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Latinos,
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Voices from the Community

By Patricia Foxen, PhD



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper was researched and authored by Patricia Foxen, PhD, UnidosUS's Deputy Director of Research. Emily Ruskin, former Senior Immigration Policy Analyst at UnidosUS, contributed to the write-up of portions of the report and her input is deeply appreciated. Guadalupe López Hernández, doctoral student in Human Development and Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), provided valuable assistance during the research and analysis phases of the study. Many thanks to Eric Rodriguez, Senior Vice President of Policy and Advocacy, and Charles Kamasaki, Senior Cabinet Advisor for UnidosUS, for their substantive feedback and contributions to the report. Thank you as well to Emily Mace, PhD, UnidosUS Consultant, for her help in editing and preparing this report for publication, and to Kelly Isaac, Senior Design and Brand Manager, for formatting and designing the final report. The author is also deeply appreciative of the support provided by UnidosUS Affiliate representatives Barbara Cesar and John Martinez (Centro Campesino, FL); Andrés Martinez and Juliana Ospina Cano (Conexión Américas, TN); Lupi Quinteros-Grady, Carmen Galvis and Tatiana Sandoval (Latin American Youth Center, DC); Isaias Hernandez and Lisbeth Perez (Eastmont Community Center, CA); and Elsa Gonazalez and Karina Vasquez (Proyecto Vida Digna, TX) in organizing the focus groups upon which the report is based.

UnidosUS is grateful to the Walmart Foundation, whose generous support and vision made this work possible. The views and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the author and UnidosUS alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of our funders.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the lead-up to the U.S. federal pandemic emergency declaration on March 13, 2020, America was in political crisis: deeply divided along ideological, class, geographic, and racial lines, and facing rising extremist sentiments and a hyper-partisan political dynamic. Latinos found themselves at the center of this social fragmentation, with their growing numbers cited as a frequent pretext for much xenophobic backlash across the country. As a result of the extreme anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric of the previous administration, many Hispanics* had begun to register sentiments that reflected some degree of societal alienation, with public opinion polls consistently showing that a sizable portion felt like outsiders who are excluded in their own nation. The eruption of the pandemic ushered in a new period of exclusion for many Latinos. Low-income and undocumented Latino immigrants, in particular, bore an outsized share of the pandemic's harsh impacts, while also being disproportionately represented on its frontlines as essential workers, keeping our nation's hospitals, food chains, and the service sector afloat. Despite experiencing some of the highest rates of infection and loss of employment, many Latino immigrant families were unable to access critical government assistance, such as stimulus relief, unemployment benefits, and other supports available to most other Americans during this prolonged period of crisis.

By August 2020, a UnidosUS national survey of registered Latino voters found that 50% of those polled (and 62% of young people aged 18-29) said they had felt like an outsider in the United States since the start of the pandemic. Against this backdrop, and seeking to find the meanings behind these numbers, UnidosUS set out to shed light on how the COVID-19 pandemic and the structural inequities it unveiled had affected experiences and feelings of

* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as "Latinx" to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

social belonging and exclusion among the country's diverse Latino population. The following report uses the concept of social belonging—grounded in the behavioral and social sciences—to explore these issues. Using a mixed-methods approach, researchers conducted 10 virtual focus groups between November 2020 and January 2021 with Latino parents and youth (in the Rio Grande Valley, TX; East Los Angeles, CA; central Florida; the Nashville, TN metro area; and the Washington, DC metro area), as well as two focus groups with frontline community service providers from across the country. Focus group results were supplemented with a short national survey aimed at quantifying select findings.

Our research findings, which are qualitative in nature, provide an in-depth and textured exploration of various aspects of social belonging among Hispanics. The focus group data tell a story of the struggles and hurdles experienced by Latinos across the country, obstacles that produced high levels of desperation and anxiety resulting from rampant sickness, lost income, and the challenges of living in small spaces with limited access to supports and resources, among others. The overarching story points to the fact that many Latinos have experienced the pandemic in ways that are substantially different from that of other Americans who were better equipped to absorb economic and social dislocation either through higher socioeconomic status or through full inclusion in policy supports. Three main themes were highlighted in the discussions:

1. ***“We’re essential workers when it’s convenient”:*** Participants discussed the feelings of injustice and being made to feel “less than” that resulted from Latino immigrants being excluded from urgently needed supports, such as stimulus checks and unemployment benefits, even as they were struggling financially due to wage loss and health emergencies. Many mentioned the pronounced fear resulting from the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant policies such as the “public charge” rule; other barriers to desperately needed support leading into and during the pandemic included linguistic and digital barriers, lack of information, confusion about eligibility for various benefits, discouraging bureaucratic processes, and outright racial discrimination. Several participants underscored what they viewed as a larger societal hypocrisy surfaced by the pandemic, whereby “essential workers”—a majority of whom are Latino immigrants—were on one level praised and touted as important and valued contributors to the U.S. economy, while on the other level being treated as disposable and exploitable labor.
2. ***“They still see us as foreigners”:*** All of the focus group discussions included impassioned and explicit statements about the particularly noxious and hurtful effects of Trump-era racism on Latinos, which continue to shape conversations around belonging and exclusion. These dynamics racialized Latinos and shaped perceptions about where Hispanics fit in the overall social order of the nation. Many alluded to negative messages about Latinos that conflate race/ethnicity, immigration status, and language markers, and they also mentioned the “racialized economics” that posit Latino immigrants as usurpers of jobs they do not deserve. Participants recounted how such public perceptions affected their everyday lives and experiences in different public milieus, where they often felt diminished or even criminalized. While some mentioned instances of hyper-surveillance of Latinos (for example, in the Texas border region), others, particularly youth, discussed the racialization of Latinos as a feeling of not being seen or being tokenized, and therefore not being understood or discerned by the dominant culture. Some attributed the invisibility of Latinos in part to the pronounced fear that often permeates immigrant lives.

3. ***“We should all be proud to be Americans”***: At the same time, perceptions and experiences around social belonging and exclusion were varied, nuanced, and at times paradoxical, which stands to reason given the diversity of the Latino population in terms of geography, class, culture of origin, and generational status. Experiences of racialized exclusion tended to vary by state and locality. Focus group participants mentioned that while Latinos are often stigmatized within broader discourse or excluded by federal policies, state and local environments often offer programs promoting welcoming environments, including a variety of resources for immigrants and minorities—thus fostering a sense of belonging at the community level. While participants thus expressed varying degrees of anguish, desperation, fear, and abandonment during the pandemic, at another level a strong sense of resilience and agency was simultaneously articulated by many, especially by those who were able to tap into existing sources of support either in their communities, their families, or themselves.

As illustrated throughout the report, the effects of social exclusion are clearly identified and felt deeply by Latino families and communities; particularly hurtful to many was the fact that various forms of exclusion and racialization have profound and long-lasting repercussions for the children of immigrants, the vast majority of whom are U.S.-born citizens. Young people who have grown up witnessing policy systems that restrict, stigmatize, and ostracize their parents and their families are at risk of becoming citizen adults who are more wary of government, less civically active, distrustful of key civic institutions, and apathetic to and disconnected from critical national interests and endeavors.

If we are to truly appreciate and celebrate the grit and resilience of “essential” immigrant workers, their families, and their communities, this report identifies some places to start. Even in the wake of a devastating pandemic and despite exclusionary government policies, study participants repeatedly articulated appreciation for small-scale community-based initiatives to provide food, health care, cash payments, and various types of psychosocial and other support. As the nation considers how to best respond to the social traumas produced by pandemic, this report suggests that grounding the provision of essential services within trusted community-based institutions and amplifying support for these indispensable organizations may offer a crucial, oft-overlooked approach to building social cohesion at a critical time.





I. INTRODUCTION

In the early months of 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) began tearing relentlessly through Latino communities across the United States, leaving in its wake devastating rates of infection and mortality, as well as higher levels of unemployment, housing vulnerability, and child hunger than in most other communities.¹ As has been widely observed, the COVID-19 pandemic both exposed and reinforced deeply rooted forms of socioeconomic inequity and exclusion in U.S. society; it also set back decades of progress that had been made toward dismantling numerous impediments and barriers to advancement among communities of color, whereby women's workforce participation had been on the rise,² child hunger was declining.³ Shockingly, the pandemic's virulence caused life expectancy among Latinos to fall between an estimated 1.9 to three years in 2020, erasing nearly 15 years of health gains.⁴ Hispanic children have been two times more likely than white children to have become orphaned or to have lost a primary caregiver during the pandemic.⁵ And while the evidence is not yet conclusive, advocates worry that the socioeconomic progress Latinos were making in other areas over prior years—such as increased high school graduation, college enrollment, or homeownership rates—has regressed during this devastating period.

Low-income immigrant families, the majority of whom are Latino, have borne an outsized share of the pandemic's impacts. Immigrant workers have been disproportionately represented on the pandemic frontlines, keeping our nation's hospitals, food chains, and the service sector afloat. Undocumented immigrants, in particular, have been more concentrated in jobs deemed essential by the government than any other group, with 78% of undocumented workers laboring in an essential sector.⁶ As a result, these workers—and in turn, their families—have been at higher risk of exposure to COVID-19.⁷ Despite experiencing some of the highest rates of infection and loss of employment, undocumented essential workers have had the most difficult path to accessing relief and public benefits. Restricted access to stimulus relief support, as imposed by the U.S. Senate in 2020, contrasted sharply with the more egalitarian practices and policies existing under other federal emergencies (such as major natural disaster declarations), thus implicitly drawing lines between “deserving” versus “undeserving” victims and survivors of nationally declared emergencies.

Latinos and low-income immigrants entered the pandemic already at a disadvantage. Prior to COVID-19, immigrants were treated harshly when it came to accessing public benefits. Moreover, the immediate past administration's policy agenda was fueled by anti-immigrant and anti-Latino rhetoric, reinforcing an environment of fear and exclusion for many Latinos regardless of their legal status.⁸ For example, as a result of the Trump-era public charge rule—which threatened to deny residence to all immigrants based on the use of government support such as SNAP or housing assistance—Latino child enrollment in critical safety net programs that had been helping to lift families out of poverty dropped rapidly, alarming experts.⁹ At the same time, efforts to suppress Latino participation in the 2020 census sent a clear message about who the administration considered to be full Americans. Some of the starkest examples of anti-Latino actions during this period went beyond exclusion into the realm of state-sanctioned violence, such as the forced separation of children from their parents or even hate-induced incidents such as the racially driven 2019 mass shooting in El Paso, Texas. Not surprisingly, researchers found that the fear and distrust created by extreme anti-Hispanic messages and policies during this period led Latino citizens and non-citizens alike to experience spikes in anxiety, depressive symptoms, and other precursors for chronic diseases due to the extreme levels of stress these toxic policies and environments created.¹⁰

Many scholars argue that the resurgence in anti-Latino and anti-immigrant sentiment in recent years has been fueled more broadly by the clear demographic change wrought by the growth of Latino and non-white populations in the United States.¹¹ One possible outgrowth is the rise of white nationalist groups who promote violent replacement conspiracies and blatant bigotry, agitating under a sense of racialized group threat from a growing minority population.¹² However, more subtle forms of racialization—that is, processes of categorizing and marginalizing broad swaths of people based on assumptions about their race or ethnicity—have also been transmitted historically through the structures of our society, from schools to the halls of government, with clear messages about who belongs in various spaces.¹³ Ironically, one of the main assumptions behind the racialization and “othering” of Latinos is the belief that this ethnic group is composed predominantly of immigrants or foreigners who are often presumed to be undocumented—despite the fact that a full eight out of 10 Latinos, and 95% of Latino children under age 18, are U.S. citizens.¹⁴ Moreover, researchers have shown that a growing share of Latino immigrants (78%) have lived in the United States for more than 10 years,¹⁵ making them longtime U.S. residents whose families have integrated into U.S. society through jobs, education, civic engagement, and community revitalization, among other means.

