



# Voices at the Intersection of Discrimination and Health Disparities:

## Stories from Latina Immigrant Mothers during COVID-19

### Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive upheaval in the lives of families worldwide and disproportionately impacted communities of color. We interviewed low-income, Latina immigrant mothers about the impacts of COVID-19 in the fall of 2020, as the worldwide pandemic stretched on into its sixth month. Mothers reported overwhelming economic difficulties as families struggled with job losses and accessing needed resources. Stress spilled over into family life and often led to maternal psychological distress, including depression and anxiety, and had negative impacts on children's health and well-being. These stressors were often compounded by immigration status, as undocumented mothers and members of mixed-status families were overlooked in major relief programs and many fell through the cracks.

These findings highlight the urgent need for targeted programs for Latina immigrant mothers and their families, including financial relief programs that are accessible to those with precarious immigration status, centralized information hubs that can provide culturally competent care coordination, and expanded physical and mental health services to support the well-being of the whole family.

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a significant stressor for Latino families. Data show that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted Latinos in terms of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, compared to other ethnic and racial groups.<sup>1</sup> For example, in California, Latinos are currently 2.6 times more likely to test positive for COVID-19 than Whites.<sup>2</sup> Studies show that Latinos are more vulnerable because they are more likely to be employed as essential workers and live in multigenerational families.<sup>3</sup>

The pandemic has also had a greater economic impact on Latino families.<sup>4</sup> Latinos are more likely to have experienced job losses, decreases in income, and food insecurity as a result of the pandemic, particularly when compared to Whites.<sup>5-7</sup> Additionally, Latino immigrants are more likely to face significant barriers in accessing public safety net programs, particularly if they are undocumented or live in mixed status families. Latino immigrants may be unaware that they are eligible for public benefits<sup>8</sup> or may not want to utilize benefits for fear of immigration consequences.<sup>9</sup>

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"In my mind I thought that it would be temporary, only 40 days and everything would return to normal... instead I was out of work for 7 months."

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"It has been frustrating because you don't know what to give in to, things can amplify quickly such as your rent, car payment, your bills, food...This all can be emotional and depressing because it stresses you out and makes you irritable of having this constant pressure of what are you going to do."

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In addition to these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women. Nationwide, mothers from all racial and ethnic groups are struggling to balance work and childcare, and a recent report shows that 2.2 million women have left the workforce.<sup>10</sup> Latinas have been impacted particularly hard, with a recent study reporting that nearly 1 in 11 Latina women remained unemployed in January 2021.<sup>11</sup> Studies also show that maternal mental health concerns are spiking,<sup>12</sup> raising concerns about low-income Latina immigrant mothers, who may experience compounding stress due to the combination of disproportionate economic impacts, increased caretaking duties, and barriers related to immigration status.

### ■ THE CURRENT STUDY:

This study explores the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on economic well-being, maternal mental health, and family functioning among low-income, Latina immigrant mothers, including undocumented mothers and members of mixed status families. Drawing participants from the "Healthy Moms, Healthy Kids" intervention study that provided a group maternal depression treatment to Head Start mothers in south Los Angeles,<sup>13</sup> this study gathered qualitative and quantitative data from 34 Latina immigrant mothers. Mothers completed surveys and participated in in-depth interviews between September and December of 2020. Participants were compensated for their time with gift cards, and all study procedures were approved by USC's Institutional Review Board.

## Research Questions:

1. What stressors are low-income, immigrant Latina mothers experiencing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How have pandemic-related stressors impacted maternal mental health, family functioning, and child well-being for this population?
3. What supports are families receiving and what gaps remain?

