

2020:

A Retrospective

bit.ly/2020retrospective



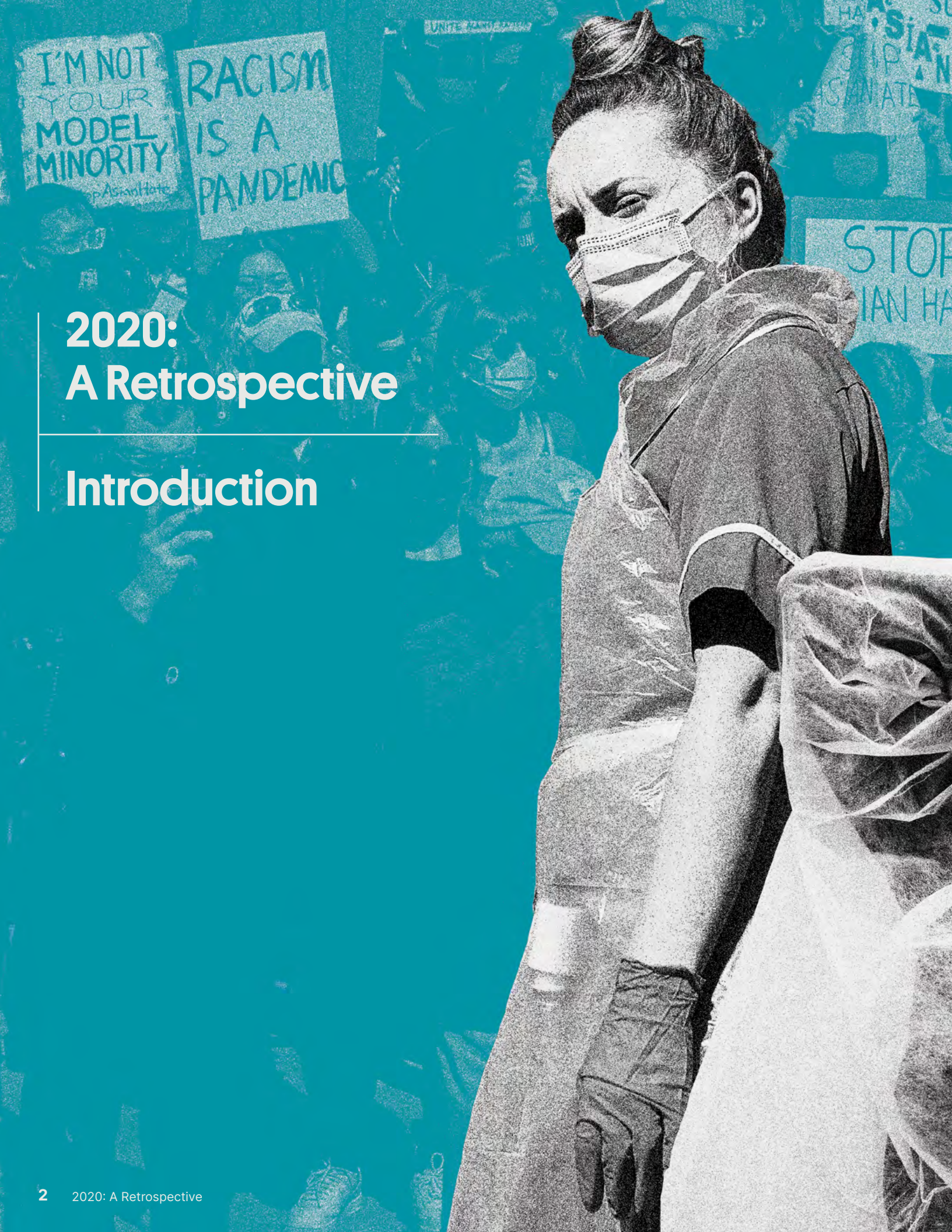
Years after the fact, the experience of 2020 is something many of us are unable to wrap our minds around or might try not to recall.

*But think back to where you were at the start of 2020. The United States was on the brink of a **series of events that would change the world as we knew it.***

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Space to imagine. Strategies for action.



2020: A Retrospective

Introduction



Nearly five years ago, our lives changed. Looking back, we could say it was overnight; but at the time, for many of us, it actually slipped from temporary accommodation to profound restructuring of our lives over the course of months — when we went from travel advisories to temporary stay-at-home orders from school or work to seemingly interminable changes in our behavior at home and in public. The public health emergency, the economic crisis, and the challenges to our democratic norms and ideals required us to rethink our day-to-day as well as our ability to respond to a series of major cataclysms. Together, these dynamics make 2020 stand out as a pivotal year. But it won't be the last time we face a moment that fundamentally changes our entire world.

This retrospective is Future Currents' invitation to the field to metabolize the experiences of that year; make sense of all the things that happened seemingly at once; and learn together how to be more prepared to advance a beautiful, just, and joyful future when we face the next such cataclysmic moment.

We are asking you to dig into your memories of 2020 and grapple with the prompts at the end of each section. Tell us your thoughts, your responses, and your experiences to form the backbone of a body of work that synthesizes the lessons we as a movement learned to be better prepared for another world-changing event or series of events. Tell us what you read here that you want to revise, fix, or rebut. Throughout this report, you'll find a series of questions to consider. We'd love to hear your thoughts, reflections, and insights.

Please visit our interactive site <https://bit.ly/2020retrospective> or email us responses at LookBack@futurecurrents.org.

Connie M. Razza,
Executive Director
Future Currents

A timeline of events

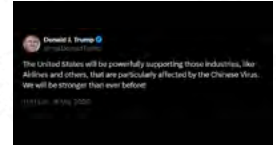
Think back to where you were at the start of 2020. The United States was on the brink of a series of events that would change the world as we knew it. Here is an incomplete list of flashpoints during the year spanning January 2020 to January 2021:



Tom Hanks announces he is diagnosed with COVID-19.



Michigan is the first state to announce a statewide school closure. Within two weeks, 48 states and Washington, D.C., shut down in-person schooling and remain closed through the end of the academic year.