While most Latinos thus have strong roots in the United States, many also have deep immigrant ties, largely because so many live in mixed-status families and communities that are composed of members with varying immigrant and legal statuses. Indeed, more than half of Latino children (56%) have at least one parent who was born outside of the United States,¹⁶ and by some estimates, as many as one in four Latino children have at least one undocumented parent at risk of deportation [see “BOX 1”].¹⁷ As a result, the risk factors that make immigrants and their families more vulnerable to various forms of social, economic, and political marginalization and exclusion are commonly felt beyond the household unit and ripple throughout Hispanic extended families and communities. Indeed, many Latinos feel a “linked fate” with their immigrant peers, and their collective experiences with discrimination have led many to question their place in America or feel like outsiders.¹⁸

BOX 1: Latino children, citizenship, and mixed-status families

- Number of Latino children in the United States: 18.7 million¹⁹
- Population of American children who are Hispanic: 25.5%²⁰
- Percent of Hispanic children who are U.S. citizens: 95%²¹
- Estimated number of Latino children who live in an immigrant family (one or more parent is foreign-born): 9.6 million (or 56% of Latino kids)²²
- Estimated number of American children who live with at least one undocumented family member: nearly six million²³
- Percent of American children living in poverty: 17%²⁴
- Percent of Hispanic children living in poverty: 29%²⁵
- Percent non-Hispanic white children living in poverty: 9.1%²⁶
- Percent of citizen children with undocumented parents living in poverty: 31%²⁷
- Percent of Hispanic children living in low-income households: 56%

As the Biden administration sets out to build a stronger, more equitable, and inclusive nation in the pandemic's wake, it has become critical for all sectors of American society to gain a better understanding of how the complex social realities described above have impacted our nation's Latino and immigrant communities, as well as to gauge the extent to which this diverse population feels itself to be welcomed and safe within our nation. The societal importance of ensuring that America's largest ethnic group feels or perceives their community as fully included within our national fabric cannot be understated. The future success and well-being of our nation's nearly 19 million Latino youth²⁸—their ability to participate fully as future adults, citizens, and workers—will depend largely on whether they feel themselves to be an integral part of our nation. Their parents' experiences of belonging, moreover, are equally vital, as the material and psychological well-being of these adults contributes not only to the health and welfare of their children and communities but, more broadly, to the success of our nation. Latinos, indeed, form the backbone of our economy, with Hispanic adults entering the workforce at a rate of two-to-one compared to their non-Hispanic peers²⁹ and roughly 80% of Latino workers laboring in an essential industry.³⁰ However, while the more than 60 million Latinos living in our country today—roughly 19% of the population—are central to the strength and stability of the United States, researchers and pollsters have repeatedly found that many continue to feel excluded or like outsiders.³¹

It is against this complex backdrop that UnidosUS, the nation's largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization, set out to research how the COVID-19 pandemic and the structural inequities it unveiled have affected experiences and feelings of social belonging and exclusion among our country's diverse Latino population. As articulated above, the nature of social exclusion in recent years has shifted in different time periods—compare, for instance, pre-Trump anti-immigrant sentiment and policies to blatant xenophobia during the Trump era—undoubtedly affecting feelings of belonging through time.

In this report, we focus on how Latino pandemic experiences have shifted our understanding once again. We first propose a framework for conceptualizing and understanding the experience—and significance—of social belonging and exclusion among Latinos, grounded in existing literature in the behavioral and social sciences. Then, we discuss the results of our mixed-methods study, which includes 10 virtual focus groups with Latino parents and youth

(in Florida, Texas, California, Tennessee, and Washington, DC) and two focus groups with community service providers and practitioners, as well as a short national survey aiming to quantify some of the key themes that surfaced in the focus groups. Overall, the report is designed to highlight community voices and delve into the lived experiences of vulnerable Latino and immigrant families who have been profoundly affected by both the pandemic and by years of exclusionary policies that often impede their ability to fully integrate and thrive within our nation.

In order to rebuild a stronger nation in the pandemic's wake, it is critical to put an ear to the ground and listen carefully to the stories of some of our country's most marginalized, and yet most valuable, communities. The results of this research have implications for national- and state-level policymakers, for community service providers, and for all Americans interested in building a more harmonious, cohesive, and truly equitable nation. This research also sounds an alarm that has been too long ignored: If our society's treatment of immigrants and their families and communities continues to be based on a mindset of exclusion and punishment, rather than on one that builds on their many assets and contributions, we will likely be contributing to increased alienation, persistent poverty, and other problems that will not only weaken a significant portion of our population but will also make the country as a whole more vulnerable to impending challenges, such as climate change or future public health crises.



II. SOCIAL BELONGING AND LATINOS IN THE UNITED STATES

What Is Social Belonging, and Why Does It Matter?

A basic foundation of most social and behavioral sciences is the notion that humans are social animals with an innate need to belong and to feel accepted and validated—whether in a family, a workplace, a community, or a nation. Social belonging connotes words like ‘team,’ ‘community,’ and ‘us/we.’ Within the field of social psychology, the humanist Abraham Maslow coined “belongingness” as an essential human motivator, one that is as important as physiological needs and needs for safety and security, respect and esteem, and self-actualization.³² Sociologists and anthropologists have theorized social belonging in terms of the social relations—the shared beliefs, symbols, and bonds of trust, interdependence, and solidarity—that enable collectivities to maintain a cohesive, stable, trusting, and harmonious society. The concept of social belonging is thus a dynamic construct that has been used across disciplines to describe personal and social attachments (in sociology), a determinant of health or identity (in psychology and public health),³³ a component of human development (in youth studies),³⁴ and a mode of being (in anthropology and cultural studies), among others.

While social belonging connotes more subjective perceptions, attitudes, and experiences among individuals, social inclusion is defined as the societal “process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged, through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights.”³⁵ As such, measures of inclusion can be reflected in a country’s inequality, disparities, or lack of social mobility among groups of people. Social exclusion, conversely, “involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole.”³⁶ Individual sentiments that can result from social exclusion can include unfairness, injustice, powerlessness, and lack of agency, all of which affect feelings of social belonging. Social inclusion and exclusion, thus, are measures of a society’s willingness to facilitate social belonging among all of its members. It is important to note, though, that both inclusion and exclusion tend to co-exist in all countries and at every level of government and interaction. The U.S. government, for example, has historically promoted social inclusion among some sectors and classes, while excluding particular segments considered “undesirable” (but whose labor and other contributions have, nonetheless, been historically utilized, if not exploited).

Not surprisingly, the consequences of social exclusion have been found to have a significant impact on both societal and individual/subjective well-being among groups that are marginalized and denied equal opportunity or treatment. At a most fundamental human level, social exclusion and isolation have been shown to negatively affect mental health, with studies showing that a poor sense of belonging is not only a strong predictor of clinical depression in adults³⁷ but also that exclusion experienced in childhood and adolescence often affects psychosocial health and transitions into adulthood.³⁸ Social exclusion and racial discrimination function as broader social determinants of health, having long-lasting physical effects (particularly among people of color) as they are connected to problems such as hypertension and weak immune systems and are considered a major factor in lower life expectancy among some groups.³⁹

Conversely, research shows that individuals who feel a sense of belonging, trust, and security in their community have better psychosocial health outcomes than those who feel isolated or marginalized. A strong sense of belonging and community protects against various stressors and risk factors that lead to depressive disorders by promoting self-esteem and a sense of collective identity. Others have shown a correlation between a strong sense of belonging in schools and higher educational achievement.⁴⁰ It is no surprise that countries scoring high on the global “Happiness Index” are those where social inclusion indicators are robust; even those with high immigration rates exhibit signs of both stability and prosperity, thus reflecting the societal benefits and costs of the inclusion/exclusion balance.⁴¹

Both social belonging and inclusion can also be thought of as critical components of social cohesion, a multidimensional and evolving sociological construct that is largely rooted in the work of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim described social cohesion as, first, an absence of social conflict (based on wealth, race, religion, or gender, etc.), and second, the strength of relationship bonds, both between individuals within groups (horizontal), as well as between groups and their government (vertical). Most current definitions of social cohesion share the common ingredients of 1) strong social relations, 2) feelings of belonging, benevolence, and bonds of trust, 3) belief in a common good and shared values, 4) civic and political inclusion, 5) economic mobility, and 6) fairness or equality (both in terms of legal equality and the distribution of resources).⁴² One of the seminal definitions of social cohesion in the realm of public policy is Judith Maxwell’s:

Social cohesion involves building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community.⁴³

Strong social relations, or social capital, can be thought of as trusting one's neighbors, tolerating different viewpoints, and participating in community life. Feelings of belonging and attachment refer to both identifying with a geographical place (e.g., identifying as being "from" Texas) as well as identifying with one's cultural or social group (e.g., identifying as being of Guatemalan heritage, as American, as indigenous, or as any intersection or compilation of various social identities). A belief in a common good is likened to solidarity or caring for other people even if they are strangers or different from oneself. Shared ideals, in the case of the United States, include "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Unfairness, injustice, and exclusion are recognized in the public realm when there is an acknowledgment that a common understanding, social norm, practice, or law have been violated. However, many people assume fairness and inclusion in society (i.e., a lack of discrimination) until they see clear proof of the opposite (e.g., George Floyd's murder), which has made the recognition of systemic and historical forms of exclusion difficult for many to fathom.

Within the context of pluralistic and democratic societies, social cohesion is desirable because it influences individual and national well-being.⁴⁴ Clearly, however, there is no universal or objective standard for what is meant by national well-being, and it should be mentioned that authoritarian regimes throughout history have thrived under seemingly cohesive societies. Today, many societies struggle more than ever with the challenge of maintaining strong, unified nations in the midst of increased demographic diversity and political polarization. As many historians and social scientists have observed, strengthening social cohesion and belonging among a nation's citizenry in the ways described above is not only important for a healthy, pluralistic democracy but is indeed the very foundation of successful state-building. Countries with higher degrees of social cohesion are more politically and economically stable and may be more resilient to shocks such as economic, natural disasters, or health crises.⁴⁵

The Racialization of Latinos

A fundamental element of social exclusion is the differential societal treatment of individuals and groups of different races and ethnic groups; volumes of papers have been written over the past decades about the challenges of building social inclusion and cohesion within increasingly multicultural/multiracial societies.⁴⁶ In the current historical juncture, and as the United States seeks to come to grips with the legacies of structural racism,⁴⁷ many have pointed to the need to better understand how exclusion and racialization are baked into our systems, continue to distort the outcome of public policies and administration, and shape public discourse in the present day.

