Student Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic:
 Perspectives from First-Generation/Lower-Income Students and Others

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-eight University of Michigan students (12 first-generation/low income and 16 from more educated, affluent families) were invited online to provide open-ended responses and photographs representative of their experiences during COVID-19, in a modified Photovoice approach. Given the literature, we expected that cultural mismatch, class stereotypes and relative deprivation would be relevant features of the accounts of self-identified first generation/lower-income students’ experience, in contrast to their peers. Using thematic analysis, three themes differentiated the written accounts of the experiences of the two groups of students: changed environmental demands, comparison to similar or different other students, and change or continuity in the availability of institutional support. Both groups of students shared concerns about issues with mental health, and concern for family. While first-generation/lower income students reported that they experienced less access to space and quiet for their schoolwork, their counterparts reported that their conditions for studying were better. Additionally, when comparing themselves to others, first-generation students mentioned their best guesses about the experiences of more affluent students, while non-first-generation students tended to compare themselves to those like themselves. Finally, while non-first-generation students wrote of continued institutional support and dedication to schoolwork, first-generation students reported having fewer resources for academic success.

Keywords: first-generation college experiences, COVID-19, relative deprivation

COVID-19 has not only caused an unprecedented loss of human life since the last pandemic early in the 20th century. In addition, it has affected closure of schools and businesses, domestic violence rates, unemployment, and economic activity, and everyday individual behavior (staying at home, mask-wearing and handwashing), (Chriscaden, 2020). It has, in addition, had a substantial

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impact on higher education in the United States. In March 2020, more than 1100 colleges and universities cancelled in-person classes, sent students home, and cancelled graduation ceremonies (Smalley, 2020). Then, over that summer, many residential colleges and universities made “reopening plans” that included offering students a choice of living on campus or not, while creating alternative models for higher education (Marris, 2020). A collaboration between Davidson College and the Chronicle of Higher Education documented 3000 institutions in the fall of 2020 as fully or primarily online (44%), hybrid (21%) or primarily in person (23%), with the remaining more complicated models (“Here’s our list,” 2020; Nierenberg & Pasick, 2020). Changes to the academic calendar and delivery of instruction continued well into 2021.

Both students and faculty were asked to make adjustments to their expectations about what higher education courses look and feel like in these new models. Many other changes were also implemented: different grading schemes, increased support for students with inadequate equipment to handle the new demands, availability of personal protective equipment on campus, regimens for sanitizing classrooms and conducting in-person classes, free virus testing, and more (Marris, 2020; Wise, 2020). These new protocols were designed to address varied student and faculty circumstances, and to mitigate health risks of gatherings of students in classes and in communities.

There is only limited data available on the strategies adopted by institutions of different types (“Here’s our list,” 2020; Nierenberg & Pasick, 2020). Non-residential institutions faced different challenges than those that are normally fully or even partly residential. Two-year and four-year institutions often differ in how much of their curriculum is already online, and therefore the proportion of faculty already skilled in that form of education. For institutions with a high rate of residential students and little prior experience with online curriculum, such as large, elite private and public institutions, the shifts were most dramatic, requiring the most adaptation by students, first in being “sent home” and then in resuming in the fall semester in a substantially online format.
In this study we aim to examine the impact on all students in a major research university setting, but to focus on the particular stressors faced by students who already carried the added stress of being a first generation and/or lower-income student in that context.

**Stress and Change**

Change is nearly always stressful; it signals new demands on the individual (Lazarus, 2009). It is more stressful when it is unexpected and novel, and when it involves a shift in familiar routines. Moreover, a robust body of research has demonstrated that individuals, including college students, have responded to past national emergencies such as 9/11, with intensified stress responses, including decreased mental health and well-being (Fredrickson, et al., 2003; Lindsey, et al., 2007; Liverant, et al., 2004; Lowell et al., 2018; Murphy, et al., 2003; Nixon & Pallavi, 2005). Studies also show that the intensity and duration of these kinds of responses are affected by pre-existing strengths and frailties (Lowell et al., 2018; Matt & Vázquez, 2008; Plante & Canchola, 2004; Saylor, et al., 2006; Wayment, 2004).

**The Stress of the Pandemic**

In the case of the pandemic, the national—actually global—emergency was also accompanied by fear of contagion and of infecting others. Being “sent home” was a signal that there was a new and unusual danger (if that signal was not already obvious), as were the demands for new daily practices to keep communities healthy. As researchers have documented, all of this was inevitably a challenge to mental health (Chang, et al., 2021; Hoffman, 2020; June, 2020; Klass, 2020). For all traditional-age college students in residential institutions, one important feature of “going to college” is normally increased independence and freedom from parental supervision (Kenyon & Koemer, 2009; Zirkel, 1992). Being sent home or kept at home also interfered with that. And for all students there was an increased demand for facility with technology that was previously unfamiliar. Thus, it makes sense to
expect that for all students in residential institutions of higher education, institutional responses to COVID-19 were stressful and difficult to accommodate.

**Differential Stress for First-generation/Lower-income Students**

Our research was guided by the assumption that some stressors were likely different for students who identified themselves as first generation college students and/or as from less affluent families than those who did not. For those students whose families with these advantages, students might be able to count on adequate room to set up a workspace for attending online classes and completing assigned work. Those students might also already have, or be able to acquire excellent equipment (laptop, monitor, WIFI connection, headphones, etc.) to enable smooth connectivity and signals for all needed schoolwork. These students are likely to live in households where everyone has separate space in which to operate even if all family members are working from home, allowing for fewer distractions from the noise of other household members. Not trivially, it was more likely that some or all household members fully understood the demands of university education, even if they had not experienced the specific pressures of “remote learning.” Finally, these households include more family members likely to keep their jobs and work remotely, protecting the family from financial hardship and illness.

In contrast, we assumed that first generation, lower-income college students would be much less insulated from family financial difficulties due to loss of jobs, inability to work safely from home because of the nature of their jobs, and sheer household density. Moreover, they could not expect their families to understand the particular pressures associated with being college students. Research already suggests a link between financial distress as a result of COVID-19 challenges and increased anxiety and depression among U.S. college students (Oh, et al., 2021). However, this line of research has yet to consider the role of student social class on the amount of concern for their finances and thus on their levels of anxiety and depression despite research that shows first-generation college students
(who likely come from lower-income backgrounds or parents with less stable jobs) report fewer protective mental health factors than non-first-generation college students (Jeong, Kim, & Lee, 2021).