A rise in hate crimes and discrimination against Asian Americans is seen immediately after then-President Donald Trump calls COVID-19 the "ChineseVirus" on Twitter (now X).



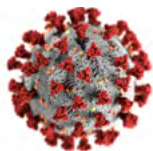
The Department of Homeland Security begins limiting international travel.



States across the country initiate shutdown orders, shuttering workplaces and businesses.



Gal Gadot leads celebrities in an Instagram rendition of John Lennon's song "Imagine."



The first COVID-19 case is confirmed in the United States.



The World Health Organization declares COVID-19 a pandemic after more than 118,000 cases and 4,000 deaths.



The National Park Service begins temporarily closing parks.



From "Tiger King" to "The Last Dance," Americans stuck at home devour streaming TV.

JANUARY 20

MARCH 11

MARCH 12 - 15

MARCH 16 - 20



Toilet paper and cleaning supplies become valuable commodities. As people fill their time at home with new hobbies, there are shortages for things like flour, baking supplies, and puzzles.



Passed by Congress with bipartisan support, President Trump signs the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.



"Social distancing," "pods," "personal protective equipment," and "flattening the curve" become household terms. People bang pots and pans out their windows at 6:00 p.m. to show solidarity with health care providers.



New York is the epicenter of the pandemic. Refrigerated trailers serve as makeshift morgues, and the Javits Center transforms into the largest hospital in the country.



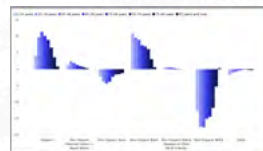
The Paycheck Protection Program provides emergency loans to small businesses to pay their employees.



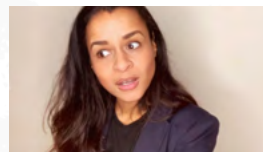
The IRS issues the first stimulus checks for up to \$1,200 to millions of Americans.



Egged on by Trump, right-wing protests of social distancing and mask mandates begin. They occur in more than 30 states.



The CDC releases its first analysis showing people of color suffer from a disproportionate number of COVID cases and death.



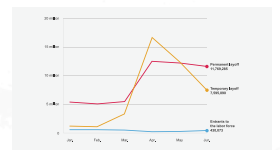
Comedian Sarah Cooper's first video lip syncing of Trump goes viral on social media.



States begin phased reopenings, lessening restrictions.



Zoom sees 300 million daily meeting participants in virtual meetings and hangouts, up from 10 million per day in December 2019



Fifteen percent of the workforce — more than 20 million Americans — are unemployed or temporarily laid off since mid-March.

MARCH 27

APRIL 01 - 11

APRIL 15 - 23

APRIL 24 - 30

A timeline of events



Operation Warp Speed, an effort to develop and distribute a COVID-19 vaccine, begins.



Trump pushes debunked science that hydroxychloroquine can cure COVID-19.



George Floyd is murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis. That same day, a video goes viral of a white woman confronting Christian Cooper, a Black birdwatcher in Central Park. Millions of Americans take to the street to protest.



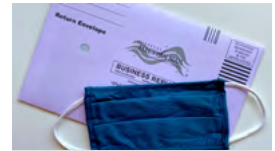
Postmaster General Louis DeJoy announces plans to slash the United States Postal Service (USPS) budget, threatening to interrupt mail service prior to the November election.



Catastrophic wildfires rage across the American West.



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention puts a moratorium on evictions.



Millions of Americans take advantage of mail-in and early voting opportunities.



Trump tests positive for COVID-19.



The Federal Bureau of Investigations announces the arrest of 13 domestic terrorists over a plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer over the state's COVID-19 restrictions.

MAY 15 - 25

AUGUST 07 - 18

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

OCTOBER 02 - 08

Questions to Consider

What else **do you remember happening in 2020?**
Where does it go on the timeline?

Where were you during these flashpoints? What were you doing? What was **happening in your community?**

Beyond these events, what do you remember about **how you felt at the time?** How does it feel to revisit 2020?



Trump supporters clash with progressive Joy to the Poll advocates in Philadelphia.

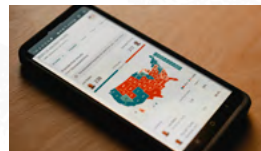
Newsom faces backlash after attending French Laundry dinner party



California Governor Gavin Newsom breaks his own strict guidelines, eating at French Laundry.



Four days after Election Day, most national media networks declare Joe Biden's election victory. The 2020 election yields the highest voter turnout since 1900. Trump allies allege fraud, filing lawsuits challenging the results and demanding recounts.



The electoral college casts their ballots for Joe Biden.



A Queens nurse receives the first COVID-19 vaccine, months before public health officials initially expected at the virus's outset.



After encouragement from Trump, thousands of far-right extremists, white nationalists, and militia members storm the U.S. Capitol building to block certification of the election results.



Election Day 2020 sees Americans choose between Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

NOVEMBER 03

NOVEMBER 05 - 07

DECEMBER 14

JANUARY 06

Public health, private grief, and trauma

☞ Rarely, if ever, are any of us
healed in isolation. Healing is
an act of communion. ☞

bell hooks

About five years after the first reported cases in the United States, [1.2 million](#) people in the United States have died of COVID-19, and we as a country have yet to go through a process of [acknowledgement and public mourning](#). In the 250 years since the United States' founding, Americans' relationship with grief has evolved from a [public experience to a private one](#). Tragedies used to be explained as [fate, the will of God, or bad luck](#) and welcomed a public remembrance. But in modern history, we are more conflicted as we try to find blame for such events. We rely on [physical monuments and markers](#) that can mark an occasion but that do not hold the space for processing our grief as it is actually happening. Grief is now seen as something to deal with personally in a private context, and that separation from public life further [stigmatizes](#) it. What's more, the coronavirus's toll over years is difficult to compare with a discrete, [one-moment-in-time event](#).