Although conversations around race and racism in the United States have long been discussed along a Black/white divide, the growing literature on discrimination against Latinos and other racial and ethnic minorities in the United States helps to understand broader issues of exclusion and belonging among our nation's increasingly diverse communities of color. Whether expressed blatantly through dehumanizing rhetoric (which casts Latinos as animals, criminals, and spreaders of disease, among other "threatening" attributes),⁴⁸ structurally reinforced through social institutions and discriminatory practices, or reproduced in more subtle ways

through unconscious bias or stigmatization, racism continues to shape the daily lives of many Latinos across the country.⁴⁹ At the same time, since the category of “Latino” is an ethnicity rather than a race, experiences of racism among Latinos vary widely depending on attributes such as skin color,⁵⁰ English-language ability, or class markers—with darker-skinned immigrants (such as those of indigenous or Afro-Latino descent) who speak little English, for example, being likely to experience more racism.⁵¹ Stephanie L. Canizales and Jody Aguis Vallejo describe the unique process through which Latinos of various races, classes, and origins have come to be racialized through “controlling images that cast Latinos and those of Latin American descent in the United States as the subhuman other, which affects how Latinos are viewed by others and how they view themselves and their place in American society.”⁵²

In unpacking how Latinos come to be seen as “other,” numerous scholars have also pointed out the underlying contradiction through which the state relegates millions of undocumented Latino immigrants to live outside U.S. law—and in essence, be criminalized—while also exploiting them for low-cost labor demands in a range of vital industries and collecting income taxes from them.⁵³ As sociologist Cecilia Menjivar argues, legal structures, bureaucracies, and public discourse all reinforce “the continued reproduction of a class of immigrants seen as particularly suited for certain jobs who can then be made excludable and disposable.”⁵⁴ By simultaneously depicting such immigrants as a threat to the American nation, these processes cast them and their families “as non-American and therefore undeserving of access to citizenship rights and resources, such as education, health care, housing, and wealth, and justifies dehumanizing policies.”⁵⁵

A unique feature of Latino racialization is thus that it merges race, ethnicity, and legal status,⁵⁶ whereby “first-generation immigrants—those who migrate to the United States—are subjected to a process of racialized illegality in which designations of foreignness and criminality intersect.”⁵⁷ Such exclusionary processes have consequences for the children and grandchildren of immigrants as well, creating a “multigenerational punishment” and form of “racialized citizenship” that impacts the social, economic, and psychological well-being of generations.⁵⁸ This particular form of racialization—which, again, especially impacts non-white Latinos⁵⁹—thus limits potential social mobility for U.S.-born Latinos (as well as their parents and grandparents), pushing “the social and economic well-being of Latinos in the United States down the status hierarchy to a new position at the bottom of the socioeconomic distribution.”⁶⁰ Historian Mae Ngai describes them feeling like ‘alien citizens,’ i.e., Americans “with formal U.S. citizenship but who remain[ed] alien in the eyes of the nation.”⁶¹ It is no surprise, then, that a national survey by the Pew Research Center found in 2018 that half (49%) of Latinos in the United States have serious concerns about their place in American society today.⁶²

Latino Diversity and the Nuances of Inclusion/Exclusion

While it is useful to analyze the social reality of today’s Latinos through the lens of inclusion/exclusion, it is equally important to understand some of the nuances that make social belonging and inclusion among this population a complex, and often paradoxical, social process. In the first place, Latinos are neither a monolith nor a race, and they should not be thought about in terms of fixed identities but in terms of their diverse, complex, and evolving attitudes toward belonging and inclusion. As a group, Latinos’ attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of race and identity vary by age, geographic location, culture of origin, and generation (nativity and integration), among other variables, all of which are likely to impact an individual’s sense of belonging in the United States (e.g. the difference between a fourth-generation Mexican American living in Texas versus a child of Central American migrant farmworkers or other immigrants). Indeed, researchers have found that

while some Latinos may have a sense of belonging, others have strong feelings of exclusion, and others yet feel ambivalent; such perceptions, moreover, can change with time as individuals develop new notions of what it means to be a member of American society.⁶³

Second, feelings of social belonging are situated within a social environment that defines various social spaces and ecosystems (national, state, local, familial). Messages about inclusion/exclusion—including both public rhetoric and concrete levels of social support—may vary substantially between these social and geographical spaces. For example, while the national government formulates policymaking (which, as noted, has been historically exclusionary as it pertains to communities of color), state and local policies simultaneously shape the daily life of immigrants in ways that are often designed to help immigrants build lives and livelihoods in their communities. Latino-serving NGOs, schools, and faith-based and other organizations thus often navigate this landscape of exclusion and inclusion by strategically targeting various levels of government for resources that can help immigrants and their families find economic stability and build a welcoming sense of belonging and community at the local level.⁶⁴





It is important to reiterate the distinction between subjective feelings of belonging or estrangement (individual mindsets) versus the social exclusion (policies of exclusion) that may engender feelings of alienation or powerlessness among Latinos. Social belonging refers to individual feelings and perceptions of membership, trust, safety, support, and respect within a wider society, which then translate to behaviors such as civic participation, volunteerism, and political engagement.⁶⁵ Conversely, a lack of “belongingness” refers to feeling that one (or one’s family, community, or racial/ethnic group) is not viewed as a member of the nation and that one’s contributions are not valued; it may be reflected in feelings of unfairness, powerlessness, alienation, or other feelings. Social belonging is complex, however, since as noted people who are excluded by structures or law may still have strong personal feelings of belonging, while conversely, some who are fully included socially or statutorily in society may experience disconnection and alienation. Understanding these social nuances and processes among Latinos in the current era is critical in that it impacts many of the outcomes described above (ranging from educational and mental health outcomes to political engagement and other indicators of immigrant incorporation.)⁶⁶

National surveys have repeatedly shown that despite experiences of collective discrimination, Latinos as a whole often claim a deep attachment to the United States, usually expressing a strong belief in the ideals and promise of the American Dream and the notion that they (or their children) can become part of mainstream society and achieve social mobility by being law-abiding and hardworking.⁶⁷ Such results are often interpreted as a strong indication of an essential optimism and resilience among our country’s Latino population. However, the *desire* or *yearning* to belong, clearly, is not tantamount to a full experience of inclusion or integration within the national fabric, a distinction that should be critical to policies and programs seeking to promote social justice or social cohesion, but which is difficult to parse without more in-depth exploration.

The paradoxes described here pre-date the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which was declared a national emergency in the United States in March 2020. It is precisely in times of national crisis that a nation’s social cohesion is expected to be elevated as people share in the experiences associated with responding. Yet in the months following the pandemic’s onset, the United States experienced a hyper-partisan national election and a government insurrection fueled by extremists and white nationalists, with national divisions along racial, class-based, and political lines increasing more than ever before. Much work has

gone into documenting how striking differences in public opinion and attitudes about even mundane public health measures can be traced back to how differently people are not just experiencing the pandemic, but how they are also living in essentially divergent realities. Ultimately, we argue that because of such stark divisions within our increasingly diverse country, it is imperative and the responsibility of the government to build a social, economic, and political order that will foster both belonging and cohesion not only among our nation's largest ethnic group but also among all communities in the United States.

The current administration and large swathes of American society now seek to move toward a more inclusive, cohesive, and racially just society. In this context, we believe it is essential and valuable to explore the deeper experiences of Latinos, including their views and mindsets, during this unprecedented national emergency. With this aim in mind, we now explore the results of our research, which sought to answer the following questions:

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic—a period exacerbated not only by a profound health and economic crisis among Latino workers and families but also by four years of heightened racial animus and extreme anti-immigrant policies—affected Latino attitudes toward social belonging and inclusion in the United States?
- How have Latinos, particularly those living in immigrant communities and in mixed-status families, responded to contradictory messages about inclusion and belonging throughout this period?
- What lessons can we draw from their experiences and perceptions in order to combat polarization and help shape a more inclusive, equitable, and cohesive society at this critical historical juncture?

Here, Latinos themselves share their thoughts and views on a range of topics relevant to social belonging. Their words will help to inform discussions and debates about how to build a stronger democratic and pluralistic nation in the coming decade.

III. METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential research design to explore how Latinos in different communities around the country have experienced and responded to social exclusion during the pandemic. Since the experience of social belonging can vary depending on geographies and sub-groups, it was important to shed a spotlight on particularly marginalized communities across the country that represent slightly different geographies and demographics. Because this report specifically seeks to explore community voices and experiences, the crux of our analysis comes from this qualitative portion of the research. Focus group results were also supplemented with a short national survey aimed at quantifying select findings in order to provide a wider national context for our analysis.

Community-Based Service Organization Input: In preparation for community focus groups, UnidosUS conducted two focus groups with frontline staff and leaders from UnidosUS's national Affiliate Network of Hispanic-serving community-based organizations. The researchers also fielded a questionnaire to all Affiliate organizations as part of the annual Affiliate recertification process in order to get baseline data on pandemic experiences from the Affiliate perspective.

Community Focus Groups: Five UnidosUS Affiliates (community-based organizations or CBOs) were selected as focus group sites in an effort to represent the U.S. geographical spread, economic and social contexts (urban, rural, border area), and diverse countries of national origin within Hispanic immigrant communities: 1) the Washington, DC metro area

(Latino Youth Action Center, LAYC); 2) the Nashville, TN metro area (Conexión Americas); 3) central Florida (Centro Campesino); 4) the Rio Grande Valley, TX (Proyecto Vida Digna); and 5) East Los Angeles (Eastmont Community Center). Affiliates were responsible for finding and screening focus group participants, and UnidosUS researchers facilitated the discussions. Between November 2020 and January 2021, two focus groups were conducted at each site, one with parents of children under the age of 18 and one with youth ages 18-22. A total of 68 participants (36 adults, 32 youth) participated in our 10 community focus groups. Reflecting the demographics of the broader Latino community, focus groups were evenly split between English and Spanish speakers comprising a mix of immigrant and U.S.-born participants. All focus groups were conducted virtually (with, on average, 6-8 participants), and participants signed consent forms indicating awareness that their answers were confidential and anonymous. Focus group discussions were fully transcribed and coded in two stages for thematic analysis.

National Latino Social Belonging Survey: Following an initial coding of focus group themes, researchers developed a survey based on the themes, designed to quantify some of the qualitative findings at a national level. From June 9 to 17, 2021, a nationally representative sample of 1,009 Hispanic respondents was surveyed in English and Spanish via telephone and online interviews (N=1009 +/- 3.1%). Survey results are based on a random national sample of Latinos; results were tabulated by a number of variables such as age, income, nativity, and language, among others.

Limitations: As the entirety of this project was conducted during the COVID-19 national emergency, researchers encountered some obstacles to conducting and completing this study. First, the target populations of highest interest intersected with the hardest-to-reach communities, those with high concentrations of mixed-immigration status families. By definition, these communities face additional barriers to research participation, including higher workloads and less free time, immigration-related fears, and, most especially during this study, limited internet access and low digital literacy. Second, the direct impacts of the virus on CBO staff and participants led to multiple schedule changes and lower participation rates in focus groups and potentially skewed participation in the national survey.

IV. RESULTS

There is evidence that feelings of alienation and exclusion have worsened among Latinos since the start of the pandemic. In a national survey of registered Latino voters conducted in August 2020, UnidosUS found that 50% of all those polled, and 62% of young people aged 18-29, said they have felt like an outsider in the United States since the start of the pandemic.⁶⁸ In mixed-status households (where one or more family member is undocumented), 75% of respondents reported feeling like outsiders since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. In that same poll, when asked about their views of the overall community, 84% of respondents indicated that discrimination against Latinos and immigrants is a problem in America today, ranking it sixth out of 22 policy issues they feel Congress and the president should address.⁶⁹

Seeking to explore the meanings behind these numbers, the results presented here provide a more in-depth and textured exploration of how Latino parents and youth have experienced and perceived aspects of social belonging during the pandemic. Focus group results are grouped thematically around four shared concerns that arose organically from each of the groups, creating common threads: 1) COVID-19's impact on Latino family health and finances; 2) Systemic government exclusion and discrimination; 3) Racialization; and 4) Spaces and ambiguities of exclusion and belonging. Within these themes, we highlight the sentiments and

mindsets generated by experiences of inclusion/exclusion that surfaced most prominently during the discussions. The sidebars display results from our UnidosUS Latino Social Belonging Survey, which, as noted, was conducted after the focus groups to quantify some of the themes discussed.

1. “This Disease Is Very Hard”: COVID-19’s Impact on Latino Households

Latino communities and other communities of color have been disparately affected by the pandemic for a range of reasons that highlight the challenging environments and conditions that often shape their everyday lives and differ from those of more mainstream communities (see Box 2). Hispanic immigrants have been particularly vulnerable due to both poor economic conditions and legal exclusion; they tend to work in low-wage jobs with no benefits and little job security, many in sectors that require their physical presence on the job. As a whole, focus group participants described how precarious job conditions, low wages, unaffordable housing, and little access to support systems all contribute to the fact that throughout the pandemic, Hispanic immigrants have been less able to:

- Work remotely from home.
- Forgo work and rely on family members or public assistance for sustainability.
- Quarantine at home (with multiple household members working).
- Take sick or family medical leave.
- Get access to personal protective equipment at work.
- Safely social distance in traveling to and from work or using public facilities (laundry, groceries, etc.).
- Rely on health insurance coverage for preventive medicine/steps.

