

‘The great accelerator’

Kaya Williams. Aspen Journalism

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Community members line up outside the lodge at Buttermilk on March 20, 2020, at a food giveaway organized by Aspen Skiing Co. The giveaway was planned from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m., but the food was all claimed by 10:45. Such efforts were emblematic of the increase in food aid that was a hallmark of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic — a surge that receded as time went on.

Photo by Kelsey Brunner

The COVID-19 pandemic was just arriving in the Roaring Fork Valley when the threat of a virulent virus became an all-encompassing crisis in the middle of March 2020. The first local case was confirmed March 8, and more were emerging. Events had already been canceled, a state of emergency declared. On March 14, 2020, Colorado Gov. Jared Polis ordered the closure of every ski area in the state to mitigate the spread of a potentially deadly infectious disease, and in the Roaring Fork Valley, life ground to a halt.

The shutdowns of that eerie spring rocked the resort economy, leaving thousands without work during one of the busiest times of the year, before public health guidance eventually shifted to a cautious reopening strategy hinging on masks and social distancing. Businesses were hamstrung by a rainbow of public health restrictions that lasted more than a year, while doctors and public health officials grappled with surges of COVID cases and a swirling dynamic of vaccinations, variants and changes in human behavior. The medical community encountered both an outpouring of support — people banging pots on their porches in gratitude — and growing mistrust, as some questioned the efficacy of public health recommendations.

Mountain resort communities reported higher rates of infection and lower rates of death than their more rural counterparts, but across the Western Slope, communities grieved — not only for people who died of COVID-19, but for those who died of other causes in isolation, unable to spend their final moments in the presence of those they loved. Some survivors developed complex and debilitating symptoms, known as “long COVID,” that persisted for months or years; the experience has ravaged their physical and emotional well-being.



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The pandemic took a drastic toll on mental health, too, as well as on pains exacerbated by loneliness and new anxieties. Front-line workers faced high demands and risk of exposure, while white-collar types adapted to a work-from-home model. Children, attending classes from a computer at home, suffered a measurable loss in learning and a less measurable but still tangible loss in socializing. And some communities began to fracture amid misinformation and disinformation. Decisions about masks and vaccines became a dividing line.

The “return to normal” was propelled by mitigation efforts in those early pandemic years. Kids went back to school in masks, then dealt with quarantines when a classmate or teacher got sick. Diners returned to limited-capacity restaurants. Music fans showed proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test to enter concert venues. At least some workers returned to offices and businesses that implemented a range of requirements to prevent outbreaks.

The events and hallmarks of a prepandemic “normal” lifestyle had started to emerge in the summer and fall of 2021, with some fits and starts amid subsequent waves of the virus. The last of the emergency declarations sunset in 2023. Eventually, the “new normal” became simply “normal.”

“It’s convenient for people not to think about the pandemic, and sometimes you sound like a bit of an oddball when you talk about it,” said Katherine Sand, director of the resource center Aspen Family Connections. “But I think it’s a defining moment in our lives.”

According to Sand and nearly a dozen other community leaders, traces of the initial crisis continued to permeate the foundation of society long after the immediate emergency ended. Five years later, the impacts are still rippling out.

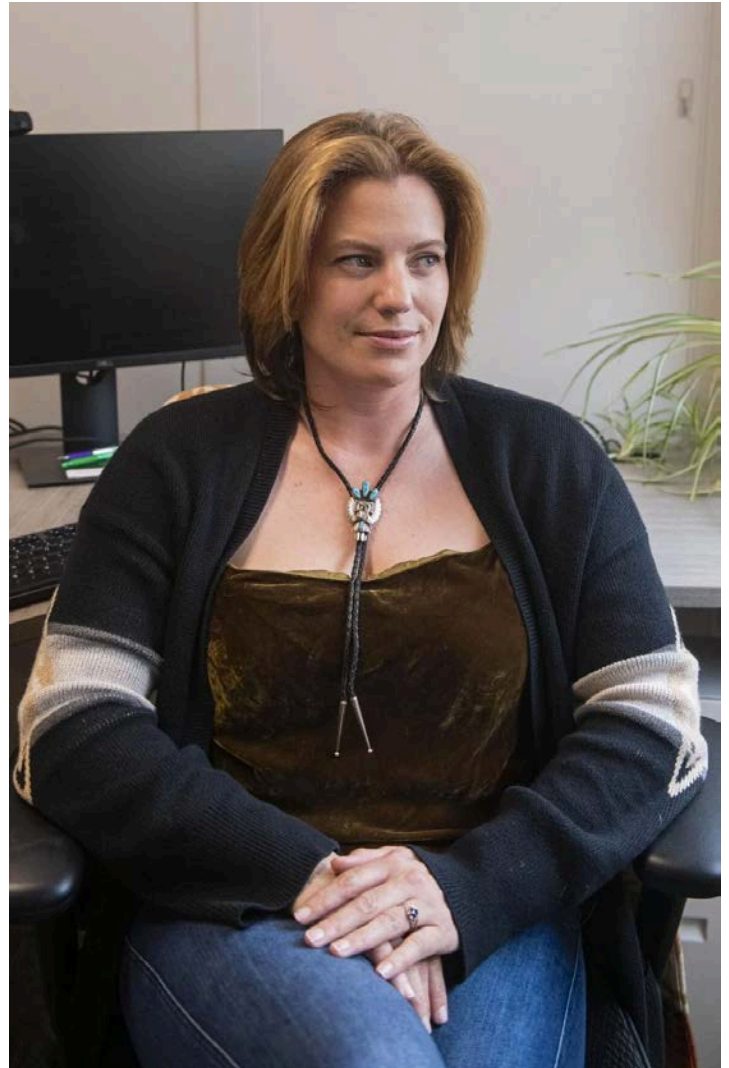
“It was horrendous on many levels, and the effects are still being felt,” said Dave Ressler, CEO at Aspen Valley Hospital.

