

Working-class immigrants terrorized by Trump administration avoid COVID-19 testing, treatment

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Working class immigrants, already amongst the most vulnerable sections of the US population, have been hard hit by the spread of the coronavirus. Doctors, immigration lawyers and community organizations report that a significant number of immigrants, despite showing symptoms associated with COVID-19, have avoided getting tested. The most common reason cited is the fear of putting themselves and their family members in the cross-hairs of the Trump administration's thugs at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and running afoul of the recently introduced "public charge rule."

In late January 2020, the Supreme Court upheld the Trump administration's implementation of a rule which allows the US government to deny permanent residency to any applicant, even those not categorized as "undocumented," if they were considered to be a "public charge"—i.e., someone who relies on government assistance.

The new rule, which had first been floated last August, has caused immense confusion and anxiety amongst immigrant communities. As numerous studies have reported, even before it took effect, the rule led large numbers of immigrant families to stay away from non-cash benefit programs for fear of deportation or putting future green card status at risk. These programs include Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, which provide much needed medical aid to poor and young children.

As the scope of pandemic was becoming apparent last month, public health experts and immigrant rights groups warned about the additional dangers faced by immigrants because of the Trump administration's inhumane policies. Ally Bolour, a Los Angeles-based

immigration attorney who is on the American Immigration Lawyers Association's board of governors, told the *Guardian* in early-March: "This is a national health emergency crisis. The government needs to come out, and just be out, and say, 'We're not going to deport you,'" Bolour said. "If you're sick, come on in. We'll take care of you.' I mean, nobody's saying any of that."

Soon after Trump declared a national emergency in mid-March, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) put out a statement on its website meant to imply that it was relaxing its application of the public charge rule: "If the alien is prevented from working or attending school, and must rely on public benefits for the duration of the Covid-19 outbreak and recovery phase, the alien can provide an explanation and relevant supporting documentation." The language could hardly have been more hostile, particularly when directed towards a community that has been the target of more and more punitive and outright inhumane policies.

Lawrence Gostin, a professor of global health law at Georgetown University and adviser to the World Health Organization, told the *New York Times* "The first rule of public health is to gain people's trust to come forward: People who don't seek care cannot be tested or treated, and their contacts won't be traced." The lack of testing puts at serious risk the lives of those who might be infected, while underscoring the very real danger of an uncontrolled and as yet undetermined spread of the coronavirus in working class communities across the country.

As numerous reports over the past month have noted, working class immigrants are amongst the most

vulnerable to the spread of coronavirus, given the fact that most cannot self-isolate, live in cramped quarters, work without any employer-paid health benefits, and are not in a position to take days off. A significant portion do not have any health coverage, with a Kaiser Family Foundation report from March finding that among immigrants, 23 percent of those who are in the US with legal documents and 45 percent of those who are undocumented lack health insurance.

There are, in most states, community clinics that serve people who require medical care, regardless of their legal status or ability to pay. Some states, like New York and California, also cover costs of medical treatment for undocumented children. But the fear and confusion generated by the public charge rule has meant that working class immigrants have tended to shy away from using any of these facilities even prior to the coronavirus outbreak. Added to it is the very real danger that using such facilities might bring undocumented immigrants to the attention of ICE agents possibly staked outside.

ICE designates medical facilities as “sensitive locations” where enforcement is generally avoided. However, that is cold comfort to immigrants who have witnessed ICE question and arrest people in and around hospitals. In February 2020, ICE arrested a man in a Brooklyn hospital and brought him out in handcuffs after agents tasered and shot another person who tried to intervene in his arrest. In March, even as the pandemic took root, ICE launched an operation involving increased surveillance and raids in sanctuary cities. The goal of the operation, as the *New York Times* reported, was to “arrest as many undocumented immigrants as possible.”

Early this week, the New York state attorney general’s office filed a lawsuit with the Supreme Court asking for a stay on the application of the public charge policy during the pandemic. As noted by BuzzFeed, the lawsuit cites declarations from numerous physicians, lawyers and community advocates, all of whom make the simple point that the public charge rule has had a disastrous effect on COVID-19 prevention efforts.

Pedro Moreno, a doctor serving patients in parts of Monterey County, California, a region that’s home to farmworkers who have been unable to take time off work, wrote in a declaration attached to the filing: “I believe some of my farmworker patients have already

been infected with COVID-19 by other farmworkers in the fields. Unfortunately, many of them are afraid to seek medical care due to the public charge rule, and are already spreading the infection in our community.”

His concerns were reiterated by Eden Almasude, a resident physician in Connecticut: “As part of my work, I have received reports of multiple patients who had symptoms consistent with COVID-19 but were afraid to go to the hospital or even obtain COVID-19 testing because they were concerned about the public charge consequences of testing and treatment and feared that a huge hospital bill would leave their families destitute. Immigrants’ concerns and fears are ongoing during this crisis.”

The attack on immigrants has always been part of a broader attack on the working class waged by the American ruling class. The coronavirus pandemic has only served to further expose the true nature of these attacks and the fundamental class divisions that structure capitalist society.



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