



Statement Before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on Delivering Government Efficiency
on "Doing More with Less: Deleting Duplicative Programs"

Assessing Duplicative Federal Benefit Programs

MATT WEIDINGER

Senior Fellow and Rowe Scholar

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Chairman Burchett, Ranking Member Stansbury, and Members of the Subcommittee on Delivering on Government Efficiency, thank you for the invitation to testify at today’s hearing on “Doing More with Less: Deleting Duplicative Programs.” My name is Matt Weidinger and I am a Rowe scholar in the Center for Opportunity and Social Mobility at the American Enterprise Institute. Previously I served for 27 years on Capitol Hill, including for over two decades on the staff of the House Committee on Ways and Means. During most of that time I served as the staff director of the now Subcommittee on Work and Welfare, which has jurisdiction over a number of means-tested and related benefit programs.

My testimony will review current means-tested federal benefit programs designed to assist low-income individuals and families. The large number of those programs is amplified by similar state and local programs as well as by closely associated temporary federal programs created during recessions. During the recent pandemic, the number, scope, and spending on such temporary programs expanded dramatically, amplifying duplication in means-tested programs. I will also review how duplication can contribute to inefficiency in providing benefits, harming rightful claimants and opening the door to significant abuse.

How Many Federal Means-Tested Programs Are There?

As I noted in a recent report, there is currently an enormous number of means-tested benefit programs supported with federal funds.¹ According to a 2015 report by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, as of 2013 there were 90 means-tested benefit programs supported in whole or part by federal funds.² In 2015, based on that CRS data, the House Ways and Means Committee developed the chart displayed below as Figure 1, visualizing those programs by type of benefit, rough funding level, administering agency, and other criteria.³

Table 2 in the appendix lists the 90 programs reflected in Figure 1. Other reviews count an even greater number of means-tested federal programs. CRS updated its 2015 analysis in late 2021, adding a handful of means-tested pandemic food programs to its list and raising its tally of programs to 95.⁴ That list includes 12 health, five cash, 15 food, 17 housing, 28 education and training, 16 social services, and two energy programs. In a new book, Clarence Carter, a former senior HHS official and currently Tennessee’s Commissioner of Human Services, lists “114 federally authorized means-tested (resource-limited) programs,” which are “under the congressional jurisdiction of 31 combined Senate and House committees” and are “administered by 14 different federal agencies.”⁵

¹ Matt Weidinger, “The Policy Lessons from Minnesota’s Massive Welfare Fraud,” *COSM Commentary*, December 23, 2025, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/the-policy-lessons-from-minnesotas-massive-welfare-fraud/>.

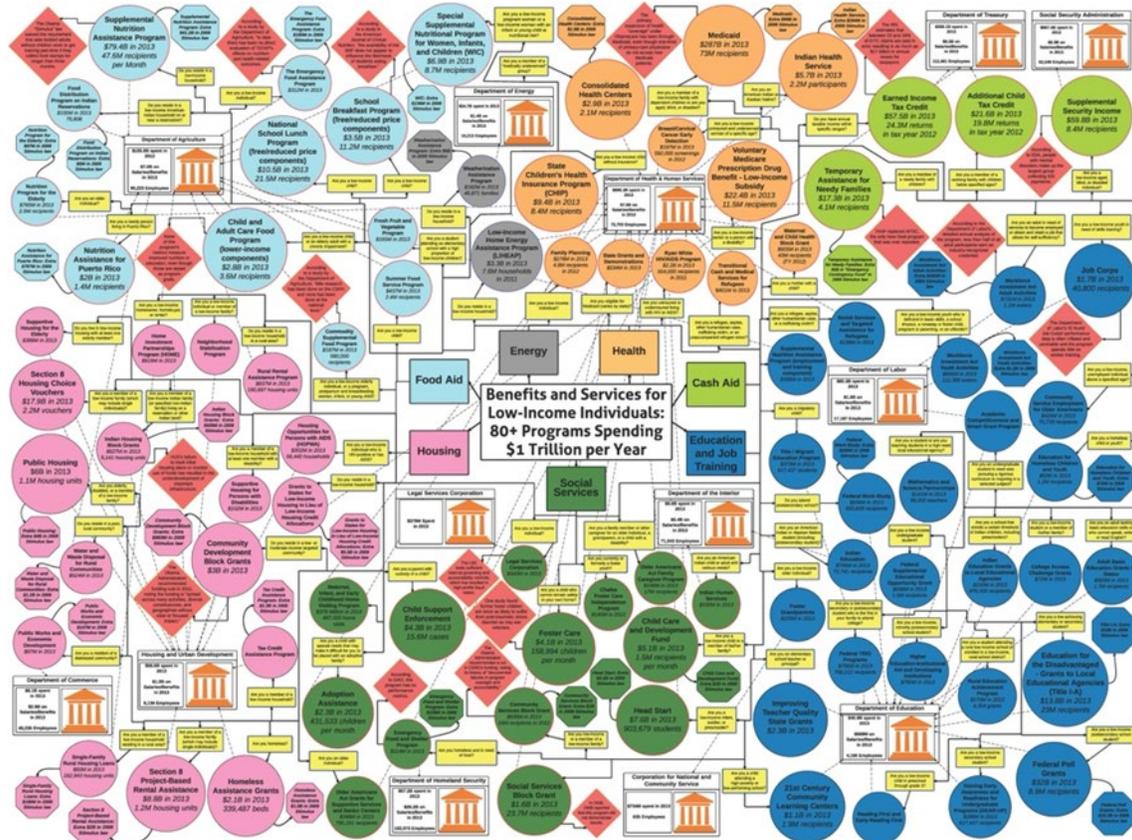
² Karen Spar, *Federal Benefits and Services for People with Low Income: Programs and Spending, FY2008–FY2013*, January 15, 2015, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R43863/R43863.6.pdf.

