

Immigrant legal status among essential frontline workers in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic era

Abstract

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Emerging evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has extracted a substantial toll on immigrant communities in the U.S., due in part to increased potential risk of exposure for immigrants to COVID-19 in the workplace. In this article we use federal guidance on which industries in the U.S. were designated essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, information about the ability to work remotely, and data from the 2019 American Community Survey to estimate the distribution of essential frontline workers by nativity and immigrant legal status. Our results indicate that a larger proportion of foreign-born workers are essential frontline workers compared to native-born workers and that 70 percent of unauthorized immigrant workers are essential frontline workers, substantially higher than other groups of workers we consider in our analysis. These results suggest that larger proportions of foreign-born workers, and especially unauthorized immigrant workers, face greater risk of potential exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace than native-born workers. Demographic, social, and economic characteristics of unauthorized immigrant essential frontline workers indicate they are more vulnerable to poor health outcomes related to COVID-19 than other groups of essential frontline workers. These findings help to provide a plausible explanation for why COVID-19 mortality rates for immigrants are higher than mortality rates for native-born residents.

Authors' Bios

Ryan Allen is an associate professor at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. He is a housing and community development scholar with a focus on the experience of immigrant communities in the U.S. He is the author of a variety of articles that focus on housing affordability, public housing, and immigrant integration in journals such as *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, the *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Urban Studies*, and *International Migration Review*. In addition, Professor Allen has served as an expert witness in multiple federal lawsuits challenging the "public charge" rule change at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. He holds a PhD in urban studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Jose Pacas is a research scientist on the IPUMS International project and an advisor to the IPUMS USA and IPUMS CPS projects. His current research focuses on the factors influencing poverty transitions, methodological improvements to urban and rural poverty measurement in public-use data. Prior work has included estimating the population of undocumented immigrants in the US, estimating the net fiscal impact of labor unions, and a historical profile of the biomedical

labor force. Jose holds a PhD in applied economics and a Master of Public Policy degree from the University of Minnesota.

Zoe Martens is a second-year master's student of Human Rights at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, with a focus on migration. She has previously worked as a domestic violence advocate for immigrant survivors in Minnesota and as a legal advocate for Central American asylum seekers at La Casa Hogar in Tabasco, México. She recently completed an internship with El Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración, based in México City, researching and documenting the implementation of México's federal legal reforms prohibiting the immigration detention of children and adolescents.