The effects were not only physical and emotional, but economic, especially in destinations such as Aspen, where urbanites flocked for a feeling of refuge and relaxation during a moment of global tumult. By the summer of 2020, it was evident that a “great urban exodus” was afoot — a term Aspen real estate broker Tim Estin used in an interview with *The Colorado Sun* during the height of the phenomenon.

“All of a sudden, you start to see a surge in buying activity, and it's like, ‘Whoa. Something dramatic is happening here,’” Estin recalled in a recent interview with *Aspen Journalism*.

The Sotheby’s broker has been tracking and analyzing market data for 20 years in his *Estin Report*,

which looks specifically at Aspen and Snowmass Village. He scrubs through every individual data point to make sure the numbers are “pure” — that a teardown, for instance, gets counted as a land sale instead of a single-family home in average prices.



Pitkin County Public Health Epidemiologist Carly Senst sits in the Health and Human Services Building in Aspen on March 13. Senst was on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic response and said the pandemic was a “litmus test” for preparedness in a crisis.

Photo by Kelsey Brunner

And he noticed that home prices were going up — at a much faster rate than they had been prior to the pandemic. Although those numbers might have popped up eventually, Estin thinks the pandemic initiated a “quantum jump,” pushing the upvalley housing market a decade into the future.

“COVID seemed to be the great accelerator,” Estin said.

Reports from the Aspen Board of Realtors indicate that the pandemic-era real estate boom continued long after public health rules relaxed and stretched far beyond the resort confines of Aspen and Snowmass Village.

Homes and condos in the Roaring Fork Valley were already expensive — and, in most cases, already on an upward trend — in the five years prior to the pandemic, 2015-19. But between 2020 and 2024, those prices increased on a much steeper slope, even when adjusted for inflation. In some cases, median prices grew two to more than six times faster in the five years after the pandemic “accelerator” went into effect — the equivalent of going from the bunny slope to an icy black diamond.

Consider a single-family home in Basalt, for instance, a category and location that experienced one of the most staggering price hikes of any community located along Highway 82.



Harvest for Hunger's Gray Warr moves crates of bread out of his van, "Larry," to give to LIFT-UP behind the City Market in Carbondale on March 14. The idea for Harvest for Hunger originated during COVID-19 pandemic, when Warr was volunteering at a local food distribution site. He now "rescues" 2,500 to 3,000 pounds of unsold food each week from local stores, then donates it to food pantries.

Photo by Kelsey Brunner

From 2015 to 2019, amid some slight fluctuations, the median sales price rose about 25%, based on December year-to-date data from the Aspen Board of Realtors. (Adjusted for inflation, prices rose almost 16%.) Between 2020 and 2024, the median sales price spiked more than 140% in raw numbers, on a consistent upward trajectory; even when all amounts were converted to 2024 dollars, the price more than doubled.

Yet, these impacts were not spread evenly or on the same schedule across all communities in the valley. Basalt saw just single-digit increases in median single-family home price between 2019 and 2020, as did Snowmass Village and Glenwood

Springs. Those communities experienced the steeper-slope trend slightly later than Aspen and Carbondale, which both saw their largest price hikes in the first year of the pandemic, followed by subsequent boosts.

