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Rural and Urban Caregiver Financial Strain and Food Insecurity During Pediatric Hospitalizations

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Disclosures

- None

Hospitalizations are expensive for families

- Caregivers have significant out-of-pocket costs during hospitalizations
 - Direct medical costs
 - Lost income/wages/productivity costs
 - Other costs: transportation, food, childcare, adult care, etc.
- Rural caregivers may have fewer social supports and resources

Knowledge gap

- Limited literature exists regarding pediatric hospitalizations:
 - Degree of financial strain and food insecurity
 - Stress experienced due to these burdens
 - Urban vs rural population experience

Objective

1. Identify financial strain and food insecurity experienced by caregivers of hospitalized children
2. Describe differences between rural and urban populations

Methods: study design

- Cross-sectional single site study enrolling caregivers of hospitalized children between 8/31/2021 and 12/2/2022
- Survey data collection:
 - Demographic information
 - Financial strain and food insecurity
 - Free text responses

Methods: analysis

- Quantitative: bivariate (chi-squared)
- Qualitative: dual researcher coding/theme development
- Focus: themes of financial strain and food insecurity

Participant demographics

- 170 caregivers
 - 47.7% were rural
- Greater proportion of rural caregivers identified as:
 - White
 - (70.8% vs. 80.2%; $p=0.03$)
 - Lower levels of income
 - (33.7% vs. 56.8% income <\$50,000 per year; $p=0.03$)

Rates of financial and food insecurity

	Overall	Non-Rural	Rural	p-value
Skipped meals, n (%)	118 (69.4)	59 (66.3)	59 (72.8)	0.36
Skipped meals due to cost, n (%)	52 (30.6)	26 (29.2)	26 (32.1)	0.68
Concerns about losing job, n (%)	44 (25.9)	21 (23.6)	23 (28.4)	0.48
Able to use paid leave, n (%)	79 (47)	44 (50)	35 (43.8)	0.42
Lost wages or tips*	200 [0, 675]	155 [0, 687.5]	250 [0, 650]	0.66
Cost of travel to and from hospital*	100 [50, 200]	100 [50, 150]	110 [70, 250]	< 0.01
Cost of meals at the hospital*	60 [30, 117.5]	75 [30, 150]	50 [25, 100]	0.11

* Median \$ (IQR)

Subthemes of financial strain

“What things have caused you the most stress?”

Lost wages	“Wondering how I will pay the bills since I've missed work without pay.”
Job security	“Concerns about treatment after we leave the hospital and my job security. ”
Insurance	“This is a new insurance company and we don't know what they cover. ”
Out of town expenses	“The expense of being out of town , meals not expected to have to prepare for out of town, making accommodations for members at home, etc.”
Medical Costs	“The wellbeing of my child and the associated cost for a hospital stay and ambulance transfer. ”
Lodging	“Not knowing if I have a place to stay ... ”

Subthemes of food insecurity

“What things have caused you the most stress?”

Primary stressor	
Logistics	“Leaving my child alone to go downstairs to get meals.”
Cost	“Costly meals.”
Exacerbated stress	
Cost	“Having to spend more money on gas and food than I'm used to.”
Lack of options	“Not having a decent reasonably priced place to eat close by. The cafeteria here does not have palatable options.”
Alleviated stress	
Availability	“...availability of food/items on site.”
Vouchers	“Food vouchers for breastfeeding so I'm not stressing about spending \$30-\$40 a day on food.”

Main findings

- Multifactorial financial burdens for families
 - Lost wages
 - Food
 - Transportation
 - Direct medical
- Similar rural and urban caregiver rates
- Multifactorial financial and food insecurity burdens were frequently cited primary stressors

Limitations & Future Directions

- Limitations:
 - Excludes chronic medical conditions and ICU stays
 - Limited free text responses
 - Framing bias
- Future directions:
 - Expanded qualitative research
 - Interventions & impact

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