REPORT IN BRIEF

Filling the Service Gaps for Immigrants During COVID-19

Insights from Denver's Community Impact Survey

About New American Economy

New American Economy is a bipartisan research and advocacy organization founded to educate, empower and support policymakers, influencers, and citizens across the country that see the economic and social benefits of a smart approach to immigration reform. NAE has created a coalition of civic, business, and cultural leaders who span the political spectrum and represent all 50 states. NAE makes the case for smart immigration reform in four ways: 1) we use powerful research to demonstrate how immigration impacts our economy, 2) we organize champions at the grassroots and influencer levels to build support for immigration, 3) we partner with state and local leaders to advocate for policies that recognize the value immigrants add locally, and 4) we show immigrant contributions to American culture through film, food, art, sports, comedy, and more. Visit www.NewAmericanEconomy.org to learn more.

About the Denver Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs (DOIRA)

The Denver Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs (DOIRA), established in 2005, promotes the well-being of immigrant and refugee communities and advocates for inclusive and meaningful integration into Denver's vibrant civic, economic and cultural life. We partner with government agencies, community-based organizations and residents to develop and implement policies, practices and programs that influence the various paths of immigrant integration.

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionally affected racial and ethnic minority groups across the United States. These groups include immigrants, many of whom have struggled to meet the essential needs of their families for food, housing, and medical care during the public health emergency and the economic recession.

To better support these immigrants and to ensure that Denver's emergency services provide equitable access to all of its residents, New American Economy (NAE) worked with the Denver Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs (DOIRA) and local community organizations to survey immigrants about their experiences during the pandemic. The COVID-19 Community Impact Survey, conducted between February and May of 2021, asked immigrants in Denver about the essential needs of their families; any help they may have received from local government and community organizations; how they may have engaged in community affairs; and if COVID-19 affected their sense of belonging.

KEY FINDINGS

A significant share of the respondents believe the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted their overall wellbeing.

- Thirty-six percent of immigrant respondents said their hours were reduced at work, and nearly 25 percent said they lost their jobs.

- More than 45 percent of immigrant respondents had to cut back on other essential spending in order to pay their rent or mortgage, and 10 percent were unable to pay their rent or mortgage on time.

- At least 30 percent of immigrant respondents had tested positive for COVID-19 at some point; another 5 percent said someone in their household felt sick with COVID-19 symptoms but never got tested.

- When thinking about the future, immigrant respondents were most worried about paying utilities or other bills (59 percent), paying for emergency expenses (39 percent), getting enough food (38 percent), paying down debt (36 percent), and paying for healthcare and medicine for their families (27 percent).

Local government agencies and community organizations are providing immigrants with support services, but service gaps remain.

- More than 56 percent of immigrant respondents said there was a local organization they could turn to if they needed help getting healthcare, housing, food, or other essentials.

- Immigrant respondents said they received a variety of support services from their local government, including assistance securing food (46 percent), help with rent or mortgage (14 percent), and access to a computer or stable internet service (13 percent).

- The majority (77 percent) of immigrant respondents said they received adequate help from the Denver government to protect them from COVID-19 and prevent its spread, but just 33 percent said they received sufficient support for a safe work environment and only 24 percent said they got help accessing needed medical care.

Many immigrants continue to actively participate in community affairs, but certain barriers were shared that prevent limited English proficient (LEP) immigrants (respondents who speak little or no English) from having access to timely, accurate information.

- At least 32 percent of immigrant respondents and 35 percent of LEP immigrant respondents volunteered at local charities or community organizations during the pandemic. More than 15 percent of immigrant respondents and even a higher share of LEP respondents, 32.1 percent, attended neighborhood association or city council meetings.

- More than one-fifth of both immigrant respondents (21.1 percent) and LEP immigrant respondents (25.3 percent) reported not having regular access to timely, accurate information in their preferred language during the pandemic.

