

# The pandemic's financial toll on Latino immigrants in California's hardest-hit rural regions threatens their work, families, and health

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## Rural Latino immigrants: A vital population

During the pandemic, Latino immigrants in the San Joaquin and Imperial Valleys have continued to provide essential services in communities confronting the state's highest SARS-COV-2 infection rates.<sup>1</sup> A majority of California's agricultural workforce in these rural regions are Latino immigrants who help supply the nation's food – including over a third of vegetables and two-thirds of fruits and nuts grown in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> Latino immigrants also account for a high percentage of service sector employees, such as domestic and home health workers. Although these sectors have been deemed essential during the pandemic, there have been few targeted policies to protect workers, their families, or their communities.

This research brief describes the financial insecurity that Latino immigrants in rural California are encountering during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic continues, Latino immigrants living in regions such as the San Joaquin and Imperial Valleys are incurring new costs as they actively engage in preventive measures, such as using personal protective equipment (PPE) and sheltering in place, and continue to provide essential services with limited to no workplace protections. Moreover, parents have faced the added burden of having to implement remote education for their children with limited affordable broadband internet services available in rural areas. Policy responses are needed to prevent adverse health and economic outcomes for a population that is vital to the nation's economy and well-being.

### Policy actions needed to protect rural Latino immigrants

- ▶ Prioritize income support – regardless of legal status – to alleviate financial stress.
- ▶ Mandate workplaces adhere to COVID-19 safety guidelines.
- ▶ Alleviate household expenses through programs such as rent moratoriums and utility payment support.
- ▶ Provide free broadband internet services to rural communities.



<sup>1</sup> *California Covid Map and Case Count*. (2019, October 20). Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/california-coronavirus-cases.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *California Agricultural Production Statistics*. (2020). Retrieved from California Department of Food and Agriculture: <https://www.cdffa.ca.gov/statistics/>.

“Right now, we either die of hunger or die of the virus.”

– Participant, Tulare County

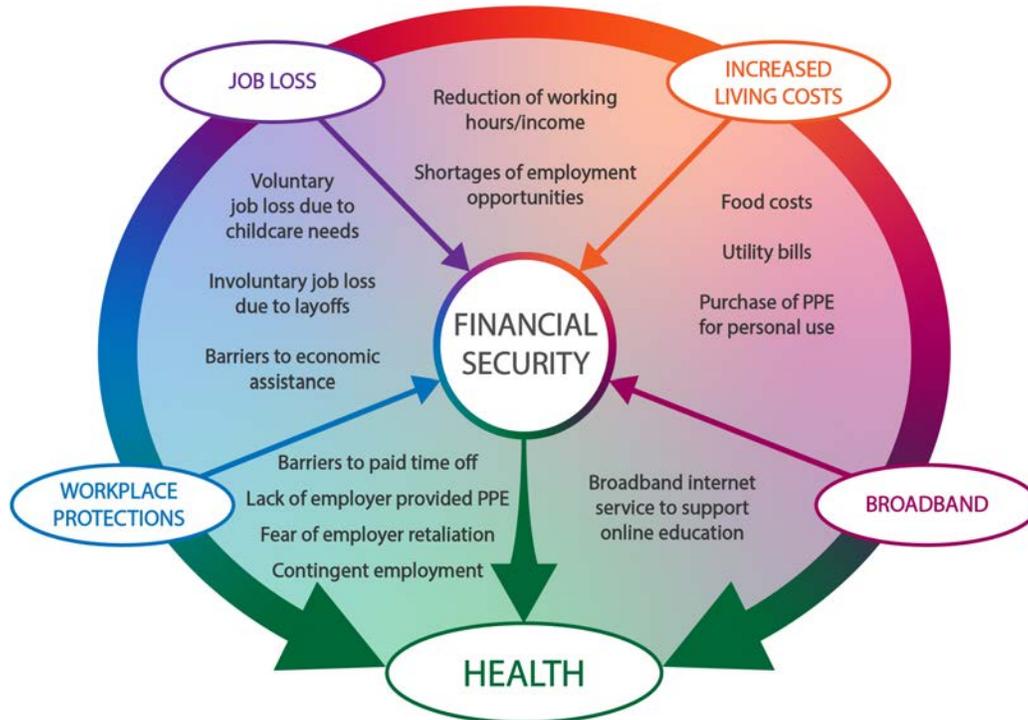


Figure 1: Multiple factors are contributing to the financial insecurity impacting rural Latino immigrants’ physical and mental health.

