

To: Interested Parties

From: GBAO

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"Heroes" Creating A "New Normal" Feel "Comforted" When They Learn More About The American Rescue Plan

A year into the pandemic, our focus groups with women essential workers reveal deep pain, loss, and trauma not just in their own lives but throughout their communities and the country. Facing strains with their families and at work, many deliberately practice gratitude and wellness. Teachers and healthcare workers generally feel a new appreciation by the public, but service workers tell a much sharper story of confrontation.

When we move to discussing the American Rescue Plan, most respondents are still learning the details. A list of the plan's components strikes many as "beautiful" and helping their families and communities. Yet despite respondents' personal struggles, some see the American Rescue Plan as aimed at those worse off than themselves—those unemployed or with lower salaries. And while most are positive about the legislation, to some a long list can be unwieldy or sound expensive.

The Personal Toll Of A Year Under COVID

COVID has left women feeling pain and trauma, although many have developed new coping skills and hope for a slower and more tolerant "new normal." Yet they explain in vivid detail how work pressures mount.

- **In these focus groups, participants reveal the deep personal impact of COVID, one year on.** Many speak openly about anxiety, depression, and loss. Our groups get very personal, very quickly. Respondents share their experiences with anxiety, anti-anxiety medication, the death of a parent, depression over home schooling, and being in a "dark place" from job loss. Several others miss vacations and going out to dinner. One teacher

One Wisconsin woman recalls the shock she felt when the pandemic hit: *We were on cruise control. Get up, get ready, go to work. Get up, get ready, go to work. We were comfortable. But then once [COVID] hit, it was like a bomb went off. I mean, you literally felt like you were watching a movie. People are hoarding toilet paper and food. I think it was just a comfortableness that we had that we didn't realize we had."*



explains how heartbreaking it has been to go without hugging her students, causing her to “literally cry sometimes on Zoom.”

- **All respondents take COVID seriously in their personal and work lives.** These respondents



NC woman

*“I have a very large family. Their beliefs in COVID and mask wearing just wasn’t aligned. **With my anxiety and my panic attacks, we just basically couldn’t go visit.** There was a period that I didn’t see them and that was very hard because we were used to visiting them all the time.”*

explain the sacrifices they’ve made because of COVID, made worse by having family members “who think COVID is a hoax.” A few even describe the tension driving them to avoid their families altogether.

- **Nonetheless, many try to remain positive, practicing gratitude and trying new coping tools** like mindfulness, puzzles, board games, yoga, drinking more water, and therapy. Others have been deliberately trying to “stay positive” or “grateful” in the face of negativity and trauma. Some also see the upside in a slower paced, less crowded life. A few moms enjoy taking a break from the “go go go.” One Arizona woman says the pandemic “made me realize I might be a little bit more introverted than I thought, which is weird. Because I always thought of myself as an extrovert. But at this point, I’m finding that I don’t really want to leave my house.”
- **Despite being called “heroes,” work pressures have increased.** Healthcare workers, unsurprisingly, report being called a “hero” regularly. “We get a lot of food...donuts, bagels,” explains one public health worker who conducts COVID tests. Yet this gratitude can elicit complicated reactions, as in “I’m just doing my job.” Another asks, “what’s the point” of gratitude when “people don’t wear masks?” Other healthcare workers have seen nursing shortages, layoffs, and burnout.
- **Teachers tell vivid stories of their recent challenges.** They, too, have faced mounting pressures, learning new online procedures, constantly cleaning their classrooms, and helping kids struggling with COVID or job loss at home. Teachers also report feeling gratitude, especially from parents. As one explains, “Like finally, we’re valued for all the hard work that we do and the efforts and what we have to go through every single day. Because I think people thought we were just like high paid babysitters at one point.” However, others have seen “hurtful” hostility on social media, where people are wondering if “teachers want to sit on their butts all day and watch TV.”

- **Service workers can be “heroes,” too, but more face confrontation.** One woman who had worked at a taco shop recounts she was called a hero “in jest” although she explains the “emotional triggers” of food. Other women in service jobs share different experiences when asking customers to wear a mask.

“I’m talking about the taco shop and it was mostly in jest. But when we opened, we had regulars and people who weren’t regulars that were so happy that we were open and all of a sudden the taco shop that was their favorite, that they didn’t get to go to for a couple of months became just sentimental and special and valuable. So it was in jest, we are just talking about tacos. But just the emotional triggers that would happen when people would come in and it felt good and I’m happy to make people happy with tacos.” – WI woman



Service workers

“These people get in my car without a mask and I have a sign on the passenger back seat facing them that says, ‘No mask, no ride. Must cover your nose, must cover your mouth.’ We’re over a year into this and I’m arguing with grown people and they’re men, it’s the men usually. And yeah, get out.” – WI woman

