'You Learn How to Make Do': Understanding Food Choices and Feeding Decisions in Low-Income Families

Holly J. Benton

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Every year, millions of Americans experience an inadequate supply of food in both quality and quantity. While the body of food insecurity research does well in identifying both the challenges faced and strategies employed by low-income households, understanding the context within which a challenge presupposes a strategy is important in establishing policies that can alleviate food insecurity in low-income households. This exploratory study seeks to understand the labor involved in food choices and feeding decisions in low-income households. Qualitative methods, including interviews, observations, and a participant journal reveal the temporal, dynamic nature of keeping food supplied within the context of a rural food environment. Making things stretch and throwing together emerge as improvisations in practices employed by low-income households as they seek to feed their families. Policies that bolster knowledge about the food environment will aid low-income households in obtaining sufficient food supplies.
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This work is dedicated to Paige and Jack, always and forever.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to understand the food choices and feeding decisions low-income families make as they seek to feed their families. Low-income families face specific challenges in order to obtain a sufficient supply of food in both quality and quantity. Inadequate economic resources require responsive strategies such as economizing, seeking social support, or altering individual eating patterns. Low-income families may also be challenged by issues of food availability and access. Responsive strategies to deficits in the food environment often require engaging additional resources in the process of feeding the family. The strategies employed by low-income families as they seek to feed their families demonstrate the improvisation in practices necessitated by impoverished economic circumstances. This study seeks to uncover these practical improvisations that low-income families employ.

Chapter One proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief background and context that demonstrates the nature and extent of food insecurity, the implications of an inadequate food supply, and the limitations of current policy. Second, I provide statements regarding the problem and purpose of the study, followed by the research questions that shaped the methods and analysis. Finally, I provide a rationale for the study, a chapter summary, and an outline of the remainder of the document.

Background/Context

Food is one of the most essential human needs. Food supplies the macronutrients (protein, fat, and carbohydrates) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) necessary for physical growth and cognitive development in childhood, while preserving health as one grows older. Inadequate food supplies in both quantity and quality then can prove deleterious to the
human body and contribute to the decline of healthy individuals. Research indicates that food insecurity – a federally established classification for the inadequate supply of quality nutrition (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, & Singh, 2013) – in fact is pernicious. Food insecurity is associated with obesity, chronic disease, and poor self-reported health status (Dinour, Bergen, & Yeh, 2007; Metallinos-Katsaras, Must, & Gorman, 2012; Seligman, Laraia, & Kushel, 2010; Stuff et al., 2004; Wilde & Peterman, 2006). Additionally, food insufficiency may contribute to depression in adults (Wu & Schimmele, 2005). As such, food justice advocates define food insecurity as a human rights and social justice issue (Alkon & Norgaard, 2009; Holt-Gimenez & Wang, 2011).

Moreover, the assumption that every individual has the ability to choose how much and what food they consume is inaccurate. Public discourse surrounding food insecurity presumes a logical economic causation – the less monetary resources one has the less food one is able to purchase and therefore consume. As such, the federal government’s food assistance program, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), should alleviate this economic hardship. SNAP provides qualified individuals with additional economic resources based on need. However, researchers are unable to agree whether SNAP actually does alleviate economic constraints in food purchases or even if it does, to what degree (Mykerezi & Mills, 2010; Ratcliffe, McKernan, & Zhang, 2011). Additionally, monetary constraints can also influence the quality of food consumed – food items high in calories from fat and sugar (i.e. energy-dense) are less expensive than nutrient-dense food items such as proteins and fruits and vegetables (Drewnowski, 2003; Drewnowski & Specter, 2004). SNAP seeks to increase nutritional quality of low-income individuals’ diets through nutrition education. Results, though, are even mixed as to the impact SNAP has on improving the quality of dietary intake among the food insecure (Landers, 2007).
The focus on individual agency, and therefore individual responsibility, in obtaining a nutritionally adequate and sufficient diet obscures the structural elements that shape the current food system in the United States, including one’s ability to access quality food. Food insecurity is symptomatic of poverty in both rural and urban locations. Access to food in impoverished rural areas is limited by transportation and the availability of markets to purchase foods, a condition characterized in social science research as a food desert (Schafft, Jensen, & Hinrichs, 2009). Alternatively, in urban areas, access to food may be more readily available due to the constrained spaces of urban streets. However, the food available in urban areas is subject to shifting store availability (Filomena, Scanlin, & Morland, 2013). The foodscape of impoverished urban areas is generally characterized as a food swamp – convenience and fast food outlets offering energy-dense food items at inexpensive prices (Freeman, 2007).

For low-income families, feeding the family means negotiating the cost of nutritional food supplies with meager economic resources. Common responses to inadequate economic resources include utilizing a food budget, economizing through the use of generic food items, transitioning to low-priced, energy-dense foods (i.e. foods commonly high in fat and sugar), and in particularly dire circumstances, reducing food intake (Bruening, MacLehose, Loth, Story, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012; Drewnowski, 2003; Drewnowski and Specter, 2004; Mammen, Bauer, & Richards, 2009). Additionally, low-income families face challenges in both time (work-life demands) and space (availability and access to fully-stocked grocery stores) that further complicate economic responses in obtaining, preparing, and consuming nutritionally adequate and sufficient food supplies (Devine et al., 2006; Dutko, Ver Ploeg, & Farrigan, 2012; Jabs & Devine, 2006; Jabs et al., 2007).
Traditional food security policy responses are prescriptive and offer little more than a small bandage for a gaping wound. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), approximately 17.4 million households in the United States experienced food insecurity at some point in 2014 (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2015). Historically, food insecurity prevalence has increased in the last decade and remains essentially unchanged in the last few years (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013). Despite this, federal spending on food assistance programs continues to decline. The most recent farm bill, officially the Agricultural Act of 2014 signed into law in February 2014, effectively cuts SNAP funding by $8.6 billion over the next 10 years (Congressional Research Service, 2014). As benefits will continue to decrease, many food insecure households will seek additional food assistance through charitable organizations and the national network of food banks (administered by Feeding America¹). The Agricultural Act of 2014, while decreasing funding for food stamps, did increase funding to food banks by $205 million over the next ten years², despite the USDA defining the use of a food bank as a “socially unacceptable” means of obtaining adequate food (Congressional Research Service, 2014; USDA Economic Research Service, n.d.).

Current food insecurity research provides a necessary background to the particular challenges faced and strategies employed by low-income families in obtaining a sufficient supply of food in both quantity and quality. However, this research does little to reveal the processes by which structural challenges are faced and household-level strategies employed. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the processes by which low-income families employ

¹ Feeding America is a national, non-profit organization operating over 200 food banks throughout all 50 states, and Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico. Feeding America relies on public funding from private individuals and corporations for their operating expenses (Feeding America, 2015).
² These monies are allocated to the Emergency Food Assistance Program which “provides USDA foods and federal support to emergency feeding organizations (e.g., food banks and food pantries)” (Congressional Research Service, 2014, p. 12).
particular strategies in the experience of mitigating food insecurity. In a context of decreased
government funding for supplemental food programs and an increasing reliance on alternative
food aid, low-income families may benefit from policy initiatives that recognize the nuances of
their experience.

Problem Statement

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), approximately 17.4
million households in the United States (14 percent of all U.S. households) experienced food
insecurity at some point in 2014 (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2015). Additionally, of those
households, nearly 7 million households (5.6 percent of all U.S. households) experienced very
low food security, a severity level of food insecurity that indicates a significant disruption in
normal “eating patterns and reduced food intake” (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2015; USDA ERS,
n.d.). Further, 3.7 million households with children (9.4 percent of U.S. households with
children) experienced food insecurity among both adults and children, and in 422,000 of these
households (1.1 percent of U.S. households with children), children went hungry, either skipping
meals or not eating for an entire day (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2015). Moreover, despite a history
of federal interventions, food insecurity prevalence increased in the last decade and remains
essentially unchanged in the last few years (at approximately 14% of all households in the
United States) (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2015).³

Current food insecurity research reveals both the challenges faced and the strategies
employed by low-income households as they seek to obtain an adequate food supply in both
quality and quantity. Often, this suggests a simplistic logic in which Challenge A is met with

³ According to the latest statistics from the USDA’s Economic Research Service, national prevalence remained
unchanged between 2012 and 2014. Between 2011 and 2014, a decline from 14.9 percent of all households to 14.0
percent of all households is noted; this decline was statistically significant (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2015).
Strategy A. Such mechanical logic does little to reveal the context within which a challenge presupposes a strategy. A more nuanced approach has the benefit of revealing why particular strategies were selected from a broad range of strategies available to mitigate a specific challenge. For example, purchasing in bulk is a common economizing strategy. However, this particular strategy may not be available to those without adequate means to store the bulk items, whether they be perishable or non-perishable food items. Given the continued prevalence of food insecurity in the United States, exploring the nuances of the lived experience may serve to inform progressive policies that can help alleviate food insecurity.

**Rationale and Significance**

The impetus for this study derives from the incomplete class analysis of feeding the family in Marjorie DeVault’s (1991) seminal work *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. DeVault’s (1991) study reveals that the care work of feeding the family is primarily women’s work and much of that work (or labor) is often invisible to the women themselves. In her class analysis, DeVault (1991) identified dispositions and behaviors relevant to social class reproduction for both working and upper-income families. However, due to her own positionality as a middle-class person, she acknowledged an inability to assess the same for low-income families. One finding stands out for this group though: eating is about survival. When eating is about survival, you may choose taste over cost if it means your children actually eat something that day.

This notion is what gets lost when food insecurity is considered as a mechanical logic of challenges and strategies. The actions of people in their lived experience can deviate from this presumed logic and reflect important observations about the structural context and one’s ability to operate within it. In this study, I explore the actions of those who live in the experience of
food insecurity and attempt to understand the labor of food choices and feeding decisions within this context. As the body of food insecurity research continues forward in an exploration of the structured environment of food insecurity, understanding the maneuvers made by persons within that structure are just as important to developing and implementing policies that not only reduce barriers, but also empower individuals.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the labor involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families. As such, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What food choices do low-income families make and how do they make them?
2. What feeding decisions do low-income families make and how do they make them?
3. What labor is involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families?

**Chapter Summary**

Food is essential to human life. Yet, every year, millions of American men, women, and children experience food insecurity as a result of the inability to obtain a sufficient supply of food in both quality and quantity. Federal interventions are often inadequate in addressing this problem. Moreover, government spending on nutritional support will decline over the next several years. In a context of decreased government funding and a push to rely on charitable food, food insecure families may benefit from progressive policies that consider the lived experience of food insecurity. Understanding the challenges posed by inadequate resources and the strategies employed by food insecure families is an important first step towards this goal. However, a mechanical logic between challenges and strategies fails to consider why and how
particular strategies are chosen and employed when faced with a specific challenge. As low-income families navigate the lived experience of food insecurity, their actions reveal the labor involved in negotiating this experience.

**Outline of Subsequent Chapters**

In Chapter Two, I discuss the theoretical framework that informs the methods and analysis of this study and provide a review of literature relevant to the challenges faced and strategies employed by low-income families. Chapter Three details the sampling strategy, data collection methods, and analytical approach that shape the findings as outlined in Chapter Four. Finally, in Chapter Five, I offer a synthesis of the findings relative to theory and existing literature, as well as the implications and limitations of this study.
CHAPTER TWO
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

This chapter presents both the theoretical framework and literature relevant to the study. The purpose of the study is to explore and understand the labor involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families. As such, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What food choices do low-income families make and how do they make them?
2. What feeding decisions do low-income families make and how do they make them?
3. What labor is involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families?

This study is informed by Bourdieu’s (1977) Theory of Practice. With the Theory of Practice, Bourdieu (1977) attempts to reconcile the objective reality, or the structural context, with that of the subjective experience, or agency, as a dialectical relationship rather than a dichotomous one. Bourdieu (1977) contends that the relationship between the individual and society is not divisive, but rather, through the practices of everyday life, individuals navigate the structured environment in ways that are consistent with an understanding of the possibilities to maneuver within that structure. For Bourdieu (1977), practices of everyday life cannot be considered simply as a product of objective reality – that is, as objectified practices. Rather, maneuvers of the agent within that practice are just as important to understanding social reality.

The review of relevant literature brings these practices to the forefront, identifying the food-related activities of feeding the family in general and of low-income families in particular. Food choices operate as a mode of distinction in that they reveal social location (Bourdieu, 1984; DeVault, 1991), while feeding decisions function to reproduce that social location (DeVault,
1991). The challenges inherent to impoverished conditions become the stage for enacting strategies. While the literature reveals the particular strategies employed in the process of feeding the family in low-income households, mere description loses sight of the improvisation of practices necessitated by these impoverished circumstances. The improvisation of practices – the labor of feeding low-income families – is what this study seeks to explore and understand.

**Theoretical Framework**

The Theory of Practice (Bourdieu, 1977) encompasses three interrelated and highly dependent constructs – namely, the field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1990). The field encapsulates the social sphere in which practices take place. Capital constitutes an individual’s economic, social, and cultural resources employed during practices within the field. Finally, habitus informs the agent’s practices through embodied dispositions.

**Defining the Field**

The social world contains multiple interrelated and overlapping distinct fields – social spheres that operate with a set of rules as legitimated within the confines of that particular social space (e.g. political, economic, academic, religion, education, art, etc.) (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990). All distinct fields exist within a larger and broader field of the social world itself. Bourdieu (1977; 1990) conceptualizes the social field as an arena in which power is both enacted and accumulated. Within the larger context of the social field then is where primary struggles take place between dominant and dominated groups (i.e. in terms of race, class, gender) (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, the social field is a metaphorical space in which agents maneuver for position over others, while those in the highest positions have the ability to establish the legitimate rules of the space (Bourdieu, 1977).
In situating the field for this study, I draw upon Bourdieu’s (1984) own research concerning cultural consumption. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu (1984) explores how conditions of social existence inform dispositions that in turn direct practices, which together constitute a lifestyle. Lifestyles can be understood as “the distinctive style of life of specific status groups” (Featherstone, 1987, p. 55). Bourdieu (1984) argues that taste – both the judgement of aesthetic value and the sensual faculty – is the defining feature of distinctive lifestyles.

Within the field of cultural consumption, taste acts as a signifier – the distinction that signifies particular positions in the field (Bourdieu, 1984):

Taste is the practical operator of the transmutation of things into distinct and distinctive signs…It transforms objectively classified practices, in which a class condition signifies itself (through taste), into classifying practices, that is, into a symbolic expression of class position…Taste is thus the source of the system of distinctive features which cannot fail to be perceived as a systematic expression of a particular class of conditions of existence, i.e., as a distinctive lifestyle. (p. 174-175)

Dominant class positions, primarily because of their economic resources, are the makers of taste, establishing distinctions as a set of “classifying practices” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 75). These practices are then used as a marker for positioning over dominated groups.

Feeding the family reflects distinctive lifestyles (DeVault, 1991), whereby specific practices signal a location within the field of cultural consumption. With regard to feeding the family, markers of taste appear within the practices of procurement, preparation, and consumption (DeVault, 1991). Recall that the USDA defines the use of a food pantry as a “socially unacceptable” means (or practice) of obtaining adequate food (USDA ERS, n.d.). Thus,
regarding food consumption, low-income families maintain diminished positions within the social field of cultural consumption if they utilize a food pantry for the purposes of feeding their family.

**Forms of Capital**

Capital constitutes an individual’s economic, social, and cultural resources employed during practices within the field. Bourdieu (1986) outlines three distinct types of capital – economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital exists in the form of monetary resources and assets (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital is born from social networks – that is, the social networks to which you belong act as a resource within the field (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital exists in three distinct forms – embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital, or effectively human capital, is directly linked to one’s position in the field and represents the socialization within that particular position or location (Bourdieu, 1986). Objectified capital is inherent to objects consumed (i.e. consumer goods) (Bourdieu, 1986). As such, objectified capital is directly linked to the field of cultural consumption. Institutionalized capital exists in the prestige afforded to those who are credentialed within a particular field (Bourdieu, 1986).

Through practices, capital is both expended and accumulated within the field (Bourdieu, 1986). Expending capital, though, does not mean a net loss of capital; rather, expending capital involves the conversion of one form of capital to another form of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, within the field of education, economic capital is converted to institutionalized, and often cultural and social, capital through costs associated with obtaining a degree (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) contends that economic capital is the base of all other capital, and thus, all capital can be accumulated by expending (i.e. converting) economic capital. Therefore, the more economic capital one has, the more one is able to accumulate other forms of capital. The
accumulation of capital allows one to advance within the field to more dominant positions (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986).

As previously stated, every field has its own explicit set of rules. As such, practices operate within the rules of the field. One’s ability to adhere to the criteria of the practices determines one’s location within the field: “…transforms objectively classified practices…into classifying practices, that is, into a symbolic expression of class position” within the field (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 175). Meeting the criteria of the practice involves leveraging the appropriate capital to enact the practice (Bourdieu, 1977). In addition, meeting the ascribed criteria of the practice – that is, converting the appropriate capital through the practice – results in the accumulation of another form of capital, namely symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977).

Symbolic capital is legitimizing capital. That is, it accrues to those within the field who perform practices legitimately, which legitimates the practices and, thereby, legitimates the person (Bourdieu, 1977). Symbolic capital yields symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1977). Symbolic power gives the bearer the ability to establish the social order, and therefore, the mechanisms of domination (i.e. practices) in the field (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu (1977) contends that these practices are arbitrary in the sense that they are constructed by the dominant group as instruments to enable the reproduction of their own social position. This reproduction, Bourdieu (1977) contends, is obscured by the practices themselves, which, when misrecognized as natural by dominated groups, contributes to and legitimizes their own domination.

Food purchasing, preparation, and consumption comprise practices within the field of cultural consumption. The particular items purchased, methods used for food preparation, and the way food is consumed are particular practices reflective of a distinctive lifestyle. As previously stated, within the field of cultural consumption, taste acts as a signifier for distinctive
lifestyles (Bourdieu, 1984). The ability to establish taste lies with those who have abundant economic capital and therefore, by virtue of abundant economic capital, abundant symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). The dominant group in the field act as tastemakers, establishing arbitrary guidelines for practices (Bourdieu, 1984). For Bourdieu (1984), tastemakers value form over function, turning specific practices and choices into cultural practices.

**Characterizing Habitus**

The value of form over function brings attention to Bourdieu’s (1977) third concept in the Theory of Practice. The main thrust of Bourdieu’s dialectical theory, and the most germane to this study, is the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus can be understood as a collection of dispositions which inform the practices of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990). These dispositions are “structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72) in the sense that they structure both practices and the perception of practices, but are also “structured structures” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). As structured structures, these dispositions reflect “the whole structure of the system of conditions, as it presents itself in the experience of a life-condition occupying a particular position within that structure” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 172). Within any given field, a habitus reflects one’s social location by its position within the field.

According to Bourdieu (1984), habitus is historical in nature and takes shape in the early socialization process of the family. Attitudes towards time, space, culture, or other matters are developed within and transmitted by this process (Bourdieu, 1977). Transmission is unconscious and these inclinations are deemed what is natural (Bourdieu, 1977). Specifically, though, habitus is important to this study because of its relation to practices.

Practices are “the product of strategies (conscious or unconscious) oriented towards the satisfaction of material and symbolic interests and organized by reference to a determinate set of
economic and social conditions” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 36). The habitus, informed by economic and social conditions of existence, produces the classifying practices of taste (Bourdieu, 1984). That is, a distinctive lifestyle within the field of cultural consumption is informed by a particular habitus with its particular set of practices.

**The Logic of Practice**

Practices occur within the field and are informed by what is acceptable, or legitimated, within the field (Bourdieu, 1977). Legitimated practices, when practiced, serve to build or accumulate forms of capital, including symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). However, in order to conduct practices within the confines of the field, certain forms of capital are required at the outset (Bourdieu, 1977). If one lacks the capital necessary to conduct practices as legitimated, because of a lack of any of the types of capital, the accumulation of other capital can be inhibited (Bourdieu, 1986).

Recall that practices are the product of strategies informed by the habitus meant to satisfy the agent’s interests (Bourdieu, 1977). As Bourdieu notes, “[i]t is necessary to abandon all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the mechanical functioning of pre-established assemblies…” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 73). Rather, it is necessary to consider the dialectical relationship between objective reality and subjective experience:

It follows that these practices cannot be directly deduced either from the objective conditions, defined as the instantaneous sum of the stimuli which may appear to have directly triggered them, or from the conditions which produced the durable principle of their production. These practices can be accounted for only by relating the objective *structure* defining the social conditions of the production of the habitus which
engendered them to the conditions in which this habitus is operating, that is, to the conjecture which, short of a radical transformation, represents a particular state of this structure. In practice, it is the habitus, history turned into nature…which accomplishes practically the relating of these two systems of relations in and through the production of practice (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78).

Thus, it is the habitus in direct contact with the objective structure that produces practices. The logic of practice rests in the subjective agent’s negotiation of the objective structure. This negotiation is conditioned by the habitus, which itself is a product of the objective structure. The dispositions of the habitus inform the range of possible practices available to an agent in this negotiation (Bourdieu, 1977). What may seem a reasonable course of action to one person, may not be to another and vice versa. Instead the logic of practice is based in the habitus’ particular dispositions toward that practice. Additionally, what practices are selected are further conditioned by forms of capital at the agent’s disposal (Bourdieu, 1986). By examining the particular maneuvers of a practice, the dispositions of the habitus – that is the logic of practice – is revealed.

This study seeks to explore and understand the practices involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families. These practices are informed by a particular habitus, which itself is conditioned by social conditions, i.e. the objective structure. As low-income families negotiate the objective structure in the field of cultural consumption, they select from a range of available practices. However, inadequate forms of capital can yield improvised practices. These improvisations reflect both the objective structure and the subjective dispositions of low-income families. In examining these practices and improvisations, I draw on Bourdieu’s (1986) understanding of labor as the implementation of practices.
Labor Defined

Theoretically, Bourdieu (1986) conceives of labor as the accumulation of the various forms of capital – capital is expended or leveraged in order to increase or accumulate other forms of capital. Labor, then, requires the execution of practices within the field. Practices, as previously stated, are informed by both the habitus and the available forms of capital. Inadequate capital can produce improvised practices (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu (1977) refers to these improvisations as strategies. Within the sociological study of the consumption of everyday life, and particularly with respect to lifestyles, such strategies (in Bourdieu’s terms) are conceived of as tactics (De Certau, 1984). For the purposes of this study, to avoid confusion within the context of food security literature, the term “tactics” is used to refer to these improvisations and maneuvers within practices. Therefore, labor, within the confines of this study, includes both the tactics and the practices as executed in the accumulation of capital.

Relevant Literature

This study seeks to explore and understand the labor involved in food choices and feeding decisions among low-income families as they seek to feed their families. Specifically, the study attempts to reveal the tactics, or improvisations, that low-income families employ in order to ensure an adequate supply of food in both quantity and quality. The household activities of food procurement, preparation, and consumption involve a multitude of interconnected choices and decisions that constitute the practices of feeding the family. These activities, and therefore food-related choices and decisions, reflect not only individual-level preferences and constraints within the private social space, but also the structural context of the public sphere in which the practices take place.
This section presents literature relevant to the line of inquiry. Specifically, this chapter presents literature related to both the challenges faced and the strategies employed by low-income families. Challenges involve personal economic constraints as well as larger structural constraints within the food environment, including both the physical availability of food and the cost of food items. Strategies involve an array of practices across both public and private spheres, accessing internal strengths as well as external social networks. Within food insecurity research, the notion of strategy is conceptualized rather categorically, as an observation of that which happens, and in essence, discounts knowledge about the possible range of options available. The idea of improvisation though is much more dynamic and requires a more nuanced approach in analysis.

I begin this section with a discussion of the concepts of food choices and feeding decisions and then proceed to discuss the challenges and strategies as outlined in the literature.

The Practices of Feeding the Family

The practices of feeding the family concern two primary areas: food choices and feeding decisions. Food choices include not only what items might be selected from the public market, but also the selection of items that may constitute a meal within the home. Feeding decisions involve an array of activities including food procurement, food preparation, and food consumption.

**Food choices.** Research suggests that social, cultural, historical, and psychological factors can influence food-related choices and decisions at the individual level. Food choices create an identity whereby one enacts a sense of self through daily food consumption (Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002). Food choices are often influenced by early childhood experiences and can change over time as individuals move through different stages of life.
(Devine, 2005; Falk, Bisogni, & Sobal, 1996). More importantly, food-related choices and decisions can reflect social location and prominent cultural ideals (Bourdieu, 1984; Devine, 2005; Devine, Sobal, Bisogni, & Connors, 1999; Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996).

The food choice process model developed by Furst et al. (1996) provides a conceptual framework for understanding the social, cultural, historical, and psychological factors involved in individual food choice decisions. The food choice process model involves three major components: life course, influences, and personal systems. The life course denotes the social roles, locations, and environments prevalent throughout one’s life (Furst et al., 1996). An individual’s life course determines a set of influences that shape personal systems – “conscious value negotiations and unconsciously operationalized strategies that may occur in a food-related choice situation” (Furst et al., 1996, p. 250). Influences include ideals (culturally acceptable standards and expectations for food choices given a social location), personal factors (cravings, preferences, and aversions), resources (monetary, cooking equipment, cooking knowledge and skills, and time), social framework (negotiating interpersonal relationships and social roles), and food context (physical surrounding, social climate, and food supply factors) (Furst et al., 1996).

Based on these influences, individuals establish habitual patterns and strategies (i.e. the personal system) for negotiating the competing values of sensory perception, monetary considerations, convenience, health and nutrition, interpersonal relationships, and food quality in making food choices and decisions within the larger societal food system or a particular food event (Furst et al., 1996).

**Feeding decisions.** These personal systems, or invisible strategies and habits for value negotiation, are evident at the family level as well and reflect the influences of social location in making family feeding decisions (Blake et al., 2009; Blake, Wethington, Jastran, Farrell, &
Previous sociological scholarship finds that the work involved in feeding the family is primarily the work of women and often invisible even to those who perform it (DeVault, 1991). Provisioning, or shopping, places women in the role of negotiator between the private life of the family and the public market where budgeting requires constant monitoring, improvisation, and conciliation of preferences and nutritional concerns with food prices and availability (DeVault, 1991). For households living at the poverty line, feeding the family is often a matter of survival. To eat is the first concern, even if this means foregoing efficient budgetary methods to ensure that the food presented is satisfactory for consumption (DeVault, 1991). Feeding decisions at the family level involve a complex orchestra of food planning, provisioning, preparation, and interpersonal relationship construction (DeVault, 1991). Meal planning requires attention to individual preferences and diverse schedules (Blake, Bisogni, Sobal, Jastran, & Devine, 2008; Devine et al., 2009). The family meal becomes a coordinated event for sociability in which the idea of family is both constructed and experienced (Blake et al., 2008; DeVault, 1991).

**Challenges to Food Security**

The primary challenge to food security identified in the literature is one of access. Access is multidimensional and can contribute to both a lack of dietary quantity and quality. Access is positioned as both an economic and an environmental problem. Specifically, households may experience limited access as a result of limited economic resources to purchase food supplies. Additionally, access to food may be limited by what is physically available and economically accessible in the public market. Each of these challenges is discussed in turn.

**Limited economic resources.** As a practice, feeding the family requires economic resources in order to procure an adequate supply of nutritional food. Research suggests an
inverse relationship between income and food insecurity such that low-income households are more likely to be food insecure (Alaimo, Briefel, Frongillo Jr., & Olson, 1998; Furness, Simon, Wold, & Asarian-Anderson, 2004; Gunderson, Kreider, & Pepper, 2011; Kaiser, Baumrind, & Dumbauld, 2007). Though income may seem a logical predictor of the relative purchasing power of a given individual or household, all low-income households are not food insecure. According to national statistics, roughly 66% of households with incomes below 185% of the poverty threshold are food secure (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2015). However, even households with higher income levels experience food insecurity. In Kaiser et al. (2007), food insecurity was present at multiple income levels including households with incomes above 250% of the poverty level (7% experiencing low food security and 2.5% experiencing very low food security). Gunderson et al. (2011) find that even households with incomes above 300% of the poverty level experience food insecurity.

