

Make Me Smart September 21, 2021 transcript

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Kai Ryssdal: We're, we're ready. I think we're ready.

Molly Wood: Yeah, let's do it. Let's make a show.

Kai Ryssdal: Let's make your show. Hey, kids, let's put on a show. Hey everybody, I'm Kai Ryssdal. Welcome back to Make Me Smart. None of us is as smart as all of us is the catch phrase around these parts.

Molly Wood: That's right. And it's the truth. I'm Molly Wood. It's Tuesday, which means it's our day to dive deep into a single topic with a little bit of help. Today, we are talking about, as promised, the social safety net, which we generally think of as this thing that's sort of supposed to help families and kids who are experiencing poverty from feeling the most brutal effects of that poverty, things like hunger and homelessness.

Kai Ryssdal: In this country, which is not like other countries, as you will hear, in terms of a social safety net, it was sort of Great Depression ish Franklin Roosevelt, when the idea that the government ought to be doing something to help people who sort of can't make it on their own. And that, you know, obviously because of the times, over the decades, since the social safety net has broadened in meaning and actual funding, and then it has narrowed, and then it's trying to be expanded again, it's a whole long saga, which is why we're doing this thing. And, and mostly it's because we wanted to square it away for ourselves and help you as well.

Molly Wood: Right. What do we mean when we say it, what actually exists versus what we sometimes think exists, and what should exist that doesn't, basically. Those are three questions in a nutshell. And here to help us answer all three of them and more is Tina Sacks, Professor of Social Welfare at UC Berkeley. Hi, Tina.

Tina: Hi, thank you for having me.

Molly Wood: Thanks for joining us. And I guess let's start with sort of this first overarching question, what do we even mean when we say social safety net? What are the programs that we're talking about that, that currently exist? What are their goals?

Tina: Sure. So the social safety net, the way I would characterize it, is it's really about providing some modicum of, you know, an income floor, potentially, for people who are vulnerable in the United States. So we're talking about things like the Earned Income Tax Credit, child tax credits,

a cash transfer program called TANF, or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. We have programs for people who are disabled and unable to work as a result. So those are SSI, SSDI. There's the Unemployment Insurance system, we have food stamps, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP. We have other food programs called Women, Infants and Children, which is to support pregnant people to get enough, you know, proper nutrition during their pregnancies. We do a little bit in terms of energy assistance, helping people pay for heating in the winter so that they can live in an appropriately heated domicile. We have a little bit of housing assistance. And we also have, pay a little bit of attention to children who have been abused or neglected by paying for the child welfare system. And so all of that adds up to roughly 8% of the federal budget in a couple years ago, in 2019.

Kai Ryssdal: You know, it's so funny until you said it was just 8% percent of the federal budget a couple of years ago, my next question was going to be boy, that sounds like a lot, but it really kind of isn't. And that, I guess, questions still applies. That's a whole lot of programs wrapped into just 8% of the federal budget, which is a big budget, but still it's not, it's not a whole lot.

Tina: It's, it's very, it's very meager, or modest, depending on your persuasion. And it is, it's relatively small relative to other programs that the federal government pays for. So for example, about 16% of the federal budget goes to defense and international security efforts. And 23% goes to social security and another 25% percent, another huge chunk, goes to Medicaid, Medicare, children's health insurance programs and subsidies to the Affordable Care Act.

Kai Ryssdal: Sorry, can I back you up for a second? So Medicaid and Medicare, do they not count as, as the social safety net in your, you know, considered experienced?

Molly Wood: I was wondering that too. I even thought Social Security was part of the safety net, I'm so confused now.

Tina: It is absolutely part of what we think of sort of broadly as the social safety net, as a safety net. But in terms of the way it is, the way we calculate spending, it these programs are sort of separated out because they are so huge, right? So Medicare, Medicaid, and these other programs that, you know, the subsidies that people might receive on the, the marketplace if they're receiving the Affordable Care Act, that's 25% of federal expenditure. So that's a huge chunk.

Molly Wood: Yeah, got it. So really, so all in everything, all of the spending that the government does to in some way assist people, sounds like it's, is 60 to 70%. We've got like Social Security plus Medicare, Medicaid, plus this other 8% kind of basket.

Tina: Correct.

Molly Wood: And I getting that right? Okay.