The human brain has coping mechanisms to deal with difficult memories, and there are several ways to explain [why we are forgetting](#) what 2020 felt like. Healthy or unhealthy, our brains can suppress memories of trauma. On a biological level, we might

remember less of 2020 because of how monotonous life became for many during stay-at-home orders; just like muscles, neurons in our brain cells can shrink if they aren't exercised. Plentiful access to vaccines has also made a difference. COVID-19 and its numerous strains are just as dangerous as they were in 2020, but vaccinations protect us from much of that risk. When it comes to our [memories of how dangerous COVID-19 was](#), researchers have found that those who got vaccinated were more likely to overestimate the risk of COVID-19 during the heart of the pandemic and those who did not underestimated the risk.



Many people's 2020 experience was traumatic — illness, death, and loss of faith in our institutions. The pandemic was exhausting. Insights from Columbia University's [NYC COVID-19 Oral History, Narrative, and Memory Project](#) are fascinating and powerful at reminding us what March 2020 felt like and get at life broadly in 2020 beyond the virus itself. In trying to make sense of hours of interviews with the oral history project, New York Times writer [Jon Mooallem reflects](#):

What I noticed in the archive, more than anything else, was the volume of suffering those interviews conveyed. Much of it predated the pandemic, and much of it didn't seem, at least at first, to have to do with Covid at all. While the pandemic created widespread pain and vulnerability, it also made existing pain and vulnerability more visible — others' and our own. It was as though, in normal life, we knew to brush that discomfort off. We made suffering invisible, blocked it out. We buried it in our blasé and carried on. But when the

production of normal shut off, so did our machinery for suppressing that vulnerability. There were no norms to contain it. The suffering overflowed.

Trauma, abuse, health problems, financial insecurity, racism, misogyny, disrespect, disappointments, exploitation, self-loathing, self-doubt, resentment, anxiety, perfectionism, regret, restlessness, a miscellany of hassles, stresses and damages leveled on people by faltering systems, stark injustices, the inevitable foibles of being human and small-bore

cruelties of every kind — it all surfaced in the narrators' interviews in long, unstoppable digressions or poignant asides. Unhappiness sprouted, fungal-like, into all kinds of lives, at all levels of privilege and in unusual forms. So many people seemed uneasy, overtaxed and sometimes even torn apart by the strain of simply existing in society that all it took was someone — the interviewers — to get them talking on Zoom for an hour for those feelings to burble out.

Excerpt from "What Happened to Us" by Jon Mooallem, Feb 22, 2023

The [anxiety and stress](#) amplified during the pandemic are trauma contributors. The pandemic and intertwined events of 2020 could lead to [prolonged grief disorder](#). In her book "Imaginable," Jane McGonigal writes that nearly one-quarter of people will experience post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms after a global pandemic. But half of people will experience post-traumatic growth, or "trying to make sense and meaning out of that suffering" — just think of how many people have adjusted our priorities and goals in life since 2020.

Questions to Consider

Have you participated in a **public grieving** around COVID-19? If so, what did it look like?

What losses from 2020 have gone **unmemorialized**?

What might a **process of public mourning** and acknowledgement for those lost and the changes wrought look like?

How has this experience of grief — private and shared — **changed your approach to the work** and what your goal is? How might not contending with grief or trauma impact your work?

Governmental response to the pandemic

In 2023, [the COVID Crisis Group](#), a nongovernmental group of public health experts, released a postmortem on the United States' response to the coronavirus pandemic, revealing a host of missteps that the federal government made. Key among them: missed opportunities to build public trust in the government's ability to respond to crises — for example, confusion around the basics that were known about the virus, whether masking was effective and recommended, and when and how long to quarantine. At a time in U.S. history when trust in government was already eroding, the COVID Crisis Group found that the poor handling of the pandemic could contribute to potentially less effective responses to the next pandemic.

Attempts to undermine public trust in government are not new. For many years, the right's playbook has included efforts to eat away at the belief in science and sow distrust in the federal government's effectiveness. The right used the federal government's COVID-19 response to further that sentiment. Stimulus checks were delayed in reaching Americans for the sole purpose of including [Trump's signature](#). At a moment when leading scientists and public health officials recommended wearing a mask for the public good, Trump labeled it optional. Around the same time as the [racial disparities](#) in COVID-19 cases and deaths were coming to light and politicians felt comfortable prioritizing [reopening the economy over protecting senior citizens](#), wearing or not wearing a mask quickly became a signal of your political leanings.

