

**The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Anxiety, Stress, and Resilience in Economically  
Challenged Single Mothers**

By

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of economically challenged single mothers during Covid 19. Mitigating the severe anxiety and stress risks linked with COVID-19 has been a goal of public health incentives. Less effort has been spent on studying the psychological issues connected to the worldwide epidemic, particularly among economically challenged communities. The aims of the study were to explore the impact of anxiety and stress of the COVID 19 pandemic on economically challenged single mothers, to determine the needs of this group, and to identify prevention and interventions that might support them in the event of another pandemic or traumatic event. The study was conducted with a transcendental phenomenological design in which nine single mothers were interviewed. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) technique was used to analyze the data. Eight themes emerged from data analysis: (a) anxiety related to COVID-19, (b) stress related to COVID-19, (c) coping with stress and anxiety, (d) impact on finances, (e) impact on mental health, (f) influence of pandemic on relationships, (h) influence of the pandemic on responsibilities, and (g) resiliency, which described how participants moved forward, despite adversity. Participants experienced increased responsibilities, radical shifts to their work-home life, reduction of income, and feelings of social isolation, anxiety, and stress. In response to their many challenges, the participants were self-reliant, took the time to evaluate their lives, focused on self, were adaptable, and willing to pioneer changes in career and home life.

*Keywords:* economically challenged single parents, COVID-19, anxiety, stress

### **Dedication**

I am grateful to God for giving me this passage of scripture in my life, when I had to believe beyond what I could see in the natural. “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God *is* with you wherever you go,” (Joshua 1:9) is what carried me across the finish line in completing this program. My husband Nickey has been my rock and I appreciate the patience he had with me on this academic journey. Our seven wonders of greatness (our children), I am thankful for the support you provided when needed the most. Stephanie Howard, Jean Leake, Dr. Donna Saunders are angels who held my arms up when I felt overwhelmed, I appreciate your acts of support and kindness that were selfless. Lastly, I dedicate this to the single mothers in our world who have proven to be resilient despite the challenges they are confronted with daily.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The mental health of economically challenged single mothers, as well as their coping and resiliency, during the COVID-19 pandemic remains unclear. Because of the pandemic-induced lockdown, the living arrangements of low-income families shifted dramatically. For many single mothers, maintaining mental health may have been challenging due to the actions that needed to be taken to stop it from spreading. The greatest fear has been that a new disease would infect the whole world's population. When the virus was first discovered, scientists had no idea what it would do, how it would spread, or how long it would take to recover. Thus, many people were terrified and worried, not knowing whether they would become sick or what would happen to the people they cared about and if they would be infected with the virus (Preis et al., 2020).

Scientists learned more about the virus, and as a result, worldwide attempts to restrict and stop its spread started. As a response, the United States enacted travel restrictions, obligatory business closures, remote learning in K-12 schools, a quarantine, and stay-at-home orders. There were also severe shortages of food and other necessities in several areas. The suddenness of these significant changes exacerbated the fear and terror of many single parents, and the resulting toll on their mental health was disproportionately severe (Liu et al., 2020). However, to date, there have been few studies that have included the voices of economically challenged single mothers about their experiences with stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whereas education and income have been related to lower levels of family members' happiness in general (Feinberg et al., 2016), it is unknown how these variables might predict changes in anxiety and stress moods during a high-stress period like the pandemic. It is possible that the degree of wellbeing among economically challenged mothers was low enough prior to the pandemic that extra pandemic-related stresses may have had minimal impact. In other words,

these mothers may have already learned how to cope with an abundance of stressors, so that added stressors may have had little or no influence on their inherent coping skills, which were dependent on the environment they were used to (Feinberg et al., 2016). In addition, these mothers have been shown to be highly resilient (Feinberg et al., 2016).

### **Background**

The various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were likely to have greatly increased the anxiety and stress that economically challenged single mothers were already experiencing prior to the pandemic. Many parents lost their jobs because of the closures, which resulted in financial troubles and increased stress for them and their families. Working from home due to quarantine and stay-at-home restrictions, while taking care of children and doing household chores was likely to present additional responsibilities and challenges for single mothers. These mothers were expected to be available for video conferencing during business hours and home school their children, while continuing to perform their work responsibilities. Also, company closures likely had a large impact economically; single parents are typically the primary breadwinners in their homes, and their families would suffer financially if they were fired or furloughed (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020).

Even if their workplaces remained open, single parents who depend on schools and institutions for childcare may have been unable to work because of childcare worries. Trying to comprehend government and media messages and make choices that are in the best interests of their children may lead to a great deal of anxiety and stress for parents (Feinberg et al., 2022). Thus, many single parents may neglect their emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing to care for their children (Alexander et al., 2021).

## Historical

Compared to other demographic categories, economically challenged single parents have a higher risk of mental health issues (Babalis et al., 2018). Single parents often need to assume a greater number of roles and responsibilities and appear to struggle more than two-parent families Van et al. (2020). Hastings et al. (2021) than for married women with children. Many children (87%) living with one parent reside with noted that poverty rates are substantially higher for unmarried women with children at all levels of education for the mother (Lundberg et al. 2016). On the other hand, cohabitation, nonmarital childrearing, and divorce have become more acceptable. In this case, economically challenged single mothers should be of concern to those who can foster the types of changes needed to enable this group to compete fairly with other subgroups, especially when seeking resources.

Several variables have an impact on mental health, including family relationships, life dissatisfaction, and chronic stress, all of which raises one's vulnerability to developing mental health disorders. According to Babalis et al. (2018), single parent families have a harder time embracing their family, as well as their own social circumstances, which explains why their mental health may be jeopardized more than other subgroups during the epidemic. As one might anticipate, lower-risk parents had lower levels of depression before the pandemic than higher-risk parents, according to Feinberg et al. (2022).

Because of considerable social and financial disparities not observed in two-parent families, the socially impaired economic status of single mother households continues to widen. The family structure is described as an axis of inequality in contemporary America. Moreover, as the demography of American families continue to change, it appears this will increasingly be the case (Hastings & Schneider, 2021).

There are reasons to believe that the economic trends within these groups will continue to pose challenges, even while governmental policies are enacted in an attempt to level the playing ground and provide needed resources in the faces of a crisis such as the pandemic. These factors have to do with income shifts due to job loss, reduced hours, and the need for childcare for mothers who continued to work outside the home during the pandemic.

In terms of self-reported mental health, single parent participants reached or surpassed the national norm, but fell short of the national average in all mental health areas (Jacoby et al., 2017). Moreover, 40% of single parents reported they were depressed in some way. High levels of stress were reported by single parents because of competing priorities, financial insecurity, and concern for their children's wellbeing and safety (Jacoby et al., 2017). This confirms that mental health treatments are in high demand. Feinberg et al. (2022) noted, "In the past, economic crises have led to increased parent stress, [and] mental health problems (p. 323). At the time of this writing, it was conceivable that single mothers would become increasingly vulnerable to the anxiety and stressors the pandemic presented as the epidemic progressed. More knowledge on this subject would give resources for various initiatives that wish to help this group (Babalis et al., 2018).

## **Social**

Social isolation during the pandemic may have created added stress for economically challenged single mothers. Friends, family members (who may have also been childcare providers), churches, and counselors are all sources of social support for many single parents. Being isolated may have had a profound effect on their anxiety and stress levels. Feinberg et al. (2020) wrote, "In addition to work and financial disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic,

families have experienced enormous stress due to seclusion within households, social isolation, [and] concern about the health of family and friends” (p. 363).

### **Theoretical**

The framework of the study is resiliency theory. Resiliency theory consists of four strengths postulated by Bernard (2004 as cited in Cambri, 2021): (a) social competency (b) problem-solving (c) autonomy (d) sense of purpose. Social competency is described as one’s ability to connect with friends and coworkers in a way that assists individuals in bouncing back positively from adversities. Problem solving is the ability to use critical thinking skills to actively work through and find solutions to their problems. Autonomy is relying on oneself, being assertive, and demonstrating faith in oneself. Autonomy allows individuals to decide how they choose to embrace the challenges around them. Sense of purpose is finding meaning in adversity. This theory is appropriate for this study because it addresses the situation of at-risk individuals. Economically challenged single mothers who were coping with the anxiety and stresses of COVID-19 were considered to be an at-risk group for the potential development of mental health concerns (Feinberg et al., 2022). They were also expected to display resilience in coping with the challenges of COVID-19.

### **Situation to Self**

My motivation for this study was to identify any needs that arose for single mothers during the pandemic. Lack of support needed during such a terrifying historic event would have created additional anxiety and stress for them. I wanted to help understand their unique needs by exploring their experiences and how they coped with all the different changes brought to their lives by the pandemic. This research study was intended to give me and other human services workers, social workers, educators, and community advocates insight into the experiences of

single mothers during the pandemic regarding how to best direct services to suit their mental health needs during a crisis. I approached this study from a transcendental phenomenological lens, which allowed me to describe the experiences of single mothers during the pandemic. Immanuel Kant described this approach as comprehending things as they appear, which is the specific mode of knowing (Kant, 2017).

Although single mothers have many aspects in common, it is likely that everyone will have experiences unique to them; therefore, it was important to track the individual experiences separately while acknowledging similarities when they apply. In keeping with the transcendental phenomenological approach, it was my intention to describe the core of these single mother's experiences during the pandemic in their own words, by capturing the reality of their lived experience.

### **Problem Statement**

In terms of the level of disruption to individuals' lives due to the pandemic, single mothers were likely to be among the ones most severely affected. There was significant anxiety in the entire population regarding how lethal COVID-19 was, how contagious, and many people were dying immediately after contracting it. Many others went on ventilators and never recovered. With the pandemic-induced lockdowns and the limitations of childcare, the living arrangements of low-income families shifted dramatically and could have possibly created additional anxiety and stress for single mothers. Moreover, for those who lost their jobs, the pandemic would have caused financial anxiety. Given all the stressors that economically challenged single mothers were experiencing prior to the pandemic, it is likely that many single mothers may have experienced increased challenges in maintaining their mental health under these conditions.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of economically challenged single mothers during COVID-19. The central phenomenon that was explored was their anxiety, stress, and resiliency during the pandemic, and the theory that guided this study was resiliency theory. Economically challenged mothers were thought to have specific ways of coping with their anxiety during the pandemic and were also expected to demonstrate some level of resilience in the face of the economic and relational hardships the pandemic posed. Resiliency theory helps to explain what factors enable individuals to be resilient in the face of adversity. A phenomenological approach was used to assist the researcher in providing a detailed description of the reality these mothers lived during COVID-19 and their perceived value of the experience. Nine participants were invited to share their experiences through semi-structured interviews, which allowed them to provide a detailed narrative of their experience. The data were analyzed with NVivo, a software program used to conduct qualitative analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

### **Significance of the Study**

Research indicates that traditional American families are transforming, and the family structure in the United States is undergoing important changes, as evidenced by increases in single parenting and cohabiting unions (Hastings & Schneider, 2021). The number of non-marital births is likewise increasing at an alarming rate. Some experts believe that by the end of the century, non-marital births will account for more than 40% of all births (Popenoe, 2017). These changes are defining the differences that exist between single parents and other groups in our country. This study will contribute needed knowledge about the experiences of economically challenged single mothers during the pandemic. It can serve as a baseline to investigate

differences between this population in contrast to two-parent homes. The study served as a way to evaluate the approaches that were used to offset the hardship experienced by these mothers. Comparison research could identify how poorly these mothers fared in comparison to other groups. More knowledge on this subject would give resources for various initiatives that are designed to help this group (Babalís et al., 2018). Also, researching this information will aid in the development of a preparedness plan to accommodate individuals in need in the event of a disaster.

This phenomenological study also has empirical and practical significance for human services workers, social workers, educators, and community advocates who are concerned about the mental effects of single mothers during the pandemic. The aim of the study was to describe specifically how single mothers experienced anxiety and stress during the pandemic and the effects the stressors had on their mental health. For single mothers who are concerned about their anxiety and stress, the findings of this study may illuminate ways these mothers successfully coped and were resilient in the face of a range of stressors and changes to their lives. These factors could support them during another crisis experienced beyond a pandemic. Results from this study can also inform both prevention and intervention programs to support single mothers in providing the services required in the event of another pandemic or crisis.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this transcendental phenomenological study. The central research question of this study was, “What are the experiences of economically challenged single mothers with respect to stress and anxiety?” There were four research questions that were used to address this central question:

**RQ1:** How was anxiety, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, perceived by economically challenged single mothers?

**RQ2:** How was stress, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, perceived by economically challenged single mothers?

**RQ3:** In what ways did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the relationships of economically challenged single mothers?

**RQ3:** In what ways did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the responsibilities of economically challenged single mother?

### **Summary**

The pandemic's impacts have had a strong negative effect on parents, and the pandemic's clinical consequences for parents' anxiety and stress are severe (Feinberg et al., 2022). In terms of clinical significance during the pandemic, parents were 2.4 times more likely than previously to score in the clinical range on depression and anxiety (Feinberg et al., 2022). Because of the pandemic's ongoing existence in our world, its enormous impact is still being recorded. The effects of the pandemic were likely to have had even more severe impacts on economically challenged single mothers due to the stress placed on them as a result of their low-income status (Cox & Abrams, 2020). It is likely that these mothers experienced greater disruptions when compared to other populations. Many parents lost their jobs because of the closures, which increased financial anxiety and was likely to increase the stress placed on them and their families. Working from home due to quarantine and stay-at-home restrictions while taking care of children and doing household chores was likely to present additional responsibilities and challenges for single mothers (Fernberg et al., 2022).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of economically challenged single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such research is needed, because if a future pandemic occurs, every effort should be taken to establish appropriate preparations. It is critical to be aware of the efficacy and of the drawbacks of current practices to ensure that appropriate protocols are created in case of a second pandemic. Although an evaluation of the potential consequences of a pandemic was performed prior to the crisis, if no concrete plan is put in place, the identified difficulties will persist, and it is critical to assess the effects of anxiety and stress on economically challenged single mothers' family homes. Current data should be used to propose and implement a plan to address the needs of this population.

The multiple variances of COVID-19 that, at the time of this writing, were impacting the population at large, and economically challenged single mothers in particular, continues to substantiate a need for ongoing research. To date, few studies had explored the various impacts of the pandemic on anxiety levels and mental health of economically challenged single mothers. Determining the types of resources that are needed to make improvements or necessary changes due to the pandemic must remain ongoing (Feinberg et al., 2022). This chapter presented the statement of the problem this study was designed to address, as well as the study's purpose, background, and significance. The next chapter will review the literature that supports the study.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The mental health of economically deprived single parents who are affected by COVID-19 is currently understudied. More research is needed to properly understand the impact of the pandemic on this group, which was already experiencing more stress than their two-parent wealthier counterparts (Cox & Abrams, 2020). For example, not only do economically challenged single mothers have less financial resources, they also have fewer non-financial resources to help with their stress than married mothers. These kinds of resources put single mothers at a disadvantage and compound the financial stress they experience (Gard et al., 2020). Murthy (2020) stated that the economic distress of single parents has radically transformed preexisting living arrangements of the disadvantaged, according to early effects of the pandemic-induced lockdown. This conclusion is based on changes in social identity, as well as improvements in education and health care systems that have narrowed social divides (Murthy, 2020). The following review of the literature focuses on women, specifically single mothers, who are also known as single parents.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Resiliency Theory was developed by Bernard (2004 as cited in Cambri, 2021) to explain how at-risk individuals can be resilient when faced with situations that seem to be out of their control. The theory consists of four strengths: (a) social competency (b) problem-solving (c) autonomy (d) sense of purpose. Social competency is a strength that individuals utilize when they are able to connect with friends and coworkers in a way that helps them overcome challenges. Problem solving occurs when individuals are more focused on using their thinking skills to find solutions rather than allow the problems to fester on an emotional level. When faced with adversity, individuals are able to be resourceful and adaptive. Individuals with

autonomy are self-reliant, have faith in themselves, and believe they can make choices that will improve their situation. Sense of purpose occurs when individuals are able to see positive aspects of their difficult life experiences and find meaning in them (Bernard 2004 as cited in Cambri, 2021).

This theory is appropriate for this study because it explains how individuals can utilize their strengths when experiencing very difficult situations. According to Hologue et al. (2020), the pandemic brought changes to every aspect of life. These changes included work changes, “reduced time for self-care and disrupted work-life-balance, which can contribute to increased distress” (p. 4). Moreover, Hologue found that, “Those who reported that the virus was a threat to the U.S. economy or to their own personal finances had significantly higher distress, consistent with an initial report by Pew Research Center” (p. 4). Economically challenged mothers would fit this group, as they were already experiencing financial challenges before the pandemic. Therefore, economically challenged single mothers who were coping with the anxiety and stresses of COVID-19 were an at-risk group for the potential development of mental health concerns. Despite their challenges, the participants in this study were expected to display all four strengths of resilience in coping with the challenges of COVID-19.

### **Related Literature**

Despite the complexities and challenges of single parenthood, more single-parent households are emerging across all socioeconomic levels. This increase in single-parent households indicates a need for additional classifications and examinations of types of single mother households mentioned by Malczyk and Lawson (2017). This section will review the literature on single mothers and the various classifications explored by research. It will also review the relevant challenges of single mothers, such as childcare responsibilities, substandard

health and mental health treatment, caring for children with specialized needs, stigma, and psychological wellbeing. The literature on COVID will also be reviewed.

### **Single Mothers**

According to the Pew Research Center, between 25% and 30% of children under the age of 18 live in single-parent households in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), showing that this demographic is on the rise. During the second half of the 20th century, the percentage of children living with single parents increased significantly in the US (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In the 1960s, only 9% of children lived with single parents; by 2012, this figure rose to 28%, indicating that single parent households are rapidly increasing. There is an increased need for additional support within this population, especially during times of crisis, such as the pandemic presented. In this section, various classifications of single mothers are reviewed, including single by choice, grandmothers, and widows. Then childcare responsibilities, stigma, psychological wellbeing, and depression will be covered.

### ***Classifications***

**Single by Choice.** Although the foundation of parenthood is still very much built on traditional values and morals, conflict often emerges between those who are committed to traditional parenthood style versus those who are committed to contemporary parenthood style (Banducci et al., 2016). Parenthood in the United States is highly valued and challenged by these different groups. Constitutional understandings of parenthood have shifted, in consideration of "new insights and societal understandings" about the family. For much of the nation's history, attaching parenthood exclusively to marriage seemed "natural and just" to many. But, as the Supreme Court's decisions on "illegitimacy" and the unmarried show, this approach eventually came to be seen as harmful and discriminatory (Ne Jaime, 2020). The historical connection to

parenthood is being challenged by these new perceptions of what parenthood should or should not be, and currently, parenthood is based on an individual's choice regarding how they decide to integrate parenthood into their family structure.

According to Van et al. (2020), single parenthood by choice can be viewed through the lens of a single parent's life path and social network. In this approach, single parenting by choice was linked to other parental transitions and was established as a life cycle norm. Parenthood by choice is seen as distinct from other single parent groups, each of which has its own set of problems. Assuming the responsibilities of single parenthood can be tasking, and the cultural script of "intensive mothering" as equal to "good mothering" may have been a factor in enabling single women to reconcile solo motherhood with being a "good" parent. The characteristics of intensive motherhood is "child-centered, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive" (p. ); hence these aspects might encourage individuals to consider the ramifications of this role when considering single parenthood.