Tina: That's right. Right. And this is from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. So they have a really nice, they delineate all of this information very succinctly.

Kai Ryssdal: Okay, the same way your, I'm sorry, Molly, go ahead.

Molly Wood: Oh, no, I'm sorry. Yeah. Well, so I was gonna say, and then in terms of that 8%, right, which is like help children and working families, or potentially, how does that compare, that meager number, compare to other countries, let's say just European countries, that seems to be the most obvious comparison.

Tina: I don't have the actual stats, the actual percentage, but I can tell you that other industrialized countries spend much more of the federal budget on things like childcare subsidies, for example. So that in, in, you know, in Northern Europe, you know, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, a person could be out of, you know, out of the labor market for up to three years to care for their child, and they would be getting paid up to 60 to 70% of their salary to remain at home and care for their child. So, in terms of what that is percentage wise of their expenditures, you know, their national expenditures or GDP, I don't have that figure, but it is vastly more than the United States spends.

Kai Ryssdal: So if you are in need in this country and dependent on government assistance, what kind of life do you lead?

Tina: A very challenging life, I would say. So one of the really important things about the United States system that is, that I, that I think is really important to try to convey to our fellow human beings who might be listening to this podcast is that in the United States, to qualify for these programs one can only make approximately less than \$13,000 a year, is the federal poverty threshold. So if you make more than that, you are unlikely to be eligible for most of these programs, if not all of them. There is some state level variability, some states will go all the way up to 130% of the federal poverty threshold. But for the most part, we are talking about people who are really enduring significant material hardship, to simply be eligible for these programs. Once you might be deemed eligible for the programs, there's something called administrative burden, which is actually built into the programs. And that simply means that in order to receive and maintain eligibility for these programs, you have to demonstrate all the time that your income has not gone above these thresholds. And as you can imagine, that might be very difficult if you're working in a gig economy, for example, if your income fluctuates month to month. And so most of these programs, people find very difficult to get them. And to stay on them. It requires an enormous amount of coordination. Programs like TANF, for example, you have to, which is Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, it's a cash assistance program. People have to demonstrate that they are working. Sometimes you have to go in and see your caseworker but you might have had to work during that time. And then you have to, you know, you have to manage your transportation to your caseworkers office to demonstrate that you are working, but that interferes with your ability to work or care for your child. So it is an incredibly complex and challenging way to live. And also, I think also very importantly, the, the monthly

cash amounts that one might receive for this are very, very low and are meant to keep you below the federal poverty threshold.

Kai Ryssdal: Wait, say that again.

Tina: The, the amount of money that you would receive, for example, for TANF, would be explicitly less than what we would consider the federal poverty threshold. So if, so you say, for example, that the, you know, per month, you can only make \$1,000, you would receive somewhere, you know, perhaps around, you know, \$500 or \$600 a month for 10. So the point of it is to make sure that you are—

Kai Ryssdal: That you're eligible for the rest, right.

Tina: That you are, no, the point of it is actually to, to incentivize you to go into the labor market, because they don't want to give you more money.

Kai Ryssdal: How could I be so silly? Sorry. Yes. Yeah. Got it. Got it. Okay.

Molly Wood: I mean, yes. And so what you have then as a result is because there's also lack of childcare subsidies or universal childcare, you have people in this, this real catch 22, it sounds like, where, in some ways they have to be dependent on these, these systems that don't work very well and are meager to say the least, but can't necessarily if they have kids go into the labor market, because there's no childcare.

Tina: Yes. So it presents an incredible, an incredibly difficult situation, in a situation that is, that has, you know, US poverty policy and US family policy has always been characterized by many of the forms of the profound forms of discrimination that we face in this country, you know, across many domains. So for example, women and people of color, Black people are explicitly discriminated against in these, you know, welfare programs, they're so highly stigmatized, they don't tend to work very well for a woman who might be a single parent, who would have to maintain her child and try to work and try to find childcare at the same time. TANF, in particular, has a 60-month lifetime cap. And so that's, you know, that's not that long, if you think about sort of the, the, the way, the vagaries of a capitalist system, you know, economies go up and down. And if you are working in the low wage labor market, you know, five years, it doesn't seem like, it seems like a long time sort of on its face. But if you think about how long it might take you to kind of get on your feet at different periods of your life, it is a relatively meager and challenging system to subsist on.