An associated predictor may help explain how food insecurity can occur at higher income levels. Most research suggests that the presence of children in the household increases the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity (Alaimo et al., 1998; Kaiser et al., 2007). Furness et al. (2004) find this to be true across all income levels, with a more pronounced effect among those households whose income falls below the poverty line. Additionally, households with children under the age of six experience food insecurity at levels above the national average (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2015). The presence of children in the household can significantly strain the economic resources available for all basic needs, not just food supplies.

In contrast, economic resources for certain households can be inadequate from the outset. Single-headed households with children also experience food insecurity rates that are higher than the national average, regardless of whether these are headed by a man or a woman (although the
rate is higher for women 35.3% to 21.7%) (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2015), suggesting that a single income stream may be inadequate. Likewise, food insecurity is higher among those with less than a high school education (Alaimo et al., 1998; Kaiser et al., 2007). Those with less than a high school education face limited employment opportunities subject to minimum wages, effectively challenging one’s ability to maintain all the necessities of a household.

Further evidence suggests though that income alone cannot solely predict or explain food insecurity. In a longitudinal study, Mammen et al. (2009) find that income levels of rural low-income families in food insecure states were greater than that of their counterparts living in food secure states, and while incomes for rural low-income families in food insecure states increased over time, those in food secure states experienced income volatility, rising over the first and second waves and declining in the third. Mammen et al. (2009), along with Heflin, London, and Scott (2011), contend that material hardship – the collective economic strains imposed by the basic needs of shelter, food, clothing, and health care – offers greater predictive power in identifying at-risk populations. Accordingly, relying solely on income measures to identify eligibility for federal nutrition assistance programs may mean that many in need are excluded.

**Environmental access.** While limited economic resources present a household-specific challenge, limited availability of food supplies in a given geographic location affect all households regardless of economic resources. The food environment – that is the availability of food suppliers, or retailers, within a particular locale – can contribute to a lack of access, primarily in impoverished areas. Impoverished areas with a limited food environment are generally referred to as food deserts. Food deserts exist in geographic areas with populations that experience high poverty rates, higher unemployment rates, and greater use of public assistance (Dutko et al., 2012). The USDA defines food deserts “as low-income tracts in which a
substantial number or proportion of the population has low access to a supermarket or large grocery stores” (Dutko et al., 2012, p. 5).\(^4\) Low access refers to the geographic distance between residents and the store or supermarket. In rural areas, low access occurs when that distance is greater than 10 miles, and in urban areas, when the distance is more than one mile (Dutko et al., 2012).

The lack of fully-stocked supermarkets and grocery stores limits the availability of food items that can be purchased, specifically perishable items such as fruits and vegetables (Larson, Story, & Nelson, 2009) that are considered healthier and therefore part of a quality diet. Dean and Sharkey (2011) find that fruit and vegetable intakes among rural residents decline as distance to the grocery store increases. Even fully-stocked grocery stores in rural and urban locations offer less availability of healthier food and beverage products compared to suburban stores (Zenk et al., 2014). Many impoverished rural and urban locations rely on small food outlets such as discount stores and convenience stores, with rural locations having a greater preponderance of these (Bustillos, Sharkey, Anding, & McIntosh, 2009; Liese, Weis, Pluto, Smith, & Lawson, 2007). Food items available at discount and convenience stores are often energy-dense (i.e. high-calorie, low-nutrient), highly processed food items that may contribute to poor health outcomes (Walker, Keane, & Burke, 2010; Zenk et al., 2014). Likewise, even when healthier food options are offered at discount or convenience store locations, variety is generally limited (Bustillos et al., 2009). Individuals and households affected by food deserts often have the added expense of travel costs (in both time and money) required to obtain better quality food items (Walker et al., 2010).

\(^4\) The USDA defines a “substantial number or proportion of the population” as “at least 500 people and/or 33 percent” of the population in a geographic area (Dutko et al., 2012, p. 5).
**Food prices.** The USDA’s Economic Research Service reports that increases in annual inflation and food prices affect food insecurity prevalence, with a 1% annual increase in food prices raising the prevalence of food insecurity by 0.6% (Nord, Coleman-Jensen, & Gregory, 2014). Nationwide, food insecure households are subject to higher than average food costs depending on their geographic location. In 2014, nearly 25.4 million food insecure people lived in areas where food prices exceeded the national average (Feeding America, 2016). Food prices also vary by population density with the highest costs occurring in metropolitan and rural locations, especially rural areas near urban centers in the Northeast United States (Feeding America, 2016). Moreover, low-income households spend a higher percentage of their income on food compared to their counterparts in high-income households (Drewnowski, 2003).

Food prices have both a direct and indirect effect on food security. Maximizing budget constraints in order to meet the necessary quantity of food often means compromising dietary quality. Non-processed food items (nutrient-dense whole foods) such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats tend to be higher priced than processed foods (energy-dense foods) which are lower in nutritional value despite an abundance of calories (Drewnowski, 2003; Drewnowski & Damon, 2005; Monsivais & Drewnowski, 2007). Longitudinal data demonstrates that the cost of healthier, nutrient-dense foods rose more sharply between 2004 and 2008 than that of energy-dense foods, 41% to 12.2% respectively (Monsivais, Mclain, & Drewnowski, 2010). Dietary studies demonstrate that low-income households spend less (mean real dollars) on food and their diets consist of energy-dense food items (Aggarwal, Monsivais, Cook, & Drewnowski, 2011; Rehm, Monsivais, & Drewnowski, 2011). Additionally, purchasing power may be affected by the particular cost of desired food items and by the interaction with food costs in a food desert. Prices on goods at convenience stores tend to be higher than traditional grocery stores.
(Gustafson, Hankins, & Jilcott, 2012). A particular individual may have the purchasing capacity to obtain healthy foods based on prices at a fully-stocked grocery store, but a convenience store may be the only option in a food desert.

**Strategies for Maintaining Food Security**

Some researchers contend that it is not enough simply to understand the individual and structural challenges faced by food insecure individuals and households. Rather, attention should be given to the strategies employed in the face of those challenges. Despite differing theoretical perspectives, research designs, and sample characteristics, investigations into coping strategies reveal relatively consistent findings.

In a mixed rural-urban sample of racially diverse households in North Carolina, Ahluwalia, Dodds, and Baligh (1998) found that participants first employed a series of individual-level responses to negotiate inadequate food supplies. Individual-level strategies reflect the work necessary to make economic resources stretch and include economizing strategies such as using coupons, budgeting money, planning menus, making shopping lists, and refraining from purchasing unnecessary items. When individual strategies proved inadequate, participants sought aid through their social networks including family members (meal sharing, receiving food aid), friends (receiving food or monetary aid that would have to be repaid), and neighbors and acquaintances (only for urgent needs). Participants also reported using community organizations (food pantries, soup kitchens, church-based dinners) as social network responses. Ahluwalia et al. (1998)’s participants also reveal the shame associated with having to employ these strategies, viewing aid from social networks as a reflection of their own failure to provide. More importantly, these findings reveal that the use of social networks in mitigating food insecurity is a temporary panacea for deprivation.
Similarly, in a study of rural and urban food deserts, Morton, Bitto, Oakland, & Sand (2008) find that neither redistribution nor reciprocal economies are successful at alleviating food insecurity. Urban participants were more likely to engage in redistribution economies (food stamps, food pantries, and community meal sites) than their rural counterparts. Conversely, rural participants engaged more intensively in reciprocal exchanges of giving and receiving food. Personal gardens enabled rural respondents to boost their food supply and give to others, while also receiving produce, fish, and meats from other rural residents. While this pattern contributed to enhancing fruit and vegetable consumption, rural respondents remained food insecure.

Other studies report more individual-level strategies than revealed by Ahluwalia et al. (1998). Greder and Brotherson (2002) report findings from a qualitative study involving 49 mothers across seven counties in Iowa (both rural and urban) which included an observation and participatory research component. Primary individual-level strategies included balancing economic priorities, altering food consumption patterns, and reducing food intake. Part of balancing economic priorities often included making trade-offs about how money was allocated between food expenses, utilities costs, and other debts.

Darko, Eggett, and Richards (2013) explore how fluctuations in economic resources over a month’s time can impact individual shopping behaviors. Participants reported more variety (fruits, vegetables, and meats) in their diets when resources were abundant. Conversely, as resources dwindled, participants reported shifting to more energy-dense and non-perishable food items. Many reported food costs as a determining factor in their shopping behaviors, often relying on low-cost food stores to supply their needs. Other strategies employed to mitigate economic demands included price matching, looking for sales, relying on household food stores, and buying in bulk.
More broadly, Carney (2012) considers household responses to contemporary economic changes following the 2009 financial crisis. In a sample of urban and peri-urban communities in Santa Barbara, Carney (2012) assesses the behaviors related to procurement, preparation, and consumption in the context of increasing unemployment and volatile food prices. Participants reported bargain shopping (use of coupons, sales, and discount stores) and shopping at multiple stores to take advantage of lower prices. Interestingly, this study reveals a unique coping strategy. Participants reported increasing home-prepared meals as a result of the economic downturn and increased food prices. Carney (2012) notes though that home-prepared meals seldom translated to healthy choices as many participants reported relying on non-perishable food items in the home-prepared meals.

Mammen et al. (2009) also consider external economic conditions and their influence on low-income families’ responses. Specifically, Mammen et al. (2009) examine a paradox in which low-income rural families residing in prosperous economic states experience more food insecurity than their counterparts in less economically prosperous states. Comparisons between states of differing economic statuses reveal that low-income rural families utilize similar coping strategies including the use of government programs, social networks, and individual techniques such as economizing, budgeting, and adjusting resources. Additionally, low-income rural families in more prosperous states relied more intensely on human capital techniques such as “gardening, freezing, canning, and preparing big soups or stews” (Mammen, et al., 2009, p. 163), whereas counterparts in less prosperous states relied more intensely on dietary intake changes such as eating less or not at all. Mammen et al. (2009) conclude that low-income rural families practice a similar range of strategies, but how and with what frequency these strategies are selected depends on their own unique circumstances.
Finally, Heflin et al. (2011) reflect that mitigating material hardship requires work (i.e. labor) as families negotiate strategies and trade-offs across competing demands. In a study of urban women, findings demonstrate the use of similar strategies to mitigate food hardship including the use of formal programs, relying on social networks, and the use of individual strategies. The authors comment though that the primary limitation to their study is that they did not systematically investigate why and how specific strategies are chosen and implemented in the experience of mitigating material hardship. The authors recommend future studies that might fill this gap in the literature.

Section Summary and Connection to Theoretical Framework

While not all low-income households are food insecure, those that are likely contain children and have a single stream of income. Likewise, low-income households that experience food insecurity may contain adult members that have less than a high school education and limited work opportunities. Within the field, low-income households operate from a position of limited economic capital. This limited economic position may be compounded by structural factors that inhibit the range of available possibilities in which to carry out the practices of feeding the family.

In the absence of economic capital necessary to feed the family, low-income households rely on a variety of strategies. First, low-income households may try to economize what resources they have by using a food budget, purchasing generic food items, using coupons, shopping at discount stores, watching for sales, and buying in bulk, among other related efforts to economize at the individual or household level. Second, low-income households may try to increase their economic capital by participating in the federal food stamp program. Should economic capital not suffice though, low-income households often engage their social capital as
a way to maintain an adequate supply. Whether through family, friends, or community supports like soup kitchens and food pantries, low-income households use social capital as a way to overcome shortages, though in some instances they may be indebted to others by doing so. Likewise, should economic capital be insufficient, an alternative is to rely on individual human capital. Mammen et al. (2009) identify gardening and canning subsequent harvests as a form of human capital. However, one could argue that using triage methods (i.e. consuming less or not at all) may be a strategy based in human capital.

As Heflin et al. (2011) point out though, many of these strategies, especially those strategies involving economizing, are used by many American households, regardless of food security status. Further, simple categorization of a strategy does not inform the question of how the strategy is implemented or even why it was chosen among a range of possibilities. For example, simply knowing that a household purchases in bulk does not tell us what items might be purchased in bulk (e.g. fresh, frozen, processed), where those items are purchased in bulk (e.g. warehouse store, supercenter, etc.), what may be necessary to store the items purchased in bulk (e.g. freezer, pantry space), and why the decision to purchase in bulk was made in the first place. Similarly, perhaps a household containing more than one adult indicates that they use triage methods such as skipping meals or not eating for an entire day. Nothing about that tells us which adults went without and how that decision was made.

As with these two examples, many of the strategies outlined in the literature neglect to offer a rich description of how and why these strategies may be implemented in the practices of feeding the family among low-income families. This study attempts to fill this gap in the literature. By examining the food choices and feeding decisions (i.e. the practices of feeding the family) in low-income families, this study attempts to reveal improvisations in practices
characteristic of the experience of food insecurity that may inform progressive nutrition assistance policies.

**Chapter Summary**

Bourdieu’s (1977) Theory of Practice offers a way to move beyond a simple categorization of the practices of everyday life. As maneuvers within a field permitting agents to convert and accumulate forms of capital, practices are dynamic processes which reflect the dialectical relationship between an agent and objective reality. Inherent to the agent is a collection of dispositions which inform the possibilities for maneuvering within the field. An agent’s capital further informs the possible practices, with limited capital necessitating improvisations in practices which can inhibit capital accumulation. For Bourdieu (1977), leveraging capital in the field, i.e. practices, is a form of labor.

This study seeks to explore and understand the labor involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families. In a context of limited economic resources, low-income families negotiate significant challenges in their efforts to feed the family. The particular strategies low-income families enact within the field of cultural consumption emerge as a site for analysis within Bourdieu’s (1977) Theory of Practice. This study seeks to explore these strategies as dynamic processes through a qualitative research design. The following chapter outlines the research methods pertinent to this study including design, sampling, data collection, and analysis.
CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS AND STUDY DESIGN

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the labor involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families as they seek to feed their families. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What food choices do low-income families make and how do they make them?
2. What feeding decisions do low-income families make and how do they make them?
3. What labor is involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families?

This study is exploratory in nature and seeks to reveal the activities involved in and the meanings associated with the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families. As an exploratory study of a lived experience, this study is well-suited to a qualitative design approach. Qualitative research designs are more amenable to investigations of lived experience.

This chapter provides detailed information regarding the research methods pertinent to this study including design, sampling, data collection, and analysis. The chapter also outlines additional considerations regarding ethical considerations, issues of trustworthiness and researcher positionality.

**Overview and Rationale of Study Design**

Qualitative inquiry lends itself to particular use in research by permitting thick description of interpersonal, social, and cultural experiences (Patton, 2002). More importantly though, qualitative inquiry provides a framework for the natural, inductive, and flexible discovery of meaning (Patton, 2002). Such inquiry tends toward direct observations of the real world as it exists without manipulation, while being open to any and all emergent themes in the
data. Qualitative data analysis gives consideration to all interrelationships without predetermined notions of causality and correlation and allows the researcher to be reflexive in the process thereby ensuring credible findings (Patton, 2002).

Two particular qualitative traditions are relevant to the study design. First, ethnography lends particular advantage to data collection methods. Ethnography allows the researcher to be present within the context of the phenomenon – to observe firsthand the activities of a situation from an insider’s perspective (Berg, 2004). Second, phenomenology as a tradition is concerned with and permits the discovery of the meaning that people give to their experience. Experiential meaning is obtained through the direct inquiry of participants (Patton, 2002). Both of these traditions reflect the theoretical framework that informs this study. Ethnography permits the direct observation of the practices associated with making food choices and feeding decisions, while the direct inquiry of phenomenology gives voice to the labor involved in these practices.

**Overview of Site Selection/Rationale**

Rural, or non-metro, locations have higher rates of poverty and child poverty than metro locations using official poverty measurements (USDA ERS, n.d.). Research suggests that rural residents have decreased access to fully-stocked grocery stores, and therefore quality foods (Larson et al., 2009). Additionally, rural residents face spatial challenges to food access, often requiring significant travel times, a matter that is complicated by a lack of public transportation (Sharkey, 2009; Sharkey & Horel, 2008). Due to my geographic location, I conducted this study in Indiana County, Pennsylvania, a rural county in the southwest portion of the state.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Indiana County is home to 88,880 residents, including 16,846 children (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Indiana County’s poverty rate in 2014 was 17.2%, with 19% of all children in the county living in poverty (Greater Pittsburgh Community
Food Bank, n.d.). Roughly 13.5% of the population in Indiana County was food insecure in 2014, with 20.3% of the child population experiencing food insecurity (Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, n.d.). Given the extent of poverty and food insecurity in the county, especially among children, Indiana County, as a rural county, was an ideal site to investigate how low-income families mitigate these challenges.

**Sampling and Criteria**

Recruitment occurred at food pantry sites throughout Indiana County. The Indiana County Community Action Program (ICCAP), serves as a partnering distributor of Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank (GPCFB) – a Feeding America food bank servicing 11 counties in Southwestern Pennsylvania (GPCFB, n.d.). ICCAP operates 19 separate food pantries throughout Indiana County, while ICCAP itself also serves as a site for the federally funded Emergency Food Assistance Program (GPCFB, n.d.). The 19 ICCAP food pantries operate at different locations throughout the county and distribute food once a month to the designated recipients in their service area. Food pantry recipients must meet income eligibility guidelines (below 150% of the poverty line for household composition) in order to qualify for food distribution. As such, food pantry recipients are considered low-income for the purposes of this study.

I attended each of the food pantry distributions throughout Indiana County on the date and time of each site’s scheduled distribution. I employed convenience sampling techniques by distributing an advertisement to food pantry recipients during distribution hours. Additionally, I asked food pantry site directors if they knew of any families that might be willing to participate and provided them with a copy of the study advertisement to provide to potential respondents.
Of the total respondents, nine families met the initial inclusion criteria. In order to participate in the study, households had to contain at least one adult age 18 or older residing communally with at least one child under the age of 18. Among the nine families who participated, six families met additional criteria required for participation in observation sessions. As a condition of participation in observation sessions, all children in the household had to be age 5 or older in order to provide child assent to participate.

These six families were asked about participating in observation sessions at the time of the initial interview. Five of the six families agreed to participate in observation sessions. A date and time was established with each family in order to attain child assent. Two families failed to appear for child assent procedures and did not respond to repeated contacts. A child in another family refused child assent. The children in the remaining two families agreed to participate in the observation sessions.

**The Research Sample**

Low-income families were recruited through convenience sampling methods at Indiana County Community Action Program (ICCAP) food pantry sites throughout Indiana County, PA. For the purposes of this study, a family is defined as any household containing at least one adult aged 18 or older residing communally with at least one child under the age of 18. In total, nine families who responded to the advertisement were eligible for the study according to inclusion criteria. A table with the sample information appears in Appendix A.

**Household Composition**

The sample families included the following: four single female-headed households, one cohabitating household, two married households, and two multi-generational households. Single female-headed households contained between one and three children. The cohabitating
household contained three children. One married household contained two children and the other contained one child. The multi-generational households included a parent (and step-parent in one household), children (both adult children and minor children), and at least one grandchild.

**Age of Household**

The ages of interview participants ranged between 18 and 53 years. Additional adult household members ranged in age from 24 to 59 years. The ages of minor children in the households ranged between 8 months and 17 years.

**Gender/Sexuality**

Interview participants included ten females and two males. All couples in the cohabitating, married, and multi-generational households were heterosexual.

**Race/Ethnicity**

The cohabitating household consisted of a mixed-race couple (African American and white), one white child from the mother’s previous relationship, and two biracial children resulting from the present relationship. Three of the single female-headed households included one biracial child (African American and white); all mothers were white. All other households contained white adults and children.

**Income and Employment Status**

Employment status at the time of the interview varied by household. Income for the single female-headed households included some combination of alimony, child support, and/or some social welfare benefit (unemployment, Social Security Disability, and Supplemental Security Income Disability); all were unemployed. Both adults in the cohabitating household were unemployed and receiving disability benefits. In one married household, both adults were actively working; one was employed full-time and the other performed part-time independent
contract work. The other married household contained a homemaker and her husband who received disability benefits, though he engaged in some seasonal part-time work. Income for one multi-generational household included disability benefits and child support; all adults in the home were unemployed. In the other multi-generational family, one member was employed full-time, one member was employed but did not contribute to the household finances, and a third member received alimony support.

**Food Assistance Benefit Status**

All households received SNAP benefits except for one married household (where both adults were actively working). In addition, four households received Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) for at least one child in the household at the time of the interview. School-aged children in all households participated in the National School Lunch Program.

**Housing Status**

Both married households resided in homes owned by the married couple. One multi-generational household resided in a home owned by one of its members. All other households resided in rental housing, with at least two of these households residing in subsidized housing.

**Other**

The adult members of two households (cohabitating household and one single female-headed household) were implementing nutrition changes at the time of the interview.

**Methods of Collecting Data.**

Methods employed in this study included in-depth interviews, participant observations, and participant journals. Each method and its rationale is discussed below.
In-Depth Interviews

An in-depth interview is a phenomenological research tool for exploring another person’s experience – their history, thoughts, feelings, and the meaning they attach to their world (Patton, 2002). Participants are able to speak freely regarding their own perspectives, to clarify and build upon their own meanings, to tell their story. All adult household members who self-identified as responsible for food-related activities in the home were eligible to participate in the interview portion of this study. Interview questions were derived from both theoretical framework and the literature review and included the following topics: general demographic information and household composition, childhood experiences and the historical context of food decisions, what meanings are made of food consumption, what food-related activities are performed in the home and by whom, how food-related choices and decisions are made in the home and by whom, what strategies are employed when there is a food shortage, and the experience of hunger. A copy of the interview schedule is included in Appendix B.

Participant Journal

A journal not only provides a means of recording events as they happen and in the participant’s own words, but also is a reflexive practice as well. Reflexivity allows one to examine their own thoughts, actions, and beliefs and consider how these contribute to the outcomes that are sought (Elizabeth, 2008). In this study, journals are an important method in terms of credibility of the findings. There may be topics too sensitive for participants to discuss in an interview setting. Participants could be more willing to reveal intimate details of their home life in a written format, especially since all journals remained anonymous.

The primary caregiver of each sample family was asked to keep a journal of food-related activities in the home for a maximum of 30 days. Participants were asked to provide a minimum
of at least two weekdays and one weekend day each week for the 30-day period. All journals remained anonymous and participation in this part of the study was completely voluntary. A journal packet was provided to each willing participant. The packet contained an instruction sheet, 30 sheets of pre-printed questions and additional pages at the end for the participant to provide a reflection on the process. Each day’s journal questions were exactly the same and asked about the food-related activities in the home during the day. A copy of the journal questions is included in Appendix C.

**Participant Observation**

As an ethnographic method, participant observation is meant to put the researcher in direct contact with the phenomenon under study (Berg, 2004). Observations allow the researcher to take note of that which may have gone unsaid in the interview setting and observe consistency between subjective experience and actual practice (Patton, 2002).

All families who met inclusion criteria for this portion of the study were asked to participate in observation sessions. Observation sessions included at least one mealtime, one grocery shopping trip, and a food pantry distribution.

**Data Collection**

All food pantry site directors were asked if they knew any food pantry participants that fit inclusion criteria and may be interested in participating. Only three directors indicated they knew of a family and would speak to them regarding participating. However, I did not receive any contacts from respondents through this strategy.

During food bank distributions, I either handed the study advertisement directly to potential participants themselves and/or placed the advertisement in the box or bag designated for distribution to the food pantry recipient. The advertisement directed interested respondents to
contact the researcher by phone in order to determine eligibility for the study based on inclusion criteria.

All 22 respondents were obtained through the study advertisement. Of those 22 respondents, only nine families met inclusion criteria. Upon initial contact with eligible families, I reviewed the scope and purpose of the study, provided information regarding informed consent, confidentiality and ability to withdraw, and informed them of all data collection methods and compensation available for participation. All nine families who met inclusion criteria agreed to participate in the study.

**In-Depth Interviews**

All families were required to at least participate in the interview portion of the study. In the initial contact, I discerned which adults in the household self-identified as responsible for food-related activities in the home and would be willing to participate in the interview. A total of 12 adults completed in-depth interviews. Interviews occurred in the family’s home (eight of the interviews) or in a public setting (one completed at a restaurant). All participants completed informed consent which included consent to participate in all data collection methods. See Appendix D for a copy of the Adult Informed Consent. I personally interviewed each participant. If there was more than one adult in the home participating in the interview, the interview was conducted with all adults, but each participant was asked and answered all interview questions. The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. I personally transcribed all recordings. Participating families received compensation from the researcher’s personal funds in the amount of $20.00 (in total, not per person) for completing the interview. A copy of the interview guide is included in Appendix A.
Participant Journal

Following the initial interview, I asked the participant (or primary caregiver if more than one adult participated) to maintain a journal for a period of 30 days. Participation in this part of the study was completely voluntary and all journals remained anonymous. I reviewed all instructions with each primary caregiver and provided a packet for their convenience. All sample families agreed to participate in this portion of the study, and I arranged with them a mutually agreed upon time to pick up the completed journal. Ultimately, three families provided journals. The completed journals were scanned into an electronic file for analysis. A copy of the journal questions is included in Appendix C.

Participant Observation

Following the initial interview, families who met inclusion criteria for the observation portion of the study were asked about their willingness to participate in observation sessions. Of the nine families, six met inclusion criteria, and of those families, five primary caregivers initially agreed to participate. For these five families, I explained the need to obtain child assent and explained the consent and assent process. A copy of the Child Assent forms is included in Appendix E. I arranged to complete the child assent process for each of these families at a day and time convenient for all parties. Ultimately, only two families completed the Child Assent process and therefore were able to complete observation sessions. One family completed observation sessions during a mealtime, a grocery shopping trip, and a food bank distribution. The second family completed observations only during a mealtime and a food pantry distribution. Families were observed during preparation of the meal, the meal itself, and the clean-up process. Grocery shopping observations were subject to a site and time of the family’s choosing, and food pantry observations occurred during regular distribution hours at the family’s
registered food pantry site. Families were provided a modest compensation from the researcher’s personal funds of $20.00 (in total, not per person) if they completed three observation sessions. I took handwritten notes at each observation session which I then typed into a word document to be used for analysis.

**Methods of Data Analysis and Synthesis**

The task of the qualitative researcher is to organize, describe, and interpret the data that has been collected in order to disseminate the findings of the study (Patton, 2002). As such, a comprehensive analytical strategy lends credibility to research in which the researcher is placed in the central role of determining significance. The analytical strategy employed in this study derived largely from the research questions and the theoretical framework. In the following, I attempt to explicate my actions and thought processes in analyzing the data.

This study is guided by a set of interrelated questions which attempt to reveal the hidden nature of the labor of feeding the family. These questions were of primary importance in the analytical strategy employed. Initial coding strategies sought to explicate patterns and categories that offered insight regarding the first two research questions – namely, what food choices and feeding decisions are made and how are they made. As such, I employed content analysis. Content analysis “attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453) which lends itself to identifying patterns and categories in the data. In this process, I used inductive analysis and allowed codes to emerge from the data. This part of the analyses is descriptive, identifying the choices and decisions made (the what), while also being interpretive by identifying the influences behind particular choices and decisions (the how).

Analyses undertaken with reference to the first and second research questions was only the first step in the analytical strategy. The data was then analyzed with reference to the third
question. I employed deductive and inductive analyses in a second round of coding focusing on the third research question. Deductively, I was concerned with identifying situations involving economic, social, cultural, and human capital, capturing both the employment and receipt of such capital, in the process of feeding the family. This analysis was also inductive though in that I allowed the meanings of these situations to emerge from the data itself, and it was these meanings that were then coded. In this way, I hoped to illuminate the labor involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families. For example, participants often invoked the idea of stretching—particularly stretching food or stretching money used for food. Therefore, I established a code of “making things stretch” to encapsulate this experience and particular labor.

