

“I just feel no matter what you lack, nobody should be treated differently”:
Understanding Discrimination in Food Assistance Programs

By

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Thesis

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Positionality Statement and Acknowledgements

I acknowledge my position as a White, cis-gendered, educated woman with socioeconomic privilege, preventing experience of food insecurity or discrimination related to food assistance. I recognize how my privileged positionality influences analyses, particularly in the absence of lived experience. I am committed to, and passion about, community engaged research approaches to address the root causes of food insecurity.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated racial and ethnic disparities in household food insecurity. Approximately 22% of Black families and 17% of Latino families experienced food insecurity in 2020 compared to less than 7% of White families.¹ Comparatively in 2019, approximately 19% of Black families, 16% of Latino families and 8% of White families experienced food insecurity.¹

Food assistance programs and temporary pandemic relief measures alleviated some of the food insecurity burden that families were experiencing during COVID-19 without addressing the root causes of food insecurity. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC) function as the primary legislative responses to food insecurity in the United States, providing low-income families with financial assistance for food purchases.² Between April and September of 2020, an additional 5 million individuals enrolled and participated in SNAP compared to the same time in 2019.³ Federal pandemic provisions supported increased participation, including providing the maximum monthly allotment for a participant's household size, and waiving the Three-Month Time Limit rule for those who are unemployed and without a disability between the ages of 18 and 49.³

Despite this assistance, participation in some of the key programs remains low. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), in 2019, approximately 50 million individuals were at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), the typical gross income eligibility requirement. However, only 35 million individuals participated in SNAP.⁴ Between 2018 and 2020, in New York State, for example, only 64% of all eligible participants accessed SNAP.⁵ While there are multiple factors that contribute to food insecurity and lack of participation in federal assistance programs, some evidence has highlighted the role of systemic racism and discrimination.^{6–13} Gaps persist regarding *who* is subject to discrimination within food assistance programs. As federal pandemic provisions expired in March 2023, it is critical to further examine how discrimination shapes experiences in food assistance programs to ensure that eligible families have access to, and can safely participate in, programs.¹⁴

Scholars have recently begun to investigate how experiences of discrimination, including racism, xenophobia and social stigma related to food assistance, could deter participation and promote further stigmatization of food assistance programs, particularly throughout the

pandemic.^{10,15} Families have cited experiences of interpersonal discrimination among caseworkers and grocery store employees who undermine individuals by perpetuating meritocratic narratives, casting individuals seeking benefits as “lazy”.^{12,16,17} These judgmental interactions can promote feelings of shame due to pervasive stigma.^{7,12,16–19} Individuals might avoid participation in food assistance programs due to negative perceptions regarding social assistance and an acute awareness of stereotypes imposed upon them.^{7,12,16,18,19}

Experiences of interpersonal racism could interact with social stigma related to food assistance to further shape experiences of discrimination.^{10,12,16,17} In Larson et al.’s study describing food insecure families’ experiences accessing food pantry assistance during the pandemic, Black, Asian and Hispanic, participants cited racist verbal and physical harassment from both customers and store employees, including use of racial slurs and surveillance in stores.¹⁰ Stigmatization surrounding food assistance further supports internalized discrimination.^{7,15,19,20} Researchers have documented how individuals eligible for SNAP, position others who receive food assistance as “abusers of the system,” manifesting internalized stigma regarding social support systems.^{18,21}

Anti-immigration rhetoric and xenophobia could instill fears of deportation or impact of enrollment on future legal status, preventing participation for immigrant families.^{9,13,18,22,23} As bi-product of the national anti-immigration narrative, Pelto et al. describe the circulation of rumors, among Latine American immigrant families in New York City. Rumors included misinformation regarding the consequences of enrollment, including child deportation, deportation of relatives without documentation status, or loss of citizenship among US-born children.⁹ Anti-immigration rhetoric compounded with limited information on, or awareness of, programs could impede participation in food assistance programs.^{9,13,21,24}

While there is some evidence regarding discrimination and food assistance programs, it remains limited. Research is either anecdotal or includes discrimination as a covariate in quantitative studies.^{13,18,22–24} Moreover, studies rarely engage participants to discuss their perceptions of barriers, or potential solutions.¹² Chilton et al.’s study remains the only study to adopt a participatory approach and directly involve those enrolled in SNAP to identify avenues for improvement.¹² In addition, studies have not yet considered the predictors of discrimination, including race, ethnicity, gender, nativity and poverty level. The purpose of this exploratory study is to apply a mixed methods approach to better understand experiences of discrimination, according to participant demographic and perceptions of judgment or mistreatment.

