



Undocumented Immigrants in the Care Economy

By Nicole Prchal Svajlenka February 2, 2021

Across the country, 5 million undocumented immigrants are working alongside their neighbors to keep the country safe amid a global pandemic—including 142,000 immigrants who make up a large segment of the care economy as child care workers, personal care aides, and home health aides.¹

The care economy is generally considered to consist of three sets of care workers: child care providers and nannies; direct care workers such as personal care and home health aides; and maids and cleaners. Though these workers are often overlooked, they are a vital foundation for a functioning economy and society. They provide essential services and care to the elderly and to people with disabilities and are teachers to children. Meanwhile, their role often facilitates other family members' ability to remain in or return to the workforce, creating a ripple effect of productivity throughout the economy.²

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) memo outlining the critical infrastructure bifurcates the care economy, including child care workers, personal care aides, and home health aides. However, in addition to the 142,000 undocumented nannies and caregivers included in the CISA guidance, an estimated 162,000 undocumented immigrants are working in households as cleaners and housekeepers.³ Given the similarities in the nature of this work—managing households to provide flexibility for its members to work elsewhere—caregivers and cleaners ought to be considered together as a whole.

Domestic workers, regardless of immigration status, have been hit extremely hard. A National Domestic Workers Alliance survey found that more than 90 percent of cleaners, nannies, and home care workers lost work due to the coronavirus early in the pandemic, with three-quarters reporting their income as the primary income for their household.⁴ While the outlook has recovered some, the situation remains perilous for many in the care economy. Care workers have kept American households functioning; they must not be left behind, as they will play a critical role as the country moves to recovery.

Family members

- Undocumented immigrants working as care providers are family to 46,500 undocumented spouses and minor children. Extending protections to these individuals is necessary to maintain family unity and ensure that they can do this important work without fear and uncertainty surrounding their loved ones.

Economic and fiscal contributions

- Each year, these undocumented workers and their households pay \$2.5 billion in federal tax contributions and \$1.2 billion in state and local taxes. These households hold \$8.4 billion in spending power.
- These workers' employers annually contribute payroll taxes totaling \$235.4 million to buoy Social Security and Medicare.
- Undocumented immigrants working in this sector own 26,000 homes, paying \$285.3 million in mortgage payments and \$1.2 billion in rental payments annually.

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For state-level data on the family members and economic contributions of undocumented workers by sector, please see "[Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic's Front Lines: A Look at Certain Sectors](#)."⁵

Endnotes

1 Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, "Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic's Front Lines: Immigrants Are Essential to America's Recovery" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2020/12/02/493307/protecting-undocumented-workers-pandemics-front-lines/>. Estimates presented in this fact sheet are based on CAP analysis of pooled 2018 and 2019 1-year American Community Survey (ACS) microdata, accessed via Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2018 and 2019 American Community Surveys: 1-year estimates" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2020), available at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa>.

2 Linda Burnham and Nik Theodore, "HomeEconomics: The Invisible and Unregulated World of Domestic Work" (New York: National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2012), available at <https://domesticworkers.org/sites/default/files/HomeEconomicsReport.pdf>.

3 These estimates are likely to undercount the number of undocumented immigrants in the care economy, as many domestic workers are employed in the informal economy or through employment agencies and are difficult to count in a survey such as the ACS. See *Ibid.*

4 Paulina López González and Tracy Anderson, "6 Months in Crisis: The Impact of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers" (New York: National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2020), available at https://domesticworkers.org/sites/default/files/6_Months_Crisis_Impact_COVID_19_Domestic_Workers_NDWA_Labs_1030.pdf.

5 Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, "Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic's Front Lines: A Look at Certain Sectors," Center for American Progress, February 2, 2021, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=495017>. For downloadable state-level data on undocumented workers in the care economy, see Center for American Progress, "State-level data on undocumented workers in the care economy," available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2021/01/29060912/StateDataCare.xlsx> (last accessed February 2021).