Throughout my analysis, I attempted to remain unbiased and value-free, allowing the data to create its own picture of the lived experience of food insecurity. In doing so, I attempted to retain a holistic approach that endeavors to reveal the “interdependence and interrelatedness of complex phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 481). In exposing the dialectical relationship between structural constraints and individual agency, I sought to reveal the characteristic dispositions inherent in the lived experience of food insecurity. For example, many participants discussed the rules associated with receiving food bank distributions, as well as the composition of those distributions. Food bank rules require that an individual or family be removed from the roles if they miss three consecutive months of food bank distributions. Participants discussed frustration with this rule as it requires them to obtain distributions regardless of whether they are in need in any particular month. Participants viewed obtaining distributions regardless of need as a waste since others could benefit from that distribution. Concerns about food waste proved to be a disposition common among participating families.
Ethical Considerations

Though this study deals with two vulnerable populations – that being economically disadvantage persons and minors – the study seeks only to understand perceptions and actions related to their experience. This study was therefore approved by the IUP Institutional Review Board as an expedited review. Informed consent procedures were included in the protocol and provided for the participant’s ability to withdraw from the study at any time. All consent processes were followed throughout the duration of this study. No participants withdrew from the study.

The study posed minimal risk to study participants. Interview questions asked participants to recall experiences with not having enough food which could have been psychologically distressing. Additionally, participant observation sessions may have elevated discomfort. However, participants were informed on multiple occasions during the consent process and during the interview process that they could choose not to answer questions that may cause discomfort or distress.

A modest compensation of $20.00 (cash) was provided to each family (not per person) who completed interviews. A modest compensation of $20.00 (cash) was provided to each family (not per person) who completed three observation sessions. Additionally, I offered some families information about resources available through ICCAP and other food assistance programs during the course of my interactions with them.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In the research design, I attempted to deal with issues of trustworthiness through triangulation. Patton (2002) argues that triangulation is useful in testing the consistency of data received and “increases credibility and quality by countering the concern (or accusation) that a
study’s findings are simply an artifact of a single method, a single source,…” (p. 563) or a researcher’s bias. Triangulation involves the use of multiple methods or data sources in the study design or multiple analysts or theoretical perspectives in the data analysis (Patton, 2002). For the purposes of this study, I employed a triangulation of data sources. Patton (2002) defines triangulation of data sources as a means of “comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means within qualitative methods” (p. 559, emphasis original). I employed in-depth interviews and paired those with observations and participant journals in order to permit a full investigation of the phenomenon of interest. In essence, this is a built-in, self-imposed technique for ensuring credibility and accuracy of representation in my analysis. Though the number of families participating in the journaling and observation sessions were few, this method did prove confirmatory to the interpretations developed in the analyses.

For example, during a food pantry observation session with the Barber household, I could witness the frustration that primary caregiver Mary feels in participating in the food bank. During her interview, Mary remarked that she often receives a random collection of food items such that she is unable to make a meal out of the items. At the food bank distribution observation, Mary went through the items in the parking lot while I was present and remarked how she had received a tuna helper packaged meal, but did not receive any tuna in order to use the packaged meal. She also noted that she received multiple of the same items and that she was missing other items that are a normal part of the monthly distribution. Mary relies on the food pantry to get peanut butter, a staple item in her home, but the box she received did not contain any peanut butter. Mary remarked that she would have to spend more money this month making up for these deficits in the food pantry distribution. Not only did the observation session confirm
Mary’s interview accounts, it also yielded additional data about potential limitations in using the food pantry to mitigate food insecurity.\(^5\)

Throughout my data collection, I employed member checks as a means of assuring that meaning was derived inductively. Specifically, during interviews I would be sure to inquire what a participant meant by a certain word or phrase, rather than assuming that their meaning was that of my own. Likewise, I would take time to clarify my understanding of the participant’s meaning by probing for elaboration of the participant’s statements. I also provided copies of interview transcripts to each of the participants and permitted them to make any changes or clarification as they deemed appropriate. None of the participants reported the need for any changes or clarification.

Additionally, in the process of my analysis, I maintained an audit trail. An audit trail records the analytical process of the researcher, identifying the implementation of the analytical strategy and serving as a record of interpretive and substantive decisions. The audit trail establishes a record of the analytical process that permits independent evaluation by other researchers and serves as a guide for those who may choose to replicate the study (Patton, 2002; Creswell & Miller, 2000). In my audit trail, I recorded the coding process, including the substantive decisions I made about the exclusivity of codes. Also, in the audit trail, I included brief analytical memos throughout the coding process to record preliminary thoughts for the second round of coding. These memos also detail interpretive decisions I made regarding the labor codes.

\(^5\) Having been to a number of food pantry distributions throughout recruitment for this study, I am aware that tuna is a normal item distributed by ICCAP. That is, normal distributions do include both the tuna helper and a can of tuna. However, I was at Mary’s food pantry site the previous month doing recruitment when I took note of particular practices by the volunteers as items tended to run out at the end of the distribution time frame. Specifically, as items ran out, volunteers would start substituting extra of other items that were still plentiful. These now non-standard distributions were given out to recipients or, as a volunteer informed me, held over to the next month. Mary likely received one of these non-standard distributions packaged the previous month.
Finally, my analysis provides rich, thick detail as a means of establishing the credibility and transferability of the findings. Rich, thick detail “creates verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). In reporting my findings, I sought to uncover the labor of feeding the family by providing vivid descriptions of the practices employed by participants as they seek to feed their families. I did this through contextualizing the practices within the experiences of each family, while also comparing and contrasting experiences across families when appropriate. Additionally, rich, thick description allows “readers to make decisions about the applicability of the findings to other settings or similar contexts” (Creswell & Miller 2000, p. 129). I provide lengthy contextual data regarding the food environment of the study site, as well as a description of each family summarizing relevant findings specific to households. Though the sample size for this study is small, I feel confident that the findings would be applicable to other rural, low-income populations throughout the United States.

**Researcher Positionality**

Credibility and validity of findings necessitate that a researcher be reflexive in the study design and analytical process (Patton, 2002). In particular, researchers need to disclose their positionality – that is, their assumptions, beliefs, and biases – and remain cognizant and reflexive about these throughout the analytical process. I am a white, forty-year-old, single female. I have never been married, nor do I have any children. My class position, though, is slightly harder to define. I grew up in what I consider to be a working-class household, but attended a small, private liberal arts college for my undergraduate education. I worked for nearly 13 years in the public sector administering social welfare and disability benefits programs, but then left this work to pursue a graduate degree on a full-time basis. At times, I have been impoverished, but
for the most part, I have been fortunate enough to have adequate funds for sufficient food and shelter.

For several years prior to commencing my graduate studies, I read widely in the area of food studies. Food studies encompasses an interdisciplinary approach to the study of food production and consumption. During my master’s program, I used my coursework to gain additional breadth and depth of knowledge about how food, food policy, and the food system shape (and is shaped by) individuals, the culture and society we live in, and the physical and social environments that surround us. The proposal for this study grew out of these interests and reflects a critical assessment of power and privilege in the food system.

The impetus for this study, as previously discussed, arose after reading DeVault’s (1991) seminal work about the caring work of feeding the family. DeVault’s (1991) theoretical lens drew largely from feminist thought, but also included a class analysis. As DeVault (1991) notes, because of her own positionality as a white middle class individual, she was unable to provide a class analysis for the experiences of those living in poverty. For study participants who were living in poverty, eating was often about survival. Given my own class experiences, I felt that I could contribute to giving voice to this particular phenomenon in the literature.

In my own life, I have been both homeless and food insecure, though luckily not at the same time. My experiences with both have inhered one particular disposition – the need to survive. This disposition shapes both my thoughts and actions, including my priorities about basic necessities. As such, my focus in consumption is to always weigh the cost of goods with their utility. When I experienced food insecurity though, often these calculations were irrelevant, and I simply had to make do with what resources, economic or otherwise, that were available to me at the time. I bring these attitudes and dispositions with me in conducting this study and its
analysis. At the same time, I am a product of the social world, and as such, I need to be aware of implicit biases reflective of pervasive ideologies.

Throughout the study and analysis, I attempted to remain cognizant of how my particular experiences, dispositions, beliefs, and attitudes could affect the data collection and analysis. Despite my critical stance and own experiences with food insecurity, I still fully expected that participants would be shopping at the lowest cost stores, purchasing the lowest cost food items, and taking steps to economize their food purchases in order to maximize the resources available to them. This logic is largely informed by the prevailing ideology of rational choice inherent in our economic and political systems. When participants made statements in interviews that did not reflect such logic, I would be sure to probe further to understand the logic of their position.

Likewise, throughout coding and analysis, I remained mindful of the need to be reflexive in formulating how I interpreted and represented the findings. While my own experiences with food insecurity could potentially inform the identification of relevant findings, I sought to remain unbiased, allowing the relevant labor and interpretation to emerge from the data itself. To enable this neutrality, I employed self-assessments that are recorded in the audit trail (Appendix F). Self-assessments enabled me to contend with my own assumptions, while ensuring the findings and interpretation were specific to the participants involved.

**Chapter Summary**

Qualitative studies are particularly suited to the exploration of a lived experience and the meanings derived from that experience. This study employed both ethnographic and phenomenological methods in an attempt to reveal the labor involved with the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families as they seek to feed their families. Sampling for this study occurred in food pantry distribution sites in Indiana County, a rural county in Southwestern
Pennsylvania. Nine families met inclusion criteria for participation in the study. Data collection for this sample included in-depth interviews, participant journals, and observation sessions, though not all families completed each of these methods. Analysis proceeded from the data both deductively and inductively as I sought to describe and interpret the phenomenon of interest. Issues of trustworthiness were addressed through the use of triangulation of data sources, member checks, an audit trail, and rich, thick description. I remained cognizant of any biases throughout the study and analytical process. The findings for this analysis are set out in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR

STUDY CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the analysis of the collected data. This study seeks to explore and understand the labor involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families as they seek to feed their families. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What food choices do low-income families make and how do they make them?
2. What feeding decisions do low-income families make and how do they make them?
3. What labor is involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families?

In the analyses undertaken with reference to the first and second questions listed above, I sought to identify the categories and patterns associated with food choices and feeding decisions in low-income families. This part of the analysis is descriptive, identifying the choices and decisions made, while also being interpretive by identifying the influences behind particular choices and decisions. With respect to the third question listed above, my analysis of the data proceeded both deductively and inductively. Deductively, I sought to identify circumstances in which participants were employing economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital in their practices of feeding the family. This analysis was also inductive though in that the meanings of these situations emerged from the data itself, and it was these meanings that were then coded. The findings are reported below with respect to each question.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the research study context. Rich, thick description of the research study context contributes to credibility, while enabling transferability (Patton, 2002). Two particular contexts are important to note. First, I discuss the food
environment in Indiana County, noting the available food retailers and community resources throughout the county. Additionally, I discuss the use of the food environment by participating families. At a second level, I explore the particular circumstances of each family and identify food security status for the participating families. This information will be helpful in understanding the findings that comprise the remainder of the chapter as particular material resources and constraints can help illuminate the particular improvisations families employ in the practices of feeding the family.

**Research Study Context**

The following provides a description of the food environment in the research study site of Indiana County. Likewise, I note how participants made use of this food environment. Additionally, the following provides a description of the food security status for each participating family.

**Describing the Food Environment**

Another important context to consider is the food environment in Indiana County. A map of Indiana County is included in Appendix F. The following information regarding the availability of stores is based on my own observations as I traveled throughout the county during sampling and data collection, as well as what I am aware of from being a resident of the county.

**Food retailers by township and borough.** Indiana County is a largely rural county with a population of 88,880 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The county is comprised of 24 townships containing 14 incorporated boroughs, including the county seat. The county seat is the borough of Indiana, PA, with a population of 13,975 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Food retailers available in Indiana Borough include a dollar store, three gas-convenience stores, and at the time of data
collection, a convenience grocery store.\textsuperscript{6} Indiana Borough is surrounded by White Township. The largest selection of food retailers for the county is in White Township, within immediate vicinity of Indiana Borough. Food retailers available in White Township surrounding Indiana Borough include the following: one supercenter, two large grocery stores (regional chains), one independent grocery store, a discount grocery store (national chain), two dollar stores, and two discount mass merchandise stores. White Township also has an additional four gas-convenience stores.

To the south of the county seat are nine townships and four boroughs. Saltsburg Borough offers one independent grocery store. The area also offers a dollar store, though this lies outside the borough limits. A gas-convenience store and a convenience grocer\textsuperscript{7} are situated within Blairsville Borough, although a supercenter, two dollar stores, and two gas-convenience stores are all available within two miles of the borough’s eastern boundary. A gas-convenience store and a convenience grocer service the borough of Armagh, with an additional gas-convenience store available just outside the borough limits. The borough of Homer City offers an independent grocery store and a dollar store; additionally, a gas-convenience store sits adjacent to the borough limits. The only other known store south of the county seat is a small Amish convenience grocer in Brush Valley Township. Young, Black Lick, West Wheatfield, and Buffington Townships lack any food retailers.

Immediately to the west of the county seat is Armstrong Township and the borough of Shelocta. The only available food retailer in Shelocta is a gas-convenience store. Another gas-

\textsuperscript{6} For the purposes of this study, a convenience grocery store can be considered an express version of a full-service grocery store. The convenience grocery store was part of a larger food retail chain. The store offered regular groceries in the form of fresh produce, non-perishables, and frozen foods, but the store also offered an array of take away services including a deli, a salad bar, a sushi bar, and a hot foods bar.

\textsuperscript{7} For the purposes of this study, a convenience grocer is any small independent grocery outlet that offers basic grocery products in sparsely populated areas. Convenience grocers do not offer gas for sale.
convenience store and a dollar store are available in Armstrong Township between Shelocta and Indiana, PA. Likewise, to the northwest of the county seat in Washington Township, the borough of Creekside has one convenience grocer. The borough of Ernest in Rayne Township lacks any food retailers, though a convenience grocer is available along a major highway further north in the township.

Directly east of the county seat lies the township of Cherryhill. Cherryhill is serviced by one independent grocer, a dollar store, and a gas-convenience store which are all located in the borough of Clymer. Pine Township offers two convenience grocers in the northern part of the township and one gas-convenience store along the southern boundary of the township. To the north of Cherryhill and Pine Townships is Green Township. Green Township offers two convenience grocers, one in the west and one in the central part of the township.

The very northern part of the county contains eight townships and five boroughs. Of the five boroughs, Plumville and Marion Center offer only a gas-convenience store. There are no food retailers available in Smicksburg, Glen Campbell, or Cherry Tree. A convenience grocer exists in West Mahoning Township just outside of Smicksburg. A convenience grocer is also available in the northern part of Montgomery Township. The researcher is unaware of any other food retailers available in this northern portion of the county. These townships are sparsely populated, and if any other food retailers exist beyond those known, they are more than likely gas-convenience stores or convenience grocers.

**Food pantry sites.** The ICCAP food pantry sites exist in 18 different locations throughout Indiana County. Please see the list of food pantry sites included in Appendix G. The study families were recipients at the following ICCAP food pantries: one family from Saltsburg Borough/Conemaugh Township, two families from Blairsville Borough, one family from White
Township, one family from Washington Twp/Creekside/Ernest Borough, one family from Green Township, one family from Rayne/East Mahoning/Marion Center, one family from Montgomery Twp/Cherry Tree Borough, and one family from Pine Township.

Additional food pantries which are not affiliated with ICCAP or GPCFB are available at churches in Indiana Borough. A total of four additional food pantry sites are known to this researcher. These food pantry sites offer assistance to anyone in the county. Some hold regular distributions while others offer only emergency assistance. As charitable organizations, these food pantries are self-funded. The researcher is unaware of any other food pantry sites throughout the county, especially ones that may be based at churches, though this is not to say that they do not exist. None of the study participants reported that they used any food pantry sites besides the ICCAP or church-based ones already known to the researcher.

Other community food resources. ICCAP offers once-monthly community meals at sites located in Green Township, Clymer Borough, and Cherryhill Township. Also, ICCAP offers a soup kitchen two times weekly and a community meal once a week in White Township (Chevy Chase Heights, a Census Designated Place).

Use of the food environment by sample families. All sample families utilized the ICCAP food pantry sites. One household reported using a church-based food pantry on an emergency basis. No sample families reported using the community meals or soup kitchens.

Use of the available food retailers varied by the sample family’s geographic location. In sum, eight of the nine families reported using the food retail outlets available in White Township, including the supercenter, the discount grocery store (national chain), one of the large grocery stores (regional chain), the independent grocer, and a dollar store. Usage varied by family and will be explored in subsequent sections of the findings. All traveled by personal
vehicle and travel times ranged between five and thirty minutes. The sample family who did not use a food retailer in White Township did not own a car. Though bus transportation was available for this participant, the service is infrequent and would mean waiting for hours to catch a return bus.

Additionally, sample families reported using food retail outlets within closer proximity of their residence including the independent grocer in Saltsburg Borough, the supercenter outside of Blairsville Borough, the independent grocer in Clymer Borough, and the convenience grocer in Creekside Borough. Also, three sample families reported use of food retailers in neighboring counties (Westmoreland County to the south, Cambria County to the east, and Jefferson County to the north). Food retail outlets used in neighboring counties included large grocery stores (regional chains), discount grocery stores (national chain), and a warehouse store (national chain). Again, usage varied by family and will be discussed in subsequent sections of the findings.

**Food Security Status**

This study assumes, by virtue of participation in the food pantry program, that all families would currently be experiencing or have previously experienced some level of food insecurity. Therefore, the research design did not include any formal measure of food security (i.e. the USDA’s U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module). However, participants did reveal enough information during the interviews to assess food security levels to some extent. A brief summary of food security status for the participating families follows. The summary also includes relevant findings specific to the household.

**Fully food secure.** At the time of the interview, one family identified as a fully food secure household. The Houser household consists of a married couple and their 14-year-old son.
Carol, the interview participant for the Houser family, indicated that the family never experienced an inadequate food supply nor did they ever feel they did not have the appropriate kinds of food. The Houser family purchases generic food items and shops at discount stores, including dollar stores, for their food supplies. The household also receives food stamps (SNAP). Carol reported that their food stamp benefit is less than what it used to be, but she did not specify an amount or indicate how long since the reduction occurred. Carol reports that she uses all the items she receives from the food pantry.

**Marginally food secure.** Two families – the Sharp and Finley families – reported circumstances characteristic of marginal food security. Marginal food security includes the concern or worry about food supplies not lasting. Janet, the interview participant in the Sharp family, indicates that while the family has sufficient food supplies at this time, she worries that something will happen (i.e. loss of income, health issues, or other inability to get to the store) and they will not have the means to get more food. Roughly four years ago, Janet’s husband, who worked full-time earning $85,000 a year, left when her youngest child was only three weeks old, emptying the bank accounts and taking all the credit cards. A stay-at-home mom, Janet found herself without any economic means to obtain food. Eventually, she started receiving food stamps and participating in the food pantry. As a result, Janet self-reports that she “hoards food” now, meaning that she stockpiles non-perishable foods and freezer items (meat and vegetables) for emergencies. She uses the food pantry as a way to obtain items for her stockpile.

The Finley family’s concern over their food supply is directly related to the intermittent nature of Betty’s part-time independent contract work. Betty’s hours vary from month to month, and if she has a number of months in a row without much work, Betty starts to get concerned that they might not have enough money for food until her husband Scott, who is employed full-time,
gets paid again. Betty is also concerned because she does not feel that she has the appropriate kinds of food to feed her children nourishing meals. Specifically, Betty worries about their ability to purchase meat for the evening meals. She reports being “cheap” and “picky” about meat prices, not wanting to pay more than $3.00 per pound for meat. She buys meat in bulk when she can and looks for sales on meat to stock up. The Finley family does not qualify for food stamps because their resources are too high. Betty and Scott report that using the food pantry allows them to make room in their monthly food budget to purchase meat.

**Low food security and very low food security.** The majority of the participating households could be categorized as low food secure and very low food secure households. Low food security denotes a shift in eating patterns towards a reduced quality of diet and/or some reduced quantity of intake. Very low food security would include households that are experiencing significant reductions in intake whether by skipping meals or not eating for an entire day. For the purposes of this discussion, the two categories are grouped together as it is difficult to parse out what may be considered a significant reduction within each household. In some of these households, consuming breakfast and lunch is not necessarily routine; individuals often skip these meals on a regular or semi-regular basis. Some report that this provides a way to conserve the supply of food, while others report that their food budget is such that they only have enough resource to supply an evening meal. No children in any of the households experienced any level of food insecurity. A brief summary for each of the remaining households follows.

The Magee household includes Kim, the interview participant, and her two children. Kim considers herself a “good home cook” and likes to keep things on hand with which she can make other things. She reports she makes her own bread so that she does not have to buy it. The Magee household relies solely on their food stamps to purchase food. Kim buys in bulk at a wholesale
club as a way to help stretch her food stamp budget. Some months, Kim does really well budgeting her food stamps and does not need to use the food pantry. The Magee children eat both breakfast and lunch at school during the school year, so during the summer when the children are home all day, Kim must find a way to make up for the extra food necessary to feed her children breakfast and lunch at home. Kim reports that sometimes this proves difficult and she has to skip meals or not eat for an entire day so that her kids have enough to eat.

The Boone family consists of a cohabitating couple and three children. Debbie, the interview participant, reported that she and her fiancé recently (two weeks prior to the interview) decided to make some changes and start eating a healthy diet. They are both overweight and experience medical problems; they would like to be able to lose weight and better control their medical conditions through this dietary change. Only the adults in the household are transitioning to this new diet, although Debbie wants to eventually be able to transition her children to a better way of eating. Debbie reports that they usually supplement their food stamps by buying food with other household money, as much as $300.00 a month sometimes. Some months, they may run out of food stamps and have no extra money to buy food. At times like these, Debbie may skip meals or not eat as much in order to make the food stretch for her family. The Boone family regularly uses the food pantry and sometimes even gets an emergency food supply from other private food pantries available in the area.

The Grove household includes Sally, the interview participant, her husband and two young sons, as well as her mother-in-law and brother-in-law. Sally is a stay-at-home mother and reports that she is the primary caregiver in the home. She makes most of the meals, although her mother-in-law does contribute when she is feeling well enough to do so. Sally is the primary food shopper as well, although she and her mother-in-law do discuss what to get beforehand.
Sally’s mother-in-law does not like to grocery shop, but she takes Sally to the store since Sally does not drive. Sally’s husband recently finished school and is now working full-time for the last two months, so the household food stamp budget is declining in relation to his income. When food runs low, Sally states that she usually ends up skipping meals in order to make sure her sons have enough to eat. Sally reports that they go to the food pantry every month and use all of what is received.

The Barbers include Mary, the interview participant, and her 10-year-old daughter. Mary had been unemployed for roughly six months at the time of the interview. As a home nurse, Mary’s hours often fluctuated and her paycheck was not always stable. This income volatility greatly impacted the food available in the house. Mary reports that she used to experience weeks of only being able to afford to consume bologna sandwiches on a daily basis. Her daughter would go stay with Mary’s parents for extended periods of time because there was not enough food in the house. Since being unemployed and receiving unemployment benefits though, Mary is able to maintain food in the home. Mary relies primarily on pre-packaged food items that require little preparation. She routinely uses the food pantry, but some months, Mary finds that there is not anything in the food supplied of which she can actually use.

Tina Rolling lives with her young son and relies solely on disability benefits as a source of income. The household receives only $16 in food stamps every month. Finding herself at her highest weight yet, Tina recently took steps toward eating healthier and is receiving dietary guidance through a certified nutritionist. Tina used to eat only once a day, eating with her son at the evening meal. Since starting this dietary change, Tina must purchase more food than before. Her young son has not transitioned to this new way of eating, so she is also buying separate food for him as well. Tina’s diet now consists of mainly fresh meats and vegetables and Tina finds it
more expensive to eat this way. She reports that she sometimes has to go without her diet food or eat less calories when she runs out of money. Tina relies on friends and family to help feed her son when she does not have food available. The food pantry items consist primarily of pre-packaged goods, which Tina is not able to eat on her new diet. Tina takes what she knows her son will eat and gives the rest away.

The Woods household is a multi-generational household consisting of Lois, her husband Rich, adult daughter Pam, another minor daughter, and Pam’s 8-month old daughter. Lois, Rich, and Pam all participated in the interview. Both Lois and Rich receive disability benefits. At the time of the interview, there was no other income in the house, although Pam would soon start receiving child support for her daughter. The family relies solely on food stamps to obtain their food. Lois reports that the monthly shopping is meant to supply an evening meal and consists primarily of meats and canned vegetables. What little fresh produce they use is obtained from the food pantry and consists usually of carrots, potatoes, and onions. Pam receives WIC for her daughter and they are able to obtain fresh fruits using the WIC vouchers. They are also able to obtain other foods that they normally would not have such as eggs and milk. Lois started cooking at the age of 5 and makes many meals from scratch when she can. Lois and Rich report that when food supplies get low they usually eat less or skip the evening meal. Breakfast and lunch are not routinely eaten by adults in this household which means that Lois and Rich are actually skipping entire days of eating when food gets low.

Each of the sample households reflect differing personal circumstances and therefore different strategies meant to overcome their own unique challenges. This is an important context to include when considering the findings presented hereafter.
Analytical Findings

The following presents the analytical findings of the collected data. I begin with a discussion of the findings relevant to the first research question. I identify the particular food choices made by participating families as well as the influences behind those choices. I then move on to the second research question and outline the procurement, preparation, and consumption practices. Again, I identify the influences behind these decisions. Finally, I move to the interpretive findings related to the third questions. I outline the findings by theme and discuss the capital involved in each practice.

Food Choices

For this study, food choices include not only food items purchased for home consumption, but also the combination of food items that may constitute a meal. In terms of food items purchased for home consumption, food choices varied by family and were subject to individual preferences, tastes, and financial and health concerns. Findings for different types of food items are outlined below and reflect these variations. Additionally, other emergent findings regarding food choices are presented.

Meat products. The most common meats purchased for consumption in the home included chicken, beef, pork, turkey, and hot dogs. Multiple types of each animal source were utilized for meal preparation. These findings are discussed below. Additional protein sources included eggs, bacon, sausage, kielbasa, wild game, fish (both store bought and self-harvested), and shellfish.

Eight families reported purchasing and consuming chicken in the home. Participants commonly reported purchasing boneless, skinless chicken breasts for consumption in the home.

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8 For one family, chicken was not a primary source of meat consumption. Though this family reported using some chicken, this chicken was received from the food pantry. They did not purposefully purchase chicken for
Other common types of chicken products purchased for consumption in the home included chicken pieces (drumsticks, thighs, wings), pre-packaged chicken products (frozen nuggets and patties), and ground chicken. One family reported using whole chicken roasters and two families reported using canned chicken.

Those who purchased boneless, skinless chicken breasts viewed it as a healthy and preferred meat choice. Some participating families identified boneless, skinless chicken breasts as a lean meat, while in the Sharp household boneless, skinless chicken breasts were preferred because of ease of preparation and taste. The Finley family reported the use of boneless, skinless chicken breasts as a routine staple in their diet because of its availability at the local discount grocery store.

Other types of chicken products reflected considerations of health and individual preferences, as well as convenience. Ground chicken was preferred in one home because it was a lean alternative to ground beef. The Boone family reported the purchase and consumption of chicken nuggets because they select items their children might enjoy: “Right now a lot of what does come into this house, is geared towards [the children], not necessarily exactly what they want, but their mindset obviously, chicken nuggets are fun.” Likewise, Betty Finley’s daughter preferred chicken legs over chicken breasts, while the Finleys also used chicken patties as a quick meal.

