



6 MONTHS LATER: Still Essential, Still Excluded

*A Report Based on Surveys of Immigrants in New Jersey
During the COVID-19 Pandemic*



September 14, 2020



INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 virus recedes in New Jersey from peak levels over the Spring, millions of New Jerseyans still face unemployment, loss of income, and hunger. While New Jersey and the federal government have passed numerous aid packages, New Jersey's nearly half million undocumented immigrants are left behind by virtually every form of aid, creating deep pain for themselves and their 264,000 immediate U.S. citizen family members. This study seeks to quantify the economic loss experienced by immigrant New Jerseyans and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their wellbeing during the first six months of the pandemic. It is an update to Make the Road New Jersey's April 23, 2020 report "[Essential and Excluded: Immigrants in New Jersey under COVID-19](#)," which surveyed 224 immigrant New Jerseyans.

For this report, we conducted a 17 question survey with the same pool of immigrant New Jerseyans and their families in late August/early September. We administered the survey over the phone and via text message to 224 undocumented immigrants and mixed status families from across New Jersey. Results are based on 187 complete responses.

BACKGROUND

New Jersey's nearly half-million undocumented immigrants are vital to our economy and an integral part of our state. [Undocumented immigrants in New Jersey pay approximately \\$600 million in state and local taxes each year and more than \\$1 billion in federal taxes.](#) Over the past ten years, [undocumented immigrants have paid \\$1.2 billion into the unemployment system.](#) Many work in essential occupations, including delivery, warehouses, health care, and cleaning, that keep us all safe and allowed millions of New Jerseyans to shelter in place during the worst months of the pandemic. Others – approximately one in four of the undocumented working population - worked in industries hardest hit by COVID-19, with the largest percentage of undocumented people working in retail, restaurant, and personal services industries, [according to an analysis completed by Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations researchers and New Jersey Policy Perspective.](#)

The CARES Act and subsequent federal relief packages have explicitly left not only undocumented immigrants out of relief, they have also penalized their U.S. citizen spouses and children from receiving aid. U.S. citizens that file taxes with an undocumented spouse are ineligible for stimulus payments under the CARES Act, as are the children of undocumented parents. This means that at least [722,527 people in New Jersey, including 262,527 U.S. citizens who live with an immediate undocumented family member,](#) have been left behind by aid under the CARES Act. Undocumented immigrants are also ineligible for unemployment insurance, pandemic unemployment insurance, SNAP, and TANF. This is the equivalent of leaving out the population of Hudson County or Camden and Hunterdon Counties combined.

"I'm a single mom. I lost my job during the pandemic and didn't qualify for any aid. I can't pay for internet and my phone was shut off. I lost contact with the community and my kids have had a hard time going to school because we don't have internet. I pay taxes and I want our representatives to see the we – me and my children – need support."

- Anonymous Survey Respondent

KEY FINDINGS

Economic Insecurity: an overwhelming number of respondents reported deep economic insecurity and job loss, and an inability to pay for basic necessities such as medicine, food and electric bills.

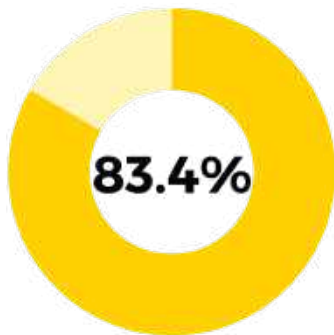
An increasing number of survey respondents – nearly all – have experienced job loss or a reduction in work hours and income.

81% live in household where a member of the household lost their job during the pandemic, a number which has **increased since April**, when approximately 71% of respondents had experienced job loss in their household. In addition, **88.1% reported they or a household member have lost income or hours of work during the pandemic.**

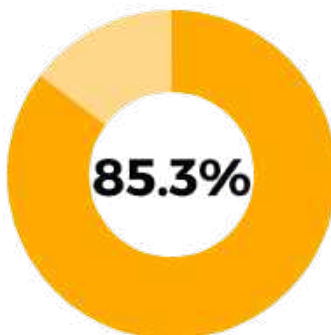
"My wife and I lost our jobs during the pandemic. I am undocumented and she is a U.S. citizen but because of my status she was not given the stimulus check. We have had to ask for help from family and friends and to start over from zero."
- Anonymous Survey Respondent

As undocumented immigrants are ineligible for unemployment and stimulus payments, this means that a significant number of respondents were without income.

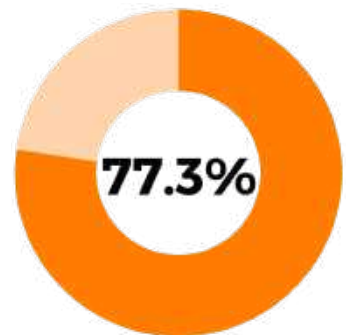
This translated into inability to pay for basic necessities:



of respondents were worried about being able to pay the light bill.



of respondents were worried about being able to pay for food for themselves or their families.