³ House Committee on Ways and Means, “Human Resources Subcommittee Discusses Need to Better Coordinate Dozens of Anti-Poverty Programs,” November 3, 2015, <https://waysandmeans.house.gov/2015/11/03/human-resources-subcommittee-discusses-need-to-better-coordinate-dozens-of-anti-poverty-programs/>.

⁴ Patrick A. Landers et al., *Federal Benefits and Services for People with Low Income: FY2008–FY2020*, Congressional Research Service, December 8, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46986>.

⁵ Clarence H. Carter, *Our Net Has Holes in It* (Authors on Mission, 2025).

Figure 1. Displaying 90 Federal Means-Tested Benefit Programs in 2013



Source: Karen Spar, Federal Benefits and Services for People with Low Income: Programs and Spending, FY2008–FY2013, January 15, 2015, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R43863/R43863.6.pdf.
 Note: The data used reflect programs in operation in FY 2013.

State and Local Programs Add to the List

State and local governments often operate their own means-tested programs supported by local funds. An accounting of such state and local programs is beyond the scope of this testimony. But it is instructive to consider a September 2023 report authored by analysts at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.⁶ They reviewed welfare benefit cliffs that result when individuals receive support from multiple state and federal programs, each often featuring its own benefit phaseouts as earnings rise. The authors’ shocking conclusion was that

due to benefits cliffs and the co-occurring phaseouts of multiple transfer programs, the hypothetical family is as financially well-off at \$11,000 as it is at \$65,000 of earned income. In other words, due to the structure of the combined

⁶ Elias Ilin and Alvaro Sanchez, *Mitigating Benefits Cliffs for Low-Income Families: District of Columbia Career Mobility Action Plan as a Case Study*, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, September 2023, <https://www.atlantafed.org/-/media/documents/community-development/publications/discussion-papers/2023/01-a-case-study-mitigating-benefits-cliffs-in-the-district-of-columbia.pdf>.

federal and local DC social safety net, an increase in employment income by \$54,000 does not result in any gains in net financial resources for this family.

The authors noted that a single parent in Washington, DC was eligible for more than two dozen distinct benefits, including DC-funded benefits such as SSI supplements, DC EITC and CDCTC payments, eight separate local housing benefits, and childcare subsidies and pre-K benefits. Overall, the number of locally funded benefits rivaled those supported with federal funds. That suggests that the subcommittee's assessment of duplication involving means-tested benefit programs may start with federally funded programs but clearly cannot end there.

Temporary Federal Anti-Recession Programs Increase the Count

The figures cited above generally reflect permanent means-tested programs. But as was displayed dramatically during the pandemic, during recessions a variety of temporary federal programs also provide support to low-income households, among others.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many new temporary programs, along with significant benefit expansions under existing programs, offered record assistance for tens of millions of needy and non-needy families and individuals alike. Those expansions included three rounds of federal stimulus checks, greater food stamp benefits, unprecedented child tax credit expansions, and extended, expanded, and far more widely available unemployment checks, among other assistance.⁷

Given their scope, expense, and focus on individuals who have lost income from work, it is worth reviewing temporary unemployment benefit expansions alongside means-tested programs. The March 2020 CARES Act alone authorized dozens of temporary federal programs and benefits, including major federal unemployment benefit programs.⁸ While not means-tested, the programs listed in Table 1 assisted tens of millions of unemployed individuals and families and served many of the same households that claim means-tested benefits:

