



Immigrants and Refugees Are Essential Workers

“The pandemic reminds us that there are no differences or borders between those who suffer. There must be just sharing among nations and their institutions in order to confront the current crisis in a manner marked by solidarity”.

- Pope Francis, Remarks on Divine Mercy Sunday, Mass at Santo Spirito in Sassia, the Sanctuary of Divine Mercy, April 19, 2020

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted key elements of inequality in American life. It also has provided an opportunity to understand the critical role that certain industries play in the maintenance of our daily lives, but which often go overlooked. The contributions of essential workers during COVID-19 is undoubtedly vital, and the contributions that workers provide are crucial to putting food on our tables and ensuring care of those ailing. Without the contributions of essential workers, millions of American lives would be upended. Although many native-born Americans participate in the essential economy, the contributions of immigrants and refugees, notably in food production, healthcare, supply chain, and home health care has proven vital in our efforts to deal effectively with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Newcomers in the essential workforce

Yasin Kakande, an essential home-health aide who came to the United States from Uganda, recently [noted](#), “the work immigrants do has always been essential — it’s just not often recognized as such.”¹ This is a mistake. It is difficult to overemphasize the key role that migrants have in the essential workforce across industries in the United States,² for example:

- 69 % (19.8 million) of all immigrants in the US labor force and 74 % of undocumented workers are essential workers, compared to 65% of the native-born labor force;
- 70 % of refugees and 78 % of Black refugees are essential workers;
- In all but 8 US states, the foreign-born share of the essential workforce equals or exceeds that of all

foreign-born workers, indicating that immigrant essential workers are disproportionately represented in the labor force; and

- The percentage of undocumented essential workers exceeds that of native-born essential workers by 9 % in the 15 states with the largest labor force.

The importance of immigrants and refugees in the essential workforce is more notable when examining their role in specific industries. In the health industry, immigrants comprise 16 % of US health care sector workers, 26 % of home health care workers and aides for the elderly, 22 % of workers in scientific research and laboratories, 24 % of workers in medical equipment manufacturing, and 25 percent in pharmaceuticals manufacturing.³ They also comprise nearly a third of all agricultural workers here in the United States. According to the US Department of Labor's [National Agricultural Workers Survey](#), approximately 83% of farmworkers are Latino, 77 % of farmworkers speak Spanish as their primary language, and 49% of farmworkers lack work authorization.⁴

Immigrants and Refugee Essential Workers Face Illness and Financial Insecurity Due to COVID-19

Not only do immigrants and refugees fill thousands of essential jobs across the US economy, but they are also at a higher risk of infection as a consequence. For example, in Immokalee, Florida, 1,910 persons had tested positive for COVID-19 by July 20 ([Florida Department of Health 2020](#)), the overwhelming majority of them agricultural workers. [Earlier](#) in the pandemic dozens of meat packing plants, which also employ a large number of migrant workers, were forced to close after thousands of people were sickened and at least 12 people died because of the outbreak.⁵ Part of this is because essential workers have not had adequate access to personal protective equipment and social distancing and other health measures have been difficult to implement in certain settings such as meatpacking plants and farm worksites. As a result we have seen a loss of human life and heightened illness. It is imperative that we as a nation not only recognize the essential work that both newcomers and native-born people alike engage in every day, but that we ensure that they are provided the protection and support needed to ensure that they and their families are kept safe.

Another obstacle facing immigrants and refugee essential workers is financial insecurity stemming from COVID-19, which is partly due to the precarious nature of some of these jobs, but also because of the failure to include immigrant and refugee essential workers in any of the COVID-19 support packages passed by the federal government. There are approximately 6.2 million essential workers who are not eligible for relief payments under the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act](#) or the "CARES Act," which was passed in Spring 2020.⁶ Additionally, there were a large number of excluded immigrant and refugee workers' 3.8 million US citizen children (younger than age 17), including 1.2 million US citizen children living in households below the poverty level.⁷

The financial impacts of COVID-19 have been severe and have really hurt families. There is language that allows immigrant and refugee workers (all individuals who have an Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN)) allowed to be eligible for stimulus payments in the House-passed [Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions Act](#) or the "HEROES" Act which passed May 12th⁸. Unfortunately no legislation giving further COVID-19 support to our country has been made law since March 2020. While the Senate has not acted, there are two ongoing efforts ongoing in the Senate to ensure that some mixed-status families would be eligible for future relief. These are the [Coronavirus Assistance for American Families Act](#)⁹ and for CARES stimulus payments through the [American Citizen Coronavirus Relief Act](#).¹⁰ While these efforts in the Senate are appreciated, broader language ensuring more essential workers and their families are included is desperately needed.