The current study was interested in knowing if mothers who had this perspective were challenged by their choices during an ongoing pandemic and if they were able to access the resources they needed during this time. With such stressors brought on by the pandemic, single parents, and in this case mothers, may have second-guessed their abilities to raise children on their own. It was the assumption of this researcher that some single mothers would have found alternative resources that served them better during the crisis, and they would no longer favor what served them well before the pandemic.

**Grandmothers.** There is limited study on the coping techniques of single parents' grandparents who are full-time grandparents to their grandkids. There is a critical need for research that outlines the problems faced by grandparents, particularly custodial grandmothers,

with respect to their parenting methods and their grandchildren's wellbeing (Dunifon, 2013). Grandparents are frequently put in a precarious position because their adult offspring have psychological and physical issues that prevent them from caring for their own children.

Extensive research on custodial grandmothers' coping abilities would be a critical first step in preventing them from becoming depressed because of many stressors they may experience (e.g., financial hardship, lack of formal / informal support, lifestyle upheaval, conflict with custodial grandmothers' parents, and health changes). If their psychological wellbeing is impaired, their capacity to offer appropriate direction and support to their grandkids is harmed. This type of emotional disturbance causes discomfort and makes it difficult for them to establish a supportive home and a healthy environment for their children (Dunifon, 2013).

**Widows.** When a woman loses her husband due to death, she becomes a widow, and her parenting status changes to single motherhood. Widowhood might have occurred because of a partner's death. For example, according to Bauer-Maglin et al. (2019), there are widows who lose a spouse in the early stages of their marriage, those who had weathered the years of raising children, those who had experienced the ups and downs that come with a long marriage, and those who were entering those much-welcomed golden years of marriage. They became widows with obligations after an unexpected or predicted death, and some of those widows become single parents with children.

According to Das (2016), widows are more likely to slip into poverty because their absent husband is no longer around to make up for the gap in finances. There is a pressing need for governmental measures that will help widowed, separated, or divorced mothers avoid poverty. There is also a fundamental need to reduce the risk of depression and other mental health issues for the sake of the single mother and for her children.

The pandemic was devastating for many, especially for those with minimum support who were compromised because they found themselves with no backup support. Resources that may have come from a loved one who became sick or died may make it extremely difficult for the widow to cope or manage daily responsibility matters. The mandated quarantine isolated many, and it is important to examine how those dealing with the loss of a spouse while still having to care for their children coped with the subsequent isolation and perhaps lack of support.

### ***Coparenting Responsibilities***

Some of the stresses that many single mothers experience are due to coparenting arrangements. Fagan and Kaufman (2015) discussed how coparenting is a multidimensional construct, including both negative and positive components. Many of the same multidimensional components of coparenting (e.g., undermining of each other, support of decisions, division of labor) that are relevant to coresidential fathers and mothers are also relevant to low-income unmarried, nonresidential parents, indicating the commonality among these subgroups when sharing responsibilities. Multiple dynamics exist within the coparenting family structure and require different levels of insight to determine what resources are needed when serving this community.

Effective cooperation between coparents might be extremely beneficial to this group. According to Fagan and Kaufman (2015), one parent who is unhappy with the other parent's choice of "new relationship" may limit that parents' social and physical engagement. Due to the ongoing conflict, a good option for the child would be to visit one parent on a restricted basis. Mediation may be necessary when seeking a practical way to reduce conflict in this situation. Discord in the interparental relationship might be a reflection of broader parental issues encapsulating their disputes. According to family systems theory, family interactions are

governed by boundaries or implicit rules and guidelines for interacting within and across family subsystems (Parry et al., 2020).

The correlation of depression and coparenting creates the potential for a vicious cycle of depression. It is possible for coparenting conflicts to persist and undermine gains (e.g., educational opportunities, social growth, or job possibilities). Giallo et al. (2021) indicated that when one coparent is in a healthy place, the other is likely to be in a healthy place as well.

According to Fagan and Kaufman (2015), the number of children born to unmarried parents or to numerous parenting partners is on the rise. Coparenting in the lives of many people is expected to grow increasingly prevalent, according to data. As a result, it is critical to extend our definition of coparenting to include more than simply a connection between a mother, father, and child, allowing for additional alternatives and approaches to be considered when evaluating this group. Understanding the complexities of these subgroups may assist policy makers and researchers in explaining why resources in this community are so limited.

### ***Child Care Responsibilities***

**Stresses Associated with Child Care.** As evidenced by Bodnar (2007), women have historically been more active in assuming caretaking responsibilities than males. Whereas single mothers may assume primary responsibility for child rearing, they must also assume the role of provider. As a result, there is less hands-on engagement with everyday childcare responsibilities. According to research, there was widespread worry that the COVID-19 epidemic would exacerbate the gender gap and gender inequality in the workplace, particularly among mothers with small children (Guatimosim, 2020).

Despite the physical and emotional consequences of inactivity and social isolation, parents felt obligated to prioritize their children's safety by restricting mobility outside of the

home (Jacoby et al., 2017). As parents tried to protect their children, putting these limitations in place may have caused a great deal of stress. The effort that parents made in low-income communities to protect their children from neighborhood troubles in general may be contrasted with how parents were forced to impose a similar limitation, in this instance, due to the epidemic. Given the tremendous challenges that families are facing because of the COVID-19 epidemic, effective family leadership—characterized by nurturing, guiding, and protection—is critical (Prime et al., 2020). However, during times of stress and uncertainty, family leadership might be jeopardized (Prime et al., 2020).

**Parents Who Care for Specialized Needs Children.** Mahomed et al. (2021) mentioned that parenting practices of mothers were not influenced by their marital status. This study revealed that mothers of children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) also experienced a lack of adequate family and school support. The emotional and physical demands for caring for such a child requires great discipline and coping skills.

According to developmental psychology theories, the importance put on parenthood and the impact it has on children is significant. According to research, variables that have a positive influence, such as support with autonomy, lead to positive results; however, negative elements lead to developmental difficulties (Rueth et al., 2017). Gard et al. (2020) supported the idea that married moms have greater noneconomic resources than single-parents or cohabiting parents; they tend to have greater levels of social support and reduced psychological distress, but education and cognitive capacity serve to provide relief during economic downturns.

**Children's Substandard Medical and Mental Health Care.** Many single mother households are in danger of not receiving the required psychological care. It is not uncommon for poor or marginalized children to receive subpar medical care. Moreover, emotional trauma

indicators are frequently overlooked during physical exams, and mental health therapy for this population is also overlooked and underutilized (Arditti, 2019). Moreover, the COVID-19 epidemic, according to Wang et al. (2020), had a devastating impact on the wellbeing of school-aged children. The interplay between lifestyle changes and psychological stress induced by home confinement exacerbated the stressors on children and may have had a negative impact on their physical and mental health. These effects often pose vicious cycles and leave residual lifetime effects on both parents and school age children. Hiratani & Hohashi (2021) reported a greater prevalence of depression amongst single parents caring for a disabled child in comparison to a two-parent household or mothers caring for healthy children, especially when handling additional stressors related to the pandemic.

### *Social Stigmas*

There is limited research on how societal stigmas impact the wellbeing of single parents in countries where two-parent households are valued. Due to negative stigma, societal norms may be a determining factor in how single parent households see themselves. For example, single parents are associated with some of the same attitudes exemplified toward social welfare issues, which are often viewed in a negative light (Banducci et al., 2016). According to one study, single parents are less satisfied with their lives than either coupled parents or childless adults (Otonkorpi et al., 2021). During COVID-19, in addition to dealing with this negative reputation, economically challenged single mothers were also dealing with the impacts of a pandemic that has severely influenced their ability to address their mental and physical needs. This study was interested in exploring how these single parents coped given their societal insecurities.

Despite the challenges that single mothers face, they are frequently seen attempting to develop trust and foster a caring relationship with their children while still preserving their livelihood (Nonoyama et al., 2017). In Nonoyama et al.'s (2017) study, even though single moms and single dads were less active in the home than a stay-at-home parent in a two-parent family, their determination to be present for their children was more apparent. Despite the difficulties they may experience in accomplishing day-to-day tasks, they may maintain a consistent level of participation. Homework supervision, transportation to and from events, and the development of social networks are just a few of these activities. These level of involvement fosters a good mental condition by creating a healthy atmosphere.

### ***Psychological Wellbeing of Single Mothers***

According to Pujar et al. (2018), mental health is a condition of wellbeing in which individuals achieve their own potential, have the resources to cope with everyday stressors, work successfully, and contribute to his or her community; all while dealing with present and unanticipated occurrences. Individuals' emotional and cognitive responses to daily stress influence their health behavior and decisions, daily enactment, and contribute to their usual behaviors. Long-term health effects emerge throughout time, emphasizing the necessity of adopting preventative measures.

Hakovirta et al. (2021) found that single parents are less satisfied with their lives than either coupled parents or childless adults, which may be due to the increased responsibilities and stressors on single parents. Single mothers may be more likely than mothers in two parent households to have work-family conflicts. Flouri (2017) explained how children from early childhood to middle adolescence are influenced by their mothers' work-family conflict; this influence is consistent regardless of the child's age, which highlights the importance of a

mother's mental health and the need for her to be stable for both she and her children. The current study investigated how the pandemic may have influenced the types of stressors single mothers are exposed to, and subsequently, the mental health of single mothers.

### ***Depression Associated with Parenting in Single Mothers***

Depression is characterized by emotions of hopelessness and despair. It is critical to recognize that depression is not limited to instances in which a person is confronted with a life crisis; a variety of other life-altering events may also affect an individual's mental condition. The sacrifices single mothers make for their children are frequently made despite or because of a lack of economic accessibility. Whereas financial stability does not protect one from the emotional impacts of a traumatic experience, according to research, as one might anticipate, lower-risk parents had lower levels of depression before the pandemic than higher-risk parents (Feinberg et al., 2022). It is interesting that high-risk parents' depression did not increase to the extent that low-risk parents did due to the pandemic. Both lower and higher-risk parents showed increases in depression due to the pandemic, but lower-risk parents' increases were greater, bringing their levels of depression nearer to those recorded by higher-risk parents (Feinberg et al., 2022).

Another study found that single parent moms were more worried and sadder, and as a result, they were more likely to suffer from mental disorders. According to a survey performed in Canada, single parents managed 18.3% of households. In comparison to paired parents, solitary mothers had 11.8% higher depression and anxiety disorder. These findings raise concerns about the pandemic's overall influence on single mothers' depression levels (Naz et al., 2020). It should be noted that while divorced and unmarried single moms have been demonstrated to have higher levels of psychological difficulties, this was not shown to be the case in research of single

mothers by choice, showing that single motherhood is not necessarily the problem (Golombok, et al., 2016).

### ***Single Mother Resiliency***

Single moms' resiliency, according to Wilson et al. (2016) is demonstrated by their capacity to support their family physically and financially, even if it means sacrificing their own mental health. Furthermore, according to Nonoyama et al. (2017), single mothers are more likely to assume additional responsibility for common home duties, such as managing finances and food preparation, which may contradict traditional parenting responsibilities, such as spending quality time with the family. Despite the challenges that single mothers face, they work at developing trust and a caring relationship with their children while maintaining their livelihood, according to Nonoyama et al. (2017). In Nonoyama et al.'s (2017) study, single mothers and fathers were determined to be present for their children. Despite the emotional difficulties they experience in day-to-day tasks, they maintained a consistent level of participation.

### **Economically Challenged Single Mothers**

#### ***Lack of Accessibility to Resources***

Economically challenged single mothers may be subjected to different outcomes during the pandemic than other subgroups because of the lack of accessibility to much needed resources. Those who are front line workers must contend with work schedules that conflict with the time frame that places of business are open. They are also challenged with not having children old enough to pick up items on their behalf. In addition, there is mounting evidence that technology-assisted treatments in socially disadvantaged communities are ineffective. It is often difficult to create required relationships without a direct contact component (e.g., in-person, video, or phone conversations). Thus, in addition to addressing concerns of access to technology,

customizing healthy services to economically disadvantaged families is critical to ensuring that underlying disparities in access to care are not perpetuated (Prime et. al., 2020).

Zhang (2022) supported the theory that multisectoral support should specifically target those in precarious occupations, those in single and crowded households, and those with preexisting health conditions, to tackle the existing inequalities incurred by the pandemic. Such measures would ensure the mental and physical wellness for all.

Gallet and Laufer (2019) discovered another important issue among the single parents they questioned: their difficulties in moving around due to a lack of public transportation and the absence of a driver's license. Such factors not only limit their capacity to engage in community events, but it also makes it difficult for them to interact with friends and family, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

### ***Emotional and Physical Impacts***

Most parents find the transition to parenting stressful, and the stress associated with parenting has been related to parent and family relationship dysfunctions; such research necessitates careful consideration of the compounding impacts of COVID-19 on the lives of single mothers (Feinberg et al., 2016). Parents' urge to safeguard their children is instinctive. Throughout their lives, most parents do everything they can to protect, care for, and prepare their children. When circumstances arise that prevent them from performing these natural parental tasks, it can leave a parent feeling hopeless and unsure. These issues can occur in either a single parent or a two-parent home. The prospect of not being able to provide on this level can be dangerous to a parent's mental health and can undermine a parent's self-worth due to unrealistic expectations about their capacity to do so.

Another study found that single parent mothers were more worried and sadder and that they were more likely to suffer from mental disorders. Naz et al. (2020), whose research was conducted in Canada indicated that single mothers manage 18.3% of households. Their findings suggest that single mothers have 11.8% higher rates of depression and anxiety disorder than other parent groups. As the pandemic continues to affect communities, such research raises questions about the overall effect on single mothers regarding levels of anxiety and depression (Naz et al., 2020).

Current research reports that economically challenged single mothers often have a long history of mental health issues (Cox & Abrams, 2020). Even before the epidemic, the stressors associated with low-income and single parenting had an influence on their capacity to function and thrive (Cox & Abrams, 2020). There is still a substantial lack of evidence to analyze the mental health effects of people who survive a worldwide pandemic.

During the pandemic-induced lockdown, this group was substantially less likely to be physically active (Maertl et al., 2021). Despite their commonalities, many subgroups have mental health issues that are specific to their dynamics. The findings of this study will serve as a foundation for rehabilitation and support programs aimed at raising awareness of economically challenged single mothers, and ideally, encouraging intervention.

### ***The Role of Societal and Social Support***

According to Daryanani et al. (2016), there is nothing intrinsically bad about growing up in a home with a single mother. In truth, the majority of single mother's children are well-adjusted (Shook et al., 2010). Single moms and their children's perseverance in the face of hardship is notable and should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Schools and the community are urged to support single moms and their children by assisting them in ensuring their children's

success while also acknowledging their resiliency (Wilson et al., 2016). Gender characteristics might substantially influence the social adjustment of children from single-parent homes, according to Chen et al. (2019). These may include the concrete meaning of gender-role types, connecting the parent's role to the child's gender choice based on the parent's qualities, and/or the absence of parental supervision. According to the findings of this study, single parents' physical and mental wellbeing is aided by social support.

Moreover, some low-income families that face a variety of economic challenges may have restricted access to broad and large social networks (McArthur & Winkworth, 2017). As a result, single parents frequently seek help from organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, which function as fatherly or motherly mentors to youngsters. Single moms frequently urge these folks to be a part of their children's life in addition to their mediating position, and as a result, they become an essential part of their children's/parenting network, which is a choice for many lower-income families. These organizations provide an additional advantage to single parents by assisting in the replacement of an absent parent in the household (Johnson et al., 2018).

### ***Community Support Needed for Single Mothers***

The justifiable need for community colleges to provide support for single-parent females, who are courageously balancing academics and raising children, is highly substantiated (Lovell & Scott, 2020). Shenoy et al. (2016) reported that single-parent students face competing demands and may experience a higher incidence of mental health difficulties, including suicidal attempts while attending school. Additional support services are needed to meet the challenges single parent mothers face.

### *Minority Single Mothers*

In comparison to other single mothers, Black moms may have more to worry about, and their stressors have increased disproportionately since the COVID-19 epidemic began. Their stressors related to protecting their children may have increased. Some Black moms spend a significant amount of time educating their children about police and other authorities. The goal of these conversations is to protect their children by raising awareness about the need to decrease racial profiling and stereotyping. These moms are worried about their children's safety, so they start preparing them to avoid becoming victims. Black mothers make a concerted attempt to engage in meaningful communication with their children to help them avoid conflict (Turner, 2020). These mothers' express anxiety about their boys' ability to manage interactions with police. Difficulties affecting single Black women grew disproportionately during the pandemic, compared to other single parent households. Whereas this group is concerned about these issues. Jackson and Preston (2019) claimed that economically low income single-parent Black households are more stressed and vulnerable in general. Increased stress and harsh parenting may have a greater negative influence on Black children, according to Conger et al. (1992). It has been suggested that this demographic was more vulnerable during the pandemic than the other single mother households

According to Abrams et al. (2019), Black women may adopt false pretenses because of the cultural pressures to demonstrate strength in their parenting methods. Because Black women frequently feel compelled to maintain this sort of character, they do not disclose their real mental health state. The tendency of Black women in the United States to hide their mental health concerns has undoubtedly led to their underutilization of psychological treatments. This population will continue to be at risk unless adequate assessments are conducted to treat them

appropriately. The resources required will be distinct from those required by the other single mothers. Black women are less likely to seek mental health treatment for their symptoms of depression because of stereotypes and beliefs associated with mental illness. Whereas 20% of the American population reported receiving treatment for depression, only 7% of Black women with this diagnosis sought treatment (Armstrong, 2020). Furthermore, Armstrong (2020) explained the outcome of those treated for depression based on cultural and economic differences exist under a false premise; they present a perceived image that is interpreted as, “I am ok, but really, I am not.”

## **Biblical Perspectives on Single Motherhood**

### ***Biblical Single Motherhood***

According to Genesis 16, Hagar, an Egyptian woman, was forced into single parenting owing to circumstances beyond her control, as applicable to many single moms. Sarah recruited her to be a surrogate for the child that God had promised her. Sarah's intentions were erroneous, and they trumped God's purpose for her life. Because of Sarah's conduct, Hagar was forced to confront several life-altering circumstances. Many single parent moms are alone, abandoned, or rejected, with the responsibility of running a home on their own. Sarah's lack of trust caused Hagar to become a single mom, because she did not believe she would be able to conceive and give birth as God had promised. Sarah took matters into her own hands by convincing her husband to lay with her maidservant to conceive a child, and then she became resentful afterwards (Genesis 16:1-4; NKJV, 1982).

God was faithful to Hagar in understanding the stressful conditions she was dealing with and comforted her during her troubles (Genesis 16:10-12; NKJV, 1982). Single parent mothers are challenged with different circumstance brought on by an unexpected pregnancy or a partner

who dies or chooses to abandon them. Sarah disliked Hagar, treated her indifferently, and made her feel as if she had done something wrong; as if being made a surrogate was not enough to make her feel bad. According to the Bible, she was treated brutally to the point that she fled to avoid the abuse (Genesis 16:6; NKJV, 1982). This type of behavior is as common currently as it was in biblical times. Rape of a woman, physical abuse of a woman, and the death of a spouse are all events that cause single parent mothers to flee reality, much as Hagar did. Hagar is visited by an angel in Genesis 16:9, who tells her to summon courage and return to her lord. In Hagar's case, this was divine intervention, but it speaks to the resilience of those who develop enough fortitude to endure hardship.