## Rural Latino immigrants are paying multiple tolls during the COVID-19 pandemic

Many Latino immigrants in rural regions have long faced financial insecurities, workplace hazards, and exclusion from the safety-net due to their legal status. We found that Latino immigrant families in rural areas are paying a triple toll during the pandemic – at work, at home, and on their health – all while being excluded from economic assistance due to their legal status. As a result, they are facing food insecurity and mental and physical health risks.

### TOLL AT WORK

- Study participants who were employed reported pressure from employers to continue working in unsafe environments despite concerns of infection and illness.
- Most participants lacked the financial stability, job security, and access to paid sick leave to shelter in place. While some wanted to take brief time away from work due to COVID-19 concerns, employers only permitted this if they showed documentation of a positive test.
- Many reported limited or no protective measures at their worksite. In agricultural or service sectors, most employers did not provide PPE.
- Despite concerns about COVID-19, those working reported that they did not request PPE or report unsafe working conditions due to fears of employer retaliation.

## TOLL AT HOME

- Most participants lost income because a household member lost their job or had work hours reduced. Women often had to leave employment due to childcare needs. Even participants who continued to work, such as agricultural or domestic workers, lacked income security due to precarious or contingent employment contracts.
- Following school closures, participants' household utility and food costs surged with more family members at home. With high summer temperatures, electricity costs rose due to air conditioning use. Food costs rose when school meals were not accessible.
- Families deferred expenses (e.g., car repairs) and reduced food expenditures to reallocate money to rent and utility bills.
- Of the participants who attempted to access the Disaster Relief Assistance for Immigrants funds, all encountered busy phone lines and were unable to obtain funds.
- Internet bills were new, significant costs, especially for participants who did not previously require daily internet access.

Limited internet provider options in rural areas left families dependent on high priced plans. Some resorted to internet access through cell phone data which was not adequate for quality remote learning.

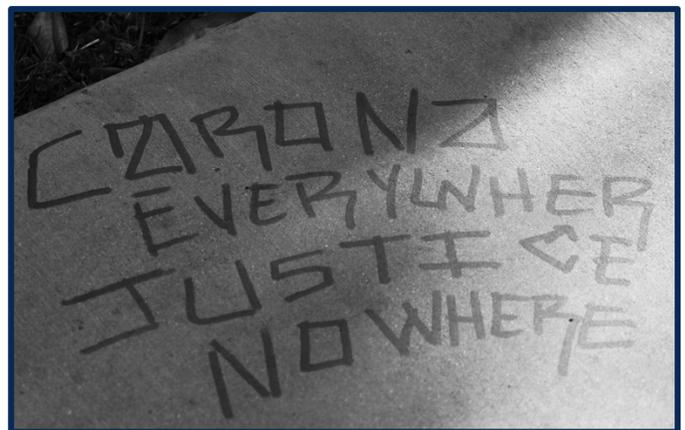
## TOLL ON PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

- A significant cause of worry was the possibility of COVID-19 illness, especially for participants who lacked health coverage.
- Many participants reported adverse mental health outcomes as a result of pandemic-related financial stress, including psychosomatic symptoms, sleep difficulties, and severe headaches, in some cases resulting in emergency room visits.
- Almost all participants and their families faced food insecurity and barriers to accessing nutritious meals due to financial constraints.
- Many participants struggled to access PPE for personal use and turned to charitable or community assistance programs (e.g., food banks, churches) for PPE donations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in new financial tolls on Latino immigrants in rural regions that must be addressed to protect their physical and mental health. Policy responses are needed at all levels, from federal and state legislation and regulations to county ordinances and programs.