- Although news media was the most trusted source of COVID-19 information for immigrant respondents overall, LEP immigrant respondents were more likely to trust information from social media and nonprofit organizations. Federal, state, and local governments were also highly trusted sources of information for all immigrant respondents.

In addition to the direct impact of the pandemic, rising divisions in their communities have jeopardized a sense of belonging for many immigrant respondents.

- At least 29 percent of immigrant respondents said COVID-19 hurt their sense of belonging by heightening racial tension, division, or feelings of isolation.

- More than 37 percent of immigrant respondents reported tension in their community related to differences based on race or ethnicity.

Impact of COVID-19 on Immigrant Community in Denver

I n 2019, Denver was home to 97,800 immigrants, who comprised 13.4 percent of the city's total population, according to NAE analysis of the 1-year 2019 American Community Survey (ACS). When the pandemic began, many immigrants faced tremendous challenges for employment and housing and struggled to access much-needed resources and assistance. These struggles were particularly pronounced for the 22,000 immigrants with limited English proficiency, who made up 22.6 percent of the city's immigrant population, based on NAE analysis of the 2019 ACS data.

To identify both the essential needs of immigrant residents and any gaps in assistance, New American Economy worked with the Denver Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs and local community groups to survey immigrants about their experiences during the pandemic. The COVID-19 Community Impact Survey focused on immigrant neighborhoods hit hard by the pandemic, in an effort to best identify opportunities for the city to address disparities and integrate immigrant communities in the future — both immediately and in the long term.

Immigrant households were already at an economic disadvantage before the pandemic began. NAE analysis of the 2019 ACS data shows that the median income of U.S.-born individuals in Denver was $40,000 in 2019, compared with $28,000 for immigrants and $17,800 for LEP immigrants. That income difference is due, in part, to the fact that U.S.-born residents were more likely to have a college degree, which makes them eligible for a greater number of higher-paying jobs; 56.6 percent of U.S.-born residents had at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 36.2 percent of Immigrants and 10.4 percent of LEP immigrants. Immigrants were also less likely to be homeowners; 50.5 percent of U.S.-born households in Denver owned their homes in 2019, compared with 44.0 percent of immigrant households.

Nationwide, COVID-19 had a disproportionate impact on economically disadvantaged families, who often had difficulty paying for housing, accessing medical care, providing childcare, and even getting food. The Community Impact Survey will help inform Denver's efforts to support immigrant residents during the pandemic and through the economic recovery.

Demographics

We received 264 valid responses to the COVID-19 Community Impact Survey from Denver. Using responses to the question about country of birth, we identified that 200 of those responses were from immigrant residents.

The majority of these immigrant respondents (96.0 percent), were between the ages of 25 and 64, making them more likely to actively participate in the labor force. In addition, 81.5 percent of all the immigrant respondents were women.

Breaking down the immigrant group by race and ethnicity, we found that Hispanics made up 45.4 percent of the respondents, followed by Asian or Pacific Islanders (20.6 percent), and Black or African Americans (17.0 percent) These immigrant respondents came from a wide range of countries with a total of 46 countries represented in the survey, with the greatest percentages hailing from Mexico (36.0 percent), Myanmar (8.5 percent), Iraq (6.0 percent), and Ethiopia (5.5 percent).