For example, participants reflected that:

We are fruit packers. For a while, they implemented safety precautions and distancing; since we pack fruit we had to wear gloves and wash our hands every three minutes a day. We had to work, because at that time, we were packing donation boxes and many people were relying on our packing to survive the pandemic. Therefore, we had to go to work. (FL, F)

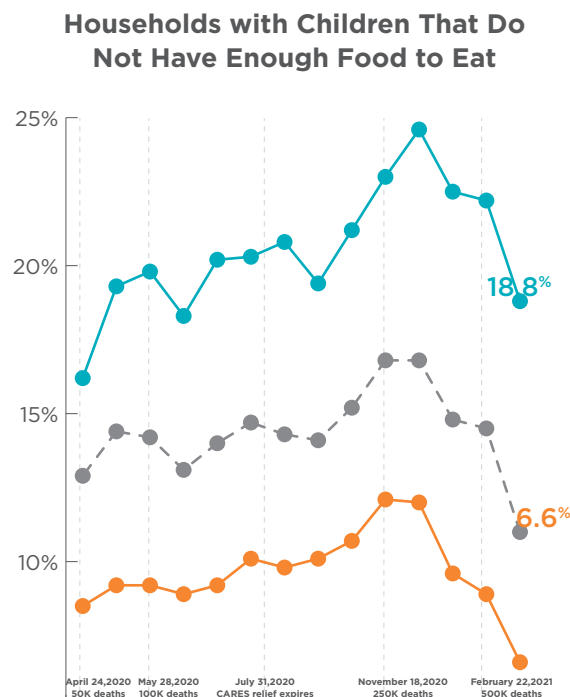
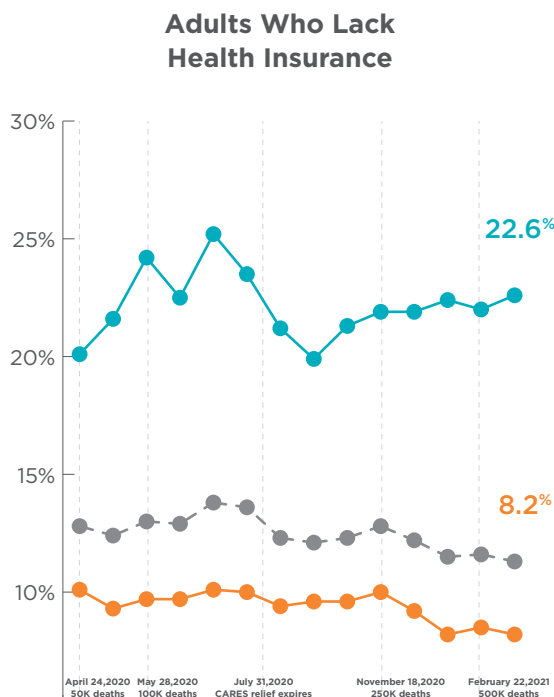
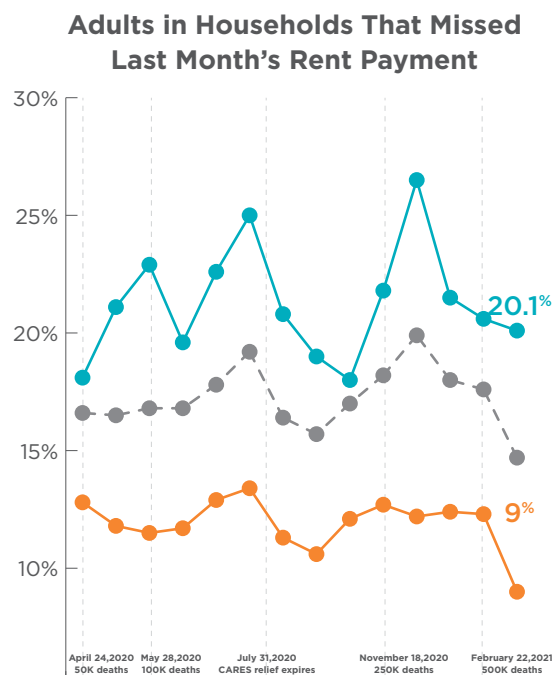
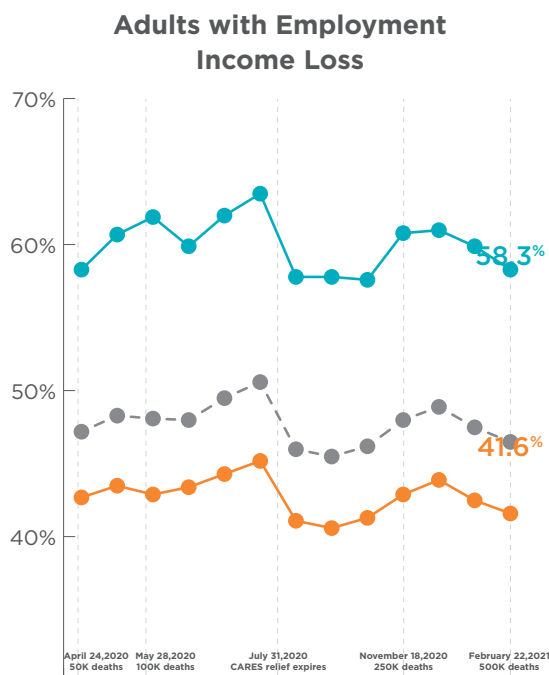
I work in a cafeteria, here in Washington, DC. We relied heavily on federal and state offices because it is near the Capitol or the branches are near the Capitol and the White House. And since that whole area is closed and there are no employees, they had to put us on a furlough. We don't know yet if they are going to reopen or definitely take our jobs away. (DC, F)

I have seven children. Right now, I'm not working. I work as an immigrant, a laborer I mean, like in the fields. The reason I'm not working is because of COVID, because of my situation. In the fields, many got infected, and [when] my boss who was in charge passed away, there was no more work. I also work in construction, I do carpentry. But now I can't find transportation for jobs because I have nobody to give me a ride. (TX, F)



BOX 2: Divergent Realities

● Total ● Hispanic/Latino ● Non-Hispanic white



Citations compiled from the UnidosUS COVID Dashboard, "By the Numbers: Latinos in the Time of Coronavirus," accessed September 30, 2021, <https://www.unidosus.org/covid-dashboard/>.

Because of these conditions, Latinos have tended to have a much higher rate of exposure to and contagion with the virus, leading to higher morbidity and mortality rates than the general U.S. population. For example, as of October 2021, CDC data showed that while Latinos comprise 18.5% of the U.S. population, they account for 27% of COVID-19 cases nationwide.⁷⁰ During various points of the pandemic, Latinos also experienced the highest rate of COVID-19 hospitalizations across all ethnic groups.

Not surprisingly, focus group participants recounted experiencing major health challenges during the pandemic. Many had either contracted (or had family members who had contracted) COVID-19. Some experienced a severe form of the disease; others were hospitalized, and some had family members who had passed away. For many, family life was severely disrupted:

UnidosUS Latino Social Belonging Survey

24%

of survey participants
reported having had
COVID-19 themselves or
in their household.

27%

of participants
reported having lost
a family member or
friend to COVID-19.

I had a very hard time because I am a single mother of two girls. I got sick at work, tested positive for COVID and passed it on to my girls; I cried so much because they both have health issues, they are asthmatic and the oldest one is epileptic and suffers from pulmonary fibrosis. When I tested positive for COVID, I wanted to die. (FL, F)

My wife had coronavirus. Well, she was very serious: I thought she was going to die. And thank God, I did not get infected, nor did my son. She was in the hospital for four days. She was suffering... And finally, she began to recover and began to eat. But I could barely bring her home because she still couldn't walk, but the hospital was full. That is why they released her. (DC, M)

My brother-in-law died because of that. He got worse and they took him to [hospital]. And then, he was not so seriously ill, when they put him in a coma. Anyway, he did not recover after that, and he died. They told my other brother-in-law that they were going to put him in a coma so that he could be released later, to discharge him later. But they made it worse with that, and he didn't come back. (DC, M)



Respondents frequently described the financial tolls of falling ill. For those who had family members who had to be hospitalized, the fear of the financial burden of hospitalization, at a time when many had extremely precarious work situations, was highly distressing. For those without health insurance, both COVID-related health expenses and other pre-existing health challenges became overbearing:

When my husband got sick with COVID, well he already had asthma, and we tried to give him some natural medicines and tea at home... then he went to the hospital... You know the bills, that is what he feared... After eight days, he had to go back to the hospital because he was very sick, he could not breathe... we know that going to the hospital is always a lot of money for us because we have no insurance. Later when he got the bill, for about \$6,000... He felt very bad, and then another bill came... So he just tried to start paying off, even if just \$25 or \$30 to start, to pay monthly. That is what he's doing. (TN, F)



I was really affected because I have a disabled child. He doesn't have medical insurance. He doesn't have Social Security either. He depends on me. And his pills have to be constant, always, because he takes three medicines. He depends on me, and at the time, right now, well, it's been really hard for me. I'm looking for ways to get his medicines. I [don't] have government assistance. (TX, F)



Most participants reported a significant loss of income because their families (themselves, their spouses, and/or adult children living with them) had lost jobs and/or had their work hours substantially reduced. For the latter, losing hourly wages while being ineligible for unemployment created a highly stressful financial situation. The financial hardship caused by the loss of employment or wages was compounded by the fact that monthly home expenses (electricity, water, food, and other household items) increased dramatically, and even with community help (such as a food bank), it was difficult to make ends meet. In the face of financial uncertainty, many recounted how they had immediately hustled to make ends meet in the absence of support, primarily by activating household strategies that immigrant Latino families have traditionally used in the face of marginality and exclusion (juggling several jobs, securing household income through informal businesses, and/or relying on all family members, including children, to contribute to the household economy in whatever way they can).

I was working in a hotel breakfast. I got fired because the pandemic started and they closed the breakfast, and right now I am taking care of my children who are not going to school; and my husband, he was working in construction, he got sick with COVID, they admitted him in the hospital with pneumonia. Now he is working as a gardener two, three days, because he was not able to go home to rest. (TN, F)

I worked as a receptionist, but I got laid off because of the pandemic, so I found another job in cleaning. (DC, F)

Currently, I only have one of my two jobs, I am a waitress. In the other job, I was in charge of the kitchen at a cafeteria that relied heavily on federal and state offices because it is near the Capitol. And since that whole area is closed and there are no employees, well, they had to put us on a furlough... I'm still part of the company because I have worked for nine years with them. But most of the staff who were working for less than five years, they already laid them off. So, we still don't know if they are going to reopen or if we are definitely losing our jobs. (DC, F)

It was difficult because our children were staying home which translated into more food... We had to stock up. We felt like we spent our quarterly budget just in one week. We also needed to buy household cleaning supplies and we felt like we were spending much more than before. Moreover, we didn't have much money, we didn't have a lot of work or they cut our hours and we were spending more money. (FL, F)





Because so many Latinos (and low-income immigrants in particular) work for companies that do not provide health insurance coverage or paid sick leave to their employees, feelings of alienation and frustration toward the workplace mounted for many during the pandemic. Focus group participants described experiences of being stigmatized (e.g. as carriers of disease) on the one hand, and on the other, ignored or not supported at their workplaces. Some stated that their employers placed them in very difficult situations, whether they got sick or not: those who contracted COVID-19 were not given sick time, pushing many infected workers to report to their jobs so as not to lose their desperately needed wages, while workers who had not been infected sometimes felt ostracized by employers who, in their view, made assumptions about their health and consequently dismissed them. Although it is possible that such employers were following CDC guidelines to protect remaining workers from potential infection, the lack of a coherent system for protecting workers' health and well-being during this time of crisis led many participants to feel that Latino workers had been abandoned by both their employers and society.