**Compounding Pre-Pandemic Stress for First Generation/Lower-income Students**

Pre-pandemic research on the experience of first generation/lower-income college students has demonstrated that there are a number of stressors that these students face in elite institutions.

**Cultural Mismatch.** Elite institutions signal upper/middle class cultural values to all students; working-class students may feel those values are a “mismatch” with their own (Stephens, et al., 2019). Institutions of higher education are said to reproduce the interests, culture, and values of students from higher-income backgrounds, leaving students from lower-income backgrounds on the outside (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). With most students at the University of Michigan coming from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, those who come from first-generation working-class backgrounds may recognize and embody the message that this is “not the place for them,” and face many challenges to academic success as a result (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Sirin, 2005; Streib, 2011).

Researchers have found that lower-income students who attend college report feeling like they don’t belong, experience negative emotions based on classed stereotypes about their competence, and don’t endorse the individualistic attitudes that higher education expects, all of which communicates their lack of fit in the institution (Jury, et al., 2017; Stephens, Townsend, & Dittman, 2019). Lehmann (2009) found that first generation/lower-income students experienced conflicting demands between economic need and educational experiences that necessitate student advancement. Means and Pyne (2017) found that professors’ office hours did not engage students from working-class backgrounds, because the students worried, they would be wasting their professors’ time. Many of these issues are detailed in a 2019 guide created by students at the University of Michigan called “Being not-rich at UM” (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ou-AelCrAg6soUJVbiviKAGBGF276w-UBLw-eMigwOA/edit)

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**Classist Stereotypes Endorsed in Higher Education.** In addition to barriers faced by cultural mismatch between first-generation, working-class students and these institutions, researchers reflect a general devaluation of these students participating in higher education (Virtanen, 2003). For example, Smith, et al. (2016) found that classist comments created a toxic environment for students who come from those backgrounds. Thiele and colleagues (2017) found that how students internalized these stereotypes about working-class people affected their participation in college. Internalizing these stereotypes led some students to be less involved and absent more from classes, while some students felt increased pressure to prove people wrong. Similarly, Keane (2011) found that working-class, first-generation students distanced themselves from “normal” college student behavior in order to be seen as performing well, and to avoid being seen as a charity case. Of course, these students may also face psychological consequences from the pressure they feel to perform beyond reasonable expectations (Sennett & Cobb, 1973).

The experiences of classism that are already present within higher education may be further intensified and become evident due to the emphasized differences in access to these resources (e.g., access to reliable WIFI, the library, resources that aid in students’ differential ways of learning, and the evidence in virtual settings of backgrounds that might reveal a student’s social class, etc.).

**Relative Deprivation and First-Generation/Low Income Students in Elite Educational Institutions**

When first-generation/lower-income students attend elite institutions of higher education, most experience both access to many resources previously unknown to them, and a sudden increase in detailed knowledge of the lives and material resources of more affluent students. First, major elite institutions offer students access to quiet, private study space, library and other information resources that are unparalleled in their home communities and past experience, and many sources of technical and other forms of advice and assistance. There are student advisors, support services for information technology, high-speed computers, WIFI and printers, and much more. At the same time, they are also
exposed to peers who have many expensive material possessions (ranging from technology to clothing), and an ability to freely spend discretionary money on concerts, restaurants, and other entertainments. In short, they are immersed in an environment that offers them access to many new educational resources, and at the same time exposes them to many students who come from economically well-off backgrounds and parents who attended similarly elite universities and are able to engage in lifestyles that reflect this background. Different students respond to these two features of their environment differently, but one possibility, articulated in many first generation/low-income students’ experience in these more affluent settings, is a felt sense of relative deprivation.

According to relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976; Pettigrew, 2016; Runciman, 1966), a precondition for feeling deprived, or angry and resentful about having lesser resources, is believing that one deserves to have more. It is well-documented that absolute deprivation, or having few resources alone, does not predict strong feelings of angry resentment (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2019; Liu, et al., 2019; Smith, et al., 2012). Instead, feelings of resentment depend, among other things, on feeling that you deserve better. This precondition is a barrier to feelings of deprivation, and in that sense may buffer some students from resenting the material resources of fellow students. At the same time, simply being in the university environment, and succeeding in it, is likely to increase students’ sense of belonging there, and of deserving the resources that it offers, even if not necessarily the exceptional material resources individual students may have. Thus, for first-generation, lower-income students who have successfully navigated the elite university environment, losing access to the many resources the campus environment offers to support academic success, combined with a new understanding of the circumstances of more affluent students, may in fact engender new feelings of relative deprivation when at home. Thus, the institutional response to the pandemic of “sending students home” could increase first-generation/low-income students’ feelings of relative deprivation compared with their peers.
Qualitative Study of First-Generation/Lower-income Students’ Experience of the Pandemic

We chose a qualitative method, because there was little or no information about how different groups of students responded to the institutional shift to remote learning and moving of students to their family homes. The pandemic made in-person data collection impossible, so we used a modified Photovoice approach (see, e.g., Nowell, et al., 2006; Strack, et al., 2004; Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang & Burris, 1997) to assessing the students’ experiences early in the period after they were sent home. Students were invited to depict their experience visually by providing us with photographs that expressed something about it. We also asked students open-ended questions about those images and their experience and used a process of thematic analysis to identify the kinds of themes that characterized the written accounts of the experiences of both first generation/lower-income students and students from more educated, affluent families.

