she,

... had to put a good girlfriend of mine out. She's sitting on my couch, and she just wanted to go to the bathroom, she claimed, and then she tells me, "Oh, and I'm on quarantine." I said, "You're what?" I've learned to ask some very serious questions before you [enter] my door. Matter of fact, I've let people know, "Just don't come," because I'm not going to risk my life for anybody else's, it's not cool.

A fourth participant reported,

I had more issues with my family wanting to come over because they were lonely and they wanted to come see my kids... and my dad was not very safe during the pandemic... not at the

beginning. I think he just didn't take it very seriously...he would want to come over and see my kids and I would have to be like, "No, don't."

Another participant talked about the challenge she faced trying to keep family members from coming to visit her mother who was undergoing chemotherapy.

Yes, and trying to keep everybody away from her (her mother), especially when she has family coming in town from up north, and everybody wanted.... to come in and see... her. No, you can't come in because her immune system is even worse, one, because of her age, and then also chemo and radiology that she's going through in order to keep herself together.

Non-compliance with recommended safety precautions was a relatively minor issue compared to expressed concerns about the vaccines. Several factors are driving vaccine hesitancy.

Multiple participants did not trust the process of vaccine development and expressed major concerns about the possible unknown effects.

- I don't trust it. There hasn't been enough research done on it. They spend years and years and years, trial and error, for vaccines, and they haven't—they spent six months, and it was rushed on top of that, and me and my wife, we may plan to have another kid, and they don't have any research on it, on what may potentially happen with pregnancy if you've had the vaccine, and I'm just not going to take a chance. And overall, honestly, I just don't trust it.
- I don't feel that it was tested ... I hear people that complain about it and I know they got it -as far as pain in the arms and just different symptoms- and then you read about people dying from getting it. It wasn't properly tested. I don't know if the Johnson & Johnson one is tested, I might get that one, but it—right now, without the two doses one being tested, I'm just a little skeptical because what did they test it on? [What] are the side effects and [where is]... the information you're supposed to get when you're taking any kind of medicines?
- Well, I have not been vaccinated yet. I don't necessarily know that I have any plans to get vaccinated. My husband doesn't have any plans to get vaccinated. Our basic concern and the reason that we haven't yet... is sort of like working out the kinks—does that make any sense?
- So, I'm not against it if people want it. My mom has been vaccinated. My dad has been vaccinated. I want to see more long-term effects before I go and put something in my body. I have two children, one that has birth defects that has to get surgeries and that needs his mom to take care of him. But if people want it, that is their choice and I have nothing against it. I just—I don't know. I want...to see the kinks be worked out first.
- I'm not getting vaccinated. I feel like eventually you're going to turn into a zombie.

Several expressed concerns about side effects of vaccinations.

- No, we don't have any plans right now as in getting the vaccine...I've heard a lot of people are getting sick because of it. And you know, as a parent, you're the one that provides for your family and you don't have to be sick and at home in the bed because ... you took the COVID shot.

- I was talking to the receptionist when I went to the hospital to see my grandfather this past weekend. And she said the first shot was bad and the second shot was even worse. And she said ...for a complete 48 hours she was in the bed and she couldn't do anything. So, I don't think I'm going to get it right now.
- My sister got vaccinated and my mom got vaccinated, but I'm not doing it. I'd be that 1% to get all the side effects, so—and I'm good.

For some participants, vaccine hesitancy was based on a misunderstanding of the science and the procedures used to clinically test the vaccines.

- We are not going to get vaccinated. I have rheumatoid arthritis, so I have...a very, very delicate immune system. And they suggest for people like us to get vaccinated. But I am not, and my family is not ... because ... that protein that they made it from, it's fake. If you search the protein, it doesn't like live very long...it's actually fake ...it's synthetic. So, I'm not going to put something synthetic in my body.
- This is why I'm not getting vaccinated, because... I just think about it like the flu vaccination. They're giving you a part of the flu, when you're getting the flu shot... So, COVID, they're giving you a part of the dang old COVID. I'm not taking it, why? To risk my life? ... If I take this vaccination, I'm going to end up getting COVID.