UnidosUS Latino Social Belonging Survey

34%

of survey participants
**reported having lost their
jobs or having hours cut due
to the pandemic.**

40%

of lower-income Latinos
and 43% Latinos living
in mixed-status families
**experienced loss of
wages or work.**

Many of the employers are not supporting our real needs. So, if someone gets sick knowing that they are going to send them home for two weeks... and that they can put them out of work, they are not going to say they are sick... There are people who actually have to go out to work. And then, they have no choice to hold on and shut up and continue. (DC, M)

This disease is very hard... you may not live with [a] relative who got worse, but if he/she dies and [your employer] realizes it, they also want to send you home. And maybe you were not in contact with [the sick relative], it is like discrimination... There are people who don't say when their relatives have died so that [employers] do not send them home. [Workers] can even lose their jobs. (DC, M)





Finally, COVID-related health and economic challenges were compounded by the fact that traditional coping mechanisms that Latino families use in the face of precarious life conditions were also affected by the crisis. Several participants noted that because Latinos rely so much on the extended family (for contributions to household finances, other household labor, and social and emotional support), the pandemic took away an important source of protection by isolating families from each other. The presence and rituals of the extended family—a crucial resource for Latino immigrants that helps enhance feelings of belonging and moderate feelings of exclusion—were thus eroded by such isolation:

My husband had the virus. We are more isolated as a family, because, before, we had our parents-in-law to help us. Now, we can't have their help. So, now, everything falls upon—if he got sick—everything relied on me. So, I believe that we are like—we as Latinos, we always help each other out, especially in our immediate families. And I believe that this has affected us a lot because we have had to limit ourselves to being alone.



As this broad brush picture shows, the disparate social reality that many Latino workers and immigrants have experienced during the pandemic builds on many of the pre-existing circumstances that already shaped their daily lives before this challenging period, forming the backdrop against which Latino social belonging and exclusion are experienced and felt. As described here, the intensity of COVID-19's impact (as relates to both wage loss and sickness) underscores the different realities that Latinos, especially those living in immigrant families, experience in the United States.

2. “We’re Essential Workers When It’s Convenient”: Systemic Government Exclusion and Discrimination

Since March 2020, approximately \$4 trillion dollars have been allocated to Americans by the federal government through a variety of pandemic relief programs, including stimulus checks, unemployment benefits, small business loans, and various state and local programs such as housing and nutrition assistance.⁷¹ It is estimated that roughly 85% of U.S. households received stimulus checks and that one in four American workers received unemployment relief during this period.⁷² Many Latino immigrant families, however, were unable to receive much of



this support. On the one hand, this inability was because immigrants have historically been less likely than native-born Americans to access public benefits (and for many, the pandemic was their first time seeking out assistance), and on the other, because undocumented Latinos were simply ineligible for supports such as unemployment or stimulus checks in the first year of the pandemic.

Adult focus group participants recounted the various ways they had felt excluded from accessing resources and opportunities during this time of extreme duress, including exclusion from federal safety net supports as well as from a range of state and local support programs, which they were unable to access due to barriers such as immigration status, lack of language access, lack of information, confusion about eligibility, discouraging bureaucratic processes, and outright racial discrimination.

For example, numerous parents in immigrant and mixed-status families discussed the feelings of injustice and being made to feel “less than” that resulted from being excluded from urgently needed supports such as stimulus checks and unemployment benefits, even as they were struggling financially due to wage loss and health emergencies.

We were excluded from the stimulus money because we don't have legal documents. But we do pay our taxes, so that's a kind of discrimination. I have a work permit, but my husband doesn't. It makes me angry because the government says... “farmworkers, packers, and people who work in construction are essential workers.” Yes, but... where is the support for them? ... Undocumented immigrants are always viewed as less than people with legal status. (FL, F)



UnidosUS Latino Social Belonging Survey

26%

of Latinos feel they received less support from the federal government than other families during the pandemic.

65%

of Latinos report someone in their household received a stimulus check.

For Spanish speakers, however, only 53% reported their household received one or more stimulus check(s).

Less than

20%

of Latinos in any category (including U.S.-born citizen adults) reported receiving unemployment insurance during the pandemic, despite high rates of lost wages/work.



My husband and I lost our jobs. So, it was quite difficult because many of us do not have access to unemployment or to get government benefits. The doors are closed for certain reasons. So, it was like, like, we either go out and work in whatever or we starve. (DC, F)

Not receiving the stimulus check felt a little unfair. Not for us, but for our children. Our children are American citizens, and [the Congress] did not take them into account. (DC, F)



Thus, while most Americans received some form of relief from federal and state governments during the pandemic, and while relaxing eligibility rules is the norm during natural disasters, early relief efforts not only continued bars on immigrant access but inserted new ones (e.g., the first round of stimulus checks). As such, politicians effectively separated out “deserving” from “undeserving” workers, families, and children—regardless of their contributions to American society.

For many in mixed-status families, this contrast was also marked by a certain amount of ambiguity or uncertainty (pointing to the inclusion/exclusion paradox), particularly given the fact that individual family members may or may not have been eligible for different types of supports at different periods in time. While some experienced this ambiguity as a source of confusion and anxiety, others spoke about it as something to which mixed-status families—whose well-being often relies on some degree of luck and circumstance—have long been accustomed. One undocumented husband, for example, whose partner and the mother of his children had a work permit, stated (only half-joking):

I didn't receive [a stimulus check or unemployment benefits] because of my legal status. [But] my wife (partner) received a stimulus check, and thank God, we paid all [the bills] with that check. In that aspect, we are lucky, that we have not yet gotten married in fifteen years (laughs). (FL, M)



Anti-immigrant policies enacted during the Trump administration also affected Latinos during the pandemic. Policies ranging from family separation to attacks on birthright citizenship for native-born American citizens paved the way for Congress to continue to implement walls and boundaries aimed at isolating and making life more difficult for immigrants, including legal immigrants. One of those boundaries was the public charge rule enacted by the Trump administration in 2019, which stipulated that legal immigrants who have received public benefits (such as SNAP, Medicaid, and other supplemental assistance) would become ineligible for permanent residency. Focus group participants discussed how the pronounced fear of immigration enforcement, combined with confusion around immigrant eligibility for services, acted as a deterrent to accessing safety net programs or health care for one's family, including for U.S.-citizen children and those with legal status.

[M]any people that I know have been scared of applying [for benefits]... [T]hey don't want to apply because the[re's] misinformation sometimes, that if you apply, immigration can find you. Or, that if you apply it's going to affect you if you want to fix/regularize [your immigration status] in the future. So, many people, don't want... or are afraid, [of] receiving the EBT card. (TN, F)



I think that there is no clarity about how this will affect the people who are in the [immigration] process. I think that that is what makes a lot of people say, “I don’t want to receive anything” just to minimize the risk. Many families do not want to harm [their odds of receiving legal status], just to receiv[e] help that might harm the whole process. (TN, F)



Latinos who are particularly vulnerable due to their health or age were especially affected by public charge fears during the pandemic. A respondent who works in a health center with people with disabilities said:

I think it got worse last year since February when the [new] public charge law came out. Many people stopped applying for aid immediately. Every day, they called saying, “we do not want to accept it because with this public charge law...” I work with people with disabilities directly who receive financial assistance for disability-related problems. And, it is very visible, it is very noticeable how everyone, out of fear, they have stopped applying or receiving [aid]—and they have even asked, “How can I return it so it doesn’t affect me?” (TN, F)



A respondent who works at a community center in LA concurred:

“We help seniors with a lot of paperwork [to] become citizens... when they really need the help, they’re afraid to ask for food stamps, to ask for Medi-Cal because they’re told that if they do, then they won’t be able to become a citizen... [these people] are residents who have done everything they have to do, [but] aren’t seeking help that they need because they’ve been lied to... [These lies] come from the government, and it comes from people that are supposed to be good sources for them... So they’re suffering! They’re barely making enough money to pay their rent. (LA, F)



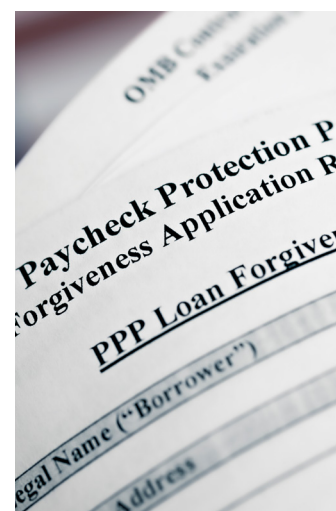
UnidosUS Latino Social Belonging Survey

20%

of Latinos, including U.S.-born citizen adults, reported that they or someone in their household decided to *avoid* public benefits since the start of the pandemic because they were worried about their own or a loved one’s immigration status. Among Latinos with children and among essential workers, 1/3 avoided public benefits.

Including U.S.-born citizen adults, **17% of Latinos reported they or someone in their household decided to *stop* participating in public benefits since the start of the pandemic** because they were worried about their own or a loved one’s immigration status.

Among Latinos with children and among essential workers, 1/4 stopped using public benefits.





Participants even reported that such fear led to self-policing of the public charge rule within their communities. One woman from Nashville who has a legal work permit said:

So, we applied for unemployment [insurance] and [the government] gave us help. Then, another family told us, “No! no... you shouldn’t have applied for unemployment because if you want to regularize your migratory status, that is going to hurt you...” So, like there are times you get self-conscious about receiving these aids from the government because of what people tell us. (TN, F)



During the pandemic, such fears even extended to COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, aggravating an already-confusing public health crisis:

To [get] the vaccine, you have to show an ID and I believe a paper or a bill or something [to show] where you’re living. A lot of [undocumented immigrants] don’t have this... or their IDs are just expired... They’re really afraid to go renew them... So, they can’t even get the vaccine because they don’t have the right paper[s] for it. So, I think they should make it a little easier for [undocumented immigrants]. (LA, F)



As one woman in LA commented, the effect of living with such pronounced trepidation on a daily basis even came to taint experiences of belongingness for lawful immigrants who had “done everything right” and had been looking forward to obtaining U.S. citizenship:

I’ve been doing papers for their citizenship for eight years now. Four years ago, if people were coming in to do the application, it’s because they wanted to become Americans because they’re so proud of what, they’ve done here, they did all the requirements, so they wanted to do it. Now, when people are coming in it is because they’re afraid. They’re doing out of fear, because they don’t want to be deported. And that’s not why you should become a citizen. You should want to because that’s a passion of yours, not because you’re afraid they’re going to deport you. (LA, F)





In addition to fear, some participants recounted the frustration and disappointment they had experienced due to bureaucratic barriers and confusing systems which seem inaccessible or purposefully difficult to navigate, discouraging many immigrant and non-immigrant Latinos from accessing supports. Indeed, many depicted a confusing patchwork of relief programs for which they may or may not have been eligible, may or may not have known to access, and may or may not have been able to access.

I lost my job [delivering food] during the pandemic. Some people from church told me that if I claimed unemployment, they were going to take away some benefits that I had... Now we are getting by with the little savings we had, it's almost gone but we have covered rent, and food... My wife has not been able to get food stamps, but it's not that she doesn't qualify, because they say that after five years of being here, she has the right, and she's been here, in this country, for eight years, she is a resident. But, since I can't contact social services, it's so hard to speak with a person. And then, they tell you: "I'm going to check; we'll send you a letter." But they never call or send a letter, even though we submitted proof It has been hard... but with God's help we are here surviving. (DC, M)

I lost my work, so I applied for unemployment, because somewhere they said that if you had your small business you could maybe qualify. And I've been waiting since I applied in March. Just this week they sent me the letter and they told me that I didn't qualify. They said that it was because I didn't send a paper, that I did in fact send. But I just gave up because it was too much of a stressful process that they put you through sent everything several times. But it's like, no one answers, they don't tell you anything, they don't send you an email, there is no way to talk to someone. (TN, F)





Indeed, bureaucratic public benefits systems can be unwelcoming and stigmatizing, especially for immigrants with language or cultural barriers who are seeking aid and relief for the first time. Numerous focus group participants talked about the lack of linguistically and culturally accessible information as barriers that made it difficult for Latinos and immigrants to access desperately needed support or resources (whether financial- or health-related) and engage with public systems during the pandemic. For example, one participant recalled:

What we saw, this has been like changing over time, things have evolved. And people's needs have also been changing. So, initially, there was a need for information because there was nothing in our language. So, that was a huge barrier, because everyone was like searching for information, but everything was in English so it wasn't possible.
(TN, F)



UnidosUS Latino Social Belonging Survey

33%

of Latinos feel they would not be able to access safety net programs as easily as other American families if they needed additional support. Among Spanish speakers and low-income Latinos, closer to 40% feel they would not have equitable access.

The majority who feel they would not have equitable access are also not sure if they are eligible for programs.