Methods

Study Design

A convergent parallel mixed methods design – triangulation – was applied, using the qualitative findings to complement quantitative results and offer context regarding participant experience.²⁵ Qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted separately, results were then compared and the extent of divergence and convergence between findings was assessed.²⁵

Data Collection

This study utilized data from The University of Michigan's Feeding Michigan (MI) Families study, which centers parent voices to address barriers in food assistance programs and collaboratively work with researchers to design policy solutions in Battle Creek, Detroit, and Grand Rapids, Michigan. Researchers worked with community organizations to recruit and convene a parent review board (PRB) of non-White and non-Asian parents to design survey questions for parents around these areas. Researchers disseminated the survey to participants in Detroit, Grand Rapids and Battle Creek, beginning in September 2022. Participants self-identified as parents to confirm eligibility with the option to complete the survey via text or phone call. Parental race and ethnicity reflected population proportions. Recruitment for surveys occurred at the community-level through targeted social media advertising, local health networks and outreach by community organizations.

Outcome, Exposure Variable and Covariates

The outcome, discrimination, was defined according to participants' experience of judgment and mistreatment. Two closed ended questions assessed whether participants had experienced judgment and mistreatment related to food assistance programs (n=286). Those categorized as missing for discrimination questions and covariates were excluded (n=14). The following predictors of discrimination were selected based on previous literature and included race/ethnicity, nativity, gender, experience of disability, and percent poverty by zip code.^{9,10,21,24,26} Survey questions on race and ethnicity included eight categories and were collapsed into five categories for analysis, including White, Black or African American, Latino and all other racial/ethnic groups. Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Middle Eastern/North African, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander and "another race or ethnicity" were collapsed into one category. One open-ended question asked participants to share their experiences of discrimination related to food assistance programs (n=146).

Statistical Analyses

All secondary cross-sectional statistical analyses were performed using STATA (version 16.1).²⁷ Descriptive statistics were performed to describe population characteristics according to participants' experiences of perceived judgment related to food assistance. A one-to-one merge was used to join US Census percent poverty by zip code data to the FMF dataset.²⁸ A multivariable logistic regression was then performed to analyze predictors, calculating odd ratios and adjusted odds ratios (AOR) with a 95% confidence interval (CI), for each of three models.

Model 1 incorporated race, gender and disability. Model 2 incorporated nativity to account for discrimination based upon immigration status.^{9,13} Given the small number of participants born outside the US (n =17), this variable was excluded from the final model. Percent poverty by zip code was selected as a covariate in the final model to account for social context, specifically the relationship between place, income and experiences of discrimination.^{10,29}

Qualitative Analysis

Responses to the open-ended question were examined separately from the dataset and reviewed for clarity. Phone interview transcripts, recorded by research assistants using *Otter.ai*, were reviewed to ensure survey notes aligned with transcripts.³⁰ The participants' full response, as opposed to survey notes, were used for analysis.

Braun and Clarke's inductive thematic analysis was used to extract themes.³¹ The responses were reviewed in two phases, beginning with a smaller sample. Following review of the initial responses, line-by-line inclusive coding was completed to generate the preliminary codebook.³¹ The preliminary codebook was revised, collapsing existing codes or adding new codes to address drift. Codes were grouped and themes were selected. In the second phase of analysis, the preliminary codebook was applied to additional responses and adjusted as needed.

To ensure rigor, a second coder reviewed the full set of responses, generating their own codebook, and both coders met to discuss disagreement.³² The initial codebook was revised, following the meeting, improving specificity by adding codes or completing further abstractions. Responses were re-coded independently and coders reviewed each data extract to discuss agreement and address code drift. Codes were redefined and collapsed accordingly. Codes were then sorted into groups a second time and themes were developed. Candidate themes were selected for analysis and a relationship was established between themes.

A detailed audit trail was maintained to further ensure rigor and transparency.³³ The audit-trail described the coding process, including tracking codebook changes and recording uncertainties around coding of data extracts.³³

Results

Quantitative

Participants were primarily female (94%) and Black or African American (65%). Fifteen percent of participants were White, 12% were Hispanic/Latino and 8% were another race or ethnicity. Most participants (94%) identified the United States as their birth country. More than one-third reported judgment (40%) or expressed concern that they would face mistreatment (36%) from food assistance programs. Female participants (40%), White participants (60%), Black participants (43%) and Hispanic/Latino (40%) reported experiencing judgment due to food assistance. Forty-five percent of those with a disability reported judgment due to food assistance.

In unadjusted models, White participants were 2.92 times (95% CI 1.47, 5.80) more likely to report judgment related to food assistance compared to Black or African American participants. Participants born outside the United States were 0.18 times (95% CI 0.04, 0.81) less likely to report judgment compared to participants born in the United States. Those living in zip codes with greater than 30% of the population in poverty were 0.45 times (95% CI 0.22, 0.9) less likely to experience judgment compared to those living in zip codes with less than 10% poverty. All other variables demonstrated null association in unadjusted models.

The relationship between race, ethnicity and judgment was retained in all three adjusted models. In Model 1, White participants were 2.95 times more likely to report judgment than Black participants (95% CI 1.48, 5.89), adjusting for gender and experience of disability, which were not significantly associated with the outcome. In model 2, controlling for nativity, gender, and disability, White participants were 2.96 (95% CI 1.49, 5.88) times more likely to report judgment and mistreatment related to accessing food assistance programs. Those born outside the US were less likely to report judgment compared to those born in the US (AOR 0.08, 95% CI 0.01, 0.40). In the final model, including percent zip-code level poverty, disability and gender, White participants were 3.24 (95% CI 1.56, 6.75) times more likely to report being judged or mistreated because of participation in a food assistance program.