Several African American participants expressed skepticism, citing the history of abusive medical testing using African American subjects.

- Well, to be totally honest and very transparent, I just don't trust it. Me being African American, based on the history of what has been done to African Americans, especially because back in history, when I read about what [has been] done to African Americans in regards to being tested on, I don't trust it. And I'm not trying to make anybody feel uncomfortable, it's just—I just don't... trust it, and I just think they just threw it together too quick. I'm just waiting, I'm not saying I won't do it, I'm just not sure. I'm on the fence with it. That's the way I feel about it.
- (T)hey got all these vaccines. Is the one with the blue caps for the black people? Is the red caps for the white people? Is the yellow cap for the Asians? You know, I don't know because I'm paranoid, because I do a lot of black history, you know, looking up on stuff, you know, and history just surely repeats itself.

4. Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Through their own voices, we have documented how the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc and disrupted the lives of low-income individuals and families throughout a state in the southeastern U.S. Many of the disruptions were shared by all, including isolation-induced mental health issues and adjustments to safety protocols as well as financial challenges. Many lost jobs and while others left jobs to protect family members. Some had major housing issues. Those with school-age children had multiple challenges, including access, reliability, and costs of broadband to support the shift to virtual learning in

schools; the inability to maintain or return to work because their children needed them at home; and the loss of free-and reduced meals at schools. Attitudes about vaccination varied considerably, with some adamant in their refusal to be vaccinated, while others acknowledged uncertainty but hesitatingly sought the vaccines and still others were eager to be vaccinated. Despite personal exposures and familial losses to the coronavirus, study participants also demonstrated great resiliency, creating ways to keep food on the table, supporting family and friends, finding the positive in having more time with children and other family members, and continuing to search for a way forward throughout the pandemic.

Study participants uniformly noted the critical role stimulus payments, unemployment benefits, and other government aid played in helping them cope with the pandemic. However, they were also quick to highlight instances in which such assistance fell short and how local nonprofit organizations, especially local CAAs, came to their rescue.

As the Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus continues to exact a heavy toll in communities with low vaccination rates throughout the nation (Anthes, 2021), our findings suggest a propitious opportunity exists to leverage--in two critically important ways--the outstanding reputation of CAAs as caring and trusted entities in low-income households and communities.

First, federal and state emergency management officials should partner with such agencies, as *trusted messengers*, to craft *trusted messages* and devise multi-channel communication strategies aimed at mitigating and minimizing risks associated with the current pandemic and any future crisis (Johnson, Bonds, Parnell, & Bright, 2021). Such an approach will refocus trust and integrity to the local level and local organizations that play an influential role in the life and values of local communities (Eldred, 2020; Kritz, 2020).

Second, given their reputational power as caring and trusted entities in low-income communities, CAAs' influence should be leveraged to garner financial resources from government and philanthropy to develop and launch multi-generational mental wellness program that address the pandemic-inducing anxiety and depression as well as abuse and battery that continue to affect the lives of adults and children in poverty-stricken households and communities (Brower, 2020; Joseph, 2021; Panchal, Kama, Cox, & Garfield, 2021; Ali, et al., 2020). This is an urgent need as such issues are likely to worsen when all of the safety nets instituted to sustain low income families during the pandemic cease to exist, leading to what some observers refer to as the impending post-pandemic cliff (Auriemma & Gailey, 2021; Gottlieb, 2021; Hazelton, 2020; O'Donnell, 2021; Stettner, 2021).

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Note

Dating back to 1964 when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act, community action agencies are nonprofit organizations with a demonstrated commitment to reducing poverty and creating pathways to self-sufficiency in low-income families and communities (see Burch, 2021).