“I ended up getting a job at Starbucks. And it’s a lot harder to deal with people now. A lot harder. I’ve had a lot of kids that had gotten a job at Starbucks who are 16, 17, go in the back and have a mental breakdown crying because of how people are treating them and talking to us. It’s hard. ... I’ve had a lot of people throw drinks at me because I’ve asked them to put on their mask or wear a mask. We offer masks, we give them out... A lot of people are not happy that they can’t come in. And it’s just a lot of negativity. I don’t feel appreciated working as a food service worker at all. And they’re the ones that are dealing with a lot and not getting paid enough.” – AZ woman

- **All told, most expect “a new normal” rather than “back to normal.”** When asked when they expect things to “go back to normal,” respondents across groups explain there is no “back to normal”—only “a new normal.” They predict a new world with three components:
 - **New practice of kindness toward oneself or others.** Respondents hope it will be easier to take time off work “without guilt or anxiety,” or work from home, or be kind to others who prefer the new slower pace or who approach life differently. As one explains: “I’m hoping that taking that little bit more kindness towards ourselves and towards others will eventually help to make the country just a better, kinder place.”
 - **New hygiene and social norms.** Respondents wonder if they’ll ever stop wearing a mask or carrying around hand sanitizer. One teacher almost hopes more people wear masks, since she so frequently gets sick from students who “sneeze all over me.” Others say they’re unlikely to go to a crowded bar ever again.
 - **National trauma we won’t easily forget or get over.** One woman compares the pandemic to 9/11, in that there was no “going back.” Another cites our country’s division and pain: “Just like she said she went to therapy, our whole country needs to go to therapy.”

Learning More About The American Rescue Plan

Respondents are well-versed in stimulus checks but are largely unacquainted with the American Rescue Plan. A list of 13 different components can seem simultaneously expensive and helpful to women’s extended families and communities.

- **Knowledge of the American Rescue Plan is thin.** Beyond stimulus checks, few know much about the American Rescue Plan at all—whether specifically by name, or more broadly about Biden’s relief priorities and accomplishments. One confused the previous



*[What did you learn tonight?] I learned there was an American Rescue Plan. **I didn't know there was one.** – Biden voter, WI*

stimulus packages, admitting, “I don’t keep track of all the names.” Others pause to try to recollect what they’ve seen.

When asked what she learned over the course of the group,

one Wisconsin woman admits, “I learned there was an American Rescue Plan. I didn’t know there was one.”

- **But when told the components of the ARP, many see their or their family’s needs met.** As they read a list of 13 components of the proposal, respondents appreciate measures they say will help their families, like PPP loans for a family restaurant, or unemployment for adult children. One Trump voter explains how her father will benefit from the union pension supports, “My dad retired. He’s in his late 60s, and he was a truck driver for pretty much his whole life. So knowing... that his pension is safe. I think that gave him a sense of relief. He brought it up the other day and just said, ‘I’m okay. We’re going to be okay.’”
- **Some also see the ARP as addressing the urgent local needs of children.** Women in our groups gravitate toward components of the ARP that help children, driven by their perception of the urgent need in their own communities. They see hungry, struggling children up close, and want more relief through food assistance or tax breaks.



Trump voter, AZ

*Our school is a title one school and I've seen so many families be affected obviously by the pandemic. And if they can be helped, **there are kids that stay home virtually because they have to take care of their younger siblings** because mom or dad or both found some job. So I see where it would be beneficial. If all this could be true, if they really do all that, I can see where it would help because I've seen so many. We're providing care packages from our school for so many kids. So that's why I'm leaning more towards it.*

- **Some are not sure they will personally benefit.** Even those who see help for family members aren't always sure the stimulus will help them directly. Quite a few say they don't need the stimulus check, or that they're not eligible for tax breaks.



Biden voter, WI

*I think everything on there is beautiful, I really do. However, when it comes to middle-class people, we're nowhere in there essentially, though. **We don't get any benefits or anything. I make too much to get a stimulus,** or again, I only get a fraction of it. Because I'm not unemployed, and because I don't have any student loans forgiven, the student loan thing doesn't affect me.*

- **There are also worries about fair distribution of relief.** People worry about stimulus checks going to the undeserving. And importantly, many recall earlier PPP checks going to large companies instead of local smaller businesses. When asked if the ARP gives bailouts to large businesses, one Arizona woman explains, "I don't know if this one does but the first one did. I'm getting them mixed up in my head."
- **Quite a few move with more information.** Respondents beginning with nearly no knowledge about the ARP move once they hear more information. Several say they feel "comforted," or "encouraged" by what they've learned. Another puts it bluntly, "I think America needs a rescue plan. I don't know if it's the right plan, but it's better than no plan."
- **However, a long list of proposals can be unwieldy or seem expensive.** Some participants struggle with the long list, missing or misunderstanding items in the list, or wondering if the list needs "prioritizing." Others also wonder if the plan seems too expensive, and openly grapple with the competing concerns of the debt and providing needed relief.

Methodology

On March 23, 2021, GBAO conducted three focus groups online with women working in varying categories of essential work across the country. Women could have worked in these industries over the past year, and several worked multiple jobs across industries. Women varied across demographics—party identification, age, education, and race/ethnicity. Qualitative results are not statistically projectable onto the population at large. Some quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.