The largest of these programs supplemented (PUC), expanded (PUA), or extended (PEUC) benefits payable under state UI programs since the 1930s, overwhelmingly supported with federal general revenue, not payroll taxes. Another federal benefit expansion, which made the normally 50-percent state-funded Extended Benefits (EB) program 100 percent federally funded for only the second time in its 50 years of operation, explicitly shifted state financial obligations onto federal taxpayers.⁹

⁷ For a brief review of pandemic benefits, see Matt Weidinger, "As Democrats Offer Massive New Benefits, a Refresher on Pandemic Check Writing," *AEIdeas*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/opportunity-social-mobility/as-democrats-offer-massive-new-benefits-a-refresher-on-pandemic-check-writing/>. For a detailed summary of pandemic unemployment benefits, see Matt Weidinger, "Unprecedented: A Brief Review of the Extraordinary Unemployment Benefit Response to the Coronavirus Crisis," American Enterprise Institute, April 9, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/unprecedented-a-brief-review-of-the-extraordinary-unemployment-benefit-response-to-the-coronavirus-crisis/>.

⁸ Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Pub. L. No. 116-136.

⁹ For a review of the EB program, see Matt Weidinger, "Why Even Permanent Benefit Expansions Are Never Enough," *AEIdeas*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/opportunity-social-mobility/why-even-permanent-benefit-expansions-are-never-enough/>.

Table 1. Major CARES Act Unemployment Benefit Programs and Federal Funding

Program	Federal Funding
Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (PUC): \$600-per-week (and later \$300-per-week) federal unemployment benefit supplements.	\$444 billion
Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA): Benefits for gig workers and the self-employed not normally covered by state unemployment insurance (UI).	\$132 billion
Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC): Federal extended unemployment checks to individuals exhausting state UI benefits.	\$85 billion
Temporary federal funding of the first week of state UI.	\$8 billion
Emergency federal relief for governmental entities, nonprofit organizations.	\$6 billion

Source: US Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Families First Coronavirus Response Act and Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act Funding to States Through May 31, 2024, https://oui.doleta.gov/unemploy/docs/cares_act_funding_state.html.

Counting just these temporary federal programs, during their operation they more than doubled the number of federal cash assistance programs otherwise designed to assist low-income and out-of-work individuals. During the pandemic, the same household could have received checks from multiple means-tested and unemployment programs at the same time. The CARES Act also expanded unemployment benefits for individuals covered by railroad UI and short-time compensation programs. Other legislation extended benefits into 2021, added a new benefit for individuals with modest earnings from multiple sources, and provided additional benefit supplements. Some lawmakers have introduced legislation to make permanent some of those now-expired pandemic programs.¹⁰

How Much Do Means-Tested and Related Benefit Programs Cost?

The current 90-plus means-tested programs are very expensive. In FY 2025, federal means-tested benefits totaled an estimated \$1.2 trillion, with state spending adding well over \$300 billion more.¹¹

Nominal spending on federal means-tested benefits grew 65 percent between 2015 and 2024, according to the Congressional Budget Office.¹² The number of Medicaid and CHIP recipients rose from 70.4 million in January 2015 to a peak of 94.6 million in April 2023 before settling

¹⁰ Matt Weidinger, “Automatic Stimulus”: How It Would Have Increased the Record Unemployment Benefits, American Enterprise Institute, December 9, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/automatic-stimulus-how-it-would-have-increased-the-record-unemployment-benefits-paid-during-the-great-recession-and-pandemic/>.

¹¹ Phillip L. Swagel, *Re: Federal Mandatory Spending for Means-Tested Programs and Tax Credits*, June 18, 2025, Congressional Budget Office, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2025-06/61472-Means-Tested-Programs.pdf>; and Brian Sigriz et al., *2024 State Expenditure Report: Fiscal Years 2022–2024*, National Association of State Budget Officers, 2024, https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/NASBO/9d2d2db1-c943-4f1b-b750-0fca152d64c2/UploadedImages/SER%20Archive/2024_SER/2024_State_Expenditure_Report_S.pdf.

¹² Swagel, *Re: Federal Mandatory Spending for Means-Tested Programs and Tax Credits*.

back to 77.3 million in August 2025.¹³ Annual federal food stamp spending totaled almost \$100 billion in FY 2024, roughly double levels before the Great Recession, in real terms.¹⁴

That spending is supplemented by various temporary federal benefit programs created during recessions. During the pandemic, state and federal unemployment benefits paid in 2020 and 2021 provided approximately \$900 billion in benefit checks, including over \$700 billion in temporary federal benefits alone.¹⁵ For comparison, in a typical non-recessionary year, federal unemployment benefits are not payable while state UI spending averages around \$40 billion.