There are many approaches to defining first-generation students within the literature, depending on a researcher’s goals, the educational context, and available information. These often include parental education, which has been shown to be a strong predictor of whether or not children will finish college, as is lower family income (Bettencourt, Masour, Hedayet, Feraud-King, Stephens, Tejada, & Kimball, 2020; Toutkoushian, May-Trifiletti, & Clayton, 2021; Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2018). In the current study we allowed participants to self-identify as first-generation or from a lower-income background. We grouped together first-generation students and students from lower-income backgrounds for two main reasons: (1) because the university context in question is overwhelmingly populated by students from college-educated, higher-income homes, making first generation and lower income students marginalized minorities; and (2) because research supports that these groups of students substantially overlap, and that combining them can be conducive to understanding barriers in the context of higher education (Garriott, 2020; Engle & Tinto, 2008). At the University of Michigan in 2019 only 15.3% of students did not have at least one parent who...
attended a 4-year university. We asked participants to identify themselves as first-generation based on these guidelines in an environment where they are largely a minority seemed appropriate (University of Michigan, n.d.; Jordan, 2020). For our purposes, first-generation students were those who did not have a parent who attended a 4-year university, because our goal was to capture students who had limited access to knowledge of higher education culture and to materials needed to succeed in these environments, due to their exclusion from these environments and their economic exploitation (Garriott, 2020).

Students from lower-income families—regardless of the presence of a parent with exposure to a four-year college—were similarly disadvantaged, given the affluent demographic context of the University of Michigan, where in 2019, 74% of students were from families with annual incomes of $100,000 or more. Thus, both groups were relatively small minorities, although of course there was inevitable within-group heterogeneity. As is outlined below, we asked students from lower-income families to self-identify, given our expectation that their atypical economic and educational background was highly salient. However, we verified that the two groups of students that resulted in fact differed on other indicators of parental education and economic resources. Of course, we knew that both the lower-income and first-generation students, because they were attending the University, had many strengths and considerable resilience, in addition to the challenges they faced; both differentiated them from the vast majority of students from more economically and educationally advantaged backgrounds. Further, research suggests the appropriateness of grouping these two sets of students together given the aim of our research and considering past research that has done similarly (Garriott, 2020; Lehmann, 2009; Means & Pyne, 2017).

METHODS

Participants

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After receiving IRB approval for our procedures, we recruited 28 participants over age 18 using two sampling methods. Data from all participants was included in the study; sample size was dictated by the norms of the methods we were using, outlined in detail below. Five participants were recruited from two university courses not associated with either author. Twenty-three more were recruited using the university’s subject pool in which students enrolled in introductory psychology courses are given course credit for participating in studies offered through this platform.

Because we were most interested in students’ self-identification with the groups in question, we asked at the beginning of the survey “Do you consider yourself to be a first-generation college student or a student from a lower-income background?” Those who responded “yes” were placed into the first-generation/lower-income student group while those who responded “no” were categorized as non-first-generation/lower-income students. We collected responses from both groups of students in order to compare and contrast their experiences during COVID-19.

Participants were asked to respond to a series of 12 questions regarding background demographic information about themselves, such as gender, race/ethnicity, and educational background. More than half of our sample identified as women (N=15) with a mean age of 19. Nearly all participants were single, never married (N=23), with one married or in a domestic partnership. More than half of the participants identified as Caucasian/White (N=15); six participants identified as Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islanders; one participant each identified as African American, Middle Eastern, and multiracial/multiethnic.

Most of the sample identified their sexual orientation as straight (N=20), while 4 participants identified as bisexual, queer, or other. More than half of the participants had completed some college credit but no degree (N=15), eight participants reported having a high school degree or equivalent (GED), and one participant reported having a PhD, law, or medical degree. Participants were also asked to indicate whether or not their parent had attended a four-year university or college. Nearly

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three-quarters (N=17) reported they had a parent who had ever attended a four-year university (N=7 had not).

**Income and social class**

As discussed above, students self-identified as belonging to the group “first generation or lower-income students,” and were grouped accordingly. However, participants were also asked to respond to five questions assessing family income and social class, so we could both validate the “first gen/lower-income status” students’ status and evaluate how those students compared with other students. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate their current financial resources, their financial resources growing up, their current income, their income growing up, and the social class with which they identified. We note that students vary in their knowledge of family income, which is why we felt it was particularly important to focus on self-identification, but also to assess the degree to which that felt experience matched other subjective and objective indicators. We present these preliminary analyses below.

In order to assess participants’ current resources and resources growing up, they were asked to respond to two questions: “How would you describe your current resources?” or “How would you describe your resources growing up?” They could describe their resources using one of six descriptors (very poor, not enough to get by; barely had enough to get by; had enough to get by, no extras; had more than enough to get by; well off; very wealthy). In terms of economic resources growing up, seven participants indicated that they had enough to get by, but no extras, five reported they had more than enough to get by, ten were well off, one was very wealthy, and one preferred not to answer this question.

In order to assess family yearly income (current and growing up), participants could choose from a series of eight income brackets (less than 15k, 15,001-25k, 25,001-35k, 35,001-50k, 50,001-
75k, 75,001-100k, 100,001-150k, 150k+). For the period when they were growing up, five indicated their family income was 15,001-25k, two reported 35,001-50k, two reported 50,001-75k, four reported 75,001-100k, three reported 100,001-150k, and seven reported more than 150k per year. For current family income, three reported less than 15k per year, three between 15,001-25k, and two participants each reported between 25,001-35k, 35,001-50k, 50,001-75k, 75,001-100k, 100,001-150k, and seven indicated making over 150k per year.

Finally, participants were asked to choose one from a list of five social class self-descriptors (working-class, lower middle-class, middle-class, upper middle-class, upper-class) to describe their own social position. Two participants identified as working-class, five chose lower-middle class, three chose middle-class, eleven chose upper-middle class, and two chose upper class.

**Design**

For this study, we used both an adapted Photovoice method and open-ended questions, to capture participant experiences during the coronavirus.

**Photovoice**

Because it is less familiar in psychological research generally, and less familiar in an online survey format, we informed participants that Photovoice is a method used by some researchers to capture important information about people’s lives that isn’t easily conveyed in written or verbal text alone by having them take a photo based on a prompt, and explain why they chose the picture they did in follow-up interviews and focus groups (Nowell, et al., 2006; Strack, et al., 2004; Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang &; Burris, 1997). Photovoice has been an important tool for capturing experiences of first-generation and lower-income students in past research (Jehangir, Telles, & Deenanath, 2020). Given the context of COVID-19 and the limitations of in-person communication as well as course-related fatigue and increased work demands, we adapted this method to an online platform for ease of
Participants were asked to upload their own original pictures (only ones that they captured themselves), in response to two different prompts regarding their experiences during COVID-19. The two prompts were as follows:

“How do you think that being a University of Michigan student [a first-generation student or a student from a low-income background] has been relevant to your experiences in events related to the coronavirus? Please upload a picture of something that represents your experiences with the coronavirus and its relevance to you as a student [as a first-generation student or a student from a low-income background].”