Rents increased too, following the steeper-slope trend of housing sales prices, according to a 2023 rental market study that the West Mountain Regional Housing Coalition commissioned. As with the home and condo sales market, a notable upward trend began in 2020. The coalition's housing data supplement from 2022 identified pandemic changes as a factor in both rising home prices and rising rents.

Estin has said that the Aspen market seems to be stabilizing after that peak-pandemic boom.

Data for some other communities such as Carbondale and Glenwood shows some tapering off as well, at least for single-family homes. Still, prices remain much higher than they were five years ago across the board. To afford a home in Aspen, a buyer has to be in the "1% of the 1%," Estin said.

"If you can afford to be a part of that environment, then the benefits are multifaceted," Estin said. "You're living in a rarefied earth."

Those who can't are forced to look further afield — even if that means a 30-minute to two-hour commute to work. This valley isn't alone in its workforce and affordability issues, but sustaining a working class is "crucial" to the survival of a resort community such as Aspen, Estin said.

And these days, Estin said, "The division between the landowning class and the working class just seems to get ... more extreme, and more extreme."



Volunteer Arabella Beavers sorts desserts to be handed out to families in cars during the Aspen Family Connections food drive at the middle school on April 1, 2020. The line of cars wrapped around to the high school to receive food.

Photo by Kelsey Brunner

‘Not just a cost of living crisis’

The impacts are clear in a valley where many for-sale listings were already out of reach for local workers, according to Jess Hedden, the interim director of programs and mission for the food assistance nonprofit LIFT-UP. (She’s also a strategist for progressive political campaigns in Western Colorado.)

Hedden said many people have to bank on fate or chance in addition to their savings if they ever hope to buy a house.

“It’s only through very narrow circumstances that people who make a modest (or) even a higher annual salary are able to come by home ownership,” she said. “And I think in addition to that, then the rental market becomes more competitive, because there are fewer people that are able to buy homes.”

Average local wages have increased in the five years since the pandemic arrived, but they haven't risen nearly as much as the cost of living, according to Hannah-Hunt Wander, a senior long-range planner for Pitkin County. For some households, that can lead to a "cliff effect" — in which they make too much money to qualify for low-income aid programs but not nearly enough to afford the steep expenses of daily life on their own.

All that, in turn, affects everything else. LIFT-UP tallied about 10,500 visits at its facilities in 2021, representing any time any individual came in for help at a food pantry or distribution site. (One person, coming in once a week, would be counted 52 times.) By 2024, the number was more than five times greater, totaling about 58,200 check-ins.

The number of guests was up, too — a tally that includes the people coming to LIFT-UP's facilities and the family members they're supporting. (If that one person was retrieving food for their family of four each week, the end-of-year tally would equal 208 guests.) In 2021, the total was about 38,300 guests. In 2024, it was up to more than 188,000.

Hedden said this data reflects the severity of food insecurity in the valley as well as the scope.

"Folks are utilizing LIFT-UP a lot more, not just as supplemental food assistance, but really relying on it regularly," Hedden said.

Put another way: Where a food bank might have helped someone cover gaps in nutrition before, it's increasingly becoming a primary source of sustenance.

There are other ramifications, too, according to numerous nonprofit leaders and human services providers in the Roaring Fork Valley.

Higher cost of housing may warrant more hours at work, or a longer commute between affordable neighborhoods and lucrative employment, which means parents may spend more time away from their kids in order to make ends meet.

They have less time to exercise and less time to visit a doctor or a dentist, and they have less money to pay for it as housing costs eat into their budget.

Inflation also rose on a steeper trajectory postpandemic, so dollars don't stretch as far as they used to — for anything from healthy food to child care to transportation to insurance coverage. The stress compounds, and takes a physical toll. And people are forced to make compromises to their well-being, just to get through another day.

“It's not just a cost-of-living crisis,” said Sand, whose Aspen Family Connections is located at Aspen Middle School. “Because we know ... that it percolates into every frame, every aspect of life.”



Katherine Sand, director of Aspen Family Connections, sits in the resource center's office at Aspen Middle School on March 10 and said the pandemic injected an “enormous” amount of financial insecurity into the community, and that people experience that fragility today.

Photo by Kelsey Brunner

'An enormous injection of insecurity'

The pandemic didn't just exacerbate cost-of-living challenges of the Roaring Fork Valley. It exposed them, in stark contrast, accentuating the economic disparities that have long defined life in this community.

"Some of that has always been here, the haves and the have-nots," Sand said.

