



UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS AND COVID-19

The Need for “Antibodies of Solidarity” in the Coronavirus Pandemic

BY SUE WEISHAR, PH.D.

In central Mississippi, where 681 immigrant workers were arrested in massive ICE raids at chicken processing plants in August, less than seven months later at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrants still employed at the plants received special letters from their employers to show the police in case they are stopped. The letter indicates that the person is an “essential” employee and should be allowed to travel to work.¹

The impossibilities and contradictions that are the reality of undocumented immigrant lives in the United States grow only stronger with the COVID-19 pandemic. For nativist Americans, undocumented immigrants are the “dangerous other,” despite easily checked facts that show native-born Americans commit crimes at higher rates than undocumented immigrants.² Although undocumented immigrants are ineligible for essential government safety net programs like Food Stamps, TANF cash assistance (i.e.

“welfare”), Social Security, and Medicaid,³ somehow they are labeled “takers.” Undocumented immigrants perform difficult, sometimes dangerous work that many Americans shun, like clearing out homes smothered in the muck of epic floods after natural disasters. Nevertheless, they are accused of “stealing our jobs.”

Now in the midst of a historic pandemic, undocumented workers, otherwise invisible and disposable, are needed to fill jobs considered essential to U.S. citizens’ health and well-being, not only at meat processing plants, where at least 20 percent of workers are undocumented,⁴ but also as farm laborers (an estimated 50-70 percent are undocumented),⁵ and home health care workers (one out of fourteen are undocumented).⁶ In New York City, an early epicenter of the pandemic, a study by the Center for Migration Studies found that 15 percent of grocery store workers and 33 percent of food delivery workers are undocumented.⁷

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At the same time, among the hundreds of thousands of people who have lost their livelihoods to the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., perhaps none have been harder hit financially than undocumented immigrants. Social distancing requirements have heavily impacted the service industry, where 32 percent of undocumented workers were employed before the pandemic.⁸ The three COVID-19 aid programs passed by Congress in late March to assist unemployed workers provide little or no relief to undocumented workers.

The Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program provides unemployment insurance for people who are self-employed, independent contractors, freelancers, and part-time workers, but only to those who are work-authorized, regardless of whether they pay taxes or not.⁹ (Over one-half of undocumented immigrant workers pay federal income taxes using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers, ITIN, assigned by the IRS.)¹⁰ The CARES Act provides direct payment of \$1,200 for a single filer, \$2,400 for joint filers, and an additional \$500 per child claimed on their tax returns; but recipients must have valid Social Security Numbers. In fact, if just one member of a family is undocumented, even if she filed her income taxes using an ITIN, the entire household is disqualified.¹¹

MariLo Martinez Rivera is the leader of a New Orleans area nonprofit, *Mujeres Luchadoras*, that provides support services to immigrant families who have lost their husbands/fathers to deportation. She recently shared with me the tremendous fear and anxiety undocumented immigrants are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many local undocumented immigrant women were employed in the hard-hit hospitality industry as housekeepers, waitresses, cooks, and dishwashers. She knows of no undocumented immigrant woman who still has work. She described their plight:

Everybody, besides being scared for their kids, for yourself, of getting sick, are especially worried about how to pay the rent. People are being threatened by their landlords. One landlord said you don't have to pay rent this month but you have to pay me double rent next month. They are never going to catch up with that—they have no safety net... One woman was so worried about paying the rent she was having headaches so bad she felt like her eye was going to pop out... People from here, at least they know where to turn to... Here [for undocumented immigrants] there is no loan, there is no nothing... It is like people don't exist... However, if there is another hurricane, who do you think will be doing the [recovery] work?¹²

Historical geographer Richard Campanella notes that during the many yellow fever epidemics that ravaged

New Orleans during its first two centuries of existence, newcomers to the city, such as mariners, transients, and particularly immigrants, dominated the list of fatalities.¹³ It is estimated that at least six thousand Irish immigrants died from yellow fever and cholera building the New Basin Canal between 1832 and 1838.¹⁴ When yellow fever struck New Orleans for the last time in 1905, Italian-born immigrants, only two percent of the city's population, comprised 39 percent of the fatalities.¹⁵

One reason why immigrants were particularly vulnerable to such epidemics is because they lacked immunity to tropical contagions—in other words, the antibodies to fight the diseases they were encountering.¹⁶

In his Easter message, Pope Francis, in his vivid and creative way of drawing us more deeply into the core truths of our Christian faith, insists that “an emergency like COVID-19 is overcome in the first place by the antibodies of solidarity... If we can act as one people, also in the face of other epidemics that are hitting us, then we can have real impact.” He goes on to identify the other epidemics as hunger, war, poverty, environmental devastation, and the globalization of indifference.¹⁷ The Pope has often noted that it is the “globalization of indifference” that leaves migrant people so vulnerable to marginalization and exploitation.

In another compelling Easter reflection, Rev. Augusto Zampini, Adjunct Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, writes “The Coronavirus-19 pandemic is a tremendous challenge for all people worldwide. It is an urgent and complex calamity that requires new solutions: ‘new wine, new wineskins’ (MK 2:22), new ways of living, new ways of working, new ways of development.”¹⁸

The pandemic has exposed the extreme vulnerabilities of immigrants and other poor and marginalized people. In the weeks, months, and years to come can we discard the old “wineskins” of fear and indifference that have placed undocumented immigrants in the untenable situation they are forced to live today? Can we rise to Pope Francis' Easter challenge to embrace the necessary antibodies of justice, charity, and solidarity and finally “not be afraid to live the alternative civilization of love”?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Interview with Rev. Roberto Mena, ST, Pastor, St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Forest, MS., May 1, 2020.
- 2 See Weishar, S. (2018, Spring). *Immigrants and Crime: Debunking the Myth*, *JustSouth Quarterly*, at http://www.loyno.edu/jsri/sites/loyno.edu/jsri/files/justsouth_quarterly_spring_2018_weishar.pdf
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JustSouth Quarterly individual articles are available free at loyno.edu/jsri/publications

JustSouth is published quarterly by the Jesuit Social Research Institute, College of Arts and Sciences, Loyola University New Orleans, 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 94, New Orleans, LA 70118

The *JustSouth Monthly* is published 12 times a year and is available upon request without charge at jsri@loyno.edu. Copyright 2014 © Jesuit Social Research Institute. ISSN 2161-315X

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