Project Redesign

Researching the safety net during the COVID crisis: Approaches for urgent and respectful interviews

Story-based methods workbook

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Resources

The links below lead to open resources that anyone can use to run their own study like this one.

- Stories we collected
- Research plan
- Messages for recruiting participants
- Participant information form [Spanish] [English]
- Interview guide [Spanish] [English]
- Story template

How we chose methods to collect a wide variety of stories

Policy makers expect policy memos. But policy memos are impersonal and abstract. We wanted to bring to light the lived experience of people trying to get benefits in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic: the *living experts*. To paraphrase Ayanna Pressley, how could we bring people in the most pain closest to the people in power? Could we begin to rebalance that power by capturing individual stories and delivering them to the people who are making the rules?

This project was an experiment in human centered policy design that was 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 Lab.

Designing simple but effective research methods

Our goal was to deliver policymakers a clear picture of the experience of trying to get benefits during the pandemic, while there's still a chance to act. We knew we had to collect a wide variety of stories in a short amount of time. We needed:

- Fast, nimble ways to find and schedule individuals experiencing unemployment
- A simple, repeatable interview protocol as a framework for human conversations

Because of the combination of speed and breadth we were aiming for, we also needed:

- Very clear research objectives so team members could make independent decisions during sessions and synthesis.
- A large team that could conduct sessions at the convenience of participants in multiple time zones.
- A lightweight synthesis framework to interpret a large number of conversational interviews conducted by different people.

Use this workbook to collect your own stories

These core methods are repeatable at all kinds of sample sizes and timelines and we discuss them in depth in this workbook. We don't discuss managing a large research team or refining research objectives here.

But you don't need a professional team, or a large one, to conduct this kind of research. We created this kit to show how our process can be duplicated by anyone with time and interest. There are links to every tool we created to design and run the study for you to use in your own work. We hope you will find it useful.

Recruiting participants

We wanted to hear from people who have a range of kinds of experiences with the system they're trying to thrive in, and to learn from their expertise. They're not the subjects of the research -- the system is. They are the experts on the experience of living through this. We adopted the idea of our interviewees being the *living experts*[1], that is, the experts on the experience they're having. But as a kind of shorthand, we fall back on calling our living experts “participants” in the study.

We sourced participants through personal networks, professional networks, social media, and community based organizations

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 survey posted widely in English and Spanish

We created a brief screening questionnaire using Google Forms and distributed a short link to it to partner organizations and via researchers' email lists and social media accounts. Here are the core questions:

Tell us about your work situation

- Fully employed/have my usual amount of work
- Partly employed/less work than usual
- No work

What type of work do you normally do? (We're interested in talking to people doing all different kinds of work for all kinds of pay).

(open-ended response)

Have you ever applied for unemployment assistance from any state?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe (don't know)

[1] The likely origin of this term is the Creative Reaction Lab.

By looking at the responses to just these three questions, we could tell if someone was experiencing the situation we wanted to study, and make sure that we covered a range of past jobs.

Our survey also included the logo of our sponsoring organization (important for credibility), a section on who we are and why we're doing this, a section with questions about age, location, race, gender, and ability, and a section with logistical questions about contact information and scheduling.

You can see the whole form here.

Then we created a set of standard outreach language for Twitter, Facebook, email, etc. You can see those templates here. We offered a $40 incentive for the estimated 45-minute interview, and we said so in the invitation. Incentives are a best practice and we strongly recommend them. You are paying for the expertise of the person you're interviewing. It is possible to recruit without them if you don't have access to funding or can't pay participants for regulatory reasons. This will affect who opts into an interview.

We asked our team members and partners to send the survey out as widely as possible. When qualified responses rolled in, we set up interviews. We either called or emailed people to set up interviews, and if they accepted, we sent a calendar invitation immediately and a reminder email or text (depending on participant preference) the day before the interview.

All told, we screened 138 people and interviewed 33.

Conducting interviews

Our approach to interviewing is not highly technical -- anyone with good listening skills can do it. Rather than having strict, scripted questions in a survey questionnaire style, we developed several focus questions for the researchers to anchor their conversations in. If the conversations covered those focuses, we were learning what we set out to.

We recommend a warm neutral interaction style that is detached but kind, and that allows space for the researcher to connect with the participant, as most effective for research conversations about difficult topics like this.

We used an open-ended interview method

We invited qualified people -- our living experts -- 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.