Kai Ryssdal: So obviously you're following the debate in Congress as they try to wrangle this \$3.5 trillion soft infrastructure bill, a good part of which is, is human infrastructure, and rather that rather than ask you to comment on the political odds of the thing, which, you know, toss up, right? What difference would some of those programs make? How much of an impact would they have?

Tina: I mean, the, you know, social policy in general and this bill in particular are enormously helpful. They are, they really keep people out of, they do help to lift people out of poverty. So for example, you know, like last year, or I'm sorry, in 2018, all of the programs that we were talking about in the beginning, you know, the earned income tax credit, TANF, etc, unemployment, it lifted about 37 million people out of poverty in 2018. And this is an enormous benefit. So we know that these policy solutions or policy levers actually can be effective if we implement them. And so investing in human capital, investing in education, investing in health, would have an enormous impact on the day to day lives of our fellow Americans. There's no question about that.

Molly Wood: Are we in, do you think, a different moment to be having these conversations because we have this relatively recent data set, you know, we saw the child tax credit reduce child hunger, we saw stimulus payments lift people, in some cases, out of poverty or keep them in their homes or allowed them to spend that money on food. It seems like previously, you know, prior to the pandemic, this was a philosophical and largely political conversation, and now we really have a year's worth, a year and a half worth of, of proof that helping people helps people. I wonder if that's gonna change the conversation at all.

Tina: Absolutely, I really, I hope so. One of my favorite writers is the writer Arundhati Roy and she has said that the pandemic is a portal, meaning It is an opportunity to create the world anew, to create something different and perhaps and hopefully more just. And I just found a study that came out in, in March of this year that provided some empirical evidence for the idea that in, this was in three relatively small samples of about, you know, 500 to 1000 people each. But people in the United States and in the UK actually expressed much more interest or much more support for something called universal basic income. So, after the pandemic, people are saying, you know, what, we are all vulnerable here. And perhaps we might be interested in providing a real income floor for our fellow human beings. So I do think that there is an opportunity here, there's a policy window here, potentially, to push through these kinds of policy solutions that may have been less palatable previous to the, or prior to the pandemic.

Molly Wood: That's a hopeful note to end on. Tina Sacks is a professor at UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare. Thank you so much for the time today.

Tina: Thank you so much.

Molly Wood: Take good care. Feel better.

Tina: Thank you. Thank you.

Kai Ryssdal: Summer colds are no fun.

Molly Wood: No. Also, it is so unique to the Bay Area that at the end of September, we're talking about summer colds. Cause that's what they are here. But yes, there you have it.

Kai Ryssdal: That was good. That was good, I learned stuff. I

Molly Wood: No, I know, it's fascinating. It, you know, there's an interesting conversation. I mean, this is everybody wants to make fun of, I know, people in my neck of the woods, the Silicon Valley types who are like, oh, we need to disrupt this and there needs to be designed thinking, but a hugely overlooked part of this, we were actually talking about this recently where we talked about the companies that, you know, put you on hold or call you back at their leisure and like, shouldn't there be some mechanism for you to get your time back? And the, the time wasting, there's a big piece, an Annie Lowry piece in The Atlantic.

Kai Ryssdal: Oh yes, the time tax, yes.

Molly Wood: The time tax and how that is deliberately built in to dissuade people and these old systems that are super clunky, or maybe they're only online and people can't access them because they don't have internet. I mean, there are so many things other than just the money that go into making these, these systems accessible to people if we want these systems to be accessible to people. And we don't want kids to starve in America, which literally happens.

Kai Ryssdal: Well, the interview ended on a hopeful note. Ms. Wood's commentary did not. So we'll just take a little break. We'll take a little break right here, let us know what you think about the interview, about the social safety net, whether you thought it was or not, how it's working. What you think about that? Let us know in an email or voice memo, makemesmart@marketplace.org or you just call us, leave us a voice message. Our new phone number is 508-827-6278. I think we have to stop saying new because we've been saying this for a while. 508-UB-SMART. Push those buttons and talk to us.

Molly Wood: And if you haven't already, please subscribe to our podcast, maybe leave us a rating if you'd prefer that I don't buzzkill the hopeful note, that's fair. That's a fair critique, I can take it out. We'll be right back with the news.