GENDER OF IMMIGRANT RESPONDENTS

DISTRIBUTION OF IMMIGRANTS BY COUNTRY BY BIRTH

Mexico - **36.0%**

Myanmar - **8.5%**

Iraq - **6.0%**

Ethiopia - **5.5%**

Other - **44.0%**

WOMEN 81.5%
MEN 18.5%

RACE AND ETHNICITY OF IMMIGRANT RESPONDENTS

HISPANIC 45.4%
ASIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER. 20.6%
BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN. 17.0%
SOME OTHER RACE 17.0%
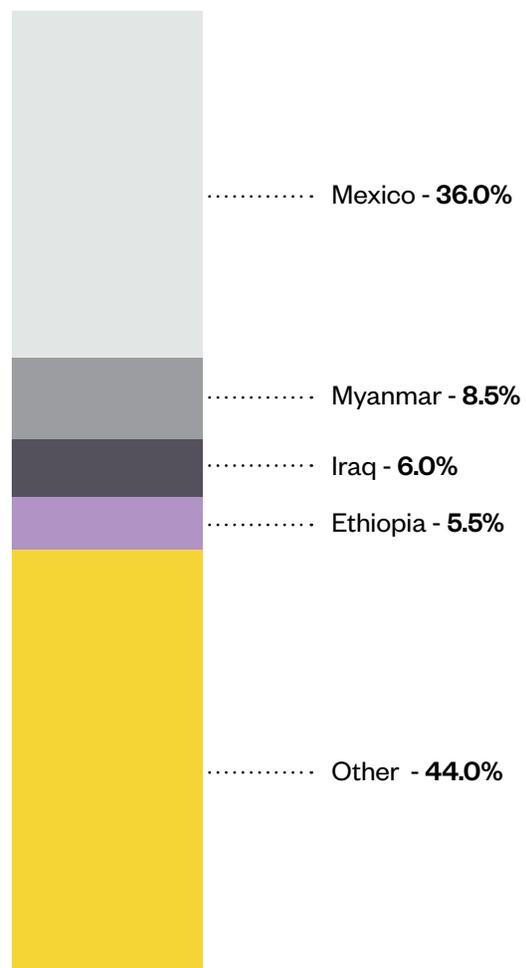
Nearly 40 percent of the immigrant respondents were identified as having limited English proficiency (LEP), meaning they reported that they didn't speak English well, couldn't easily communicate in English about everyday things, understood only a few English words, or did not speak English at all. LEP immigrants faced more severe challenges during COVID-19, particularly when resources were not available in their primary language.

Of the LEP immigrant respondents, more than half came from Mexico (52.9 percent) and nearly a quarter came from Myanmar (24.1 percent). Nearly 61 percent of them spoke Spanish as their primary language and 23.0 percent spoke primarily Burmese. A third (33.3 percent) of LEP immigrant respondents had personal experience with the refugee or asylum system, and more than one in five (23.3 percent) had arrived in the country within the last five years.

40.0%

of immigrant respondents were identified as having limited English proficiency (LEP)

DISTRIBUTION OF LEP IMMIGRANTS BY COUNTRY BY BIRTH

Mexico - **52.9%**

Myanmar - **24.1%**

Other - **23.0%**

PRIMARY LANGUAGES SPOKEN BY LEP IMMIGRANTS

SPANISH
(**60.9%**)

BURMESE
(**23.0%**)
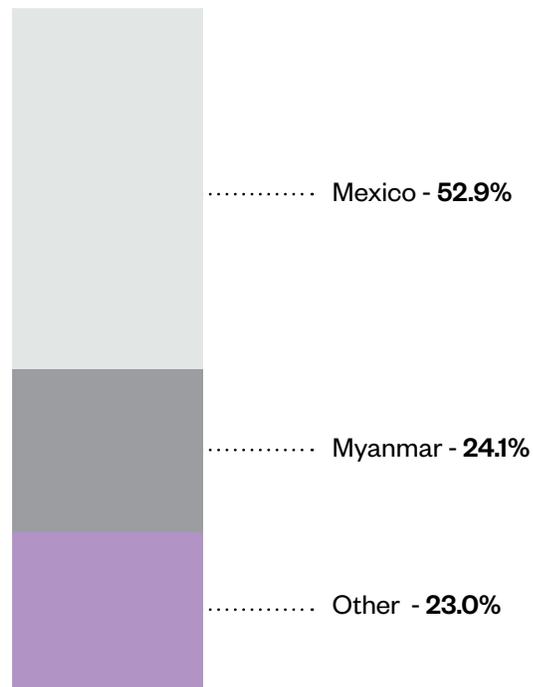
33.3%

of LEP immigrant respondents had personal experience with the refugee or asylum system.