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 created an interview guide for researchers to use, with a preamble and follow-up questions and a closing. The preamble had standard language for describing the study, and formally getting consent to participate and be recorded. (Participants could decline recording, but most of them agreed.) The closing covered thank-yous and collecting the participant's preferred payment method. In between, the script offered questions that the researcher could use, if they chose, to elicit the story:

- Tell us about you and your living situation. What are your days like? *[Look for routines, relationships, pressures]*

- Tell us about your working situation – are you working now? What kind of work have you been doing?

- How are you getting by, in general?

- *[If it doesn't come up]* Have you known anyone who got sick with coronavirus? What happened?

- Have you ever applied for unemployment? When? What was that like? What happened?

- How close was the process of getting benefits to what you expected? If you remember, what did you expect before you started, and how did it play out?

  - How did you know what to do? [Friends? Family? Employer? Internet? News? Government website?]
  - Where are you in the process?
  - Where did you get information about it?
- What questions do/did you have about unemployment or other benefits?
- Have you ever applied for other state benefits before, like food stamps?
  - [*If they've never applied before:*] How're you learning about what your options are? What do you think you'll get out of it? How long do you expect it to take to get help from the state?
  - What do you wish the state could provide that you're not getting?

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. We paid the $40 incentive, via the electronic method of their choice, within 24 hours of completing the interview.

When we could, we recorded interviews

If participants gave their permission and it was technically feasible, we recorded the interview using either the internal recording function if we were on a video conference app, or a call recorder if we were on the telephone. Whenever possible, we scheduled a second team member to take notes on each session. But if a second team member wasn't available, the primary researcher took notes while conducting the interview. In general, we didn't expect to go back to the recordings to do full transcription. But recordings are handy for collecting verbatim quotes and double-checking story details.

So at the end of each interview, we had a recording and a notes document containing all kinds of messy typos and such, but capturing most of what the participant said. These were the raw material for our stories.

Synthesizing interviews into stories and actionable findings

Making sense of qualitative interviews can feel messy. There's a temptation to turn it all into quantitative measures. Sometimes that is appropriate. In this study, we wanted to maintain the voices of the living experts rather than abstracting them to become generic. Capturing short stories from each interview was key to keeping the experiences of real people front and center. Even if we never did another bit of analysis, we wanted to put the stories out in the world in a way that they could stand on their own.

But we did do quite a bit of synthesis to better understand what we were hearing from people and to turn that into specific insights that policy makers can act on.

With 9 researchers, it made sense to break into smaller working groups to do deeper analysis and synthesis. People on the research team picked parts of the synthesis and reporting that they were interested in, and then organized themselves to look at the data, pull out patterns and insights, and develop illustrations or visualizations. Working groups used a range of approaches.

Story capture

For each interview, the primary researcher (with the note-taker if there was one) refined their raw notes into a 2 to 4-page story as soon as possible after each interview. We used a consistent story template structured around the five focus questions, so that stories could be compared.

Researchers matched their observations and participants' comments to the section of the story format, even if the participant had talked about them in a different order. We aimed especially to create a sequential narrative of the participant's efforts if they had had trouble accessing benefits, under "why were they trying to get benefits and how did it go?" Each week, we compiled and shared these stories with sponsors and interested parties, before conducting any more formal synthesis.

We published the stories from the week's interviews at the end of each week by sharing the collection with partners, community based organizations, and sending links out publicly.