### **COVID-19 Influence on Economically Challenged Single Mothers**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on worldwide mental health (Alzueta et al., 2021). According to Tweng et al. (2020), there is early evidence that significant mental anguish has become markedly more prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to COVID-19, heightened fear and worry were evident, with some specific population subgroups expressing more fear, anxiety, and depressive symptomatology than others. Their findings emphasize the need to make mental health care more accessible. Anxiety and depression symptoms were the most common indicators of psychological discomfort, according to the data. During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, 39% of people experienced anxiety symptoms and 19% reported symptoms of depression (Holingue et al., 2020). Because economically challenged single-parent families have a greater number of responsibilities and stressors than two parent families (Cox & Abrams, 2020), it was important to explore their mental health needs in this study.

### **Effects of COVID-19 on Parents**

During the epidemic, parents in general suffered abrupt household adjustments. Rearranging their lifestyles, putting home schooling plans in place, and managing work-life schedules were just a few of the adjustments made. Managing activities, such as Zoom meetings and social engagements outside of the classroom became a concern suddenly. A two-parent family has the advantage of sharing tasks with a spouse or partner. When one spouse wants to vent or sort out a situation, the other partner might use a partner as a sounding board.

Most parents feel that school systems follow a pattern; a formal organized routine that teaches students the value of time, keeping a schedule, and completing homework. Systematic routines are thought to aid in the development of children's future work habits. A small number of parents were polled, and they reported that school routines play a major impact on child discipline (Bhamani et al., 2020). Single mothers have more limitations than two-parent households do when determining how to accommodate the academic and social needs of their family. The deficits in a single-parent household may create much additional stress, unlike that found in a two-parent household.

### **Effects of COVID-19 on Economically Challenged Single Mothers**

Raising children alone with no assistance may be highly stressful and lonely, putting a single mother and her family members at risk (Gallet & Laufer, 2019). According to the findings of Van et al. (2020), single-parent families appear to struggle more than other parent families. A single parent must make decisions on their own and then deal with the repercussions of poor decisions made with the best of intentions. This process produces a slew of unpleasant emotions and ideas, such as loneliness and abandonment, which frequently contribute to depression.

Because of the epidemic, new factors have been introduced to add to these detrimental consequences that were not there previously (Van et al., 2020). Scholars have projected that the economic instability following the COVID-19 pandemic, which would disproportionately afflict racial and ethnic minorities and single parent households, will be much larger than that of the Great Recession (Zusman et al., 2020). The value of community participation for economically disadvantaged single parent families can help relieve some of those stressors. However, the absence of family support networks adds to the strain and aggravates mental health issues. It is crucial to highlight that during COVID-19 lockdowns, parents were unable to rely on assistance from relational networks like family members and teachers (Fontanesi et al., 2020). Those with a low level of extroversion may have experienced this as a greater challenge, not to mention the effects it had on the economically challenged single mothers who were already compromised with other risks.

Recent research appears to be lacking in data on the mental health of the economically challenged single mothers during the pandemic. However, Wolf et al. (2021) described the impacts on parents during the pandemic and the vices they chose to cope with when feeling unhappy or concerned about the current COVID-19 scenario. Parents who reported a higher degree of COVID-19 pandemic effect also had higher parenting stress, which was linked to harsh parenting and alcohol consumption. Psychological abuse among parents is linked to having greater symptoms of depression or losing a job during the epidemic. The current study was interested in the different coping mechanisms chosen by single parents to cope with depression and stress that may differ from those reported in Wolf et al.'s study. Perhaps some single mothers would be less likely to use alcohol as a coping technique because their job as primary caregiver makes abstinence necessary, whereas others may have found the pressures of single

motherhood during a pandemic to be excessive and have become dependent on alcohol (Wolf et al., 2021).

Gard et al. (2020) stated that family income could indicate hardship and may mask the complexities of the effects of socioeconomic disadvantages on family processes and influences income, parental education, and occupational status; all of which were affected or compromised during the pandemic. This research raises question, if these resources were indeed affected during the pandemic, how did families manage without them? In most cases when a disaster occurs, additional resources are needed to back up normal support services. Disasters or crisis events often create isolation for many and there is often limited access to food, childcare, medical access, which impose additional hardships on the family.

According to Ammar et al. (2020), enforced house confinement causes higher psychosocial distress. Many homes were faced with unique challenges because of the epidemic. As stated by Miranda et al. (2020), having children at home increases a parent's anxiety due to potential hazards. Given that parents are concerned not only about their personal wellbeing but also about the health and safety of their children, it was likely that parents in the current study would be fearful about COVID-19 (Miranda et al., 2020).

According to Cox and Abrams (2020), single-parent families have been impacted more than two-parent households by the closure of schools, summer camps, and childcare institutions. When compared to parents in two-parent families, single parents are considerably more emotionally distressed. Single parents are more prone than two-parent families to feel lonely or isolated. In fact, 54% of single parent households versus 38% of two-parent households are sad. In addition, 57% of single parent households versus 38% of two-parent households have wept

because they are overwhelmed or irritated, and 49% single parent households versus 5% of two-parent households have had more frequent distress in the last week (Cox & Abrams, 2020).

Furthermore, single parents' wellbeing is critical throughout the epidemic, and the necessity to maintain their mental health has also heightened their anxieties. According to Eyler et al. (2021), the pandemic will certainly continue to raise household burdens. COVID-19 has established a barrier between youngsters and their need for physical activity. Parents would benefit immensely from innovative services that provide methods to assist their children in getting the physical exercise they need despite pandemic concerns (Eyler et al., 2021).

Another point of worry is that, because economically single mothers already have limited time and financial resources, participating in the initiatives meant to assist them may be challenging. They may also lose access to critical forms of social support that they had been relying on prior to the pandemic. According to Hertz et al. (2016), single mothers seek out single mothers by choice organizations to assist with issues unique to them. They join these organizations for both practical and emotional support because they are able to feel connected to others who understand the issues they are experiencing. What happens if they lose connections to these kinds of sources of support? Their mental health will have effects on the broader society. It is conceivable that the rise in single motherhood is associated with other aspects of child behavior, such as delinquency, behavior disorders, accidents, and mental health issues (Amato et al., 2015).

### **Effects of COVID-19 on Minority Single Mothers**

Even though people of color are usually younger than White people, they are more likely to have underlying health problems such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease. They are more likely to have a harder time getting COVID-19 testing and/or treatment and are also more likely to be uninsured in comparison to the White population (Artiga et al., 2020). According to

Ammar et al. (2020), enforced house confinement causes higher psychosocial distress. However, minority single mothers are less apt to access the help they need for such distress. Whereas 20% of the American population reported receiving treatment for depression, only 7% of Black women with this diagnosis sought treatment (Armstrong, 2020).

A crisis-oriented multidisciplinary intervention is urgently needed to minimize the high risk of mental illnesses and develop an Active and Healthy Confinement Lifestyle (AHCL). The goal is to meet the mental health requirements of people who are confined to their homes without the required assistance. This is especially pertinent to those who suffer from different mental challenges, such as depression, fear, loneliness, abandonment, and social isolation issues prior to the pandemic and vulnerable populations that need extra support during times of crisis such as the pandemic presented.

### **Summary**

More single-parent households are emerging across all socioeconomic levels. Although the United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, there are roughly 12 million single parent-headed households in the US, with single moms accounting for 80% of them (United States Census Bureau, 2020). According to research, single moms have more challenges in the workplace than married or cohabiting mothers (Richard & Lee, 2019). They also must assume multiple responsibilities with caring for children and working, and a number of other day-to-day tasks on a limited budget. Due to the number of lifestyle changes and the financial impact of the pandemic, it is important to reach out to individuals who are vulnerable due to a lack of financial means and/or physical or mental health assistance.

According to Feinberg et al. (2022), the levels of parenting dramatically rose during the pandemic. The pandemic's heightened impacts have had a stronger negative impact on parents,

and the pandemic's clinical consequences for parent depression have been severe. In terms of clinical significance, during the pandemic, parents were 2.4 times more likely than previously to score in the clinical range on depression (Feinberg et al., 2022). Because of the pandemic's ongoing existence on our planet, its enormous impact is still being recorded. Now that we are aware of this, it is critical to ensure that mental health services reach those who are experiencing sadness or anxiety because of the epidemic. It is critical to explore the experiences of economically challenged mothers to identify their needs and ensure their ability to manage their households during a future surge or variant of the pandemic or a future crisis. Due to the additional stressors placed on economically challenged single mothers, this study was conducted to achieve a better understanding of the pandemic's effects on their anxiety, stress, as well as their wellbeing. With every crisis that single mothers face, they are also presented with opportunities that will allow them to beat the odds so that they will not succumb to mental disparities. These opportunities will help them dispel the negative light that the traditional culture portrays them in; they may defy those classifications when more light is shed on their authentic experiences.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to learn more about the experiences of economically challenged single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's focus was to explore their anxiety and stress to determine how to better support this population in future waves of the pandemic or future crises. This chapter will present the research design, participants, researcher's role, data collection and analysis procedures, trustworthiness of the study, and ethical considerations.

#### **Research Design**

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological design. Transcendental phenomenology, as defined by Immanuel Kant, is a way of understanding things as they seem. Phenomenology was appropriate for the study because the study's aim was to explore economically challenged single mothers' lived experiences of anxiety and stress amid the pandemic. The study was interested in how they perceived that event. Transcendental phenomenology is a qualitative approach to research, which researchers use when they aim to answer questions about individuals' experiences, the meaning they derive from those experiences, and their perspectives concerning a particular social phenomenon or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). A transcendental phenomenological approach is used when researchers are more interested in the participants' view of their experiences than the researcher's view. Husserl's bracketing was used to put aside my personal experiences and to be open to allowing the participants to describe their lived experiences from their eyes only (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Moustakas, 1994). In keeping with this approach, semi-structured interviews were administered to participants. Semi-structured interviews are designed to yield a

significant quantity of descriptive data from participants regarding a focused topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017) so that the research questions can be addressed.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this transcendental phenomenological study. The central research question of this study was, “What are the experiences of economically challenged single mothers with respect to stress and anxiety?” There were four research questions that were used to address this central question:

**RQ1:** How was anxiety, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, perceived by economically challenged single mothers?

**RQ2:** How was stress, prior to and during the COVID 19 pandemic, perceived by economically challenged single mothers?

**RQ3:** In what ways did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the relationships of economically challenged single mothers?

**RQ3:** In what ways did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the responsibilities of economically challenged single mother?

### **Setting**

Participants were residing in Western ML and South-Central PA at the time of the study. Due to the data collection being carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher interviewed the participants via a Zoom platform. The interviews were conducted in a location of participants’ choosing, out of the range of hearing from others.

## **Participants**

Nine economically challenged single mothers volunteered to take part in the study. To qualify to participate in the study, mothers needed to be over the age of 18, single, and experiencing economic challenges.

## **Procedure**

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was received before conducting the study. The participants were selected by word of mouth. I initially contacted people in the community who knew of potential participants who met the criteria for the study. I then contacted potential participants individually by phone and informed them of the nature of the study, what participation entails, and their determined eligibility. The telephone script I followed is in Appendix A. I asked questions that would help determine their eligibility, such as age, ethnicity, and their marital status, and if they met the criteria and were interested in participating, an interview was scheduled via Zoom. Participants were emailed a consent form (Appendix B) 15 minutes before the scheduled interview. Before the interview began, I verbally went over the informed consent and nature of the study with the participants and encouraged them to ask questions. I explained that they would be sharing their lived experiences, that the study was voluntary, their information would be kept confidential, and their answers would be anonymous. They were informed that they would be recorded for the purposes of having an accurate record of their interviews and for the purposes of analysis only (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Kostere & Kostere, 2015). I provided them a copy of the consent form. After the signed consent form was received, I began the interview, which lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours.

### **The Researcher's Role**

As a researcher conducting a qualitative study, my first job was to protect participants and their data. In qualitative research, the researcher's role is very important because they come in close contact with participants as they try to uncover individuals' ideas and emotions. As the researcher in this study, while collecting data directly from participants, I tried hard to set aside any preconceived ideas about this topic. In order to do this, I used bracketing, which is a process by which researchers acknowledge any biases or preconceived ideas about the phenomenon they are studying. I acknowledged my own perceptions, recorded them in a journal to set them aside as I collected data on their lived experiences - a process which supports the transcendental phenomenological study design. I was also responsible for accurately communicating my research, collaborating with others, and conveying useful information to benefit the larger research community, businesses, the economy, and society. I had a duty to act honestly and ethically throughout the research and treat my participants with ethical considerations.

### **Data Collection**

The data from this study came from semi-structured interviews. Participants were questioned using open-ended questions about their experiences with anxiety, stress and other difficulties during the pandemic.

### **Interviews**

To learn more about the impact of COVID-19 on the anxiety and stress of single mothers, participants were given in-depth interviews. The participants were given the opportunity to speak at length about their experiences during COVID 19. These interview questions were designed to address the research questions used to guide the study. For qualitative research, interviews are the best way to explain, gain better insight on a topic, and investigate the perspectives, behaviors,

as well as the experiences of the study's participants. Open-ended questions are used in interviews in order to get more detailed information.

### *Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions*

The following questions were asked of the participants during the interview:

1. Please tell me a little about yourself - where you grew up, your family and how you are doing these days?
2. Can you tell me about what you experienced from (during?) the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What did you do when the COVID-19 pandemic started?
4. Could you unpack that for me a little bit more by describing exactly what it looked like from your eyes?
5. What did the COVID-19 pandemic experience tell you?
6. How did/do you feel about your circumstances or life in general because of the pandemic?
7. What was the event like for you?
8. Please describe your thoughts during the COVID-19 pandemic?
9. Tell me about your feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic?
10. What circumstances have influenced you because of the pandemic?
11. How would you summarize your wellbeing during the pandemic?
12. Please describe how you view your experience. Was it positive? In what ways? Was it negative? In what ways?
13. In what ways did you maintain your responsibilities? Tell me more about these experiences.
14. Please describe if the experience impacted your mental health and if it did, in what ways?
15. How are you feeling now/these days? Why do you say that?

16. Please describe any significant life changing experiences you may have had during the pandemic.

17. Were there specific things you struggled with during the pandemic?

18. Did the pandemic ease any struggles you had?

Questions 1-7 were asked because I wanted to use broad open-ended questions to give participants opportunities to talk about their experience at length. I did not want to lead them on by asking anything specific. Questions 8-10 were asked because I was interested in how they perceived the pandemic at the time. I wanted to explore any emotional experiences and thoughts they had during the pandemic. Question 10 was asked because I was interested in their lifestyle changes since these might be influential to their thoughts, feelings, anxiety and stress. I asked Questions 11 and 14 because the study's focus was on mental health during the pandemic. In Question 12, participants were asked to categorize their experiences into positive and negative aspects to explore their coping strategies. In Questions 13 and 16, I was interested in how their responsibilities shifted and lives changed due to the pandemic. For many, parental responsibilities increased. I was interested in how their responsibilities shifted and how their lives changed during that time. Question 15 was used to help participants reflect on their experiences and how they feel currently. While Questions 17 and 18 were intended to capture any specific experiences that they had not mentioned about their struggles and potential positive occurrences during the pandemic.

### **Data Analyses**

An independent recording platform named otter.ai transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim. I listened to the audio recording and checked the audio for accuracy of the transcribed interviews. The transcripts were imported into NVivo (QSR International, 2020), a tool that is

utilized for managing data analysis with qualitative data. NVivo is a qualitative software program that “can take qualitative data analysis further compared to managing it manually” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011, p.71). NVivo was used to sort and code qualitative data efficiently and in a short amount of time (Leech & Onwuegbuzie 2011, p. 71). To evaluate the data, the NVIVO software was used in conjunction with a thematic approach to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Individual transcripts were read multiple times. Passages that related to the research questions were highlighted and coded. Thematic analysis in the IPA progresses from a descriptive to an interpretative mode (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In IPA, each transcript is initially classified into broad themes, which are then further refined via further analysis, resulting in a more precise subject for each transcript. The codes were grouped under potential themes, with each theme labeled to organize the information each theme contained. Themes became superordinate themes when more than three participants were represented. Then subthemes were designated when different aspects of a particular experience were identified. The items that did not have any correlation with the themes or aims of the research and did not address research question were not included (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Each interview was managed in the same way, and after every transcript was coded, a final list of superordinate themes was developed.

During data analysis, I made sure that what the participants experienced and how they experienced it was synthesized to allow for its own meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Moustakas, 1994). I grouped themes together according to meanings and subtheme’s themes were grouped together under superordinated themes (Moustakas (1994). I followed the recommendations of Bloomberg and Volpe (2022), who noted, “Analysis is considered to be complete when theoretical saturation occurs—that is, when no new concepts emerge from the

data and when the theory has been thoroughly validated with the collected data” (p. 120).

Transcripts were reviewed again at the end to determine whether there were any new emerging themes that may have been missed. A table was then created in which the themes were listed.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness of the study is the extent to which a study is reliable, credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable. Trustworthiness was in part achieved through meeting via Zoom with my committee chair who assessed my study repeatedly by critiquing and recommending various changes to improve the quality and validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2020).

### **Credibility**

Credibility concerns “whether the participants’ perception matches with how researchers portray them” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022, p. 313). As a researcher, I strove to remain true to participants’ experience and listen to them with an open mind. I used extensive quoting and thick rich descriptions to make sure that their experiences were accurately captured. Credibility was also established through the researcher’s bracketing of her biases. I acknowledged my biases and thoughts about the phenomenon at the beginning to avoid their interfering with the study. I used bracketing to sort through those biases (Moustakas 1994) to ensure that they were not reflected in any of the participants shared experiences. Bracketing is the process which enables a researcher to acknowledge and explore the ways that our biases and prejudices impact our interpretation of data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022). Self-reflection is encouraged to help identify bias. I kept a journal throughout the study to ensure that I was aware of my biases.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability is a measure of reliability. In order to increase the dependability, and therefore the trustworthiness of a study, the researcher must ensure that the research process is

“clearly documented, logical, and traceable” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022, p. 317). I carefully documented all the data collection and analysis procedures to ensure the study was dependable. Confirmability is “concerned with establishing that the researcher’s findings and interpretations are clearly derived from the data” (p. 313). This requires the researcher “to demonstrate how conclusions have been reached” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022, p. 313). The depth and richness of the researcher’s descriptions included in the study were those that were accurate and captured in detailed participants’ experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022).

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the fit or match between the research participants and whether the reader finds participants’ demographics and descriptions applicable to another setting (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022). Transferability is achieved through conveying the richness of, and clearly identifiable, experiences and situations that can assist researchers in determining whether their experiences are applicable to another population. In other words, “lessons learned in one setting might be useful to others” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022, p. 319). Bloomberg and Volpe, (2022) explained how experience richly described in one area could be broadly applicable in another:

It [transferability] is about how well the study has made it possible for readers to decide whether similar processes will be at work in their own settings and communities by understanding in-depth how they occur at the research site (p. 319).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are an important aspect of research with human participants. As a researcher, I complied with the following ethical considerations in conducting this study: receiving approval from the IRB before conducting the research and making sure participants were informed of their rights of participation using informed consent. Moreover, I also ensured

that participants confidentiality would be respected, their identity would be anonymous by not including identifiable information and replacing names with pseudonyms, as well as securing data on a password lock computer, which will be erased after 3 years. Other aspects I complied with included storing audio recordings and transcripts on a password lock computer for 3 years, which only the researcher will have access to, and will also be erased afterwards. Also, I used pseudonyms used while coding data and ensured that no one would profit from the research as specified by the CITI Program (2014) and Liberty University's IRB (2015).