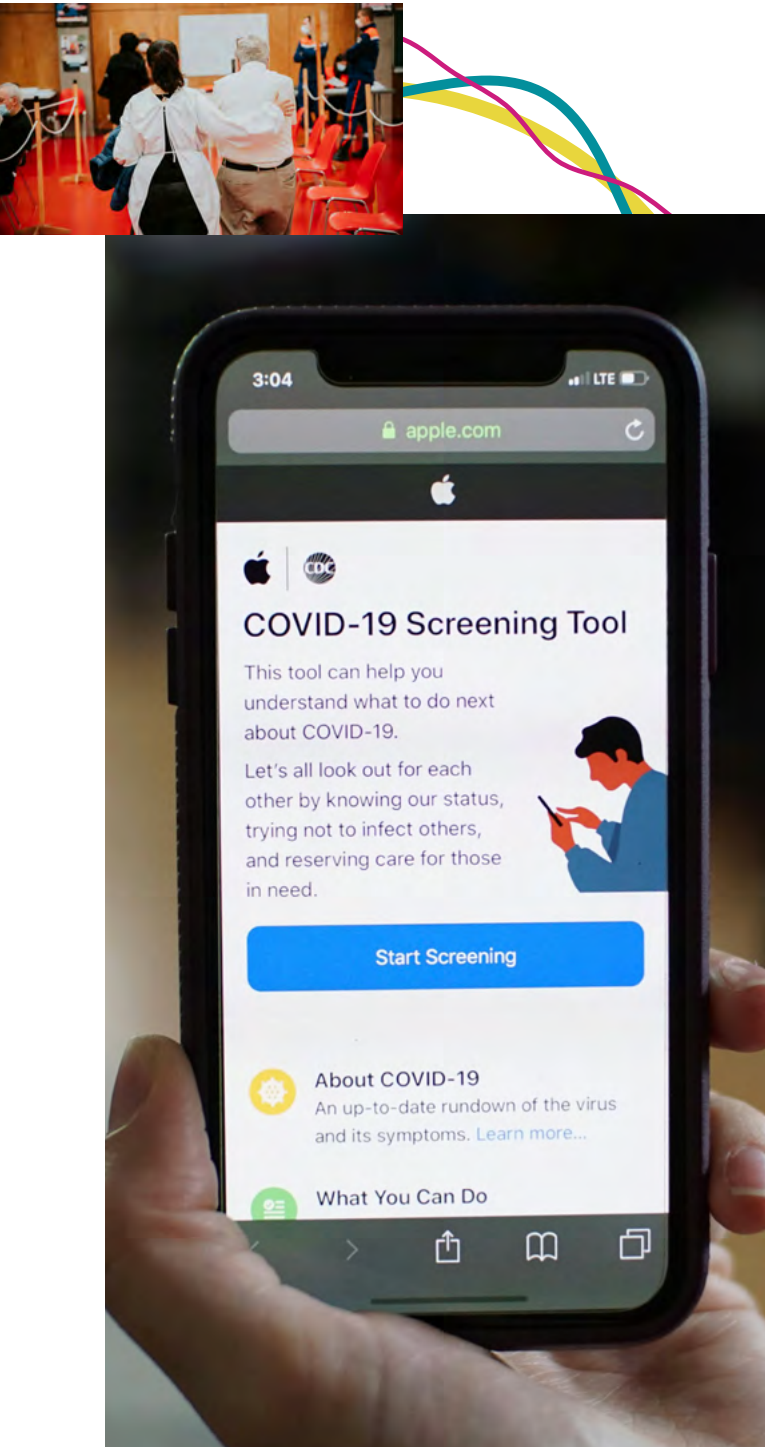
In May 2020, the Trump administration launched Operation Warp Speed. The public-private partnership was an effort to rapidly develop a COVID-19 vaccine. The task was monumental — to return to a more normal life, people would need to be protected from the coronavirus, but experts expected development of a vaccine to take years. Operation Warp Speed successfully and

dramatically cut the time to “shots in arms,” with the first vaccine administered to the public just seven months after launching.

But the federal government missed an opportunity to seize some of the windfalls for the American public, given the [collaborative nature of the operation](#). Take, for instance, the vaccine's cost. The federal government invested more than \$30 billion on Operation Warp Speed, and privately developed vaccines were [available to the public at no cost](#) for an initial period of time. The federal government could have negotiated with big pharma that vaccines would be free to Americans in perpetuity — and many progressive organizations were asking the government to do so — but when the COVID-19 public health emergency ended in 2023, so did financial coverage of vaccines. Now on the commercial market, [vaccine costs fall to individuals' insurance or individuals themselves](#), depending on coverage, costing as much as \$200 out of pocket. Since this change, the rate of those seeking booster shots has declined.

Similar issues existed around guaranteed supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) for all Americans and COVID-19 tests. In spring 2020, PPE and COVID-19 tests were hard to come by — for both individuals as well as medical professionals. The federal government declined to use World Health Organization-developed [COVID-19 tests](#) as it developed its own. It stood up the COVID-19 Hoarding and Price Gouging Task Force and leaned on the Defense Production Act but failed to enact [price-gouging protections](#) for consumers. Using data already in hand, the federal government could have preemptively sent masks, COVID-19 test kits, and PPE materials directly to individuals without requiring registration. But it never sent out masks and was late to get test kits out into the public.

Unfortunately, society ultimately only set a segment of the population up for success.



Social distancing and stay-at-home orders

[The weak federal response](#) also fostered an environment ripe for states to chart their own course in 2020. With a lack of concrete response policies and with guidance changing at a breakneck pace, states and localities were forced to step in and manage the response around public health precautions like masking regulations, school closings, and business openings. Within the span of weeks, [stay-at-home orders](#) marooned people in their houses, and school closures led to virtual learning in most states across the country. Governors in 43 states and the District of Columbia issued stay-at-home orders between March 19 and April 7. The orders lasted for varying lengths, ranging from three weeks to more than 20 weeks in some states. Roughly 4 in 5 states implemented [mask mandates](#) beginning in April; mandates ranged from approximately two months to nearly two years. [Schools in 48 states closed](#) for the remainder of the academic year, and the 2020-2021 school year was a patchwork of in-person, remote, and hybrid learning that varied state by state.

Folks who were able to work remotely were asked to do so. But workers who could only complete their jobs in person (and were not laid off) were suddenly in close and frequent proximity to greater exposure. They were clerks stocking grocery shelves, nursing home staff caring for our elderly, and delivery drivers bringing people meals. They were, overwhelmingly, [people of color](#) who were working in roles that are typically low paying, and they made it possible for society to mostly function and for so many others to stay safe during the peak of the pandemic. Unfortunately, society ultimately only set a segment of the population up for success.

With society segmented into “essential workers” ([more likely workers of color](#)) and those working from home (more likely white), many white Americans were confronted with society’s inequity in a way they had previously not paid attention to. Black people and Latino people were [disproportionately impacted by COVID-19](#), because of the confluence of ways the American system fails them. [Structural racism](#) in the United States leads widely to poorer health outcomes and a worse prognosis for Black and Latino people, including environmental factors that contribute to preexisting conditions and equity issues around access to a healthy lifestyle. Because Black and Latino workers are more likely to be employed in work that required them to be in person and take on greater exposure, that immediately brought up questions about what type of work was valued, whom the government chose to protect, and how [racial equity is often missing](#)

from the conversation. As epidemiologist Katelyn Jetelina said, [“Distancing during a pandemic is a luxury.”](#)

To put it more bluntly, many of the things asked of the public were feasible only for a privileged set of Americans who were able to work remotely or reliably have their kids online for school. While the focus on social distancing and staying home was important, it was equally as important for federal, state, and local governments to design solutions focused around providing protections and PPE for on-site workers.

