

Project Redesign

Pandemic unemployment and the social safety net

Participant characteristics and research methods

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Participant characteristics

Because of the urgency of our research question, we used researchers' and sponsors' email lists and social media, as well as relationships with community based organizations, to recruit a sample of convenience. It was important to us that we speak with a broad range of Americans going through unemployment, including people historically marginalized. Because unemployment insurance is administered by states, we also wanted a broad geographic distribution. We assembled our participant sample using a screening questionnaire posted widely in English and Spanish.

In the end, we spoke with people in 15 states, with our sample distributed fairly evenly among the northeast (7), midwest (11), south (8), and west (8) regions. Our participants ranged in age from 19 to 65, and had worked in a large range of primarily service jobs. The group was heavily female, with 20 women, 10 men, and 2 non-binary or trans people. More than half of the sample (19) identified as non-white, and 6 of the 33 disclosed a disability. Here are the people we interviewed, identified by first name only:

Name	Previous work	Race or ethnicity	Age	Gender	Disability	Location
Alba	Clothing entrepreneur	Hispanic / Latinx	30	Female	No	San Diego, CA
Amahd	Door-to-door sales	Black or African American	22	Male	Yes	Detroit, MI
Anh	Medical assistant, student	Asian	25	Female	No	Oakland, CA

Anna	Budtender	White	43	Female	Yes	Easthampton, MA
Anthony	Grocery - dairy associate	Black or African American	23	Male	No	Greensboro, NC
Brandon	Sales support	Black or African American	36	Male	No	Upper Marlboro, MD
Brian	Freelance music production	White	35	Male	No	Brooklyn, NY
Christina	Hotel management	White	25	Female	Yes	New Orleans, LA
David	Site reliability engineer	White	30	Non-binary / third gender	No	Chicago, IL
Debbie	Pet sitter	White	65	Female	No	Rancho Cucamonga, CA
Donna	Social worker	White	60	Female	Yes	Greenfield WI
George	Server	White	24	Trans Female	No	Dallas, TX
Georgia	Design strategy	Black or African American	48	Female	No	Alexandria, VA
Janiya	Customer service	Black or African American	23	Female	No	Milwaukee, WI
Jasmine	Retail	Hispanic / Latinx	26	Female	No	Queens, NY
Jonathan	Bartender, server	White	29	Male	No	Milwaukee, WI
Julie	Pet sitting, adult retail business	White	50	Female	Yes	Aptos, CA
Kevin	Field sales support	Black or African American	33	Male	No	Cleveland, OH
Lorelyn	Talent development/HR	White	38	Female	No	Neenah, WI
Mark	Administration at coffee plant	White	37	Male	No	Logan, UT
Mike	Pet sitter	White	44	Male	No	San Francisco, CA
Misha	PR/events	Black or African American	33	Female	No	Los Angeles, CA
Mohammad	Gas station	Asian	31	Male	No	New Haven, CT

	attendant, student					
Rachael	Housekeeping on cruise ships	Black or African American	41	Female	No	Texas
Ross	Lawn mowing	White	32	Male	No	Milwaukee, WI
Santiya	Call center rep & online boutique	Black or African American	26	Female	No	Greensboro, NC
Sara	Server, student	Hispanic / Latinx	36	Female	No	New York, NY
Savannah	Server	Black or African American	21	Female	No	Milwaukee, WI
Shalonda	Professional driver	Black or African American	38	Female	No	Milwaukee, WI
Tatiana	Stocker for Macy's	Black or African American	19	Female	No	Milwaukee, WI
V	Systems engineer	White	35	Female	Yes	Portland, OR
Yvonne	Internet sales	Black or African American	40	Female	No	Martinsville, VA
Zach	Bartender, server	White	30	Male	No	Dallas TX

Open-ended interview method

We invited qualified people to participate in a one-on-one interview by phone or videoconference (participant's choice). Our interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, with most being around 40-45 minutes. We offered each participant \$40, paid via the electronic method of their choice.

All researchers used a conversational interview style designed to elicit stories, rather than a rigid, survey-style question set. Researchers began the interview asking some version of "how are things, and how have they changed since COVID?" and asked follow-up questions if needed from there. For each interview, we wanted to learn about the focus questions represented in our stories:

- What's the living and working situation like, generally, and how are things different during COVID-19 from how they were before?
- Why were they trying to get benefits and how did it go?
- Are they getting help? What kinds? How is it, asking for, getting, and using this help?
- What are they doing to keep things together for themselves and their family?

- What are the big takeaways that the world should know about this story?

We allowed each participant to tell their story, offered sympathy when they mentioned hardships, and asked clarifying questions. At the end, we verified self-reported demographic information and asked if we could use their first name in reporting.

For each interview, the primary researcher refined their raw notes into a 2 to 4-page story answering those focus questions. We shared these weekly with sponsors and interested parties, before conducting any formal synthesis.

Synthesis methods

We used several tactics to identify themes across interviews and solidify actionable findings. Most conventionally, we combed through interview data using a series of lenses relevant to policy objectives:

- Barriers
- Pain Points
- Breakthroughs
- Relationships
- Other stressors

We identified instances of each of these and how they helped or hindered the participant in their goal of getting by.

We also examined the stories participants told us via metaphor and story genre to compose a canonical story of being unemployed during this pandemic.

Finally, because the process featured both extensive waiting and worrisome deadlines for almost everyone, we dove deep into the role of time in our participants' stories. We created and compared timelines that show how much time and attention people were putting into the process, and how long it took for benefits to be implemented and actually distributed once passed by Congress.

Taken together, these methods illuminate the reality of unemployment at this uniquely challenging time.

About the project

This project was an experiment in human centered policy design, in a partnership between Project Redesign at NCoC and New America's New Practice Lab. Our methods and approaches echo the framing of Equity Community Centered Design, originated by [Creative Reaction Labs](#).