### **Summary**

Purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of economically challenged single mothers with respect to stress and anxiety during COVID-19. In this chapter, I presented the methodology component of the study. I presented the research design, the role of the researcher, data collection and analysis procedures. In the next chapter, Chapter Four, I will report the findings of the study and address how the findings answered the research questions.

## Chapter Four: Results

Economically challenged single mothers were the focus of this qualitative, phenomenological investigation. Public health policies and incentives have a goal to reduce the serious mental health hazards associated with COVID-19. Anxiety and stress concerns are often overlooked as a factor in this pandemic, especially among the most underprivileged populations. Nine economically challenged single mothers were interviewed over Zoom. Analyses were conducted using NVivo and IPA.

### Participants

#### Participants' Demographics

Nine ethnically diverse economically challenged single mothers participated in the study. In terms of ethnicity, there were three Caucasians, four African Americans, one biracial, and one Hispanic participant who immigrated from Puerto Rico. They ranged in age from 28 to 58, and their average age was approximately 45. All participants were residing in Western MD and PA at time of the study.

**Table 1**

#### *Participants' Demographics*

Participant*	Age	Ethnicity
Abigail	45	Caucasian
Bloom	48	Caucasian
MeMe	56	African American
Precious	28	Biracial
Resilient	46	African American
Ruby	40	African American
Diamond	38	Caucasian
Angel	38	Hispanic

*Note.* \*Participants were given pseudonyms

## **Participants' Profiles**

### ***Abigail***

Abigail is a 45-year-old Caucasian mother of two sons, who, at the time of the study, were 18 and 21. She grew up in the same area she lives in now, residing with her mother and father while attending high school. She was married not long after high school and moved about 10 minutes away from where she originally lived. She attended some college out of high school and worked at a newspaper outfit doing graphic design before discontinuing college and working full time at the newspaper. When she was married, she switched to secretarial work at a law office and learned how to sell real estate. When she had her second child, she started her own business doing title abstracting from real estate and this is what she is still doing currently. She left her husband in 2019 and at the time of the study, she was raising her two boys as a single mother.

Abigail was asked to pick a pseudonym name and she thought of a name she thought was appropriate. When I asked her the interview questions, she deeply pondered on each question and reflected on the experiences she had during the pandemic. She described in detail what these experiences were like for herself and her family. As I proceeded from one question to the next, her thoughts became emotional and enriched with vivid description of what she had gone through doing the pandemic. As I dived deeper into the questions, I began to recognize the potential of understanding what this population was challenged with during this period. Abigail stated, "So, I think it was up and down. I think there was probably a lot of, as I said, like anxiety, because it would come and then it would go, depending on if the news said this or that."

***Bloom***

Bloom is a 48-year-old Caucasian mother of four boys, who at the time of the study were between the ages 17 and 24. They were living with her during the pandemic. She grew up in a very small community in the general area in which all participants resided. She separated from her husband a few years ago and was living on her own as a single mother at the time of the interview. At the time of the interview, she was attending school to become a homeopathic life coach. She enjoys gardening and dreams of having a holistic farm one day. Bloom was quiet and appeared to be excited about the journey we were about to embark on. When I asked her the first question, she paused for a minute and asked me to repeat it again and I did. Bloom responded with rich detail as she described her lived experiences. I reminded her throughout the session the importance of describing what she saw and experienced from her own eyes. Bloom was clear with each response she gave; she took time out to think and to respond in a way that was easy to interpret, as if she were holding up a picture and she was showing me what it looked like to her. She stated,

I experienced a lot of . . . not being able to see family which is hard. . . . hard on them and hard on me and they're like isolated, you know, and I think a lot of their fear about going out in public, and if you're going to, like catch, like, COVID.

***MeMe***

MeMe is a 56-year-old African American mother of two daughters, who at the time of the study was 26 and 30 years old. She was attending school full-time and joined a union to work in the fashion and TV industry. She also said she was a big family person who loves spending time with her daughters, being creative, exploring photography while traveling. She had been living for 15 years in the general area which all participants were residing at the time of the study. Meme was enthusiastic about sharing her experiences and when I asked her the first question, she became emotional, and I encouraged her to take her time.

She then responded to the questions, explaining how she survived through the pandemic. The more Meme expressed what these experiences looked like from her prospective, the more I realized how different the COVID-19 experience varied from person to person based on what the experience was from their eyes. She stated,

After the initial shock of everything, and the realization that you know, you have to be bunker down, there was a lot of a mixed emotions [positives and negatives] I was [having] at the time. My daughters were in one state . . . I was in another.

Meme continued to discuss what her surroundings were like during this period:

I was with my parents, my mother and my stepfather, and you know, a lot of TV watching and a lot of reading. And after about a month of that I decided to enroll in school. So, then it became studying. Then I decided to do some things . . . career wise, and I decided to join the union in terms of working in TV and film. So, it was a lot of reading.

### ***Sarah***

Sarah is a single mother with three children, and one grandson. At the time of the study, two of her three children were adults. The other was 14 and still living at home, while the older two were out of the home. Sarah described the events that she experienced during this period in her own authentic way. The description of events was surreal which could only be described from her perspective as she spoke of the highs and lows of her experiences. “My life has been upside down. It was a, it made me feel a little bit better that I wasn't the only one now whose life had completely changed.” The compassion Sarah described for the medical community was amazing and even in her own despair she wished that she could have helped during the pandemic, when it was needed the most.

### ***Precious***

Precious is a 28-year-old biracial single mother who at the time of the study was raising her 4-year-old son with special needs. She stated she had a supportive family that helped her

regularly during the pandemic. She was finishing her cosmetology license and working in the medical billing field where she could telework from home. Precious seemed excited to begin the interview and was enthusiastic about sharing her story. Precious was asked to pick a pseudonym name of her choice and she decided to use “Precious,” which represented her well because of her gentle and quiet appearance. I asked her questions as if we were having a conversation and I made sure that she understood that these questions were all centered around her experiences. In response to the first question I asked, Precious took a deep breath and asked, “Can I tell the real story?” and I said, “Yes.” She then described what she went through in a deep sincere manner by painting a picture of what it was like from her point of view. She stated it was somewhat challenging caring for her son at this time:

It was a little hard he didn't understand we weren't allowed to do our normal activities to go outside during the lockdown to go see friends and family. You know, we had to be very safe, very to ourselves. So that was very hard.

### ***Resilient***

Resilient is a 46-year-old African American single mother raising six boys, ranging from 11 to 31, at the time of the study. She worked full time at a major banking corporation but was currently out on disability due to migraines. Resilient was told that she could select a pseudonym name and she decided that the name Resilient would be appropriate because it reflected her positive attitude in the face of adversity.

When I asked Resilient questions, she dove right in, explaining how the COVID-19 experience was for her. She described the challenges she faced, while being optimistic about her circumstances. Resilient’s story was deep and visible because of the detail of events that she shared from her perceptions. She stated:

I think I'm more sensitive. Because of COVID-19. I mean, so many people being evicted, we're blessed. We're not, you know, so many people going hungry. . . . Sometimes I feel selfish for. . .being frustrated with situations. Because I know someone else is doing so

much worse than what we are. And I think we all need to keep that in mind. And if we're able to help someone, I think we should, we should not hesitate to help them.

### ***Ruby***

Ruby is a 40-year-old African American single mother of two girls and a boy. At the time of the study, their ages ranged from 10 to 12 years of age. Ruby grew up in a town in which one side was Black and the other sides were White, and everyone in that community was family or knew each other. It was a rural area about 30 minutes from a major city. Ruby grew up in a divorced family; on her mothers' side she has four siblings (three girls, one boy) with 11 siblings in total. Ruby grew up in a blended family.

Ruby started unpacking her story before I had the chance to start the actual interview protocol. It appeared that Ruby had been waiting for someone to ask her how she did and was doing during the pandemic. "It was incredible," she stated. I just listened and allowed her to describe in her own way what this experience was like for her. Eventually we got to the questions, and she expounded on her lived experience in a factual way, as she described one event after another, unpacking each detail through her eyes as it occurred. The richness of the unique experience she shared could have only been explained by Ruby. Ruby's resilience was demonstrated in how she made the best of what she described as a challenging situation:

I try not to get frustrated. And try not to, you know, stay, I did not want to stay in fear. So, I had to, honestly, I had to really stay in the Word of God so that my mind wouldn't be all over the place.

### ***Angel***

Angel is a 38-year-old Puerto Rican single mother of two children: an 8-year-old boy, and a 13-year-old girl. Angel was born and raised in Puerto Rico. She had lived in the same general area as the other participants for the last 5 to 6 years. When we went over the consent form, I recognized that she was anxiously waiting to start the interview, and I made sure we

started on time. I asked the first question and immediately she was concerned about answering it correctly. I explained that it was a conversation we were having about her lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. I noticed a change in her posture as she relaxed. I allowed her to explain her experiences as she reminisced about them, and it was crystal clear to me what the experience was like for her, as she described the incidents vividly one at a time. The deepness of the experiences came from her core, and it was obvious that it was her story, and only she could tell it because she lived it and was still living it. She stated, “I was not aware of how much I worry and how much anxiety until these couple of years, and I wasn’t really aware that I was that anxious, I think until those couple of years.”

## **Results**

### **Themes**

Each audio recording of participant interviews was transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo12, which is a software program that facilitates the analysis of qualitative data. Eight categories of themes emerged from the data analysis of the nine participants interview transcripts. Themes were considered to be themes if there were three or more participants, and they were relevant to the research questions that guided the study (Braun & Clark, 2006). Tables 2 and 3 show the themes subthemes and number of participants represented in each one.

**Table 2***Superordinate Themes 1-4, Subthemes, and Number of Participants*

Superordinate theme	Subtheme Sub-subtheme	Number of participants
1. Anxiety related to COVID-19		9
	COVID-19 was scary	5
	Fear of what was happening	7
	Fear of getting COVID-19	4
	Financial anxieties	5
	Other fears: Running out of supplies and traveling	2
2. Stress related to COVID-19		7
	General frustration over COVID-19 and changes	4
	Lack of self-care	3
3. Coping with anxiety and stress related to COVID-19		9
	Avoid listening to the news	2
	COVID-19 safety	3
	Research, making masks, and stocking up	3
	Leaning on God	4
	Support of friends and family	3
	Self-care	4
	Therapy	2
	Coping over time	2
4. Impact on finances		7
	Impact on work	9
	Lost job	3
	Uncertainty of work and looking for work	3
	Working less	5
	Working from home	3
	Studying for something new	3
	Joined a union	1
	Having to budget	3
	Aspects that improved finances	6
	Unemployment	5
	Other financial help and services	3

**Table 3***Superordinate Themes 5-8, Subthemes, and Number of Participants*

Superordinate theme	Subtheme Sub-subtheme	Number of participants
1. Impact on mental health		8
	Depression	2
	Frustration that it drags on	2
	Mixed feelings	5
	Other symptoms	2
2. Influence of pandemic on relationships		7
	Appreciating people more	3
	Divisions due to COVID-19	2
	Isolation	6
	Spending quality time with family	7
	Trying to stay connected through other means	3
3. Influence of pandemic on responsibilities		6
	Increased responsibilities	6
	Kids being home	4
	Helping kids with school	6
4. Resilience		9
	Moving forward	4
	Putting me first	4
	Putting things in perspective	3
	Reason to hope	3
	Seeing the positives	3
	Time to pause and reflect	3
	New opportunities	6
	Take nothing for granted	3
	Be adaptive	1

*Superordinate Theme 1: Anxiety Related to COVID-19*

This superordinate theme contains seven subthemes regarding participants' anxieties related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These themes included how scary COVID was, especially in the beginning, and how the fear was related to not knowing what was happening and whether the

participants would get COVID. Participants also discussed financial anxieties and worries over traveling and running out of supplies.

**Subtheme 1: COVID-19 Was Scary.** In this theme, five participants discussed how afraid they were of COVID-19. Their fears ranged from scarcity of supplies, to being uncertain and worried about being left alone, in Diamond’s case, worried about loved ones. For example, Bloom stated, “I think it was kind of scary. Everybody seemed like they're panicking and just trying to like, oh, like I said get all your food and toilet paper and get everything prepared and just panicking, like Oh, is this any way to catch it and die.” Diamond stated she was “scared . . . uncertain” and “sure there were times where I might have even felt alone. Especially during that time when I was homeless, staying in a hotel.” Precious recalled, “just everybody was on edge. And I think for me, it was more or less—you know, I had, I always check on my grandparents, you know, they're like my kids, my grandparents and everybody else.” Resilient mentioned she felt “scared” and Sarah stated, “It was scary. There were scary moments, rough patches.”

**Subtheme 2: Fear of What Was Happening.** Seven participants spoke about how the fear had to do with uncertainty about what was going on. For example, Abigail said that in the beginning “it was really scary because you didn't know what was happening. And the kids from school, just everything was different. So that was just a big adjustment. We basically, when they said you were on lockdown” she did not know what to expect. Bloom said, “I think it was just fear and uncertainty. . . just a fearful time.” Diamond stated she was “scared” and “uncertain” and “just trying to take it day by day. I'm sure there were times in fact, I know, there were times that I was concerned about what was going on.” Meme seemed to agree, stating, “It was scary. It was the not knowing.” Meme also stated that:

In the beginning, it was just like, ‘What is going on? Who would have ever thought that we would be in this place in the United States of America?’ Yes. I felt like if we were led properly, if they were certain proper, skillful people” it would have been better.

Precious spoke about the suddenness of all the fear and changes. She stated, “We were like, ‘oh, my goodness, what is this? How does everybody have this suddenly?’ It was very out of nowhere for us.” Resilient also talked about the uncertainty, “You never know what's going to happen from day to day, I will tell you that it was very stressful.” Ruby stated,

It was just basically going into what was today going to be, you know? It was just something that you didn't know what you were going to be allowed to do, what you weren't going to be allowed to do with shopping and stuff.

Ruby mentioned, “I’m a single parent, me and my ex-husband now. You know, we are in two different states. So, everything was basically how do I do this because all the kids are in different schools. You know, like every day was something different.”

**Subtheme 3: Fear of Catching COVID.** Four participants discussed how they were afraid they would get COVID-19. Abigail stated that she would grow anxious when she saw a surge locally. She said,

So, there was coming and going of anxiety, depending on what COVID was doing, if there was a new variant, or any of that kind of stuff. But, um, and then I would feel good if it seemed like it was gone away, and we had it under control.

She added, “We have a big surge, or now it's in Pennsylvania, or there's many cases in Franklin County or the hospitals are closed.” Bloom stated, “A couple of months there I did some housecleaning. And that was kind of stressful, because you didn't know if there was going to be germs from the people that stayed there.” Bloom recalled that “a lot of my friends and loved ones— some died and some have been really sick, and I experience not being able to see family which is hard on them and on me, they were isolated.” Bloom stated that “we tried not to catch it, you know, especially when it was first new, we didn't really know all it was, and I think I was

even more fearful of it in the beginning than I am now.” Bloom further discussed her fears of family members bringing it home; for example, her “son working as a plumber might bring it into the house, even though I would try really hard to protect my home, I really didn’t have control.” Precious stated, “It was on and off, like anxiety; when my son caught a cold, I would call his doctor, and ask is this COVID or is it a cold or the flu, I would have these thoughts.” Sarah spoke about worrying she would catch it from the unvaccinated. Sarah stated “hard to see loved ones engage in risky behavior before vaccines came out. It made me somewhat sad and knowing that my older two children, neither one of them are vaccinated.”

**Subtheme 4: Financial Anxieties.** In this theme, five participants discussed their financial anxieties related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These include worrying about money and how it relates to housing, relocation, and supporting their families. For example, Abigail stated, “Money was a worry.” Angel said she worried about her financial situation and “how am I going to keep my family together if I lose my job.” Precious stated, “I was more worried than anything. Am I going to be able to pay all my bills? To make sure I stayed afloat.” Sarah worried over, “What am I going to do? How am I going to pay my bills? Will I have to move?” Diamond explained how she was forced to pay to stay in a hotel for a period of a 14-day quarantine which she had to put on a credit card. “It put a strain on my finances,” she said.

**Subtheme 5: Other Fears: Traveling and Running out of Supplies.** In this theme, two participants discussed how fear of not being able to get to their relatives and running out of their necessities was a concern during the COVID-19 pandemic. Diamond stated that they were “really cracking down on people traveling” and she was concerned about a change of address issue she had. Bloom worried about running out of supplies: “I think there was a little fear of one thing, like, running out of supplies, and running out of different food and toilet paper.

### ***Superordinate Theme 2: Stress Related to COVID***

This superordinate theme contains two subthemes regarding participants stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These subthemes included how frustration over COVID-19, changes and lack of self-care created stress.

**Subtheme 1: General Frustration Over COVID and Changes.** Four participants spoke of various aspects of COVID-19 that left them feeling frustrated and stressed in their lives. Feeling stressed by the academic struggles her children were experiencing, Resilient spoke of her frustrations and how it affected her stress levels: “Initially, it impacted my health, like I said, I was stressed, I was anxious.” She went on to talk about her children’s grades, “They just weren’t doing well,” and she stated she had many nights crying over it.

Ruby was frustrated with work protocol that involved long lines for health checkups prior to admittance into the building. She stated, “Is this the new normal, when coming into a company, you start at six o'clock, and there's a line to get your temperature done?” Ruby added, “Normally I liked to be there early” and the long wait would cause her delays in getting to work on time. Angel said, “I definitely felt the shift in my house; mentally, emotionally, even physically; in some ways spiritually.” Angel was struggling with childcare and public housing, which included moving twice during this period. Precious, whose son has a sensory processing disorder, described difficulties with mask wearing for both of them: “You know, I'm just so used to breathing and I hate masks because it itches my glasses, and it's even harder for \_\_\_ [her son] because he has sensory disorder. So, he will tear if off, he doesn't like it.” Resilient actually had COVID-19, stating, “my second and eighth graders, brought COVID home from school, that was it. The first time they got it was last June; they brought it and then I ended up getting COVID. And I was really, bad.”

Three participants described how uncomfortable the masks were and how it put her in awkward situations. Diamond stated, “And for me, it's not good, it's very uncomfortable; whenever I would go to the store, I would wear my mask; whenever I was around people, you know, I did want to respect people's space and wear the mask, but I have a hard time breathing.” She added, “And of course, there's a lot of information out there. And I don't believe everything I hear.” Diamond went on to explain how she was reprimanded for not having the mask up over her nose at a class she attended at a local community college. Precious stated,

I hate the masks because it itches my glasses. And it's even harder for \_\_\_ [my son] because he has sensory processing disorder. So, he will tear off the mask; he doesn't like it and with asthma, it's hard to breathe. I had to make sure I bought a specific mask—not too tight or to lose.

Ruby stated that the mask and vaccine mandates caused division in her family, and their family functions may never be the same because of it.