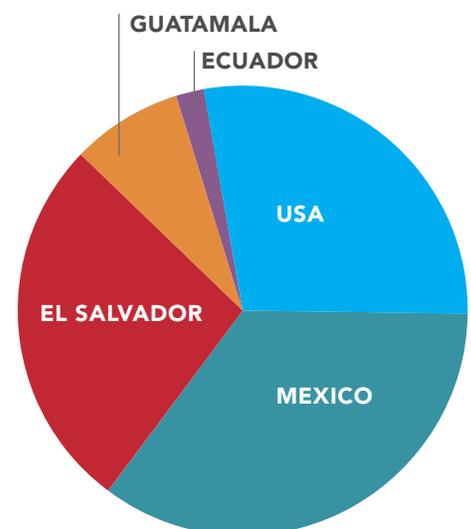
### ■ PARTICIPANTS:

The majority (76.5%) of mothers in the sample were born outside of the US, in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, or Ecuador. Mothers were 38 years of age on average and reported having 1 to 6 children, with children's ages ranging from 8 months to 26 years old. In terms of partner status, 58.5% of mothers were married or living with a romantic partner, 17.6% were divorced or separated, and 20.6% were single or never married. This sample was of very low socioeconomic status, with 71% of mothers reporting monthly income from earnings of less than \$1,499, which is equivalent to less than \$18,000 per year.

### ■ MEASURES:

The survey portion of the study assessed demographic information, including family information, employment status, housing instability, financial stressors, and access to safety net resources. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were assessed using the exposure subscale of the COVID-19 Exposure and Family Impact Survey (CEFIS)<sup>14</sup>. In addition, the survey assessed maternal mental health symptoms using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)<sup>15</sup> and General Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7)<sup>16</sup>. These standardized measures show high validity and reliability and were administered in both English and Spanish.

MOTHER'S  
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

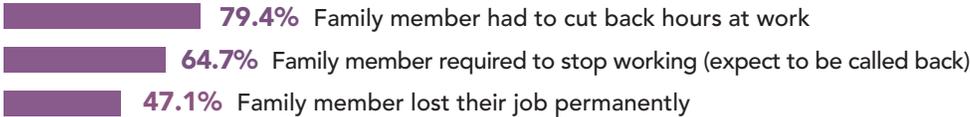




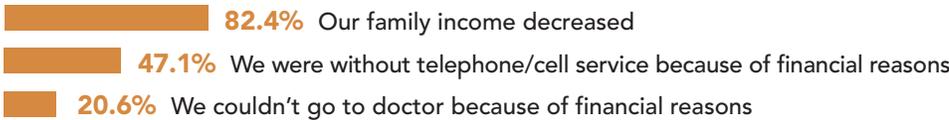
**QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS**