Kai Ryssdal: All right, we are back to do a little news. Mine is sort of a catch up on two items from, mine are, actually, because I got two of them. And a couple of things we talked about. The first is the Texas abortion law, which we talked about on a Tuesday actually, about reproductive rights being economic rights. It's worth a note here in case you missed it late yesterday afternoon. A Texas doctor who admitted in the pages of the Washington Post that he had performed a post six week abortion has been sued by, get this, attorneys in Arkansas and Illinois, not in Texas. But Arkansas and Illinois. One of those attorneys, by the way, who is still under the protection of, shall we say, the Federal Bureau of Prisons for a prior crime on his part, has sued this doctor. So I bring that up just for an update actually, to let you know that this is now actually going to wind its way through the courts. And there will be actual hearings as opposed to the shutting down of hearings, which is what happened in the Fifth Circuit. And in the Supreme Court that we talked about when this happened. So I thought that was of note. The other follow up item that I have is a podcast. Perhaps some of you listen, perhaps some of you don't, it's The Daily by the New York Times. And it's a follow up to a point I made on Friday

about the Pentagon's apology for that drone strike in Kabul that went horribly wrong. As we were leaving that country, and the Pentagon said we killed a known ISIS K terrorist. And it turns out after some reporting by the New York Times, it was actually a humanitarian aid worker and I think seven children. Barbaro today, the host The Daily, talked to their Kabul reporter about how the New York Times did its reporting on the investigation that led the Pentagon to come clean about what had actually happened. It's remarkable, it's infuriating. And it is, just to close the loop on what I said on Friday, it's exactly what happens when you don't have intel on the ground. And when you rely on these over the horizon systems, which President Biden and the others have said they are going to use. I recommend it very highly. It's really good. Barbaro aside, but that's a whole different thing. Sorry. Sorry, I can't help it. Come on. People say the same thing about us, you know that.

Molly Wood: Oh, no, yes. No, the banter has already gotten exhausting for so many people, I know. Um, yeah. Yes. You know, a comprehensive top to bottom review of American intelligence, I think, could be called for, like, we tend to want to lay this all on the feet, at the feet of any president. And certainly the buck stops with the President. But if you were like the CEO of an operation that was not functioning very well and kept having lots of failures, it seems to me you would look at that. And see if you could fix it up some. So just gonna throw that out there. Speaking of the Texas abortion law, which by the way, I mean, the idea that these anti-choice activists in Texas are now irritated that the lawsuits have been filed in ways that they weren't hoping, including by at least one person who was like, yeah, no, I want this thing to be overturned and so I sued like that doctor was hoping, is rich, that's really rich. Like, oh, no, you enabled a bunch of vigilantes, and then it didn't go how you thought it was gonna go. But on that note, Caitlin Myers, who we had on the program when we talked about reproductive rights being economic rights, tweeted yesterday, Monday, that, that economists have now filed an amicus brief with the Supreme Court to share evidence on the effects of abortion access, we'll have a link to her tweet and to the brief that they filed with the Supreme Court. And what she tweeted was economists were silent when Roe was decided in 1973. And again, when Casey was decided in 1992. With those precedents hanging in the balance today, we filed our first Abacus brief with SCOTUS to share evidence on the effects of abortion access.

Kai Ryssdal: It's, it's a reasonably quick read, honestly, for a Legal Brief.

Molly Wood: And obviously, this is not only an economic issue, and we are certainly not trying to suggest that. However, it is in addition to all of the other issues that it is an economic issue, especially when we talk about, for example, the thing where children in this country are starving, because we won't help them even if we're willing to force women to give birth to them. Yep. Alright, that's all I got. I got some other stuff about mergers and acquisitions, but somehow it just doesn't feel right now. Let's move on.

Kai Ryssdal: He knows I love him. I kid because I love him.

Molly Wood: If I listened to the afternoon show and like Alvin the Chipmunk comes out of the airwaves, I'm gonna know why.

Kai Ryssdal: He's laughing. He's dropping the table. Oh, my God. Okay. All right, you take it out. Oh my god.

Molly Wood: We have a voice memo from Beth in New York in response to last week's episode on the legacy of Occupy Wall Street.

Beth: I was 23 at the time living in New York City and occupy wall street didn't really speak to me as much as it probably would now because it was headlined largely by straight white dudes, which if you'll recall at the time, 10 years ago was not a thing that non straight, non-white, non-dudes were allowed to feel publicly uncomfortable with. But the history of social movements is complex and fascinating. So, thank you for making me smart and making me think.