“How do you think the individual effects of coronavirus has had on you may be different from other students? Please upload a picture of something that represents your perceptions of how these experiences may be different for you compared to other students.”

Following these prompts, students were asked to respond to the following question for each photo: “Please describe why you chose this picture and how it represents your experiences as a University of Michigan student or a first-generation college student/student from a low-income background.”

Given the constraints of COVID-19 we used these open-ended questions allow participants to provide us both textual and visual expressions of their experience. We followed the typical method of interpreting participant explanations of their photos (ordinarily provided in interviews or focus groups). We were unable to arrange for participants to actually meet with policymakers (often important in Photovoice procedures), but we shared a report on the findings with policymakers with the participants’ comments quoted at length, and a summary of policy recommendations that might help address the difficulties they identified.
Open-Ended Reflections

Participants were asked to respond to two broader open-ended questions in addition to the Photovoice prompts. The following questions were asked:

- “How do you think being a university student [or a first-generation student or a student from a lower-income background] has been relevant in your experiences in events related to the coronavirus?”
- “How do you think the individual effects coronavirus has had on you may be different from other students?”

Analysis Procedures

Thematic analysis is a term used to specify a particular kind of content analysis.

In recent years, content analysis has been used as a term for deductive (hypothesis-testing) analysis of content that relies on counting occurrences of codes within documents, and often those codes are subject to quantitative analysis. Some methodologists in this area (Smith, 1992; Boyatzis, 1998) have suggested that thematic analysis can be inductive or deductive, qualitative or quantitative, if it focused on the identification of “themes.”

More recently, the term thematic analysis has often been reserved for a particular form of systematic inductive analysis of text, advocated and explicated by Braun and Clarke (2006). We used this narrower definition of thematic analysis to explore the documents created by our participants. In the first step of this process, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021), we first both read all of the students’ answers to the photovoice questions, and (separately) the more general questions, without reference to any particular construct, but with some expectations about the types of content...
we might see. We identified possible codes as we proceeded, comparing notes. We then reviewed five responses each from participants who identified as first-generation and those who did not, based on the method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Following this, we conducted three rounds of coding, in which both of us coded five to six responses independently, in order to ensure we had a detailed codebook allowing for acceptable completeness and consistency. After each round of coding, the codebook was adjusted for clarity. Following this, the first author coded the remainder of the data.

There is no simple quantitative “test” of validity or reliability in this method; while we must converge to agree on themes, it is assumed in this method that researchers’ separate perspectives are valuable and contribute to a more complete understanding, so indexes of reliability are not calculated. Instead, researchers are expected to demonstrate the validity of their claims by offering evidence (in quotations or accounts of actions) to support them. The goal of the analysis is not some universal truth, or identification of a mechanism that should work across all people, but instead a set of propositions about how the identified constructs might operate together in a carefully defined group (in this case, students in an elite institution of higher education). Standards for qualitative methods have been outlined by several authors (see, e.g., Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007). However, we found most useful and comprehensive the account provided by an APA Task Force in 2018 (Levitt et al., 2018); we adhered in this project to their integration of many recommendations.

We initially identified fifteen codes in the data. Six captured themes we thought were more common among first gen/lower-income students: fake information, unavoidable distractions, financial pressure, need to contribute to the family, fewer resources for success, perceptions of different others. Seven more seemed to characterize the accounts of non-first-gen/lower-income students: routine disruption, human interaction, focus and/or dedication to school continues, university, not enough to do or efforts to keep busy, comparison to others who are quite similar except in one minor way, and
fewer distractions. Finally, two more seemed simply to be fairly common, but not related to the students’ group: vulnerable family members and mental health. We re-organized these codes into three broad themes, which helped highlight the virtually opposite experiences of the two groups: changed environmental demands; comparison to similar or different other students; and change or continuity in the availability of institutional supports. Two themes that did not differentiate the groups together reflected family and personal health vulnerabilities.

Preliminary Analyses

A total of 28 students completed our study, 12 who self-identified as first-generation or lower-income and 16 who did not. We conducted preliminary chi-square analyses using Fisher’s Exact Test on the demographic data based on participant first-generation/lower-income status responses. In terms of gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and marital status, there were no significant differences between the groups (we had no expectation of differences on these, so we used 2-sided p-values to test significance; all were greater than .05).

We verified the presumed differences between the two groups of students, by examining the direct indicators of income, parental education, and self-identification; all of these variables differentiated the two groups based on first-generation/lower-income status, using Fisher’s Exact tests. Specifically, participants who identified as first-generation/lower-income students were more likely than the other students to report not having a parent who attended a four-year university (p<.001), having fewer current (p<.001) and past financial resources (p<.001), having lower current (p<.001) and childhood incomes (p<.05), and self-identifying as lower-class (p<.005). Frequency data showed that these patterns were sharply distinct on all indicators. For example, 6 of the 8 students in the first-gen/low-income group who responded to this question reported a parent without college, while only 1 of the 16 other students did. All 8 of the first group reported low family household income, and 4 of 15 of the other students did; similarly, all 8 of the first-gen/low-income students...
reported that current family resources were low, while only 4 of the 15 other students did. Reported childhood income differentiated the two groups only slightly less (7 of 8 and 6 of 15 members of the two groups respectively), as did social class identification (7 of 8 and 3 of 14 respectively).

RESULTS

Photovoice Results

Many students took photos of the spaces where they worked in their parents’ house, or the boxes and suitcases they used to move home. For example, one first-gen/lower-income student wrote this about the image they chose:

I chose this picture because it’s a representation of most of my daily routine. I normally only have room to work either at my desk or my bed. Since my desk is quite small and my chair isn’t the most comfortable, I normally do my writing and lecture watching while sitting on my bed. I am infinitely thankful to have a newer MacBook that is reliable. I do most of my heavier coursework in the evening when it’s quieter and the internet is faster while everyone is sleeping. My cat almost always hangs around in the evenings and likes to sleep as close to me as possible, which is very endearing but also annoying.