Qualitative

The open-ended responses demonstrated both structural and interpersonal forms of judgment, including five key themes. First, at a structural level, participants articulated how perceived program weaknesses and limited enrollment eligibility functioned as a form of discrimination. Second, stereotypes related to social support programs existed as a key form of interpersonal judgment, and for participants identifying as Black women, the intersection of race and gender often shaped descriptions of discrimination. Third, judgment and mistreatment elicited deeply emotional responses, suggesting a damaging impact on families. However, participants actively resisted stereotypes and negative characterizations, asserting their fundamental right to access programs safely. Finally, participants provided policy suggestions related to expansion of SNAP/WIC (*Table 3*).

Structural – Perceived Program Weaknesses and Limited Eligibility as a form of Discrimination

Participants suggested that the structure of food assistance programs functioned as a form of discrimination. At this level, program weaknesses included bureaucratic barriers impeding program access, mistreatment from caseworkers, and challenges using Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) and WIC cards. Limited income eligibility also shaped descriptions of mistreatment.

Bureaucratic Weaknesses: For several participants, bureaucratic barriers limited their ability to access services, acting as the source of perceived mistreatment. They described excessive paperwork, extensive wait periods to confirm application acceptance and poor communication with caseworkers. Despite timely submission of an application, the Department of Human Services (DHS) denied assistance, citing late application submission. This frustrating process left some without assistance, forcing them to submit additional paperwork. Although participants did not receive notification to schedule application review appointments, or could not maintain consistent communication with caseworkers, they were sometimes denied assistance due to missed appointments.

Income eligibility: Narrow income eligibility requirements often prevented access to assistance, despite the need for additional financial support. Several participants stated that their employment income was insufficient to fund food and “survival” costs. Moreover, they noted how month-to-month fluctuation in assistance, or “cutting” assistance, contributed to financial difficulties.

Mistreatment from caseworkers: Participants repeatedly described negative experiences with DHS or caseworkers. These descriptions typically referred to the tone with which caseworkers communicated over the phone. They referenced a lack of patience, rudeness, judgment, and insults. One participant articulated that their negative experience with a caseworker deterred them from seeking food assistance, stating that the magnitude of mistreatment outweighed their daily financial struggles.

Challenges shopping with WIC and EBT cards: The appearance of the EBT cards often functioned as a source of perceived judgment. Participants reported judgment from cashiers and fellow shoppers for using EBT cards in grocery stores. Participants further described feelings of shame if they could not remember their EBT code or the card malfunctioned. For WIC shoppers, the limited list of accepted items promoted feelings of stress and shame, particularly at check-out. Two participants described judgment associated with “holding up the line,” upon attempting to check-out with a non-WIC approved item.

Interpersonal – Stereotypes related to social support programs existed as a key form of interpersonal judgment and discrimination

Participants noted social assistance stereotypes related to laziness, “stealing” from the government, having too many children, poor parenting and wasting taxpayer dollars. Community members, families, grocery store employees and caseworkers perpetuated judgment. Specifically, White men or “rich people” often instigated discrimination. However, participants also alluded to a *pervasive* sense of judgment, excluding a reference to a particular individual or group. For example, participants frequently referred to “people,” or offered responses without a subject.

The intersection of race and gender shaped discrimination: Two participants identifying as Black women identified discrimination specific to their identity. For example, one individual described stereotypes related to “laziness” *because* she is a Black woman. Race and gender were further connected to the assumption that she ‘takes advantage’ of assistance.

Anti-immigrant rhetoric shaped experiences of discrimination: For a participant from outside the US, they also faced stereotypes related to ‘stealing from the government’ upon seeking assistance. In this instance, the stereotype provided a platform to both disseminate misinformation regarding eligibility as well as incite fear related to “informing ICE” of the call.

Xenophobia extended to participants, demonstrating the intersection of whiteness, xenophobia and food assistance: While a White participant described experiences of racial discrimination, they

also employed the ‘stealing’ narrative towards those identified as “Arabic folks.” This participant used new car ownership to assert that “Arabic” individuals did not ‘deserve’ benefits. Thus, the claim demonstrates the complexities of racial identity and discrimination, exhibiting a tension between perceived discrimination and enforcing stereotypes against others.

Interpersonal – Judgment and mistreatment elicited deeply emotional responses

Judgment and mistreatment in response to participating food assistance programs evoked emotional responses, including embarrassment, sadness, feelings of inferiority, disappointment, and internalized shame. Participants frequently noted feeling “looked down upon” or used the term “feeling less than” to describe responses to mistreatment. Thus, they expressed how judgment produces a hierarchy that positions them as inferior. These expressions reveal the damaging impact of judgment beyond access to material assistance.

Shame promoting fear of judgment: Despite lack of previous judgment, some respondents described fear of mistreatment. Feelings of shame surrounding program participation produced anxiety regarding potential mistreatment. Some participants described efforts to avoid “attention” in public settings as a protective measure. Others described internal difficulties seeking assistance due to feelings of shame.