Even after stay-at-home measures were lifted, life didn’t go back to what it looked like before March. COVID-19 was still present (and in 2024 still very much is), and without protection from vaccinations, people faced decisions around how much exposure risk they were willing to take on. In summer 2020, parents in many places were faced with questions of what to do with kids when summer camps didn’t reopen. College students and high school graduates faced an unfamiliar landscape for entering the workforce. People with pre-existing health conditions and at higher risk of COVID-19 had to navigate a society that no longer participated in protecting them.

In our collective memory, lockdown policies seemed to last forever. In reality, stay-at-home orders lasted [five weeks on average in red states and seven weeks in blue states](#). The impact on school-age children was dragged on for much longer — most [schools were closed](#) until the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, with millions of students remaining remote well into 2020-2021. Since 2020, 30 states have passed laws that [limit public health infrastructure](#), such as limiting stay-at-home orders, mask mandates, vaccine requirements, school closure policies, and data-sharing, undermining our ability to combat a future pandemic across the scales.

Questions to Consider

Do you think the **progressive agenda** appealed to a wider swath of Americans in 2020? Why do you think that?

Why or how do you think we were **able to unlock the outcomes we’ve long sought**, and why do you think these wins disappeared?

What do you wish you would have done, and what might you consider in the future?



“Distancing during a pandemic is a luxury.”
— Katelyn Jetelina



Breaking the economy

Faced with a public health crisis, policymakers had to decide how to best forge ahead. They looked to the most recent moment of economic turmoil — the 2008 Great Recession — to shape their response guidance. The Great Recession resulted from a [lack of demand](#) for goods and services, the root of which was based on the decisions made in the financial sector and was completely different from what we were facing during COVID-19. The nation purposefully paused the economy in 2020 in light of the public health emergency, ultimately leading to an [inability to produce goods](#) that were in demand. Within the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than [6 million Americans](#) filed for unemployment — blowing away the previous record of 1 million people in 1982. It took time before the public health world and the economic world began talking to each other on how to build a path out of the crisis, balancing health concerns and economic concerns.

Given the nature of the crisis, the [big questions](#) swirling in the public's mind were how long public health restrictions would last and how shutdowns would disrupt employment and supply chain flows, especially among the leisure, hospitality, and service industries. There was also concern around the [potential long-tail effects](#) and whether or not the economy would rebound or remain in crisis when it was safe to reopen.

Question to Consider

What might it have looked like to **approach the economy differently** in 2020?



Relief and recovery programs

In March, Congress quickly passed the first of several economic stimulus packages: the CARES Act. The CARES Act included access to [paid sick and family leave](#); [economic impact payments](#) of \$1,200 per adult and \$500 per child to millions of Americans; [expanded unemployment insurance benefits](#) to more workers, for a longer amount of time, and with additional federal dollars on top of state benefits; more liberal use of retirement funds; small-business and corporate relief; and \$150 billion to state, local, and tribal governments.

On paper, the COVID-19 recession lasted two months, although the hardships that the pandemic brought on or exacerbated [lasted much longer](#) than the official recession. The expansion of the social safety net — which the Biden administration's American Rescue plan significantly built upon in 2021 — pulled [more than 12 million people](#) out of poverty. Approximately 5.6 million of those 12 million were children, cutting the childhood poverty rate by more than half. Policies that progressives had been long pushing for made a significant and material difference for Americans but were ultimately [temporary](#). And those most vulnerable who lost support when the programs expired were right back where they started.

Different groups of people [fared differently](#) in the recovery. [Black, Indigenous, and Latino people](#), who are more likely to work in hard-hit industries and jobs without

health benefits, faced greater economic instability and higher unemployment rates than white people. Women — especially [Black](#) and [Latina women](#) — had a slower jobs recovery than men, due to the sectors [women are more concentrated in](#) and the struggles facing paid care workers. [Adults with lower educational attainment levels](#) fared worse than those with bachelor's degrees because of the types of jobs they tend to work in, and workers in low-wage jobs had greater and more sustained losses than others. [Undocumented immigrants](#) were ineligible for relief, and more than [5 million U.S. citizens and authorized immigrants](#) living in mixed-status families were excluded from the CARES Act.

On the flip side, [corporations and their shareholders](#) saw huge profit gains during the pandemic, and the [richest Americans](#) amassed even more wealth.

Questions to Consider:

How does **your experience look different** from this high-level recap?

What is something that, if implemented or done differently, would have **significantly improved your perspective** on how successful the COVID-19 response was?

Reevaluating our relationship with care

Those early pandemic days were, for many, a wake-up call to prioritize care. For many, the sacrifice essential workers made prompted action. Some [banged pots in appreciation](#); others contributed to care worker mutual aid funds; and still more got involved in advocacy campaigns like [Stop The Spread](#).

Many Americans who previously outsourced child care to nannies, child care centers, and schools were thrown into primary child care at the same time they needed to work (whether in the home or outside of it). The lack of a functioning system for child care became evident. Similar examples around a lack of access to care can be found looking at elders in nursing homes and workers' inability to access paid family and medical leave.

Ideas like universal paid family and medical leave weren't new to the progressive movement. They had been things the movement had been pushing for over a long time. But now, they felt relevant to a much wider swath of Americans contemplating their own needs. As discussed briefly above, 2020 was a moment in time when long-held progressive goals

were prioritized. Care package relief money flowed to the vast majority of [child care centers and home-based child care providers](#). Workers across the country were guaranteed [paid leave](#) and job protection. Outside the government context, mutual aid programs provided for communities and kept the pressure on the government to fund public programming that receded as COVID-19 moved from a pandemic to endemic.

Questions to Consider:

How can we **use these lessons to offer greater protection** to workers in the care industry, reflecting how much we actually value their labor?

How can we build on the idea above so that **when faced with another 2020**, we acknowledge our evolutionary relationship with care and start from there with the lessons learned instead of losing ground?

☞ Ideas like universal paid family and medical leave weren't new to the progressive movement... But now, they felt relevant to a much wider swath of Americans contemplating their own needs.



Unrest and our democracy

Beyond the pandemic and economic crisis, 2020 was also politically turbulent. People took action in ways that expanded our democratic practice and imagination:

- Responding to a spate of police killings of Black people, millions of people mobilized in [over 4,700 demonstrations across the country](#) in support of racial justice and against police brutality.
- Amid a public health crisis, Americans exercised their right to vote at the [highest levels since 1900](#), with about two-thirds of the voter-eligible population casting a vote that fall.