On an individual basis, temporary federal benefits paid during the pandemic were equally unprecedented. A typical household of four persons collected \$11,400 in stimulus checks.¹⁶ A single unemployed individual receiving just average state benefits could have collected \$46,000 in state and federal unemployment checks if unemployed from March 2020 through September 2021.¹⁷ The federal child tax credit was temporarily expanded to as much as \$3,600 per child in 2021, and made payable for the first time to non-working parents, akin to welfare checks. Tens of billions of dollars more was spent on expanded federal food stamps, rental subsidies, childcare benefits, and much more. A family with two children and two unemployed adults could easily have collected over \$100,000 in total federal and state aid. Some proposed creating far greater pandemic benefits. For example, a pandemic universal basic income (UBI) proposal from then-Senator Kamala Harris would have provided a non-working family of four \$336,000 in federal checks, at a total federal cost of \$21 trillion, conservatively estimated.¹⁸

How Many Programs Are Duplicative?

The answer to how many programs are duplicative depends on how one defines duplication.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) annually reports on federal programs and agencies that “have potentially duplicative goals or activities.”¹⁹ In its most recent report, GAO

¹³ KFF, Total Monthly Medicaid & CHIP Enrollment and Pre-ACA Enrollment, March 2014–October 2025, <https://www.kff.org/affordable-care-act/state-indicator/total-monthly-medicare-and-chip-enrollment/?activeTab=graph¤tTimeframe=0&startTimeframe=139&selectedDistributions=total-monthly-medicareandchip-enrollment&selectedRows=%7B%22wrapups%22:%7B%22united-states%22:%7B%7D%7D%7D&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>.

¹⁴ US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—Key Statistics and Research,” July 24, 2025, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/key-statistics-and-research>.

¹⁵ Matt Weidinger, “Lessons from the Unprecedented Fraud and Abuse of the Unemployment Benefits System During the Pandemic,” testimony before the House Committee on Education and Labor, September 21, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/testimony/lessons-from-the-unprecedented-fraud-and-abuse-of-the-unemployment-benefits-system-during-the-pandemic/>.

¹⁶ Matt Weidinger, “As Democrats Offer Massive New Benefits, a Refresher on Pandemic Check Writing,” *AEIdeas*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/opportunity-social-mobility/as-democrats-offer-massive-new-benefits-a-refresher-on-pandemic-check-writing/>.

¹⁷ Weidinger, “As Democrats Offer Massive New Benefits, a Refresher on Pandemic Check Writing.”

¹⁸ Matt Weidinger, “Kamala Harris, the \$21 Trillion Woman,” *RealClearPolicy*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/kamala-harris-the-21-trillion-woman/>.

¹⁹ US Government Accountability Office, *Opportunities to Reduce Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication and Achieve an Additional One Hundred Billion Dollars or More in Future Financial Benefits*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-25-107604.pdf>.

defines duplication as occurring “when two or more agencies or programs are engaged in the same activities or provide the same services to the same beneficiaries.” Given the broad scope of benefits and intended recipients, few of the 90-plus means-tested programs identified by CRS provide *precisely* the same benefits to the same beneficiaries. But that very strict standard is hard to square with real-world questions about whether 27 education and training programs or 17 housing programs are all really necessary, or some might be duplicative and better combined to simplify program operation, oversight, and access by intended recipients.

Some forms of duplication rise to GAO’s strict standard, such as when both states and the federal government fund their own child tax credit, earned income tax credit, childcare or related programs. One also could reasonably question whether it is duplication when the federal government provides bigger unemployment benefits, for longer periods, to individuals who already collect state UI checks. States might pursue those expansions on their own but naturally don’t if they know the federal government will shoulder the costs. That is exactly what occurs when the federal government has nationalized the EB program, taking on states’ normal 50 percent share of benefit costs. During the pandemic, when EB reverted back to requiring a 50 percent state share, no state continued paying program benefits.²⁰

Other types of duplication may be harder to see. For example, when Congress in 2021 temporarily expanded the child tax credit to provide payments for the first time to nonworking parents, it was widely understood as effectively reviving the former entitlement to cash welfare checks ended in the 1996 welfare reform law.²¹ A Washington Post oped was aptly headlined “Goodbye Clinton Welfare Reform. Hello Child Tax Credit.”²² While that policy change (while it lasted) didn’t technically create a new program, it nonetheless duplicated benefits paid under the TANF cash welfare program, among others. Meanwhile, defenders incorrectly hailed the changes as a “tax cut,” which many would not think of as a “program” at all.²³

The Cost of Duplication Extends Far Beyond Spending on Benefits

Independent of how many programs are regarded as duplicative, the cost of operating 90-plus means-tested and related programs extends well beyond just the amount spent on benefits.