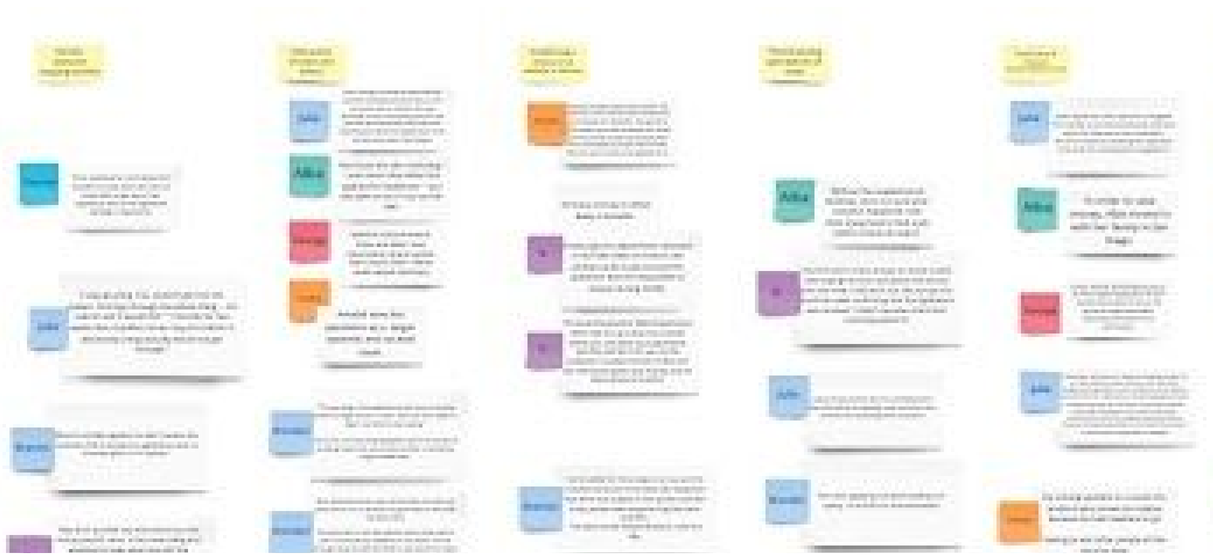
Not only did we use the stories as a way to capture observations about participants' experiences for our partners and the public, but they were also the main source of observations and quotes for synthesis. Later, we used the stories as source material for blog posts, articles, and presentations for audiences that ranged from advocates working on safety net issues to law makers and policy makers, to experience designers inside and outside government.

Lens synthesis

When we designed the study, we knew we would not have a lot of time to synthesize and analyze the data. Typically on an ethnographic research project, the researchers would design the study to be exploratory. Themes and patterns would be revealed in coding transcripts and analyzing the coded data. But we didn't have time for that. So, we "pre-coded" the qualitative data by identifying themes we expected to see in the interviews:

- Barriers (obstacles to getting benefits)
- Pain Points (friction and effort)
- Breakthroughs (release of an obstacle or friction)
- Relationships and influences (family, friends, social media, etc.)

After we turned most of our interviews into stories, we began working to identify patterns and solidify actionable findings. From the stories and our interview notes, we identified instances of each of the lenses and recorded them on virtual sticky notes using online software that acts like a shareable online whiteboard. For each instance, we tried to explain what about the observation or quote helped or hindered the participant in their goal of getting by. The top of the board looked like this:



Part of our virtual whiteboard, showing sticky notes with observations or quotes on them, along with a participant identifier in vertical categories of lenses (Zoom in on the image.)

We began with our sticky notes grouped in the above categories, but we did several group exercises to categorize them further, and (as often happens) we identified new categories in the process. Two new categories emerged.

- Attitudes and feelings
- Other stressors (factors that add cognitive or emotional load)

Then, we talked about what it all meant. Which barriers were most severe and what made them important? What could we tell our audience about why they should care about the other stressors participants were dealing with?

Using these discussions as inputs to reporting, we wrote up our answers, along with other insights and takeaways in briefs about each lens. Each brief includes information about how we got from interview to story to finding.

Metaphor and genre synthesis

Because the focus of our research was stories, we also used some unconventional tools to analyze common threads among what participants said and what researchers felt when they heard it. Storytelling and responding to stories are core human capabilities, so we held a session where we asked researchers to talk about their responses to the stories via metaphor and story genre. This kind of structured conversation can help identify themes, especially emotional and impact-related ones, that the more formal lens synthesis might not produce.

We used prompts to seed this more emotional and wide-ranging conversation:

- What these applicants are going through is like…
- Draw an invitation representing the “party” that the participants are being invited to
- Choose a genre (romance, horror, science fiction, quest, etc) and write a participant’s story arc in a few sentences

For this kind of synthesis, it’s helpful to ask team members to write or draw their answer while a moderator keeps track of time. Then have a “show and tell” where each person explains what they came up with and why.

Some of the answers from our session were:

The experience is like…

- Roller coaster
- Falling through a hole with no net
- Waiting room with no doors out
- Nightmare (everything is uncertain and off from what you expect)

The invitation and party are...

- Like a **wedding invitation**: The state demands your patience and presence...no RSVP, no rain date
- "**Exact attire required but no instructions**."
- "You have a **chance to win this gift** but you have to fill out this long list and respond in 1 hr."
- Like being **invited to a party but arriving at an eviction**.

