

Project Redesign

Pandemic unemployment and the social safety net

Project mechanics

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Problem: Unemployment assistance offerings were complex and overwhelming for people in need

This project was designed to bring to light how difficult it is to get benefits to communities of focus: low wage workers, people of color, people with disabilities. It featured

- Qualitative, ethnographic (to the extent possible without travel) research aimed at understanding the experience of populations eligible for unemployment assistance, and how certain policy or programmatic changes would improve outcomes and delivery.
- Creating artifacts (based on the research) that would bring lawmakers or agency leaders closer to seeing their work through the users of their policy, including what is currently broken about the process, barriers to access, and ways in which vulnerable communities are excluded (intentionally and unintentionally).

Objective of the study

Gain insights about the experiences that Americans have with applying for unemployment and other benefits, where they're getting information about benefits, and what their personal outcomes have been so far.

Goals

The overall goal of the project was to help **inform draft legislation and policy making to close gaps in existing benefits**. In addition, we:

- quickly collected qualitative data about the lived experience of people applying for benefits
- developed a nimble, responsive research protocol to learn from the folks affected
- brought to light how difficult it is to get benefits to communities, and increase access to government benefits through individual interviews documented as journalistic stories
- represented experiences of people who are eligible for unemployment assistance and circulated insights and findings while the research was ongoing to inform legislative and policy discussions

Research questions

- What do people know about the existing and new options for unemployment and other benefits?
- Where are people getting their information about safety net benefits?
- How aware are people that there are new programs that they may be eligible for?
- How common is it that people applying for unemployment and other benefits have done so in the past?
- What's the experience like for people who are most in need and applying for benefits from multiple programs, such as unemployment, SNAP, and WIC?
- How are people coping while they wait for benefits to come through?

Expected outcomes

- Understanding of specific inflection points for benefit applicants and challenges they face in getting benefits they are qualified and eligible for.
- Individual stories illustrating a range of situations and circumstances in which Americans are experiencing interactions with benefits systems during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

Exploratory interviews that are 30- to 60-minutes long, conducted over video or phone. Each session was led by one researcher. Some sessions included a notetaker.

Interview questions were open-ended, based on high level focus questions and specific themes. We held weekly sessions we called “Stories from the field,” in which we featured a story from the previous week’s interviews, major takeaways from the interviews, and took questions from attendees.

Format of sessions, questions, and themes

Interviews were conversational, between researcher and participant. Participants' family members often made cameo appearances. We focused the interviews on recent past experiences rather than future possible wants and needs. The interviews were designed to answer particular focus questions that ultimately formed the outline for 2- to 4-page stories that researchers wrote about each interview.

Data collection

- The main sources of data collected were
- Verbal protocol from the interviews
- Video / audio of each interview
- Researcher notes
- Screening questions
- Closing demographic questions
- Links to websites where participants got information or applied for benefits

Reflections

Although we had hoped to recruit participants through community based organizations that reflected the communities we wanted to focus on, it takes substantial time for those relationships to form and develop. Some participants came through relationships that researchers had with CBOs or extended professional networks, but most came through open calls shared widely on social media. This means that we missed large swathes of the most underserved and underrepresented folks in the most need.

Another reason that CBOs were largely unavailable to us was that they were busy helping the people they exist to serve. Helping us was far down on their list of priorities.

Events in the world, such as the killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed, did color our interviews to some extent that can't really be measured. But the passing of time in relation to the span of time that the CARES Act covered did change the conversation in the interviews from the first week we talked with living experts, which was the first week in June to the last interview conducted June 29. For example, by the end of the interview period, more participants were worried about benefits running out than at the beginning.

We would have liked to do interviews with Spanish-speaking living experts. But our network of sources for participants was not fruitful.

In terms of interview protocol, our focus was very much on the overall experience of applying for unemployment benefits and the life situation of each participant. Hearing about the difficulties people had getting online, using their state's system to fill out their application, and then understanding the status of their claim left some of us wondering if there were opportunities to conduct usability tests of state systems. But that would be a very different project.

Finally, if there were not a pandemic, we would have done interviews in the field. We would have met participants where they live. We would have been able to collect contextual information that was impossible to gather by doing interviews by video or phone. What living spaces were like, meeting other people living there, seeing artifacts of the context. The data would have been richer, but the interviews also would have been longer and likely far fewer as it takes considerable time to arrange in-home visits.

Team and staffing

[Research team bios](#)

Our key partners at New America were

[Tara McGuinness](#)

[Vivian Graubard](#)

[Crystal Yan](#)

[Nikki Zeichner](#)

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](#).