Operating dozens of programs that provide similar assistance creates unnecessary administrative costs and complexity for state agencies that administer most means-tested programs. No one should be surprised that such a vast system is a nightmare to efficiently administer and for needy individuals to navigate. Multiple overlapping programs can also contribute to excessive

²⁰ Matt Weidinger, “The Biden Administration Suggested Blue States Extend Unemployment Benefits, but They All Rejected the Offer,” *AEIdeas*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/opportunity-social-mobility/the-biden-administration-suggested-blue-states-extend-unemployment-benefits-but-they-all-rejected-the-offer/>.

²¹ Matt Weidinger, “‘Child Allowances’ Revive Welfare as We Knew It,” *AEIdeas*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/opportunity-social-mobility/child-allowances-revive-welfare-as-we-knew-it/>.

²² Charles Lane, “Goodbye Clinton, Welfare Reform. Hello Child Tax Credit.,” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/goodbye-clinton-welfare-reform-hello-child-tax-credit/2021/03/09/22628de2-80ed-11eb-81db-b02f0398f49a_story.html.

²³ Matt Weidinger, “Biden’s ‘Tax Cut’ Rhetoric Is Really Just Code for Benefit Increases,” *The Hill*, April 4, 2024, <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/4572496-bidens-tax-cut-rhetoric-is-really-just-code-for-benefit-increases/>.

dependence on benefits, such as when individuals who collect multiple benefits face large benefit cliffs as earnings rise, creating significant disincentives to work and marry.²⁴ A 2024 survey by the Sutherland Institute found that, of Utah adult benefit recipients, 43 percent admitted to having deliberately limited their household income to avoid losing benefits, including by turning down a raise or promotion or choosing not to get married.²⁵

The challenges of administering, much less effectively coordinating, so many programs are daunting, each with its own rules, staff, benefit and administrative budgets, oversight and reporting requirements, and far more. In the end, the most important challenges are those faced by individuals forced to navigate the complicated maze of means-tested programs, augmented by often unfamiliar temporary federal programs in recessions. Urban Institute experts recently encouraged states to improve benefit coordination across multiple programs and agencies.²⁶ That approach makes sense, especially while states are already making changes in major programs like SNAP and Medicaid in keeping with federal legislation designed to improve program integrity and efficiency.

Consolidating federal funding streams could assist such efforts. One important dynamic to consider is that, while CRS counts over 90 federal means-tested benefit programs, spending is highly concentrated on the very largest programs. Of all federal programs designed to provide assistance to low-income individuals, 81 percent of federal spending in FY 2020 flowed to just the 10 largest programs (led by Medicaid, SNAP, SSI, and the refundable portion of the EITC).²⁷ Put another way, the 80-plus smallest federal means-tested programs constitute under 20 percent of total spending. Eighteen programs had annual federal obligations under \$200 million, a tiny fraction of the largest program (Medicaid, which spent \$519 billion in federal funds on benefits and services that year).

Duplication Creates Complexity that Contributes to Fraud and Abuse

As noted above, today's large number of programs creates excessive complexity for both agencies and individuals in need. That complexity also invites fraud and abuse, especially during times of increased need and surging demand for assistance.

In recent years, massive amounts of taxpayer resources have been lost to fraud. Across all federal programs, GAO estimates that federal taxpayers lose “between \$233 billion and \$521 billion annually to fraud” based on data from 2018 to 2022.²⁸ Three of the four programs with the

²⁴ For a comprehensive review of benefit cliffs and their implications, see Angela Rachidi et al., *Stranded by the Safety Net: How to Fix the Benefit Cliff Problem*, American Enterprise Institute, December 2, 2025, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/stranded-by-the-safety-net-how-to-fix-the-benefit-cliff-problem/>.

²⁵ Nic Dunn, *Strengthening the American Dream: Addressing Benefits Cliffs to Empower Safety Net Participants to Pursue Work and Opportunity*, Sutherland Institute, November 2024, <https://sutherlandinstitute.org/reports/strengthening-the-american-dream/>.

²⁶ Amelia Coffey, “How Can State and Local Human Services Agencies Improve Program Coordination in Today’s Federal Policy Landscape?” Urban Institute, January 13, 2026, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-can-state-and-local-human-services-agencies-improve-program-coordination-todays>.

²⁷ Landers et al., *Federal Spending on Benefits and Services for People with Low Income*.

²⁸ US Government Accountability Office, *Fraud Risk Management: 2018–2022 Data Show Federal Government Loses an Estimated \$233 Billion to \$521 Billion Annually to Fraud, Based on Various Risk Environments*, April 16, 2024, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-105833>.

biggest losses to fraud in FY 2024 were means-tested: Medicaid lost \$31 billion, the Earned Income Tax Credit squandered \$16 billion, and food stamps lost \$10 billion. Only Medicare, at \$54 billion, lost more.

