



Effect of School Closure on Food Insecurity and Dietary Habits

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Background

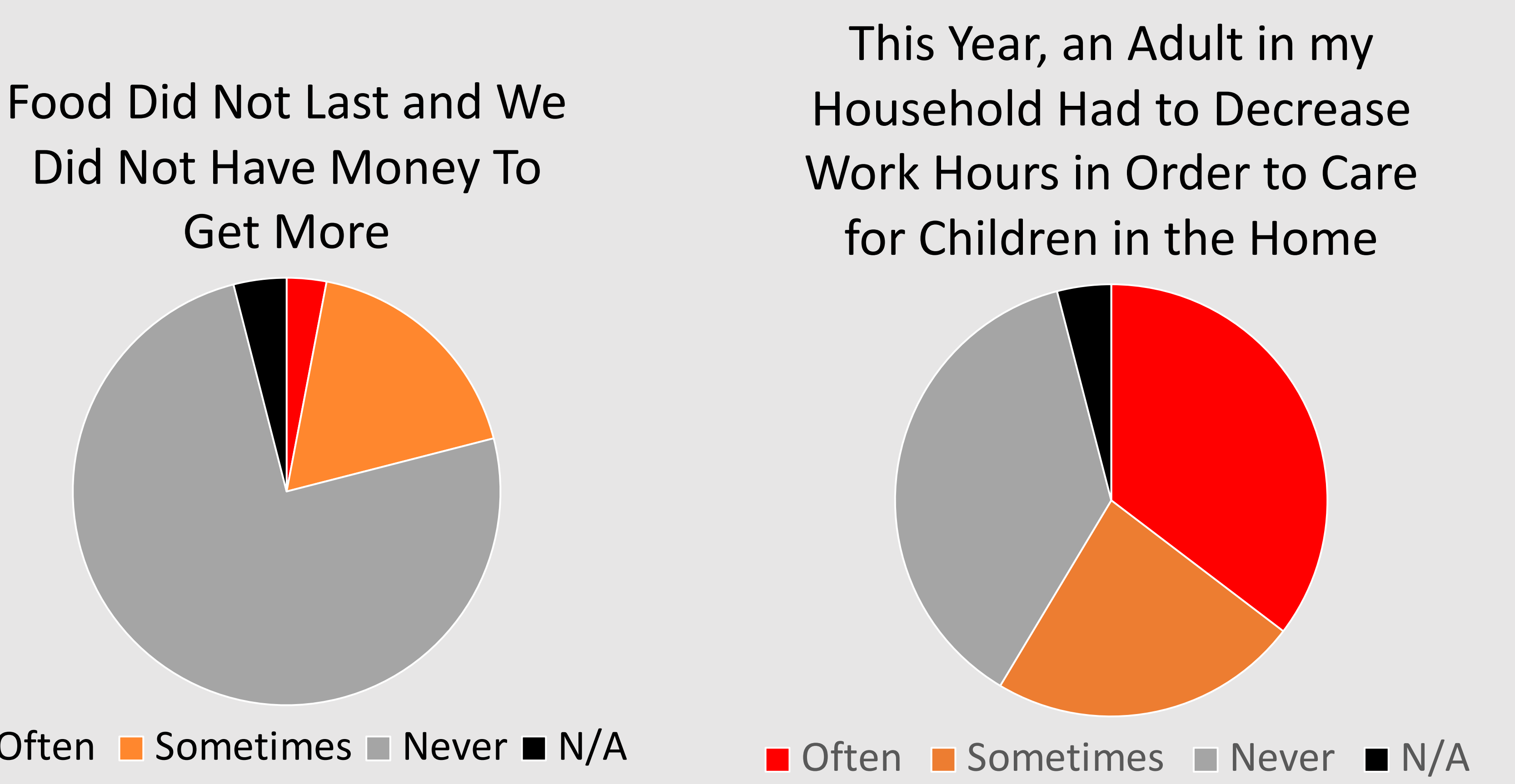
School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have had negative consequences for children's health, including their nutritional status. The purpose of this study was to assess the effects of pandemic-related school closure on food security, dietary choices, and caries risk among patients at a pediatric dental clinic.

Methods

A modified food-insecurity questionnaire consisting of 12 questions was given to parents during their child's dental appointment at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. The questions inquired about changes in food access, enrollment in government-assisted meal programs, eating habits, and food selection since the onset of the pandemic. 197 surveys were collected over a period of four months between June and October of 2021.

Results

Among respondents, 19% were currently experiencing food insecurity. Additionally, 32% of children were enrolled in school meal programs. Common challenges to accessing meals during school closures were transportation and time constraints. Of note, 53% of primary caregivers reported reducing their work hours due to school closures. Regarding dietary changes and caries risk, 61% of children had increased snack consumption during in-home learning and 48% of respondent were purchasing more shelf-stable foods.



Discussion

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, food insecurity affected 1 in 7 households. In 2020, it was estimated to have reached 1 in 3. Previous studies have established a link between food insecurity and childhood dental caries, obesity, diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease, decreased immunity, depression, and increased mortality rates. Pediatric dentists are well-positioned to identify children from families experiencing food insecurity.

Conclusion

Screening for food insecurity at pediatric dental visits can be useful to identify children at increased risk for potentially carious dietary habits and guide appropriate dental management. Furthermore, similar questionnaires will lead to improved coordination with other providers to ensure that children obtain the services necessary to achieve proper nutrition.