The second most commonly purchased animal protein was beef, specifically ground beef (in either pre-made burgers or packaged ground beef). For the Grove family, ground beef is a staple in their meals: “To be completely honest, we get 30lbs of hamburger. We eat it.” Hamburger also offers a cheaper alternative to other types of beef cuts: “A lot of the steaks and consumption in the home as the majority of the family members did not like the taste of chicken. Preferred meats purchased for consumption in the home of this family included pork and ground beef.
stuff we don’t do anymore…at [discount grocery store name withheld] I’ll buy the hamburgers in the pack of ten for $8.” (B. Finley). Purchasing lean ground beef was important as well, which according to Tina Rolling could be costly: “Like the extra lean um ground round,…that hamburger in the store is really expensive, um, but…that’s what I can eat.” Some mothers reported that their children enjoyed hamburgers. More often though, hamburgers were viewed as a typical part of a summer meal whether as part of a holiday or special occasion or as part of an average meal prepared on the grill.

Some participants reported the purchase and consumption of beef roast in their homes. For other families, the use of beef roasts was limited by children’s preferences and the cost of this particular cut. Finally, some participants reported purchasing and consuming steak in the home. Two families reported regularly consuming steak due to recent dietary changes. One other household reported purchasing and consuming steaks. The frequency of this was limited primarily due to cost: “Not very often. It just depends on if we can afford it. Like afford the meat. Like what we really like to have on the grill is steaks. And if, it depends on if we can afford it or not” (Grove).

Pork was the third most reported meat source. Common types included pork chops, loin roasts, ham steaks, and ribs. Particular types commonly purchased in participating households were subject to individual preferences. Hams and turkeys (whole) were reported by all families as a holiday staple (for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter). Some reported having both a ham and a turkey at one holiday, while others reported either a ham or turkey being preferred over the other depending on the holiday. Only a few families reported purchasing hams or turkeys (whole or pieces) for everyday use, while one family reported the purchase of ground turkey over
ground beef due to health issues: “Um, ground turkey, ‘cause I just had my gall bladder out, so I can’t have red meat, not too much red meat ‘cause it’s too fatty” (Magee).

A majority of the families (7 out of 9) reported purchasing and consuming hot dogs on a regular basis. Hot dogs were consumed for both lunch and dinner meals and were a common meal regardless of the season. For the other families, hot dogs were not a preferred food item.

Other reported sources of protein included eggs, bacon, sausage, kielbasa, fish (both store bought and harvested), wild game, and shellfish. Families reported the use of eggs and bacon for weekend breakfasts. Some families reported using sausage and kielbasa, especially for summer holiday picnics. One family reported harvesting and preparing their own fish, while two families reported purchasing and consuming fish as part of their diet. One family reported the use of wild game, namely ground venison that they received from a family member and the food pantry. Despite the rural location, none of the families hunted or harvested their own wild game. Finally, some families reported purchasing and consuming shellfish, namely shrimp. Shrimp was used as a way to create dietary variety: “And like during Lent, we’ll try to come up with somethin’…different with the fish” (R. Woods); “We do a tuna noodle and we do a shrimp scampi.” (L. Woods).

**Fruits and vegetables.** All families reported purchasing a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, reflecting individual taste preferences among household members. Common fruits included apples, berries, bananas, grapes, and oranges. Fruits reported with less frequency included peaches, pears, nectarines, watermelon, and kiwi. Common vegetables included carrots, potatoes, asparagus, celery, and onions. Vegetables reported with less frequency included lettuce, tomatoes, peas, corn, green beans, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, peppers, Brussel sprouts, zucchini, and mushrooms.
Most notably, with regard to fruit and vegetable purchasing, families reported differences in terms of what forms of fruits and vegetables were purchased (i.e. fresh, frozen, or canned). Eight out of the nine families reported purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables. The Woods family, though, reported purchasing only canned vegetables and fruit. Lois Woods reported that any fresh produce used in the household is received from nutrition programs like WIC and the food pantry. All other families reported some combination of fresh and packaged fruit and vegetable purchases.

Taste preferences, food safety, and nutrition were all concerns when considering whether to purchase canned fruits and vegetables. Tina Rolling preferred not to eat canned fruit because of the “syrup” it’s packaged in. Kim Magee eschewed canned vegetables “because they have no nutrients really.” Meanwhile, Debbie Boone eschewed canned goods because of a previous experience: “One time I opened a canned good…there was a June bug in it.” Finally, Sally Grove learned at a dietician walkthrough at a local store that it’s healthier to “buy frozen because …there’s no sugar added,…um, no extra salt.” While Sally and her family use both canned and frozen vegetables evenly, Sally reported that some frozen vegetables “have a better taste than canned.”

The purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables, however, was tempered by concerns of waste. In the Grove household, Sally and her family members tend not to buy fresh fruit unless they plan to eat it right away, otherwise the food might waste away. Kim Magee reported purchasing and consuming a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, but she is careful where she purchases them. One time, when purchasing strawberries at the wholesale club where she does her monthly shopping, Kim ended up with a package that was molded on the inside. As a result, she only purchases fresh fruits and vegetables at the local supercenter for fear of wasting
money on moldy produce. Betty Finley reported purchasing fresh fruit, but her children take too long to eat the fresh fruit and it “goes bad.” Ultimately, frozen forms of vegetables were preferred by participating households because these items were “a little cheaper than the raw” (Betty Finley).

**Dairy.** Participating families routinely purchased cheese (in various forms), cottage cheese, yogurt, and butter. All households reported purchasing cheese in some variety and of various forms (e.g. block, sliced, string). Some households reported purchasing yogurt which was used as a snack or as part of a lunch. A few households reported purchasing cottage cheese. Personal tastes were a major driver for cheese purchasing with some households reporting that they “always have cheese” (Magee). For the most food insecure, cost often affected which form was bought and how often it was purchased. The Woods household reported purchasing cheese only occasionally when it was on sale or “unless it’s for a particular meal” (L. Woods).

Participating families also reported routinely purchasing and consuming milk. Seven out of the nine participating families routinely consumed milk, with many reporting milk to be a staple item in their home. In the Woods household however, Pam is lactose intolerant, and as a result, they do not routinely purchase milk. Occasionally, they will purchase lactose-free milk for Pam, but the cost is prohibitive: “When I get my milk, that’s 5 bucks right there.” (Pam Woods). The Woods family has been purchasing regular milk more frequently now that Pam’s daughter is old enough to drink it, but they only purchase what they can get through Pam’s WIC allotment.

Other families, including the Sharps, the Boones, and the Groves, relied on WIC for their milk purchases as well. For the Sharps and the Boones, with three children in each household, milk could be a costly item in their food budget. Both Janet Sharp and Debbie Boone perceived
the cost of milk to be “expensive” (Sharp). Both households consumed large quantities of milk and were concerned about what to do when they are no longer eligible for WIC benefits.

Additionally, taste preferences and health concerns contributed to what types of milk were purchased. In the Boone household, Debbie and her fiancé disagreed over which type of milk to purchase. Debbie grew up on 2% and her fiancé always drank fat free. For many years, they purchased only fat free, but recently they made a switch to 2% because it “isn’t that much unhealthier than fat free.” Debbie was happy about this change because she prefers the taste of 2% better.

**Bread.** For some families, bread was also a staple item, but the Barber, Houser, and Sharp households reported not consuming much bread. The Magee and Woods household reported making their own bread from scratch. Other families were constrained in their bread purchases because of their involvement with WIC. Most of those receiving WIC benefits did not care for the taste of wheat bread which was the only type allowed on WIC.

**Other food items of choice.** The preceding detailed findings related to what most would characterize as perishable (fresh or frozen) whole food items. This section details findings related to processed and pre-packaged food items as well as drinks consumed in the home.

Cereal and oatmeal were popular choices for breakfast with all nine participating families reporting the purchase and consumption of boxed cereal in the home and five families reporting the use of oatmeal (either instant or rolled oats). Additionally, two families reported the consumption of Pop-Tarts in the home, which were generally used for afternoon snacks.

Particular types of cereals purchased and consumed varied by household and reflected taste preferences as well as economic circumstances. Janet Sharp’s children only eat Cheerios because that’s all WIC allows and the children do not like any other kinds. For the Finley family,
regular cereals are too expensive, so they purchase the generic versions of their members’ most
desired types including “Raisin Bran,…Mini-Wheats…Frosted Flakes.” All households reported
receiving cereal as part of their food pantry distribution, and for the Woods family, this was
generally the only cereal consumed in the home. Lois Woods reported that they do not purchase
special cereals unless it is “on sale and we have to have a coupon for it.” Three families reported
purchasing and consuming French Toast Crunch when it was rereleased back in the market.

Likewise, peanut butter was a staple common to all participating households. In some
households, peanut butter was one way of helping to ensure adequate nutrition for the children.
Janet Sharp used peanut butter as an alternative protein source for her children who enjoyed
peanut butter sandwiches in the morning for breakfast. Likewise, Sally Grove used peanut butter
as a high calorie item to help her oldest son gain weight because he is skinny, a trick she learned
from dietitians on a walkthrough at a local grocery store.

For other households, peanut butter sandwiches or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
could serve as a typical lunch or even as a snack. Likewise, a majority of the households (seven
of nine) used lunch meat and cheese as a typical lunchtime meal. In desperate times, peanut
butter and jelly and lunchmeat sandwiches were ways to make it through:

I’ll eat for a week but it’s gonna be peanut butter and jelly all week, every meal, or it’s
gonna be imitation cheese for 99 cents and bologna for 99 cents and a loaf of bread for 80
cents. And that’ll get me through the week. (Barber)

Another convenient lunchtime option reported by participating families was canned or
boxed soup and pre-packaged noodles and broth with six families reporting the use of these
items. In the Houser household, Carol and her husband routinely consumed canned soup for
lunch, while their son preferred Oodles of Noodles. Debbie Boone viewed cup-o-soups as a
cheap meal, even if “They don’t fill ya up so much…”, that could be paired with other items like a roll or hamburger if necessary. For the Rolling family though, pre-packaged noodles and broth were a way to get through the lean times. Tina reported eating Ramen noodles on a frequent basis when her food budget was low.

Participating families reported the use of a variety of other non-perishable goods that they used to constitute meals. Canned meat (three households), canned beans (five households), canned dices tomatoes (two households), and jarred or canned pasta or tomato sauce (four households) were commonly reported to be used in preparing meals. Sometimes though, beans could be the main part of a meal. Janet Sharp reported her children enjoy eating kidney beans, or “mighty beans” as they are called in her house, as a main part of their meal. Sally Grove reported that a common lunch in her household could be just “canned butter beans.”

Participating families reported the use of a variety of other food items which they used to constitute a meal. Pasta (i.e. spaghetti or other type of noodle) was common to all participating households and considered by some to be a staple item in the home, always having it on hand. Pasta was another way to compensate for a lack of economic resources: “Um, we shop we try to do it, get stuff that’s spread out, ya know you can, lot of your pastas, ya know noodles, stuff that you could make multiple meals out of” (R. Woods). Three participating families also reported the consumption of canned pasta (i.e. raviolis and spaghetti-os) in the home. Three families reported routine consumption of rice in their home, while two other families reported occasional rice consumption. The consumption of rice in the home usually depended on children’s taste preferences with rice being consumed more often in homes where children liked rice. Children’s taste preferences also contributed to the consumption of macaroni and cheese, with five participating families reporting the regular use of macaroni and cheese in the home.
Participating families also reported the purchase and consumption of a variety of frozen food items including lasagna (three households), cut potato fries (four households), pizza (two households, and pierogis (two households). Three households also indicated the purchase and consumption of pizza rolls that were used as a snack in the home. Additional frozen snacks reported to be purchased and consumed in the home included bagel bites (one household) and corndogs (one household). The consumption of frozen dairy products (i.e. ice cream) were reported by two households, while the Boone household reported having popsicles on hand for their children. No patterns emerged regarding the influences for the purchase and consumption of these items.

A variety of snack food items were routinely purchased and consumed by participating households including chips (five households), pretzels (four households), popcorn (four households), and crackers (usually with cheese) (three households). The Woods and Grove families – the two most food insecure households – reported only purchasing and consuming chips for special occasions, and both households reported very limited purchase and consumption of other snack food items overall. For these households, the purchase of snack food items was limited to special occasions such as birthday parties or an event such as watching a football game. The Woods family actually reported making their own potato chips to which they add their own seasonings.

For other households, taste preferences, ideas about health, and cost factored into these choices about snack food items. Janet Sharp, a health-conscious shopper, reported being particular about the chips she bought for her children. She avoided the “pressed stuff” like “Doritos” and “Pringles” while also being careful about the types of oils regular chips might be fried in. Mary Barber reported avoiding “greasy” food like chips, preferring “popcorn or
pretzels.” For the Finley household, snacks like “popcorn” and “potato chips” are common, but only purchased “if they’re on sale.”

Some households viewed chips and pretzels as a convenient part of a meal. Debbie Boone and her fiancé served their family sandwiches and chips as a meal, while the Houser household paired chips and pretzels with items they cooked on the grill. Various other food items were employed by participating households as an anytime, after-school or evening snack including cookies (four households), fruit snacks (three households), Jell-O cups or Jell-O (two households), fruit cups (three households), applesauce (two households) and pudding (one household).

Baking supplies were common in most of the households (six in total). Baking supplies generally included flour, sugar, eggs, milk, cocoa powder, baking soda, and baking powder, but could also include already prepared food items like Oreo cookies, rolled oats, pre-packaged mixes, or frozen fruit depending on the types of baked goods being made. Four of the six households reported making cookies for Christmas as a holiday tradition, with some families using this as a means to offer gifts to others.

Typically, though, families who utilized baking supplies did so for the purposes of making breads, cookies, and cakes (including birthday cakes), usually from scratch, on a regular or semi-regular basis. Baking supplies were also used for making desserts in many of these households. The Grove household reported making desserts like cobbler from scratch using frozen fruit, while Betty Finley reported a unique dessert called Mississippi Mud made from Oreo cookies and cool whip. Households that reported the use of baking supplies in the home generally had a member who enjoyed or was especially skilled at baking.
Baking supplies could also be used for making other items from scratch as well. Debbie Boone reported that her fiancé liked to make his own pizza crust from scratch, while the Woods family reported making as much food as they can from scratch using their baking supplies: “Anything that can be made from scratch can be made from scratch. Noodles, bread, desserts…We’ve started makin’ other things like our pierogis and that homemade from scratch, so” (L. Woods).

Drinks of choice. All participating families reported consumption of juice in the household. Apple, grape and orange juice were reported most frequently. Juice is received monthly from the food pantry, and for households participating in WIC, juice is part of the monthly allotment. Some families reported purchasing juice on their own (usually orange juice).

The availability of juice however did not necessarily correspond to consumption patterns. For Janet Sharp, whose household is WIC eligible, juice was something that she limited for her children. Janet limits her children to only one container of juice per week because eating whole fruit is a healthier option since “…at least you’re gettin’ the fiber too.” For the Woods household though, the juice supplied by the food pantry was an important staple item due to Lois’s diabetes. At the time of the interview, Lois was having difficulty with stable blood sugars throughout the day. Juice was a necessity for when Lois’s sugar would “bottom out.”

Two families reported the regular purchase and consumption of soda pop, while another family reported no longer consuming soda pop due to health concerns. The consumption of soda pop was limited in the remaining households and usually reserved for special occasions. In the Houser and Barber household, soda pop was not a “staple drinking item” compared to other options such as “Kool-Aid,” “iced tea,” “coffee,” and especially “water.” Though Janet Sharp eschewed soda pop “because of the sugar content” and “artificial sugars,” she does purchase
soda pop for events like birthday parties when other people will be in her home. Likewise, Lois Woods only purchases soda for “special occasions,” preferring the economical option of a concentrated juice mix that can last the household “a month.”

For other households, other drinks were frequently purchased for consumption including bottled water (plain or flavored) in four households, Gatorade in two households where children were involved in sports, and iced tea in three households. Four households purchased Kool-Aid (3) or Crystal Light packets (1) for use in the home.

Section summary. Most of the households purchased and consumed a wide variety of both perishable and non-perishable food items and drinks in their homes. Individual taste preferences, health concerns, and economic resources were common factors contributing to these food choices consistent with Furst et al.’s (1996) food choice process model. Many households relied on food items received through the food pantry or with their WIC benefit, while other households eschewed some of these same items because of individual taste preferences or health concerns. Some food choices, like pasta or peanut butter and jelly, reflect the necessity of limited economic resources. For the households with the most limited economic resources, food choices reflect the proactive planning necessary for keeping food supplied. For some households, purchasing baking supplies in the public market, and using those to make food items such as bread, was a means of both stretching their economic resources and navigating the costs of those food items in the store. These ideas will be further explored in findings below.

Feeding Decisions

Feeding decisions in the home comprise practices employed in the procurement, preparation, and consumption of food. In describing procurement practices, I focus largely on where shopping is done and by whom, how often food procurement occurs, the economizing
strategies used in doing so, while being open to any emergent themes. In terms of preparation practices, it is important to consider both who does the preparation and how it is done – that is, what is employed in performing preparation practices (i.e. cooking methods, appliances, skills, etc.). When considering consumption practices, I explain what is typical about breakfast, lunch, and dinner in these participating households, both in terms of the experience and what is consumed. What follows is a description of these and other emergent procurement, preparation, and consumption practices as reported by participating families.

**Procurement.** Grocery shopping practices varied by household and often reflected the composition of household members, available resources, as well as individual preferences, attitudes, and beliefs. Five of the nine households did their primary shopping at a supercenter (two households) or a discount grocery store (three households). Additionally, two households did their primary grocery shopping at a large grocery store, one at an independent grocery store, and one at a warehouse store (in a neighboring county).

Cost, convenience, and quality often contributed to the selection of a primary shopping site. Betty and Scott Finley’s primary shopping site is the discount grocery store available in White Township, though they also frequent the same chain in a neighboring county. For Betty and Scott, the discount grocery store is where the “get like the bulk of necessities” because other available stores in the area are deemed “expensive” in comparison. Betty reported that she only purchases at the large grocery stores or supercenter in the area if something she needs or wants is on sale. On the other hand, Mary Barber limits her shopping to the supercenter “a minute down the road” which she views as more convenient than spending the gas to travel across town to an independent grocery store where only one item she needs “might be cheaper” or on sale. For Tina Rolling though, her choice of a primary shopping site depended largely on how she
perceived the quality of food items available at different food outlets. While Tina recognized that
the supercenter is cheaper for certain items, she preferred shopping at the large grocery store
where her family’s farm supplies produce and where there is “local meat.” For Tina, knowing
where the fresh food comes from was an important factor in considering where to shop.

For others, the decision of where to shop was independent of these factors. For nearly
four years, the Boone family had been limited to shopping at the supercenter just outside of town
because they lacked a form of transportation necessary to access the lower priced stores in White
Township. Despite finally securing a vehicle, Debbie and her family try to stay local to cut back
on their gas costs. As a result, Debbie still shops at the local supercenter, though she reported
frequenting the store more often. At the same time, Debbie Boone was exasperated by the
experiences she often has at the local supercenter. Debbie reported issues with expired food, poor
customer service, and non-competitive prices. Likewise, Debbie reported routinely being
overcharged for her grocery purchases. For Janet Sharp though, her transportation issues now
limit her to shopping primarily at the local independent grocery store. Experiencing problems
with her car, Janet now only travels to White Township about “once a month” and relies on the
independent grocery store conveniently located just a few blocks away from her house despite
reporting “it’s way more expensive.”

Debbie Boone, however, was not alone in finding the supercenter employees to be rather
unfriendly. Sally Grove shared Debbie’s sentiments, identifying one employee who remarked on
Facebook that supercenter customers “are idiots.” At the same time, some of Sally’s own
subjective experiences and personal preferences contributed to her family’s decision about where
to shop. Sally, herself, was a former employee of the same national chain supercenter when she
was living in Ohio. Sally remarked:
I don’t like what they do. I don’t support them. They don’t support the troops, I don’t support them. My husband is a disabled combat veteran. He gets a discount at [large grocery store], he doesn’t get a discount at [supercenter] because they don’t support the troops. That’s not a big reason, but it’s a reason.

Sally and her mother-in-law preferred shopping at one of the large grocery stores despite others in the sample reporting those stores to be expensive.

Primary shopping sites were often complemented by one or more secondary shopping sites. Families used secondary shopping sites for multiple purposes. Secondary shopping sites were often places where one could purchase meats on sale or do other bulk purchasing. The Woods family typically shops at the discount grocery store in White Township, but they also shop at other grocery stores to help make their dollars stretch. Specifically, Lois and Rich Woods purchase the majority of their food supplies at the discount grocery store in White Township, but they travel to the large grocery store in a neighboring county to capitalize on preferred items that might be on sale. Likewise, they purchase from the independent grocery store in White Township who offer “buy two, get three free…special deals” which is when they really “stock up.”

For some, secondary shopping sites were places to replenish stocks of perishable food items. Kim Magee does her primary shopping at the warehouse store in a neighboring county, but uses the local supercenter for “perishable, non-freezable stuff” such as milk, bread, and other staple items. Additionally, the two families (Boone and Rolling) undergoing dietary changes viewed the use of a farmer’s market as a way to save on the expense associated with their new consumption patterns. The Boone family were regular shoppers of the local farmers’ market ever since WIC had introduced vouchers to be used there. In deciding to make a switch in their
consumption practices though, being able to purchase produce at the local farmer’s market contributed to their decision to start eating more healthy options like fresh meat and produce.

He says well you know eating healthier is usually more expensive. And I’ve heard that, and I said but you know what,…maybe not so much…I mean the stuff that we’re buying like the fresh fruits and vegetables, as long as they’re in season. And we can always go to the farmers’ market.

Debbie reported, however, that her local farmer’s market does not take food stamps which could impact their ability to use the farmer’s market as a means of lowering their food costs.

In general, most families shopped once a month for their household food needs, obtaining the majority of their monthly food supplies at one time (from one or more grocery shopping locations). For those with the least economic resources (i.e. those relying solely on food stamps to obtain their food supplies), this may be the only shopping trip for the entire month. For most families, perishable food supplies were replenished about once a week or so.

In single-parent households, decisions about grocery shopping often involved whether to take children along to the store. Three out of four single-mothers reported taking their children with them to the store, though the type of store (primary vs. secondary) and the type of shopping required often contributed to this decision. Kim Magee might take her children with her when she does her weekly shopping to replace perishable items at the local supercenter, but her trips to the wholesale club store where she purchases most of her food supplies are limited to just her and her girlfriend who drives them both there. Stocking up on items at the warehouse club store means little room in the tiny car for more than Kim and her girlfriend. Likewise, when Janet Sharp makes her trip to Indiana once a month, she tends not to take her children with her as there is little room in the car for anything else. However, when she shops at the local independent
Janet Sharp also indicated that before she started having problems with her car she chose to go to a large grocery store in White Township because they had a daycare for younger children on site.

Among married or cohabitating households, decisions about grocery shopping were more complex and involved decisions about who, between the partners, would be responsible for doing the grocery shopping. In the Finley, Woods, and Houser households, members reported sharing the responsibility. Both Betty and Scott Finley participated in grocery shopping for their home, with Betty having a larger share of the responsibility. While Scott and Betty might go together occasionally for groceries when there was a sale on for meat at one of the stores they frequented, Betty often shopped for the majority of their food supplies on her own and depending on her work schedule, as she did when I observed her grocery shopping experience during data collection. At the same time, because of Betty’s work schedule, Scott usually stopped at the store on his way to work to pick up non-perishable items that the household might be running low on. For the Woods and Houser households, shopping was reported to be a collective effort. In these households, both partners participated in grocery shopping.

For the Grove and Boone household however, the adult female members of the household were the primary shopping agents, though their partners may accompany them occasionally. In these households, individual temperaments and dispositions contributed to this arrangement. Both Debbie Boone and Sally Grove reported that they are the primary food procurers in their home and do not often shop with their partners because they lack the “patience.” Debbie spends a great deal of time comparing prices and using coupons, whereas her fiancé would prefer to “just get it and go.” For Sally Grove, shopping with her husband requires extra planning because
she needs to line up everything she needs aisle by aisle. Sally reported that backtracking to get an item makes him “so mad.”

Sally Grove and others in married or cohabitating households also reported taking their children with them to the store, particularly when the household contained younger children. Households containing older children indicated that they infrequently took those children to the store. Likewise, among married or cohabitating households, the decision about what to buy was often left up to the adult female members of the household, though some households reported sharing equally in those decisions. Both Carol Houser and Lois Woods reported that they shop with their respective partners. Carol and her husband walk through the aisles and work together to identify items that they may need to resupply. Lois and Rich Woods share equally in finding sale items and making a shopping list, while Rich often contributes to deciding what meals might be good when they are in the store doing the shopping.

For Betty Finley and Sally Grove though, the decisions about what to buy were often left to them as the primary cooks in the home. Both Betty and Sally reported being the ones to make a list for grocery purchasing. Sally’s list consisted of items she needed for meals she planned to make, while Betty’s list comprised what items she needed to replenish among the household food supplies. Unlike Betty and Sally, Debbie Boone was not the primary cook in her household, yet she was still responsible for making a list of groceries to purchase. Debbie expressed concern with this arrangement because her fiancé is the primary cook and he is reluctant to provide her with a list of items he needs for the evening meal, leading to frustration for both:

And then he gets frustrated and he’ll say, well I don’t know,…I don’t know what you wanna have for dinner today. And then I’ll get frustrated and I’ll say well you’re the one cooking it you have to tell me what you want. You have to tell me what I’m going to get.
I can get the drinks, I can get the condiments, I can get the snacks, I can do breakfast and lunch. But as far as dinner goes, you’ve got to tell me.

Among single-parent households, grocery shopping lists were uncommon. Kim Magee reported using a grocery list, except she might not end up taking it with her in the end. For Kim though, much of her grocery shopping at the warehouse club store is routine now as she “get[s] the same stuff every time.” Janet Sharp reported that she usually goes to the store with an idea of what meals she wants to get that week, but like other single-mothers in the sample, generally went through the store aisle by aisle selecting items both desired and needed. Tina Rolling reported shopping this way until she made changes in how she eats which now necessitates her making a list of items she might be running low on in preparation for going to the store.

All participating families used at least one form of economizing strategy in order to procure groceries for the household. The most frequently used economizing strategy was taking advantage of sale items. All families reported taking advantage of sale items as part of their procurement practices. Fruits and meats were common items reported to be purchased when on sale. Most often though, families tried to use a combination of economizing strategies in procuring their groceries. Many reported the current or past use of coupons in their procurement practices, which could be used in combination with other sale items.

Another primary economizing strategy for participating households was to purchase in bulk. Purchasing in bulk manifested in multiple forms. For the Magee household, purchasing in bulk meant purchasing at a warehouse store. Kim Magee purchased the majority of her family’s groceries at a warehouse store in a neighboring county. Items at warehouse stores are generally packaged in large quantities which Kim then breaks down and freezes.
For other participating families though, purchasing in bulk simply meant purchasing in large quantities. The Grove household purchases meats in bulk at a butcher shop in Armstrong Township. The Grove household reported purchasing 30 pounds of ground hamburger along with pork loins. Sally also reported that the meat she purchases at the butcher shop is better quality because “there’s hardly no grease in it.” Purchasing at the butcher shop also meant they could control the thickness of the pork chops and size of the pork loin they used for their Sunday roast.

Others sought out bulk purchases they could make at regular grocery stores. Debbie Boone reported purchasing large packs of chicken that she would then break down into smaller portions for freezing. Likewise, because of their dietary change, Debbie and her fiancé eat salmon which they purchase in a “pre-packaged…two-pound bag.” Bulk purchases were often combined with sale items as well. Janet Sharp reported stocking up on freezer items and meats when they are on sale and likewise, breaking these down into smaller portions to be used at another time. Participating families reported purchasing a variety of food items in bulk, though meat was the most common item purchased in bulk.