A non-first-gen/lower-income student chose a picture of their workspace too:

I chose to use a picture of my desk area because it represents the comfortable space, I have been given to continue my student duties while abiding by the stay at home order. I do not have this comfortable study space in my apartment in Ann Arbor and usually would go to a coffee shop to do homework. Being at home has allowed me to have a comfortable and secluded study situation in the comfort of my own home, and this is something I wouldn't have had if I were stuck on campus.

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It is striking that the first-gen/lower-income student represents a space that is now more difficult to work in, while the other student depicts a space that is actually more comfortable at home than at school.

Some students took pictures of objects that seemed to them to sum up an important aspect of their experience, often making evident their awareness of their own relative disadvantages at home, compared not only to school, but to their peers. For example, one first-gen/lower-income student chose objects to reflect both their own experience and what they thought others’ might be:

I chose headphones because coming from a lower-income household, I don't have noise-canceling headphones, so it has been a bit harder to focus and have meetings with others without the interference of my family or having to hear them in the background. This also represents that [what] we listen to or hear from the media/internet is very important because sometimes we may believe false information.

Another similarly wrote:

This here is a pair of headphones, in which those who use it can block off audio stimuli from their surroundings as the music and audio override the sound coming from outside. Those with a lower-income background will likely find it harder to block off and forget about the crises related to the coronavirus. Due to their circumstances and resources those not from a lower-income background would find it easier to neglect and block off the current situation and focus on other things.

The first student also wrote about this photo:

I chose a lamp because most of the time I stay up late at night to finish assignments because I can’t concentrate during the day. I'm assuming most kids stay up late, but I'm sure that they
have the ability to do assignments during the day, yet they may choose to do them during the night. For me, I don't have the alone time to work during the day, and feel I am forced into working late at night. If I had the option, I would try and finish all my work during the day, like I normally do, so I can sleep during the night.

Another reflected on felt pressure at school to hide their class background and their family’s lack of understanding of their work at school:

I really struggled with finding something to photograph/upload for this prompt. I ultimately chose this picture. This was a reference photo I took for an architecture drawing class last semester. I remember this being really difficult for me because we were supposed to do our final drawing referenced from real life, but I was very insecure about my house. It's small and I was cleaning up messes and clutter at every turn trying to take reference photos. I feel a lot of pride in this photo as well because it shows a few of my accomplishments framed in the hallway (including my college acceptance certificate). My family was questioning my photos and they didn't really understand the meaning of my classes or the importance of the lighting and the cleanliness. Overall, I was able to turn a simple task into a frustrating and difficult mess with my insecurities. I feel like this captures the small frustrations that seem to pile up when things aren't a priority for my family. They generally don't understand the importance and the scope of my work, and they also don't see a reason to not use the internet at different times while I'm doing classwork (See Appendix for photo).

Two others chose these objects:

This picture of my wallet on top of my psychology notes and textbook resemble both the conflict and stress of each element and also how my finances are under stress, which is resembled by my deteriorating wallet (See Appendix for photo).
FIRST-GEN/LOWER INCOME STUDENTS AND COVID-19

This is the picture of my bed in my parents' house. This bed signifies my luck at having someplace to sleep, to call home, while others are struggling with living arrangements or can't be home with family.

The last item makes clear that some first-generation/lower-income students were able to think about not only the upward comparisons that fuel feelings of relative deprivation, but also the downward comparisons that lead to an appreciation for one's safety and security at home.

In contrast to these choices, many of the more affluent students expressed continuities in their material environment. Here are a few examples:

I chose this photo because I am continuing to take classes during the spring and summer semester to help keep busy and push on with my degree. Education is still very important to me, and my parents and I am fortunate that I am able to do this.

I took a screen grab of Zoom because this is where a lot of my classes take place and where I talk with my best friends whom I met at UM.

I took a picture of my fridge because I am lucky that it is full of healthy food and so many students are struggling with food insecurity right now.

Some took photos that pointed to particular challenges, often comparing themselves to others close to them (for example, a brother), or to their own past experience.

I chose this photo of my brother's water bottle because he works long hours as a paramedic and has not changed them in any way since the pandemic began. Working 24 hour shifts and transporting COVID patients, I cannot begin to comprehend the loss that he has encountered due to coronavirus.

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I took a picture of me taking this survey because I think it represents my experience with coronavirus and its relevance to me as a student at the University of Michigan quite honestly. The fact that I have to take this study online, rather than doing in-person studies like this class usually offers, shows how my experiences with coronavirus took away opportunities for real learning and growth. While I am fortunate to be safe and sound in my home and am thankful to all the essential workers who are helping us all out, this form of online learning has been very detrimental to my self and my growth.

Some of the most powerful images and accounts depicted first-generation/lower-income students’ own and families’ struggles without using particular objects. For example, one used an image of himself, and others used symbolic images to develop a metaphorical account of the pandemic’s relation to individual and collective human survival.

This is a picture of me during one of my stops at a restaurant to pick up food to deliver to a family. I was working in this picture, which represents a student working during coronavirus to try and get money for their family. Other students do not have to work during this time; as a lower-income student, my family depends on me bringing in some type of money year-round.

A first-gen/lower-income student presented an image of a gas stove burner with the flame on and explained it this way:

I chose this picture due to the history of fire and heat with mankind. This represents my experiences with the coronavirus as a first-generation college student as it shows a basic tool of survival that our ancestors used long ago. Right now, my family has to innovate and plan to ensure our safety while conserving our resources. This is parallel to the purpose of heat and
comfort that fire serves in certain situations. We have to be aware of our surroundings and exploit the resources available to get through this virus.

However, some more affluent students employed a very similar strategy with symbolic images:

I have been very lucky that my family has not financially suffered during this pandemic due to the fact that both of my parents are essential workers. They can both work from home. This is painting of koi fish, which usually symbolize peace and serenity. I’m almost at peace because my family is safe, and we are still financially stable.

Results of Thematic Analysis of Written Accounts

Using an inductive and comparative approach, we identified 3 themes that were common in the responses of participants to the five questions we asked, including the two responses to the Photovoice prompts. Two additional codes were identified as occurring frequently and therefore of interest.