Resistance – Participants resisted stereotypes and negative characterizations, asserting their right to access programs safely.

As participants claimed their right to access programs, they expressed feelings of pride, self-worth, and resilience. One individual described “overcoming” judgment and mistreatment while another explained that they are “proud” to care for their families, despite judgment from others. Another participant challenged the stigma associated with programs, stating that individuals should feel “comfortable” accessing assistance. One participant referred to judgment as “universal,” beyond food assistance, to diminish mistreatment, claiming their self-worth and value as “someone who has paid into the system.”

Resistance by challenging stereotypes and emphasizing daily realities: In addition to challenging both stereotypes and mistreatment, participants directly contrasted dominant stereotypes with their daily lived experiences. For example, several participants noted that despite others’ “assumptions,” around laziness, or “not working,” they work several jobs to support their families. Moreover, participants described exclusion from programs due to injury, university commitments or work.

By referencing the stereotype alongside lived experiences, they rejected it as a false misrepresentation of their realities.

Resistance – Participants provided policy suggestions related to expansion of food assistance programs

In addition to refusal of judgment, mistreatment and stereotypes, participants provided policy suggestions to address discrimination. At a structural level, several responses described the need to expand SNAP, particularly in the context of inflation and rising food costs. Moreover, they articulated the importance of removing bureaucratic barriers and improving “organization,” encouraging timely processing of applications. At an interpersonal level, participants promoted positive interactions with caseworkers, free of judgment and mistreatment, to support increased access to food assistance. However, several participants offered indirect policy suggestions as they discussed their experiences. They explained the importance of expanding income eligibility due to insufficient employment wages. Thus, participants indirectly advocated for increase in eligibility *and* wage increases that would enable them to support their families.

Discussion

This is the first study, to our knowledge, to quantify experiences of being judged for participation in food assistance programs. The current study expanded existing work, that explores barriers to participation and stereotypes surrounding social assistance, by examining discrimination in food assistance programs using a mixed methods approach.^{9,13,18,21,23,24} The quantitative results found that forty percent of participants reported experience of judgment related to their use of food assistance or expressed concern about mistreatment. Moreover, White participants were more likely to report judgment compared to Black participants in all models. The qualitative results demonstrated that participants perceive judgment as both structural as well as interpersonal. However, they actively resist judgment and mistreatment. The qualitative and quantitative results suggest occurrence of both convergence as well as divergence.²⁵

The finding that close to half of participants reported experiencing judgement or concern about mistreatment while participating in a food assistance program, and the theme related to exposure to stereotypes identified in the open-ended responses, demonstrate convergence. An overwhelming majority referenced deeply harmful exposure to mistreatment and a pervasive feeling of judgment that extended beyond direct interpersonal interaction.^{7,10,18,19}

Researchers have linked the experience of judgment, internalized shame and overall stigma surrounding social assistance to a neoliberal political and economic system that champions individualism.^{7,17,19,34} Neoliberalism thrives on meritocracy, positioning the individual as responsible for their social and economic circumstances and insisting that personal merit alone determines financial security.^{7,19,34,35} Thus, stigmatizing, and shaming poverty, or food insecurity, is deeply ingrained into the social fabric. Stigma functions as a vehicle to reinforce individual responsibility and distract from systemic forces and factors, such as race, class and gender, that shape inequity.^{7,19} Consequently, stereotypes are typically grounded in the notion of government “dependence,” or “theft” as an antidote to meritocratic ideals.³⁶ Beyond reference to systemic forces, it is important to emphasize the damaging *impact* of this stigma on participants in food assistance programs.^{8,12,16} Feelings of embarrassment, shame and fear sometimes deterred participants from enrollment or seeking additional services.^{8,12,16,21}

However, disagreement between the intersectional discrimination, evident in the open-ended responses, and logistic regression suggest divergence. Whereas the qualitative responses highlighted denigrating discrimination for Black women and immigrant participants, the quantitative responses demonstrated that White participants were nearly three-times more likely to experience judgment. This finding challenged initial expectations and existing literature.^{10,11,36–40} For example, Gonzales et al. reported that Black adults were significantly more likely to report judgment and mistreatment when applying for social services or public assistance.¹¹ While White individuals using social assistance have reported race-based discrimination, typically employing racial epithets against Black recipients of social assistance to distinguish themselves as “deserving”, literature does not reference White adults' reports of food assistance-based discrimination.³⁸ The survey question in this study asked participants to report judgment because they use food assistance; therefore, the wording of the question itself could have supported the findings. It is also possible that as White participants are not subject to racial discrimination, they could be more perceptive to class-based, or food assistance-related, discrimination.^{36,38} Alternatively, despite its intersection, Black participants could be more perceptive to race-based discrimination as opposed discrimination on the basis of food assistance use alone.^{17,36,38,39} Mitchell-Walthour et al. attribute heightened perception of race-based, rather than class related, discrimination among Black individuals to internalized meritocratic myths that mask classism.¹⁷ However, it is also possible that the nature of discrimination, (e.g., racialized stereotypes related

to the ‘welfare queen’) result in a focus on racism, despite its inherent relationship with class.^{38,41} Thus, asking about experiences of judgment in food assistance programs because of your race or ethnicity, could have captured the intersectional nature of discrimination at a quantitative level.