Another strategy mentioned by some participating families was to price match. This involves looking through sales flyers to find the best price on items and then having a store match an advertised price at another store. Price matching was a way to maximize savings for Debbie Boone:

Well, before food stamps I like to sit down about a week in advance. I’m a planner. So I like to have my list, like to have all my coupons cut, set aside. I am an ad matcher, try to get the best deal.
Meanwhile, Betty Finley used price matching to help her save money while keeping her shopping limited to just one store. However, price matching does require procuring groceries from a store that will permit the price match. Debbie Boone’s primary grocery store is the local supercenter, while Betty Finely shopped at the discount grocery store in White Township.

The use of generic food items was also a commonly reported procurement practice. The Finley and Houser family reported relying mainly on generic food items for their food supplies. Both Betty Finley and Carol Houser do their primary food shopping at the discount grocery store in White Township which generally offers only store brand food items. Carol Houser’s secondary shopping site is a dollar store in White Township which primarily offers off-brand food items as well. Carol reported she did not feel “there’s a whole lot of difference” between store brand and name brand food items. Other households who reported the use of generic or off-brand food items also indicated that minor difference in taste between generic and brand items.

For other households, generic or store brand food items were routinely purchased, but there were some exceptions. Factors that contributed to the decision about whether to buy a name brand over a generic food item included cost, taste, and convenience in food preparation. Though Lois Woods reported purchasing name brand peanut butter (“Jiff”), all other items are purchased based on “…whatever’s cheapest when I’m at the store.” Tina Rolling preferred store brands on some items because the “…store brands are better.” Sally Grove reported purchasing name brand items out of a concern for freshness, reporting that certain name brand items “stays fresher longer.” In addition, Sally reported that she prefers Barilla pasta over store brands or even other name brands because of how it can be prepared:

Ya know when you’re cooking pasta the only time you can ever actually season the pasta is right before you put it in, in the boiling water. You don’t really need to do that with
Barilla, because it’s already got its own flavor…Um, but that’s why I like it. Because you
don’t have to add a crap ton of salt, to season it.

The use of the food pantry was a common procurement practice for all participating
families. However, families differed in how they used the food pantry to meet their needs. For
self-proclaimed food hoarder Janet Sharp, the food pantry was a way to help maintain her
stockpiles at home. Janet reported that while she did not need to go to the food pantry at this
point, the food she received at the food pantry helped her stockpile for the worst-case scenario.
For all other households, the food pantry offered a way of obtaining food supplies to help meet
their monthly food needs. The Grove, Woods and Houser households reported using everything
that the food pantry provides. For other households though, the use of food pantry items
depended on individual taste and preferences with most selecting what they will use from the
foods supplied and donating the rest to friends or family in need, to other food banks, or to food
drives.

**Preparation.** In eight of the nine participating households, women were the primary food
preparers. The Boone household was the only exception. In the Boone household, Debbie
Boone’s fiancé was the primary food preparer. Debbie Boone reported growing up as an only
child in a household without any scheduled meal times or food routine. As a result, Debbie never
learned how to cook. Debbie reports that her fiancé enjoys cooking and decided to take on this
responsibility early in their living arrangement. However, Debbie reported that she assists her
fiancé with food preparation by making simple things like side dishes that could be heated in the
oven, microwave oven, or on the stove. As previously noted though, Debbie Boone was the
primary food procurer, including being responsible for going to the food pantry, despite not
being the primary food preparer.
In three other partnered households, food preparation responsibilities were often shared between both men and women. Food preparation undertaken by the men in these households depended on that individual’s skill level. For example, Scott Finley grew up with his three brothers in a single-parent, working-mother household. Their meals often consisted of ready-made food stuffs such as fish sticks and macaroni and cheese or other simple meal items like sandwiches. Scott recalled making simple items when he was growing up including “peanut butter and jelly” sandwiches, “eggs,” and his mom taught him “…how to make pancakes, the simple ones.” In his family life with Betty, Scott undertakes some responsibilities in food preparation. He makes his own lunch to take to work which includes a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a selection of snacks, cooks pancakes for his daughter when she asks, and prepares macaroni and cheese for his children. During the meal observation with Scott’s family, Scott helped by making the macaroni and cheese for his family’s meal, by starting the gas grill, and by putting the hamburgers and hot dogs on the grill. Ultimately though, Betty was the one responsible for cooking the meat itself.

In contrast, Rich Woods could make his own noodles from scratch and discussed preparing a specialty dish, Chicken Flatino:

…there’s a dish I make that I learned from the one chef where I used to work…he had all these fancy dishes and stuff. So every now and again, I’ll make…Chicken Flatino,…you just take your chicken,…it’s like a three blend cheese, mix that with mayonnaise and cook it in a wine sauce…

Rich Woods grew up with a sibling in a working-class home where his mother made simple meals like hot dogs and mashed potatoes, spaghetti, or homemade ham pot pie. Later, when Rich moved out of his childhood home, he worked in the food service industry for nearly seven years
where he learned many of the skills he uses. His wife Lois Woods reported that Rich routinely participates with her in preparing the evening meal.

In the Grove household however, Sally Grove reports sharing the responsibilities of food preparation with her mother-in-law. Sally’s mother-in-law has some medical conditions that prevent her from being able to stand for extended periods of time, but she still contributes to the food preparation responsibilities when she is feeling up to it. When she cannot, she helps Sally by looking after Sally’s two young boys while Sally prepares the evening meal. Sally’s husband and brother-in-law do not share in these responsibilities with her and her mother-in-law. Sally feels like it is her responsibility to perform these duties because she is not working outside of the home:

I try to be that good wife….I try to have ya know dinner on the table ready for him, or at least almost done….since I’m not working. I feel terrible. Because I’m not doing my part… putting any money towards…supporting my children. I don’t feel like I’m doing anything. I’m a stay-at-home mom, I’m doing everything, but I just, I’m weird (laughs).

In single-parent households, food preparation responsibilities naturally fell to the adult in the home. In general, the single mothers who participated in the study were the primary food preparers in their home. Kim Magee retains full custody of her children and, as such, prepares all meals for her children except what they might receive at school for free breakfast and lunch. Janet Sharp shares custody with her soon-to-be ex-husband who has visitation every other weekend. Janet revealed post-interview that on the weekends she has her children they visit with relatives, specifically her parents or siblings, where she and her children typically are fed lunch. In her words, she purposefully “imposes” on others on the weekend, so that she does not have to
use her regular food supplies to feed her children on the weekend when she has them. This helps Janet conserve her food supplies.

While Mary Barber and Tina Rolling retain full custody of their respective children, both Mary and Tina often rely on others to provide prepared food to their children. Mary Barber’s daughter splits her time between Mary’s home and Mary’s parents’ home during the week so that she can continue to attend the same elementary school after Mary moved her residence. Mary remarked that there are many times that she tells her daughter to just stay at Mary’s parent’s home because there is no food in the house. Likewise, Tina Rolling’s good friend contributes to the meals in her home. Tina’s friend works full-time and has a family of her own, but she often shares the leftovers of her family’s evening meal with Tina and her youngest son, a practice that Tina reports “help[ed] me with grocery money.” Tina reported that since making her dietary changes, Tina’s friend only occasionally does this now, and usually only provides for Tina’s young son.

Children also contributed to the food preparation responsibilities in participating homes. The extent to which children contributed to these responsibilities varied by the age of the children. Children aged ten and older reportedly could prepare their own breakfast, lunch and snacks if necessary. In general, participating families reported that children aged ten and older regularly made their own cereal, fixed a light lunch (sandwich or soup), and would use the microwave oven or conventional oven to prepare a snack or light meal on their own. Some children aged ten or older were also preparing their own hot breakfasts including eggs and French toast. In a participant journal, one mother noted that her teenage son prepared the entire evening family meal because the primary food preparer in the home was unavailable. It is important to note that none of the participating families indicated that these children were
required to do so, only that they were capable of doing so, and would do so when necessary or desired.

Children under the age of ten were often involved in less skilled tasks and usually with the assistance of an adult. Sally Grove reported that her oldest son (age 4) liked to help her in the kitchen to prepare the evening meal, while Kim Magee’s son (age 9) would rather play video games than help Kim and his sister in the kitchen. Sally’s son helped her by performing simple tasks like “cracking eggs” and shredding potatoes with the potato shredder. Kim Magee’s daughter also performed simple tasks like cutting things with a “butter knife,” measuring out ingredients and stirring items on the stove, teaching her to “be extra careful around the water.” Other common tasks for young children included preparing salad vegetables, setting the table, and washing dishes.

Overall, the cooking skills of the primary food preparer in the household influenced the type of cooking methods used and the cooking appliances available for use in food preparation. In general, those with more cooking skills had more cooking appliances and used a variety of cooking methods compared to the appliances and methods used by those who were less skilled. However, one did not equate for the other. That is, even in households with primary food preparers that were technically trained, the amount of methods employed and appliances available could be limited.

For instance, Kim Magee and Sally Grove both reported having undergone culinary training in their vocational-technical programs in high school. Kim reported making her own bread and other items from scratch. In addition, Kim reported employing the following cooking methods: baking, broiling, boiling, and pan frying. The only kitchen appliance available in the
Magee household was a slow cooker, which Kim reported she only recently obtained. Likewise, Sally Grove reported using some of the basic cooking methods for her family’s food preparation. Sally reported that she and her mother-in-law often made desserts and other baked goods from scratch. Sally’s cooking appliances included a slow cooker, a stand mixer, a microwave, a potato shredder and a pot pie maker.

In contrast, Janet Sharp’s kitchen appliances included a pressure cooker, stainless steel pots and pans, a cast iron skillet, a wok, and a set of Chinese dishes for when she makes Chinese food. A self-proclaimed “cooking freak,” Janet reported using a variety of cooking methods including baking, broiling, stir fry, and more recently, using a pressure cooker. Janet reported that she recently obtained her $99 pressure cooker with her income tax return. In addition to the methods previously reported, Janet also spoke of preparing her own béchamel sauce for homemade macaroni and cheese. Janet reported attending post-secondary education for hotel and restaurant management and watching cooking shows on TV as a form of therapy after her marriage fell apart. Though Janet rarely made anything from scratch, she spoke with enthusiasm and pride when discussing the food preparation she does for her family.

Though she lacked technical training, Lois Woods proved to be the most skilled home cook of all the participating families. Growing up, Lois lived with her grandmother, two aunts, and some cousins. She started cooking full meals at the young age of five, learning by reading directions and following the example set by her aunt who worked as a cook in a local diner. Lois’s kitchen is a true scratch kitchen. Rich Woods details one example of Lois’s expertise: “Homemade sausage, gravy and biscuits...for breakfast. Three loaves of banana bread baked. Dinner rolls baked. Makin’ fried chicken, mashed potatoes, corn, with country gravy. And if there’s dessert, chocolate cream pie.” While many other primary food preparers reported being
able to make food items like bread or other baked goods from scratch, Lois Woods was the only primary food preparer who demonstrated the ability to make entire meals from scratch. Despite her skill level, Lois owned few kitchen appliances. She primarily used the stove top and oven for preparing meals. She also made use of a slow cooker and a blender.

In contrast, Mary Barber was the least skilled primary food preparer among participating families. Mary grew up with her three siblings in an intact dual-parent household. Her mother cooked meals and did the grocery shopping. Mary recalled also that her father made soups and pies when she was growing up. Reportedly, Mary was not involved in food preparation responsibilities when she was growing up. In her current household, Mary is often on the go with her daughter, so meals are not generally scheduled or planned. At the same time, Mary reported being a good cook who enjoys cooking for other people.

However, during the meal observation with Mary and her daughter, I noted that Mary had very little in the way of cooking utensils, pots, pans, and even kitchen furniture (a small table no bigger than a card table with only one chair). For the meal, Mary prepared spaghetti (from a box), chicken parmigiana cutlets (from frozen), and Jell-O (from a box). Mary’s preparation was interrupted multiple times because of a lack of cookware. For instance, Mary prepared her Jell-O in a cake pan only later to realize she had no other pan available with which to cook her chicken parmigiana in the oven, prompting her to empty the Jell-O into an oversized shallow sauce pan and use the cake pan for the chicken in the oven. Mary noted her own lack of measuring cups, a strainer for draining the pasta, and pot holders to remove the chicken from the oven. Likewise, Mary’s preparation time was uncoordinated. She prepared and finished boiling her pasta before putting the frozen chicken parmigiana in the oven to bake, which required 30 minutes baking time. Once her chicken parmigiana was done cooking in the oven, Mary realized she had never
heated the sauce, which she then prepared in a skillet. In her clean-up, Mary remarked that she had no containers for leftovers. She placed the pot of drained spaghetti in the refrigerator as it was and put the leftover sauce in a mug and placed it in the refrigerator as well.

Among participating families, Mary, Janet, and Lois proved to be exceptions. In general, most families reported the use of basic cooking methods such as baking, boiling, sautéing, steaming, broiling, grilling, and pan frying and/or deep frying (usually with an appliance). Six of the nine families reported owning an outdoor grill that was used primarily in the summertime. Families reported a variety of foods cooked on the grill including hot dogs, hamburgers, chicken pieces, kebabs, sausages, kielbasa, and steaks, but only when such meat could be afforded. Eight of the nine families reported owning and/or using a crock pot (i.e. slow cooker) for preparing meals. In addition, all families owned a microwave which was used to heat/reheat food items or, in many cases, to steam frozen vegetables. Though the Finley family reported the occasional use of the microwave for a boxed frozen meal (i.e. frozen pot pie or TV dinner), none of the participating families used a microwave to cook a meal.

**Consumption.** Among adults in participating households, consumption of breakfast and lunch were typically non-standard. That is, adults may or may not eat breakfast and/or lunch on any given day. Five of nine participating households reported that the adults in the home never or rarely ate breakfast. In these homes, the adult members’ first meal of the day is typically lunch. In the Grove and Woods households, the two most food insecure households in the sample, adults may or may not eat lunch either.

In general, school-aged children in participating households ate both breakfast and lunch at school as recipients of the USDA’s National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. In some cases, school-aged children may eat an additional breakfast at home before
going to school. Janet Sharp commented that the breakfast her children receive at school is “Pop-Tarts and donuts,” so she feeds them something more substantial before school, usually a peanut butter sandwich or even some homemade waffles prepared and kept frozen to be used for such occasions. Mary Barber’s ten-year-old daughter sometimes eats breakfast at home because she’s “rapidly in this growth stage” according to Mary.

There were only two children among participating households who did not attend school for at least a half day: Sally Grove’s youngest son (age 2) and Pam Woods’ daughter (age 8 months). These children ate breakfast and lunch in each of their respective homes, though no set schedule was used to do so. For Sally, feeding her youngest son could be challenging because of his medical conditions. According to Sally, her youngest son is “mentally delayed” and so “he’ll eat when it’s his time to eat, when he wants to eat.” At the same time, Sally shared that it is sometimes difficult to get her oldest son (age 4) to eat as well. Sally reported that at dinner time her oldest son is “always running around playing” and will eat bites of food in between this running around.

Other mothers reported difficulty getting their young children to eat regularly as well. In the Magee household, both children (age 8 and 9) spent much of their time outdoors on weekends or during the summer, while Tina Rolling’s son (age 6) also preferred to be outside playing with others. Both mothers reported difficulty getting their children to come in and eat. As a result, Kim provides quick meals like hot dogs. On the other hand, Tina accommodates this by offering heftier snacks when her son first gets home from school, including “a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a hot dog, um, he’ll eat like an egg sandwich, um oatmeal.” Despite these difficulties, all families reported providing breakfast, lunch, dinner, and usually a snack (either
after school or before bedtime) to all children in their respective households. No child in the study experienced any type of food insecurity as a result of a lack of food in the home.

One family reported having a regular eating schedule. Carol Houser discussed her family’s typical eating schedule as follows:

We usually up and eat breakfast right around 8, 8:30, okay. Um, lunch is like around 11:30, 12 o’clock. And then supper, if my son does not get supper by 4:30 then he’s hollerin’ ‘mom, shouldn’t you be cooking,’ so ya know (laughs), during 4, right around 4:30 is suppertime. Um, there’s usually a, a snack right around 8, 8:30 at night.

Among the other households though, structured mealtimes were uncommon. Most families reported that they did not have structured mealtimes. In general, adult household members and/or adolescent children ate breakfast when they got up or fed young children when they got up, lunch time could reportedly be anytime between 11:00AM and 1:00PM, and dinner time depended on the activities of the household on any particular day. For Sally Grove, preparing the evening meal could be delayed by activities such as doctor’s appointments for her young son. Likewise, homework routines often influenced evening meal times, particularly in households containing elementary school-aged children.

Despite not having regular meals or scheduled mealtimes, most families shared common ideas of what constituted a breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Participating families reported a variety of different types of food items consumed as a breakfast meal including cereal, eggs and bacon or sausage, pancakes, peanut butter sandwiches, waffles, French toast, omelets, yogurt and fruit, fruit, protein shake, oatmeal and Pop-Tarts. Typically, participating household members consumed quick and easy breakfast items such as cereal or Pop-Tarts for breakfast throughout the school week. Some families indicated that household members consumed hot breakfast items
such as oatmeal or eggs (with or without meat and potatoes) during the school week. In addition, some families reported providing a hot breakfast on weekends usually consisting of eggs, a breakfast meat, sometimes pancakes, waffles, or French toast.

With respect to lunch, families reported consuming a variety of different food items as well. Eight out of nine participating families reported consuming peanut butter and jelly or peanut butter sandwiches at lunchtime. For some households, peanut butter and jelly or peanut butter sandwiches served as part of an actual meal that could be accompanied by a selection of smaller items including any of the following: a piece of fruit, a granola bar, a yogurt cup, cookies, and chips. For most adults, a peanut butter and jelly or peanut butter sandwich usually served as a quick replacement for a meal. For children, a peanut butter and jelly or peanut butter sandwich usually served as a snack.

Seven out of nine participating households reported consuming a lunch meat (with or without cheese) sandwich as part of a typical lunch meal. Participating families also reported the following quick lunches for kids: pizza rolls, bagel bites, hot dog, pizza and yogurt, pizza and mac and cheese, cheese and crackers, Salisbury steak and packaged noodles with broth. Other lunch items reported to be consumed by adults included soup, salad, canned beans, or Stove Top stuffing. Four households reported consuming leftovers from previous evening meals when available and desired as a quick lunch for adults and/or children.

Regarding dinner, participating families shared a common conception of the food items used to constitute an evening meal. Specifically, participating families reported that the evening meal should consist of a meat, vegetable, and starch at a minimum. Most often, members in participating households indicated that this same conception of the evening meal existed in their childhood homes. More important to note though is how members in participating families
distinguished meat from other food. In discussing how she navigates her food budget, Debbie Boone relates this distinction: “We have food bank which gives us a lot of our staples like the peanut butter and jelly and stuff like that. But the meats, the food food.” Likewise, when discussing her husband’s food habits when they first met, Betty Finley’s remarks reveal this distinction as well:

But I noticed even whenever we met, he didn’t have a lot of food in his house. It would be like buy as needed…As far as food – meat, potatoes, stuff like that, it might be okay I’m gonna have that tonight, go buy it and bring it home.

For participating households, the items that constituted an evening meal, especially meat, were more often defined as an actual food compared to other types of food items which might be considered staples and/or snacks.

Participant Kim Magee made another interesting distinction with regard to the evening meal. During her interview, Kim recalled that her family always had family dinner when she was growing up: “Uh, ya know, like, meat, potatoes, sittin’ around the table with fam-, with my mother, my father, my brother. Um, ya know, just all the courses (laughs).” Later in the interview, as she talked about the evening meal in her own home, Kim offered: “And then dinner, like I said, it’s family dinner. We might not eat family dinner, but it’s family dinner.” Kim makes an important distinction between a family dinner defined as its components and the family dinner defined as the experience of eating together. For Kim and her family, their evening meal is still considered the family dinner even if the meal itself lacks some of the preferred food items.

Six out of nine participating households reported eating the evening meal together as a family. For some households, the evening meal provided a time to discuss the events of the day.
Janet Sharp likes to “keep the lines of communication open” by talking with her children about what they did in school that day. Likewise, in the Woods household, Lois’s younger daughter is the only “not in the house during the day,” so the conversation tends toward hearing “about the school day.”

In other households though, family dinner was less formal. Carol Houser describes a typical mealtime in her home: “I’m usually makin’ supper and then hollerin’ ‘food’. And the troops come runnin’ … just throw paper plates on the table, get some silverware out.” In the Grove household, when Sally’s husband is home for a meal, he’ll “go to the living room” despite Sally and her mother-in-law eating together at the table. Both Mary Barber and Tina Rolling reported less formal dinner occasions as well. Mary reported that she and her daughter generally eat in the living room on the couch. When I observed the Barber household for their evening meal, Mary’s daughter ate at the small kitchen table using the one chair available while Mary stood beside the table. In the Rolling household, Tina and her son usually ate dinner together, but since starting her new diet, Tina generally eats on her own and serves her son something to eat when he decides he is hungry.

Despite reporting that her family eats the evening meal together, Kim Magee discussed how sometimes she may not eat with her children too. Sometimes, Kim might be “busy working on a homework prep” or sometimes the children “take forever to eat.” Occasionally, Kim may just need a respite:

There are even just some days I’m just so stressed out that I’m just like you guys talk about your day, like. There are days they come home and get straight off the bus fighting and those are the days where I’m just like, eh. You’re just going to sit at the table and fight, I’m not going to sit and listen to it.
Kim reported though that she generally eats with her kids on the weekend because they will recap the week using a conversation starter called High/Low. Everyone reports “one good thing” and “one bad thing that happened to you during the week.” Kim viewed it as a “good way to communicate.”

Likewise, members of the Finley household may not eat their evening meal together. Scott Finley works afternoon shift (from 3PM to 11PM, Monday through Friday) which means that he is not home in the evenings. Betty Finley’s work schedule is undefined, so she may at times not be home for the evening meal either. The Finley children are both involved in several different afterschool activities including performing with the high school band, participating in sports and attending church groups. Oftentimes, the weekends and summer months are the only opportunities that the Finley family has to eat together. At the same time, this opportunity may only present itself during lunch, as it did when I observed their meal during data collection. In general, though, Betty and Scott report that, regardless of the time of year, most of their meals are “grab and go” and that the family generally splits off to their own corner of the house with their meal.

Participating families reported consuming a variety of foods for their evening meals. All participating families reported consuming an American-style Italian dish containing some type of pasta (usually spaghetti), with or without sauce and with or without meat, as an evening meal, which may or may not also include bread and butter. This dish was referred to as spaghetti or pasta by all households. Additional uses for pasta varieties included being served as a side dish (especially to young children), being used to make homemade macaroni salad or macaroni and

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9 The frequencies provided hereafter should be understood as the number of participating households reporting they consumed a particular food item or food items as part of the evening meal and should not be confused with the frequency with which any of the meals detailed were consumed by any of the participating families.
cheese, and being used in casseroles. Five of nine participating households reported consuming hamburgers (with or without fries) as a part of an evening meal. Those same households reported consuming hot dogs (with or without fries) as part of an evening meal as did two additional households. Seven of nine participating households reported consuming pizza as an evening meal. Three households reported consuming homemade or semi-homemade pizza (such as Chef Boyardee pizza kit) as their evening meal. Two households cooked from frozen, while one family cooked from frozen and ordered out and another only ordered out. Other common dishes prepared for the evening meal included chili (five households), tacos (including taco salad) (four households), and casseroles (three families).\(^\text{10}\)

Betty Finley reported a unique dish for the evening meal. When asked how she responds to feeling that she does not have the appropriate kinds of food in her home, Betty discussed her strategy of innovation which included making goulash\(^\text{11}\):

\begin{quote}
Um, if, like if we don’t have a, I don’t know a meat, that there might not be enough of, we may add things to it to make it more of a meal...instead of everybody havin’ a meat and a side and a this, it might be a,...a stew or a goulash type a thing that would feed us maybe for a couple of days instead of a one meal thing.
\end{quote}

Both Debbie Boone and Sally Grove recalled a goulash dish served to them during their respective childhood. Debbie recalled her childhood goulash dish contained “squash and cheese” and it was “baked.” Sally Grove reported her mother made a goulash consisting of “hamburger,

\(^\text{10}\) Other foods or collection of food items that participating families reported consuming (at least one or more households): breakfast as dinner, meatloaf, chicken and rice or couscous, lasagna, sloppy joes, fried chicken with mashed potatoes and a vegetable, burgers and fries and vegetables, salmon with vegetables and rice, chicken patties, chicken or steak salad, hot dogs and sauerkraut, haluski, halupki, pierogis, pork roast, Italian wedding soup, pork chops and noodles, tuna noodle casserole, green bean casserole, meat with mashed potatoes, vegetables, and bread and butter, kebabs, shepherd’s pie, stew, beef roast with vegetables, baked chicken, grilled cheese, hot dogs and baked beans, kielbasa with mashed potatoes and baked beans, chicken noodle soup (homemade), and roasted chicken.

\(^\text{11}\) Goulash is a typical Hungarian dish consisting of meat and vegetables resembling a stew.
diced tomatoes, tomato juice, sometimes noodles.” Though these are the only references to goulash from participating families, it is important to note that goulash appears to be a non-standard dish in these households. That is, the food items that are used to constitute the goulash differ for each of these respondents.

Regardless of how the evening meal was consumed or when it was consumed and what it consisted of, consumption practices in participating households included clean-up following the evening meal. Mothers in four households do all the clean-up duties without any assistance from children, while Debbie Boone and her children handle all the clean-up duties in their household. The children in the Finley household are required to do the dishes as part of their clean-up responsibilities, but Betty and Scott report that they are the ones who end up doing the dishes a majority of the time. In the Woods household, all members except Pam’s young daughter are required to do the dishes if they did not help to prepare the evening meal, though Lois reported that she and Rich are the ones who end up doing the dishes a majority of the time as well. Tina Rolling’s young son usually cleans their dishes because he enjoys doing dishes, while Janet Sharp’s young children help do their household dishes because of Janet’s allergy to fluoride (in tap water).

Another consumption practice in participating households was eating out or getting takeaway foods. Seven of nine participating families reported going out to eat, getting takeaway foods or using a drive thru at a fast food restaurant. As previously reported, two households reported ordering pizza from a local restaurant to be eaten at home. Most commonly though, participating families reported eating out at a local Chinese buffet, with the most popular one being located in White Township. Three participating families reported eating out at a Chinese buffet restaurant on an occasional basis, meaning once a month or once every few months, while
Sally Grove and her husband get Chinese takeaway almost every payday. Two households reported getting takeaway from Subway or other local deli-style restaurants, while three families reported going to or getting takeaway from fast food restaurants including Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonalds.

For the Finley family, eating out at a Chinese buffet was reserved for special occasions, while their use of takeaway foods was convenient because of their hectic schedules. Betty reported that they usually go to the Chinese Buffet to celebrate her son and daughter’s birthdays which are “four days apart.” Betty also reported purchasing pizza or other fast food because it is quicker than preparing something when she or the children are “comin’ home late.” Despite these practices, Betty and Scott regulated their use of takeaway foods by using coupons or taking advantage of daily specials.

In the Boone household, Debbie budgets for one or two evening meals away from home a month, usually meant for a special occasion as well. Sometimes though, Debbie and her fiancé might get takeaway as a change from “doin’ dinner” if they “know that [they’re] gonna have the money.” In the Grove household, other than the Chinese takeaway she and her husband get almost every payday, Sally Grove reports that her family rarely eats out:

Like we don’t hardly ever eat out. Ever….maybe, like if me and my husband, like…Friday, I’m wantin’ to go see Pitch Perfect 2. We may go get something to eat then. But, it’s kind of rare that we go out to eat. Like we haven’t actually been out to eat since March.

