

# The Dallas Morning News

## On the front lines, Latinos fight the coronavirus, poverty and vulnerability as contagion rages through Texas

“We don’t have a Plan B and this isn’t just me,” says one Dallas woman.

By Dianne Solis and Alfredo Corchado 1:26 PM on May 28, 2020

Rosa Garcia poured her pinto beans into plastic bags, enough, she hoped, for a pot of protein-rich frijoles for each needy family lined up for free groceries at her Dallas church.

The undocumented immigrant lost her housekeeper jobs with the coronavirus-induced collapse of the once-booming Texas economy. A relative has it worse: She lost her husband and son to the raging contagion.

“I do the little I can,” Garcia said. “We are united in pain.”

Henry Velasco, an El Paso trucker, constantly sterilizes his hands, as well as the steering wheel and gear shifts of his big, black 18-wheeler rig when he hauls everything from canned food to toilet paper between El Paso and Amarillo. The 52-year-old knows he’s more vulnerable to the coronavirus because of his diabetes. And he lacks health insurance.

“It’s either pay for insurance or feed the kids,” Velasco said.

Latinos are on the coronavirus frontlines, providing for people as workers in food factories to the trucking industry to cleaning businesses. They are also at the front of the line to catch the virus because of where they work, lower incomes and health care problems.

Now, Latinos have been losing their jobs at a [higher rate](#) than any other demographic group in the nation, with [nearly a fifth](#) now unemployed. Nationally, the unemployment rate for whites was 14.2 percent -- nearly 5 percentage points below Latinos. Latinos now make up nearly a fifth of the U.S. population.

Many Latinos who still have jobs face a vicious trade-off: Is the paycheck worth sacrificing their health at a crowded workplace?

If Latinos get sick, they are unlikely to appear in official medical statistics in Texas: Many lack insurance and don’t seek care. They are more likely to be uninsured than any other group in Texas, the state with the nation’s highest uninsured rate.



Seamstress Brenda Flores makes baby bloomers while wearing a mask at T&Q Cutting Services on May 2, 2020 in Dallas.

Owner Rudy Romero has been helping supply hospitals and others with PPE such as face masks and gowns. (Juan Figueroa / Staff Photographer)

### COVID-19 and race in Texas

As of May 25, Texas has had nearly 55,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and nearly 1,500 deaths. Here is the racial and ethnic breakdown for cases with completed investigations.

⬆️ Denotes a group that is overrepresented compared with its percent of the population

State population	
Reference percentage	
White	41%
Hispanic	40%
Black	12%
Asian	5%
Other	2%

#### CASES

	Number	Percent	
Hispanic	5,862	46%	⬆️
White	4,063	32%	
Black	2,315	18%	⬆️
Asian	498	4%	
Other	96	1%	
<b>Total*</b>	<b>12,834</b>	<b>100%</b>	

#### DEATHS

	Number	Percent	
White	180	48%	⬆️
Hispanic	122	32%	
Black	67	18%	⬆️
Asian	6	2%	
Other	2	1%	
<b>Total**</b>	<b>377</b>	<b>100%</b>	

\*Another 1,938 cases and another 114 deaths have unknown race/ethnicity

SOURCE: Texas Department of State Health Services

Staff Graphic

In Texas, Latinos are nearly three times more likely to be uninsured than a non-Hispanic white. Many low-wage earners make too much to qualify for traditional Medicaid. A smaller percentage are undocumented and don't qualify for government assistance. Other immigrants with legal status don't work for employers who offer insurance or elect not to pay premiums because of low wages.

These factors result in a [27%](#) uninsured rate for Latinos vs. 10% for whites vs. 15% for blacks.

Fully a fifth of Latinos in Texas live in poverty, a slightly higher rate than blacks, and more than double the rate of whites, according to census data in 2018, the latest available.

“Hispanics are vulnerable, both healthwise and poverty wise,” said Eva Moya, associate professor at the Department of Social Work at the University of Texas at El Paso. “They also have limited options when it comes to healthcare, as they do on whether or not they can say no to a job.”

Data collection on race and ethnicity has been inconsistent throughout Texas and the nation, even as coronavirus cuts a deadly and silent swath through the state.

True infection numbers may be much higher because there's been so little testing, public health experts say. About 46% of those who have tested positive for COVID-19 in the state are Hispanic, higher than their state population of 40%.

Many of the workers in industries such as meat and food preparation, where people have traditionally labored shoulder to shoulder in close quarters, are Latino. Nationally, Latinos make up nearly 40 percent of the meat and poultry industry--double their population.



Catholic volunteers from [Dallas Area Interfaith](#) and Pastor Gaston Giacinti, center, carry boxes of food to give to families in need during a drive-through delivery at St. Bernard of Clairvaux Catholic Church in Dallas, April 29, 2020. (Ben Torres / Special Contributor)

In Dallas, Blanca Parra Gonzalez' fiancée, Hugo [Dominguez](#), was a worker who became sick and died after working at the Quality Sausage Co. [factory](#), where other coronavirus infections were reported. Another Dallas plant, [Don Miguel Mexican Foods](#), shuttered its doors for 14 days in April because an unspecified number of employees caught the virus. In Irving, the [Brakebush Bros. Inc.](#) poultry plant said 40 of its employees tested positive for COVID-19.