But when the shutdowns of 2020 left thousands of workers and business owners without income, it became clear just how many families were living "paycheck to paycheck, hand to mouth." Their day-to-day lives could appear no different from that of other families, but they had no "safety net" to cover an unexpected expense and no buffer for the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic.

The pandemic introduced "an enormous injection of insecurity," Sand said.

"I think people do not feel on solid ground in most aspects of their lives in the way they were able to before," Sand said.

Researchers at Princeton University, in New Jersey, and Giessen University, in Germany, argue that this instability, in the wake of the pandemic, "disproportionately" affected documented and undocumented immigrants.

Their 2024 study indicates that immigrants "experienced higher rates of unemployment, greater losses of income, more exposure [to] occupational risks, and higher rates of food and housing insecurity."

And all of that "exacerbated preexisting differentials in access to health and health care to generate higher rates of COVID infection, morbidity, and mortality among adults and stunted educational outcomes for their children." The pandemic also exacerbated inequities for Native communities, according to the study.

Moreover, undocumented immigrants had less access to federal relief programs that were distributed by social security number, and "even before the pandemic, undocumented migrants were reluctant to seek medical care for fear of creating a documentary record that could alert authorities to their presence in the country."



Syringes are prepared with the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine in the command unit trailer set up next to the vaccination tent in the Benedict Music Tent parking lot in Aspen on Jan. 14, 2021.

Photo by Kelsey Brunner

Left in the lurch?

For some time, though, and at least for some people, emergency relief programs, stimulus checks and loans from the Paycheck Protection Program helped people get by. Millions of dollars flowed into organizations such as the Aspen Community Foundation, which established multiple pandemic relief funds to support businesses, families and individuals.

It was “a vast amount of philanthropy, particularly in this valley, and we were fortunate at [Aspen Family Connections] that we got to steward quite a lot of that,” Sand said. At one food distribution event, somebody drove up and handed her a \$10,000 check.

On a global level, such giving seemed to beget even more giving — at least for some time. A study on “the new world of philanthropy” noted that during the peak of the pandemic, it appeared more likely that “positive giving” behavior could inspire others to do the same. But as the pandemic abated and “social anxiety significantly decreased,” that extra social influence “disappeared.”

Sand didn’t expect such bounty to continue forever, at least for basic needs. “Life picked up again,” after all, and she recognized that philanthropists had other charitable interests to support too.

“We were able to help a lot of people in some quite profound ways,” she said. “But that’s not there anymore.”

The “return to normal” also meant the loss of pandemic-era government safety nets. In the 2023 Colorado Health Access Survey of about 10,000 households statewide, it’s clear those drop-offs had consequences.

Both state and federal eviction moratoriums in 2020 helped tenants stay in their homes even if they couldn’t pay rent; Polis also established a larger time window for tenants to catch up on rent if they applied for emergency rent assistance. After those policies expired, the survey indicated that “a larger share of Coloradans are now worried about where they will live.”

There was a similar trend in food insecurity — reflected in the percentage of people who “ever ate less than they thought they should in the past year because they couldn’t afford food.” Those rates dipped in 2021, aligning with “a flood of pandemic aid,” but then those rates increased in 2023, when much of that aid had expired.

Access to affordable health insurance is backsliding, too. One program was designed to keep people enrolled in Medicaid during the pandemic even if their income exceeded eligibility limits. It ended two years ago, and people started losing coverage in May 2023.

On paper, the drop in Medicaid enrollees looks like a decrease in the number of people who need help. But the reality, especially in high cost-of-living places such as the Roaring Fork Valley, is that many of those people still don't make enough to afford private health insurance.

Valerie Carlin, chief impact officer at the Aspen Community Foundation, wrote in an email that the organization "did not see a marked increase in requests related to the pandemic-era benefits ending. However, the nonprofits we support are experiencing the effects."

She cited the challenges at Mountain Family Health Centers, which serve a significant number of Medicaid patients. The organization "has been heavily impacted by the rollback of that program," Carlin wrote.

Carlin also believes LIFT-UP's increase in demand "could be correlated" with a reduction in other benefits, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. SNAP recipients got temporary bumps in monthly support during the pandemic, but that ended in 2023, resulting in an average reduction of \$90 per person, according to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

Meanwhile, at Aspen Family Connections, Sand has seen an increase in client numbers since the pandemic began, but she said that data could reflect a growing comfort level or awareness of the organization, rather than just a growing amount of need. What's more telling, in her view, is the nature of clients' situations, which tend to be more complex and acute than they used to be, especially as kids get older.

"There's still a fragility," Sand said.