For the Woods household, getting takeaway food from a local convenience store helps them get through a tough time. Lois and Rich reported that near the “end of the month, when it comes time to [get] either food stamps again or food pantry again,” the household resorts to
“eating pasta” or homemade “noodles.” At midnight when their food stamp allotment becomes available, they “treat” themselves to “a midnight snack” at the local convenience store, purchasing small sandwiches, subs or wraps as their “supper that night” since it might have “been so long since” the family had “like a meal or something.”

Finally, a few families reported entertaining others as a general consumption practice. Only the Finley family reported having a Sunday dinner, which they usually shared with Betty Finley’s parents and siblings. The event could take place at Betty’s house or, more commonly, at her parents’ home. The Woods family reported having Lois’s son and his family over once a month “for a family meal,” though not necessarily on a Sunday. Other participating households reported inviting others into their home for children’s birthday party celebrations, as Tina Rolling did for her 22-year-old son just before my interview with her. They had a “cookout” the previous weekend where “people just popped in and out.”

**Section summary.** In general, procurement, preparation, and consumption practices varied by household and often reflected circumstances specific to the composition of household members, the resources available to household members, as well as particular beliefs, attitudes, and preferences.

Primary shopping sites reflect concerns with food costs, convenience and transportation issues, as well as the perceived quality of goods available in the food environment. Secondary shopping sites are necessary to maximize the household food budget, to keep foods supplied, and to implement economizing strategies. Families employed a variety of economizing strategies including purchasing sale items, using coupons, purchasing in bulk, price matching, and the use of generic food items.
The women in participating households were primarily responsible for food preparation with one exception (i.e. Boone household). Men contributed to food preparation according to their skill level while children provided some assistance as well, whether by helping the primary food preparer with the evening meal or making a snack or small meal for themselves (generally among older children). Some households relied on others to prepare food for their household members. Participating households reported employing a variety of cooking methods, skills, and using a variety of cooking appliances in preparing the food in their homes.

Regarding actual consumption in participating households, adults may or may not eat breakfast and/or lunch on any given day, while children generally consume breakfast and lunch at school. During weekends and summer, it can be difficult to get young children to eat, but regardless, regular meals are provided to them. Participating families considered the evening meal to be one of substance with meat, a starch and a vegetable being the primary fare. Mealtimes fluctuated with the activities of the day, but in general, most families ate their evening meal together. Consumption practices included eating out or getting takeaway, though this was infrequent, as well as entertaining others with a meal on occasion.

In the next section, I proceed with detailing the labor involved in the food choices and feeding decisions in participating households.

**The Labor of Food Choices and Feeding Decisions**

During interviews, participants struggled with the idea of what food supplies they “keep” in their home. In response to this interview question, some interviewees would discuss staple food items such as milk, eggs, bread, cheese, etc., while others would simply recount a list of foods they could recall being in their home at the current moment. As outlined in a previous section, most families shopped only once a month, gathering most of their food supplies at one
time. Those with a little more economic capital experienced flexibility in being able to supplement this with periodic trips to replenish their supplies. The idea that one would “keep” food supplies in the home on a constant basis contrasted with the temporal nature of maintaining food supplies in these homes. This juxtaposition suggests a number of challenges to keeping food supplied.

In this section, I detail findings related to the labor of food choices and feeding decisions in participating low-income households. As the previous paragraph suggests, a primary challenge in these homes is keeping food supplied. The labor of keeping food supplied spans procurement, preparation, and consumption practices. In detailing these findings, I give attention to the challenges encountered in keeping food supplied as well as any responses to those challenges. Specifically, I explore the labor (i.e. capital expenditures and accumulations) associated with these responses. In addition, I explore other theoretically and substantively important themes emerging from the data related to the labor of food choices and feeding decisions in these homes.

**Keeping food supplied.** Participating households considered the cost of food items available in the marketplace to be expensive: “Everything’s too expensive.” (Barber); “Stuff is expensive.” (S. Finley). Many of the economizing strategies employed by participating households (e.g. using coupons, price matching and the use of generic items) reflect the ways in which participating household members attempted to lower the prices of the food items needed for their homes. Likewise, as previously reported, all families reported purchasing items on sale as a strategy to lower the expense of food items, especially meat.

Often, participating household members simply purchased “whatever’s cheapest…at the store.” Sally Grove reported purchasing vegetable oil in large quantities because “it saves money that way.” In deciding between the name brand and store brand of vegetable oil though, Sally
selects whichever is “cheaper,” usually being the store brand. In fact, Lois Woods and her husband Rich report that while they plan ahead with coupons and sales, ultimately the prices at the store are what matter the most:

Yeah it just depends on whatever is on sale that day, we’ll, I mean, there’s an ad, and we’ll, we don’t set out just to buy the specific brand. (R. Woods)

Ya know if we look and we have a coupon, and the coupon ends up being cheaper than the store brand for the item well then that’s the route we go. (L. Woods)

So, once you get to the store some of the things you buy might, might be influenced by…what prices are on the shelf? (Researcher)

Right. (L. Woods)

Right. (R. Woods)

Participating families reported using specific stores in the food environment to navigate the cost of food items. Recall that five of nine participating households reported a supercenter or discount grocery store as their primary shopping site. However, in Debbie Boone’s experience, the perception of lower costs at these sites may not be so. In fact, Debbie Boone cautioned against such assumptions about cost at both her local supercenter and the discount grocery store in White Township: “But I don’t care for [supercenter]…ya gotta watch their prices ‘cause they’re not always the lowest” and “[discount grocery store], you have to watch too though because they’re not always the cheapest.” Debbie’s comments suggest that finding and obtaining the lowest cost food items may require particular attention to the food environment. Participating families reported using weekly flyers and sale ads to help prepare for their shopping, except for Mary Barber who no longer receives these at her home. The Woods household also reported
using web-based interfaces sponsored by a regional chain large grocery store to help inform their shopping.

Shopping infrequently though can hinder knowledge about the food environment. Betty and Scott Finley, like many other households, reported doing their main shopping once a month. However, since Betty primarily handles the food shopping, this main shopping trip might be put off because of Betty’s work schedule. When they finally make it to the store, Betty and Scott might find that “Prices change.”

Some participating households reported experiencing other types of changes in the food environment which can impact the food supplied. Kim Magee shops at a warehouse club in a neighboring county. At the time of the interview, Kim Magee recalled the items that she usually purchases at the warehouse club. One of these items is yogurt. However, Kim reported that she now buys a different brand of yogurt because “they took my black cherry away.”

The availability of products in the food environment can impact what participating households purchase. When I observed Betty Finley shopping at the discount grocery store in White Township, Betty was unable to purchase several items on her list – items that she normally purchases at the discount grocery store – because they were either out of stock or perhaps no longer available there. Likewise, she anticipated purchasing frozen pot pies for snacks or small meals for her children. She prefers to buy them in a four pack which were not available on this particular day at this particular store. Betty remarked that she would need to travel to the same discount grocery store in Punxsutawney where they might be available. Additionally, Betty intended to purchase bananas for the house, but after looking over many bunches, she decided against purchasing them because they were all overripe and likely would spoil before her children eat them.
At the same time, Betty selected and purchased items not included on her list. Specifically, she selected some green grapes on sale for $1.49 a pound, remarking that “kids and [husband] will eat” them. Likewise, Betty selected another sale item, two packages of fresh sweet corn – on sale in a four pack for 99 cents – because it would be “something different for kids” and that they “don’t have a lot because of the price.” Betty selected another non-list item – frozen curly fries. Betty reported that she picks these up whenever they are available at the discount grocery store because it is also something different for her children.

Despite reporting in her interview that she found the large grocery stores in White Township to be too expensive, Betty reported during the shopping observation that she had a second list for items she planned to purchase at one of those large grocery stores. Specifically, she intended to purchase some name brand items\(^\text{12}\) (peanut butter and salad dressing) used in her household as well as cherries and pork ribs reported to be on sale at that store. Other than the pot pies, Betty did not report whether she would seek out the missing items at another store. Searching for alternatives seemed unlikely given Carol Houser’s report about her own shopping habits:

> I go to [discount grocery store], if they have them for a decent price I buy it, if not,…I don’t usually look for an alternative…it depends if I’m going to be making something with it that week or…if it’s for special a time that we’re gonna have something special and I really do need it for this, then I’ll look for it at a different store.

Even individual store policies contributed to the practices of shoppers in this food environment. Janet Sharp reported that she prefers to shop in White Township and will go to multiple stores there to gather her food supplies. Additionally, Janet reported being a coupon

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\(^{12}\) Name brand items are not typically carried at the discount grocery store.
user and using her coupons at the stores in White Township. At the time of the interview, Janet reported experiencing issues with her car such that she ventured to White Township shopping only once a month now where previously she might go there once a week. Due to this transportation issue, Janet Sharp reported shopping now for many of her regular supplies at the local independent grocery store where food items were reportedly “way more expensive” (Sharp). The local independent grocery store did not honor double coupons either, so Janet finds it no longer worthwhile to use coupons for her shopping.

Transportation could interact with the cost of food items in the food environment in other ways. Sally Grove lives fifteen minutes away from the local independent grocery store in Clymer Borough, yet she prefers to shop in White Township which is reportedly a half hour from her home. Sally perceives the prices at the local independent grocery store to be “way too high.” Despite this, Sally reported that her household will purchase items at the independent grocery store even if it costs more “especially if we don’t feel like going all the way into town.” Likewise, Tina Rolling reported purchasing staples at the “little convenience store…at the end of the street” because “it’s more convenient…than running all the way into town.”

At the same time, Sally reported that when planning where to shop, she will go to the local independent grocery store if “something on sale” is known “for a fact [to be] cheaper there.” Sally’s decision to go for the sales at this local independent grocery store means that she is purchasing all of the other supplies she may need at the same time at this location as well. As a result, her costs could be higher. Tina Rolling reports making a somewhat parallel decision. While she prefers to shop at one of the large grocery stores in White Township, she will “do everything at once at” the supercenter because “toiletries and stuff clearly are going to be cheaper.” In Tina’s case though, choosing to obtain all her supplies at the supercenter could
potentially save her money compared to the items at the large grocery store. At the same time, Tina reported the reverse to be true as well. She will spend more on items at the large grocery store just because she prefers to keep her shopping to one location and she prefers the large grocery store over the supercenter because of quality concerns.

For Debbie Boone, transportation used to be an issue limiting her to shopping only at the local supercenter. As previously detailed, Debbie reported recently coming into some money and being able to purchase a vehicle. She reported procuring groceries more frequently because of this acquisition, yet she still limited her procurement to the local supercenter. The cost of food items was especially important in the Boone household where the size of the household impacted how much Debbie would need to purchase at any one time:

It got quite expensive too, because for a family of five, then when you buy a pack of hot dogs, well you can’t just buy one pack, you have to buy two. Because even if you’re not eating all the hot dogs, you need some more hot dogs than just one pack. And then that’s two packs of buns.

The Woods family echoed this frustration with how food items get portioned for sale in the marketplace: “try not to go with the microwave stuff” (L. Woods); “You really don’t get as much out of it.” (R. Woods); “Yeah…You might spend six dollars for a box of fried chicken that has six pieces in it and for what” (L. Woods). The Woods family report making things from scratch as a way to navigate the cost of food items in the store.

Main staples purchased in the Woods household include meat and canned goods as most of their food supplies are intended to provide the evening meal. On occasion, the Woods family reported purchasing items that could be used at lunch time such as “half price” lunch meat and cheese “that are like ready to go out.” Likewise, Janet Sharp reported the purchase of almost
expired meat as a strategy in her procurement practices “especially if there was…a rough month.” Janet limits this strategy to purchasing almost expired beef because “it’s a little easier to tell” if it has gone bad. While Janet reported purchasing almost expired meat at the local independent grocer as a means of navigating food costs, she was reluctant to take certain types of meat from the food pantry because of potential risks associated with perishable meat products:

And usually, if they have regular meat packages from a store that have been thrown in the freezer, usually don’t take it just ‘cause I’m a little bit freaky about food sanitation and food holding temperatures ‘cause I went to school for hotel and restaurant management and I had to go to the food sanitation…so usually, I don’t take it.

As reported in a previous section, participating households used the food pantry as a means to keep food supplied in their homes. Each food pantry in Indiana County distributes food once per month with the day of the month being unique to the area served. For instance, the food pantry serving White Township operates every second Tuesday of the month, whereas the food pantry serving Young Township operates every third Thursday of the month. All participating households reported that they attend or attempt to attend the food pantry every month.

Attending the food pantry on a regular basis ensures continued access to these supplies. Participating households reported concerns about continued access because of the three-month rule enforced at the pantries. The three-month rule requires a household to reapply after missing the food pantry three months in a row, a rule imposed (as the researcher understands it) by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank which serves the Indiana County area food pantries.

At the Blairsville Borough food pantry, the director and volunteer workers enforce an additional rule. Recipients missing a month at this pantry must sit in a corner of the distribution
site and wait until the end of the distribution time.\textsuperscript{13} Once the workers determine that there are sufficient supplies leftover to be distributed to these individuals, these recipients can collect their distributions.\textsuperscript{14} Kim Magee recalled her experience in being subject to this rule:

So, like last month, or whenever the day you were there, I had to wait…I hadn’t been there the month before…I went in this time and I said to the lady, I wasn’t here last month, I know that I need to sit, where do I need to sit? And she was like, well if you weren’t here last month you need to sit and I’m like, mmmhmm. That’s exactly what I just, okay. And then they sent someone over to calm me down. You were there, I don’t, I’m sure you don’t remember when I came in, but do you remember anybody getting irate at the food bank? I did not need to be calmed down (laughs).

Kim reported missing food pantry distributions two out of the last five months because of emergencies in her home. She missed one month because she had gall bladder surgery and she missed the second month when school was cancelled because of poor winter weather. Kim must walk to the food pantry on the other side of town and did not wish to drag her children out in below zero temperatures.

At the same time, Kim admits that there are many months when she does not need the pantry to augment her monthly food supplies because she budgets her food stamps well. Additionally, since Kim’s food pantry distribution falls a week prior to the date she receives her food stamps, Kim may not need the food pantry distribution, especially when she has done well budgeting that month. Still, Kim reports going even when she does not need to simply to avoid being kicked off the role.

\textsuperscript{13} This rule also applies to new recipients according to Kim Magee. If you arrive and sign up for the food pantry on the day of the distribution, you must wait until the end to see if there is enough to be distributed.

\textsuperscript{14} In visiting all food pantries as part of the sampling process, I noted this to be the case only at this particular pantry. The researcher is unaware of whether this rule exists but remains unenforced at the other pantries.
For Mary Barber, maintaining consistent attendance at her food pantry distribution site did not necessarily correlate to consistency in the food items received. In her interview, Mary reported frustration with the items she received from month to month: “like the one month I used everything but a can of Ocean Spray,…and then sometimes it’ll just be like, oop I can only use peanut butter and the cereal…It just depends.” When I observed her during the next food pantry distribution, Mary again expressed frustration with the items her box contained. Mary commented that other recipients ahead of her in line were given fuller boxes which included cereal, an item missing from her own box. In sorting through the items at her car and in my presence, Mary found one of my recruitment flyers indicating the box she received was left over from the month before. Mary reported she would only be able to use a few items from the box and intended to donate the unused items to another independent food bank in the area. Mary summarized her experience as being a waste of time and gas.

For most participating households, the condition of the food items provided by the food pantry were cause for concern. In general, all Indiana County food pantries distributed a base set of food items purchased by ICCAP from the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. This base consisted of non-perishable food items including canned goods (i.e. soup, vegetables, fruit, pasta, and meat), dry pasta, rice, boxed meals, and fruit juice, among other items. The ICCAP distribution could also include some produce and a small supply of packaged meat (usually a pound of ground beef, chicken cubes, or ground venison). Additionally, ICCAP distributions included breads, cakes, and other baked goods donated by a national chain supercenter and occasionally surplus meats from one of the regional chain grocers with stores in the area.

Most households reported receiving bread and other baked goods that were expired, moldy, or stale and therefore of no use other than to be fed to birds or otherwise discarded.
Likewise, participating households reported receiving rotting or rotten produce. For Tina Rolling, even the small packages of meat supplied by ICCAP could be cause for concern because she does not “know where it comes from.” Debbie Boone shared her own concerns about the surplus meats provided at the food pantry which reportedly could be “expired,” “freezer burnt,” or the “package is torn.” In Debbie’s own words, “it’s such a waste.”

Beyond this base supply, individual food pantries can purchase additional food on their own directly from the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank at discounted rates as well as receive donated goods from members of the community. As a result, the number of food items distributed varies by food pantry. Likewise, some pantries permit recipients to select from among donated and surplus items while providing the ICCAP base to all recipients. In other locations, boxes are pre-packed with available base and donated items and distributed at random, as is the case at Mary Barber’s food pantry site. In a few pantries, recipients could select what they wanted from all food items provided as Scott Finley was able to do when I observed his food pantry distribution.

In Debbie Boone’s experience, the usefulness of donated goods at her food pantry was tempered by the condition of such items. Despite her assertion that the “food bank is amazing,” Debbie reported receiving “molded” macaroni and cheese and another box “had…little bugs in it.” Debbie responds to these experiences by “thoroughly check[ing] everything from the food bank,” and often, she finds that a lot of the items are expired. In general, most participating household members reported being careful about the food pantry items they kept and ultimately used because of the condition in which these items were received from the food pantry.

In Debbie Boone’s experience too, insider knowledge can contribute to overcoming the challenges associated with the use of the food pantry. Debbie’s food pantry usually has donated
items which recipients are permitted to select from on their own. In addition, recipients receive a pre-packed selection of items and whatever breads and meat might be available. Debbie reported planning a particular time for arrival at the food pantry such that she can maximize the amount she receives:

Usually go down about 12:30, it’s kind of like the mid-way mark. Because then if there’s anything down there, it’s kind of still there, so it’s not all picked over, if there’s extras. But at the same time, since it is halfway through, if there’s um, anything left over and they want rid of it, then when you’re going through, they’ll like give you extras. I found that out.

Likewise, Tina Rolling’s experience reinforces the benefits of insider knowledge. Tina only receives $16 in food stamps which “does not go very far.” There have been many times when Tina might “need emergency food” which she can get from ICCAP, a resource she knows about because she once “worked at ICCAP for a little while.”

Keeping food supplied in participating low-income households requires negotiating the surrounding food environment. The cost and availability of food items in the marketplace are of primary importance in this negotiation. Successful negotiation requires attention to the shifting nature of the food environment to maximize dollars spent. Transportation issues, store policies, family size and the location of stores can contribute to one’s ability to effectively negotiate. Relying on the food pantry to compensate for a lack of economic capital can yield the same results. Pantry policies as well as the consistency and condition of food items at food pantries can derail well intended plans for keeping food supplied. Building cultural capital in low-income food procurement practices may help to alleviate these shortcomings.
Planning it out. As previous sections suggest, keeping food supplied involves a variety of strategies requiring not only attention to detail, but previous planning. Looking through ads, figuring out where to buy what items, and lining up any coupons require household members to assess the food environment and invest the time necessary to plan strategies meant to ensure an adequate supply of food items in the home. In participating households though, planning for the marketplace was only one aspect of planning required to meet the needs of the household. Often, diversions from the normal day-to-day prompted and required planning by participating household members.

The Woods household participates in a family meal with Lois’s son and his family once a month. As a made from scratch home cook, Lois receives Facebook posts from her son and daughter-in-law for specially requested meals at the family gathering. As a very low food security household, such requests are not easily or instantaneously gratified. Instead, special requests must be accommodated through appropriate planning. Lois usually “save[s] the recipe” and goes “shopping next month” to accommodate such requests. Birthdays and holidays also require appropriate planning for the Woods household because of the limits in their economic capital.

Despite having enough food supplies from month to month, Janet Sharp reported undertaking the same type of planning. Birthdays and holidays influence how Janet “shop[s] the month before” so that she can “save money…for the next month” when special supplies might be needed. In fact, Janet reports that in order to make her Christmas cookies which she gives to others as gifts or provides to others in need during the holiday season, she has to start planning months in advance:
I actually start buying for that in July, like every month…when I go shopping we’ll buy two things of flour, two things of sugar, two pounds of butter, which go in the deep freezer. If I didn’t have a deep freezer, I couldn’t do that either, do my cookies, but like every, every month starting in July we, I start stocking up on chips and chocolate chips, decorations, that kind of stuff.

Disruptions in the sources of food supplies necessitated planning as well. At the time of the interview, Janet reported her daughter only had two WIC checks left and then the household would lose this benefit. Janet relied on WIC for staple items like milk and eggs, which could be costly should she have to pay for them herself. At the time of the interview, Janet reported planning over the previous three months trying to figure out how to compensate for this disruption in her supplies. Specifically, Janet’s planning involved determining what she “can eliminate” to make room in her budget. Eliminating things in her food budget means getting other items like “juice” and “spaghetti noodles…down at the food pantry” if she “can find them…and they’re not expired.” In addition, Janet reported arranging with her sister and brother-in-law to assist her by stopping at the warehouse store in a neighboring county to purchase a bulk container of peanut butter for the household on a monthly basis once she loses the WIC benefit. As previously reported, Janet lacked a reliable car to make this journey herself, but she felt that purchasing this item in bulk might free up some of her food budget to compensate for the changes she would need to make.

Janet was not alone in this experience. The Boone household eventually would lose their WIC benefit as well when Debbie’s youngest son turned five the following February. Debbie still had some time before she started planning for this disruption, but she was already worried. Debbie and her household have received WIC benefits continuously for the last 16 years owing
to the timing of her children’s births. The Boone household relies on WIC for important, and usually expensive, food supplies in their home such as milk as well as fresh and frozen vegetables. Debbie reported a bounty of these items in her home because of the WIC benefit. In Debbie’s words, losing WIC, “[i]t’s goin’ to be an adjustment.” Debbie shared that she had already started thinking about other options:

There was this program that I heard about…Commodities Program. And it’s um actually for women that have children. And um, for over the age of 5, I think it was till the 6th year. So, but it would have been in that year, it would have been like a transition. So like coming off of WIC, I could have went to the, participated in the Commodities Program, at least for another year. And there’s programs but not in Indiana County, so I can’t do it.

That’s a bummer. So, unless something comes up.

Here again, Debbie’s insider knowledge could potentially mitigate this circumstance and aid in keeping food supplied, except the surrounding food environment lacks this opportunity. Debbie’s response though suggests she might not look for an alternative program or plan other ways to compensate for her household losing this benefit.

Compared with Janet Sharp, Debbie’s approach reflects differences in how the two households use the food environment. Differing economic capital permits Janet Sharp to use the food pantry primarily as a way to hoard supplies in case of a crisis, but Debbie Boone relies on the food pantry for many staple items. For Debbie, there is no wiggle room to shift where she gets supplies. In fact, Debbie Boone reported often running short on her food budget (i.e. food stamp allotment) necessitating her to plan for how to cover when she falls short:

We would have to decide if we were gonna pay a bill or if we were gonna go grocery shoppin’… we would look at it and be like, okay we have $100, well we can spend it on
food or we can pay the cable bill, pay the electric bill…maybe pay half of the bill and catch up on it the following month. Or we would just get food and pay the bill the month after or we would pay the electric bill and we would just scrape.

For some households, planning could be a way to make sure food supplies and food budgets last the entire month. Kim Magee reported in her interview that sometimes she successfully manages her food stamp budget, and as a result, she may not need assistance from the food pantry. At the same time, Kim reported that her most difficult months to budget are the summer months when her children are home for three meals a day, a disruption that strains the food supplies requiring additional planning on Kim’s part.

Sometimes, meeting certain standards in a meal required appropriate planning to have specific items on hand at certain times. Sally Grove reported planning weekly meals as a way to prepare for her food shopping. After gathering input from others in her household, Sally would make a list of the items needed from the store. However, Sally and her family were “all about freshness” (Grove). Maintaining this standard meant planning to procure fresh food items from the store on the day those items might be needed lest they spoil beforehand.

In contrast, most other households reported that their procurement planning does not include planning weekly meals. Rather, the food items available in the home might dictate what meals get prepared. Mary Barber reported not having “typicals,” or planned out weekly meals. Instead, “Whatever’s in the cupboard, that’s basically what’s there” and what might be used to prepare an evening meal. Other households reported thinking about what meals they might want to make while in the store shopping.

Keeping food supplied requires planning for the marketplace, yet other types of planning may be necessary in low-income households. Supplying food for birthdays, holidays, and other
family or special occasions requires advanced budgetary planning. Disruptions in normal practices and food supply sources force low-income families to explore ways of maintaining food supplies or otherwise budgeting existing supplies and sources. Planning is necessary to help prevent food shortages, and in the event of a food shortage, planning is necessary to maintain security in other areas.

Despite a general attention to planning in these households, most families did not regularly plan their evening meals. Instead, evening meals might reflect the supplies available in the household that day or what was available in the marketplace during procurement. This lack of planning evening meals suggests that as a practice, planning contributes to conserve economic capital more than any other objective.

**Making things stretch.** Planning enables a primary practice in participating low-income households – namely, making things stretch. Participating households attempted to make not only their food budgets stretch, but also their food supplies stretch in multiple ways. As previously reported, participating households used economizing strategies and the use of the food pantry as ways to make food budgets stretch through the end of the month. Economizing strategies lowered the cost of needed goods, while the food pantry created room for other goods to be purchased in the marketplace. Planning what types of items would be purchased in the marketplace or selected from the food pantry directly impacted whether food budgets and supplies could be sufficiently stretched.

Selecting and purchasing non-perishable food items over fresh food items was key to making things stretch. Tina Rolling reported that, prior to making her dietary change, she went shopping primarily when the household ran out of a food item, and seeing as she was already at the store, she would go ahead and pick up other items consumed in the home at the same time.
Tina remarked that she would arrive home to find that she already had multiple of the same items she picked up at the store, a result she reports her mother also had in her own shopping when Tina was a child. For Tina though, the strategy makes sense:

Ya know, buying whatever I saw and that we ate, and most of the time it wasn’t gonna go bad anyway, and eventually we were gonna need it, so it didn’t matter, and it was just one less maybe trip to the grocery store.

Non-perishable food items, including packaged frozen items used in multiple households, can be stored for extended periods of time making them available whenever a food shortage should arise. Many participating household members viewed fresh food items, like fruits and vegetables, as a liability in the home because, if not consumed or otherwise used promptly, the fresh fruits and vegetables would rot making the food item inedible. Should a suitable alternative not be available or the household lack the funds to replace it, this might mean a meal cannot be provided. Essentially, fresh does not stretch. Many households relied on canned or frozen goods for this reason.

Participating households reported selecting or purchasing foods that might stretch over several meals. As previously reported, all participating households reported purchasing and consuming pasta in their households. As Kim Magee points out: “Um, I try to always have some kind of pasta ‘cause pasta stretches (laughs).” Even small quantities of pasta can be filling, especially for young children, meaning there is usually leftovers for another meal or even more meals depending on the size of the family. Likewise, casseroles, usually containing some type of starch, were a convenient way of making meals stretch:

There are certain things ta put a meal together and if you don’t have them and can’t go out and get them, then you have to figure something else out, ya know, I mean, I do,
that’s why we do a lot of casseroles, or did, because they’re cheap, they’re quick and I can make ‘em last three days. Ya know, pasta, mushroom soup, cheese and peas, there ya go, that’s three days’ worth of meals.

Utilizing leftovers, regardless of it being a pasta or casserole, was an important tactic in participating low-income households. Betty Finley reported a seven-day rule in her home. She kept leftover foods and dishes from their meals in the refrigerator for seven days and would reportedly serve a collection of leftovers as a meal. In some cases, even leftover parts of a meal could be converted into new meals, as was the case in the Woods household where Lois reported that leftover noodles “might end up in a soup” the next day. Likewise, Lois reported freezing leftovers “to be reused even if it’s only like a cup of something.”