In the Panhandle's Moore County, more than half the county's 500-plus cases are linked to the [JBS USA](#) meat factory in Cactus, said the Texas Department of State Health Services. In Sherman, several dozen cases have been linked to a Tyson Foods Inc. plant.

In the El Paso-Juarez binational region, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the maquiladoras factories long ago placed Mexican-Americans solidly in the middle-class and beyond by putting them in

management jobs in the Juarez plants. But it also placed them solidly in a petri dish of infection, where there are almost four times more deaths in Juarez compared to El Paso.

On a balmy day at the St. Bernard of Clairvaux Catholic Church in East Dallas, parishioners working with the nonprofit **Dallas Area Interfaith** talked among themselves about problems they faced as they passed out food to a long line of needy people.

Rosa Garcia said she was already helping family cope with the deaths of two family members in Dallas when her husband found out two more relatives had died in Florida. “For immigrants, it is harder. We have to struggle three times harder,” Garcia said.

Nearby, a small woman named Cecilia with a white face mask set below bloodshot eyes took a break. She said she didn’t sleep much because rats and bugs have infested her apartment, and she must be on guard that they don’t bite her children at night.

Cecilia lives on a janitor’s wages. She asked that her surname not be published because she is undocumented and fears she’d lose her job. She can’t pay her rent and the landlord says it will be an extra \$300 if she wants to change apartments.

Maria Ramirez lost all four of her housekeeper jobs in March. Then, came another blow: fever from the gripa, the common name for a flu the Mexican undocumented immigrant fears was really the coronavirus.

“We don’t have a Plan B and this isn’t just me,” said Ramirez, who is undocumented and uninsured. “It is the whole community. How will we pay our bills?”

She has two small U.S.-born children at home and a husband who builds fences. That work is drying up. “We are all human beings and we deserve dignity. We just don’t know what to do.”

She sent her daughter out to buy a thermometer to check her fever, but stores were sold out. Three weeks later, she believed her respiratory infection was the coronavirus but she was never tested and feared going to a testing site because of her immigration status.

## Enduring

Some unauthorized immigrants say they can’t afford not to work, even when they’re sick. Their low wages as cooks, caretakers, housekeepers and factory workers barely allow them to meet monthly expenses. Then there is the Latino culture that calls for people to *aguantar*, to endure the adversity.

One immigrant, who asked not to be identified because she is undocumented because she was afraid of losing her job, said half of the workers at a Dallas-area clothing factory were laid off. But she was allowed to keep her \$9-an-hour job “because I am a hard worker.”



*Parochial Vicar Luis Prado of St. Bernard of Clairvaux Catholic Church, stretches his arms while speaking and joking with a woman, as families picked up at St. Bernard of Clairvaux church in Dallas, April 29, 2020. (Ben Torres / Special Contributor)*

The factory didn't give them face masks, and many workers seemed to suffer from colds or the flu, or worse, she said. "We had to maintain distance from the other workers but it was hard."

Then, she got sick, too. "I had fever and pain all through my body. It was hard to get out of bed. Various companeros were like that. We had no option."

She has no health insurance. She took Ibuprofen. She recovered without hospitalization after a week. But she isn't sure she had the coronavirus because she never got tested.

Shutting down a factory line isn't necessarily the best option for workers, either.

Rudy Romero, a U.S. citizen raised in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, was torn about whether he should shutter his garment business T&Q Cutting Services near the Dallas design district. His workers need their paychecks.

"When people don't work you file for unemployment and stress goes up," said Romero. "That's not good for your health."

Romero decided to shift operations from making trendy clothing to making masks as donations for the Dallas, Frisco and Forney police departments. Big corporations, including Baylor Hospital, Harris Methodist Hospital, Coca Cola, and Racetrack gas stations, soon began contracting Romero to make tens of thousands of gowns and cloth face masks. He had to double his workforce to more than 70 people.

"The people who are working are the most vulnerable to this virus," he said, adding the company practices social distancing, handwashing, facemasks. "We're protecting people's health and their jobs. That's good for their households and good for the economy."

None of the workers have had the coronavirus.

Along the border

In El Paso, the largest city on the Texas border, nearly a quarter of Latinos are uninsured, according to the latest Census data. And 8 out of 10 people are Latino.

Leticia Favela, an uninsured U.S. citizen, uses the Mexican medical system for her health care. Favela criss crosses the border monthly to buy her insulin, which at \$100 for a one month supply costs half as much in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, as it does in El Paso. "I couldn't afford my medicine, otherwise," she said, as she surveyed prices at the farmacias in Juarez.

But now Favela faces a new dilemma. She's 65 years old. Is it worth the risk of infection to travel to a city that has less testing and was slower to declare a lockdown to the coronavirus than her hometown of El Paso?



*Business owner Rudy Romero cuts fabric at T&Q Cutting Services on May 2, 2020 in Dallas. Romero has been helping supply hospitals and others with PPE such as face masks and gowns. (Juan Figueroa / Staff Photographer)*

Henry Velasco, the trucker, injured his fingers while hitting a nail with a hammer, in a home repair. He couldn't steer the wheel well and puss began oozing from his finger. He did what many fronterizos do: He went to the cheaper pharmacies on the Mexican side of the border and saw a doctor who prescribed antibiotics. Then, he took a few days off to heal before he hit the road again.

He's as worried about his health as he is about sliding into poverty.

“Either way you look at it, both can kill you,” he said.