Moreover, the qualitative responses illustrate that experiences of mistreatment were not universal. For immigrant participants, qualitative responses revealed food assistance judgment grounded in anti-immigrant rhetoric. Although only approximately 6% of the participants in this study reported being from immigrant families, the responses echoed existing findings that reference how anti-immigrant sentiment stokes fear of enrollment in SNAP and WIC.^{9,13,22,24} Pelto et al. connect fear and misinformation to the Trump administration’s deployment of incendiary rhetoric against immigrant families.⁹ This study additionally *sources* misinformation as participants indicated that caseworkers and program administrators disseminate misinformation as a function of discrimination.

Black women in the sample were subject to racialized stereotypes regarding “laziness” and “theft” from the government. Indeed, the historical underpinnings of racism in social assistance structures are well described.^{17,36,38,39,41} Social scientists have documented how political actors and media outlets weaponize denigrating stereotypes against Black women as a form of “gendered racism,” which imposes outsider status as a vehicle for racial control.^{17,38,41} For example, through the 1980s, Ronald Regan popularized the “welfare queen” stereotype, which depicted Black women as lazy, self-centered individuals who manipulated government assistance for personal benefit.⁴¹ Brown Iannuzzi et al. exhibit the ramification of these stereotypes, finding that study participants were more likely to associate social assistance use among Black individuals with laziness and social assistance use among White individuals with hard work.³⁶ They argue that shifting “work ethic” stereotypes could reduce “biases” in programs.³⁶

Ultimately, in this study, recommendations from participants voices were clear and align with some existing literature.^{16,23,36,37} First, at an interpersonal level, the reference to caseworker/community relationship does imply a need to reduce bias, particularly considering that harmful interactions sometimes shape enrollment decisions.^{16,23,37} Improved communication could address extensive wait periods and reduce paperwork requirements, which could, in turn, increase enrollment and reduce perception of discrimination as well as caseworker burden.^{16,23,37} Given deeply entrenched forms of discrimination, however, ranging from structural to individual,

reducing bias could function as a useful starting point, but will likely be ineffective as the sole solution.^{16,37,41}

Second, comprehensive policy change is needed. Participants repeatedly emphasized the need to expand income eligibility to receive food assistance.¹⁶ Slight changes in income often result in abrupt termination of benefits, which can be particularly damaging if the individual cannot maintain communication with a caseworker or does not receive advance notification.⁴² Moreover, they articulated a need to increase benefit allotment to support their food budget. Thus, participants alluded to the importance of incorporating Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) households, addressing the benefit “cliff”.⁴³ ALICE includes those who cannot afford basic cost of living, despite having an income level above the official FPL.⁴³ United Way established ALICE to recognize those often excluded from social assistance policy.⁴³ Individuals in ALICE households experience a benefit “cliff,” referring narrow income eligibility that excludes families just above the official FPL.⁴³ However, the pandemic has demonstrated federal capacity to better support ALICE households by increasing allotment at a national level.^{3,43}

In addition to expanding assistance, participants pointed to the need for *livable wages*. Echoing Gains-turner et al. findings, perpetually low wages produced insurmountable financial hardship even with food assistance, particularly for single mothers.¹⁶ Gains-Turner et al. and Painter advocate for Universal Basic Income to ensure that all families can afford basic necessities, including housing and high-quality food that fulfills family needs.^{16,44} This approach could address the limitations of narrow eligibility requirements and silence “deserving” vs. “undeserving” stereotypes.^{7,16,18,19,36–39,44} Systemic changes that strengthen food assistance access could support broader narrative shifts that recognize fundamental rights to access programs as opposed to punishing families for experiencing food insecurity or poverty.^{12,16,45}

Strengths and Limitations

This study offers a novel approach, recognizing the role of discrimination in food assistance programs and using it as a platform for broader critique. The findings expand on existing literature by providing insight into the nuances of judgment, acknowledging how barriers to enrollment and mistreatment interact to shape participant experience^{9,10,12,15,20,22}.

However, this study includes several limitations. The small sample size limited study power. Sample size and homogeneity prevented examination of multiple confounders. Future

research should explore associations with a larger, more heterogeneous sample. This would allow for inclusion of nativity and language spoken at home in logistic regression models. In the qualitative arm, saturation was not achieved, where no new insights were generated from analysis, given the limited responses from Spanish speaking and immigrant participants.³³ While the open-ended responses did support detailed analysis, the short answers, sometimes only several words, produced weaker accounts, which further undermined saturation.³³ Future research should incorporate longer in-depth interviews to provide greater context for participant experience.^{7,12,19}

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that discrimination is deeply embedded in food assistance programs, negatively impacting participant experience. Given the growing inequities in food security, there is an urgent need for research efforts to continue to examine discrimination in food assistance, focusing on questions that provide insight into intersectional judgment and mistreatment. Studies should continue to adopt community-based approaches to ensure that any survey questions for interviews include content relevant to community context.^{12,46} When discussing discrimination, food insecurity and poverty it is crucial to center those with lived experience, supporting policy advocacy efforts that call for systemic change.^{12,46}

Figure 1. Analytic sample calculation from the Feeding MI Families survey in Detroit, Grand Rapids and Battle Creek, MI.

