

The American safety net consists of several programs that provide assistance and support to people experiencing hardships. While many programs are mandated at the federal level, much of the funding for and implementation of them occurs at the state level, which can create a confusing and uneven patchwork of coverage.

The three articles in this issue draw from papers published in volume 686 of the *ANNALS* of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. This volume focused on entitlement reform and was published in December 2019. We thank volume editors and IRP affiliates Robert Moffitt of Johns Hopkins University and James Ziliak of University of Kentucky for working with us to identify topics for this issue of *Focus on Poverty* (formerly *Focus*).

When these papers were originally written and published, the world was barely aware of what was on the horizon. The COVID-19 pandemic affected not only people's physical and mental health, but also whether and how they were able to work or study, or even to feed, clothe, and house themselves and their loved ones. In this issue of *Focus on Poverty*, we examine how well some key social safety programs addressed the unprecedented increase in needs. Authors also share what lessons can be learned from this crisis for the system to react more quickly and effectively in the future.

We begin with an assessment of the Unemployment Insurance (UI) program by Till von Wachter, Professor of Economics at the University of California, Los Angeles. UI is the largest safety net program for working-aged adults in the United States. This examination was valuable pre-COVID, and even more important given the precipitous increase in unemployment and the number of people seeking help from the UI program during the pandemic. This assessment also considers changes and expansions that were part of the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance package, including coverage for self-employed, contract, and gig workers.

Next, Robert Collinson of University of Notre Dame, Ingrid Gould Ellen of New York University, and Jens Ludwig of University of Chicago share a history of housing assistance in the United States and recommendations for how the system can be more responsive to those who qualify for support. The types of housing assistance most commonly available have changed over the years and include both support tied to a particular location and dollars that go with the tenant. In a system where only a fraction of people who qualify receive help, and even fewer receive help quickly, there is significant room for improvement. Reforms include tailoring the program more to local conditions such as availability of housing stock and cost of living, as well as standardizing available benefits from region to region and state to state.

Finally, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, previously called the Food Stamp Program) is a key element of the social safety net. Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach of Northwestern University explains how it has been an effective program, and why reforms should be undertaken cautiously in order to avoid making the system less efficient and effective. She also examines the critical role SNAP played during the COVID-19 pandemic; it not only provided much-needed support to struggling families, it was also an important influx of funds for struggling local economies.

In our *Research to Watch* section, we preview research dealing with the reluctance of some mixed-immigration status households to apply for SNAP benefits due to fears of being targeted for deportation. Juan M. Pedroza, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of California, Santa Cruz, and his coauthors are examining the role that community-based organizations are playing in California to educate relevant populations and to counter those fears. According to Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, 5.9 million children nationwide have at least one unauthorized family member. This suggests that mixed-status households who forego accessing the food assistance benefits to which they are entitled could have a significant impact on food security for children.