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**Towards greater understanding of healthy food access among childcare workers**

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Amanda S Birnbaum, Stephanie A Navarro Silvera, Megan K Trusdell, Valisha J Andrus.



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**Presenter Disclosures**

**Amanda S. Birnbaum**

The following personal financial relationships with commercial interests relevant to this presentation existed during the past 12 months:

**No relationships to disclose**



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**Background**

- Early childhood education settings are a major focus of childhood obesity efforts.
- Front-line childcare providers – predominantly low-wage earning females – are expected to implement healthy eating guidelines.
- Workers' own food access and experiences that shape their contexts and behaviors have not been well-addressed.



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# Objective

Explore perceptions of local food environments and access to healthy foods among childcare workers in New Jersey.




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## + Why does this matter?

- Social justice perspective
  - Social roles and dependencies
 
  - Food justice
 

At the Shoprite that I go to, there's produce that's available organic. But, not much else... So I don't even know if there's an organic milk available. I'm sure there is, but it's not on the shelves in the Shoprite.

A lot of us are on... welfare... or we have to get food stamps, um, just to get help to buy food alone

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## + Why does this matter?

- Pragmatic perspective
  - Childcare workers educate children about food and eating through much more than just curriculum and standards
    - Observational learning
    - Verbal and nonverbal

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## + Methods

- Semi-structured guides were developed using a socioecological framework.
- Focus groups and interviews were conducted with childcare workers about:
  - Food shopping practices
  - Foods available at their regular stores
  - Affective and interpersonal experiences while shopping.




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## + Methods



Oddly-placed speakers

- Audio recordings
- Transcriptions
- On-going reviews for themes
- Codebook under development

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## + Participants

19 females at two different childcare centers in northern NJ

### Center #1

- University-based childcare center serving infants – pre-K
- Approximately 50 staff
  - Mainly college-educated
  - Unionized, higher wages than usual
- Participants were mostly white, moderate SES

### Center #2

- Community-based childcare center serving infants – pre-K
- Approximately 80 staff
  - College degrees not the norm
  - Low wages
- Participants were mostly African- or Caribbean-American, lower SES

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**+ Shopping environment**

When I think about this Pathmark... it's like, "I've got to hurry up and get out of this store" because it seems... too compact or crowded at times.

I feel like I have the same conversation with myself every time I walk into Stop and Shop... it's always crowded and I'm just like "Why do I come here everyday?"

The people in [Whole Foods], they don't seem very nice to me. Like, you know, you ask them a question and they just assume you should know.

I see people at Whole Foods all the time. Yeah. The shoppers are pretty friendly.

C-Town... that thing was filthy. It was just gross...but yeah...and those are [the] stores that save you money.

Where we shop...it's crowded... Um, some of the stuff that they do have there, it could probably be a little better, but... it's like I said, it's what's affordable for us.

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**+ Budget constraints**

**As the reason for shopping in particular stores...**

The prices at Shoprite are phenomenal. That's why I shop there. You can get two big, huge slices of pizza, with grilled eggplant, roasted red peppers and a can of soda for like \$3.50. It's good quality stuff.

Walmart... it's extremely affordable. That's why I used to shop there.

**... or as a barrier to shopping elsewhere.**

I mean, I would love to shop at Whole Foods (laughter) Trader Joe's, but their prices being ...up there....

It feels like...it's more affordable for...guys like you [moderator], you understand what I'm saying? Like I don't want to make it sound too...like...But that's the way it feels.

This is how much I make so, if you could maybe cut these prices in half, I could get a lot more healthy food.

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**+ Family needs**

I do a big chicken, I do crockpot, I do all that. But then they get tired, they want something different.

We keep kosher in our house, so, sometimes a regular supermarket doesn't have as much as, let's say, a Fairway or Trader Joe's would. So usually we go there...to get meats...

I prefer to cook my own food but, for my daughter and my husband- they don't necessarily eat that healthy food that I'm eating, so that last resort is going to buy them the stuff that they are going to eat, which may include Little Caesar's pizza ...or McDonald's or Chinese food because that's what they like to eat. I'd rather that they not, but, what are you gonna do.

Last week, I bought a rotisserie chicken at Fairway and my husband thought it was the best thing he ever ate, and I'm like "Don't get used to it because it is like \$3 more for a rotisserie chicken at Fairway than Shoprite. So that Shoprite chicken is just fine for you."

My kids like to eat!



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**+ Multiple factors interacting**

My daughter is big. She's bigger than me, now... You want to try to eat healthy for your child...but, listen, tonight is spaghetti cuz that's all Mommy can afford... I want my daughter to lose weight. But in order for her to do that I have to be able to afford [healthy foods to fill her up]...

So if I go getting Perdue chicken [because it's healthier], you know, my kids, they like to eat. Now they're only gonna get one chicken leg. Cuz they're used to getting two. But now, if I gotta spend \$10 on a pack of Perdue, I gotta cut their chicken out.

[Food banks] are good, but a lot of their stuff, don't be fresh... Sometimes you get the bread, it's got mold... When I see something like that, I'm like, no, listen, I'd rather just go ahead and take away from a bill and just go and [buy groceries]

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**+ What we learned**

- Experiences of discrimination
  - They're like, "Do you have money for that?"
  - You got people looking at you like, "What are you doing in here?"
  - It's just a certain look that you get sometimes, you know... people will be like, "She can't afford this gourmet store"
- Perceived unsafe environments were reported as disincentives to shopping at particular stores.
  - I live between two Shoprites... I'm not going to go to East Orange, with my own people... (laughter)... I'm going to West Orange... I'd rather be where I get the looks, to avoid the drama and the fighting!
  - I won't go to that Pathmark because I'm uncomfortable driving there.

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**+ What we learned**

- Some participants avoided stores due to such experiences and perceptions
  - [we] so do not like going into any of those... lower income places, around the first of the month. Because that's when everybody gets their check... mad dash for food shopping
  - A lot of us just stay within where we shop at... You walk into a place... you want to go and try... and you just get these looks.
- Others pushed through barriers to satisfy family food priorities.
  - ...before I started going to Trader Joe's, I thought it was going to be all white people and I walk in and it's not all white people... had I never stepped out of my comfort zone... I would have been assuming all of these years
  - I'm just trying to get some food in my house... I don't care who's in there

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**+ Discussion**

- Childcare workers have complex, heterogeneous histories, practices, and perceptions regarding food.

A lot of us want to eat right like everybody else is eating - of course! But it's hard. It's hard either money-wise... or being looked at a certain way, you don't feel comfortable...

I wish at places like Walmart, Pathmark, Target - well not even Target but like Walmart and Pathmark, would offer more organic and like gluten-free

- Understanding and supporting their healthy food access could both reduce nutrition disparities and strengthen their effectiveness in implementing childcare center policies.



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**+ Where do we go from here?...**

- Continue to seek inclusion of more voices, have not yet reached saturation.
- Explore a concept from architecture - "threshold fear" - as a possible mechanism for racial disparities in perceived access to a full range of food retailers
- Use GIS to explore geographic access and barriers to different food retailers, in light of home and work locations.
- Plan to develop a quantitative instrument to explore findings and relationships among constructs in a larger sample.



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