That list omits unemployment benefits only because massive and highly vulnerable pandemic unemployment benefit programs had expired. But as I noted in a January 2026 report, during the pandemic,

Fraud resulted in implausibly high benefit claims. For example, in California the massive volume of PUA claims suggested every self-employed individual in the state applied for PUA benefits. Overall, official estimates of improper payments stretched to \$200 billion, while unofficial estimates reached \$400 billion, most involving federal benefits. Many experts believe that most improper payments—and certainly most fraudulent benefit payments—flowed to overseas criminal syndicates, while significant losses also benefited domestic gangs, solo criminals, and agency insiders.²⁹

The vulnerability of temporary federal programs stemmed in part from their hurried creation, which featured few controls and even less common sense. Boosted by federal supplements, most unemployment claimants initially collected benefits that exceeded prior paychecks, and millions were paid without agencies first confirming identities or prior work history.³⁰ After its expiration, the Department of Labor admitted the widely abused PUA program had a staggering 36 percent improper payment rate.³¹

The same state agencies experiencing a record surge in claims for state UI benefits were tasked with simultaneously standing up unprecedented federal programs that soon eclipsed even record state UI claims.³² Criminals exploited that record demand, flooding an overwhelmed system with fraudulent claims.³³ Tens of billions of dollars were lost to fraud even as deserving individuals were blocked from accessing benefits for weeks and sometimes months.

²⁹ Matt Weidinger, *Funding the Administration of Unemployment Benefits: Overview and Reforms to Improve Efficiency and Program Integrity*, American Enterprise Institute, January 21, 2026, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/funding-the-administration-of-unemployment-benefits-overview-and-reforms-to-improve-efficiency-and-program-integrity/>.

³⁰ Matt Weidinger and Amy Simon, *Pandemic Unemployment Fraud in Context: Causes, Costs, and Solutions*, American Enterprise Institute, February 13, 2024, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/pandemic-unemployment-fraud-in-context-causes-costs-and-solutions/>.

³¹ Matt Weidinger, “Labor Department Report Finds Pandemic Unemployment Program Had a Staggering 36 Percent Improper Payment Rate,” *AEIdeas*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/opportunity-social-mobility/labor-department-report-finds-pandemic-unemployment-program-had-a-staggering-36-percent-improper-payment-rate/>.

³² At the start of the pandemic, seven states had more initial UI claims than the precrisis level (211,000) nationwide: California (1,058,325), Florida (228,484), Michigan (304,335), New York (366,595), Ohio (274,288), Pennsylvania (404,677), and Texas (276,185). For more information, see Matt Weidinger, “Unemployment Claims Continue to Surge,” *AEIdeas*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/opportunity-social-mobility/unemployment-claims-continue-to-surge/>.

³³ Matt Weidinger, “Elevated Claims and Payments Make Unemployment Insurance a Bigger Target for Scammers,” *AEIdeas*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/opportunity-social-mobility/elevated-claims-and-payments-make-unemployment-insurance-a-bigger-target-for-scammers/>.

Efforts to stem massive fraud sometimes resulted in even longer waits for deserving claimants. For example, California shut down its unemployment claims processing system for two weeks in September 2020 in part to add new anti-fraud features designed to prevent abuse especially of temporary federal benefits.³⁴

Fundamental Reforms Are Needed to Reduce Duplication and Prevent Abuse

What can policymakers do to simplify this overly complicated system, which is unnecessarily difficult for individuals in need to navigate and contributes to fraud and abuse?

A first change should be to reduce the number of programs and consolidate federal funding into more easily administrable portions. Republican lawmakers in the early 1990s contemplated consolidating funding for what was then an even greater number of federal means-tested programs into eight coordinated block grants addressing low-income families' need for cash, health, food, housing, and other assistance.³⁵ Significant consolidation of employment and training programs has since occurred, even as over two dozen means-tested education and training programs remain today. The 1996 welfare reform law replaced a handful of cash welfare programs, most notably the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant. Lawmakers could revisit that reform agenda, perhaps focusing first on many small means-tested programs.

While not directly related to duplication, a reform agenda should also address the financial incentives built into the architecture of many federal programs that contribute to misspending. Recent welfare fraud cases in Minnesota share a common thread: Federal funds dominated spending under the programs in question, which were distributed by state and local agencies that too often lack incentives to spend wisely. The *Feeding our Future* program was fully federally funded, while federal taxpayers cover 63 percent of all Medicaid spending in Minnesota.³⁶ The federal share of Medicaid costs is greater in some other states, leaving federal taxpayers there even more exposed to any fraud losses.