**Subtheme 2: Lack of Self-Care Due to Stress.** In this subtheme, three participants discussed how their lack of self-care due to stress during COVID-19 pandemic was apparent. The lack of self-care ranged from being stressed, overeating, and not exercising. In Angel’s case, “the toll I will say was all the stress I was putting on myself, it let me know, I didn't take care of myself, because I wasn't thinking at the time of what it would do to me.” Angel was concerned about being evicted and was unaware that she was not caring for herself mentally. For Diamond, when asked whether the experience impacted her mental health, she responded, “Oh, I would say probably yes, it did. Because, you know, I struggle with food and exercise; well that became a bigger struggle during the pandemic, it was how I cope.” Meme said she worried about, “not getting too fat. [That] I ate too much.” She struggled with worrying about her daughters she could not get to, who lived in another state.

### ***Superordinate Theme 3: Coping with Anxiety and Stress Related to COVID***

This superordinate theme contains eight subthemes regarding participants' coping with anxiety and stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The anxiety and stress participants were coping with were related to not knowing what was happening and how participants would be able to endure during this period. The subthemes included how to balance watching news and living a normal life, while being concerned about safety, especially in the beginning, and how to make and purchase masks to avoid getting sick as well as stocking up on supplies in the event of a shortage. Participants also discussed leaning on God, support of friends and family, self-care, therapy and coping over time.

**Subtheme 1: Avoid Listening to the News.** In this subtheme, two participants discussed how the overuse of listening to the news caused them anxiety due to fears of catching COVID-19. Abigail stated, "We would have a big surge, or now it's in PA, or there's this many cases in Franklin County or the hospitals are closed. Like, you would have to watch how much you would look at the news, because that could cause a lot of anxiety." Diamond, stated "For me I just avoided listening to the news because it made me feel uncertain and scared of what the future holds."

**Subtheme 2: COVID Safety.** In this subtheme, three participants discussed how important safety concerns were for them during the COVID-19 pandemic. MeMe mentioned how she thought twice about where she would choose to go because she was not sure if she would be safe from the virus: "I was always going to different events and networking, and I do miss that, now I think about okay, do I really want to go here? Is it important?" Precious had to consider everything before choosing where to go and not go: "Well, do I want to do this to my kid, making sure that you wash your hands, cover your face, like that messes with your mental

[health].” Both participants felt restricted and unsafe because of the unknown possibilities of being exposed to the COVID-19 virus. Precious was preoccupied by making sure they were safe, to the point that she became overly sensitive about everything. Ruby exercised precautional measures consistently stating, “When I went to the store, I used alcohol in a spray bottle; so, anytime I went to the store, I would just spray myself down and the groceries and stuff like that.”

**Subtheme 3: Research, Making Masks, and Stocking Up.** In this subtheme, three participants talked about researching COVID and making masks, whereas two participants mentioned stocking up to cope with the pandemic. Abigail initially stated, “I stressed out and I probably panicked. But I personally went and researched. I tried to figure out what they were talking about and how to protect myself and my family.” Abigail became aware of the shortages and she stated, “I learned that there was a mass shortage so again, [and] because we didn't have any, I started making masks.” Abigail was determined to find ways to take care of her family. Both Bloom and Ruby discussed stocking up on supplies. For example, Bloom stated, “I started stocking up, like, I remember, like spending extra money just to try to stock up on things that might not be there.” Ruby also remembers, “just trying to stock up on, things that won't perish, you know, I mean, like rice and stuff.” The three participants were resilient and willing to do whatever was necessary.

**Subtheme 4: Leaning on God.** In this subtheme, four participants discussed how leaning on God during the COVID-19 pandemic gave them hope and comforted them during the scary times. Their comments ranged from how reading God’s Word provided comfort, how praying helped, and how trusting in God reassured them. Diamond stated, “It was unnerving; then of course, you know, I always turned back to God.” Resilient described the importance of praying as follows: “I'm going to say it right now. You need prayer through this.” Ruby mentioned how

she got through all that she endured with the help of God. For example, at one point in her interview, Ruby stated “I tried not to get frustrated. And try not to, you know, I did not want to stay in fear. So, I had to, honestly, I had to really stay in the Word of God so that my mind wouldn't be all over the place.” Ruby stated at another point, “Honestly, I take it back to being spiritual. . . . I would not have kept a sane mind without reading the Word. And being around spiritual influences.” Ruby added, “It really, honestly, it really made me as a believer, it made me want to be close to God.” Each one of these participants had their unique experience of leaning on God. Sarah stated that she was reassured when “[God] showed me that you're going to be good, as long as you trust me.” According to these participants, God’s presence in their lives during this period helped them to cope.

**Subtheme 5: Support of Friends and Family.** Three participants mentioned having support from family and/or friends to help them cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Resilient stated she had “a support system like my cousin A\_\_, my cousin N\_\_, they would bring food for the boys to eat and things like that. When it comes to situations like this, it changes you.” Ruby stated she relied on spiritual people and different groups: “I had to be around spiritual people because they're the ones that kept me going and staying in the Word, and there were just different groups. Um, we still did our sons and daughters conferences.” Angel also said that she found support from friends and family when she needed help with childcare.

**Subtheme 6: Self-Care.** In this subtheme, four participants discussed how important self-care became in their lives due to the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their forms of self-care ranged from devoting themselves to getting healthier, walking, doing yoga, self-love and having a life coach to provide support. Abigail and Ruby both talked about how the pandemic affected their self-care. Abigail, who enjoyed doing yoga in a classroom, had to give

up doing yoga. She stated, “Like, for one example, with the yoga, I felt like that was good for my brain to feel calmer and more center, I don't like doing it online. I like to do it in a classroom with people with the music and the whole atmosphere.” Abigail continued to elaborate by stating the importance of “trying to do things for myself that keep me mentally healthy.” She added, “And it's just taking a little more effort than before, because you can't do yoga or whatever.”

The participants experiences were somewhat different, as MeMe stated “having a life coach to believe in me was so encouraging,” adding that it “just really caused me to sit with myself and to look at myself in the mirror to make sure that going forward, I'm in a healthy space, mentally. That meant not doing things that I don't want to do.” MeMe also mentioned walking with her mother and stepfather when the country was on lockdown and stated that it helped. Precious described her self-care as, “self-love, So, I've done things to make me feel better, like doing my hair once every three months in a salon, you know, getting my nails done. I just learned to love yourself when you're by yourself.” Sarah stated, “I have not always taken care of my body and I have not always eaten right, but now I am going to try and be healthier.” Sarah expressed concern about being in good health as it related the COVID-19 outbreak and the affiliation it has with “taking care of yourself versus not taking of yourself.” Precious also talked about the vulnerability to COVID-19 due to having underlying conditions: “I know a lot of the COVID-19 cases was other things; you know . . . like stuff that triggered asthma where it might not have been just COVID; it was there already, an underlying sickness.” Ruby stated, “So it makes you look at that and want to be healthier.”

**Subtheme 7: Therapy.** In this subtheme, two participants discussed how therapy helped them cope during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their mental health concerns ranged from needing help on how to be calm during the pandemic to identifying needed services in the community.

Abigail stated that she “feels . . . calmer and I know it’s because I’m aware of what’s lacking and the options I have to get help through therapy or programs that will help me to deal with the situation calmly.” Sarah discussed how she refamiliarized herself with previous therapy techniques she had learned in counseling that helped her during the pandemic:

The things that I had learned, you know, in therapy, you know, all of that, I had more time to dwell in it, think about it, and remember and put that stuff in place, leading up to the pandemic that help me in the pandemic.

Sarah was receiving therapy prior to the pandemic for work related issues and that therapy helped her cope during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Subtheme 8: Coping Over Time.** In this subtheme, two participants discussed how they handled their situation over time by ordering items online and ordering curbside grocery pickup and learning to adjust to the new way of doing things. Bloom stated.

I started not going shopping very much like I, pretty much started ordering things I needed on Amazon and doing even some grocery shopping online where you can just go and put it in your car or just pick them up.

Resilient stated “initially, I had stress and anxiety behind it and realized I had to learn how to cope and to navigate through things, then I felt better.” Bloom and Resilient both learned how to cope by embracing what they had around them and by utilizing what was readily available in the community.

#### ***Superordinate Theme 4: Impact on Finances***

This superordinate theme involved the financial impact COVID-19 pandemic had. Seven subthemes were contained in this theme, including the *impact on work*, which had several smaller themes, *studying for something new*, *joining a union*, *improved finances*, *having to budget*, and *financial services, including unemployment*.

**Subtheme 1: Impact on Work.** In this subtheme, there were five smaller themes regarding the impact of COVID-19 on work. These impacts included job loss, uncertainty of work, reduced hours, working from home, studying for something new, joining a union, and financial help in the form of services and unemployment. The participants described the financial situations they were challenged with in the beginning of the pandemic and throughout.

**Sub-Subtheme 1: Lost Job:** In this subtheme, three participants discussed the loss of their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic and reported their lived experiences through this event. Ruby stated, “In March, once the school shut down, I still had to go to work. But the following week, they started laying off. So, I got laid off. Like there was only so many people left that job.” She stated that it was hard, “especially being laid off. And at that time, I mean, the unemployment was there, but now, I had to watch, because I got three kids, a car note, and other bills.” Ruby continued stating, “So I had to adjust . . . . I mean, this was after I went a whole year without working.” Diamond described her experience by stating, “I lost a job that I had been with for 6 years. . . and I was really saddened by that because I loved that job.” MeMe’s experience was one that she had hoped for, stating, “So after getting furloughed, you know, although I was looking to leave that job, you know, it’s always a kick in the stomach, you know, to feel rejection.” However, she went on to mention what it was like for her in the beginning: “So after the initial shock, and I was working in the hospitality field at the time and didn’t think we would be furloughed because we were told that, we wouldn’t lose our jobs. Honestly, I was hoping we would.”

**Sub-Subtheme 2: Uncertainty of Work and Looking for Work.** In this smaller theme, three participants discussed how they felt regarding their work situation because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Angel stated,

I'm in the place right now that my job slowed down again (pretty much was cut half of my hours and change me from salary to hourly). And I'm not sure from one day to the next what will be, because I don't know how much they will really need me.

Angel explained how not knowing can be so frustrating, stating,

Yeah, pretty much I'm not certain. So, I'm right now in the moment, looking for other options. Just because, and I started my real estate license again. Because of that reason, as well, because I'm trying to find ways to make more. . . . Trying to you know, work for home and do other things to make a living or at least to somewhat survive.

Diamond stated, "Well, the one thing prevalent lately is me, not working, I am doing a little bit of an errand job by taking people to work and picking them up from work, but I am uncertain of what tomorrow will be." Diamond continued, "Because, you know, I do have reservations about working because of the mask." At the time of the study, Ruby was concerned and tried not to think about it.

***Sub-Subtheme 3: Working Less.*** In this sub-subtheme, five participants described how they were working less due to the pandemic. The participants all shared that the abrupt change to their work lives was significant. Abigail stated, "The big thing for me was the change in financial, and then the courthouse is shut down, which I need to work." Angel stated, "I just had to adjust because all of sudden, no school and you're going home to work 20 hours only, but I was lucky because I had a little savings to rely on." Bloom stated, "I was a massage therapist one day, and the next day I wasn't practicing." Precious stated, "I wasn't working for 2 or 3 months and that was a little hard to make ends meet." Ruby stated, "When I got laid off, I had my own side hustle that I used to help out."

***Sub-Subtheme 4: Working from Home.*** In this sub-subtheme, four participants spoke about the transition in working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Angel stated, "I was given the opportunity to stay with the same company. And last year, I started working from home in February. So, it's been 1 year." The transition from work to home helped Angel because

she did not have to worry about childcare expenses. Sarah stated, “Now I had to figure out how to be at home; so, I found myself working more on my business, giving it the attention that it needed.” Precious stated, “Working from home allowed me to be with my son for the first time, and I didn’t have to worry as much about him being safe.” Resilient stated, “It was a blessing for me to work from home with my boys, I worried about all the kids that had to stay home alone, because their mothers had to work.”

***Sub-Subtheme 5: Studying for Something New.*** In this smaller theme, three participants discussed how they wanted to do something different in their lives, perhaps go back to school, or transition from full time work to part time work, to have a better quality of life. MeMe stated, “Career wise, I decided to join the union in terms of working in TV and film. After that, I decided to enroll in school and then it became studying for me and a lot of reading.” Sarah stated, “So I decided that I didn't want to go back to work full time. Right now, I want to finish my education and go back and pursue that.” Bloom stated, “I decided to pursue my passion for homeopathic therapy and put reflexology on the back burner for now; my heart is in the herbs.”

***Sub-Subtheme 6: Joined a Union.*** In this smaller theme, one participant discussed how she joined an organization to help leverage her employment opportunities. This appeared to be something she would not have done if it had not been for the pandemic. Meme stated,

Yeah, so during the pandemic, I too, had an aha moment, I decided to join a union, which I've been wanting to join for years, and it was always a financial thing, because it costs money to join the union. And so being home and not having extra expenses allow me to join.

**Subtheme 2. Having to Budget.** In this subtheme, three participants talked about needing to budget or manage their money during COVID-19. They stated they needed to spend less, adjust to living differently, utilize their savings to stay afloat, and depend on their part-time business (side hustle) to help close the gap during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. For

example, Ruby stated, “It was about managing my money and not squandering [it]. I paid the bills and stuff, but I would give some money to my kids to teach them how to budget.” She added, “I didn't have anybody in daycare, because the daycare shut down. I did put money up; I would go to Sam's Club because I figured, like, you have to be able to manage your money, especially being laid off.” Angel stated there was a lot of “worry.” She continued, “a lot of overthinking. Hello, stress. We cannot deny working through the night [and I had to learn how] to manage.” Angel added, “Yes, I had to manage my money closely.” Precious stated, “I had to make sure you know, I budgeted very well, like I was very, very tight with my budgeting.”

**Subtheme 3: Aspects That Improved Finances.** In this subtheme, five participants discussed aspects that helped increase their financial situation, which had been devastated due to the hardships of the pandemic. Meme stated “Although, you know, I wasn't getting a lot of money from unemployment. It was the extra spending that I wasn't doing.” Meme stated those things had to do with, not going out to dinner all the time and . . . spend money at the mall all the time.” Angel stated, “keeping the kids at home helped me save some money because I had no child childcare and friends who pitched in helped me to maintain my responsibilities, helped me with not being as stressed.” When asked, “So did the pandemic ease any of the struggles you had?” Ruby responded “Yes, for the stuff that was coming in; the money that was coming in.”

**Sub-Subtheme 1: Unemployment.** In this sub-subtheme, five participants discussed qualifying for unemployment and being thankful for having money. Because of unemployment, the bills were paid. Abigail stated, “I did qualify for unemployment, which I normally wouldn't have been qualified because I am a contractor.” Meme stated, “Thankfully, you know, we were all able to get unemployment. And that was a lifesaver to have that and to be able to be still not go out to dinner all the time and go spend money at the mall all the time.” Precious stated, “I had

to get unemployment, and it helped me pay the bills and not worry.” Ruby stated,” And at that time, the unemployment was there.” Sarah stated, “As far as the finances are concerned, at the time, there were resources available.”

***Sub-Subtheme 2: Other Financial Help and Services.*** In this theme, three participants discussed extended services, such as financial aid due to attending college, Internet services resources, tax breaks, public housing, stimulus checks, Comcast television extension. Abigail stated,

I had my Comcast bill extend and . . . the additional programs from the pandemic helped to ease my financial problems. . . . I qualified for a \$50 Internet credit each month because my son qualified for financial aid.

Abigail continued, “Then as I progressed with the government aid and stimulus checks, I did qualify for unemployment, which I normally wouldn't have, and there was a built-in tax break that worked out when I filed my taxes.” Angel stated, “The public housing helped me to pay less rent and take care of other expenses; because of the low rent, it really helped me economically.” Ruby stated, “I mean, like, the unemployment was there, the stimulus checks came in; thank God, you know, you got some money coming in, but that's not enough.” Sarah stated, “Like I said, I didn't need for anything; I got food stamps. My bills were taken care of and I found myself applying for these different resources.”

### ***Superordinate Theme 5: Impact on Mental Health***

In this superordinate theme, the participants described the mental health challenges they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme contains four subthemes regarding the impact on mental health that the COVID-19 pandemic had in the areas of depression, frustration that it dragged on, mixed emotions, and other symptoms.

**Subtheme 1: Depression.** In this theme, two participants discussed being or feeling depressed. For example, Diamond stated, “I do suffer from depression. Because of the depression, I turn to food and sit around. I like to sit.” Abigail stated, “There was a period where it just got pretty depressing. So, it was very monotonous, and I felt more depressed and lonely.”

**Subtheme 2: Frustration That it Drags On.** In this subtheme, two participants discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic dragging on affected them. Abigail stated “Mentally just, I'm done with it. Like, oh, I'm done, my frustration over the fact that it's not getting better, and we can't get back to whatever we want to, was a big mental feeling that I have.” Ruby stated, I “want it to be over.” Ruby said, “I feel annoyed, because it's one of those things where it's like, come on and be over with. Like, I'm annoyed because you have COVID. Then it went to delta. And then I don't know where delta went.”

**Subtheme 3: Mixed Emotions.** In this theme, five participants discussed the mixed feelings they had during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mixed feelings seemed to have to do with the good and bad aspects of the pandemic. Angel stated, “I had mixed feelings.” She added, “I can be happy with the kids. But then you hear a little bit more about what’s happening and then you don’t understand. So, it was just mixed feeling.” Meme stated “I felt excited and sad because of all the lives lost. It didn't have to be this way and the need to be ‘bunkered down was a lot.’”

Meme continued,

But I think overall, I felt good, I mean, just not having to get up to be at work, you know and to save some money, pay off some bills and to see who's for you and who's not for me. It was a lot of mixed emotions.

Sarah stated, “I would feel rage. And empathy, you know, for everyone involved in general, you know, the health care system, and, you know, the people who were dying from COVID. Um, so it was a range of emotions in that way, too.”

**Subtheme 4: Other Symptoms.** In this theme, two participants discussed mental disorders and being very stressed. Precious stated, “It also played much with, you know, the mental disorders that I have, and, you know, you're isolated and you don't have your friends or your support, right there with you that you need.” Precious continued, “So rather than a hug, I got a text instead and that wasn't the same.” Resilient stated, “You know, if I'm getting a call from a teacher or an email and all those things combined is very, very stressful. So yeah, once my migraines hit hard, I couldn't do anything after that.”

***Superordinate Theme 6: Influence of Pandemic on Relationships***

This superordinate theme contains four subthemes regarding the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on relationships. This influence included appreciating people more, divisions due to COVID-19 requirements, isolation, and trying to stay connected through other means.

**Subtheme 1: Appreciating People More.** In this subtheme, three participants discussed the importance of family, educational support, and being more attentive to the children. Precious stated, “I had a lot of help with friends and family. If I needed it, they had my back” Resilient stated,

So, I think I just sat back and I thought a lot and you know, being more caring and loving and attentive to the children asking them, how they are you feeling? But I think I'm more sensitive. Because of COVID-19. I mean, so many people being evicted, we're blessed.

Ruby stated, “You had to help the kids out with schoolwork. But when you got like three kids in the house, in different grades, and you got to deal with different homework assignments, it makes you appreciate teachers more.”

**Subtheme 2: Divisions Due to COVID.** In this subtheme, two participants discussed the divisions that were among family, friends, and their communities. There were several divisions

due to COVID-19 protections and also between the Black and White communities. With respect to masks, Ruby stated,

I was at a funeral, my aunt, she passed away, it wasn't COVID. So, we go to the repass. I didn't have a mask on, I was down there, it was a whole bunch of us. My one aunt just starts flipping out because I didn't have a mask on.