23.3%

of LEP immigrant respondents had arrived in the country within the last five years.

LEP immigrant respondents were much less likely to be college educated than immigrants who were proficient in English. Whereas 58.8 percent of English-proficient immigrant respondents had a bachelor's degree or higher, only 21.3 percent of LEP immigrant respondents did.

SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO HAD A BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR HIGHER

English-Proficient Immigrants

58.8%

LEP Immigrants

21.3%
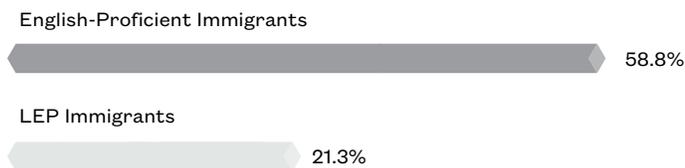
Additionally, 62.3 percent of all immigrant respondents reported household income below $40,000 in 2019. The percentage is even higher for LEP immigrants: About 73.0 percent of LEP immigrant respondents reported household that was below $40,000.

SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WITH A HOUSEHOLD INCOME BELOW $40,000

English-Proficient Immigrants

62.3%

LEP Immigrants

73.0%

Household Wellbeing

At the beginning of the pandemic, the unemployment rate rose more quickly for immigrants than for U.S.-born workers, according to data analyzed by the Migration Policy Institute. The gap has since shrunk, but the unemployment rate for both groups remains higher than it was before the pandemic. Of the immigrant respondents in the NAE survey, taken between February and May of 2021, nearly one-third (32.3 percent) said they were unemployed. At the same time, more than half of the LEP immigrant respondents (51.2 percent) said they were unemployed.

SHARE OF RESPONDENTS WHO WERE UNEMPLOYED WHEN SURVEYED BETWEEN FEBRUARY AND MAY 2021

Immigrants

32.3%

LEP Immigrants

51.2%

Looking at the impact of COVID-19 on employment, 24.7 percent of immigrant respondents reported losing a job during the pandemic, 36.0 percent said their hours were reduced, and 14.0 percent reported having to either quit a job or reduce their hours in order to care for family members.

TABLE 1: HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED YOUR EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS?

	Immigrant Respondents
Lost a Job	24.7%
Had Hours Reduced	36.0%
Had to Quit a Job or Reduce Hours to Care for Family Members	14.0%

Immigrants who were able to work during the pandemic often faced conditions that threatened the health of them and their families. Of the survey's immigrant respondents who could not work remotely, almost one-fifth reported that their workplace did not have proper health measures in place or provide protective gear — increasing their risk of becoming infected and passing the virus on to family members.

Nearly one-third (30.2 percent) of immigrant respondents reported having had COVID-19 that was confirmed with a test, and another 5.5 percent said either they or a family member felt sick with COVID-19 symptoms but didn't get tested. Meanwhile, nearly 40 percent of LEP immigrant respondents reported that there were people in their household who either tested positive for COVID-19 or felt sick with COVID-19 symptoms but never got tested.

30.2%

of immigrants reported having had COVID-19 that was confirmed with a test.

5.5%

of immigrants reported either they or a family member felt sick with COVID-19 symptoms but did not get tested.

40.0%

of LEP immigrants reported there were people in their household who either tested positive for COVID-19 or had symptoms but never got tested.

When asked whether they were able to receive medical care during the pandemic, 48.0 percent of immigrant respondents said they needed medical care and were able to receive it. Of those, 18.8 percent said they didn't have health insurance and 25.0 percent said they had high copayments or fees.