Kai Ryssdal: Yes, totally fascinating. And what's amazing is in the, I know, it's been much longer than this. But the idea that we went from 10 years ago, non-straight, non-white non-dudes weren't allowed to express discomfort with this. And now it's of course, you know.

Molly Wood: Yeah, I know, I think that is so fascinating. Yeah. Anyway, yes. A lot. All of, all of that was fascinating. And you realize that a lot has happened in 10 years. And I'm gonna say that on the balance when it comes to non-straight, non-white, non dude's feeling more comfortable on the balance. It's a good thing. Oh, yeah.

Kai Ryssdal: Oh. All right, a voice memo from a listener making other people smart. Here we go.

Laura: Hey, Kai and Molly. This is Laura out of Los Gatos, California, the Bay Area. Just wanted to let you know that I was walking with my boyfriend a few weeks back and we were talking about crazy COVID news. And I was able to educate him on the difference between misinformation and disinformation thanks to your guys's make me start podcast, so thanks for that. Even I was kind of surprised that I was able to comprehend and absorb such amazing facts from all the multitasking I do while listening to your podcast, so thank you.

Kai Ryssdal: That's awesome.

Molly Wood: I love this stuff you never know is gonna sink in. Never know. That's outstanding. All right. And finally, we don't want to beat a dead horse except that we actually do because jokes get funnier the more you tell them. So here you go.

Megan: Hey, y'all. It's Megan from Flower Mound, Texas. I cannot tell you how pumped I am to have finally made it with a voicemail on to the show. But even more awesome is that you guys probably didn't realize that you played both my mom Patty and my voicemail within the same show. So that was pretty awesome. Thanks.

Kai Ryssdal: We're a tight knit little family here at make me smart. That's, that's all I'm saying.

Molly Wood: We played her the same show and didn't even realize. That is amazing. We had no clue. Oh, that's outstanding. I think that this is not our only parent and child listening situation because we also have the guy whose kid was going to college or that woman. Yeah. If you, if you are one of them, tell us, and you know, you know how we love a duo. Send us a dual voicemail.

Kai Ryssdal: Oh man. All right. As we always do end, we end on a Tuesday with the make me smart question. What is something you thought you knew you later found out you were wrong about? Here we go.

Jen: Hi, Jen calling from Colorado. Something I thought I knew but just very recently learned I was wrong about involves toaster ovens. I always thought that the silly little flat tray that comes with the toaster oven is if I wanted to bake, I don't know, two cookies. I just recently learned it's supposed to live in the bottom of the toaster oven as an easy to clean crumb catcher. I'm getting smarter every day, including thanks to you folks. Thanks. Keep it up.

Molly Wood: Oh, that's amazing. Also, I'm cracking up because that little tray is like the most useful thing in my entire life because I only ever, I have like, you know, I bought a house during the pandemic. It's almost been a year and I have two ovens which used to be like my dream. I think I've used them like three times. I only ever use my little toaster oven. It's like one of those little induction ones or convection. Yeah, and I use that little tray which is supposed to be a crumb catcher apparently, for literally everything. Potatoes, green beans, meatballs. Too funny. I do have a lot of crumbs down there. See, you never know what you're going to learn if you have put off emailing or sending us a voice memo with your answer to the make me smart question, wait no longer. Call us leave us a voice message/ 508-82-SMART, 508-UB-SMART. See you tomorrow.

Kai Ryssdal: You learn something new every day.

Molly Wood: Like literally they smoke and they're gonna light on fire. I mean, I cleaned mine out. Make Me Smart today was produced by Marissa Cabrera and Marque Greene. Tony Wagner writes our newsletter, and our intern is Grace Rubin.

Kai Ryssdal: Charlton Thorp engineered the program during the roll. Juan Carlos Torrado is gonna mix it down later. Ben Tolliday and Daniel Ramirez composed our theme music. Bridget Bodnar is in charge. Sitara Nieves is actually in charge, in charge.

Molly Wood: In charge, in charge, in charge, this chrome conversation, I just want you all to know, is continuing abait, apace, continuing apace in the slack. Everyone's like, where do the crumbs go? Were the on the counter? Were they on the bottom of the toaster oven? That's why it's always slightly on fire.