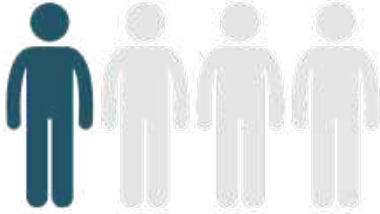


of respondents were worried about being able to buy medicine for themselves or for their families.

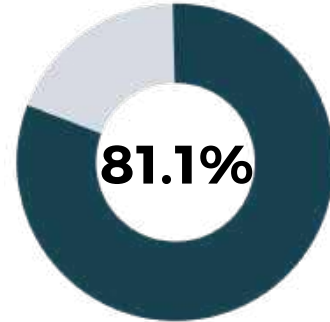
KEY FINDINGS (cont.)

Housing: A Looming Eviction Crisis with Little Aid

Respondents expressed deep concern over the ability to pay rent.



One in four respondents owed at least 4 months rent or mortgage payments.



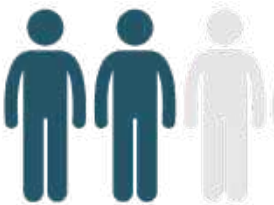
81.1% were concerned they would not be able to pay the next month's rent.

Disturbingly, **1 in 8 tenants experienced harassment** at the hand of their landlord during the pandemic, and despite the fact that there is a moratorium on evictions in New Jersey, **at least one respondent was evicted from her home during the pandemic.**

"I lost my small business during the pandemic. I also lost a close family member. I have not received a penny in aid."

- Anonymous Survey Respondent

Lack of Workplace Safety for Essential Workers



An alarmingly high number of respondents, **two in three that have worked throughout the pandemic,** reported feeling unsafe at work.

13.7%

In contrast, **only 13.7% reported feeling safe at work.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the Trump administration and Congress fail to deliver any aid for excluded workers and immigrant families, it is incumbent upon states to take action to protect these frontline workers and families. New Jersey must take immediate and swift action to support undocumented immigrant families, their children and spouses and workers excluded by aid. Revenue raisers in the state budget that tax corporations and the wealthiest New Jerseyans that are better off now than they were before the pandemic should be considered to pay for these critical programs. There are numerous proposals pending in the legislature and other action the state can take to ensure all families can be included in the recovery.

These include:

- **Immediate pandemic relief for excluded workers and their families:**

Nearly a half million undocumented New Jerseyans and their 225,000 US citizen family members have been left behind by federal COVID aid for nearly six months. New Jersey must create a COVID relief fund for these excluded families, including \$600 weekly payments to unemployed workers barred from unemployment insurance and immediate passage of S2480/A4171: one time payments to immigrant taxpayers excluded from federal relief. New Jersey should also include ITIN filers in the state Earned Income Tax Credit.

- **Protect Frontline Workers:**

An overwhelming number of frontline workers reported feeling unsafe at work. New Jersey must take action to protect these workers who have kept our state safe, through an executive order that creates enforceable mechanisms to protect workers' health and safety. While undocumented workers are ineligible for unemployment, they are eligible for paid sick days. The New Jersey state legislature should pass S2453/A4209 to provide essential workers with 15 emergency paid sick days available immediately during a state of emergency and increase the base number of earned sick days from 5 to 7. The legislature should also pass A4268 which permits workers during a public health emergency to refuse to work if an employer has not taken sufficient measures to alleviate exposure to communicable disease or other health or safety hazards.

RECOMMENDATIONS (cont.)

- **Cancel Rent:**

A wide majority of respondents feared being able to pay the next month's rent and light bill, and a substantial portion have been unable to pay rent for one or more of the months during the pandemic. New Jersey must act immediately to suspend rent and utility payments and to create a program that permits all low-income residents to obtain rent and utility relief, regardless of federal immigration status. The current \$100 million fund is insufficient to support the million renters in New Jersey. A good first step is to pass A4266/S2340/A4034 which protects renters unable to make up several months' rent from being evicted and provides forbearance to homeowners who are unable to immediately meet their mortgage payments.

"I pay 300 a month in medicine because I'm uninsured. And most months during the pandemic I have to decide whether to pay for food or my medication. It's such a difficult situation. The utilities company sends us letters that they will shut off the lights. Many nights I don't sleep thinking about my debts. It's very stressful when you don't have access to aid. This is impacting my physical and mental health."

- Anonymous Survey Respondent

About

Make the Road New Jersey builds the power of immigrant and working-class communities to achieve dignity and respect through community organizing, high quality legal and support services, policy innovation and transformative education.