48.0% of immigrants said they needed medical care & were able to receive it

18.8% did not have health insurance

25.0% reported high copayments or fees
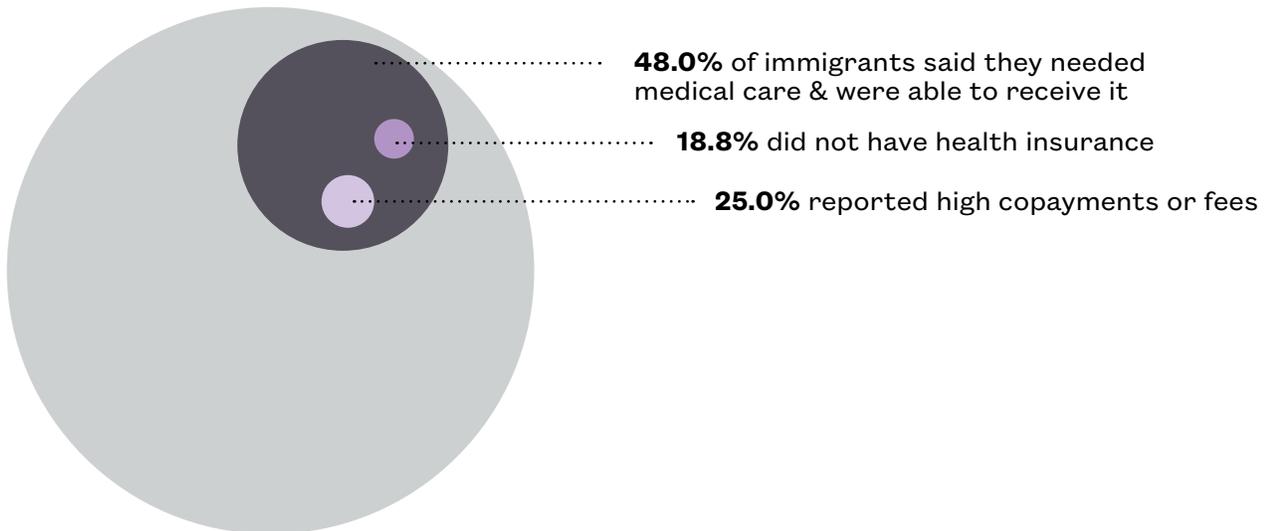
More than 24.1 percent said their family and friends received adequate help from the city government to access the medical care they needed, and 77.0 percent of immigrant respondents said the city government took proper action to help protect them from COVID-19 and prevent its spread. However, just one-third of immigrant respondents said the city government provided enough help to ensure they had a safe work environment. In addition to help with healthcare needs, 46.5 percent of immigrant respondents received help from the city government to secure food.

GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Immigrant respondents reported ....

Family and friends received adequate help from the city government to access medical care

24.1%+

City government took proper action to help protect them from COVID-19 and prevent its spread

77.0%

Received help from the city government to secure food

46.5%
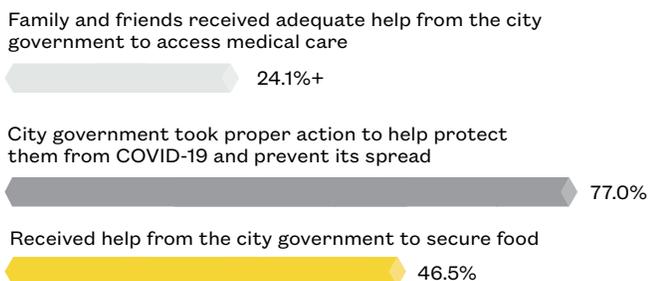
1/3

of immigrant respondents said the city government provided enough help to ensure they had a safe work environment.

When thinking about the coming month, immigrant respondents were most worried about paying utilities or other bills, paying for emergency expenses, getting enough food, paying down debt, and paying for healthcare and medicine for their families.

TABLE 2: WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT THE COMING MONTH, ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT BEING ABLE TO…?

