

Stimulus does little to stifle Covid-19 fears in the undocumented community

J.D. Long-García - March 31, 2020

Until about a week ago, Margarita Aguila worked full time as a seamstress. Her husband, who works as a delivery driver for a number of businesses, including hospitals and schools, saw his hours cut drastically from more than 40 hours a week to as few as 12. When California implemented stay-at-home measures, the family lost their livelihoods completely.

“It’s a bit difficult, but God will provide,” said Ms. Aguila, a parishioner at St. Rose of Lima in Maywood, Calif. She stays home with her three children and does her best to continue their online learning.



People wait in line for help with unemployment benefits at the One-Stop Career Center on March 17 in Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher)

Ms. Aguila and her husband are undocumented immigrants, but their children are U.S. citizens. If the children catch the coronavirus, she said, they will have health care. But as far as her husband and herself, Ms. Aguila said their only plan is just to not get sick.

“I don’t want to get ahead of myself,” she said. “I’m just maintaining my faith in God.”

Every day, she watches Mass and prays the rosary with her pastor online. The Rev. Dario Miranda broadcasts daily Mass, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy and Benediction. He keeps up with around 1,000 parishioners, most of whom are Spanish-speaking, using Flocknote.

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“There’s a lot of suffering in this community,” Father Miranda said, adding that it has been a challenge to stay in touch with parishioners since the church is closed. “For the immigrant community, Mass is a big part of their identity. It’s how they get through the challenges of life.”

They like being in the church building, he said. They pray before its images, especially Our Lady of Guadalupe. “That’s how they charge their batteries,” Father Miranda said. “So it’s been a big struggle.”

Faith, work and health care are among the top concerns in the immigrant community, according to [faith leaders across the country](#). The federal government’s \$2 trillion stimulus plan, which allots \$500 billion to corporations, has done little to address concerns about all three among St. Rose’s parishioners.

“While millions of U.S. citizens will be receiving one-time checks or unemployment for the next several months, this stimulus package is utterly disappointing to the millions of tax paying undocumented immigrants who are left out,” said Michael Nicolás Okinčyc-Cruz, the executive director of the [Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership](#). His organization has been promoting participation in the U.S. Census but has shifted to a phone and online outreach to the immigrant community during the pandemic.

“In Chicago, as in communities across the country, many Latinx families have been financially devastated by the economic reverberations of the pandemic,” he said. “Locally we see this continuing to deepen the feeling of anxiety and fear that many immigrant families face on a daily basis.”

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José Arnulfo Cabrera, director of education for the Ignatian Solidarity Network, said many in the undocumented community are worried that they will not be able to pay rent. He is a recipient of the [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals](#) program, or DACA, an Obama-era policy to protect undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children from deportation.

“My mom cleans houses for a living and hasn’t worked all week because her clients are self-quarantined,” he said in an email to **America**. “Many of our friends have lost their jobs or are day laborers and haven’t found work.”

Health care is a concern to both undocumented immigrants and legal residents, Mr. Cabrera said. Last August, the Trump administration [tightened restrictions on legal immigrants](#) who receive government benefits, referred to as “public charges.” The new policy denies greencards to many immigrants who use Medicaid, food stamps and other benefits.

Immigrants in the Dallas area mask their symptoms so they can continue to work, according to Josephine López Paul, lead organizer with [Dallas Area Interfaith](#).

“We’ve seen our service industries obliterated,” said Ms. López Paul. “Immigrants are being hit the hardest right now and there’s no safety net for them.”

About 7 percent of the U.S. population consists of noncitizens, according to the [Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation](#), and noncitizens are significantly more likely to be uninsured. U.S. citizen children who have at least one noncitizen parent were also significantly more likely not to be insured.

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Health care is a major concern for María Ramírez, a Dallas-area Catholic who cleans homes. “Since we don’t have our papers, we don’t really go to the doctor when we’re sick,” she said. As far as contracting the coronavirus, Ms. Ramírez said undocumented immigrants would be leery of going to a hospital because they would not be able to pay the bill.

“We live day to day,” she said. “Most of us live in apartments. We work and what we earn, we spend. We don’t have money saved.”