Major Themes in the Two Groups

**Changed Environmental Demands.** The first theme focused on changes in their environment after leaving campus. For first-generation/lower-income students these changes were noted in terms of the way in which distractions were now unavoidable, and they were faced with financial pressures, including the need to contribute to their families. In terms of the inescapable distractions, many students mentioned that they now had more limited space and were surrounded with family members who were always at home. They reported concerns about their lack of privacy and the need to do some things (like schoolwork) at odd hours when family members would not be disturbed or around. Some students also talked about the presence of a lot of noise and a sense of insecurity and anxiety making it difficult to ignore these distractions. One student wrote:
Others that live in my house don't understand the need to do homework all day, and don't respect my request for silence when needed. As if this transition has not been hard enough, try being in a house where everyone is ignorant to what you're going through.

And others indicated:

because we are not allowed to go out, my family is home most of the time, which is why I am distracted from studying and focusing on schoolwork.

This place [home] is often loud and crowded with everyone being home.

While some students are quarantining in their vacation homes, I am struggling to find a quiet space in my house with 8 people.

In addition, students commented to increased financial pressure on them as a result of COVID’s impact on their family (loss of jobs, fewer hours of paid work, etc.).

One student described the situation this way:

It is harder to access the materials necessary to continue completing coursework, and it's harder to pay for rent as most work study jobs are stopped right now and it's almost impossible to get another job because of hiring freezes.

Another said:

Our main source of income has come to a halt due to this current situation, and because we are lower income, we do not have a hefty amount of back-up money. Our family has to actively seek out food providers and this external stress has decreased my ability to fully focus on my online coursework.
The second, pointed toward by the last quotation, was their own *felt need to contribute to the family’s resources* (which might be new or might be continuous with past commitments, but were exaggerated post-COVID). As one student put it: “there's also the worry about how I can contribute to my family's income during these uncertain times that everyone is out of a job and no place is hiring.”

In contrast to these experiences of the changed external environment for first-generation/low-income students, the students from more affluent, educated families focused on the disruption of their routines and the loss of human interactions they enjoyed, but also noted that there were fewer distractions and better work conditions, and that they had to put extra effort into keeping busy and finding things to do.

The *disruption of routines* focused on the change from their “normal” (pre-COVID) everyday life: changes in their academic schedules, their social schedules and plans, and cancellation of events they had planned to attend. This student expresses this concern quite economically:

> Many of the events I was planning and looking forward to have been put on hold or cancelled.
> The change to virtual classes with an unknown plan for the fall semester has changed the way that I learn and interact with my peers.

Another wrote:

> I think as being a student I was very affected by coronavirus, I had to leave my friends, the place that I called home for the last year, my routines and schedules and what was the daily normal life for me.

Many students emphasized the *change in interaction with others* in the post-COVID period. In these comments, part of both of the quotations above—“changed the way I learn and interact with my peers” and “had to leave my friends”) students focused on the fact that they were spending more
time with family at home and changing the way they interacted with peers from in-person to virtual contact.

Some of these students mentioned that they were actually experiencing fewer distractions and more comfort in their situation at home.

I was really lucky to have a designated study space at home where I could set up all of my things for school. I have completely taken over our dining room and spread out all of my things, so I have everything I need at any time. I also have access to high-speed internet here which makes getting my assignments completed on time and viewing lectures a lot less stressful because I know my internet is reliable.

Students also pointed to lack of enough to do either directly or indirectly. Thus, some students indicated that they try to “keep busy” or stay occupied, by taking spring or summer classes, or in other ways. In addition, some pointed to the fact that they were sent home during a school semester when they had schoolwork to do, and that wasn’t helpful. For example, one student wrote: “It made me feel very lonely given the fact that there isn't many things to do around where I live.” Another wrote:

Being a student at the University of Michigan has allowed me to keep myself occupied during the coronavirus. I finished my second semester online and am now taking a full semester of spring classes to keep myself busy.

Comparison with Others. First-generation/lower-income students were strikingly accurate in their accounts of how they thought other students’ experience might differ from theirs, perhaps because they focused on those different from them in family background. For example, most of the first-generation/lower-income students perceived that non-first-gen/lower-income students have fewer responsibilities and therefore an easier time. These students imagined that non-first gen/lower-
income students could relax more, had time for more leisure activities, were supported better by their families, didn’t have to help their families, and were free to worry about other things and focus on their schoolwork because of fewer distractions and less financial pressure. For example, this student wrote:

I think those who come from higher-income families feel a sense of relief since they are supported by their parents, and they are not worried about working. For me, I try to work as a Door dash driver as much as I can because my family and I need the money in order to pay bills, buy groceries, etc. Those who do not have to work or worry about the needs of their families are worried about other things that I wish I could worry about.

Another student only focused on those students’ “other worries”:

Lower income/first gen students may primarily worry about monetary effects or even where their next meal will come from. For other students not from these backgrounds, they may be also negatively affected but may not have to worry about these same issues.

In contrast, the students from more affluent families tended to compare themselves to students much more similar to themselves, who differed in some fairly minor way (for instance, living farther from campus). For example, one student wrote:

I think other students who were from out of state or from a different part of Michigan struggled more to get their items packed and head home before the coronavirus cases started to worsen.

*Change and continuity in access to institutional resources.* The first-generation/lower-income students wrote about their sense of having fewer resources for their own educational success, now that they were off-campus. Examples included access to mental health resources, motivating
teachers, poor internet connection, lack of understanding of the demands of school from those around them, and the tension between financial pressures and their education. One student, for example, wrote:

I feel like this pause in my normal academic structure has been especially difficult. I am no longer surrounded by resources to help and motivate me for success. I also feel a lot of uncertainty going forward with my college education. I don't have mentors or parents who have experienced the stress of college, and with the added complications with coronavirus it has been stressful. Although I am fortunate to have a reliable computer for doing classwork, I have very slow and unreliable internet connection at my disposal and very little privacy and extra space for studying.

In contrast, students from more affluent backgrounds reported that they were continuing to stay focused and 

\textit{dedicated to their schoolwork}. One student wrote:

I feel that I have been really lucky when it comes to my situation with the pandemic. About a week after in-person classes began, I moved back home (about an hour away) and continued school there. Leaving my apartment and moving back home allowed me to have a much more comfortable living situation and also took away a lot of things that I would have had to have been responsible for if I were living by myself. I no longer had to get my own groceries and had much more space being at home.