In contrast, the TANF program today provides states fixed federal block grant funding instead of former open-ended entitlement funds that rose whenever welfare caseloads grew, which invited greater dependence on benefits and fraud. The switch to block grant funding fundamentally altered the program's financial incentives, driving states to discourage unnecessary benefit takeup and fraud and focus on assisting work-capable recipients with finding, entering, and retaining employment. Work requirements and time limits contributed, but the federal block grant played an unheralded role in reducing dependence and abuse. TANF needs further reform,

³⁴ David Manoucheri, "EDD Backlog and Fraud Timeline: How We Got Here," KCRA 3, June 23, 2021, <https://www.kcra.com/article/edd-backlog-and-fraud-timeline-how-we-got-here-california-unemployment-jobless-covid-19/35312619>.

³⁵ Relative to the 90 programs displayed in Figure 1, the far larger number of programs reported then is attributable to the subsequent consolidation of over 150 employment and training programs and differences in methodology. See Summary of Welfare Reforms Made by Public Law 104–193: The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and Associated Legislation, H.R. Rep. No. 104-15, at 4, Table 1 (1996), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-104WPRT27305/pdf/CPRT-104WPRT27305.pdf>.

³⁶ USA Facts, "How much does Medicaid cost in Minnesota?" <https://usafacts.org/answers/how-much-does-medicaid-cost-in-the-us/state/minnesota/>

but the same dynamic could be repeated by converting more programs into fixed block grants covering similarly broad purposes.³⁷

As part of that transition, more funding responsibility—and thus direct financial concern about fraud—should shift to states. States will argue they can’t afford that, especially under current program terms. But history shows block grants and related eligibility changes can contribute to rapid declines in both caseloads and benefit costs, making any new state responsibilities more manageable. Since the 1996 reforms, the TANF program’s caseload has fallen by 85 percent as more parents left or stayed off welfare in favor of work, resulting in an almost 250 percent real increase in federal funding available per TANF recipient.³⁸ HHS recently reported that, at the start of FY 2025, states collectively had \$11.3 billion in unspent federal TANF funds, with every state except New Jersey reporting reserves.³⁹ Meanwhile, states have been able to shift program funds to complementary needs like child welfare, childcare, and work-supporting tax credits.⁴⁰

Lawmakers also could adopt proposals from the 2022 volume American Renewal that would give states credit when increased work by benefit recipients leads to greater earnings and federal tax credit payments to families.⁴¹ That would limit state costs while offering a strong financial incentive for better individual outcomes.

A third set of changes would expect more accountability from individuals and states administering benefits. Recipient engagement in work and training is already poised to expand under the One Big Beautiful Bill. Such changes have strong parallels in 1996 reforms, which were followed by remarkable improvements. As I described on their 25th anniversary, after those reforms,

Welfare caseloads plummeted as millions of mothers left or stayed off the welfare rolls in favor of work. In just the five years after August 1996, the number of families on welfare dropped over 50 percent. Aided by a strong economy, the share of never-married mothers (the group most likely to go on welfare) who worked rose almost 40 percent over the four-year period beginning in 1996. . . . As a result, earnings rose sharply while poverty plunged.⁴²

³⁷ Ron Haskins and Matt Weidinger, “The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program: Time for Improvements,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 686, no. 1 (2019): 286–309, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002716219881628>.

³⁸ Matt Weidinger, “The Welfare Program You Never Heard About During the Shutdown,” *COSM Commentary*, November 10, 2025, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/the-welfare-program-you-never-heard-about-during-the-shutdown/>.

³⁹ David Sweigle and Alex J. Adams, *The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Contingency Fund*, US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, January 2026, <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/main/TANF-Contingency-Fund-Issue-Brief-January-2026.pdf>

⁴⁰ Gene Falk, *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant: A Primer*, Congressional Research Service, December 18, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48413>.

⁴¹ Angela Rachidi et al., “A Safety Net for the Future: Overcoming the Root Causes of Poverty,” in *American Renewal: A Conservative Plan to Strengthen the Social Contract and Save the Country’s Finances*, ed. Paul Ryan and Angela Rachidi (American Enterprise Institute, 2022), <https://www.americanrenewalbook.com/a-safety-net-for-the-future-overcoming-the-root-causes-of-poverty/>.

⁴² Matt Weidinger, “Turning Back the Clock on Welfare Reform,” *AEIdeas*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/opportunity-social-mobility/turning-back-the-clock-on-welfare-reform/>.

