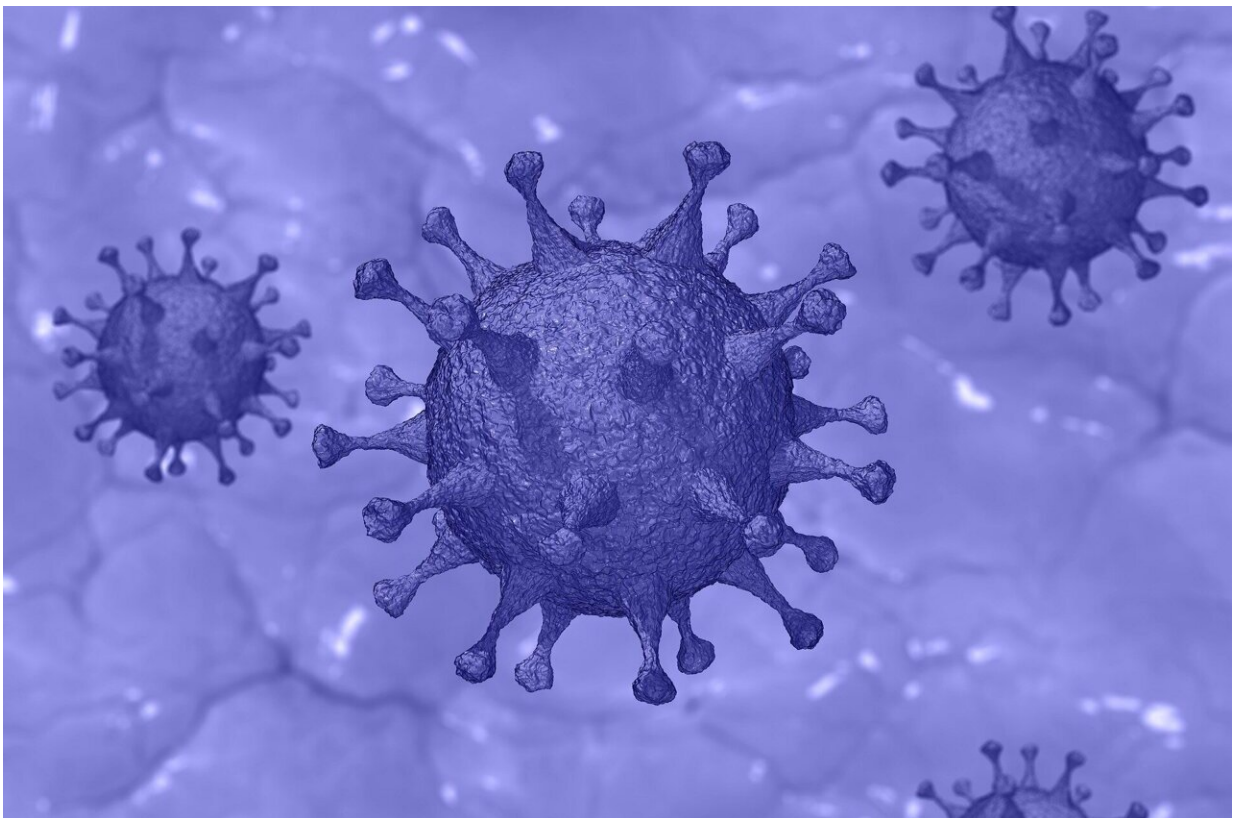


COVID created an expanded social safety net. Activists are now quietly working to bring it back

May 3 2023, by Davis Giangiulio



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In March 2020, the economy grinded to a halt as the COVID-19 pandemic forced widespread shutdowns of businesses. As Congress

watched the economy collapse, it responded by doing something lawmakers have resisted since the 1960s: a large expansion of the social safety net.

Emergency paid sick and [family leave](#), modernizing and expanding [unemployment insurance](#), monthly tax payments to families with children and expanded [health care access](#) all were passed during the emergency. In turn, it rescued families and the U.S. economy from a crash that could've rivaled the Great Depression.

But these programs were temporary. President Joe Biden tried to extend them through his Build Back Better agenda, but Congress failed to find the votes. Now, activists are pressing to foster the permanent return of these benefits.

'It kept families from sinking'

Piper Stiles, a single mother of a 10 year old, worked jobs that shut down early in the pandemic, so she relied on expanded unemployment benefits, which she called a huge help. When the monthly expanded child tax credit payments started coming in July 2021, the Maine resident paid off debt that improved her credit rating, and used payments to open a savings account for her daughter. It wasn't life changing, but it provided optimism.

"Could this be sort of an inoculant for our culture," she said, "to (be) willing to extend actual meaningful support to people who are struggling economically?"