	Immigrant Respondents
Paying utilities or other bills	59.3%
Paying for emergency expenses	39.0%
Getting enough food	38.4%
Paying down debt	35.5%
Paying for healthcare and medicines for their families	27.3%

"Give more aid to immigrants, since many of the aid they give is for people with legal documents … since immigrants contribute a lot to this country …"

— Survey respondent

Housing

Housing prices have been rising fast in Denver in recent years, with rents increasing by 12.8 percent in metro Denver just since the start of pandemic in March 2020. At the same time, a economic recession brought job losses and strained household finances. In the NAE survey, 58.7 percent of immigrant respondents were renters, while just 30.6 percent of immigrant respondents were homeowners.

Immigrant Renters (58.7%)	Immigrant Homeowners (30.6%)	Other (10.7%)
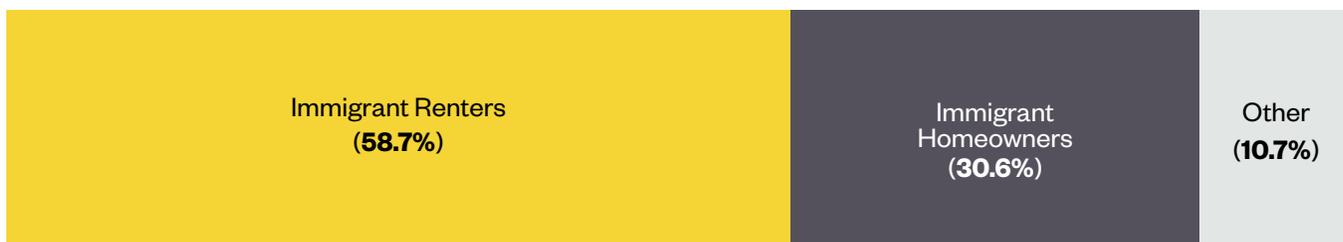
Many families found themselves struggling to catch up with rent or mortgage payments: 45.2 percent of immigrant respondents had to reduce other essential spending to pay the rent or mortgage. Meanwhile, 10.1 percent of immigrant respondents said they were behind on their rent or mortgage. Some were facing eviction or had already been evicted.

To support immigrant residents with housing issues, Denver's city government has a rent and utility assistance program that doesn't require immigration status on its application. In our survey, 13.9 percent of immigrant respondents said they received help from the city to pay their rent or mortgage.

45.2%
of immigrant respondents had to reduce other essential spending to pay the rent or mortgage.

10.1%
of immigrant respondents were behind on their rent or mortgage.

13.9%
of immigrant respondents received help from the city to pay their rent or mortgage.
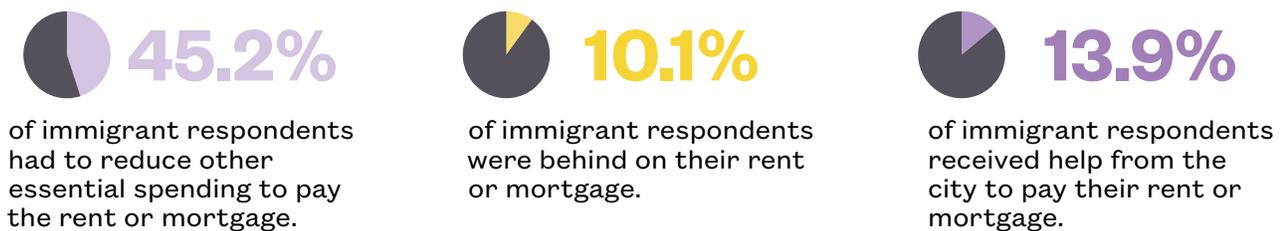
With in-person schooling shut down during the pandemic, access to a stable internet connection became critical for families with school-age children. Of surveyed families with needs for education and childcare during the pandemic, 19.5 percent of immigrant respondents did not have a reliable internet connection at home for their children's online classes. More than half of all the immigrant respondents (50.4 percent) worried that their children were academically behind as a result of the pandemic, for any reason. A significantly higher share – 65 percent – of LEP immigrant respondents were worried that their children were academically behind.