Additional accountability measures could include lifetime limits on key benefits, especially for able-bodied adults. In major means-tested programs, long-term dependence is now the norm even among able-bodied adults. Sixty-three percent of non-elderly, non-disabled adult recipients now collect public housing assistance for a decade or longer.⁴³ A recently released HHS report finds almost half of all food stamp recipients in 2017-2018 (the most recent years reviewed, when the US unemployment rate averaged 4.1 percent) received assistance for over 20 out of 24 months.⁴⁴ Exceptions should apply for seniors and individuals with disabilities, but the goal for most able-bodied adults should be to work and support themselves instead of depend on taxpayers for extended support. Identifying and preventing more fraud and abuse would be an important side benefit.

Concluding Thoughts

Duplication is hardly reserved to federal means-tested and associated benefits. GAO's May 2025 review found that duplication plagues many federal agencies and programs.⁴⁵ But it is especially important to review and address duplication in means-tested and associated benefit programs, given their critical role in assisting those in need. All Americans should be confident that these important programs are appropriately targeted and efficiently and effectively directing taxpayer funds to those who need them most. Duplication compromises that mission, and the complexity created by operating too many programs harms claimant access to benefits, limits effective oversight, and opens the door to fraud and abuse.

⁴³ Howard Husock and Bruce D. Meyer, "Subsidized Housing and Upward Mobility," *National Affairs*, Fall 2025, <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/subsidized-housing-and-upward-mobility>.

⁴⁴ Gilbert Crouse et al., *Welfare Indicators and Risk Factors: 24th Report to Congress*, US Department of Health and Human Services, August 2025, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/0cfb67b2619c9f7ef4fd40b14a5d4da7/24th%20Welfare%20Indicators%20Report%20to%20Congress.pdf>.

⁴⁵ US Government Accountability Office, *Opportunities to Reduce Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication and Achieve an Additional One Hundred Billion Dollars or More in Future Financial Benefits*.

Appendix

Table 2. Federal Means-Tested Benefit Programs, by Purpose, FY 2013

<p>Cash (5) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Supplemental Security Income Earned Income Tax Credit Additional Child Tax Credit Pensions for Needy Veterans</p> <p>Health (12) Medicaid State Children’s Health Insurance Program Consolidated Health Centers Breast/Cervical Cancer Early Detection Indian Health Service Family Planning Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program Transitional Cash and Medical Services for Refugees State Grants and Demonstrations Voluntary Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit – Low-Income Subsidy Maternal and Child Health Block Grant Medical Care for Veterans without Service-Connected Disability</p> <p>Housing (17) Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers Supportive Housing for the Elderly Home Investment Partnerships Program (HOME) Neighborhood Stabilization Program Rural Rental Assistance Program Public Housing Indian Housing Block Grants Water and Waste Disposal for Rural Communities Public Works and Economic Development Community Development Block Grants Supportive Housing for Persons with Disabilities Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA) Grants to States for Low-Income Housing in Lieu of Low-Income Housing Credit Allocations Tax Credit Assistance Program Homeless Assistance Grants Section 8 Project-Based Rental Assistance Single-Family Rural Housing Loans</p>	<p>Education and Job Training (27) Job Corps Workforce Investment Act Adult Activities Workforce Investment Act Youth Activities Academic Competitiveness and Smart Grant Program Community Service Employment for Older Americans Education for Homeless Children and Youth Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (training) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (employment and training) Social Services and Targeted Assistance for Refugees Title 1 Migrant Education Program Federal Work-Study Mathematics and Science Partnerships Indian Education Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant Federal TRIO Programs Higher Education-Institutional Aid and Developing Institutions Foster Grandparents Improving Teacher Quality State Grants 21st Century Community Learning Centers Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR-UP) Reading First and Early Reading First Federal Pell Grants Rural Education Achievement Program Education for the Disadvantaged – Grants to Local Educational Agencies (Title I-A) Adult Basic Education Grants to States College Access Challenge Grants Indian Education Grants to Local Educational Agencies</p> <p>Energy (2) Low-Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) Weatherization Assistance Program</p>
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<p>Food Aid (12) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Special Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) School Breakfast Program (free/reduced price components) National School Lunch Program (free/reduced price components) The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) Nutrition Assistance for Puerto Rico Nutrition Program for the Elderly Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations Child and Adult Care Food Program (lower-income components) Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program Summer Food Service Program Commodity Supplemental Food Program</p>	<p>Social Services (15) Adoption Assistance Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program Child Support Enforcement Emergency Food and Shelter Program Older Americans Act Grants for Supportive Services and Senior Centers Foster Care Legal Services Corporation Community Services Block Grant Chafee Foster Care Independence Program Older Americans Act Family Caregiver Program Indian Human Services Child Care and Development Fund Head Start Social Services Block Grant Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (social services)</p>
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Source: Karen Spar et al., *Federal Benefits and Services for People with Low Income: Programs and Spending, FY2008–FY2013*, Congressional Research Service, January 15, 2015, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R43863/R43863.6.pdf.