Out of these participants,

60%

are unsure of their eligibility and 30% say the process is difficult and confusing. Among mixed-status families, 24% cite immigration concerns.

Moreover, in an era where access to public services and benefits relied heavily on remote, virtual, and digital means, the lack of access to high-speed internet in many Latino families further discouraged them from seeking desperately needed help, especially during the first devastating months of the pandemic. Participants discussed feeling isolated and “left behind” due to the lack of internet or computer access, and the digital literacy divide those lacks created:

[I work] in testing and vaccinations. And there's a lot of Latinos and older Latinos that are not sure how to use the internet... They're like, "How can I book my vaccine appointment? How can I do this? Where can I go?" They stand in the vaccination line for 40 minutes ... [but] they wanted to be in line for COVID testing ... [L]anguage [and] technology are big barriers in trying to get the care that we need as a Latino community. (LA, M)



Often, it was the combination of linguistic and digital barriers that created heightened anxiety:

[I] have a son who is in second grade. So, when classes started, it was very complicated because they weren't adapted to the [online] system. "Mommy! Tell me how do I do this?" I would try to communicate with the translator [but] she was busy ... So, I would tell my daughter—the oldest, she is in 12th grade already—"Help me." But she was also very busy with her classes. So, I got to a stress level that I would say was so desperate, so out of control. (TN, F)



These challenges were especially pronounced on the border, where communities are extremely marginalized and isolated:

In the area where we live, many children don't have internet, don't have the necessary equipment. Parents don't understand the computer very well. So, it's stressful for people trying to work and move forward, right? The teachers are very demanding and an adult has to be with you to be online. And they don't understand that people have to work, right? We have the chance to work and have a steady job, but there are many single mothers, people who have lost their jobs, and the stress of schooling and the stress of bills, I mean, it impacts us a lot. (TX, F)



Some focus group participants described situations where, in addition to administrative, linguistic, and technological hurdles to accessing public benefits, they had felt discriminated and dehumanized as they sought support in desperate situations where anyone would have had a right to expect a minimum amount of human decency and empathy. One woman in Nashville, for example, recounted her experience seeking financial support for a \$400 electrical bill and the humiliation she was made to feel during this ordeal:

When my husband got sick, we both had to stop working. I applied for help in several places, but the first thing they tell me, is "Do you have Social Security? Are you a citizen? Do you have documents? Do you have insurance? Do you have a work permit?" And I tell them, "No." They said: "Oh! So, you can't qualify." "But my husband is sick, and he can't work..." I took all the proof, they didn't help me anywhere." One place told me to show a [drivers] license, and I [said]: "from where am I going to bring it if I don't have it?" The only thing that I could show them was my consulate ID that they give us from my country. The lady who talked to us grabs the ID, and says, "this is not valid..." And I felt bad because when I had arrived the first time, there was [a] Hispanic girl who had given me the application and said "apply, because right now there is a help that it doesn't matter the race, color, if you are an immigrant." So when I came back home, I had another phone number to call but they told me, "we don't speak Spanish, just English." I tried to tell them that I need an application for rent or bills. They asked if I spoke English, I told them, not much. "Okay," she/he said, and they hung up. And I called again because there it says that there is Spanish available, and they never answered. There are moments that we do go through hardship because we do not get treated the same as those who have documents/papers. They don't tell you, "oh, let's try and let's see if you qualify or not." No, they just tell you no, so you can't do anything. (TN, F)



Participants thus brought up a range of reactions and responses to Latino experiences of exclusion—including fear, confusion, and the persistent feeling of being diminished and treated as undeserving during a period of national emergency. Others, however, responded more with resistance (and even anger) at what they viewed as an underlying hypocrisy that surfaced during the pandemic, whereby “essential workers”—a majority of whom are Latino immigrants—were at one level praised and touted as important and essential contributors to the U.S. economy, while in practice being treated as disposable and exploitable labor.



My husband... is an essential worker... he isn't valued. For one, there is his immigration status. And two weeks ago, he stopped going to work because he got sick with COVID... So, I believe that that is unjust because he hasn't stopped working...since [the pandemic] started and he hasn't received any support... it is hard because it is as though your life isn't worth anything in this country. (TN, F)

I have been here for about 20 years... I've been paying my taxes for years now, the lowest amount I've paid is \$400 to \$600, and the average amount is \$800-\$1500. I've had to pay a lot. Long story short, we're essential workers when it's convenient. (FL, M)



In the same vein, some participants expressed skepticism about public pronouncements of support for “essential” immigrant workers, depicting a government that has paid lip service to essential workers but made it difficult or impossible for them to access help. One youth described how this somewhat cynical contradiction (between calling workers “essential” while also excluding them from support) is merely a superficial, “performative” message of inclusion for Latinos and immigrants:

[T]here's posters all around the United States saying, oh, we care about our essential workers... But it's very performative. So, it's like, okay, you're thanking me but why don't you pay me a living wage? (TN, M)



Finally, some participants discussed the social hierarchy applied to the term “essential worker.” This presumed hierarchy lifts up health professionals and first responders over and above food supply chain workers or farmworkers (often low-wage Latinos), once again highlighting a ranking of deserving individuals that places immigrants at the bottom:

[W]hat [politicians] take into account are those at the highest level. For example: hospital personnel, military personnel, fire departments, all those bodies are called “essential” ... [A]ll the other sectors act like they are lesser ... when they’re actually also essential... It seems like the people who make more money, they are the first ones to be taken into account. (DC, M)

Well, I think that we are essential workers in a different way. Perhaps, the government does not see us as such, but for our families we are essential, and we have to see in one way or another how we met those needs. Although other people may not see it that way. (DC, F)



UnidosUS Latino Social Belonging Survey

60%

of Latinos report either being an essential worker or living with one.

Among mixed-status families, this number is 70%.

32%

of respondents feel the U.S. government has treated essential workers unfairly.

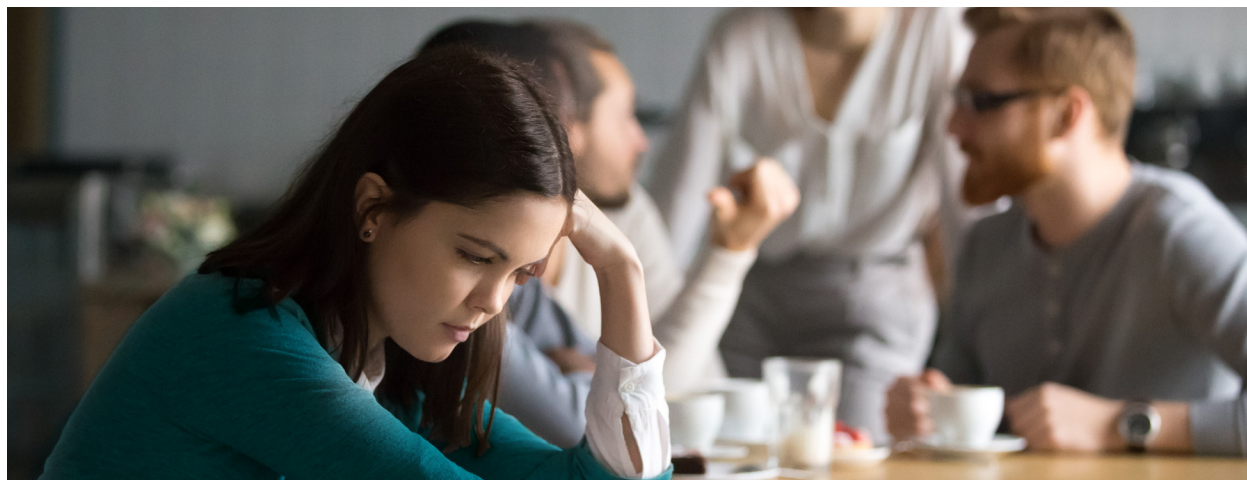
Close to 40% of Latinos in mixed-status families feel the government has treated essential workers unfairly.

As this section shows, the poor treatment of immigrants by the government prior to the pandemic influenced the beliefs, mindsets, and behaviors of families in desperate need after the COVID-19 federal emergency declaration. While some of these sentiments veer more toward negative feelings of alienation and frustration, others point to how the rise of the “deserving essential worker” designation gave way to a demand for recognition and respect for their contributions to the nation, particularly in a crisis.

3. “They Still See Us as Foreigners”: Racialization and Belonging

The words and actions of the now-former President of the United States throughout his tenure shaped the attitude, views, and experience of Latino immigrants during the first year of the pandemic. It is no coincidence that during the presidency of Donald Trump—a leader who infamously described Mexicans as “rapists,” the country of origin for some immigrants as “shit-hole countries,” and who refused to condemn the violent actions of white supremacists—race-based hate crimes escalated dramatically and televised incidents of attacks against immigrants being told to “speak English” and “go home” became nightly news stories.

Many of the focus group participants spoke openly about their own experiences with discrimination and racism during the pandemic and the fact that these experiences had become far more acute during the Trump years. Even those who stated that they did not experience racism directly—often because they live in predominantly Latino enclaves in places like LA—spoke about the acute racism of the Trump years as an affront to Latinos collectively:



From my point of view, which has no political angle, the past president had a lot to do with how things got so heated. [He] gave [racists] a lot of freedom... I had never seen so much racist behavior as in the past as in the last four years. However, nowadays it's even worse; I see it every day in the streets. (FL, M)

It just has a lot to do with the way the country is brainwashed [about] how Latinos are. I just think race is a really big problem in the United States, especially after who we had as president. I think [the Trump years] kind of set back a lot of things for a lot of people... So, I really do think that the spotlight was put on the Latino community, on us being this, these bad people. But we look at it, we're hustlers. We do everything for ourselves and we're the hardest working people here. (CA, F)

When I entered high school I knew that it was predominantly white. And I was so scared to go in because the like presidential election was coming up. And I remember when Trump won, there's like a bison there they always paint and that was colored in with Make America Great Again. And I was just so worried that I was going to be attacked on campus for being Mexican. And like after when you know Trump attacks my people, I was just so worried about that. But it wasn't as bad as it was 'cause there is a OID office, the Office of Intercultural Development, and so they made it easier for me during that time.



UnidosUS Latino Social Belonging Survey

16%

of Latinos report having been called offensive names or told to "go back" to another country

(20% of U.S. citizens; 20% in mixed-status families; 20% of essential workers).

20%

of Latinos have been criticized for speaking Spanish in public

(28% of young adults ages 18-34).

20%

of Latinos have experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly because of their Hispanic heritage

(29% of young adults ages 18-34 and 25% of essential workers).

The majority of these incidents took place in public places (parks, stores, etc.), with 1/3 happening at work and just under 1/4 happening when dealing with law enforcement or authorities.

In their discussions of experiencing racism, focus group participants depicted those engaging in racist discourse as tending to conflate race/ethnicity, immigration status, and the language markers that make Latinos targets for discrimination, as well as appealing to the “racialized economics” that posits Latino immigrants as usurpers of jobs they do not deserve:

I feel like people look at immigration now as a bad thing. People look at it as us trying to come and take something that's theirs, that isn't theirs, let's just say the land or whatever it is... [Most people] can never understand the struggle it is to be [an immigrant]. It's very easy for them to say that we're not welcomed here because they don't know what it's like... I feel like it's a lot harder, as the time has gone by, for immigrants to actually come and do better for their kids or do better for themselves. (CA, F)



Participants in all focus groups recounted how racism affected their everyday lives and experiences in different public milieus where they often felt diminished, policed, or criminalized. Several participants pointed to the fact that generalizations and false stereotypes about undocumented immigrants or those who are thought to “cheat the system” lead the public to conclude that all immigrants (and by extension Latinos) are suspect. For example:

I have been stopped by police officers for no reason, they corner me, look at my face and my Hispanic features and that's it. I bump into them and I know that all it takes is a look at me for them [to] stop me. Obviously, first things first, they ask for my license and registration and when they check them, I know I'm in trouble. (FL, M)

They still see us as foreigners, not only as foreigners, most people see us as criminals. Because I think that as a society, we don't educate ourselves... I have been to places where they look down on me. They simply judge. (DC, F)



UnidosUS Latino Social Belonging Survey

76%

of Latinos agree that because Latino immigrants are treated differently (seen as foreigners) in the United States, Latinos who are not immigrants also tend to be treated differently. (80% among U.S.-born citizens)



In some areas, such as the Texas border towns, practices enacted daily by authorities that criminalize Latinos—such as hyper-surveillance and profiling by Customs and Border Protection—were discussed as normalized, everyday experiences. While some viewed such practices as a clear example of racial inequity enacted by law enforcement, others mentioned that this normalization of surveillance practices often led community members to be blinded to their own exclusion.