To increase internet access in the city, Denver residents voted in November 2020 to opt out of a state mandate that would prohibit the city from building its own broadband network. This made it possible for the city to expand broadband access to more of its residents. In our survey, 13.2 percent of immigrant respondents said they received help from the city government to access a computer or a stable internet connection.

EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE DURING THE PANDEMIC

Immigrant respondents reported ....

Did not have reliable internet connection

19.5%

Worried their children were academically behind as a result of the pandemic, for any reason

50.4%

Received help from the city government to access a computer or stable internet connection

13.2%
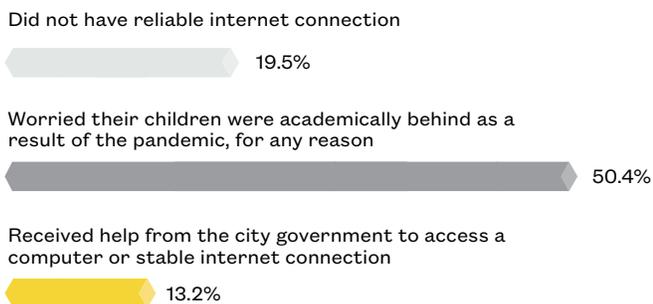
65.0%
of LEP immigrant respondents were worried their children were academically behind.
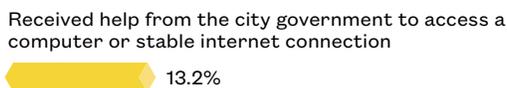
Community Engagement

It is critical that government engage with vulnerable community members to help them through challenging times. Overall, 26.4 percent of immigrant respondents said their family and friends received adequate help from the city government to meet their essential needs during the pandemic. Meanwhile, 18.4 percent of immigrant respondents said the city provided sufficient help to get them through the financial hardship of the pandemic.

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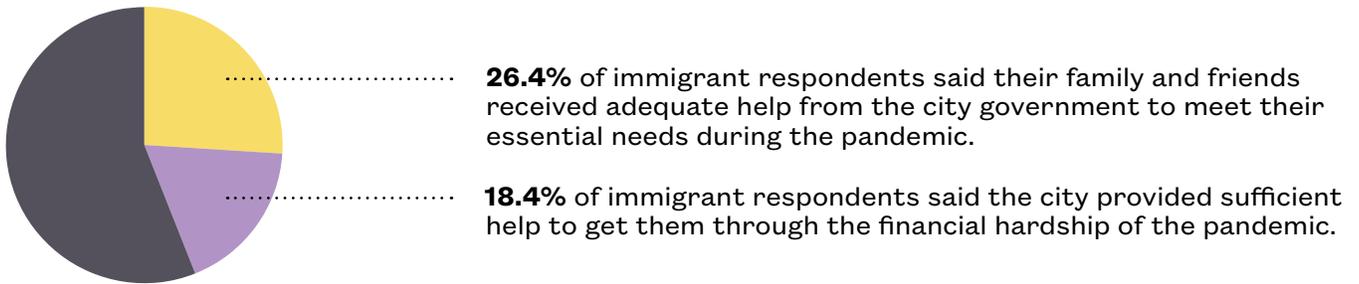
When planning outreach to these communities, it is important for the city to better understand the most effective ways to meet them where they are in local communities. In our data, nearly one in eight immigrant respondents voiced their opinions to a city official by writing or calling. LEP immigrant respondents were twice as likely as all immigrant respondents to attend neighborhood association or city council meetings, highlighting the value of in-person meetings in immigrant neighborhoods.

Our survey data also shows that many immigrants maintained strong ties to charities or nonprofit organizations during the pandemic, with 32.4 percent of immigrant respondents saying they volunteered their time at one of these organizations.