**Pandemic-related stressors**

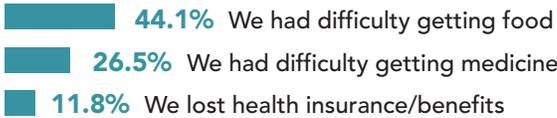
**EMPLOYMENT:**



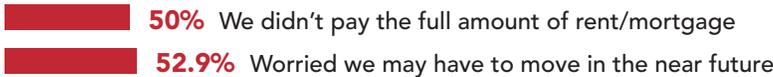
**FINANCIAL HARDSHIP:**



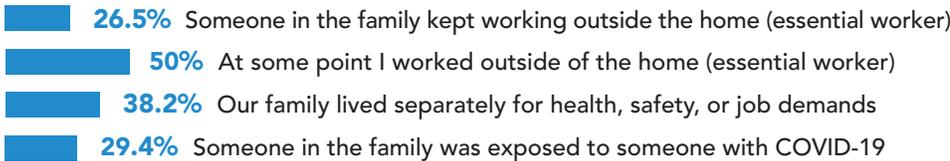
**DIFFICULTY ACCESSING BASIC NEEDS:**



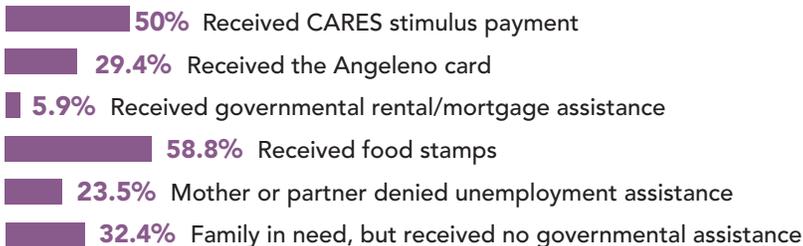
**HOUSING:**



**HEALTH/ESSENTIAL WORKER STRESSORS:**



**GOVERNMENTAL SUPPORTS:**

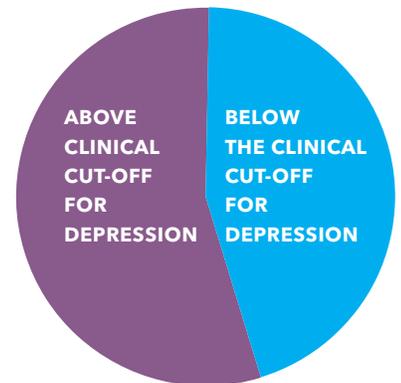


**MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH**

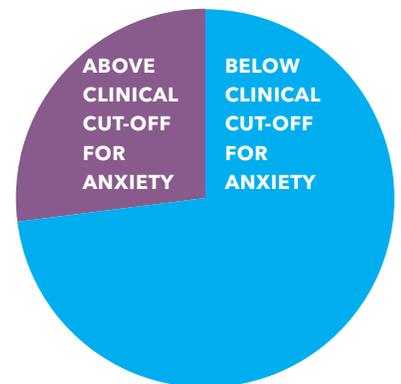
55.9% of mothers scored above the clinical cut-off on the CES-D, indicating they qualified for a probable diagnosis of depression

26.5% of mothers scored above 10 on the GAD-7, indicating substantial rates of anxiety that could impact functioning

**MATERNAL DEPRESSION SCORES (CES-D)**



**MATERNAL ANXIETY SCORES (GAD-7)**





## ■ QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

During in-depth interviews, mothers talked about the sense that they were living precarious lives, where any single stressor could (and often did) set off a chain reaction of negative events. Importantly, mothers also described the additional stress of being an immigrant during the pandemic, a cross-cutting theme that touched on every aspect of their lives. This cascade of pandemic stressors typically started with ubiquitous stay-at-home orders, which sent shock waves through family units.

### Stay-At-Home-Orders & Distance Learning

Overall, mothers described the disruptive effect of the implementation of county-wide stay-at-home orders, including the sudden shift to distance learning. Most mothers reported that the additional role of teacher fell on them at this time, and that they often had to monitor multiple children's progress throughout the school day. Many mothers reported that they continued to face significant language and technological barriers, even after attempting to utilize resources given to them by the school. For example, some mothers reported being unable to communicate with school staff because they didn't speak English and many shared difficulties teaching their children because of the language barrier. Others shared barriers in terms of accessing the internet and feeling confident using the computer. For example, some mothers shared that the wifi hotspots provided by the schools did not function adequately. Overall, many mothers shared concerns that distance learning negatively impacted their children's learning and development.

**"At school, at least [my son] has his instructors to help him. But I don't speak English and so...I'm unable to help him and it makes me sad."**

**"I think the largest problem is the way the school district is under the impression that everyone has the internet...The boxes which they provided, the hotspots, are so glitchy and calls freeze. They say these boxes are capable of managing five devices at once but they're glitchy even though we only have two."**

### Economic Challenges

Echoing findings from the survey, mothers reported significant economic challenges as a result of the pandemic and stay-at-home orders, including experiences of job loss or having work hours reduced, either for themselves, their partner, or other member of their household. Mothers also shared their struggles with unreliable work schedules and the challenges of juggling work and childcare.

Mothers also faced difficulties with affording and accessing basic necessities, including problems paying rent, losing phone and internet service, experiencing food insecurity, and accruing more and more debt as they were given extensions on rent and other expenses that eventually needed to be paid back.

When it came to accessing safety net programs, some mothers reported that they did not qualify for any benefits. Others shared that they lost benefits for themselves or their children or experienced difficulties

**"I used to have someone helping me with my son when I worked, but since we don't have that money any longer, it's not possible. This holds me back from looking for full-time employment."**

**"We've had financial limitations. If I used to spend this much, now I must spend half of that. If I used to eat five eggs, now I may have to eat two or three...We have to eat less, so the food lasts more."**

**"Just recently I received a letter that I need to submit certain paperwork...I have tried calling, but there's no answer. It's worrisome because it is related to the food program."**



## ■ QUALITATIVE FINDINGS *continued*

### **Economic Challenges** *continued*

verifying their eligibility for benefits, explaining that they never heard back from agency workers or were unable to schedule in-person visits to sort the problem out. Others had difficulties navigating through misinformation and confusion to figure out what benefits were available and how to apply, particularly because information was not available in Spanish.