And people took action in ways that challenged it:

- Across the country, armed members of the right protested stay-at-home orders, flooding state capitols and claiming the government was impinging on their liberties.
- And in what will remain a dark day in our nation's history, Trump supporters who refused to accept election results stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

Anti-lockdown protests

By spring 2020, conservative advocates began protesting efforts to protect public health and safety like [mandatory masking and stay-at-home orders](#). Appropriating chants of [“My body, my choice”](#) and as public awareness rose about the increased risk to essential workers and Black and Latino people, [mostly white protestors](#) took to the streets to call for restoration of individual liberties over shared responsibility. Across the country an estimated [35,000 to 47,000](#) activists and acolytes of the far-right — flanked by organized armed militias — occupied state capitols and public

spaces, calling for a full reopening of the economy and an end to measures like masking, capturing outsized media attention. With Trump's support, in many places these protestors were [armed and grew violent](#).

Racial reckoning

In late May, the widely circulated video of the police murders of George Floyd and of other African Americans (e.g., Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, and Ahmaud Arbery) captured the attention of a country stuck at home — including many white Americans [unable to distract themselves with their ordinary pursuits](#), who paid attention, often for the first time, to systemic racism. With chants of [“I Can't Breathe,” “No Justice, No Peace,”](#) and eventually [“Say Her Name,”](#) as many as 26 million diverse Americans took to the streets protesting in more than 4,700 demonstrations across all 50 states. Within weeks, Black Lives Matter protests were among the largest social movement upsurges in history. The protestors' [demands were vast and relatively decentralized](#) — ranging from an end to police brutality and decreased funding for law enforcement to removing Confederate statues, from federal to local actions — all aimed at ending systemic racism.

The demonstrations were largely organized over [social media](#), filled with [crowdsourced water and snacks](#), largely [masked](#) and COVID-cautious. For a sizable number of attendees, these demonstrations were the [first protests](#) they participated in. But armed law enforcement met these [largely nonviolent](#) protests with more force than they had met the [armed](#) — and sometimes violent — [anti-lockdown protests](#). Racial justice protestors often faced [riot police, state police, or the National Guard](#); prolific arrests; and control tactics like tear gas.

Questions to Consider

What was **your relationship** to these protests? What feelings did the protests inspire?

How could we **capture the energy and participation in moments like** this to advance a progressive worldview and/or policy wins?

2020 election

Leading up to the 2020 election, there were two prevailing issues on people's minds — outside of the candidates themselves, that is. First, was how to be prepared for threats to the election and its outcomes; and second, was how to ensure people were able to vote despite threats to public health.

Prior to Election Day, [three-quarters](#) of the American public expressed concern over political violence around Election Day. A concerted, behind-the-scenes effort among labor, organizing groups, and voting and civil rights organizations began in fall 2019 to fight against efforts to undermine the 2020 election. Over the course of the year, the groups worked to update infrastructure to meet new kinds of threats, fight disinformation, and produce reliable information around voting security. Ultimately partnering with business, bipartisan and nonpartisan groups, and former elected officials to broaden their appeal and mission, the coalition was ready to stand against sabotage attempts and violence.

And through Election Day, [159 million Americans voted](#). This high voter participation rate can be attributed to many factors but was mostly feasible because states widely expanded access to [mail-in and early voting options](#) to protect public health. In 2016, 40% of voters cast their ballot by mail or early in person (21% and 19%, respectively). In 2020, [nearly 70% of voters](#) did so (40% by mail and 26% early in person), and the USPS delivered ballots to [135 million voters](#).

Biden voters were much [more likely to vote by mail](#) than Trump voters, and the Trump administration attempted to stymie mail-in voting efforts by cutting funding to the USPS. In August, Postmaster General Louis DeJoy walked back the efforts to [defund the USPS](#) that would have increased mail processing times and jeopardized millions of mail-in ballots.

Research suggests that high voter turnout in favor of Biden was influenced by [largely nonviolent Black Lives Matter protests and the desire to address racial inequities](#) over the coronavirus response and ensuing economic crisis.

Insurrection

Less than one week into 2021, another major event in U.S. democracy took place. On Jan. 6, some 2,000 right-wing extremists stormed the U.S. Capitol to prevent Congress from certifying Biden's electoral victory, with some chanting "[Hang Mike Pence](#)," after the vice president refused to overturn the election results. The insurrection was unprecedented; the Capitol had never before been breached. Trump, who was hosting a "Save America" rally, instigated the attack by telling his supporters the election was stolen and [encouraged rally attendees to go to the Capitol](#). He also resisted urges from Republicans and Democrats to call for insurrectionists to stand down or to send in the National Guard. The insurrection attempt quickly became violent, ultimately leading to six deaths.

Questions to Consider

What did it feel like for you in **fall 2020** and on **Jan. 6**?

How did this season **reprioritize your work**? Did it distract you from your work or take away from goals you should have kept working toward?

How did our 2020 experience change us?

People are simply more likely to have false memories of events that align with their feelings, priorities, and worldview.



The United States looks very different in 2024 than it did in 2019. Among many quality-of-life indicators, the pandemic [wiped out gains](#) achieved over the past 20 years. While today's mortality rates and educational scores might seem normal to someone in 2000, they could shock someone looking at them in 2019. In 2020, many public spaces became private. As we hunkered down to social distance in our own homes, gathering places like public parks, playgrounds, libraries, and schools were off-limits.

We are still processing the trauma of 2020; we live in a state of general ennui. One outcome of 2020, and the pandemic specifically, is a [general malaise](#) among society. Around the fourth anniversary of COVID-19, The New York Times published a [compendium](#) summing up the many lasting effects from 2020 today, including changes that have lingered and some that have emerged after four years of unprecedented times. Our experiences from that year led to decreases in trust and confidence in our political, education, and criminal justice systems.