A few of the stories:

- **Action movie with a ticking time bomb**: you have to detonate it… have to go out there to turn the bomb off but there are all these obstacles.
- **Tetris** - pieces are coming down; you can't flip them quickly enough; they pile up and up.
- **Sci Fi: ship went down**; life support in ship but don't know if outside can be breathable or if there's anything to eat. Others out there… seem friendly but never know. Limited time to get off the planet or secure help from beings there.
- **Old style faerie story** where the fairies are dangerous and play tricks. You think you make a good deal, but they come back and demand their due, which is way bigger than you thought.
- **Escape room video-game.** Puzzle after puzzle, level after level.
    - Every time you escape, there's another room waiting for you.
    - Video game music; puzzle style game.
    - Never reach the end of the game.
    - Nobody has the cheat codes.

Then we talked about the results of those exercises and identified the most resonant genre and arc (in our case, a complicated video game with impossible puzzles and no apparent end). Going back and comparing this narrative to our lens results and our raw stories, we composed a canonical story of being unemployed during this pandemic.

Timeline synthesis

Because the process featured both extensive waiting and worrisome deadlines for almost all of the participants, we dove deep into the role of time in our participants' experiences. We chose several representative stories and documented timelines that show when each person lost work, when they applied for benefits, and each contact or attempted contact with a state agency that they told us about.

To create the timelines, a few of the researchers gathered to re-consider the insight clusters from the Lens Synthesis. We copied every virtual sticky note that mentioned time and regrouped them into different ways of looking at "time": :

- Waiting to hear or receive payments
- Timing (some participants had problems because they applied before benefits systems were adjusted)
- A day in the life
- Repeated tasks
- Contacts with state agencies (milestones in the customer journey)
- Overall duration of the process

After getting a sense of when and how problems occurred, we decided to go back to the stories and map the time-related elements of them against a semi-standardized journey. The journey had 4 phases: Before submitting the application; Application period; Receiving benefits, and What happens next. We did this using text in a spreadsheet, with every number or date in bold. In contrast to the other synthesis techniques, this helped us take the emotion out of the data so that we could see the overlaps of participants' experiences. Here's a sample of a few rows:

Debbie	Applied **April 28th**	**7 weeks** waiting. Included: one form error (wrong eligibility start date) and initial "benefits" of $0. Called state agency **every 5 minutes for a few days.** A specialist was supposed to call back 3-10 days later. 2 later a different rep said something else.	*Still waiting*	
Misha	Application pending for **1.5 weeks**	Misha was told it could take up to an additional **6 weeks** to process her ID Verification, so she is currently waiting for what might be at least 10 weeks or more, before she sees her first unemployment benefits.	*Still waiting*	
Donna	Applied **April 4th.**	Returned additional paperwork April 17th. Pending since April 18th. **Spent many hours** being on hold and emailing.	*Still waiting*	
Ross	Applied in **less than an hour on April 21st.**	Waited **at least 65 days.** Waited several hours in line on the phone. He also looks at the unemployment facebook group around **3-4 times a day.** "And for us it's been **13 weeks**. And it could be another **10 weeks."** "	*Still waiting*	
Jonathan	Filled application out March 18th, June 1st got into the system, longest call she's had was held for **90 minutes.**	Is waiting for **11 weeks of backpay**, he was calling them upwards of **10x a day**. Now checks **twice a day** for unemployment.	*Still waiting*	Back at work already

Spreadsheet of data related to time as reported by participants in interviews. View all the rows here.

When we had all the stories mapped out along the journey, we chose a few to represent visually as illustrations of common situations. We re-added quotes and excerpts from the stories to show the ups and downs of the process and how it all affected each person. Our objective: show clearly how much time and attention people put into the process, and how long it took for benefits to be implemented and actually distributed after the CARES Act was signed into law.

The stories we captured are powerful on their own. But conducting various analysis activities helped us understand more deeply what we heard from participants. From that understanding, we developed specific, actionable insights that we then wrote up in various final deliverables.

Taking care of participants and the team

Our conversations with participants covered matters of great personal pain and worry. They had to, to accurately capture what people are experiencing. So it was important that we look to the wellbeing of both people engaging in the conversation, both during the interview and after.

Resources for participants

In many usability interviews, it's standard practice to make sure a participant gets to complete their task afterward (as a fair exchange for them showing the research team the barriers to doing so). But we weren't in a position to fast-track our interviewees through any of 50 unemployment systems, or even to get extra information about their claim status.

Instead, we asked our community partners to help us compile a list of resources that participants might not already be using if they needed help getting benefits or mental health support. We asked participants at the end of their interview if they needed help. We provided this information about resources to everyone who wanted it.