Additional challenges for immigrant mothers included the burden of financially supporting family members in their home country, although many reported being unable to do so. Many mothers shared the emotional impact of this additional stressor.

### **Health Concerns**

Many mothers reported being exposed to COVID-19. Some mothers reported having family members who tested positive, were hospitalized, or even died from the disease. Others shared that their family did not seek out medical attention or testing, raising concerns about the true extent of the pandemic's impact on this population. Many mothers also identified that either they themselves or a member of their immediate household identified as an "essential worker." Mothers reported significant health concerns because of having family members who were essential workers, and some shared distressing stories of living separate from their partner due to this concern. Families feared the possibility of infection, and also the reality of the struggle to access coronavirus testing and medical treatment if it was needed.

### **Discrimination**

Mothers also discussed the discrimination they experienced as immigrants in the United States, either in terms of interpersonal experiences of discrimination or the effect of structural barriers, particularly for undocumented mothers or members of mixed status families. The biggest challenge reported by undocumented immigrant mothers was being ineligible for the CARES Act stimulus payment, even if their partner or children were documented. Mothers reported that this experience made them feel invisible and forgotten by society. Mothers also shared that the anti-immigrant political climate amplified their stress and contributed to fears of discrimination when leaving the home to look for resources.

**"Most of the information is provided in English and so it makes it difficult for me to apply or research those resources. The language is a problem."**

**"Sometimes I feel sad, stressed out. I feel anxious because in my case, I'm able to eat because of the food stamps I receive but when I eat, I think of them not being able to eat, because they don't have support for food like food stamps in their country."**

**"It's impacted us economically because in our countries our families depend on us from month to month, what one can do to support them."**

**"Both my son and husband tested positive for COVID-19 [and] I was forced to go back and forth between two homes...Being apart from my family and not being able to spend time with them as I would have wanted to, really worried me."**

**"When my husband had his coronavirus test, he had a portion of it to pay...and that's going to collections because he doesn't have good insurance at work."**

**"I've been to places where information is provided in English and you ask them to provide [it] in Spanish, they look at you and talk to you in a very different and rude manner and you're advised that this is a country where English is to be spoken."**

**"First of all as an undocumented, we didn't qualify for resources, although some of my family members are legal residents and two of them citizens. Because of me, they couldn't benefit from the small amount of money we would have received."**



## ■ QUALITATIVE FINDINGS *continued*

### Impacts on Maternal, Family, and Child Well-Being

Mothers discussed a range of negative impacts on their own functioning, as well as family and child well-being. For themselves, many mothers identified impacts on their mental and physical health, including depression, anxiety, sleeping problems, and gaining weight. Mothers discussed the ways that financial hardship led to isolation and anxiety. They also shared the ways that they had to put significant life events on hold due to the pandemic and the need to care for their children. Mothers shared significant feelings of loss as they not only coped with losing loved ones to COVID-19, but also experienced shifts in identity as family roles changed. Mothers also shared experiences of loneliness and lowered social support.

For the family, mothers shared stories of heightened stress and conflict among family members, including with their partners and relatives, often due to financial stress, parenting differences, and managing the fear of infection with the virus.

Many mothers also shared that the stressors of the pandemic have affected their parenting, as they try to juggle their own mental health concerns, oversee distance learning, and manage the household. Several mothers reported feeling less patient and more irritable. Some mothers reported feeling that they were suddenly overloaded with responsibilities, and had difficulty getting the help they needed.

For their children, mothers reported concerns about the loss of peer socialization, delays in academic and developmental progress, and increasing concerns about their children's physical and mental health. Many mothers reported that their children were over-eating and not getting enough exercise since they were stuck at home.

### Effective Supports

Mothers demonstrated creativity in accessing and utilizing supports, from formal government programs to church and other community resources. However, many gaps remained, with several families falling through the cracks and reporting that they did not receive any support. Mothers reported attempting to piece together financial support from several sources. The majority of mothers reported accessing food through their children's schools, as well as utilizing food stamps and food pantries.

