

The unseen plight of undocumented workers in the US during the pandemic

Melody Isley

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The United States marked another grim milestone this week, reporting a record 2,921 deaths due to COVID-19 on Thursday. The country has recorded a total of over 288,000 deaths since February and 15 million total cases.

Despite these horrific numbers, there still remain hundreds of thousands of unreported infections and thousands of deaths that are left out of official counts. Undocumented workers in the US are at a unique risk of being under-reported, as their lack of citizenship and the ever-present threat of detention and deportation prevents them from seeking assistance, medical or otherwise.

During the crisis triggered by the pandemic, the undocumented, a particularly abused and exploited section of the working class, face even greater challenges than before. These workers live not just in fear of deportation, homelessness, or destitution, but are increasingly forced to suffer the prospect of contracting COVID-19 alone, unseen, and denied care.

Making up nearly 6 percent of the American workforce, undocumented workers fuel industries like agriculture, manufacturing, meatpacking and animal husbandry, as well as the broader service industry, which includes food services, building and outdoor maintenance, and construction.

Across the United States, more than 2.5 million farm workers and almost 2 million food service workers are undocumented immigrants, constituting almost half of all farm workers in the United States and almost a quarter of food service work. Undocumented workers provide up to 30 percent of the labor in the service industry in California.

Despite the “essential” label tacked onto these industries during the pandemic, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration has refused to require or enforce any kind of COVID-19 safety measures for workers.

COVID-19 has ripped through the agricultural industry and its “essential” workers. Research by Purdue University estimates that more than 145,000 farm workers have tested positive for COVID-19. This number, while staggering, does not include temporary laborers as well as those who could

not be tested—most likely undocumented workers.

The Immokalee Region of southern Florida, a region known for its significant immigrant population and year-round tomato growing, reported more than 1,000 COVID-19 cases in October. At a watermelon farm in Florida’s Alachua County, 90 of the farm’s 100 workers tested positive for the disease over the course of a month.

According to a recent study from UC Berkeley, farm workers in California have contracted coronavirus at nearly three times the rate of other workers. In the San Joaquin Valley of Central California, one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world and by far the most active in the US, one county reported almost 28,000 cases and 522 deaths, with rates growing astronomically between August and December. More than 1,180 agricultural workers in Santa Barbara County have tested positive, revealing only a fraction of the actual scale of the spread.

As in agriculture, meatpacking workers and others in food production have a significantly increased risk for contracting the virus. California’s Central Valley also set another US record with the largest outbreak from a single farm, when 400 employees tested positive at a poultry farm in Merced County. In Los Angeles, the Farmer John meatpacking plant, the largest such facility in the state, racked up tens of thousands of dollars in wrist-slap fines for unsafe conditions which resulted in more than 300 employees contracting COVID-19 during the month of November alone.

Tyson Foods, the world’s second-largest meat-processing company, recently made international headlines after managers placed bets on how many workers would contract the deadly virus at a pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa. The company has reported that more than 10 percent of their 100,000 employees have contracted the virus—a record for the industry. In Perry, Iowa, home of one of the largest Tyson facilities, more than 730 workers have tested positive, making up more than 10 percent of all cases in rural Dallas County.

All told, eight percent of all COVID-19 cases in the US so far can be linked to meatpacking plants. When there is an

outbreak at a farm or packing house, these “essential” workers are unable to physically distance at work and also at home due to cramped living quarters. As these cases develop, it becomes a distinct possibility that half if not the majority of workers at a given facility will contract the virus.

Compounding the existing pains of financial instability and the constant fear of deportation, undocumented workers face amplified challenges during the present crisis as they have no access to state or federal financial assistance, no opportunities for remote work, and are likely to take on whatever low-paying, precarious position they can find in the labor market, risking their lives in the process.

Miguel, an undocumented restaurant worker for more than 10 years, painted a devastating portrait of the difficulties facing undocumented workers across the US in a recent interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

He explained that while many undocumented workers are left behind and harassed by the US government, they still “work those jobs that American citizens don’t want to do. We clean toilets, we clean the offices, we’re doing the hard labor to keep this country running. We keep it clean, we keep it fed ... and no one sees us.” Despite being on the front lines of the pandemic and fueling much of the US economy, undocumented workers are given even fewer resources than others, while also being actively terrorized by the government.

Many undocumented workers have lost their jobs, forcing them to move-in with three or four other families to afford a place to stay. “A lot of them have become homeless during COVID,” Miguel explained. “They don’t have a place to go, they don’t have a place where they can get help.”

According to the US Census Bureau, immigrant workers are over four times more likely than US-born citizens to live in overcrowded conditions—a situation that already is troubling but is even more worrisome during the COVID-19 crisis and contributes heavily to the disproportionate rate of infection in immigrant communities.

Miguel worries that “kids from undocumented families are going to be left behind because they don’t have the resources.” As undocumented parents are denied resources, their children, including those who are US citizens, suffer alongside. He explained that since many parents are unable to afford to pay for internet service, children risk falling behind academically as classes move online. “Kids are being forced to go to Starbucks to sit outside on the sidewalk or sit outside the library to do their homework and go to their online classes,” Miguel noted.

While some workers have the limited ability to take time off for testing or quarantine, undocumented workers lack even these insufficient measures. Miguel said, “We are disposable. You get sick? You get fired. And that’s the end

of it.”

In San Diego, the family of one undocumented farmworker spoke to CBS8 about their struggle. The children of the farmworker reported that their father had contracted coronavirus from a coworker in the fields and developed severe symptoms, leading to his death.

The family, undocumented and citizens alike, feared that testing would pose a serious risk to their safety, as COVID-19 testing requires a certain amount of personal information to be aggregated into a national database. The father died without access to testing and had been actively barred from proper resources and care due to his undocumented status. The family is now forced to grieve in anonymity due to continued fears of deportation. Their father’s death will be unreported by the government and unseen in the official death toll of the pandemic.

Many undocumented people live in mixed-status households, and more than 90 percent of immigrant parents have children who are American citizens. Living in a mixed-status household puts every member of the family in a precarious position. Even if some are citizens, they often report feeling unable to ask for help from any government affiliates, ranging from local police to local hospitals and financial relief agencies, for fear that they could potentially put their undocumented family member at risk for identification and deportation.

These fears are entirely justified, considering that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has conducted some of its largest raids in history during the pandemic. The WWSWS reported in September that a record-breaking raid saw more than 2,000 immigrants taken into custody, primarily from their homes since a pandemic stay-at-home order was in place.

A scientific and humane response to the COVID-19 crisis would include free and abundant access to resources like rapid testing and treatment for all people, as well as widespread financial assistance for all workers and their families, regardless of citizenship or work status. But this is not possible under capitalism in which everything, including workers’ lives, is subordinated to the demands for ever greater profits. Workers must take up the fight for socialism to reorganize society under the democratic control of the international working class to meet the needs of all, rather than the financial interests of a few.



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