For the interviews, we wanted to make it very clear that there was no obligation to continue if the participant found the process upsetting. We added a few lines to the preamble of our interview protocol to make sure that each researcher would cover this during the opening of the session. Our professional researchers know what to do if a participant gets emotional, but in case you haven't experienced this, here are some good ways to handle it:

- Reinforce that you're connecting with their experience. Say, "That's a powerful story."
- Remove time pressure. "Take all the time you need. Feelings are just fine."
- Offer sympathy -- ask if they'd like to take your hand, or, in a remote interview, say "I wish I could offer you a hand to hold right now."
- Check in when you think they're ready to continue. "Would you like to continue?" Reinforce that they can take their time.

- Remind them of the possibility of stopping if it's too much. "Would you like to stop here for today?"

Many participants will choose to continue even when the material is very distressing, but it's only okay to do so if it's a free choice.

Care for researchers

These interviews were challenging for even our experienced research team. Some of them experienced secondary trauma; most experienced exhaustion and sadness after intense interviews. We leaned on Vivianne Castillo's work about researcher self-care and resources she shared with us, and the team supported one another through regular meetings and communication.

Researchers bring their own experiences and life events into the work

In addition to self-isolation and working remotely (because of the COVID-19 pandemic) on an urgent and emotionally challenging project where nearly everyone was learning a new policy area, researchers had their own major life events to deal with during the 6 weeks of the project.

A few researchers completed graduate degrees and dealt with the disappointment of not being able to celebrate with family and friends. We helped parents or siblings deal with getting benefits or loans. People moved their households across cities or across the country. There were bug infestations in apartments or major construction projects in living spaces. There were family adjustments to make as researcher's children finished the school year and faced a summer of socially distanced activities. Folks changed full-time jobs (everyone on this project was part-time). Some of us grieved the death of a family member. There were happy stresses, too: a new niece, birthdays, anniversaries.

Current events affect researchers and participants

National and international events also affected how the team was feeling and what they took into the interviews with them, as well as how participants interpreted what was happening to them. During the 6 weeks of the study, we saw major significant events unfold. President Trump fired Inspectors General, attacked voting by mail, and tried to get former administration members released or pardoned from indictments and convictions. He cleared protestors from the park in front of the White House with tear gas. The U.S. reached the milestone of 100,000 COVID-19 deaths and another milestone of 40 million Americans filing new unemployment claims. George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police, catalyzing protests against police violence in cities around the world, and opening up the national conversation about race and equity in new and important ways. States and cities started re-opening, only to see disturbingly large spikes in COVID-19 cases.

Supporting researchers

We designed the project not only for the care of participants who were sharing with us their often difficult challenges, but also for the health and welfare of the researchers.

Have a large enough team

One of the advantages to having a large team of researchers was that everyone could do a few interviews, spreading the work and the emotional labor among us. In addition, there were enough researchers available at any given time that some could pair up so one person could take notes while the other ran the interview. This gave us 2 witnesses to some interviews -- a useful thing for analysis of the data -- but also gave researchers someone to immediately debrief with.

Training on detached engagement

On reflection, it would have been good to hold training early in the project to help researchers on skills for “detached engagement,” something that professional social workers, teachers, and others who work in the safety net space cultivate every day to manage secondary trauma. Having passion about understanding human problems is good. Internalizing those problems is not healthy or sustainable.

Daily checking in and over-communicating on open channels

Absent of that training, we took deliberate steps to care for the researchers.

We set up a Slack channel, where everyone checked in every day. We over communicated availability and what we were working on. We set up separate Slack channels for the smaller working groups to work together, and individuals could directly message each other.

Weekly check-ins

We had a weekly meeting on Friday afternoons to discuss insights from the interviews. We often started those meetings with an “emoji check-in.” As we were all remote from one another all the time, we relied on GSuite tools for collaboration. For our Friday meetings, we kept running notes in one file, with the agenda for the current meeting at the top. Everyone could see notes being taken and add notes, themselves. The emoji check-in was a meeting opener where the team could drop a few choice emojis so show a bit about how they were feeling about the world and the project.

Tracking and monitoring interview coverage

Throughout the study, we tracked how many interviews each researcher was conducting, to monitor each researcher's emotional and psychological burden. The lead checked in with individual researchers to see how they were doing. If there were signs of burnout, the lead would recommend people take time off from the project.

When the lead saw signs that someone was tapping out, she worked with the team responsible for scheduling interviews to give those researchers a break.

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 Lab.