



Social Security for All, The Pandemic Has Exposed the Systemic Failures of America's Inadequate Welfare State, It's Time to Start Over

Mimi Abramovitz, Hunter College CUNY

The economic crisis that accompanied the COVID pandemic pushed the safety net into the spotlight—and millions of Americans have found it threadbare. People seeking help for the first time are learning what poor and working-class people—mostly women and people of color—have long known: that in times of crisis, the net doesn't catch you when you fall. In this year's adaptation of the iconic soup and breadlines from the Great Depression, people all around the country arrive at church-run food pantries or line up in cars for food; 10,000 cars sat for hours at a San Antonio food bank in April. Some two million people in New York City alone are now food-insecure. By July, 40 percent of all Americans earning less than \$40,000 had lost their jobs, and 40 percent did not have even \$400 in cash on hand for an emergency.

The time is right for one of those epochal revolutions in American social policy where we start over and build anew. Relying just on small improvements cannot fix the separate and unequal systems that provide minimal relief to people who need more. The systems are too corroded by racism and sexism, too friendly to corporate exploiters. They are too abusive to purported beneficiaries—and their bureaucracies too often harass and police rather than help. Many who seek government help are intimidated and surveilled, forced to navigate an obstacle course to get paltry levels of support, or simply turned away. These are not glitches but rather defining features of the operating software of the system. From the point of view of people who need help, the welfare state is terribly broken. After a storm of protest by newly unemployed Floridians who waited months for benefits, even their right-wing governor, Ron DeSantis, acknowledged that the system was a "clunker" and that "it was designed, with all these different things, to basically fail, I think." (That DeSantis was trying to deflect blame from his administration doesn't negate the truth of his characterization.) From the point of view of elites who rewrote the rules to make an already inadequate system even less responsive, the system is indeed working exactly as intended.