Planning makes stretching food supplies and food budgets possible. Purchasing foods with a long shelf life kept food available in the household for needed occasions. With much the same concern, households selected specific items from the marketplace as a means of implementing this tactic because these items might yield multiple meals. Nearly all households (seven of nine) reported some way of making things stretch suggesting that this tactic may constitute a disposition among participating household members.

Throwing together. Should stretching fail, as it did often in the less food secure households, a second tactic could be employed. Participating households invoked the idea of throwing together a meal as a response to food shortages. In the Grove household, Sally and her mother-in-law resort to “throwing stuff together” when there are no longer any food stamps available to purchase additional food items. Throwing stuff together as a tactic is only possible if there are items on hand to do so, and even if they are, the result might not be palatable:
Again, it depends on what we have on hand. Um, if say ya know, we have stuff to make, like half the stuff to make chili, but only have chicken, we’ll have chicken chili. Like throw stuff together. The worst thing is it’s gonna taste bad, but it will still be something in your stomach. (Grove)

The Woods household, another very low food secure household, reported the same tactic, except given the Woods’ ability to make things from scratch, the result could be better tasting: “We put our heads together and we always can figure out something, even if your thing is the most weirdest thing to eat together. We will figure it out and make it taste excellent.” (P. Woods)

The idea of throwing together was reported by other households regardless of whether the household experienced a food shortage. In discussing the meals she prepares in her home, Betty Finley commented: “like I might do a hamburger one day or chicken the next day. But a lot of times it’s just throw whatever you can together for them.” For the Barber household, time could be a factor in implementing this tactic: “When I have time, I make a meal, when I don’t, throw stuff together, here it is, or you just want that okay.” Tina Rolling discussed how her mother used this tactic to conserve time as well: “it depended on time,…how long something was gonna take, if she didn’t get it in the crock pot before work, ya know, then it was something quick, that she could throw together.” Other participating household members recalled similar experiences in their childhood homes.

Interestingly, throwing stuff together could be cause for innovation. Sally Grove shared that she makes a dish passed down from her grandmother whom Sally and her husband lived with after they got married. Sally described how to make her grandmother’s pork chop dish the way she learned it from her grandmother. Sliced potatoes are used to line a baking dish that gets covered with sautéed pork chops or chicken and covered by “cream of mushroom soup” that you
“blend in with the oil” leftover from the meat. The entire dish then gets baked in the oven. Sally indicated that this dish was not any type of traditional food based in her grandmother’s heritage, rather, “it was a happy accident”: “She just threw it together. Because my grandma grew up poor…my grandpa was the only one that worked. So, they weren’t poor, but they weren’t comfortable. So, she had to, ya know, throw together what she had.”

In Sally’s household though, throwing together becomes a tactic to mitigate stressors other than just financial hardship. Despite reporting planning her weekly meals, Sally related that in her household, the question of what’s for dinner can be stressful given that her husband is very picky and often will choose not to eat what has been prepared by the female members of the household. Sally reported that the question of what’s for supper in her house “is a cuss word,” and at the end of the day, she and her mother-in-law will “grab something quick” and “throw stuff together.”

Throwing together is a tactic that can mitigate food shortages. At the same time, throwing together can be used to conserve other resources such as time or emotional energy. As previously detailed, many households did not plan beforehand what they might have for an evening meal, owing possibly to the temporal nature of food supplies in the home. Participating households reported this tactic in both their own homes and their childhood homes suggesting that throwing together is a disposition inherent in the conditions of existence in low-income households.

**Keeping time.** When describing their experiences, participating household members expressed an attention to time. Specifically, participating household members discussed ways that they attempted to conserve time. Participating household members reported a variety of procurement and preparation practices they employed to conserve time.
Though participating families often relied on both a primary and secondary site for procuring food, participating household members reported trying to conserve time by coupling their food shopping with other personal or household errands. Tina Rolling reported she tries to do “everything in one trip” such as “prescriptions, doctors’ visits, groceries.” For Tina, multiple “trips to town a week” is something she “can’t afford.”

Betty Finley though was often faced with the decision about which geographic location to shop in. Betty’s work requires her to commute to different areas of the county and sometimes to counties in the surrounding area as well. Betty reported that she does most of her shopping in White Township because she often must pass through there on her way home, a time saving measure in itself. However, when Betty is not working, she prefers to travel to Punxsutawney, a borough lying just over the northern border of Indiana County. In Betty’s words, though White Township and Punxsutawney are relatively equal distance from her home, traveling to Punxsutawney is a “straight shot” and she can avoid all the traffic lights in Indiana Borough on her way to the stores in White Township.

More often though, participating household members reported employing time saving food preparation practices. For the Finley and Barber households, fast food was an option for saving food preparation during hectic times, even if it meant “extra food expense” (Barber). For other households, entire meals could be based on time saving preparation practices. Kim Magee reported a making “ghetto tuna noodles”: “It’s macaroni and cheese with tuna and uh, you put a little bit of mayonnaise in it when you’re done and microwave peas, throw that in and stir it all in. It’s like super quick tuna noodle.” Likewise, Sally Grove and her mother-in-law revamped a standard dish. Instead of “a stuffed pepper,” they prepare “unstuffed peppers” with everything
cooked together “on top the stove.” Meanwhile, Debbie Boone reported purchasing pre-packaged frozen food items to cut down on food preparation tasks for her and her fiancé.

Debbie Boone and her fiancé had recently made a change in their consumption habits and were choosing to eat healthier at the time of Debbie’s interview. This change meant that her fiancé, the primary food preparer in the household, now had to prepare two meals for the family’s evening meal. Debbie discussed ways she is now helping him by preparing food items such as “pasta” or meals like “sandwiches” in advance. Likewise, Tina Rolling reported preparing foods in advance as a time saving strategy with her new consumption practices: “A lot of times,…if I’m making a meal, I’ll usually turn it into 2, 3, or 4 meals…like the same thing for supper that I had for lunch.” Tina reported that prior to making dietary changes she routinely skipped breakfast and lunch, eating only at the time of the evening meal with her son. However, her new consumption practices require her to eat more frequently throughout the day.

In her interview, Tina often contrasted how she used to do things compared to how she currently engages in food-related practices. Regarding her consumption and preparation practices, Tina remarked that:

Like now,…I prepare my meal, I have breakfast, a snack, lunch, snack and a meal…it’s more of a process to get my meals ready. And to make sure that I’m cooking them the way I’m supposed to be cooking them. Before, um, I ate whenever I felt like it, which was normally in the evening.

Tina further described how it takes her much longer to do her shopping since she is now reading labels and comparing food items looking for the least processed food items she can find. For Tina, engaging new consumption practices requires investing the time to build the cultural capital necessary to perform such practices. At the same time, engaging these new consumption
practices means expending more economic capital since she must purchase food for more meals. Moreover, the food she now purchases and consumes must be fresh food which costs more than the pre-packaged food items that she previously bought out of convenience as well.

In general, while employing time saving practices appears to save participating household members time, doing so can come with trade-offs. Using fast food or pre-packaged foods as time saving devices actually adds monetary expense, detracting from the economic capital available to the household. Employing human capital (i.e. creative meals in the Magee and Grove households) as a means to conserve time could prevent the expense of economic capital, but may not contribute to any type of capital accumulation. Undertaking new dietary consumption patterns requires investing time and money in building the cultural capital necessary to routinely employ these practices.

**Handling waste.** As previously detailed, food pantry policies and operations varied by site. At some food pantry sites, recipients might be able to select all of what they receive, while at others they are provided a pre-packed box of food items without an opportunity to select from what might be available. Still, in other pantries, there may be a mix of items that they can select from and then also be provided a pre-packed box. For those with an opportunity to select items to take home, participating households reported being careful about the items they choose. Debbie Boone reported issues with moldy and expired products at her pantry as previously reported. Janet Sharp confronted these issues at her pantry site as well. Likewise, multiple households reported receiving spoiled produce, bread and meats from their food pantry sites.

However, participating families reported dealing with waste other than expired or otherwise defective products as a result of using the food pantry. For Kim Magee, the need to attend the food pantry every month or risk losing the benefit entirely creates waste in her house.
As previously noted, Kim’s only budget for food is her food stamp allotment, which some months she is able to budget really well. With a galley kitchen and limited space, Kim has to figure out what to do with the extra food she receives because of the pantry’s policy. Often, she ends up giving it to the “Boy Scouts,” potentially recycling the same food back into the food pantry system.

Other items received, while still in good shape, may not be wanted or desired. Janet Sharp, who can select all items she receives at the food pantry, will not take any items she knows her family will not use, handling the potential waste at the procurement site itself:

I don’t pick it up unless I already have a use that I know I can, it won’t go to waste. If there’s somethin’ there that it’ll go to waste at my house, then I don’t get it, I just don’t pick it up.

Other households reported this same desire to only keep what the household might use even though they are not provided the opportunity to select items freely at their pantry. Participating households reported sorting through their distributions and giving away unwanted items to friends, family, or others in need.

Debbie Boone faced a unique waste situation in her home. The Boone household contains five members and is considered a double according to the GPCFB policies. As a double, her household is supposed to receive twice the normal base supply distributed at the food bank. So, for example, if the base supply includes one hamburger helper meal, she actually receives two, which is needed to feed the entire family for one meal. Sometimes though, Debbie ends up with only one of the boxes of the pre-packaged meals and prefers to give it away rather than try to portion it out.
Debbie reported an interesting strategy based upon the potential waste she receives from the food bank. Items that she may not prefer are kept on hand in the pantry for a month’s time. If after a month the item has not been used, then she will donate it or put it in the laundry room at her low-income housing complex for their complex’s sharing program. Debbie reports that carrying these extra items even if they are unwanted is useful during times when they might be “stretching” items for dinner.

Due to the food pantry operating policies, recipients may end up with unwanted items. In most cases, this waste occurs because participating recipients are unable to select items they prefer as one would be able to do in a public market. Other situations can produce unwanted food supplies, yet the result is usually the same. Low-income families become handlers of food pantry waste, sifting and sorting it out and eventually moving it along with the potential to receive the same waste again. Handling waste is a practice imposed upon low-income households by the structure of the food pantry organization.

Sharing labor. The idea that spoiled, rotten, or otherwise inedible food received from the pantry is considered waste may not be difficult to understand. However, one may wonder why unwanted items or items that are not preferred by the household, whether because of taste preferences or health concerns, could be considered waste in these households where food may not always be available. The distinction is that non-preferred items go to waste in these households because they are not being distributed to others in need. Hence why most families re-donate these goods or give them away to others who may be in need: “if I’m not gonna use it, I don’t pick it up, because it’s, somebody else might need it.” (Sharp)

Even the use of the pantry itself could engender such sentiments. Sally Grove reported that her households tries not to go to the food pantry:
If we get it, and they run out of food, what is, what if a family that comes in who has a lot more kids than us, who really, really, really needs it, ya know, comes in after us and there’s nothing left.

Though Sally Grove reported having to skip the evening meal at least once a week, she still considered receiving a food pantry distribution as wasteful if others in worse conditions could benefit from it.

Participating households reported sharing labor in other ways as well. Borrowing food or money until it can be returned or paid back in some fashion (e.g. babysitting), giving to friends in need, or even combining household supplies to share in a meal together were all reported by participating households. Most participating households reported having close friends or family members with whom they might share labor. The social networks maintained by participating households were relatively small with only a few ties.

For example, Betty Finley reported sharing with her parents in providing the food for the Sunday family meal. Betty’s parents also helped her maintain knowledge about the food environment by contacting her to let her know about any sales on meat. Many times, Betty, Scott and Betty’s parents will all go together to take advantage of the sale. Ties in the Grove household are even smaller. Despite multiple family members living close by, Sally and her household only talk to her “husband’s aunt, who lives one house” away.

Tina Rolling reported the largest social network including immediate family members, extended family members, and roughly three or four female friends. At the time of the interview, Tina reported that her refrigerator recently broke. Tina’s aunt stepped in and replaced this appliance for Tina. Without this help, Tina was unsure what she might have done:
I couldn’t go get a new refrigerator…I would have had to of figured something out,…I have already gotten…loans just to pay bills, but the bills are still there, and now so is the loan…I mean, I got sick, because…how do I do this…I only get paid once a month,…Usually by the time I pay bills, and do go to the grocery store, within two days I’m out of money.

Tina gets by with the help of her friends and family who are willing to jump in and lend a hand when things are tight, or even impossible. Tina’s friends will stop at the store to pick up supplies, help her get needed items for her young son, or even give her clothing to wear.

As most participating household members did not work, social networks largely comprise friends and family members. Formal ties to churches or social service organizations may be beneficial in sourcing food supplies as it was for Debbi Boone when her “case manager” gave her information about another independent food pantry, but these ties may lack the sense of community experienced through the small social networks available to most participating households. This sense of community contributes to the idea of seeing unwanted or undesired food distributions go to waste if others are potentially in need.

**Dealing with shame.** At the end of each interview, I asked participants if there was anything else they thought I should have asked them about food-related activities and food choices and decisions in their home. Janet Sharp replied by telling me that I should have asked about the emotional experience of the food pantry, explaining her feelings about the stigma associated with being a recipient:

It’s always gonna be embarrassing asking other people for help…I think it would be for anybody. Asking for help is just something you don’t do in this society, ya just don’t do
it...But a lotta stigma is that if you get food stamps or if you’re goin’ to food pantry or you’re gettin’ WIC or any of that, it’s ‘cause you’re lazy. I’m not lazy.

Though she grew up in a working-class household and recalled her father’s stigmatized experience of using a food pantry during a work strike, Janet’s marriage pushed her out of the food security danger zone. At the time of their separation, Janet’s husband earned $85,000 a year, and Janet reported they always had enough. When her husband left, Janet and her children had no money and only about a week’s worth of food. Janet had to figure out what to do. After sourcing some canned goods and meat from her parents’ surplus, Janet realized she had to do more, which is when she reached out to the food pantry. In describing her experience, Janet recalls some of the feelings brought on by not having food at that time:

> It takes an intense amount of willpower…it’s very difficult…it’s demoralizing, makes you feel like crap about yourself, makes you feel like you are not a good provider, makes you feel like a terrible mother, terrible father probably too if he were there. It just makes you feel like,…you don’t deserve to be alive…it completely breaks you down…before you realize how, what you need to do. And then, that’s when ya figure it out. At least that’s how it worked for me.

At the same time, Janet attempted to distance herself from this stigma and others who suffer from it as well:

> And I’m not embarrassed and I’m not a freeloader, I’ve worked in the past…I don’t feel like a freeloader for using it. It’s not like I am sitting here smoking three packs a cigarettes a day instead of buying food…I’m not doing something else instead of buying food for my kids.
In many respects, Janet Sharp’s household is an outlier in this sample. Beyond Janet’s concern about a potential crisis, the household is fully food secure. For the Sharp household, the food pantry is a means of obtaining surplus supplies rather than as a regular procurement source, such as it is for the remaining households. Janet retains many markers of her middle-class life including her kitchen accoutrement and the concern she shows over buying organic and unprocessed food items.

At the same time though, Janet’s experience of shame and stigma are echoed by other participating households. Sally Grove reported that she and her husband would prefer not to be receiving food stamps, but because of their children, they need the assistance:

We don’t want to be on it. We really don’t. And it’s not a shame, it’s not like we’re ashamed to be on it, it’s just a ya know, we don’t want to be on it just for the simple fact that ya know, my husband wants to be able to provide for us without somebody’s help…we don’t want to be on it, but we have to be, because of the kids.

Despite reporting that she and her husband were not ashamed of their experience, Sally, like Janet, attempted to distance herself from others receiving assistance:

Almost everybody that’s like I’m friends with on Facebook, even my dad, is like uh, welfare this,…welfare this, welfare that,…I work hard for this, blah-blah-blah. And my dad, I looked at him and I was like, I’m pretty sure my husband serving our country for four years and getting hurt has entitled him to his fair share of the government’s help…My husband has earned his fair share.

Tina Rolling, too, echoed Janet’s sentiments about the shame of asking for help, while also distancing herself from others in how she handles her household affairs:
I’ll sell something or ya know, ask for help which I really have a problem doing. Really have a problem doing. I’m offered all the time and unless it’s going to like, ya know, downright cause like a, a, a severe problem, I don’t take it. We get by. We still have all of our utilities, today. We have food, so…I’m literally not buying, like I don’t blow money,…90 percent of my money is spent on essentials and for [youngest son].

For other households though, the use of food assistance programs does not carry the same weight and shame. Debbie Boone grew up in a relatively unstructured household. Her father worked, was an alcoholic, and reportedly was rarely ever home. When her father was there, her mother might prepare a meal, but otherwise, Debbie ate what she wanted when she wanted. She recalled receiving food assistance in her childhood home:

Um, we got food bank. We must have gotten food stamps, but if we did, it was on the down low. It was kind of like, we’re gonna be quiet about this, like I don’t want anybody to know we have the food stamps…And I’m thinking, why are you ashamed to have them, if you need them you need them.

Debbie has received WIC assistance for the last 16 years, while also receiving food stamps and using the food pantry. Debbie discussed that her fiancé has talked about not using the food pantry anymore, but she says they cannot afford to not use it. In fact, Debbie actively looks for food assistance programs that might be available to her. Though Debbie did not specifically say so, it appears she does not experience any shame in using these food assistance programs.

Likewise, Kim Magee reportedly does not experience stress about the lack of food in her home. Kim grew up in an intact nuclear family who ate the evening meal together every night. Kim recalled that she never went hungry as a child. However, when she got married in her young adulthood, sometimes she would go without food: “it would just be like going to Walmart with
whatever little bit of money that we had and trying to make it last…we sometimes went hungry, but we were adults.” (Magee). As previously detailed, Kim’s current household is food secure except in the summer months when she must make her food supplies stretch to cover the extra meals for her children since they are not receiving breakfast and lunch at school. Kim reported she “sometimes go hungry” so her “kids have food” which she’s “okay with”:

So it’s not really, you don’t feel like, your experience of maybe having to skip a meal is not really stressful for you. (Researcher)

No, not really. It doesn’t anger me or upset me like, it is what it is. (Magee)

Kim, like Debbie, is open to using food assistance programs that might be available in her community. At the time of the interview, Kim reported learning too late about a summer lunch program that had operated in her community the previous summer:

I would have thought like the school would have sent home something or there would have been like something on the [name withheld] Community site, but there wasn’t. And, and my friend was just like, did you know that they do this at the community center? I’m like, nope, that would have been great (laughs). So if they do do it again this year,…I will definitely participate in that. Maybe not every single day but some days.

Kim’s attitude here, and her attitude toward the three-month rule at the food pantry as previously detailed, suggest that she just wants to have enough for her family to get by and the assistance she seeks is simply meant to help her do so.

Both Kim and Debbie’s attitudes contrast sharply with that of Janet. In some respects, the difference appears to be one of time. Kim and Debbie both report long-standing experiences with food insecurity and using food assistance, while Janet’s difficulties surfaced roughly four years prior when her husband left, and despite using the food pantry and receiving food stamps, Janet’s
household has been food secure ever since. The more entrenched one becomes in impoverished conditions, the more accepting one can become of the assistance required to survive. This is to say that these attitudes suggest long-term impoverished conditions can instill certain dispositions toward food insecurity and the assistance required to navigate that experience.

Likewise, Sally Grove’s attitudes speak to other social conditioning factors that can impact the experience of food insecurity. Twenty-four-year-old Sally and her husband are just starting out with their family and navigating the expense of having young children. Sally is the primary food preparer and procurer in her multi-generational household. Sally’s husband, a retired veteran, is just starting out in his new career. As previously detailed in another section, Sally reported that she wants to be “that good wife” and have dinner on the table when her husband comes home. At the same time, Sally also feels diminished in her role as a mother because, as a stay-at-home mother, she is not providing any income for her family. Sally reported her household experiences dwindling supplies at the end of the month limiting the availability of food in her household, and despite other adults being in the home, she usually goes without:

But what I do is when the food is finished cooking, I will get them their plates first, then [mother-in-law] and [brother-in-law] will get theirs and I’ll get what’s leftover…because like I said, my kids eat first. And I was raised, the mom gets the last. Everybody eats before the mom.

Sally’s attitude here and her concerns about being the “good wife” draw on dominant gender roles that, reportedly, were a condition of her existence in childhood.

In other homes where adult members experienced disruptions in normal eating patterns, the adults always reported a concern for making sure children were fed, but shared in the
responsibility of eating less, as was the case in the Woods household. Both Lois and Rich reported sitting back and letting the kids eat first, or putting “food on one plate” to “share it.” As with other food-related tasks in their home, Lois and Rich Woods shared equally in the experience of food insecurity in their home. The contrast between the Grove and Woods households suggests that adherence to gender roles may complicate the experience of food insecurity, particularly for women.

As previously detailed in this section, Janet and Sally also attempted to distance themselves from others to mitigate feelings associated with their experience of food insecurity. Janet mitigated her shame by drawing on cultural scripts about the poor, contrasting herself as a previous worker deserving of the aid. At the same time, Sally uses her husband’s veteran status as symbolic capital, attempting to position herself differently in the field. Janet and Sally were not alone in these attempts. Betty and Scott Finley spoke with some vehemence about their situation:

In terms of…this…experience of not maybe having the appropriate kinds of food in your home, what thoughts or feelings do you experience when that happens?

(Researcher)

Oh anxiety, depression, worry, concern. Anger. Because those people on welfare eatin’ better than I am and I’m working hard for my money. (B. Finley)

And they’re not working at all. (S. Finley)

And I’m payin’…for their food and here’s… (B. Finley)

What we can afford. (S. Finley)

We can’t afford what they’re affording…‘Cause we work so hard and then you see what all they get. (B. Finley)
They can get it for free. (S. Finley)

Betty and Scott’s comments draw attention to cultural scripts regarding the welfare system and its recipients, scripts largely based in hegemonic ideals of meritocracy.

Betty and Scott do not receive food stamps as they are resource ineligible – that is, their resources (cash on hand, vehicles, etc.) exceed the allowable limits. Likewise, the entire Finley family previously received medical insurance through the Children’s Health Insurance Program in Pennsylvania. When Scott took his job with his present employer, the entire family lost their insurance. Luckily, they were all able to be put on health insurance through Scott’s work, but unfortunately, they have to pay co-pays under this health care coverage.

When Betty got sick and had to undergo an operation, she knew she would be out of work for some time, putting a strain on their already limited resources. In deciding to turn to the food pantry for assistance, Betty remarked: “so we knew that that would be something that would help us, and…I pay my taxes so I might as well take ya know, opportunity to get what we could get.” Like Janet, Betty attempts to distance herself from others by invoking her legitimacy as a worker. While their comments reify class-based ideologies, Betty and Scott still take the opportunity of utilizing what programs are available to them and would consider other sources of aid as well. In distancing and legitimizing themselves, Scott and Betty negotiate the field of cultural consumption through symbolic power, attempting to maintain a position over others in more impoverished conditions.

The experience of food insecurity can engender shame in those who experience it. This shame is brought on by negotiating the field of cultural consumption in ways not consistent with legitimized practices. Dealing with shame means distancing oneself through legitimizing other aspects of one’s life. Symbolic capital and symbolic power play a role in establishing this
legitimacy. For others, extended periods of time in this experience can potentially temper feelings of shame. Likewise, adherence to strict gender roles can impact the experience of food insecurity with more egalitarian arrangements potentially moderating the effects.

Section summary. Owing to the limited economic capital in participating households, keeping food supplied becomes the primary labor associated with food insecurity. Keeping food supplied highlights the importance of knowing and navigating the food environment. Food prices, food availability, store policies, and transportation all influence the labor of keeping food supplied. Likewise, the availability, consistency, and condition of food items at the food pantry contributes to a household’s ability to keep food supplied and highlights the influence of structure in this experience. Planning is necessary in keeping food supplied as it conserves economic capital, even if a household does not engage in meal planning at the household level. Planning enables the tactic of making things stretch. Stretching requires attention to the types of foods purchased, how they might be prepared and what might be done with what is left over. Throwing together is a response to the temporal nature of food supplies in the home as well as a means to conserve other important resources such as time and emotional energy.

Other emergent themes contribute to an understanding of the labor involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of participating low-income households. Particular procurement and preparation practices are enacted as a means to conserve time, usually without any direct benefit to capital accumulation in the field. Making the decision to receive from the food pantry means handling the waste that this structure creates. This burden highlights the ways in which limited, but strong, social networks engender a sense of social responsibility to others in need. At the same time, as participating household members navigate the field of cultural consumption, legitimacy is gained through symbolic capital and symbolic power.
Chapter Summary

This chapter related both the research study context and the detailed analytical findings derived from the collected data. Indiana County is a rural county with most food sources located in White Township. Eight of nine participating households reported conditions consistent with some level of food insecurity. Most households reported conditions consistent with a low or very low food security level.

Participating households reported purchasing and/or consuming a wide variety of food items. Frequently consumed food items included ground beef, pasta, and peanut butter sandwiches consistent with the limited economic resources available in these households. In general, most participating households utilized food outlets available in White Township where food costs were less expensive. Usually, participating households procured from both primary and secondary shopping sites as a way to maximize economizing strategies. Adult female members were primary food procurers and preparers in most cases, though egalitarian conditions existed in some married or cohabitating households. In general, adult members of participating households did not routinely consume breakfast and/or lunch. For participating households, the evening meal was considered the primary meal in the home and ideally consisted of a meat, vegetable, and starch. For some families, the evening meal was a time to recap the events of the day and prepare for the remainder of the evening.

Keeping food supplied comprised the primary labor in participating households. Keeping food supplied required both surveillance of the local food environment as well as vigilance within the home food environment. Making things stretch, a primary improvisation in participating households, required procurement and preparation of food items that could last for extended periods of time. When food supplies failed, throwing together was an option for
creating something from almost nothing. Participating households demonstrated a concern with conserving time, which usually resulted in increased expense in food procurement. Emergent findings indicate that the food pantry structure and organization encumber participating households with the labor of handling multiple forms of waste, while dealing with shame associated with using food assistance programs can reify prominent class prejudice.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore and understand the labor involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families as they seek to feed their families. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What food choices do low-income families make and how do they make them?
2. What feeding decisions do low-income families make and how do they make them?
3. What labor is involved in the food choices and feeding decisions of low-income families?

In this exploratory study, I framed my investigation within Bourdieu’s (1977) Theory of Practice. Bourdieu’s (1977) Theory of Practice recognizes practices in everyday life as a dialectical relationship between objective reality and subjective experience. Framing this study in this manner allowed for an analytical assessment that could identify interconnections and dynamic processes in the practices of feeding the family in low-income households. The previous chapter provided a detailed understanding of this analysis. In this chapter, I provide an interpretation and synthesis of the findings presented in Chapter Four. In addition, I explore the limitations and implications derived from the results of this study.

Discussion and Synthesis of Findings

In summary, the findings presented in the previous chapter suggest that participating low-income households simply do the best they can with what they have in a way that makes sense to them, considering their available resources as well as their abilities, beliefs, and attitudes, even if this sometimes means expending more economic capital. In this section, I examine the
classifying practices in low-income households and how these relate to both the theoretical framework and substantive literature set forth in Chapter Two.

**Understanding the Classifying Practices in Low-Income Households**

Lois Woods is the source of the quotation used in the title of this manuscript. When asked how she might describe the experience of having a food shortage in her home to others, Lois replied simply, “You learn how to make do.” Lois’s statement summarizes, succinctly, the improvisation of practices necessary to feed the family in the experience of food insecurity. You learn, simply, how to make do.