**“[My husband] had to start taking sleeping pills...The stress of thinking, [we have to] pay the rent...make [other] payments...The money is running out and we don't have a job.”**

**– Participant, Merced County**



## **Policy recommendations to alleviate financial insecurity**

California’s policymakers should provide Latino immigrants with income support – regardless of legal status – to alleviate financial stress.

- Implement and expand cash assistance programs, such as the state’s Disaster Relief Assistance for Immigrants, and provide resources to ensure implementation is widely accessible.
- Promote awareness of Earned Income Tax Credit (CalEITC) in rural communities, particularly for Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) filers who were not previously eligible.
- Provide stipends or temporary housing accommodations for low-income workers – regardless of legal status – with a confirmed or suspected infection, as have been piloted at the county-level.
- Provide paid childcare leave to rural immigrant parents – regardless of legal status – who have had to leave employment to care for their children.

Regulatory agencies, such as Cal/OSHA, should ensure that workplace protections enforce COVID-19 safety guidelines to protect workers from COVID-19 and financial insecurity.

- Mandate that all employers and contractors provide PPE to reduce out-of-pocket costs for workers and promote occupational safety.
- Implement an OSHA emergency temporary standard for COVID-19.
- Investigate COVID-19 complaints from industries at higher risk of violating COVID-19 workplace safety guidelines (e.g., agricultural employers).
- Expand protections against employer retaliation so workers can request PPE and report dangerous workplace conditions without fear.
- Require that employers provide hazard pay for workers in vital sectors, such as agriculture.
- Ensure that labor protections specifically protect undocumented immigrant workers.

State and local policymakers should implement programs that alleviate household expenses and expand the safety-net.

- Expand and enforce moratoriums on residential evictions to provide flexibility in rent payments, protect renters from evictions, and reduce housing insecurity.
- Provide low- and no-cost utility payment assistance to offset other household expenses.
- Improve outreach efforts, communication, and enrollment for federal nutrition assistance programs, such as CalFresh, in rural immigrant communities.
- Make no- and low-cost PPE widely available in the community.

State and local policymakers should ensure that free broadband internet services are accessible to rural communities to promote quality remote education.

- Make broadband internet services available at no-cost in rural regions.
- Provide no-cost bilingual educational programs to train and build digital capacity among immigrant parents to support remote education.

**“A lot of co-workers have already died [of coronavirus].”  
– Participant, Imperial County**

## About The CLIMA Study

The COVID-19 and Latino Immigrants in Rural California (CLIMA) Study seeks to understand how federal, state, and local health and economic policy responses to COVID-19 are impacting the health of Latino immigrants and their families in rural and agricultural regions of California.

Between July-August 2020, we conducted a first wave of in-depth semi-structured interviews with Latino immigrant adults ages 18 or over in three rural counties: Merced, Tulare, and Imperial. These counties were selected due to their significant Latino immigrant populations and their high COVID-19 case rates. As of October 21, 2020, Imperial County alone had a rate of 6,917 cases per 100,000 population.<sup>1</sup> Interviews sought to identify how participants' financial circumstances, employment conditions, access to health care and other basic needs have changed during the pandemic and how these have shaped physical and mental health. We conducted thematic analysis of interviews to identify the results presented in this brief.

As described in this brief, we found that Latino immigrant families in these hard-hit regions faced risk of infection in workplaces, severe financial insecurity due to the out-of-pocket

costs of day-to-day prevention, and food insecurity and mental health risks. Participants also had limited access to mental health resources and support and reported concerns regarding the potential impacts of remote learning on their children's education and long-term social mobility. For more information about this study, please contact Principal Investigator, Maria-Elena De Trinidad Young at [mariaelena@ucmerced.edu](mailto:mariaelena@ucmerced.edu).

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