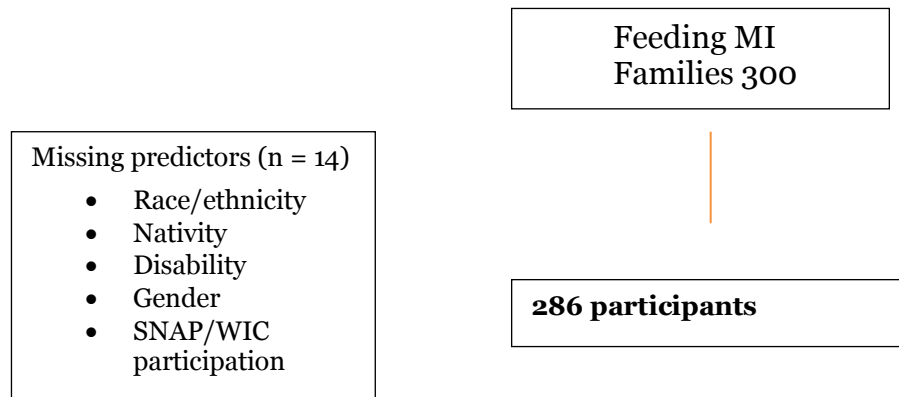


Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of food assistance participants according to experience of judgment because they use food assistance.

	Experience of food assistance judgment n = 116 % (Frequency)	No experience of judgment n = 170 % (Frequency)
SNAP Participation		
Never SNAP	18.52 (5)	81.48(22)
Ever/Current	42.86 (111)	57.14 (148)
WIC Participation		
Never WIC	43.75 (7)	56.25 (9)
Ever/Current	40.37 (109)	59.63 (161)
Anticipated Mistreatment		
Concerned about future mistreatment	57.28 (59)	42.72 (44)
Not concerned about future mistreatment	31.15 (57)	68.85 (126)
Disability		
Has disability	45.19 (47)	54.81 (57)
Does not have disability	37.91 (69)	62.09 (113)
Race and Ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino	40.54 (15)	59.46 (22)
Black or African American	33.51 (62)	66.49 (123)
White	59.52 (25)	40.48 (17)
Asian	28.57 (2)	71.43 (5)
Other Racial/Ethnic Groups	80.00 (12)	20.00 (3)
Gender		
Male	43.75 (7)	56.25 (9)
Female	40.37 (109)	59.63 (161)
Nativity		
Outside United States	11.76 (2)	88.24 (15)
United States	42.38 (114)	57.62 (155)

Table 2. Unadjusted and adjusted odds ratios for experience of discrimination among participants

	Unadjusted (95% CI)	Adjusted – Model 1 (95% CI)	Adjusted – Model 2 (95% CI)	Adjusted – Model 3 (95% CI)
Race/Ethnicity				
Black	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
White	2.92 (1.47, 5.80) *	2.95 (1.48, 5.89) *	2.96 (1.49, 5.88) *	3.24 (1.56, 6.75) *
Hispanic/Latino	1.17 (0.55, 2.48)	1.24 (0.58, 2.64)	2.28 (0.97, 5.36)	1.19 (0.54, 2.61)
Other	3.97 (1.61, 9.78) *	3.84 (1.55, 9.51)	7.10 (2.40, 20.94)	4.20 (1.67, 10.68)
Gender				
Male	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Female	0.87 (0.31, 2.41)	0.81 (0.28, 2.30)	0.74 (0.26, 2.11)	
Disability				
Yes	1.35 (0.83, 2.20)	1.28 (0.77, 2.14)	1.20 (0.71, 2.02)	1.20 (0.71, 2.02)
No	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Nativity				
US	1.00		1.00	
Outside US	0.18 (0.04, 0.81) *		0.08 (0.01, 0.40) *	
Percent Poverty				
Less than 10%	1.00			1.00
10.1% to 14.7%	0.70 (0.31, 1.62)			0.80 (0.33, 2.00)
15.1% to 18.9%	0.46 (0.20, 1.07)			0.40 (0.16, 0.97) *
21.4% to 29%	0.73 (0.27, 2.01)			0.78 (0.26, 2.18)
Greater than 30%	0.45 (0.22, 0.92) *			0.55 (0.26, 1.19)

* = Statistical significance (CI does not contain 1)

6 subjects missing for percent poverty by zip code (n=280)

Table 3. Selected participant quotations

Structural

Theme: Program weakness and limited eligibility as a form of discrimination

Bureaucratic weakness

I haven't gotten approved after applying and applying.