On the other hand, some participants also described the racialization of Latinos as a feeling of not being seen or of being forgotten, and therefore not being understood or discerned by the dominant culture. Several participants, for example, brought up the fact that crimes against Latinos are only rarely discussed in the media. Youth, in particular, discussed this Latino invisibility in relation to current social movements addressing social injustice and racial equity in their community—with some comparing the erasure of Latinos to the more prominent Black Lives Matter/#BLM movement.

I'm going to say we're definitely viewed as outsiders. I just feel we're not noticed as much as others. Not only that, but I know how Black Lives Matter is a big movement, and I totally understand why that movement was brought up. It made me notice, because when that movement was going on, a lot of Hispanics were saying, ... "Oh, but what about us? When are we going to do something about us?" (FL, F)



Some youth attributed the invisibility of Latinos in part to the pronounced fear that often permeates immigrant lives (a fear that Trump supporters reinforced through outright racist discourse and policies/actions), while others attributed it more to generational differences:

You do see Hispanics being targeted by ICE. They also have their own political issues going on. But definitely, I guess you could say they're afraid. They're afraid of doing anything that could cause them to get deported. But I totally feel like we're undermined ... because of how Trump, the way he portrayed us, and the things he said during his talks and conversations. (FL, F)

I think that happens sometimes because the Latino culture tends to be individualistic. I was talking to older Hispanics, not kids my age (about BLM). And it was, "yo no me meto en eso" (I don't want to be involved in that). "That's not my issue. That's not my place." I sometimes feel it's maybe that is due to our fear of being deported or something. I don't know. But we're not willing to stand up to even our own community when something happens to our community. (FL, F)



As this quote implies, while younger Latinos understand such fearful attitudes among older immigrants, the mindset of "don't rock the boat" can also be frustrating for those who have been born in the United States and whose sense of belonging is also being shaped in the midst of a critical national conversation on racial equity, justice, and inclusion.

It is important to note that all of the focus group discussions (which were conducted after the 2020 election) included impassioned and explicit statements about the particularly noxious and hurtful effect of Trump-era racism on Latinos. Even in the aftermath of that administration, the messages Trump sent to Latinos and other communities of color about their value continued to shape conversations around belonging and exclusion. This section thus shows that the tone and attitude of the president toward immigrants, the policies of his administration, and the outright racism that became permissible by national political leaders influenced the views of Latino mixed-status families about their "place" in the country. These dynamics racialized Latinos and shaped perceptions about where Hispanics fit in the overall social order of the nation. Combined with government economic relief and assistance policies and programs that excluded and restricted access for vulnerable families with immigrants during a national emergency, that sentiment further deepened the collective sense of injustice, among other things.

4. "We Should All Be Proud to Be Americans":

Spaces and Ambiguities of Belonging

As mentioned earlier, the exclusion of Latinos in the United States must also be understood (both historically and in the current moment) as part of a complex and paradoxical dynamic defined by various disconnects in the nation's treatment of immigrants and minorities. It

stands to reason that if messages about belonging and inclusion directed at the Latino community are inconsistent, Latinos themselves will reflect ambivalence (or at least a variety of perceptions), all of which often gets lost in the more simplified survey or opinion questions. Individual Latinos may speak about the treatment of Latinos as a collective in one way while assessing their personal situation and community in another. Their perceptions may vary depending on particular geographies and/or spaces that contextualize feelings of belonging or exclusion. Individuals may also speak about belonging and inclusion in a more abstract or aspirational way that reflects a strong desire to be seen as full Americans (and to achieve an “American Dream”), or they may discuss the very concrete, usually more localized aspects of daily life that may or may not make them feel like they belong (are valued, supported, and respected) in a community.

Indeed, while many focus group participants mentioned the above examples of Latino exclusion and racialization, a more nuanced narrative of belonging permeated the discussions. For one, many talked about their strong feelings of belonging to and identifying with the American nation despite the various forms of racism or exclusion they’ve experienced.

I feel I am part of [American society], because I am contributing, just like everyone else... This is a nation of immigrants, so we should all be proud to be Americans, even though we’re not born in this country... And I have kids [who] were born Americans, and they’re going to be Americans to the day they die. I love America... I’ve lived here most of my life. That doesn’t mean that I [...] forget where I come from. I know where I come from. (LA, M)

Well, most of the time I do feel like I am [accepted], especially since I was actually born here... But I just feel like America’s so diverse that it’s kind of ridiculous that race is still such a big problem for us here. (LA, F)



Experiences at the state or local level may reinforce broader feelings of exclusion or discrimination, or localities may—and often do—seek to counteract such tendencies, as, for example, when states or cities provide programs that promote welcoming, inclusive environments for immigrants and minority groups. Participants in all focus groups mentioned various types of local support, often provided by schools, health clinics, and community-based organizations. These organizations and institutions were able to reach them during the pandemic through food banks, the provision of internet connectivity, health information, or other programs. Other participants mentioned more informal or organic sources of support such as neighbors and friends who provided help, despite the isolation imposed by the pandemic. The following quotes indicate the appreciation and relief felt when such efforts were provided by communities during the pandemic:

We received boxes full of vegetables from the very beginning in our community. In addition, there is information available everywhere in ads regarding who we can contact and where we can go in case of an emergency, about safety measures and how to protect ourselves; they even hung a bag with cloth masks that we could wear, wash and reuse. I mean, the community stocked us up like that and they still do, every now and then. They even come from time to time and run the tests for free. We’ve had all of those options, thank God. (FL, F)





There are many citizen kids who don't get assistance, such as Medicaid and all that and I feel like they discriminate against them for that reason. Of course, now, with the pandemic since last March, there's a lot of assistance here in Brownsville. Like, food banks where they give food to people every week. So, that's quite a benefit for all the families, whether you are a resident or not. (TX, F)



Whether or not particular states or communities are experienced as welcoming or unwelcoming environments for Latinos depends not only on the degree of concrete support provided to those in need but also on public expressions of acceptance of diverse community members. Focus group participants discussed the geographic variability of such environments. Youth, in particular (and especially those in Florida, Texas, and DC where there are relatively large Hispanic communities), discussed feeling somewhat protected by being part of a Latino ethnic enclave.

I grew up in a very Hispanic community. And so, a lot of my friends were Hispanic; we had immigrant parents. And it wasn't until I really went to college [that] I started meeting people from different demographic groups. (LA, M)



Several participants alluded to how the experience of being treated as “different” varied by geography, pointing out, for example, that experience of traveling beyond their communities had opened their eyes to racial stereotypes and behaviors.

I have family in Idaho, it's a very rural area where it's mostly white folk. A few years back, it's like they were used to us, the Hispanic community, and we would feel welcome. But after these past years, it seems that they started going back to the old ways, where they would see you and it would be like, 'What is this guy doing here?' It's like they just started coming out and just making you feel unwelcome, I don't know what happened to them. It's like a switch flipped and the neighbors that used to be really nice with me, now they're giving me these dirty looks. So it's going to take a lot to go back to making things right again. But here in California, you hardly see it because it's over, it's so many cultures, so many races that you hardly see it. (LA, M)

Here in DC I feel like people accept us... On the other hand, I recently traveled to Oklahoma and people are a bit racist there, so to speak. They would ask you to speak English and they say that if you want to speak Spanish you should go back to where you came from and things like that. (DC, M)



In the Texas border communities, the question of racial discrimination was also discussed as an internal division that separates Latinos in border *colonias* (who tend more to be undocumented, Spanish-dominant, and very poor) from the more “Americanized,” English-speaking Latinos who live a bit further away from the border. As this participant alludes to, the trope of the “deserving/undeserving” Latino is thus in some cases perpetuated within the Latino community itself, while perceptions of non-Latinos toward Hispanic immigrants are not uniformly negative:

There's discrimination within our own race in this country. Like there are Americans who value you, there are many Americans who respect Latinos because they're hardworking, because they struggle a lot, because they are, they don't give up. And there are Latinos who believe they are American, and they have contempt toward us. So, even the same race treat you badly. So, as I'm saying, there's a bit of everything (TX, M)



Even within the micro-spaces of everyday life, participants discussed the somewhat paradoxical experience of being made to feel both included and excluded as Latinos. Some youth, for example, conveyed the feeling tokenized or even exoticized within such spaces. A Nashville youth, for example, describes a lounge at school where Latino students congregate, which (she felt) was used by the school to portray an image of diversity and inclusion. Despite this, she stated that Latino students are still made to feel as “different” and “foreign” by the school in other ways:

[My current school] is predominantly white. And so they have this room called a commuter's lounge. They describe it as the most diverse place on campus. Because most [student] commuters are Hispanic or Egyptian or just...they're “foreign,” as they say. And when they give tours they always pass through there and they always say that it's the most diverse place on campus. And I've heard a couple Hispanic kids saying, “oh, they treat us as a zoo exhibit.” And it's a little sad at how they like to show that off. But I also understand, you know, they're trying to promote diversity. But that's pretty much the only place that most people feel comfortable in 'cause everywhere else people stare at us when we speak Spanish or just something like that. (TN, F)



On the other hand, some expressed feelings of hope as communities continue to change and become more welcoming. Such fluctuations and positive changes at a more local level stand in contrast to more regressive tendencies at the national level, such as the anti-immigrant discourse and policies espoused by the Trump administration:

Nashville is continuing [to be more] diverse. You know back like in the 1960s like the school where I went to was segregated and now it's like the most diverse high school in the state. And so I really see like the city being more diverse and welcoming people of all backgrounds. And I'm so proud of that. And I would like to mention that as a future educator, when I see that there aren't as many teachers of color in classes, that's why I really want to bring that in classes. (TN, F)





Finally, it is important to underscore the fact that the experiences of both systemic exclusion and racialization are not merely felt individually by adults and young people but also are experienced and deeply felt within families and communities. As pointed out by numerous focus group participants, the treatment immigrant Latino parents experience has profound and long-lasting repercussions for their children. Parents in all focus groups expressed a strong concern that their children, and indeed Latino children and youth in general, are made to feel fearful and unsafe in their country despite overwhelmingly being U.S.-born citizens.

You feel [racism] daily...and that is like another virus on top of us, of us Latinos, and it is hard for us to go out... Our kids were born here, and they are also in danger because...my children have experienced racism. They make [children] feel like they don't belong here. So, it's like another virus, besides COVID, that doesn't stop, and is growing. (TN, F)

I think after the last administration...I saw a lot of anxiety with a lot of students [who] I work with... asking me like, "Is my mom going to be deported? Trump hates Mexicans." How is a child supposed to feel safe if our, the President of the United States is creating laws that discriminate against their parents, our cousins? And, at the same time, people believing the stuff that he's saying to the point where I have five cousins that are big Trump supporters...I think he set us back a whole lot with some of the policies of discrimination. (LA, M)



UnidosUS Latino Social Belonging Survey

42%

of Latinos in our survey report that during the pandemic, they have **felt like an outsider in the United States** (42% of U.S. citizen adults and 49% in mixed-status families).

44%

of Latinos agree that American children with undocumented parents are treated worse by American society compared to other children. Among U.S.-born citizen adults and higher-educated, higher-income Latinos, it's 50%.