Americans are experiencing [higher levels of depression and anxiety](#) post-2020. We are [much less happy](#) than we have ever ranked globally. Americans have become more [cynical](#) and less [engaged](#) at work. In 2021, a record number of workers — more than 48 million — voluntarily left their jobs, and in 2022, that number grew to more than 50 million during what economists termed “the [Great Resignation](#).” Struggling with pandemic burnout, shifts in remote work, and revaluation of priorities, a phenomenon called “[quiet quitting](#)” emerged, with

pollsters finding that at least half of Americans were showing up at work and fulfilling but not going above and beyond what was expected of them in their jobs.

What's more, the [happiness gap](#) between conservatives and liberals is growing. When confronted with adversity around issues they care about, those on the left are more likely to respond with sadness, while those on the right are more likely to become angry. Perhaps this can be attributed to a polarized and partisan media environment, where Americans are less likely to agree on a set of established facts than they were in the past. And when it comes to memories, there is a demonstrated partisan bias in what memories stay with us. People are simply more likely to have false memories of events that align with their feelings, priorities, and worldview. Take [Jan. 6 as an example](#). Democrats more than Republicans believe Trump bears responsibility for the storming of the Capitol, believe in the importance of prosecuting insurrectionists, and believe that those convicted should face stiffer penalties. In another example, liberal voters are more likely to believe in the safety of a COVID-19 vaccine and the validity of the 2020 election results than conservative voters.

We are watching the failures of 2020 particularly ensnare American youth. Despite prevailing wisdom, closing schools [did not stop the spread of COVID-19](#), and the longer schools stayed closed, the more students fell behind. Across the board — in large and small districts, in rich and poor districts, in rural and urban districts, and in districts that remained closed longer and



those that reopened quickly — everyone experienced learning loss. We know that [Black and brown students](#) disproportionately bear the burden of learning loss, attending schools that were likely to stay closed longer. What's more, kids who weren't in school weren't just not learning — they weren't building relationships with their peers and now face an increase in [discipline issues and mental health struggles](#). Almost five years later, [more than one-quarter](#) of students were chronically absent from school. One reason we as a country are [much less happy](#) can be largely attributed to dissatisfaction among young people whose lives were disrupted on the brink of adulthood, leaving them to grapple with the feeling that much of life is outside of their control.

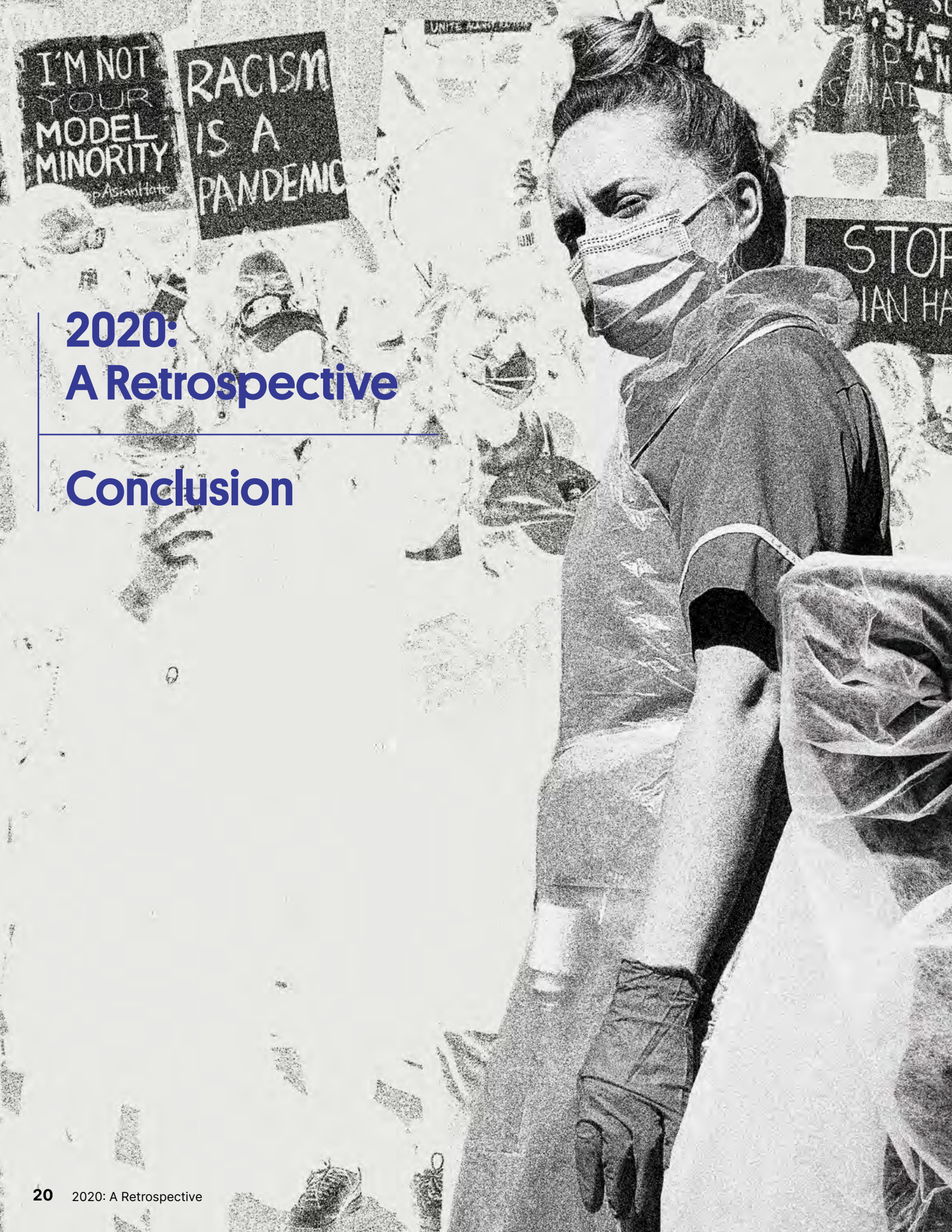
Questions to Consider

What **changes feel most prescient** in your work?
How have these shifts impacted your ability to achieve your goals?