Sarah was angry over those who did not get vaccinated: "I'm disappointed that, in my community many were not getting vaccinated because they didn't trust the medical system. and that angered me. Sarah also touched on divisions due to racial disparities:

So yeah, then I'm explaining to my White friends that when COVID hits my community and my people this way, it angers me. You know, I have anger towards you about that because of the unfairness in healthcare treatment before the pandemic started.

**Subtheme 3: Isolation.** In this theme, six participants discussed how they were isolated from friends and family. Bloom stated, "We tried to isolate from my mother and used sanitizer all the time and mask and just trying to be careful not to get it." Bloom further stated "We didn't hug and if any of us felt sick, we just stayed away. And I think not hugging made you feel bad and like you're missing out on something. So yeah, I felt cut off from your mother." Meme stated,

It was a scary time. In the beginning, who knows what was going to happen, I was separated from my daughters I was waiting, making sure they were okay. Healthwise, financial wise. We were dealing with their dad being sick and not being able to be there.

Precious stated, "You're isolated and you don't have your friends or your support right there with you. Rather than a hug I got a text, like, I want to hug my [grandparents] but had to fight through it every day." Two participants talked about being bored, alone, and "stuck in the house." Precious added, "The negative, again, was feeling alone and being stuck in the house and my son didn't understand we weren't allowed to do our normal activities." Sarah stated, "I just suffered so much from the boredom. . . . having to cancel like family reunions. And you know, travel time with families, and spending time with family."

**Subtheme 4: Spending Quality Time with Family.** In this subtheme, seven participants described having the opportunity to spend more quality time with the family members they were shut in with. For example, Abigail stated, “But once you got through, I did the baking and the cleaning and organizing and spending extra time with my kids and other people.” Angel stated, “I like having a little bit more time with them, my kids.” Bloom stated, “As you know, as a kid, he wasn't as safe as I would be. So that was hard. And I mean, the kids stayed home for a long time, which I enjoyed.” Meme stated, “I want to say it really gave me time to spend with my mother. And my stepfather. I mean, you know, I was doing things around the house, I was painting and spending quality time,” Meme continued, stating, “It was positive in that I got to spend some quality time with my parents.” Precious stated, “I think the positive would be me being able to spend more time with my son, you know, growing and building that bond together.” Resilient stated,

Um, I think it brought my family closer, you know, because of all that time together. Because I think so many times, we lose sight of family you know, the kids are in school all day and parents are working, you cook dinner, you're tired, you go to bed.

Ruby mentioned being able to “appreciate being around family and the hugs and you know, interacting with people and just not taking things for granted.” Ruby added, “It was, it's basically I want to say, just, you know, you just gotta thank God for the little things, um, the hugs the family time together.”

**Subtheme 5: Trying to Stay Connected Through Other Means.** In this theme, three participants discussed staying connected through technology, phone calls, and conference calls to check on family and those living by themselves during COVID-19 pandemic. Meme stated, “The negative part was being away from my daughters but luckily with technology, we were still able to stay connected.” Meme stated, “My daughters were in [one state] and I was in another . . . , and luckily with all the technology with Face Timing and Zoom, we were able to stay connected.”

Precious stated she made “many phone calls to my boyfriend and my mother. Mom, is just up the street, but you know, you had to make sure that, her my dad and my siblings were okay.” Ruby stated, “Me and my sisters—we would have a conference call. Because my one sister, she, she's single. So, there was nobody in her apartment.” Ruby added, “checking up on people. You know, people that couldn't get out, you know, what I mean, making sure that they're okay.

***Superordinate Theme 7: Influence of Pandemic on Responsibilities***

This superordinate theme contains two subthemes regarding the increased responsibilities they managed that were related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These subthemes included Increased responsibilities, which contained two smaller themes, *Kids being home*, and *Helping kids with schooling from home*.

**Subtheme 1: Increased Responsibilities.** In this subtheme, six participants discussed the increased responsibilities they had due to COVID-19. These included increased financial responsibilities, taking care of their children, helping kids with schoolwork, looking out for their mothers, helping kids with virtual learning, classroom struggles, understanding teachers' instruction and attending to their own and their children's wellbeing. Abigail stated, “I'm a single mother and so I had to make sure everybody was financially taken care of and I had to make sure that my boys were taken care of.” Abigail continued to state, “at the same time, was trying to help my mother, especially, to prevent her from having to go out as much.” Angel stated, “I mean it's no secret I had a little bit more responsibilities, and I felt kind of stuck a little bit.” Two smaller themes within this subtheme were the extra responsibility of having their children home and especially having to help their children with school from home.

**Sub-Subtheme 1: Kids Being Home.** In this sub-subtheme, four participants discussed the responsibility of having the children at home and keep more food in the refrigerator when

they had been eating at school. For example, Diamond had her daughter and grandson at home with her, while being the primary caretaker of her grandson. Diamond stated, "I mean, my responsibilities were really, you know, just my daughter and grandson and making sure you know, they had what they needed, just bearing down and doing what I had to do." Angel stated that having the kids home made it "impossible to look for other work options, because I was worried about their schoolwork." She added, "It was in a back-and-forth situation." Resilient stated, "Like I said, it was more stressful with the kids being home." Ruby stated,

Kids are home now. So usually, they're in school, and they're having their lunch and all that stuff. So now you got to have the food, the refrigerator and everything stocked; it was like this stuff for school, this stuff is for home, you know.

Sarah stated, "My main responsibility was my child, my daughter's wellbeing, you know, was home now and had to go through this."

**Sub-Subtheme 2: Helping Kids With Schooling From Home.** In this theme, six participants discussed having to help with their children's schooling and the many challenges they faced with virtual learning. They felt unequipped without the knowledge they needed to help their kids. For example, Diamond needed to help her grandson with schooling. This was such an increase in responsibilities that she had to discontinue helping him. Precious stated, "The hardest thing was him doing virtual school." Resilient stated, "It was with the kids schooling, the frustration from the kids. It put stress on me, because the kids were frustrated with schooling and you know, the teachers not getting what they need from the student." She added, "When it came to the point where I was trying to work full time and then having to be home, you know, to help the boys with their school work, that was crazy." Ruby seemed to struggle the most with this situation. She stated that helping her kids with virtual learning at home was one of her biggest stressors. She mentioned this multiple times throughout her narrative. Ruby stated she was juggling her own job and "dealing with the kids." She stated, "I'm trying to, you know, at least

do something over here. But you have to stop and make sure that their work is going through.” She added that part of the stress was that “the kids are frustrated; we're frustrated because it seems like we're trying to send things and the paperwork, teachers aren't receiving them because they're not sending them the right way. Or certain codes weren't working.” Moreover, she said, “and then when you have three kids that are asking you questions, and you're trying to you know, get the answers yourself through these teachers, and these emails and things aren't coming, it was really frustrating.” The classroom struggles and helping them with their work was also frustrating:

trying to figure out how to use Google classrooms and the Google, . . . learn this way . . . to do the math, and be able to show [how you did it.] . . . Go on YouTube and try to break it down. How to do these problems.

She added, “Because the teachers will say, ‘Well, the instructions are in there,’” but they are not easy to follow.” Sarah stated, “I realized I guess during that time too, that I hadn’t been involved with any of the kid’s studies. I always provided like tutors and things like that.”

Resilient stated, “Okay. It was just everything combined. Um, I can't even blame it on the children. I think it was just everything that was going on, you know, trying to maintain full time employment, and teaching the kids.”

### ***Superordinate Theme 8: Resilience***

This superordinate theme contains eight subthemes regarding participants’ resilience related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These subthemes included how not to give up even when the COVID -19 was at its worst, especially in the beginning. Participants were determined to move forward and find a solution. They wanted to be there for their families and were not going to give up taking care of them and providing for them. They embodied a spirit of making the best out of

what you have now. Participants also discussed putting me first, putting things in perspective, seeing the positive, reason to hope, taking nothing for granted, and being adaptable.

**Subtheme 1: Moving Forward.** In this theme, four participants discussed how moving forward was important for them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Abigail stated,

You want to not give up, not give up, but that it's just never going to end. "And something just clicked and I'm like, okay, I'm going to figure something else out here. Because I want to enjoy life and have experiences, and if it's going to look different, then I got to figure out what this is going to look like.

Angel stated, "I just tried to get myself together for my kids, you know, you have to keep yourself in a good way. And so, you can continue moving forward." Precious stated, "Like you really have to push yourself. You know, make every day happen. I mean, we, yeah, things had to be switched up, but we still made it work. And you know, we made every day count." Resilient stated, "I think it's very important, even for our children. We need to teach them how to adapt to change, because things will change, and you have to be able to move forward, even though those things have changed." Resilient captured the spirit of having to move forward, stating she did "not just live life as if nothing was going to happen. I mean, I still had to grocery shop. I still had to feed him. I still had to do you know all these normal things."

**Subtheme 2: Putting Me First.** In this subtheme, four participants discussed the time they were given to sort through their lives. The time allowed them to evaluate their lives and really search for something better for themselves. MeMe said, "I got to spend some quality time with myself. I got to slow down and sit with myself and not be so busy." Angel stated, "I think it helps you to deal with things in a different way. Think and explore yourself so you can know how to deal with the situation better." Sarah stated, "just kind of like, putting me first, you know, kind of gave me that time to just sit and evaluate. Because yeah, life is so short, right?" Sarah stated, "It allowed me time to focus on me." Sarah stated, "So then . . . when I started looking for

jobs again, which was probably August of that year of 2020, I was calling my own shots and told them, this is what I will do and what I won't do.” Precious stated, “So I honestly had a positive experience because I got to work on myself.”

**Subtheme 3: Putting Things in Perspective.** In this subtheme, three participants discussed sitting still, quieting down, reflecting on what is truly important, valuing those around them, and learning to trust their own voice and insight. For example, MeMe stated,

It was a really sad and somber time in the world. But at the same time, it was kind of a blessing in disguise. We all got a chance to be still, slow down, reflect and have a chance to do it differently.

MeMe added,

I do kind of get in my thoughts and I feel like I should be in certain areas, like, you know, finding my own place to live and things like that. But I have to put it all in perspective and think about all the people that lost their lives.

Ruby stated, “and honestly, I mean, it really makes you look at everything, really, you know, your finances, um, you know, you can't go to work or you're getting laid off, and you have a family, and you only have unemployment.” Ruby added, and you just start “to value life, those around you, and just even a little thing of being able to just go out and, and shake somebody's hand or whatever.” Ruby further stated,

And it's like, time is short. You know, you have to appreciate the time, and your loved ones while you're here. So, all that bickering and fighting and stuff like that. I mean, if today was the last day, wasn't it worth it? You know what I mean?

Sarah stated that she grew by “being open and being more aware, and just trusting my voice and my insight and using that more. Because I was always a person who would dive in or maybe get emotionally attached.”

**Subtheme 4: Reason to Hope.** In this theme, three participants discussed counteracting the negative, feeling good, putting their hope in “God,” and feeling hopeful. Abigail stated, “I am hopeful, especially with the vaccine.” Abigail stated there was negative and positive, “but I feel

like the positive was circumstantial. It was positive because of the nature of the negative; like it was kind of counteracting the negative.” Diamond stated, “I put my hope in God that, you know; it's gonna be a better day, and it might not be a better day here.” MeMe stated, “I feel hopeful. I feel good. There are moments you know, you kind of get back to, the go, go go and the rush, rush rush.” MeMe added, “Like I said, I felt hopeful still.”

**Subtheme 5: Seeing the Positives.** In this theme, three participants discussed the benefits of the COVID-19 pandemic. A few described it as a time of calm, a time to sit with themselves, and appreciating how people cared for other people. Bloom stated, “Yeah, like I'm just really appreciating your family and appreciating like you never have before the pandemic and you didn't realize how important it was to have that physical contact, like just hugs, you know.” Bloom stated, “but in a way it was good that it kept you home. Like, there's, both sides of the coin, because it is nice to calm your nervous system down and enjoy people while you have them.” Diamond stated, “I mean, I think you know, one of the things that was positive was seeing how people cared; people were helping people, you know what I'm saying? And yes, being respectful of one another when being out there you know.” MeMe stated,

So, after getting furloughed, you know, although I was looking to leave that job, you know, it's always a kick in the stomach, you know, to feel rejection. But it was a good time for me to sit with myself and learn myself.

When asked, “So what did the COVID-9 pandemic experience tell you?” MeMe responded, “Just to go for it, you know? Go for your dreams. Nothing's promised tomorrow. So, to live your life fully and out loud.” Ruby stated, “I think I'll take it as a positive because you have to look at it like, I'm still here. So as long as I'm still here and breathing and able to move around, thank you, Jesus, I'm not going to complain.” She added, “There was a guy I just read a story about that attended Howard University in his 70s. Always wanted to go to Howard University. Just read a story about that the other day, and he did.”

**Subtheme 6: Time to Pause and Reflect.** In this theme, three participants discussed the importance of having alone time to sort out their thoughts and reflect. Bloom stated, "I think it gave a lot of people time to really contemplate their life, [to spend] more time with their families that were in their house." Sarah stated, "To [have] that time to think." Ruby stated she reflected on the impact of her mindset on her kids, stating,

And then I have to think about what it did to my kids? If I took that negative, then they would have taken the negative. You impact people just by being around them. So, if you're in a bad mood they will be in a bad mood too.

**Subtheme 2: New Opportunities.** In this subtheme, six participants discussed returning to school, slowing down, new jobs, relocation, and employee flexibility. For example, MeMe stated.

You know, I've always wanted go back to school and the pandemic afforded me the opportunity and to slow down, you know, because it was just like, go go go, do do do. And it really afforded me the opportunity to really figure out what that looks like for me, you know, because I had worked in a family business.

Precious stated, "I'm working on bettering myself. Like, I got a job that I never thought I would have as a medical biller. By my friend having faith in me and her being my manager, and she's like, 'You got this. I'll train you from the bottom.'" Precious stated, "I've gained more than I've lost. Because, you know, it gives you that time to work toward yourself and decide what you want to do with yourself." Sarah stated,

So, I did have to move, relocate. But . . . I didn't have to; it was just part of the decision that I had made to, you know, with, the decision I made to, to get my life together, you know. So, I started by getting a cheaper place.

Precious stated, "When you're home, you get to learn yourself and make yourself happy." Resilient stated,

But I'm very grateful for my employer that they were very flexible. With my employment, you know, all I had to do was tell them, "Look, my boys are having trouble the first three periods of the day, is there any way that we can shift, you know. . ."

Ruby stated, “I had the opportunity to work on my beach kid business with my kids.”

Ruby added, “It’s just what we should have learned: to appreciate life.” Sarah stated, “But, I did

I think I really appreciate the time alone. I just became like, oh, I'm going home and just be.”

Sarah added,

I think it was a positive experience from my background. You know, I didn't always make the right decisions. Single mother, you know, at 17. I graduated high school, went to the workforce, and then you know, went back to school.

**Subtheme 3: Take Nothing for Granted.** In this theme, three participants discussed physical contact, loving your family, hugging, pausing, interacting with people, and appreciating the school systems. Bloom stated, “You didn't realize how important it was to have that physical contact, like just hugs, you know.” Bloom added, “And like, yeah, you just took it for granted.”

MeMe stated,

And it just makes you feel like, you know, again, that you're not going to take anything for granted, you're going to love on your family, you're going to hug them. I mean, I've always been a hugger. But I'm going to hug them more.

Ruby stated, “Being able to appreciate being around family and the hugs and you know, interacting with people and just not taking things for granted.” Ruby continued, “And so it just shows you that change comes, whether you're prepared for it or not, you know what I mean, but you can try to get prepared. But I just think that, the day-to-day living—you have to just appreciate what you got.”

**Subtheme 5: Be Adaptive.** In this theme, one participant discussed resolving problems and changing circumstances in relation to being adaptable. Resilient stated,

And adapting to the change, that will definitely help you. Yeah, cuz I think by stressing over too many things, it's not healthy for you or anyone else, you have to come up with resolutions to the problems, to overcome.

## **Addressing Research Questions**

The focus of this study was to explore the experiences of economically challenged single mothers' anxiety and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study hoped to provide these mothers unique perspectives, circumstances, along with textural and structural descriptions of their experiences to better understand the participants' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This section will summarize how each of the four research questions were addressed by the results of the study.

### ***RQ1. How was anxiety, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, perceived by economically challenged single mothers?***

The experiences of the participants' responses related to their experiences of anxiety emerged in the first superordinate theme, which was *Anxiety related to COVID-19*. The participants perceived their anxiety increased during COVID-19 especially when it suddenly dominated their lives. They were concerned about contracting the virus and not having enough income to sustain their daily lives. They were also concerned about what was really going on as there were so many unknowns about the virus. They became anxious listening to the news and hearing about a surge that was near them.

### ***RQ2. How was stress, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, perceived by economically challenged single mothers?***

The everyday lives of economically challenged single mothers were already stressful before the pandemic and the unexpected changes that COVID-19 brought severely increased their stress levels. They were feeling stressed and overwhelmed because of all the lifestyle changes, childcare concerns, and having to comply with COVID-19 restrictions, the mask wearing, the testing, and the constant changes with restrictions.

***RQ3. In what ways did stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic affect the relationships of economically challenged single mothers?***

The experience of single parent mothers during the pandemic was different for each individual but there were aspects of the experience that they all had in common. They reported embracing the opportunity to be at home with their families. On the other hand, stress and anxiety were mentioned by four of the participants with regard to the relationship changes they experienced. The shutdowns and requirements led to feeling isolated and they found it difficult to maintain relationships and the level of social support they were used to prior to the pandemic.

***RQ4. In what ways did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the responsibilities of economically challenged single mothers?***

The financial impact and the additional responsibilities were a tremendous adjustment for economically challenged single mother during the pandemic. The challenge included caring for their loved ones, assisting their children with schoolwork, while trying to keep up with their everyday responsibilities. Participants had to manage both work and childcare responsibilities.

### **Summary**

This study explored the lived experiences of economically challenged single mothers during COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter reported the themes that emerged from data analysis, as well as a description of participants. The chapter also showed how the themes addressed the research questions. The participants identified many stressors, including changes in academic systems, altered financial status, limitation of support systems from family or social networks, and public conflicts regarding policies on prevention of disease transmission. In response to the

many challenges, the participants conveyed resourcefulness in their individual methods to manage their challenges by focusing on self or the willingness to pioneer changes in career and home life. One factor that appeared difficult to overcome was scarcity of support systems due to isolation protocols, leaving those with limited resources, such as single mothers, alone and seeking other ways to cope. As stated by Precious, “You're isolated and you don't have your friends or your support, right there with you.” In the absence of foundational support systems of family, coworkers, and social activities, some participants mentioned speaking to God or a reliance on prayer to be a source of comfort. The next chapter will provide conclusions, including a discussion of the results, implications, limitations and delimitations, suggestions for future research, and a summary.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusions**

The focus of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of economically challenged single mothers with respect to their anxiety, stress, and changes to relationships and responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has shown that overall, parents and mothers in particular reported being more overwhelmed, depressed, and frustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cox & Abrams, 2020). Therefore, research concerning how economically challenged single mothers were as it relates to stress, anxiety and resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic was needed. Nine mothers were interviewed about these experiences. The central research question this study addressed was, “What are the experiences of economically challenged single mother with respect to stress and anxiety?” In this chapter, the findings will be summarized and discussed in comparison to previous research on economically challenged single mothers. Then implications of the study will be provided along with limitations, delimitations and suggestions for future research. The chapter will end with a summary of the study.