**"I still have no idea how I've managed...so many things are just piling up and I'm at the point where I don't think I can go on. At the same time I look at my children and know that I have to go on for them."**

**"Sometimes [my partner] is afraid to be with me because sometimes he thinks that maybe I have been exposed, or vice versa. We wear masks in the home because he's concerned about us exposing the children given that he and I are out all day."**

**"In some ways I feel frustrated, angry and there's been a bit of friction towards my children, and I feel I may have raised my voice at them at times for things when it wasn't necessary."**

**"At the beginning [my son] was depressed and started getting anxious and eating more often; about every 2-5 minutes. I eliminated cookies and junk food, so he wouldn't gain more weight."**

**"The food program has benefited us greatly. I don't believe that we would have been able to go on with the children without this program. The pandemic may not have killed us, but starvation would have."**



## ■ QUALITATIVE FINDINGS *continued*

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### **Effective Supports** *continued*

However, there were stark differences between families who were able to access social safety net programs (CARES Act stimulus payment, unemployment insurance, Angeleno card, local rental assistance, etc.), and those who were not. The Angeleno card proved to be a key support for several families that received the aid.

**“[The Angeleno Card] was a great help because it helped me practically for a month’s rent, which was a little more than that. For me, it was a great help...otherwise I’d be behind about 4 months.”**

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## **Resilience and Coping**

Although families faced overwhelming obstacles as a result of the pandemic, mothers shared their strength and resilience in coping with these challenges. Many mothers reframed the situation in a positive lens and identified several positive impacts of the pandemic, including at times a greater sense of family unity, better communication between family members, and realizing what truly matters in life.

**“This month has been very hard, but we have learned that we need to be patient, that things will get better...We were close as a family, but this has definitely brought us closer.”**

**“We know now—which is something we didn’t know before—that our health is the most valuable thing and that if there is health, we can make plans, we can all be together and that material things don’t matter.”**



## CASE EXAMPLES

**Rosa\*** | **Rosa and her family struggle to make ends meet**, after her husband was laid off and her son's hours at work reduced. She has three children under the age of 18 and reports that they have had to sell items or borrow money to try and cover their rent. She worries about her son, who is an essential worker, and shared that four close family members have tested positive for COVID-19.

More than anything, Rosa is sad and frustrated that her family didn't qualify for unemployment or the stimulus package, even though she and her husband have been paying taxes for many years. Rosa and her husband are undocumented, but she wishes her children, who are citizens, could have qualified for the stimulus benefit.

"It makes me sad to not receive that assistance. To not be seen as a human being. Especially in such times when we should all be equal. But that's not the way it is."

Rosa is also frustrated by managing remote learning for her son who has Autism, sharing that she spends six hours a day supporting him in school and then with additional therapy sessions.

**Gabriella** | **For Gabriella, although she lives in low-income housing**, she still fears the debt that she is accumulating month to month. She shares that her family was already behind on rent before the pandemic, and since COVID things have only gotten worse: "We'll still need to make the payments just as with all other bills and it becomes very nerve wracking." Although she reports that the housing program has been very supportive, the reality is, "when all this is over, it's going to add up."

Gabriella's grown daughter is supporting the family as an essential worker, but her hours have been cut back, so she normally only works a couple shifts a week. Gabriella volunteers at food banks, which helps her hear about resources in the community. She says these connections help her navigate the confusion about where to get help. "I'm very grateful to resources available in my community. I may not work, but soap and cleaning items are never missing here in exchange of volunteering hours."

Gabriella said she continues to experience a lot of anxiety about her financial situation and wants to get help to deal with the stress.

**Maria** | **Maria describes the stress of being undocumented and a single mother**. First, she lost her job at a factory, then found work at a lower wage, but then she also had to start paying for childcare. After realizing how little money she had left over, she decided to quit to take care of her children full-time and look for a better paying job.

"I worry about paying rent and how to survive with 2 children...This pandemic has caused us hardships which I never imagined I'd live through in my lifetime."

Maria hasn't received the stimulus check or the Angelino card, and shares that she has been waiting for 5 months to hear back about her application for CalWORKs. Although she tries to follow-up, she isn't able to reach anyone by phone and can't visit the office in person.