What does the Catholic Church teach?

The Catholic Church's solidarity and service related to immigrants and refugees stems from the belief that every human being is created in God's image. In the Old Testament, God calls upon his people to care for the

alien because of their own experience as aliens: “So, you, too, must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:19). In addition to providing extensive direct social, legal and integration services to immigrants and refugees in the United States, the Catholic Church provides direct spiritual ministry to migrant communities, including most notably migrant farmworkers. The Catholic Church and the USCCB have supported and will continue to support efforts to increase the economic security of workers, whether newcomer or native-born. Human labor has an inherent dignity because it allows us to share in the ongoing work of creation, while providing the resources we need to build and sustain families. The bishops have called on Congress to raise the federal minimum wage, extend tax credits that benefit low-income working families, and increase funding for job training.

What can you do?

- **Pray.** Use and share this [prayer](#), issued by Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the USCCB, in response to COVID-19.
- **Learn.** Take a moment to become more aware about the situation confronting migrants and their families because of COVID-19 at the Justice for Immigrants [COVID-19 resource page](#).
- **Act.** Fill out our [action alert](#) to let your Senator know that protections for immigrants and refugees need to be included in the next COVID-19 relief package.
- **Make Sure All Are Included in COVID-19 Relief.** Urge your Senator to support the [Coronavirus Assistance for American Families Act](#) and the [American Citizen Coronavirus Relief Act](#) and any other measure that helps to ensure that immigrant and refugee families are included in COVID-19 relief.

Endnotes

1 Yasin Kakande, “We are not enemies. We are essential workers,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/opinion/coronavirus-essential-workers-immigrants.html>.

2 The following, bullet points are taken from Donald Kerwin and Robert Warren, *US Foreign-Born Workers in the Global Pandemic: Essential and Marginalized*, JOURNAL ON MIGRATION AND HUMAN SECURITY, (SEPTEMBER 2020), AVAILABLE AT, [HTTPS://JOURNALS.SAGEPUB.COM/DOI/10.1177/2311502420952752](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2311502420952752).

3 Id.

4 U.S. Department of Labor, Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey 2015-2016 (NAWS), published January 2018, available at https://www.doleta.gov/naaws/research/docs/NAWS_Research_Report_13.pdf

5 “Trump deems farmworkers ‘essential’ but not safety rules for them. That could threaten the food supply,” *Politico*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/12/trump-farmworkers-essential-coronavirus-safety-250142>

6 *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act* (CARES Act), §2201, Pub. L. No. 116-136 (2020). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/748/text>.

7 Donald Kerwin and Robert Warren, *US Foreign-Born Workers in the Global Pandemic: Essential and Marginalized*, JOURNAL ON MIGRATION AND HUMAN SECURITY, (SEPTEMBER 2020), AVAILABLE AT, [HTTPS://JOURNALS.SAGEPUB.COM/DOI/10.1177/2311502420952752](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2311502420952752).

8 *Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions Act* (Heroes Act), H.R. 6800, 116th Congress (2020).

9 USCCB Committee on Migration, “Letter of Support for Coronavirus Assistance for American Families (CAAF) Act”, August 5, 2020, <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/letters-of-support-and-administrative-requests/letter-of-support-for-coronavirus-assistance-for-american-families-caaf-act/>.

10 USCCB Committee on Migration, Letter to the Senate, July 1, 2020, https://justiceforimmigrants.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/American_Citizen_Coronavirus_Relief_Act7.1.20-FINAL.pdf.