In the primary labor of keeping food supplied, making do requires forethought. Much of this labor (i.e. conserving economic capital) though is dependent on conditions outside the control of low-income households. Despite the efforts of enacting economizing practices meant to conserve and stretch both food budgets and food supplies, food prices, shifting food availability, food policies and the geographic orientation of the food environment ultimately dictate what can be purchased and how frequently. These conditions of existence imposed by market conditions engender flexibility as a disposition of the low-income habitus.

This flexibility reveals itself in the lack of meal planning in participating households. So much of the labor of food choices and feeding decisions in low-income households is dependent on what can be obtained in the food environment. Most participating households reported that the selection of items, especially those meant to supply an evening meal, occurred in the marketplace at the point of procurement where costs can be weighed with other factors. This lack of meal planning, or even delay in meal planning, is significant as it contrasts sharply with the effort most households demonstrate in planning a strategy to deal with conditions in the food environment.
In turn though, this flexibility informs a tactic meant to compensate for impoverished conditions. Making things stretch requires making the best use of what is available in the marketplace or elsewhere in the food environment. Certain food items are favored over others because their properties aid in stretching the food budget (i.e. non-perishables over fresh). At the same time, the properties of certain food items enable stretching the food supplies themselves. The use of pasta as a staple item, the reliance on dishes that can extend consumption, and the attention to leftovers are all tactics based in a flexible disposition towards the food environment and the field of cultural consumption.

In navigating the food environment, participating households may be unable to secure desired items because of the shifting availability of supplies. In the procurement process, participating household members may not seek out alternative food items should desired items be unavailable. At the end of the month, throwing together becomes a tactic for overcoming inadequate supplies and food supply shortages. Throwing together is flexible by nature as it relies on what might be available in the household food supplies at the time the tactic is employed. Human capital plays a significant role in the tactics of making things stretch and throwing together. Cooking knowledge and skills available in the household can aid in helping to make things stretch as well as making palatable that which can be thrown together.

Likewise, in the primary labor of keeping food supplied, making do requires strength of person. In most cases, impoverished conditions in participating households interacted with the food environment to produce a disposition of resignation. Over time, as households continue to experience the effects of this dialectic between the food environment and conditions of existence, participating household members become resigned to the experience of food shortages. When
participating household members act as agents in the food environment, subtle practices reveal this disposition.

For instance, when desired items are unavailable, participating household members are unlikely to choose an alternative, resigning themselves to do without. Further, as participating households navigate the food environment, they are encumbered by both unwanted and spoiled items, owing to the structure of the food pantry organization. In very few cases, there may be some push back, but for the most part, low-income household members resign themselves to the work of further distributing or eliminating this waste in the system. Finally, when food supplies run short, those who must go without resign themselves to the necessity of doing so. Certain resources and beliefs may vary across households and influence how shortages are handled in participating households, but ultimately those who must go without demonstrate this resignation.

In sum, both resilience (i.e. flexibility) and resignation define the habitus produced by the impoverished conditions inherent in low-income households. A lack of economic capital generates improvised classifying practices requiring participating household members to engage both human and economic capital in flexible and resilient ways. Engaging the food environment from a position of impoverishment necessitates resignation in the face of access issues, imposed structural labor, and in some instances, the labor of doing without.

**Performing Labor**

Bourdieu (1986) contends that time is necessary for the transformation and accumulation of capital. Economic capital can buy time necessary to increase cultural capital, while investing time can serve to transform economic capital into social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Participating households employed a number of procurement and preparation practices meant to conserve rather than expend time. Sourcing from the closest shopping site, using fast food, and purchasing
pre-packaged meals or food items were ways to buy time at the expense of economic capital, yet these practices did not yield any type of cultural capital accumulation. Neither did these practices yield significant increases in any other forms of capital as the use of fast food and pre-packaged, processed food items are not legitimate practices in the field, as evidenced in Johnston and Baumann’s (2009) work on the foodie culture.

The greatest expenditure of time common to participating households involved preparation for entering and interacting with the marketplace. Impoverished conditions necessitate extensive knowledge about the food environment and market conditions. As such, investing the time to build cultural capital about the food environment and market conditions could yield dividends in conserving economic capital, but this practice, and the cultural capital gained, offer little in terms of legitimization in the field of cultural consumption.

Likewise, some families invested considerable time expenditures in the process of preparation practices meant to feed the family. The Woods household could devote entire days to the process of preparing food items for the evening meal, a practice enabled by forms of human capital. As these events take place in the private sphere, beyond the purview of the field, capital accumulation is limited to the social capital garnered from sharing the fruits of this labor with others in small social networks.

The findings of this study suggest that limitations in economic capital inhibit capital accumulation in low-income households, consistent with Bourdieu’s (1977) Theory of Practice. Classifying practices in low-income households force members to expend economic and human capital while accumulating limited social and cultural capital. None of the practices in low-income households offered opportunity to garner symbolic capital as these practices lacked
legitimizing power in the field and were often concealed by the private nature of preparation and consumption practices.

**Making Sense of Challenges and Strategies**

Consistent with the body of literature reviewed in Chapter Two, limited economic resources, environmental access and food prices acted as challenges to the practices in participating households. The findings from this study suggest though that such challenges inhere responsiveness on the part of participating households. This is to say that participating households in this study demonstrated an attention to the food environment necessitated by the primary labor of keeping food supplied. Understanding and navigating the food environment could potentially conserve economic capital as well as food supplies in the home.

Food choices in participating households reflect many of the influences in Furst et al.’s (1996) food choice process model. Personal factors, resources, social framework, and the food context were primary contributors to food purchases made by participating low-income households. The food context included food supply factors such as the availability of goods in the marketplace as well as quality issues in food pantry distributions. Despite being consistent with this model, some participating families struggled to maintain personal systems for food choices because of disruptions in food sourcing.

Procurement, preparation, and consumption practices varied by household, but were largely influenced by circumstances germane to the household including available resources, attitudes, and beliefs. In general, women contributed to these practices more than men, but in cohabitating and married households, some egalitarian arrangements prevailed. Procurement practices reflected the labor of keeping food supplied, yet as this study suggests, keeping food
supplied means keeping only desired food supplied. Consumption practices in these homes reflect unstructured arrangements with some attention to familial sociability.

The available literature details responsive strategies employed by low-income households as they attempt to feed their family. Broadly, this literature details a series of strategies that low-income families employ beginning with economizing strategies, then use of social supports (i.e. redistributive social programs such as food stamps and the food pantry) and social networks, followed by individual-level responses based in human capital. While the findings from this study are consistent with the broad strokes of this literature, this study suggests that strategies are not performed in a series, but rather occurring contemporarily with each other. Describing responsive strategies as a series of events, and even describing strategies as a catalogue of practices, belies the dynamic nature of the processes involved in feeding the family, particularly that the necessity of impoverished conditions are ever present demands negotiated on a daily basis. The findings from this study suggest that making things stretch and throwing together are continual processes that constitute the labor of keeping foods supplied and exemplify the resiliency and resignation inherent to food insecurity as agents interact with the food environment.

**Conclusion**

Every year, millions of Americans continue to face deprivation in their food supplies because of impoverished conditions. Federal interventions meant to alleviate this deprivation are inadequate and will continue to diminish over the next several years. As government funding decreases, many will begin to rely on charitable organizations to compensate for impoverished economic resources. Progressive strategies based in the nuances of the experience of food insecurity are needed to counter this continuing social problem.
As an exploratory study, this study sought to understand the food choices and feeding decisions in low-income households. While the existing body of food insecurity literature does well to outline the particular challenges faced and strategies employed in mitigating food insecurity, this literature does little to reveal the processes by which a particular challenge is countered by a specific strategy. Strategies implemented in the practices of feeding the family in low-income household speak to both the objective reality and subjective experience of agents acting in the world.

This study suggests that the practices of feeding the family are dynamic in nature, requiring constant attention and negotiation of the food environment. The labor of keeping food supplied means keeping the food desired supplied and handling the waste of distribution networks meant to alleviate household deprivation. Primary tactics in negotiating the food environment – namely, making things stretch and throwing together – reveal the dynamism of these practices and uncover the resiliency and resignation inherent in food insecurity. This study contributes to the body of literature by revealing the dynamism of the food insecurity experience and offers a window toward new lines of investigation in this area.

**Implications**

This study suggests important implications for how food security is both measured and alleviated. When this researcher broached the idea of what might be typical about meals in participating household, interviewees responded by discussing what might be typical about the evening meal only. This response suggests that individuals in low-income households do not consider breakfast and lunch to be specific meals. In fact, many participating household members reported consumption patterns inconsistent with the cultural ideal of three meals a day. Often, adult members in participating households reported rarely or never consuming breakfast.
Additionally, in some households, adult members did not consume lunch on a regular basis. This disposition about the idea of a meal may or may not be specific to food insecure situations, but this finding has important implications for how food security is measured if it does. The USDA’s measurement tool specifically asks whether household members skip meals in determining the severity level of household food security. If a respondent routinely only consumes dinner as a strategy to keeping food supplied, their response to the survey may be no, despite this individual not consuming breakfast and lunch on a regular basis. There is potential for underreporting national food insecure persons as well as underreporting food insecurity levels.

Further, this study suggests important implications in approaches to alleviating food insecurity. Inadequate information about the food environment can be detrimental to food security in low-income households. Policies that increase communication about available assistance programs would benefit food insecure households, especially in rural communities. Likewise, policies with mechanisms designed to disseminate information about the food environment, including market conditions, will go far in aiding low-income households in the labor of keeping food supplied. Moreover, findings suggest that the organizational structures of food banks burden low-income families with the task of handling waste. Policies and procedures that eliminate this burden should be considered.

**Limitations**

This study is limited by the small sample size of participating households. Only nine low-income households were willing and eligible to participate in the study. Despite the limited sample, the findings from this study suggest consistent trends in important overarching areas, while contrasting experiences often reflect the dynamic of differing household circumstances. Likewise, the findings from this study may be limited with regard to generalizability to urban
areas given the rural study site. Finally, social desirability bias is always a factor to consider in qualitative studies.
References


Appendix A

Participant Summary

Sharp Family
Janet (interviewee and primary caregiver), age 35
Son, age 10
Son, age 7
Daughter, age 4

Magee Family
Kim (interviewee and primary caregiver), age 35
Son, age 9
Daughter, age 8

Boone Family
Debbie (interviewee and primary caregiver), age 37
Fiancé, age 35
Son, age 15
Daughter, age 8
Son, age 4

Finley Family
Betty (interviewee and primary caregiver), age 47
Scott (interviewee), husband to Betty, age 49
Son, age 17
Daughter, age 12

Grove Family
Sally (interviewee and primary caregiver), age 24
Husband, age 26
Son, age 4
Son, age 2
Mother-in-law, age 54
Brother-in-law, age 24

Barber Family
Mary (interviewee and primary caregiver), age 30
Daughter, age 10

Rolling Family
Tina (interviewee and primary caregiver), age 46
Son, age 22, not in household
Son, age 6
Woods Family
Lois (interviewee and primary caregiver), age 43
Rich (interviewee), husband to Lois, age 37
Pam (interviewee), daughter of Lois, age 18
Daughter (of Lois), age 15
Daughter (of Pam), age 8 months

Houser Family
Carol (interviewee and primary caregiver), age 53
Husband, age 59
Son, age 14
Appendix B
Interview Schedule

General demographic information and household composition:

Age and gender (of interviewee)?

What are the ages and relationship of the people who live with you?

Do you work? If so, what work do you do? How many hours do you work a week and what is your typical schedule?

What other members of the household work or are involved in some structured activity such as school? What are their schedules like?

Childhood experiences and the historical context of food-related choices and decisions:

In general, what may have been some typical meals that you recall eating as a child? As a young adult?

In general, what was typical about food-related activities (such as shopping, food preparation, mealtimes, etc.) in your home as a child? As a young adult?

In general, what do you recall about how food contributed to such traditional events as holidays, family gatherings, or other important occasions?

Is there anything else in particular that you recall about your experiences with food and food-related activities in your childhood home or as a young adult?

Current food-related activities in the home:

As much as possible, describe what may be typical about food and food-related activities in your home.

What food supplies do you typically keep in your home?

What cooking skills do you and others in your home utilize?

How do you make decisions about food-related responsibilities in your home?

Who is responsible for performing food-related tasks in your home?

How would you describe a typical mealtime in your home?
What kind of traditions do you feel you have that involve food?

What is typical about grocery shopping experiences for your household?

How do you make decisions about what to buy?

What is typical about the use of a food pantry for your family?

How do you make decisions about the use of the items you receive from the food pantry?

**Strategies for food shortages:**

Do you ever feel that you do not have enough or the appropriate kinds of food in your home?

If so, what are some decisions you make when you are faced with this experience?

If so, what do you feel are some of the reasons that you experience food insecurity?

**The experience of hunger:**

What thoughts or feelings do you experience when a food shortage exists in your home?

How would you describe this experience to others?

**Closing questions:**

Is there anything else you would like to add that would help me understand the food-related activities or food choices and decisions that you make in your home?

Is there anything that I have not asked about, but that I really need to know about the food-related activities or food choices and decisions in your home?

Is there anything that I have not asked about, but that I really need to know to understand the experience of food in your home?

Is there anything else you think I should have asked you about food-related activities and food choices and decisions in your home?
Appendix C

Journal Instruction Sheet and Questions

As the primary caregiver in your family, you have been asked to keep a journal of food-related experiences in your home. Please complete this journal to the best of your ability. Try to be as detailed as possible. When describing a particular meal or snack, indicate as much information about that meal or snack. For example, if you ate a sandwich, include all the items you used to make that sandwich. Perhaps you can even describe how you decided to use those particular items in making that sandwich. Also, try to include information about any brands of food items that you may have used or if you used a generic brand of any particular food item. If you are describing any food-related tasks and activities that you performed, try to include as many details as possible about that experience so that I, as a reader, can understand exactly what you did and how you did it. For example, rather than just saying that you prepared a meal for your family, describe the meal (including all food items used in the meal), how you decided what to prepare, who was involved in the preparation, what you cooked and how you cooked it, or even what time you ate the meal and how you decided on that particular time. The more details you provide about the experience the more I can understand the particular decisions and choices you made while performing those tasks. When describing any particular experiences related to a lack of enough food for your family, please try to provide detailed information about the choices and decisions you had to make in order to overcome this challenge. For example, if you did not have enough food to eat, tell me what strategies you may have used (such as eating with relatives, going to a soup kitchen, etc.) in this situation and how you made those decisions.

You have been supplied with enough journal entry sheets in this booklet to make entries for the next 30 days. I understand that you may not be able to complete that many entries and would ask that you attempt to make at least three entries per week on different days, including two weekdays and one weekend day. If you need additional space, please use the reverse side of the day’s journal entry sheet. Be sure to number any responses provided on the backs of pages so that I can tell which question is being answered. Also, the journal booklet includes some extra blank pages at the end. If you are willing to do so, please indicate there any thoughts you may have about the journaling experience and anything that you learned in the process.

This journal will remain anonymous and confidential. You do not need to put your name on or in this journal. If you talk about others in your household, please do not indicate their names either. Simply refer to these individuals as they are related to you. For example, say “my son” or “my daughter” instead of using your son or daughter’s names.

We have agreed that I will pick up your journal on the following date: _____________.

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If you have any questions, please contact me so that I can address any of your concerns. Thank you in advance for your time and efforts in completing the journal for this research study.

Researcher:
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724-840-0493
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Journal Entry Date: _________________
Please use the back of this page if you need additional space for your entries.

1. Please describe at least one meal or snack that you ate today. Include any tasks that you had to do in order to be able to eat that meal or snack.

2. Please discuss whether others in your family ate the same meals or snacks that you did. If they did not do so, please discuss this and what foods others in your family ate that may have been different than what you ate.

3. Please describe any activities or tasks related to food that you did today. Include any activities performed in the home or in other locations. For example, did you prepare any meals, make a shopping list, plan any meals, go to the grocery store, go to the food pantry or seek any other food resources, etc. If others in your family helped you, please discuss how they did so.

4. Please discuss any experiences today when you had to go without food or were concerned that there would not be enough food for your family to eat. Include details such as how long you had to go without food, what led to there not being enough food for you and your family to eat, how were you able to get enough food and how did this experience make you feel.

5. Please share any other thoughts about your experiences with food today that you may not have been able to discuss in any of your other responses.
Appendix D

Adult Informed Consent Form

The Experience of Hunger: Understanding Food Choices and Feeding Decisions in Low-Income Families

You are invited to participate in this research study. The information provided in this form is intended to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate in the study. If you have any questions about any information that is discussed, please do not hesitate to ask.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how families make food-related choices and decisions, especially during times when there may be limited availability of food supplies necessary to meet the needs of these families. Also, I am interested in how food-related choices and decisions create meaning for families.

You have been identified as an eligible person for this study due to your involvement with the food pantry program administered by ICCAP (Indiana County Community Action Program) in Indiana County. However, this research study is being conducted by this researcher, who is a Masters student in the Sociology Department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. This research is not connected in any way with ICCAP or the food pantry program. Your participation in this study will in no way affect your eligibility or standing with ICCAP and the food pantry program. The information obtained in this study will be used for completing my thesis requirements in the Masters program. I may also use this information to publish research articles in journals or to present at academic and professional conferences. Additionally, I may share my findings with local and national food resource programs so that they may identify new ways to help their consumers. Your identity, however, will be kept strictly confidential in any form or forum in which the findings of this study are shared.

You have also been identified as an eligible person for this study due to your responsibilities in the food-related activities of your household. If you choose to participate in the study, I will personally interview you. Your interview will be recorded using a digital voice recorder and then transcribed by myself. The interview questions will gather information about you and your family’s food-related activities, choices, and decisions. First, you will be asked to provide information about yourself and your family members including ages, relationships, and any school and work commitments. Also, you will be asked questions about experiences in your childhood and young adulthood that pertain to food-related activities, choices, and decisions. You will be asked to share personal information that you may find distressing such as experiences that you have had with hunger. You can choose not to answer these questions if you feel that they would make you uncomfortable. If you do not have any responsibilities in the food-related activities of your household, you may not be asked to participate in this portion of the study.

If you are the primary caregiver in your family, you will be asked to keep a journal of food-related experiences and activities in your home for 30 days. A booklet will be provided to
you with instructions for completing the journal. This journal will be anonymous. You can choose not to participate in this part of the study. If you are not the primary caregiver in your family, you may not be asked to participate in this portion of the study.

As part of this study, you may be asked whether or not the researcher can come observe you and your family during mealtime, grocery shopping trips, and at food bank distributions. If you do choose to participate in this portion of the study, we will arrange days and times that are most convenient for you and your family. In observing you and your family, I will take handwritten notes about the food-related activities and experiences I observe. The notes I take will be typed into a word document and the originals will be destroyed. The observations I make will be included as findings in the results of this study. You and any members of your family can choose not to participate in this portion of the study if this makes you uncomfortable.

If you and your family choose to participate in this study, you will receive a modest compensation for your time. The maximum compensation available for your family is $40.00 (total and not per person) and will depend on what portions of the study in which you participate. A compensation of $20.00 (total, not per person) will be provided to your family for the completion of an interview(s) or the completion of an interview(s) and a journal. A compensation of $20.00 (total, not per person) will be provided if your family participates in the observation sessions.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide whether or not to participate in this study. If you do decide to participate, you can change your mind at any time by notifying me that you wish to withdraw from the study. You can withdraw at any time without any penalty. If you withdraw from the study, all information pertaining to you (and your family) will be destroyed.

If you choose to participate, all of your (and your family’s) information will be kept strictly confidential. I will maintain a master file of your name, age, and electronic copies of all study activities that you participate in. Only I will have access to this file. Your identity in all transcripts and observation notes will be kept confidential by using your initials or a pseudonym. I will not use your or any of your family members’ names or other identifying information when I discuss the results of this study. Instead, publications of this research will use alternate names that I assign.

This research is being done by myself, Holly Benton, under the direction of Dr. Melissa Swauger. If you have any questions at any time, please do not hesitate to contact either myself or Dr. Swauger by phone or email.

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If you agree to participate in this study, please sign the attached statement. By signing your name you are agreeing to take part in this research study. Your responses are completely confidential and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I will provide you with an unsigned copy of this informed consent form to keep.

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730).
INFORMED CONSENT FORM: SIGNATURE PAGE

I understand the information provided in the Informed Consent Form and I consent to participate in this research study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of the Informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

NAME (please print): _______________________________________________

Signature: _______________________________________________________

Date: ______________

Phone number where you can be contacted: _______________

Audio recording completed if unable to sign? Yes or No

********************************************************************

I certify that I have read the Informed Consent Form to the above individual and provided a copy of the Informed Consent Form to the above individual for their review prior to signing this form. I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study. I have answered any questions that have been raised and have witnessed the above signature.

Researcher’s signature: __________________________________________

Date: _______________
Appendix E

Child Assent Forms

My name is Holly Benton. I am a student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) and I need to complete a research study. I am going to tell you a little bit about my research study so you can decide if you want to help me or not help me with this study. You can ask me questions at any time while I am explaining my study to you. You can also ask me to explain any words that you do not understand. I would like you to help me because you are a child in a family that is already helping me with my study.

I would like to know what happens during mealtimes in your house. I would also like to know what happens when your family goes to the grocery store and to the food pantry. If you would like to help me, I will need to come and watch you and your family during these times. I will not need to ask you any questions, but you can ask me questions at any time. I promise not to be rude to you or trick you in any way when I answer your questions.

When I come and watch, I will need to write down notes in a notebook so that I can remember what happened later on. In my notes, I will write your name so that I can remember what you did or things you said. Later, I will type these notes into a computer document, but I will not write your name in this computer document. I will use a pretend name for you in the computer document. All of the notes that I wrote in the notebook will be destroyed so that no one knows who you are.

Your parent(s) know that I am asking you to help me with my study and agree that it is okay for you to help me if you want to. You should have a nice time while I am watching your family, but if you do not feel it is a nice time or if you are uncomfortable in any way, you can stop helping me. The things I learn from watching your family may help other families, especially families that may not have enough to eat.

No one is making you help me and you do not have to help me if you do not want to. If you do not want to help me with my study, nothing bad will happen to you and no one will be mad at you. If you decide later that you do not want to be a part of my research study, you or your parent/guardian can tell me that by calling, emailing, or writing to me. All of my notes and computer documents that mention you will be destroyed and I will not include you in my study.

If you do want to be a part of the research study, no one will know who you are and I will not tell anybody. You can pick a pretend name to use or I will pick one for you if you want. I will be spending time with many other families as well. The time I spend with you is just a small part of my research study. When I finish my research study, I might talk about what I learned with other people or write it down so other people can read it. I will always use your pretend name when I talk about what I learned or write it down for others to read.

If you have questions, you or your parent/guardian can contact me at any time. I also have a phone number and email address for my professor who you may contact as well. I will give a copy of this form to you to keep and another copy for your parent/guardian to keep.
If you would like to help me in my study, please print and sign your name on the next page. If you are unable to print and sign your name, please let me know. I will read this consent form to you out loud and you will be asked to tell me whether or not you agree to help me with this study. I will record this on a voice recorder. If you decide later that you do not want to help me, I will destroy this recording as well.

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730).
CHILD'S INFORMED ASSENT FORM: SIGNATURE PAGE

I understand the information in this form and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that no one will know who I am. I can change my mind at any time and agree not to participate. I have an unsigned copy of this form to keep. I understand that my parent/guardian has also agreed to my participation in this study.

Child’s Name (Please Print): _____________________________________________________

Child’s Signature:  _____________________________________________________________

Date: _____________________

Phone number: _____________

Audio recording completed if unable to sign? Yes or No

I certify that I have read the Child Informed Assent Form to the above child and provided a copy of the Child Informed Assent Form to the above individual for their review prior to signing this form. I have explained to the above child the nature and purpose, potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study. I have answered any questions that have been raised and have witnessed the above signature.

Researcher’s signature: _______________________________________________________

Date: _________________
PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT TO CHILD’S PARTICIPATION

I consent to have my child participate in the research study. I understand that my child’s participation is limited to participant observation sessions during mealtimes, grocery shopping trips, and food pantry distributions. I am in agreement that my child may participate in this portion of the study. I understand that my child’s information and identity are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw my child from the study at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of the Child’s Informed Assent Form to keep in my possession. I have also signed and received an unsigned copy of the Informed Consent Form regarding my own participation in the study.

Child’s Name (Please print): ______________________________________________

Parent/Guardian’s Name (Please print): ______________________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature: ________________________________________________

Date: ________________

Phone Number: ______________

Audio recording completed if unable to sign? Yes or No

I certify that I have read the Child’s Informed Assent Form to the above individual and provided a copy of the Child’s Informed Assent Form to the above individual for their review prior to signing this form. I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study. I have answered any questions that have been raised and have witnessed the above signature.

Researcher’s signature: ____________________________________________

Date: ________________
Appendix F

Map of Indiana County

Appendix G

List of Food Pantry Sites and Operating Schedules

ARMSTRONG TOWNSHIP – SHELOCTA BOROUGH
12:30 am – 2:00 pm
Third Tuesday of every month
Shelocta Community Presbyterian Church

BANKS TOWNSHIP – GLEN CAMBELL BOROUGH – CANOE TOWNSHIP
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm
Third Thursday of every month
Rossiter Methodist Church

BLACKLICK BOROUGH – BURRELL TOWNSHIP
11:00 am – 2:00 pm
First Tuesday of every month
Blacklick Presbyterian Church in Blacklick

BLAIRSVILLE BOROUGH
12:00 pm – 1:00 pm
First Tuesday of every month
Blairsville Presbyterian Church, Walnut Street

CLYMER BOROUGH – CHERRYHILL TOWNSHIP
11:00 am – 1:00 pm
Third Thursday of every month
Clymer Fire Hall

GRANT TOWNSHIP
9:30 am – 11:30 am
Fourth Thursday of every month
Calvary Bible Church, 2712 Pine Vale Road – Glen Campbell

GREEN TOWNSHIP
10:00 am – 12:00 pm
Last Wednesday of every month
Commodore Fire Hall

HOMER CITY BOROUGH – CENTER TOWNSHIP
10:00 am – 12:00 pm
Second Thursday of every month
United Methodist Church, Corner of Main & Church Street – Homer City
INDIANA BOROUGH
8:30 am – 10:00 am
Second Tuesday of every month
Trinity United Methodist Church

MONTGOMERY TOWNSHIP – CHERRY TREE BOROUGH
12:30 pm – 2:00 pm
Second Tuesday of every month
Arcadia Presbyterian Church

PINE TOWNSHIP
9:30 am – 12:00 pm
First Tuesday of every month
Pine Township Fire Hall

RAYNE TOWNSHIP – MARION CENTER BOROUGH –
EAST MAHONING TOWNSHIP
9:00 am – 10:30 am
Second Thursday of every month
Marion Center Volunteer Fire Department

SALTSBURG BOROUGH – CONEMAUGH TOWNSHIP
8:00 am – 10:00 am
Third Thursday of every month
Basement of the Saltsburg Community Center, 419 Salt Street

SOUTH MAHONING TOWNSHIP – WEST MAHONING TOWNSHIP –
SMICKSBURG BOROUGH
10:00 am – 12:00 pm
First Thursday of every month
Plumville Presbyterian Church, Main Street – Plumville

UNITED AREA
(Armagh Borough, Brush Valley Township, Buffington Township,
East Wheatfield Township, West Wheatfield Township)
9:00 am – 11:00 am
Fourth Thursday of every month
Brush Valley Fire Hall – Route 259

WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP – CREEKSIDEBOROUGH – ERNEST BOROUGH
10:00 am – 12:00 pm
Second Thursday of every month
Creekside United Methodist Church Education Building
WHITE TOWNSHIP
9:30 am – 11:30 am
Second Tuesday of every month
Church of the Brethren – Route 286 across from Rustic Lodge

YOUNG TOWNSHIP
1:00 pm – 2:30 pm
Third Tuesday of every month
Iselin Community Church