Many prominently mentioned the University itself as a helpful resource for coping with COVID, including kind faculty or others or their prior way of life. Some combined both themes in their responses. For example, these two students expressed the latter sentiment.

In my experience, in the winter semester, it felt encouraging being a U of M student amidst the pandemic. I felt like our desires to be safe were heard and respected. Teachers
were very sympathetic towards our situation, as well as their own. It was much needed to have a supportive environment to learn in.

I think that the University of Michigan has done a great job keeping students updated in terms of coronavirus plans. I am from Ann Arbor, so I was able to go home when school was cancelled.

**Family and Personal Health Vulnerabilities.** Two themes arose pretty frequently but came up equally in both groups. These were vulnerable family members and mental health challenges. Some students in both groups wrote about the fact that family members at home were “essential workers” and were taking real health risks on a daily basis.

My dad is a healthcare provider, so it has been difficult because he has been going to the hospital for work, which is definitely stressful.

The position my family and I are in is one that is scary during such a harsh time, especially with two high-risk family members.

One of my parents is a health care worker who comes into contact with coronavirus patients daily.

Similarly, some students in both groups referred to their own mental health as jeopardized by the COVID crisis, and or to concerns about access to mental health resources, or even support from teachers and friends.

I think my mental health was really affected. I felt isolated from my friends and my old lifestyle.

**Discussion**
COVID-19 has had major implications for people in every sector of life in the U.S. and worldwide. As has been documented in previous literature on stress associated with major changes and previous national emergencies, it is evident that the stress of COVID-19 can be reasonably expected to have negative effects on their mental health (Fredrickson, et al., 2003; Lazarus, 2009; Lindsey, et al., 2007; Liverant, et al., 2004; Lowell et al., 2018; Murphy, Wismar & Freeman, 2003; Nixon & Pallavi, 2005). Our results are consistent with that expectation, regardless of whether or not the students were from a low- or high-income background. Consistent with past studies of stress in students, our respondents from both backgrounds commented on the disruption of their life as a result of being sent home from college (Kenyon & Koemer, 2009; Zirkel, 1992). Moreover, although lower-income students were more likely to have family members working in lower-level positions that brought risk to their safety, students from higher income backgrounds also mentioned they were concerned for the safety of family members working in jobs that could expose them to the disease (e.g., as doctors and paramedics).

Although a disease may not directly discriminate against who is infected, one’s ability to protect oneself from being exposed and to proper treatment if exposure does happen largely varies based on access to resources in this country (Abera, 2020; Parker, et al., 2020). Further, differences in economic resources affected the other things students were preoccupied with as a result of changes in their lives due to the pandemic. Specifically, with regard to changes in their environment and consistent with previous research, first-generation students from lower-income backgrounds were concerned about their financial situation and expressed COVID-19-specific anxiety about adequate resources to live, as well as about unavoidable distractions at home, and fewer resources to support their academic efforts (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2017). Comparing themselves to others, they also were keenly aware that other students from higher-income backgrounds did not have to worry about these same things. Finally, first-generation students from lower-income backgrounds
described a change in the availability of institutional support received for their academic success. Specifically, these students wrote of having fewer resources to support their schoolwork, such as poor internet and new or increased tensions between their financial needs and educational demands.

While non-first-generation students expressed distress related to disruption of their routine and loss of in-person interaction, when discussing the changes in environmental demands they actually often expressed experiencing fewer distractions since moving home. Additionally, although first-generation students correctly predicted these differences in distractions among students from higher-income backgrounds when comparing themselves to others, these more affluent students did not express parallel awareness of their first-gen colleagues. When asked how the effects of COVID-19 might be different for them compared to other students, those from higher-income backgrounds did not comment on first-generation/lower-income students. Instead, they compared themselves to students not very different from themselves, but who, for example, had to travel farther to go home. Finally, non-first-generation students expressed a continuity in the availability of institutional support since COVID-19. Specifically, they were more likely to talk about the positive role of the university in their lives during this difficult time, which helped them continue their dedication to schoolwork throughout this period.

It is evident from the differences in student responses that the effects of COVID-19 for these two groups of students exacerbated existing disparities that set first-generation, lower-income students apart from more students from family with more educational or economic resources. While few lower-income/first generation students expressed felt resentment or anger about their situation, they did express awareness of the ways they had lost resources they had come to rely on (presumably deserved), and that their situation differed in that way from their better-off peers. The differences in the themes that arose between these groups of students are crucial to consider, not only because of the psychological cost of the sense of not belonging and relative deprivation that the first

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generation/lower-income students experienced, but because they point to students’ differential ability to continue focusing on their education, with access to the resources they need (both tangible and in terms of distractions) during this difficult time.

These differences set these students up for very different futures that are already documented well within the literature on first-generation/lower-income students in higher education (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Lehmann, 2009; Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2019; Sirin, 2005; Smith, et al., 2016; Streib, 2011; Stephens, et al., 2019; Virtanen, 2003). People are more likely to reproduce class from generation to generation than to overcome it. Although deemed the “great neutralizer,” education does not eliminate this reproduction (Mitnik, et al., 2016). The implications of the exacerbation of these differences as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overstated.

Though students may have access to more resources while on campus, once sent home, many lower-income students are left with few tools to pursue academic achievement. Further, financial strain affected their ability to focus on and continue pursuing higher education. First-generation/lower-income students mentioned concerns about losing scholarship funding, their ability to pay for school, and possible need to take a break from their education to help support their families. These are concerns that do not plague the minds of many higher-income students. As one first-generation/lower-income respondent put it, “Those who do not have to work or worry about the needs of their families are worried about other things that I wish I could worry about.” Missing out on in-person interaction and the disruption of moving may seem small to these first-generation/lower-income students who are anxious about whether their family will stay afloat during these increasingly uncertain times.

Limitations and future directions

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We believe the narratives offer a thematic picture of the students’ responses that is consistent with those in the Photovoice images, but they do so in a way that is remarkably powerful. Standing alone the images cannot tell the story, but the combination of images and texts to articulate their experience seemed to provide many students with better tools for self-expression than either did alone. In the current project the use of these two methods together was purposely provided in an attempt to gain access to the concerns and experiences among students who are often overlooked in research on student experiences at primarily White and wealthy institutions.