### **Summary of Findings**

The focus of this study was to explore the experiences of economically challenged single mothers’ anxiety and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study hoped to provide their unique perspectives, circumstances, along with textural and structural descriptions of their experiences to better understand the participants’ lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This section will summarize how each of the four research questions were addressed by the results of the study.

**RQ1. How was anxiety, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, perceived by economically challenged single mothers?**

The first superordinate theme that emerged from the study, *Anxiety related to COVID-19*, addressed this research question. The participants spoke about being highly anxious over not knowing enough about COVID-19, how it was going to spread, how infectious it was, and whether they would get it. They would listen to the news and worry about it reaching their geographic area. They worried about finances and running out of supplies. Specific anxiety arose over watching the news, and about themselves or their families coming down with COVID-19. Samples of the participants narratives highlight how they experienced anxiety as it occurred in their day-to-day experience during the pandemic. For example, Abigail's stated,

We would have a big surge, or now it's in Pennsylvania, or there's this many cases in Franklin County or the hospitals are closed, like, you would have to watch how much you would look at the news, because that could cause a lot of anxiety.

Diamond stated, "For me I just avoided listening to the news because it made me feel uncertain and scared of what the future holds." MeMe expressed her experience with anxiety as she described how she thought twice about where she would choose to go, because she was not sure whether she would be safe from the virus "I was always gone to different events and networking, and I do miss that, now I think about okay, do I really want to go here? Is it important?"

The participants coped with their anxiety through engaging in self-care, through being safe, and through stocking up on supplies. Many participants leaned on God. As Diamond expressed it, "I always turned back to God." Resilient described the importance of praying, "I'm going to say it right now you need prayer through this." Ruby said, she got through all that she endured with the "help of God multiply." For example, at one point in her interview, Ruby stated,

I tried not to get frustrated. And try not to, you know, I did not want to stay in fear. So, I had to, honestly, I had to really stay in the Word of God so that my mind wouldn't be all over the place.

At another point in her interview, Ruby stated, “Honestly, I take it back to being spiritual. I would not have kept a sane mind without reading the Word.”

**RQ2. How was stress, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, perceived by economically challenged single mothers?**

The participants identified with everyday stress prior to the COVID 19-pandemic and during the pandemic, they identified with different types of stress, (a) general frustration over COVID and changes, (b) wearing masks, relocating, childcare, (c) lack of self-care due to stress. Precious experienced stress in dealing with her son, who, has a sensory processing disorder, described difficulties with mask wearing for both of them,

You know, I'm just so used to breathing and I hate masks because it itches my glasses, and it's even harder for (her son) because he has a sensory disorder. So, he will tear if off, he doesn't like it.

Resilient expressed her frustration and how it affected her stress levels by saying: “Initially, it impacted my health, like I said, I was stressed, I was anxious.” She went on to talk about her children’s grades, “they just weren’t doing well,” and she had many nights crying over it. Ruby was frustrated with work protocol that involved long lines for health checkups prior to admittance into the building: “Is this the new normal, when coming into a company, you start at six o'clock, and there's a line to get your temperature done?” Adjusting to job site changes because of COVID-19 testing protocols caused stress for Ruby in getting to work on time she shared: “Normally liked to be there early and the long wait would cause me delays in getting to work on time.” Angel described how the mood changed in her home, when she started feeling overwhelmed: “The toll I will say was all the stress I was putting on myself, it let me know, I didn't take care of myself, because I wasn't thinking at the time of what it would do to me.” Angel was struggling with childcare and housing, which involved moving twice during this

period. Angel said, “I definitely felt the shift in my house, mentally emotionally even physically, and in some way spiritually.” Feeling stressed during the COVID-19 pandemic was described by Diamond and MeMe as follows: “I struggle with food and exercise; well that became a bigger struggle during the pandemic. It was how I cope.” MeMe said she worried about her daughters she could not get to, who lived in another state. She worried about how the stress was affecting her; about “not getting too fat. [That] I ate too much.”

**RQ3. In what ways did stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic affect the relationships of economically challenged single mothers?**

Four participants identified experiencing relationship changes due to the COVID 19-pandemic. Those relationship changes included family divisions over wearing masks and getting or not getting the COVID-19 vaccine, shut down of activities, and feeling isolated. However, participants also said they had the chance to spend quality time with the family members they lived with and found other means to connect with loved ones residing outside the home. Samples of the participants narratives highlight the influence of the pandemic on their relationships. For example, Ruby experienced stress in her family relationship as it related to wearing mask:

I was at a funeral, my aunt, she passed away, it wasn't COVID. So, we go to the repass. I didn't have a mask on, I was down there, it was a whole bunch of us. My one aunt just starts flipping out because I didn't have a mask on and it created some family problems.

Sarah articulated the stress and anxiety experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with respect to the conflict she experienced with two relationships that were dear to her. She described how she felt being forced to defend one over the other:

So yeah, then I'm explaining to my White friends that when COVID hits my community and my people this way, it angers me. You know, I have anger towards you about that because of the unfairness in healthcare treatment before the pandemic started.

Sarah was also disappointed by the low vaccination rates of her community:

I'm disappointed that, in my community many were not getting vaccinated because they didn't trust the medical system, and that angered me, and I felt that I was in the middle of what made sense to me on both sides.

The shutdown of everything during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially extra curriculum activities that served as therapy for Abigail, was stressful:

Like, for one example, with the yoga, I felt like that was good for my brain to feel calmer and more center, I don't like doing it online. I like to do it in a classroom with people with the music and the whole atmosphere.

Precious and Sarah discussed how not being able to see people they were accustomed to seeing and being in relationship with stressed them out and left them feeling anxious. Precious said,

You're isolated and you don't have your friends or your support, right there with you. rather than a hug I got a text, like, I want to hug my [grandparents] but had to fight through it every day.

Sarah stated, "I just suffered so much from the boredom. Um, having to cancel like family reunions. And you know, travel time with families, and spending time with family.".

**RQ4. In what ways did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the responsibilities of economically challenged single mothers?**

In the findings, six participants stated they experienced increased levels of responsibilities because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased responsibilities can be extra stressors. The responsibilities included increased financial stress, caring for loved ones, increased role of academic support for their children. Samples of the participants narratives highlights how they experienced these changes during the pandemic. For example, Abigail and Angel both shared the stress related to the responsibilities of taking care of loved ones. Abigail stated,

I'm a single mother and so I had to make sure everybody was financially taken care of and I had to make sure that my boys were taken care of . . . . At the same time, was trying to help my mother, especially, to prevent her from having to go out as much.

Angel stated, “I mean it's no secret I had a little bit more responsibilities and I felt kind of stuck a little bit.” Resilient and Sarah spoke about how quickly things happened and how they had to adjust, describing it as, “It was just everything combined. Um, I can't even blame it on the children. I think it was just everything that was going on, you know, trying to maintain full time employment, and teach the kids” (Resilient). Sarah stated, “My main responsibility was my child, my daughter's wellbeing, you know, was home now and had to go through this.”

Home schooling the kids during the COVID-19 pandemic was very frustrating for the single mothers in this study. Ruby clarified it this way:

The kids are frustrated, we're frustrated, because it seems like we're trying to send things and the paperwork, teachers aren't receiving them because they're not sending them the right way. Or certain codes weren't working. . . . Trying to figure out how to use Google classrooms and the Google,” “learn this way. . . . to do the math, and be able to show,” “go on YouTube and try to break it down. How to do these problems.

Ruby also spoke of needing to organize meals to include lunch (meals that were provided by the school):

Kids are home now. So usually, they're in school, and they're having their lunch and all that stuff. So now you got to have the food, the refrigerator and everything stocked, it was like this stuff for school, this stuff is for home, you know.

## **Discussion**

Eight superordinate themes emerged from the research describing the experiences of nine economically challenged single mothers who persevered through the COVID-19 pandemic with resilience and strength during one of the most challenging times in American history.

### ***Superordinate Theme 1: Anxiety Related to Covid***

The single mothers in this study experienced heightened levels of anxiety when the COVID-19 pandemic started, and they did not know what was going on nor how their families would be affected. The concern about getting Covid overwhelmed them and much of their anxiety had to do with wondering how devastating it would be. As the lockdowns of schools,

businesses, and workplaces occurred, participants experienced anxieties regarding how they would manage financially and how they would manage home schooling their children while trying to maintain a job, or seek employment all at the same time. This was a traumatic event that left them feeling paralyzed. A few of them feared being displaced from their homes or were displaced because of the effects of the COVID-pandemic on their finances and quarantine requirements. Others struggled to figure out accommodation for their parents who were living alone, while trying to adhere to the traveling restrictions that were put in place. Many feared running out of supplies or worried about money. Despite this horrific time, these single mothers persevered by facing their fears and fighting through with resilience and determination during one of the worst periods in our world.

These findings are similar to those of previous studies regarding anxieties of parents, and especially mothers, during COVID-19. Cox and Abrams (2020) reported that parents reported greater anxiety about the COVID-19 than those who were not parents. In Cox and Abram's study, mothers tended to be more anxious about COVID-19 than fathers were. Two additional studies found that fear of catching COVID-19 and threat to their lives "were associated with worse mental health outcomes (De Miranda, 2020, p. 1).

### ***Superordinate Theme 2: Stress Related to COVID***

In this superordinate theme, participants discussed aspects of COVID-19 that caused them stress. These included wearing masks, work protocol, and needing to relocate. They also stated that the stress they were experiencing led to lack of self-care. Single mom's stress levels were at an all-time high during the COVID-19 pandemic and it appeared that no respite was in sight. The suddenness in which the changes took place and the immediate need to wear masks were extremely stressful. Participants complained that mask wearing posed a health risk because

it challenged their breathing, while compromising other health risks they had prior to the pandemic. Two participants were particularly irritated by how uncomfortable mask-wearing was. One had preexisting health issues, such as asthma, and was not able to breathe with having the mask on. One of these participants mentioned how difficult it was for her special needs son in trying to get him to wear the mask.

The regulations enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic created increased stress for one of the single moms who had to be tested for COVID-19 prior to reporting to work each day, and it compromised her in getting to work on time. These were the many stressful situations in which single moms were challenged daily. Moving from one place to another was a dilemma two of the single mom's experienced because of not having enough money to stay one place and the other to reduce her living expenses. The findings clearly showed how the COVID-19 pandemic increased the stress for economically challenged single mom. It brought many disruptions and unexpected situations that increased their stress levels. Feinberg et al. (2022) wrote about the huge changes that occurred in household due to COVID-19. The authors summarized these changes as causing enormous stress. Alexander et al. (2021) noted that the COVID-19 measures were crucial. Mask-wearing was "a key, but under-utilized tool" (p.64), and the testing was very important to "identifying and isolating COVID-19 positive individuals and limiting spread" (p. 64). Therefore, although many participants found this new normal to be stressful, these measures were needed to protect public health.

### ***Superordinate Theme 3: Coping with Stress and Anxiety***

Superordinate Theme 3 was *Coping with stress and anxiety related to COVID-19*. Eight subthemes were included under this theme. Participants were concerned about getting COVID-19 and protecting their families and they coped with these concerns by carefully choosing what

they decided to be involved in, as a way of precaution. Listening to the news was described as triggering anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic and they would have to avoid watching the news as a way to cope. Researching about COVID-19 helped to cope with the fear of the unknown aspects of the disease, and making mask became a necessity because participants feared catching COVID-19, and at one point there were not enough masks. Leaning on God was a significant part of coping with these terrifying circumstances. Some participants also had support of family and friends. Self-care, coping over time, and therapy were described by participants as being vital sources to help deal with the struggles of the increased anxiety and stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### ***Superordinate Theme 4. Impact on Finances***

In Superordinate Theme 4, the participants discussed their financial concerns and 11 subthemes emerged out of the experiences they had. The pandemic had a large impact on participants' work, and they were concerned about job loss, uncertainty of work, reduced work hours, and qualifying for unemployment. Participants spoke about going from full time to part time employment or being required to work based on weekly workload productivity, which was uncertain and varied from week to week. A few of the participants did not lose their jobs but had to work from home, and yet others went a whole year without having a job.

In spite of their financial concerns and the need to budget, the services such as unemployment helped offset some of these concerns. Childcare expenses, bulk shopping, receiving unemployment actually assisted in helping the participants to pay off bills, pursue other employment, and alleviated the extra expense they had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, three of the participants agreed that working from home benefited them. Childcare expenses, safety of their children, and being able to spend more time with their children was

appreciated. Some participants discussed being excited about being laid off, which gave them an opportunity to try something new. One participant was able to go back to school, while another reduced her full-time work hours to part-time, and the other decided to pursue a different career. Yet another participant decided to join a union to help her with her career goals. The need to budget and know how to manage their money during the COVID-19 pandemic was essential to survive. Overall, participants were thankful for the extended services provided by the federal government, unemployment compensation, tax breaks, public housing, and other companies in reducing their payment or allowing them not to pay for certain periods of time.

Although Holingue et al. (2020) cited several studies showing that the major changes in work with less time for self-care and disruption of work-life balance can contribute to distress and anxiety, these mothers appear to have been particularly resilient in coping with all of these disruptions. Further, Holingue et al. (2020) cited several studies finding that “those who reported that the virus was a threat to the US economy or to their own personal finances had significantly higher distress, consistent with an initial report by Pew Research Center” (p. 4). Even though these mothers were resilient, they were nevertheless impacted by all these stressors together, as the next theme shows.

#### ***Superordinate Theme 5. Impact on Mental Health***

Superordinate Theme 5 contains four subthemes showing the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of the economically challenged single mothers who participated in this study. They expressed the frustration of it dragging on and how it negatively affected their mental wellbeing. Two participants spoke of experiencing depression and feeling depressed. Participants had a mixture of feelings and the pandemic seemed to exacerbate other symptoms. These findings

indicated that at least two of the participants had preexisting medical conditions, such mental health disorders and migraine headaches, which were exacerbated during COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, the study's findings revealed some of the impact on the mental health of single mothers the COVID-19 pandemic had. It would make sense that an event of such magnitude would affect individuals differently. Nevertheless, there were experiences they collectively voiced that were captured by the study. Some mothers were depressed and others had other symptoms and mental health issues. Feinberg et al. (2022) noted that the extent to which the parents in his study were depressed was "striking" (p. 370). In Jacoby et al.'s (2017) study, 40% of single parents reported they were depressed in some way. Jacoby et al. concluded high levels of stress were reported by single parents because of competing priorities, financial insecurity, and concern for their children's wellbeing and safety. However, overall, the study shows that these mothers are resilient and will rise to the occasion when it comes to supporting and being there for family. Frustration because of the pandemic dragging on with no end in sight would be a normal response. The situation would cause anyone to feel annoyed or depressed and even begin to question the validity of it, as some of them did. They conveyed feelings of being lonely and sad, which are natural responses, considering the emotional impact it had on them. In addition, the recovery period from this is indefinite. Moreover Holingue et al. (2020) noted,

Previous research on the long-term effects of pandemics and quarantining suggests that the end of the crisis does not necessarily bring an end to deleterious mental health effects. Those affected may experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety months—or even years—afterward.

It is important to remember that single mothers had stressful situations to deal with before the pandemic, which also had an impact on their mental health. As one of the participants mentioned, not having services available to support her mental wellbeing made it worst for her during the pandemic. Many of the single mothers were anxious and stressed during this period

because of the lack of contact and prior resources not being available. These types of events can have a severe impact on mental health, and resources are needed to provide more support.

***Superordinate Theme 6. Influence of Pandemic on Relationships***

The COVID-19 pandemic strengthened and challenged relationships within this population and four subthemes emerged specifically regarding these relationship changes. Participants discussed how they appreciated their relationships more due to seeing how vulnerable they can be. Many of the participants discussed losing loved ones or knowing someone who did and appreciating their children more. Divisions in relationship were discussed by two participants. Mask mandates were a source of family division because a participant did not wear a mask at a family function. Other participants felt like she had to choose one side over the other as it pertained to political beliefs amongst colleagues and family over COVID. Racial divisions were discussed because some people in participants' lives did not understand that racial disparities in health between Black and White people had an influence on how destructive COVID-19 was to the Black community.

The COVID-19 pandemic created social isolation of family structures, enhancing self-reliance and increasing time spent with immediate family members. The feeling of isolation was discussed as the participants described feeling, bored, alone, stuck in the house and being afraid of being alone during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another participant discussed missing and hugging their family members who did not live with them. However, while isolation was an issue, others discussed being happy that they had more free time and enjoyed having their kids home or other family members they lived with. They were also able to find ways of staying connected to family outside of the household through other means. Facetiming, conference

calling, and making phone calls, while checking up on those they knew were alone, were some of the resources single mother used during the COVID-19 pandemic to communicate.

Employment furloughs, business closures, and expansion of remote work-at-home situations altered relationships with coworkers, neighbors and friends. Personal contact was now replaced with electronic/virtual communication and surrounded by ongoing social media reports of unfortunate deaths due to COVID-19, creating community fear and anxiety concerning disease transmission. Relationships were sometimes strained and conflict occurred regarding CDC policies and social disparities throughout the communities.

It is understandable that single mothers were challenged in the face of these experiences due to the precaution regulations that were in place to protect everyone from the deadly pandemic that gripped the nation in fear. Single mothers experienced decreased contact with their extended family and in some cases were totally isolated from visiting or seeing their loved ones. These crucial support relationships that once extended love via in-person validation and support was no longer accessible, in the same way as human touch was not. However, these mothers experienced increased engagement with their children's education and social activities which were now occurring at home. While participants were isolated from forms of social support they no longer had access to, they reported feeling that mother-child relationships were enhanced. On the other hand, single mothers experienced frustration in their pursuit of enforcing isolation rules for adolescents and young adult children, who sometimes waived in following the guidelines. Their lack of following safety precautions posed a risk to the entire family unit, compromising the relationship between the mother and child/children.

Feinberg et al. (2022) explained that during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents experienced enormous stress due to seclusion within households, social isolation, concerns about

the health of family and friends, disruption to school and childcare, and the need to make new decisions related to health care. Mazza et al. (2020) also found that among the measures to manage the pandemic, “the lockdown has been particularly burdensome, due to its pervasiveness and lengthy duration” (p. 578). Given all these changes, participants in this study showed their resilience in their ability to appreciate quality time with their families, the ability to stay connected through virtual means, and in appreciating what people did for each other during the pandemic.

### ***Superordinate Theme 7. Influence of Pandemic on Responsibilities***

The responsibilities that emerged in Superordinate Theme 7 showed how economically challenged single mothers’ responsibilities substantially increased during the pandemic. Participants needed to take care of loved ones by making sure they were safe, implementing the COVID-19 restrictions and provided for. With the kids at home, they needed to do more caregiving, shopping, and stocking up on food that otherwise would be provided at school. One of the most difficult responsibilities for these single mothers involved helping their kids with virtual learning and homework. The participants described how stressful it was trying to balance these increased responsibilities. Many said they felt anxious, while others discussed having healthy support system from family and friends.