You'll give information, and you do your side of the job, but they'll still turn you off for whatever reason. But I need SER emergency assistance, but they say you have to wait until eviction, which is kind of stupid because you kind of avoid eviction. And if you have eviction or your name, you can't get home.

Because it's happened to me multiple times where they'll say, oh, yeah, we called you missed your appointment, so you're denied, but you guys never call. Or sometimes they want documents or the proofs and stuff, and they send the letter out and you get the letter on the 12th, and they want to due by the 14th.

We're just trying to feed our families and we get so much pushback from the social workers, questioning our integrity about getting this help. And that's bothersome.

I tried to get food stamps, but the worker was rude and I don't feel like she wanted to help.

Case workers sometimes feel like they are better than the people they serve. The ones with bad attitudes express it verbally with micro aggressions, small insults and insensitivity.

Eligibility

Because I have a job, they said I make too much money to be getting food stamps to feed my children. I felt it was very wrong because they still have to eat and bills still have to be paid.

I can work, which makes me ineligible for assistance even though working doesn't begin to cover what I need to survive.

Card Use and Shopping

Some stores don't want you to buy. All there groceries up so they will make food higher at your local market and some gas station don't want to take stamps

I was judged at the checkout register for using my snap card.

WIC was the worst. Having all the specific size items and brands. And getting something wrong and not finding out till checkout and having to hold up the line to go get the right one [item].

Interpersonal

Theme: Stereotypes related to social support programs or assistance

We are discriminated against by rich people, and we are often ridiculed and bullied by them.

Many people do judge you for having a bridge card. They say you shouldn't have kids if you can't feed them on your own, but I appreciate the help I get.

Harsh comments like the government is raising my children or taxpayer dollars are being wasted on feeding my children.

Table 3. Continued

I feel like when I used to use the SNAP benefits card that people judged me like I just sit around and do nothing, but I actually worked two jobs to cover all my bills as a single mother.

There is definitely still a stigma attached to food stamps. People are self centered and don't know there are many reasons a person or family needs or uses assistance. These uneducated people still label those on assistance as lazy, or degenerates.

People think those who get assistance are "less than." I'm more bothered by seeing that there isn't positive change in the community.

You go to the store, and you're sitting there. I just feel like I shouldn't be...people look at me differently. It's just I feel very judged when I go into a store..I feel very stereotyped and like, there's a thing that comes with, you know, getting food stamps, you feel almost like [you're] wrongdoing and it shouldn't be like that.

The intersection of race and gender shaped discrimination

I'm black so people say I'm lazy and get free stuff but I'm a single mom and I work all the time. It's just never enough.

Using snap or receiving assistance outside of my community, I am easily judged and frowned upon as a black woman.

*For families from outside United States, anti-immigrant rhetoric shaped experiences of discrimination
When I tried to ask for help to get food stamps, I was told I couldn't get them because I'm not from here. That they would notify ICE. That I was stealing from the government.*

Xenophobia extended to participants, demonstrating the intersection of whiteness, xenophobia and food assistance use

Because I'm white, they think I am stable or make money to not be eligible for the program. I seen Arabic folks with new cars getting benefits because they don't claim their husband's income and take away from the rest. I'm not a bigot or have a grudge against another race. I'm very friendly and caring towards all races. If you want more info, you can call me.

Theme: Stereotypes related to social support programs or assistance

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Theme: judgment and mistreatment elicited deeply emotional responses

It makes you feel sad.

Feeling embarrassed around other people.

It makes you feel worthless and less than a person. The way that they look and talk to you, or give you a hard time.

People always look down on people who are less fortunate. Or if you receive food benefits, they look at you funny like you're the scum of the earth.

I always feel judged and a bit ashamed, because my family needs assistance.

Shame promoting fear of judgment

I haven't been judged or discriminated against in any way, but I have the fear of this being done to us, and so we try to be careful to not bring that kind of attention to us.

Miedo de no ser atendido solamente por ser de otro país.

[Fear of not being served because you're from another country.]

Took a long time to accept help because I felt ashamed and I still feel shame when I need to ask for help, but having children makes you do whatever it takes to provide.

Resistance

Theme: Participants resisted stereotypes and negative characterizations, asserting their right to access programs safely

I continued to be proud and take care of my family while they stayed at one level pointing fingers.

Table 3. Continued

You know, in life you judge for everything, you know...Let's just face it, we judge about everything. So, I can't, you know, I don't let that get to me or, you know, because I know that I've worked and I've put into that system as far as you know, being someone who has been employed and paid into the system.

Growing up, I used to get made fun of because we would get food stamps, and we were treated like we were more poor than others just because we had food stamps and that was our way of getting food. So I kind of had to deal with that, but I overcame it

You should feel comfortable paying like everybody goes through hard times. And I'm just grateful there is food stamps."

Resistance by challenging stereotypes and emphasizing daily realities

People assume they know why people use food stamps. My job decreased my responsibilities to basically nothing because I am a returning college student.

Some people feel you never worked. I'm a parent that worked two jobs until I was injured. Even when you are attempting to better your life, you can be made to feel less than.