Knowing what the world looks like five years later, **how would you change the policies or actions** in response to COVID-19?

Much has been made of the costs of 2020. What have we **gained from our experience in 2020**?





2020: A Retrospective

Conclusion



The coronavirus global health pandemic was an extraordinary event, and we inevitably will face another pandemic. What's more, factors like climate change and population growth actually mean pandemics are [likely to be more frequent and more severe](#) in the future than they have been in the past. In concert with more frequent climate change-related natural disasters and environments becoming uninhabitable from drought, sea-level change, and heat, we will again be challenged with a set of circumstances that change the world.

There is no easy way to capture everything that 2020 meant to us as a society and no way to describe what it meant to us as individuals. Nearly five years later, this paper is the first step in a Future Currents project where we seek to strengthen progressives' preparedness for cataclysmic events. In closing, consider the following questions:

What points discussed above resonate the most with you and your 2020 experience?

What are we missing in this reflection on 2020?

What were you least prepared for — as a person, as an organizer, as a mission-driven staff?

What did 2020 teach you about preparedness?

What would it take to be ready for another 2020, a moment in time with massive changes out of our control?

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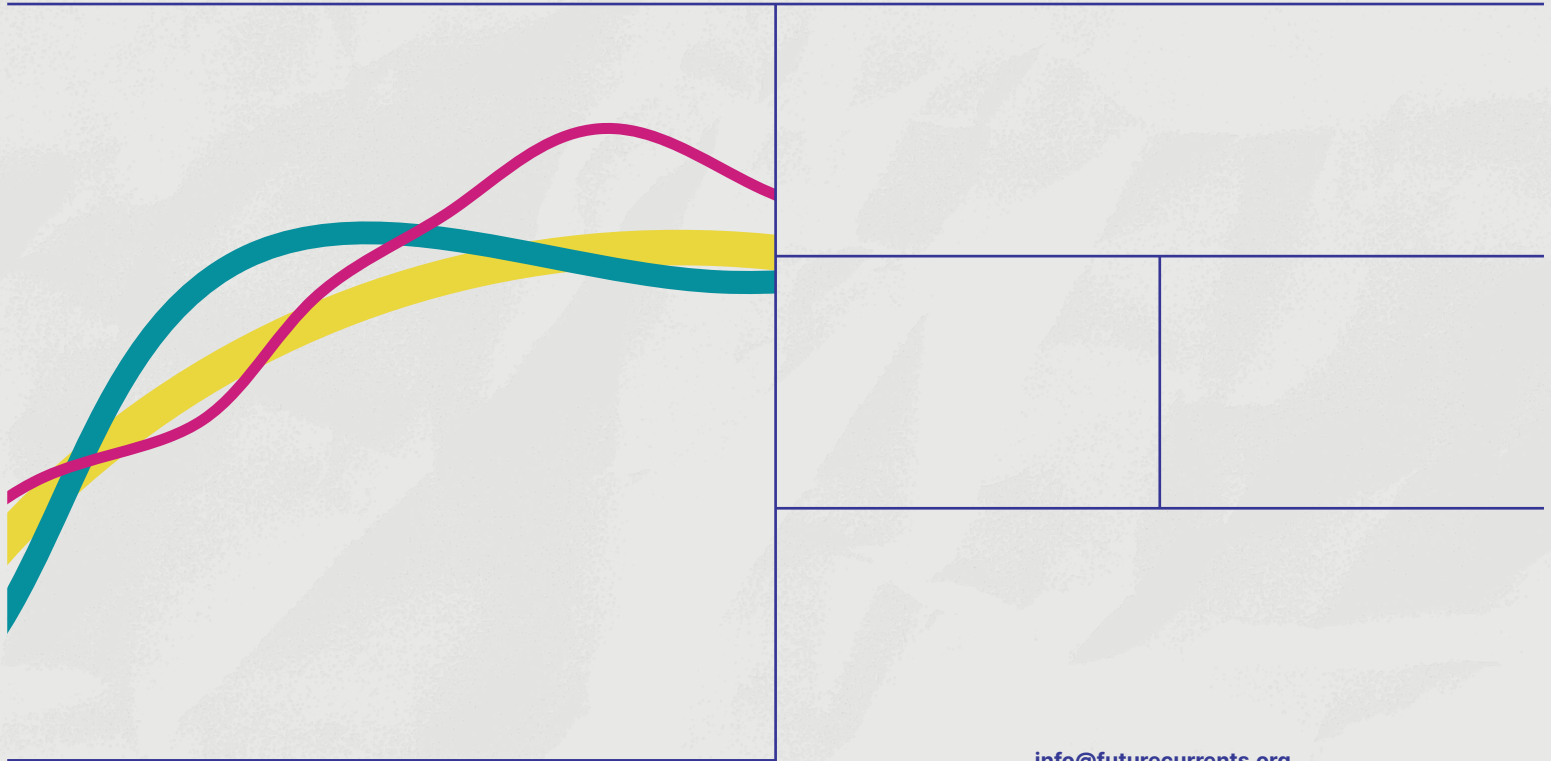
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About the Author

Nicole Prchal Svajlenka is a senior research strategist with Future Currents. Prior to joining Future Currents she was the Director of Research at the Center for American Progress, where she led the development of research strategies to advance the Rights and Justice Department's work, and remains a senior fellow. Nicole worked for many years on CAP's immigration team, where her portfolio included crafting quantitative analyses to advocate for immigration reform. Before CAP, she held positions at the Brookings Institution and the Pew Charitable Trusts.

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Future Currents creates the spaces for movement organizations to build resilient relationships, tackle pressing challenges, prepare for possible conditions, and map our way to the future we deserve. We focus on the knotty, chronic, systemic, and often scary obstacles in our daily lives, including authoritarian threats to our democracy, the shifting economic paradigm, and the effort within movements to retool and reshape to meet changing conditions. Our mix of creative methods are key to sparking new understandings, analyses, and strategies that open up the potential for long-term change. Future Currents is a project of the New Venture Fund, a 501(c)(3) public charity.



info@futurecurrents.org

Contact us about this report:
LookBack@futurecurrents.org

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