When undocumented immigrants do approach hospitals, they quickly turn away if they see any law enforcement present, according to Ana Chavarin, lead organizer of Pima County Interfaith in Tucson, Ariz. Families are less afraid of the virus itself and more concerned with how they would pay for a long-term hospital visit, she said.

Ms. Chavarin has met with families who, not knowing how long the pandemic will last or when they will find work again, have begun rationing food. “Because they are undocumented, they cannot apply for any kind of help,” she said. Some have U.S. citizen children and could apply for benefits on their behalf, she said. But fear of deportation keeps many from doing so.

Those who do find work find less of it. “We’re working in construction, but we have to maintain six feet distance between us,” according to Noël López, who works in the Los Angeles area. “The construction is pretty basic. We can’t get a lot done.”

One day, the electricians will work. On another day, the plumbers come in. Mr. López said he is working no more than three days a week, and some of those are half days.

Food is the number one concern for pastors in Houston. Some parishes and congregations have started to purchase gift cards for food while others are collecting items for the church pantry.

“There is a tremendous anxiety in the community about the economic impact of the virus,” Mr. López said. His wife is no longer working and his kids are home from school. His children, who are U.S. citizens, have health insurance, but he and his wife do not. His elderly mother does not have health insurance either.

Food is the number one concern for pastors in Houston, according to Elizabeth Valdez, lead organizer for [The Metropolitan Organization](#). Some parishes and congregations have started to purchase gift cards for food while others are collecting items for the church pantry. Local chapters of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are gathering items, but since they often count on elderly volunteers, it has been a challenge.

Children cut off from school presents another challenge for low-income families. “The kids being home, [families] don’t always have the technology they need to keep up with school,” Ms. Valdez said.

Janie Carrillo, a parishioner at Holy Ghost Church in Houston, said the community pulled together after Hurricane Harvey. The Redemptorist parish is in a low-income neighborhood and serves mostly Spanish-speaking Catholics.

“We have generous people here,” she said, adding that the community is exploring drop offs and other ways to get food to those in need. “This is probably just the beginning of these problems, so we’re preparing for what’s to come.”

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Knights of Columbus are teaming up in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to provide food and other necessities to those in need, especially the elderly. The [“Hearts that Serve”](#) hotline includes grocery and medicine delivery, according to Isaac Cuevas, the associate director of immigration affairs for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

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“There has to be a way to get the money into the hands of service workers,” said Joe Rubio, director of the [West/Southwest Industrial Area Foundation](#), a community organizing network. Pastors are seeing an increase in domestic violence, he said, likely stemming from frustration, economic pressure and children being home from school. [Studies](#) have found that immigrant survivors of domestic violence are unlikely to report abuse to law enforcement. Isolation and behavioral health issues have the potential to lead to an increase in suicide rates, he said.

“This could profoundly change the nature of parishes and congregations,” Mr. Rubio said, referring not only to the economic impact of the coronavirus but also how communities respond to those in need during the crisis. “We have to think about how we compensate those making the biggest sacrifices and how we ramp up the economy once it’s over.”

Reina Orozco and Jesús Velázquez have been staying indoors with their family in southern California. Both lost their jobs because of the pandemic and they only leave their home to buy groceries. Ms. Orozco, a seamstress, started sewing protective masks for her community.

“We accept donations, like around \$10 for four masks,” she said. “It’s not about business. It’s about helping others. And it helps keep me busy during the day.”

Ms. Orozco estimated that she had made more than 200 masks so far. For the time being, it allows her to practice her craft. “No one is thinking about buying a dress right now,” she said, noting that many people in her community have been let go.

The couple has been staying connected with their community at St. Agatha Church in Los Angeles, especially with their friends from Bible study and their prayer group.

“I think now is the time to pray for everyone,” Mr. Velázquez said. “The church can help us and we can stay connected to our faith through Catholic radio and television. Now is not the time to lose our faith.”

On a recent morning, Ms. Aguila ran into one of her neighbors while taking out the trash. For the most part, people in her apartment complex have been keeping to themselves as they observe social distancing measures. Her neighbor asked if she could borrow some condensed milk, rice and beans. Ms. Aguila shared what she had.

“We have to give each other a hand when we need it,” she said. “I have faith in Jesus Christ and I think he is asking us to encourage each other. We have to keep moving forward. If someone needs food, we should share what we have. We’re not rich. We’re poor. But we see God’s hand in everything.”