Some described how children of undocumented immigrants respond to their parents' exclusion by developing both a sense of strength and determination as well as a sense of protectiveness toward their parents. However, whether or not such resilience points to positive reactions (such as a desire to excel in school or to be more civically engaged in order to effect change in the future), some parents stated that the psychological damage of feeling “othered” can be formative for such youth:

Sometimes you say, “Why...?” Sometimes I tell my daughter this. “I don’t understand,” I tell her, “Why don’t they [treat us] equally?” And she tells me, yes, mom, some day, she says, so I will finish studying, I will go to work, and when you are not able, I help you. I support her so much, and my two kids; study so someday you can speak English, because I don’t want you to go through the same that I have gone through. (TN, F)

[I]n a certain way, sometimes that [unfairness] becomes instilled in [children]. For example, in my daughter’s case, she says: I think it’s very unfair how they have treated us because I know that you work and get us ahead. So, she says: she says, when I grow up, I am going to exercise my vote, I am going to exercise my rights. On one hand, it is fine, but on the other, well, [my children] still feel less-than other people. (DC, F)



As we can see here, for many focus group participants, their experience during the pandemic included positive interactions with local individuals, agents, and institutions that helped moderate the harm caused by federal exclusions and restrictions on emergency aid. These positive experiences enabled some to retain hope. Some that lived in relatively “safe” and cohesive communities were also able to get a glimpse of the lived experience of those mixed-status families that live and work in communities less hospitable to immigrants as well as racial and ethnic minorities. Youth and adult focus group participants thus expressed a wide range of sentiments regarding experiences of belonging and exclusion, including some degree of community and optimism, but also desperation, need, worry, fear, anxiety, isolation, and anger, many of which were heightened during the pandemic. Finally, the systemic exclusion of immigrants that characterized the pandemic and the xenophobic environments remaining from the Trump administration added to what was already an extremely challenging period for Latino parents and their children during this crisis.

V. DISCUSSION

The data and focus groups tell a story of struggles and hurdles experienced by Latinos across the United States, obstacles that in many ways converged and intensified in the early weeks that followed the federal emergency declaration and economic shutdown. The levels of desperation and anxiety recounted by Latinos in this study—resulting from rampant sickness, lost income, and the challenges of living in small spaces with limited access to supports and resources, among others—point to a specific lived experience. This experience differed in substantial ways from that of many other Americans who were better equipped to absorb economic and social dislocation, both before the pandemic by higher socioeconomic status as well as during it through full inclusion in policy supports. In addition, the onset of the pandemic followed years of toxic anti-immigrant rhetoric and decades of racially based policies disproportionately targeting people in Latino immigrant families.⁷³

At the same time, focus group discussions revealed a nuanced and sometimes ambivalent (or even apparently inconsistent) set of attitudes and perceptions around social belonging in the United States. This is not surprising, since Latinos—and immigrants in particular—have long been subjected to mixed messages around their desirability and inclusion in the United States and are influenced by the varied environments in the communities in which they live and work. In that context, we highlight a few more definitive findings from the conversations with study participants.

First, focus group participants validated that any discussion of social exclusion must use Latino families as a unit of analysis, rather than individuals in a household. Latinos are notoriously family-oriented in their value system, and social networks and support structures are largely based around extended family structures. As such, the impact of pandemic-era government policies that restrict access and participation to only some family members affects the whole family, including a whole generation of U.S.-citizen children.

Secondly, unlike most other American families, the participants in the focus groups already experienced socio-economic challenges and social exclusion before the pandemic. Their situation, including their predominantly U.S.-citizen children, became dramatically worse during the initial months and year following the federal emergency declaration.⁷⁴ Many participants shared stories of serious financial desperation with few safe alternatives for employment or earned income and few options to access relief, support, and aid.

Third, focus group participants in the early days of the pandemic were well aware of the administration's views about them and cognizant of several anti-immigrant and exclusionary policies the regime had put in place that targeted them. Many expressed fear, anxiety, frustration, and disappointment. They shared stories about the initial days of the pandemic and quarantine when there was confusion about their ability to access emergency aid enacted by Congress or they faced various administrative obstacles to accessing needed public benefits that appeared deliberate and intentional.

Fourth, the focus group discussions revealed that many were sensitive to the elevation in social status for “essential workers” during the pandemic. This designation instilled in Latinos a sense of pride and self-respect for working through the quarantine, but it also raised consciousness about how the media and government treated some essential workers better than others. They viewed the fact that Congress left them out of many social and economic benefits of relief and recovery that were afforded to other essential workers as unfair and unjust.

Further, participants recounted how they perceived discrimination and racialization during the pandemic as an affront to their collective ethnic identity and a highly unjust societal response to their hard work and the broader social and economic contributions that Latino immigrants make to the nation. The immigrant Latino family narrative tends to be largely based in a model of social and economic advancement (“*superar*”) through hard work, educational opportunities for one’s children, and “doing things right” (paying taxes, seeking to obtain legal status, avoiding problems with law enforcement, etc.). These aspirations form the core of the immigrant family project, shape generational expectations, and thus underpin the intrinsic value and self-respect that immigrants give themselves—and which contrasts sharply with negative and dehumanizing anti-immigrant messages.

Finally, while many shared moments of deep anguish during the pandemic, a strong sense of positivity and agency was also articulated, especially by participants who were able to tap into existing sources of support either in their communities, their families, or themselves. As such, many revealed the resilient attributes that have often helped Latinos navigate through experiences of hardship, including finding or inventing avenues of mutual support, learning new skills, relying on the emotional support provided by strong family ties, and trying to keep an eye on the longer-term future of one’s family.⁷⁵ In particular, participants expressed appreciation for programs, services, and outreach offered by UnidosUS Affiliates and other community initiatives, which were described as indispensable during a pandemic in which so many had felt neglected or abandoned by other systems (such as workplaces.)

In many ways, focus group participants described the familiar framework of the “American Dream” to which generations of immigrants before them have aspired. Indeed, our national survey results found that 84% of respondents still “believe in the American Dream for their family and their children”—despite the many frustrations and exclusions they reported experiencing during the pandemic. This type of optimism, resilience, and “can-do” attitude has helped Latino communities through many vast challenges and disasters. However, focus group conversations revealed another potentially potent sentiment: the reliance of our nation on Latino workers during the pandemic during one of the most xenophobic and racist administrations in recent memory, combined with their exclusion from many policy supports, has brought to the surface a demand for real respect and fairness toward all Latinos and communities of color.



VI. CONCLUSION

This research, which set out to gauge how a series of complex realities have impacted Latino feelings and experiences of belonging, took place within a highly fluid sociopolitical context. In the lead-up to the March 13, 2020, federal pandemic emergency declaration in the United States, America already was in political crisis: In the lead-up to the U.S. federal pandemic emergency declaration on March 13, 2020, America was in political crisis: deeply divided along ideological, class, geographic, and racial lines, and facing rising extremist sentiments and a hyper-partisan political dynamic. Latinos in the United States were, in some cases inadvertently and other cases deliberately, at the center of the social fragmentation taking place, with their growing numbers cited as a frequent pretext for much xenophobic backlash across the country.

As a result of such antagonism, Latinos—and immigrant Latinos and their families in particular—had begun to register sentiments that reflected some degree of societal alienation and neglect prior to the onset of the pandemic. By early 2020, low-income Latino immigrants—especially those in the country without lawful status raising U.S.-born children—perceived that they had been knocked to the bottom of the American social order. These families managed to survive (and some thrived) by keeping a low profile in communities that in many ways exemplified the type of pluralistic, inclusive, and democratic societies we hope our nation can become one day. They persevered with the help and support of family and social networks, social service and immigrant-serving organizations, and state and local officials who support immigrant integration efforts. Within such environments, community leaders and members sought to advance greater social cohesion as a means to resist the polarizing and divisive dynamics reflected in national political discourse.

The eruption of the pandemic ushered in a short period of relative political unity, with Congress passing, with near-unanimous support, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act within two weeks in March 2020 followed by a more expansive package of domestic aid known as the CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security, Act). These measures, along with others promulgated by other institutions such as the Federal Reserve Board, were widely credited with limiting the scope and degree of economic and social dislocation attributable to the pandemic. For a brief time, it seemed that political leaders, first responders, health professionals, and the business community set aside any political, social, and cultural differences and cooperated to limit the spread of the virus and its adverse economic and social consequences. For most Americans, these policies worked. But for Latinos, especially those in immigrant families, both the policies themselves and the larger context in which they were implemented produced far less favorable outcomes.

Early on, COVID-19 spread rapidly, creating overwhelming distress in Latino and other communities of color and putting significant stress on health professionals and emergency responders in areas of high morbidity. Moreover, Congress's failure to remove immigrant restrictions to relief and emergency aid took a rapid toll on desperate families hit hard by both the virus and the economic impact of shutdowns and quarantines. By the summer of 2020, it became clear that the federal emergency response to date was inadequate and ineffective, as caseloads and deaths hit new records and disproportionately impacted racial and ethnic communities, especially mixed-status families.

By the time we sat down with our focus group participants in November 2020, the United States had registered roughly 14 million cases and 260,000 deaths from COVID-19, and at the date of our last focus group in January 2021, those numbers had risen to roughly 26 million and 430,000, respectively.⁷⁶ Because of systemic barriers that existed before the pandemic (and some that remained in place during the crisis), the virus spread unabated within immigrant families, who in large part lacked the type of aid provided to similarly situated American families. The political and social divisions within the country undermined efforts to prevent the spread of the virus, and such fragmentation still hinders full inoculation of the population, which is an essential prerequisite to restoring the nation to some form of “normalcy.”

A number of reports from UnidosUS and others have documented—and are still documenting—the disparate health and economic impacts of the pandemic on Latino immigrants and their families, along with specific policy prescriptions to address disparities⁷⁷ This report complements existing research by delving into the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of Latino community members across the country. Here, we have focused on the scope, degree, and impact of the pandemic and accompanying policy responses on

Latino immigrant families' perceptions of social exclusion—their experiences of “othering” by society and their sense of belonging (or not) in American society. As illustrated throughout the report, the effects of social exclusion are clearly identified and felt deeply by Latino families. For children living in mixed-status families, such obstacles and the various scenarios that accompany them (such as ineligibility for important supports or watching parents be discriminated against) risk becoming part and parcel of their psychosocial development into adulthood and may have harmful repercussions on their psyches, as many researchers have found.⁷⁸ If the family is unable to find material and other types of support, the grind of exclusion can accumulate, with traumatic repercussions for decades to come.

Young people who have grown up witnessing policy systems that exclude, restrict, stigmatize, and ostracize their parents and their families are at risk of becoming citizen adults who are more wary of government, less civically active, distrustful of key civic institutions, and apathetic to and disconnected from critical national interests and endeavors. There is also no question that these youth will be more challenged in other ways compared to peers who were fully included in the range of pandemic supports, such as future caregiving for aging parents who directly bore the brunt of the government's exclusionary policies in this national emergency. At the same time, demographic trends suggest the rest of us will be increasingly reliant on these future workers to care for our parents and ourselves as our society ages.

If the old adage that how a nation treats its most vulnerable is a measure of its humanity is true, the experience of Latino mixed-status families during the pandemic has shown how callous and cruel American society can be. One essential response to addressing the effects of the disparities highlighted by the pandemic is dismantling or mitigating the fundamental sources of these disparities, in particular, the U.S. immigration policy system and a benefits regime that disproportionately excludes Latino immigrants and their families.⁷⁹ While such measures, as well as more generalized measures designed to build a more inclusive and cohesive nation, are welcomed, they face a daunting policy landscape. Moreover, even if enacted, they cannot address the damage already caused by the social inequalities exposed and reinforced by the pandemic and the nation's policy responses to it.

If we are to truly appreciate and celebrate the grit and resilience of “essential” immigrant workers, their families, and their communities, this report identifies some places to start. Even in the wake of a devastating pandemic and despite exclusionary government policies, study participants repeatedly articulated appreciation for small-scale community-based initiatives to provide food, health care, cash payments, and various types of psychosocial and other support. Although these efforts did not fully eliminate economic disparities, participants found them both validating and inspiring. As the nation considers how to best respond to the social traumas produced by the pandemic, this report suggests that grounding the provision of essential services within trusted community-based organizations and amplifying support for these indispensable organizations may offer a crucial, oft-overlooked approach to building social cohesion at a critical time.

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