At the same time she is struggling with a harassing landlord and pain from a medical problem she can't afford to address. She reports feeling anxious and having trouble sleeping. She says: "I get depressed and have the feeling of not wanting to do anything. It's really horrible because you wonder, why continue?"

*\* All names and some identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality.*



## Summary:

Our findings suggest that Latino immigrant families are suffering significant economic, social, and emotional impacts as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Latina mothers reported high levels of maternal depression and anxiety related to financial strain, family stress, and experiences of discrimination, and their stories illustrated the seemingly insurmountable barriers they face, particularly for undocumented mothers and members of mixed status families. Although limited programs may exist for this population, participants in this study overwhelmingly reported significant barriers to accessing critical health and social services. Results show the stark disparities in health and well-being for this population and highlight the urgent need for targeted programs for Latino immigrant families in the context of the on-going pandemic.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Accessing resources:

- Mothers reported significant confusion about public programs and eligibility, as well as difficulties proving eligibility (particularly with closures of state and local agencies), accessing services and paperwork in Spanish, and utilizing technology to access information
- For example, Maria may have been eligible for a county healthcare program for undocumented residents, but was unaware of this resource and continued to suffer from chronic pain

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Institute county-wide offices to coordinate dissemination of information about public programs (housing, healthcare, financial assistance, etc.) to make information more widely available
- ▶ Ensure that county agencies provide information in Spanish and promote access for people who experience technological barriers
- ▶ Include funding in agency budgets for community outreach to combat misinformation
- ▶ Expand county funding for medical-legal partnership programs that help low-income individuals access public benefits
- ▶ Establish partnerships with existing institutions (e.g. schools) to facilitate the dissemination of information, particularly since undocumented families may distrust formal government agencies

### Financial support for undocumented immigrants/mixed status families:

- All undocumented families and mixed status families were not included in federal stimulus payments, and many families experience on-going need
- Although Biden's stimulus bill includes couples who jointly files taxes and have one valid social security number, this will likely not help mothers like Rosa, whose husband is also undocumented
- The Angeleno card was very helpful for families (10 out of 34 received it), additional support like this is needed

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Provide additional targeted financial relief programs for immigrant families regardless of immigration status



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Housing needs:

Difficulty paying rent was the biggest concern for families, and many experienced worries about eviction, including harassment from landlords. In addition, very few received support through LA's rental assistance program

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Provide community outreach programs to empower renters so that they know their rights
- ▶ Ensure that the new statewide housing program provides rent forgiveness for all with significant financial hardship who may fall off a financial 'cliff' once eviction moratoriums are lifted

### School supports:

- Many families shared that they experienced technological barriers (e.g. difficulty accessing the internet and navigating remote learning platforms)

### RECOMMENDATION

- ▶ Provide financial support for families to access the internet and trainings to navigate platforms
- Schools need to ensure that families can access information in their native language, since families' experiences widely vary and seem to depend on having a Spanish-speaking teacher or other Spanish speaker at the school
- Spanish-speaking families would also benefit from support in aiding their children with schoolwork in English

### RECOMMENDATION

- ▶ Provide additional funding and support to ensure linguistically competent school-based supports for families
- Many families reported relying on free school lunch programs during closures, most families were better able to cope with food insecurity by combining different food resources-school programs (P-EBT card, food stamps, food pantries, etc.)

### RECOMMENDATION

- ▶ Make expanded school food supports a permanent benefit for those who need it

### Physical and mental health concerns:

- Mothers reported significant physical and mental health concerns (depression and anxiety, sleep problems, etc.)
- They also shared concerns about their children's mental health and development (anxiety, over-eating, depression, loss of developmental progress)
- Mothers varied in their ability to access physical and mental health supports, particularly those that could fit with the demands of their day as they engaged in remote learning, working, etc.

### RECOMMENDATION

- ▶ Expand flexible physical and mental health supports that families can access regardless of immigrant status or ability to pay
- ▶ Fund targeted public outreach for this population to provide de-stigmatizing information about mental health concerns and ways to access mental health support



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### AUTHORS AND AFFILIATIONS:

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Suzanne  
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