A number of organizations continue to provide support for people in financial crisis; some, including the food rescue nonprofit Harvest for Hunger, were born in those peak pandemic years and have since expanded services. Some, including the Aspen Community Foundation and Pitkin County's Department of Human Services, already offered grants for individual emergencies when the pandemic hit

— just not at the scale of those COVID relief efforts — and they continue to help people facing a temporary financial hardship, such as an unexpected medical event.

But those funds won't solve the larger-scale disparities that were exacerbated by COVID. Many programs want to see proof that an applicant can become financially sustainable. And even those short-term needs have become bigger over time.

Sam Landercasper, deputy director of Pitkin County's Department of Human Services, said the county's Emergency Assistance Fund had to raise its maximum allocation per grant from \$1,000 to \$1,500 to \$2,000, because prior amounts just weren't covering what they used to.

Like so many others in this field, Landercasper recognized that “there [have] always been people ‘left in the lurch’” — but the phrase “‘left in the lurch’ really just feels rough, because it feels like almost this idea that they're just not acknowledged, and I don't think that's the case,” Landercasper said.

“I think that the solutions are hard and huge and not easily understood, and so I wouldn't want it to sound like anybody's given up on anyone. It's just ... there's no easy way to solve it.”



Pitkin County Public Health Director Jordan Sabella sits in the Health and Human Services Building in Aspen on March 13. According to Sabella, the COVID-19 pandemic strengthened partnerships and communication: “We have a very engaged and well educated community who wants to contribute, and wants to see the best outcome for as many of us as possible.”

Photo by Kelsey Brunner

The social determinants of health

These socioeconomic disparities could be interpreted as a public health concern, too, because in a way, “everything is a public health concern,” according to Pitkin County epidemiologist Carly Senst. Her work is focused on understanding and mitigating the spread of illness — case management, data-tracking and communication.

And while the public health department isn’t charged with solving the cost of living crisis, it’s on their mind. People who “live in areas with lower indicators of health,” such as lower income levels and more housing instability, suffer “more negative health outcomes due to any infectious disease,” Senst said.

That can spell far-reaching effects for the well-being of the valley, because the people whose labor propels the resort economy are often the ones facing those disparities.

“These individuals are our workers. They are our cleaners, our chefs, our servers, our bartenders, our ski (instructors) — I mean, these are people integral to our community, and any threat to their well-being, their children’s wellbeing, is a threat to our community,” Senst said.

“Those problems existed before, and then COVID really threw contrast onto it,” Senst said.

Dr. David Brooks, chief medical officer at Valley View Hospital in Glenwood Springs, sees that heightened awareness as a benefit that emerged from all the tumultuous downsides of the COVID pandemic. Health care providers are now more conscientious of the ways in which life circumstances such as financial status, housing and language can affect individual well-being, he said.

“It really has focused health care on viewing health outcomes through a lens of social determinants of health,” Brooks said.

He said the pandemic also improved channels of communication and partnerships across different agencies — a sentiment echoed by other medical professionals as well as nonprofit and business leaders.

Sand noted: “There’s no one who I was working with during the pandemic that I couldn’t pick up the phone to [call] now, so that’s a very powerful plus.”

“The collaborative legacy of the pandemic is pretty profound here in our county,” Sand said. “It’s really good.”

Sand also praised organizations — such as the Savings Collaborative, formerly LaMedichi — that are working to help people build savings and generational wealth to withstand future crises. Those buffers — while not a be-all-end-all solution to economic disparities — can make a major difference in families’ well-being and protect them from predatory lending. (And the nonprofit is now teaming up with Pitkin, Eagle and Garfield counties on a Financial Empowerment Center in Glenwood Springs.)

“That we did that, that all that stuff happened, that people were as adaptable and resourceful and creative to try and keep people’s lives together — that’s an amazing story of human survival, really,” Sand said.

And that’s the lens she prefers to apply to life after COVID: “We are actually pretty damn resilient.”

Ready for the next pandemic?

“This was not our first pandemic, and it won’t be our last,” said Ressler.

He hopes, sincerely, that there will be a great span of history between one health crisis and the next, as there was between the Spanish flu of 1918 and COVID-19 of 2020. At Aspen Valley Hospital, “universal precautions” existed even before the latest pandemic to limit the spread of infectious disease.

Still, he thinks it would be “irresponsible” to confidently assert readiness for what could be another great unknown. Human behavior — and the proliferation of misinformation — can throw a wrench in even well-refined pandemic plans. He emphasized the safety, effectiveness and importance of vaccination in mitigating illness. (Brooks said the same.)

“I just hope that when we have — and I’m saying when, not if — when we have our next pandemic, that our country comes together in a more unified fashion,” Ressler said.

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