While we hope this research makes important contributions, there are some limitations worth noting. While we collected open-ended, qualitative data we analyzed these responses in a search for patterns of group differences. By analyzing the data this way, important individual experiences could be overlooked. Future studies could consider the benefits of analyzing student responses in a more idiographic way.

We did not capitalize on the capacity of Photovoice methods to enable individuals to bring their concerns to policymakers themselves. Because of the constraints of the moment, we did not find a way to bring our respondents into a conversation with administrators at the institution in a way that might have been both empowering and frustrating to the students. However, because we do believe that is an important benefit of Photovoice as a method, we shared an early version of this manuscript with administrators, along with a plea for recognition of the particular needs of this group of students.

Our sample is small and draws on students from only one institution. In order to capture the needs of students in similar positions but different kinds of settings, research needs to be conducted including students from more settings. Further, our results do not rule out the possibility of differences in experiences along other dimensions of identity, nor does it capture the ways in which many of these identities are overlapping in their positionality and relation to power and systems of oppression (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). By focusing on first-generation and lower-income students we hoped to
broaden the often narrow scope of first-generation status that focuses on parental education attainment alone. However, even with this extension, we cannot be sure whether first-generation status or income background alone or in combination tells us the whole story of these students’ experiences. For instance, there is much overlap between economic exploitation and racism in our society. Future research should consider how a student’s racial identity is also central to their experiences in these predominantly White, affluent institutions. The current sample was mostly White, and therefore we could not draw conclusions about the role of racial identity in student experiences during the pandemic.

Finally, we used open-ended survey questions to capture participant experiences in words; although they were useful and effective, interviews or focus groups might provide a richer context for probing student concerns.

Policy Implications

The findings described in this study have many implications for institutional policy. As this pandemic is not over, and others are predicted, administrators should consider how they can increase support for students who not only face precarious situations as a result of the pandemic (e.g., emergency funding), but also those who face constraints in resources that have been exacerbated. Based on some of the specific examples from student responses, we offer a non-exhaustive list of recommendations for administrators in higher education to consider in order to support first-generation/low-income students and prevent exacerbation of some of these already prevalent differences between first-generation and non-first-generation students. Some of these recommendations likely also apply to employees in corporate, governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Technological Needs

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First, related to technological needs, although some institutions have begun to address computer-related concerns among students, the resources may be in short supply and need should be reassessed over time. This concern is, we suspect, common to employees in many settings, not just students in higher education. One example of corporate attention to this issue is Google’s announcement that all of their employees were entitled to spend $1000 to purchase equipment or furniture needed to make remote work less difficult (https://blog.google/inside-google/life-at-google/working-from-home-and-office/). Specific to the university setting, many first-generation participants mentioned a lack of access to noise canceling headphones. Living in crowded households with greater distraction makes clear to students that these devices would be helpful. Many students from first-generation/lower-income households also faced very limited access to adequate WIFI. Any steps, including special funding, that administrators could take to help with these problems should be taken.

**Financial Needs**

Because students from lower-income backgrounds were considering taking a break from school (risky since it increases their chance of dropping out), part-time status should be easy and affordable for these students, while at the same time accompanied by access to supportive encouragement to continue in school. Specifically, the cost per credit hour should be equal to that of students at full time status (full-time tuition divided by 18 credit hours). While students from more economically privileged backgrounds may be able to afford full-time tuition rates, students from lower-income backgrounds certainly may not during this time. Obviously, the cost of even part-time education at the university may prevent some students from taking advantage of this option to continue advancing toward their degree, as they seek time to help support their families. For that reason, it must be easy for students to resume their educations when their financial situation improves.
For these reasons, financial aid packages should be reevaluated to reflect the increased need in resources in this group of students. In a similar vein, the fees associated with disenrollment should be reconsidered for these students with financial need. The precarious situations that many of these students may find themselves in as a result of the pandemic should not result in further barriers to education.

Scholarship requirements, deadlines, and policies should be revised to include a consideration of the need for flexibility. Students who have been granted scholarships but may need to take a break from their education because of the impact of the pandemic on their families should not also face loss of existing financial supports. Therefore, institutions need to adopt increased and ongoing flexibility in how students finish their education.

While these recommendations apply only to students in higher education, we note that parallel policies—avoidance of eviction due to financial pressures, increased flexibility in loan-repayment plans, and deadlines for work—may apply much more broadly in work settings.

Other Educational Needs

Finally, deadlines for assignments and educational milestones should also continue to be flexible in support of student need. Policies that lessen the importance of time and consider the value of pass/fail grading options, should be in place until the pandemic has left our communities. Here too research already shows that flexibility in work settings—both of work schedule and number of hours worked—helps address pre-existing differences in non-work-related pressures among employees (see, e.g., Bear, 2021), as well as other effects of the pandemic, like increased demands for dependent care among workers (Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020) and structural inequality (Carli, 2020).

Other Policy Considerations

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In addition to the very clear need for intervention among college students, the implications of this study extend to the broader context that has changed since the onset of the pandemic. Research (including this study) has shown that these effects have not been experienced equally (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021; Hofmann, 2021; Lopez & Neely, 2021; Riggle, et al., 2021). Therefore, we strongly encourage state and national policies that maintain housing security (Consumer Financial Bureau [CFB], 2021), including policies that defer rental payments (CFB, 2021). Additionally, state and national government, as well as NGOs, should continue to devise new ways to address food insecurity. Further, model strategies for acting rapidly and more effectively should be widely disseminated to national, state and local governmental and nongovernmental institutions, so we are better prepared to mitigate the disproportionate impact of disasters of all kinds on those with the fewest resources.

References


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Saylor, C., DeRoma, V., & Swickert, V. (2006). Rhonda College students with previous


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Appendix

Photo example #1

Photo example #2

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Author Biographies

Jessica M. Kiebler is a candidate in the joint doctoral program in psychology and women’s & gender studies at the University of Michigan, where she also obtained her bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Her research interests include stereotypes of low-income women and Women of Color in the context of gender-based mistreatment, the role of deservingness in blame for gender-based mistreatment, and experiences of first-generation college students at primarily White and wealthy institutions.

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