Participants provided policy suggestions related to expansion of food assistance programs

Just need more food assistance.

Generally people look down on those who need the help and since I can work, which makes me ineligible for assistance even though working doesn't begin to cover what I need to survive.

I think it's just more of being a single mom. Having to, you know, pay for everything. Just not getting the support and help that you need.

They need to have a better system. Let us know why they are cutting our food stamps off..I don't think they should do that, especially if you have kids, because right now, it is a bad time. And inflation is going up, so they definitely should change the program around...maybe try something new, just to help a lot of people out, it'd be much better if they did that.

I think it's the permanent human service workers that we feel attacked by when we're filling out these services and or have phone interviews to renew our services. We feel attacked by them, you know, and I'm saying like, they're not sympathetic or they don't hear us out. They always think everybody is running a scam or game on them. And that's not what we're trying to do. That's the law by assistance like ourselves. We're just trying to feed our families and we get so much pushback from the social workers, questioning our integrity about getting this help. And that's bothersome.

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Appendix

Code Book

Interpersonal Discrimination (ID)

- Judgment
 - From program administrators (DHS or caseworkers)
 - From cashiers/food pantry
 - From community members
 - From family/friends
- Degrading
 - Lack of empathy-make fun of for using SNAP
- Stereotypes
 - Assumptions of SNAP recipient's background
 - Assume people are taking advantage of system
 - Parenting
- Discrimination
 - Based on housing/community location
 - Racial
 - Immigration status
 - Gender
 - Income
 - Power differentials
 - Whiteness, xenophobia, food assistance use
- Personal Feelings/Responses
 - Fear
 - Embarrassment/Shame
 - Feelings of inferiority
 - Sadness

Structural Issues (SI)

- Judgment from program administrators (DHS or caseworker)
- Bureaucracy
 - Overworked/unavailable case workers
 - A lot of paperwork
 - Long waiting periods for application
- Eligibility
 - Income
 - For immigrant populations
- Need to adjust money with inflation
- Some places don't accept SNAP
- Challenges shopping with WIC
- Higher prices in local stores
- Appearance of card

Resistance to Discrimination (RD)

- Pride/Self-worth/Resilience
- Contrast stereotype with reality (having job)
- Grateful, despite negative treatment
- Policy suggestions direct/indirect

Audit Trail

Research question: How do participants in food assistance programs experience discrimination?

Approach: inductive coding as part of a mixed methods

1. Review open-ended responses and adjust for grammar.
2. Code first-round of responses and develop preliminary codebook. Thoroughly review the preliminary codebook to collapse existing codes or add new codes based upon interview content. Select preliminary themes for abstract.
3. Cross-check phone-participant responses with RA notes listed in dataset.
4. Apply preliminary coding scheme to the new responses.
5. Share responses with colleague for double coding.
6. Adjust codebook with colleague as necessary.
7. Regroup codes into themes and select themes for final analysis.

Coding Process

02.07 Designing preliminary codebook

- Uncertainty regarding coding for responses specific to food pantry experiences
- Participant responses do not align with regression output. Whereas Black female participants discuss intersectional forms of discrimination in the open-ended responses, the regression demonstrates that White participants are more likely to face mistreatment compared to Black participants. This disagreement could be related to the format of the question given the focus on mistreatment related to food assistance as opposed to perceptions of racial discrimination within food assistance programs.
- Short responses sometimes do not support rich participant accounts, making coding difficulty.
 - Would be useful to examine open-ended responses alongside semi-structured interviews.

02.10 – Initial Theme Development

- The primary themes and codes were identified. There was some difficulty arranging themes to create an ‘interconnected’ analysis where each theme builds on the next without becoming redundant.
- Concern regarding over extrapolation of themes, extending beyond the data.

02.25 – 02.28 Initial codebook application

- Coding new set of responses

- Uncertainty regarding lack specificity around some of the codes. For example, “degraded” might not accurately capture the respondents’ description, particularly related to discussion of “feeling looked down-upon”. “Feelings of inferiority” might provide a more detailed depiction of experiences.
- Participant reference ominous “you” to describe judgment, which could allude to the pervasiveness of judgment or the extent to which participants internalize perceived discrimination.
 - Uncertainty around how to code this reference without shifting to discourse analysis.

3.10 Coding Meeting

- Some disagreement between coders, particularly related to descriptive vs. abstractive coding
- Codes were sometimes over extrapolated, or extended beyond the data.
- Codebooks were combined to create a new codebook. We agreed to code independently and review codes at a following meeting.

3.13 Second Coding Meeting

- More coding revisions were completed, including streamlining parent and child codes, creating broader codes and addressing drift.
 - Codes were too descriptive and often included only several data extracts.
- Agreed to adjust coding independently and return for a final review.
- During the independent revisions, a code for policy suggestions was generated.

3.28 Final Coding Meeting

- Reviewed each data extract to confirm coding agreement.
- Some disagreement regarding mistreatment and lack of empathy codes under degrading parent code
 - This code was collapsed into one code.
- Codes were categorized into themes and four candidate themes were selected for analysis.