The role of single mothers is substantially consumed with perpetual activities of daily living in managing their family’s educational, social, and economic existence. The unpredictable and devastating nature of the COVID-19 global pandemic posed challenges that threatened the stability of the family structure for single mothers. The pandemic would prove to be most burdensome to single mothers as they attempted to meet the evolving needs presented by the pandemic, with strained limited resources, to manage and participate in virtual education,

childcare, and elder care, while also striving to maintain or obtain financial resources to provide for their families. The COVID-19 pandemic presented economically challenged single mothers with a magnitude of challenges and responsibilities never experienced in the 21st century.

According to Gulland (2020), the closure of schools forced parents to homeschool their children. Bhamani et al. (2020) mentioned that online schooling presented extra burdens to parents who needed to have computers and internet available at specific hours. Technical issues had to be overcome or their children might miss out on learning. The abrupt way in which parents were faced with these challenges was another factor in placing additional stress on parents (Bhamani et al., 2020). Again, the mothers in this study demonstrated resiliency in how they were persistent in overcoming these challenges they were faced with and demonstrated an ability to bounce back.

### ***Superordinate Theme 8: Resiliency***

Superordinate Theme 8 and its eight subthemes showed ways in which participants were resilient in facing the challenges of the pandemic. The participants discussed the importance of moving forward, knowing that giving up was not an option. They also discussed how their example would help motivate their children as well. Showing their children how to respond to a crisis was important for all the participants. The participants talked about putting themselves first, paying attention to their health, engaging in self-care, and calling their own shots. They were able to view COVID-19 as an opportunity to engage in self-examination and make better choices. Participants also expressed an understanding of the importance of keeping things in perspective as they discussed the world-changing event that the COVID-19 pandemic represented. The number of deaths, work-related changes, school closures, among so many difficult shifts in family life, helped the participants look at life realistically. The participants

demonstrated their resiliency in their decision to move forward. Three participants voiced reasons to hope. They were hopeful about a promising vaccine and they placed their hope and faith in “God,” which helped them to persevere. A few of the participants said there were more positives than negatives; it all depended on how you chose to look at it. In addition, six participants discussed ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic opened up opportunities that were life changing. A few of them went back school, others had their work hours reduced, which allowed them to pursue other interests, and another decided to move to a cheaper place to release some of their financial burden. Another joined a union, while others got new jobs.

One of the participants stated she appreciated life more. Many said they would not take life for granted. They would not take for granted the importance of physical touch, interacting with people, and teachers in the educational system. They realized how important it is to appreciate what one has in life. Participants also discussed the importance of being still and reflecting, evaluating their lives. Three participants highlighted the need to get away and just sit and reflect to sort out their thoughts. This was a common comment throughout the research at different points, when participants were describing their lived experiences during COVID-19. Finally, participants talked about how important it was to be adaptive. A participant discussed the importance of being adaptable to change and understanding that nothing remains the same. What was important was being a part of the solution by trying to figure out how to better the situation.

Overall, the pandemic presented economically challenged single mothers with opportunities to use their strengths in leading their families. Notably, they showed resiliency in motivating their families, being self-reliant when short of social support and left to fend for themselves, in seeking new opportunities, and being adaptable and making adjustments in normal routines. These single mothers were able to perform at their best during the pandemic in

helping their family make necessary changes. With the inability to predict the future of the pandemic and what course they would be required to take, these single mothers proceeded by leaning on their faith, thinking innovatively, and taking risks to create new opportunities in financially supporting their family.

These single mothers became more protective over what they learned during the pandemic regarding their self-care and how they wanted to proceed with their future. They also used this opportunity to model for their children how to persevere through adversities by seeing the greater good in the positive things as well as the negative. This pandemic broadened the single mother's initiative and ability to launch forward despite disparities, challenges, and social controversies. As a result, their children will proceed into the next generation prepared with stories of resiliency comparable to the generation that survived the Great Depression.

There is limited literature on resiliency in economically challenged single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, Feinberg et al. (2016) found that economically challenged mothers tend to be resilient in the face of adversity. Moreover, these results are in keeping with the theoretical framework of this study, resiliency theory (Bernard et al., 2004 as cited in Cambri, 2021). Participants showed their resilience in keeping with this theory by demonstrating self-reliance, being adaptive, approaching problems proactively with the aim of finding solutions, and in keeping connected to sources of social support as much as possible. They were also able to find meaning in their experiences and put some of the challenges in perspective.

### **Implications**

This phenomenological study has empirical and practical implications for human service workers, social workers, educators, and community advocates who are concerned about the mental health of economically challenged single mothers during the pandemic. The study's

findings described how single mothers experienced anxiety, stress, and resilience during the pandemic. Single mothers who are concerned about their anxiety and stress will identify additional benefits that can help them during another crisis experienced beyond a pandemic. Results from this study can lend support to documenting the resources needed for single mothers' programs to provide them with additional services they may require in the event of another pandemic period. The results emphasize the effect of life disruptions and financial constraints on economically challenged single parents and their mental health outcomes, including their resilience, under these circumstances.

### **Theoretical**

Resiliency theory provided a framework for exploring the experiences of economically challenged single mothers with respect to stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from this study provided support for Bernard's (2004 as cited in Cambri, 2021) assumptions concerning resiliency. This study's findings contributed to resiliency theory by applying the theory to the experiences of economically challenged single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's findings provided important evidence of the participants' resiliency in their demonstration of the four strengths of resilience postulated by Bernard (2004 as cited in Cambri, 2021) - (a) social competency (b) problem-solving (c) autonomy (d) sense of purpose. Social competency is described as one's ability to connect with friends and coworkers in a way that assists in their ability to bounce back positively from adversities. Problem solving is the ability to use critical thinking skills to work through and find solutions to their problems. Autonomy is relying on oneself, putting oneself first, and having faith in oneself. Autonomy allows individuals to decide how they choose to embrace the challenges around them. Sense of purpose is finding meaning in adversity.

Participants demonstrated problem-solving in the way they coped. The participants explained that they felt stressed and anxious during the pandemic; however, they chose to move forward and determine what their new norm would look like, and they positively adapted to their shifting circumstances. They demonstrated problem-solving in their determination to find ways to provide for their families and not give up. Bernard (et al. 2004 as cited in Cambri, 2021) discussed how resilience is an intangible ability that permits certain people to be struck down by life and rise stronger than before. Rather than allowing failure to crush their spirit, resilient people find ways to rise from the ashes. The participants discussed how they experienced great fear, not knowing what was happening, afraid that they would run out of supplies, and afraid that someone might die. In the beginning they felt stressed and anxious, but at the end of it all they felt hopeful. When an individual feels hopeful in the face of adversity, that is a definition of resilience.

The pandemic reminded participants that life is short, and they were determined to do whatever they needed to live their lives to the fullest, to appreciate their families, and to take care of themselves. They demonstrated autonomy by relying on themselves and being assertive, and making sure their family's needs were met. Participants showed autonomy in "just trusting my voice and my insight and using that more." Autonomy was also modeled through the participants deciding to put themselves first. For example, Sarah stated, "just kind of like, putting me first, you know, kind of gave me that time to just sit and evaluate." They were able to put the adversity caused by the pandemic in perspective, focus on themselves, find their own meaning and purpose and the life direction that was right for them. One participant expressed the desire to have their children learn from experiences with adversity as well. She wanted her children to learn from the

experiences and understand that problems would happen but learning from those experiences and being part of the solution rather than the problem was key.

In the end, the participants stated that it was important for them to move forward, take time to evaluate their lives and embrace the new opportunities they had in front of them. They vowed especially not to take anything for granted. Participants agreed that in the face of adversity they had a choice to allow the situation to cause them to become hopeless or to look for the best in the situation no matter what.

### **Practical**

Economically challenged single mothers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic provides evidence for their need for mental health support. This is in line with previous literature showing that overall, parents and mothers in particular reported being more overwhelmed, depressed, and frustrated during the pandemic (Cox & Abrams, 2020). As participants explained, they experienced increased stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the majority did not have the mental health support. A common theme evolved surrounding the mistrust in the reliance on healthcare systems in preventing disease transmission, along with concerns of disparities in accessing healthcare systems for minority patients. Prior research has found lower supply of many types of health care providers in segregated minority communities (Chan et al., 2019; 2021).

Most of the mothers in the current study suffered from financial worries due to increased responsibilities, anxiety and stress as well, at having to attend to their children's in-home virtual schooling. Cox and Abrams (2020) explained that parents have complicated feelings about the best approach to schooling during the pandemic and can increase mothers' stress and anxiety. Based on this study's findings, several implications for practice warrant discussion. The lack of

mental health services to address the effects of COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to anxiety and stress with single mother is problematic and needs to be addressed immediately.

Professional counselors must be knowledgeable of resources that will help single parents handle the many demands of their responsibilities. This might include low-income family supports, child-sitting services, academic assistance programs for kids, and child-friendly businesses and/or activities (Whisenhunt et al., 2019). Mental health professionals who see economically challenged single mothers during a crisis can support them by supporting their strengths and resilience. Awareness of these strengths and focus on these strengths in the face of unexpected events could help single moms reduce or eliminate anxiety and stress. Feinberg et al. (2022) mentioned that an intervention that strengthens mothers' resilience could be useful before another crisis emerges.

Multiple modalities can be considered when addressing the anxiety and stress of single parent family households who have symptoms of anxiety and stress brought on by the COVID-19 outbreak. Kimber et al. (2021) discussed a complex psychosocial intervention which could serve as a clinical model to assist those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It can be flexibly integrated into the conventional clinical practices of most practitioners and can deliver several outcomes based on symptoms (e.g., secondary traumatic stress, burn-out and anxiety symptoms, etc.). This clinical method can be disseminated across multiple stakeholders (e.g., practitioners, patients) demonstrating an adaptability potential for most organizational services who exist to reach victims of the pandemic.

An individual assessment should be considered in defining the single parent family households and its distinctive characteristics. This would necessitate a tailored approach

intervention specifically designed for that group and targeting the effects of anxiety and stress during the pandemic.

COVID-19's impact on anxiety and stress will have numerous long-term and ongoing consequences since many unknowns remain. In certain cases, boosting existing treatment is the best course of action. Many issues, on the other hand, will be novel and will worsen pre-existing health disparities, necessitating new evidence-based remedies (Pierce et al., 2020); such approaches will require ongoing research of single parent family households.

Additional solutions are needed to support a rapidly changing pandemic and different approaches may be required. Researchers and mental health professionals will need to be creative in their approach to mend the issues surrounded by COVID-19, as it will require a mixture of old and new interventions to sufficiently eradicate the issues caused by the current pandemic. This is significant for those challenged with anxiety and stress in single parent family households, due to a pandemic that continues to unfold in our world.

### **Empirical**

This study provides evidence that economically challenged single mothers were affected by a significant amount of anxiety and stress during the pandemic. The study contributed to the growing research providing evidence of the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected economically challenged single mothers' psychological wellbeing. The study's finding supported previous findings that mothers showed higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, and that they were prone to developing PTSD symptoms (Mazza et al., 2020). In addition, these findings supported Feinberg's et al. (2016) assertion that these mothers may have already learned how to cope with an abundance of stressors, so that added stressors may have had little or no influence on their inherent coping skills, which were dependent on the environment they were used to.

The study contributed to the empirical research on single mother's resiliency during the pandemic as well. Their coping mechanisms to manage their anxiety and stress were relatively positive. With a few exceptions, they were able to find ways to engage in self-care, increase their knowledge in the midst of a terrifying pandemic with unknown factors, and increase their supplies as well as manage tightened budgets. Overall, these mothers were shown to be highly resilient (Feinberg et al., 2016). Despite the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on single mothers as it relates to anxiety and stress, economically challenged single mothers found ways to put the pandemic into perspective and evaluate their lives and what they wanted for themselves. These findings suggest that economically challenged single mothers were able to be open to new opportunities presented by the COVID-19 global crisis and discover purpose and meaning.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to learn more about the experiences of COVID-19 single parents. COVID 19's influence on single parents' anxiety and stress was a primary focus of this research to learn of ways to provide better supports for this population in the future in case of another pandemic or traumatic event. To better understand the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic limitations and a statewide lockdown, nine economically challenged single mothers were interviewed. This study will present the delimitations and limitations of the study.

#### **Delimitations**

The researcher chose certain boundaries around her topic. First, I chose to limit the study to economically challenged single mothers. The scope of the study was to assess how economically challenged single mothers fared during the pandemic, and the research chose to focus on this group rather than single fathers or wealthier single mothers. I chose economically

challenged single mothers because limited resources are available regarding this population. This population already had its challenges before the pandemic, and so I was interested in exploring how they fared during the pandemic and what further supports may be needed in relation to their experiences of anxiety and stress in any future wave or variant of the pandemic or future crisis.

### **Limitations**

The first limitation of the study is sample size. Due to the study's design, which was a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design, the researcher used a small sample of nine participants. A transcendental phenomenological study was chosen to capture the rich experiences of economically challenged single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher limited the number of participants to allow participants to speak at length about their experiences. When focusing on lived experiences to explore a particular phenomenon, the researcher wants an in-depth view of each individual's experience to gain a better understanding of the collective experiences. However, this limitation means the results might not be generalizable to the larger population of economically challenged single mothers. Another limitation was that this study explored the experiences of individuals from a single geographical area: the Western ML, Southern PA area, which means that the results may not be applicable to single mothers in other areas of the US. Future research is needed to validate these results. Moreover, an interview via Zoom instead of in-person may have presented other limitations. Participants may have been more open and more comfortable if the interview had been held in their home environment or in another agreed upon location.

### **Future Research**

Future research should conduct a similar study in other parts of the country to validate these findings. Future studies could also explore whether anxiety and stress are more prevalent in

single mothers because of how single parenthood is culturally. It would be interesting to examine how attitudes toward single mothers may have fluctuated over time and their relation to welfare policies (Hakovirta et al., 2021). Understanding the effects of anxiety and stress on single mothers because of these attitudes should also be studied. It would be important to understand how single mothers are perceived in society, as it might affect the public response toward families who face economic struggles (Hakovirta et al., 2021). Many are still experiencing challenges as a result of the pandemic. Future research could also determine whether these attitudes have changed or gotten better; or whether they grew worse during the pandemic.

The multiple variances of COVID-19 that continue to affect the population continues to substantiate a need for ongoing research because no one knows the overall impact these variances will have on economically single mother households now or in the future. Determinations of what types of resources will be needed to make improvements or necessary changes due to the pandemic must remain active. Future research could conduct a needs assessment to determine what economically challenged single mothers' needs are related to reducing anxiety, stress and increased responsibilities during episodes of the pandemic. This can occur by focusing on the need rather than the experience.

### **Summary**

According to Pujar et al. (2018), mental health is a condition of wellbeing in which individuals achieve their own potential, have the resources to cope with everyday stressors, work successfully, and contribute to his or her community; all these while dealing with present and unanticipated occurrences. This research focused on the mental health of economically challenged single mothers in the midst of a very stressful event: the COVID-19 pandemic. Single mother households are common in modern culture and are rapidly expanding. Moreover, the

structure of so called “normal homes” is constantly altering due to shifting family dynamics in communities. In the past, traditional homes signified the presence of a mother, father, and children. New sorts of family households are frequently created when family arrangements evolve. Unmarried, widowed, or divorced parents who have not remarried are considered single parents. A mother, father, grandparent, uncle, aunt, or non-biologically related adult can lead a single-parent family. The study was conducted with a concern that COVID-19 might contribute to a rising inequality among single parents, particularly single moms, who are economically disadvantaged and have deteriorating mental health.

Compared to other categories, single parent families have a higher risk of mental health issues (Babalis et al., 2018). Several variables impact mental health, including family relationships, life dissatisfaction, and chronic stress, all of which raise sensitivity to mental health disorders. Single parents often fill numerous responsibilities, making them more vulnerable to developing mental health issues (Cox & Abrams, 2020). According to Babalis et al. (2018), single parent families have a harder time embracing their family as well as their own social circumstances, which explains why a study into their mental health during the pandemic was needed.

A transcendental qualitative approach was used to allow the participants to describe their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic through their own eyes. The single mothers in this study experienced numerous stressors and life changes due to the pandemic. They initially experienced a great deal of fear and anxiety about being infected and dying. They worried about themselves, their loved ones, and they experienced financial anxiety. They coped with their stress and anxiety in a number of ways, including avoiding listening to the news because it would make them feel uncertain and scared of what the future would hold, mask making, leaned on

God, self-care, and therapy. Most of these coping strategies were healthy rather than unhealthy. Also, although they experienced many changes related to work and finances, they also took time to transition to pursue interests they would not have otherwise. Many appreciated the time they had to reflect, appreciated family more, time alone, and valued their lives in a new way. Participants also voiced appreciating what people were doing for each other. All in all, the participants demonstrated resilience in the way they experienced the pandemic. They saw the pandemic as an opportunity after the initial fears subsided. It should also be noted that in terms of public policy, the participants stated that they appreciated and benefited from the financial services that were available to them during that time. Some were able to pay off bills, and these services tended to offset their stress. The findings of this study are a first step in exploring the experiences of economically challenged single mothers about their experiences. More research is needed in following up with them post pandemic and exploring their needs in the case of another wave, variant, or crisis.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Telephone Script

Hello Potential Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of economically challenged single mothers as it relates to anxiety and stress because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be a single mother, 18 years of age or older and reside in the Western Maryland, South-Central Pennsylvania area. Participants, if willing, will be asked to do the following tasks:

- You will be interviewed regarding your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and asked to describe these lived experiences. The interview process will take one to two hours. The session will be audio and/or video recorded.
- Participants will be asked to review the questions at the end to verify that the responses recorded are their described and lived experiences (Wrap-up will be 20 minutes).

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Would you like to participate? (YES) Great, do you mind answering some questions so I can confirm your eligibility? (NO) I understand. Thank you for your time. Conclude the conversation.

(If eligible) Can we set up a time for an interview? I thank you for your time. I am looking forward to hearing about your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(Request email address.) A consent document will be sent to you one week before the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

Sincerely,

Gloria Hill-Murray  
Doctoral Candidate

## **Appendix B: Consent Form**

**Title of the Project:** ANXIETY, STRESS, RESILIENCE AND THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ECONOMICALLY CHALLENGED SINGLE MOTHERS

**Principal Investigator:** Gloria Murray, a doctoral student in the School of Education, Liberty University

### **Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study on Anxiety, Stress, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on economically challenged single parents. To participate, you must be 18 years and over, a single mother, and live in the Western Maryland or South-Central Pennsylvania area. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

### **What is the study about and why is it being done?**

The purpose of this study is to determine if single parent mothers experienced stress and anxiety problems because of the COVID-19 pandemic. My motivation for this study is to identify any problems that arose with single mothers during the pandemic that created anxiety/stress, by providing research regarding these experiences. The goal is to identify any needs that occurred with hopes that those seeking to provide services for this population would be able to, because of the literature provided.

### **What will happen if you take part in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Be interviewed in your home or at a mutually agreed upon location or via Zoom. Interviews will last one to two hours and

- will be recorded.
2. Review the written transcript to verify that the exact responses you gave are accurate to what you said and clarify any discrepancies regarding your personal interview (approximately 20 minutes).

### **How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Your participation will help identify the experiences of single mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic and possibly help provide additional services during a crisis.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

1. Participant responses will be kept confidential using a unique pseudonym. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
2. Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
3. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation, and do not submit your study materials. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Gloria Hill-Murray. You may ask any questions you have now.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what

the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date