The government's interventions had meaningful effects. After the child tax credit expanded in 2021, child poverty fell from 9.7% in 2020 to 5.2%. The drop was even larger for Black and Hispanic children.

During unemployment insurance (UI) expansion, the [poverty rate](#) in 2020 fell to 9.3% in June amid recession from 11% in February. The national uninsured rate fell to a record low of 8% by early 2022, and the limited paid leave scheme during 2020 prevented an estimated 15,000 cases of COVID-19 per day nationwide.

"It saved people's lives," Dawn Huckelbridge, director of Paid Leave for All, said about emergency leave. "It kept families from sinking."

Kali Daugherty, a Wisconsin resident and also a [single mother](#) of a 10-year-old, was working three jobs before the pandemic. When it hit, she lost one. While [financial difficulties](#) are constant in her life, she said the expanded child tax credit alleviated that. "We weren't better financially off completely, but we weren't struggling."

Using the payments, she didn't rely on her credit card between paychecks to get last minute essentials, avoiding acquiring more debt and paying off some. Daugherty also used it for things she wouldn't do otherwise, like using some of the last payment to take her son to a waterpark, thanks to increased financial security.

But the child tax credit expired at the end of December 2021, and emergency paid leave ended a year earlier, with the American Rescue Plan Act in March 2021 (ARPA) only partially reviving it via a tax credit. UI expansion and reform lapsed in September 2021.

Some of these programs were supposed to be extended through Build Back Better. The House passed bill included a paid leave scheme, along with extensions of both the expanded child tax credit and increased Affordable Care Act (ACA) health care subsidies in ARPA.

But in the Senate, support dried up. "When we got past the sense of dire emergency, and the economy began to rebound, the support gradually

diminished," said Bob Greenstein, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project.

The final iteration of Build Back Better was the Inflation Reduction Act. The bill only included an extension of the ACA subsidy expansion and increases, until 2025, and changes to Medicare.

Ben Day, executive director of Healthcare NOW, a group advocating for a national single-payer health care system, said he thinks health care survived because of what the pandemic revealed. "It just dramatically exposed how employment based health insurance doesn't make sense at all." Even then, he was disappointed at how few of the health care items became law.

Return to the status quo

A stereotype of the American social safety net is that ending programs is politically perilous. Americans, according to polling, were split on whether the expanded child tax credit should be permanent, but broadly support paid leave.

Huckelbridge said the Trump Administration's Labor Department failed to advertise emergency leave, so when it expired there wasn't outrage. Meanwhile, Greenstein said that trope isn't true, as Congress before has expanded benefits during downturns then taken them away during recovery, though not on a scale like this.

When the programs expired, beneficiaries suddenly lost support. The [child poverty](#) rate rose from 12.1% in December 2021 to 17% in January 2022 after the expanded child tax credit's end.

When payments stopped, Daugherty returned to the financial struggles expansion temporarily ended. "We just went back to how things were...

This is all we had to rely on."

Alexa Tapia, UI campaign coordinator for the National Employment Law Project, contended that paring back expanded [unemployment benefits](#) harmed some workers more than others. "Many Black and Brown workers were left without the benefits they need," she said.

The path forward

Huckelbridge said the advancement on paid leave has been enormous since the pandemic. "We've made more progress in the last three years than we had in the decades prior."

Day said a key part of that has been increasing embracement of government, a shift he thinks was accelerated by the pandemic. "The more the U.S. government provides these programs that have life saving impacts, the more that narrative (of demonizing government) changes."

That change is happening with voters. In the 2010 elections, exit polls reported 56% of voters said the government was doing too much. But in the 2022 elections, 53% said the government should do more.

Now that some programs have already existed, the case for bringing them back gets easier, Greenstein said. Driving that is hard evidence for the activists' arguments. "We have the data showing how immensely successful this program was," Tapia said about UI enhancement.

While Democrats typically lead the charge for these programs, there may be room for bipartisan agreement. Republicans have expressed openness to paid leave in the past, particularly parental leave, and some conservatives have their own proposals to expand the child tax credit, though different than what activists support.

Elisa Minoff, senior policy analyst at the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the center's lead in work on the ABC Coalition, a group pushing for a child allowance, said more lawmakers are prioritizing the expanded child tax credit because it benefited so many of their constituents. "They've heard directly from families in their communities," she said.

Stiles and Daugherty are now, after being beneficiaries of the programs, involved in the ABC Coalition's Parent Advisory Board. If and when the expanded [credit](#) returns, they're pushing it to be stronger with more robust benefits.

But while they're involved in this fight specifically, they also stressed this benefit can't stand alone. Instead, all of the programs mentioned and more need to return or be created for there to be a more effective safety net.

"Welfare in the United States is such a dirty word," Stiles said. "What really needs to shift to allow the change that needs to happen is something that is more subtle and internal, and I feel like that's the conversation that we need to be having."

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