TABLE 3: HAVE YOU DONE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING IN THE PAST YEAR?

	Immigrant Respondents
Volunteered at a charity or nonprofit organization	32.4%
Attended a neighborhood association or city council meeting	15.2%
Voiced your opinion to a city official by writing a letter/email or calling them	12.4%

Charities and nonprofits play a significant role when it comes to helping Denver's immigrants. Fifty-six percent of immigrant respondents reported there was a local organization they knew they could turn to if they needed help getting healthcare, housing, food, or other assistance.

"I feel like communities are realizing their power within this space, mutual aid has done more for a lot of folks than government and in that sense I think I feel a greater belonging."

— Survey respondent

One major challenge of the COVID-19 crisis has been figuring out how best to fight misinformation and provide accurate data to vulnerable communities, especially in the languages they prefer. About two-thirds of immigrant respondents and LEP immigrant respondents (67.8 percent and 66.7 percent, respectively) said they had regular access to timely, accurate information during the pandemic in their preferred language.

Federal and state governments were among the most trusted sources of information about COVID-19 and pandemic-related assistance among all immigrants, including those who are limited English proficient. However, while news media was the most trusted source for immigrant respondents (41.7 percent relied on media coverage to get COVID-19 information), LEP immigrant respondents said they trusted social media more than news media, partially because social media is more likely to be transmitted in their primary language. LEP immigrant respondents are also more likely to rely on information from nonprofit organizations than immigrant respondents in general, meaning it could potentially be more effective to reach out to these immigrants through community organizations.

TABLE 4: WHAT IS YOUR TRUSTED SOURCE FOR INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 AND WHERE TO GET HELP DURING THIS PANDEMIC?

	Immigrant Respondents	LEP Immigrant Respondents
Federal government (e.g., president, CDC)	38.7%	37.9%
State government (e.g., governor, health department)	41.2%	43.7%
City or County government	32.7%	28.7%
News media	41.7%	31.0%
Social media	26.6%	32.2%
Family and friends	22.6%	18.4%
Nonprofit organization	21.1%	32.2%
Medical professional	26.1%	13.8%

Sense of Belonging

The COVID-19 pandemic has socially isolated Americans and, at the same time, exacerbated economic inequities and racial tensions — all factors that threaten to hit the immigrant community particularly hard.

The lockdowns and travel restrictions put in place to slow the spread of the virus kept many immigrants from connecting with their family and friends or expanding their local networks; 44.2 percent of immigrant respondents and 39.1 percent of LEP immigrant respondents said they often felt isolated from family and friends during the pandemic.

"The lack of trust between people makes racial discrimination worse."

— Survey respondent

In addition, 37.6 percent of immigrant respondents and 31.0 percent of LEP immigrant respondents said racial and ethnic tensions existed in their community, with many Asian American respondents adding that a surge of anti-Asian hate crimes made them feel less safe in their own communities.

"I'm an Asian American living in a world where many people blame my race for the virus. I never feel safe, not even to breathe while I'm throwing away the trash."

— Survey respondent

Overall, nearly three in 10 immigrant respondents (29.1 percent) said COVID-19 hurt their sense of belonging, by heightening racial tension, division, or feelings of isolation.

"I believe COVID increased political polarization and contributed to a sense of insecurity for my family near the election. Our neighbors left KKK and ICE notes on our cars and on our door. It has also been scary to see people deny the pandemic and prioritize their own self-interest above the community's wellbeing and safety."

— Survey respondent

Conclusion

Our survey sheds light on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on immigrants in Denver. Racial tensions and economic inequalities that existed before the pandemic have only been exacerbated, leaving some immigrants feeling more insecure and disconnected amidst rising hate crimes. At the same time, unemployment, unsafe worksites, rising rents, and inadequate healthcare and internet access has put immigrants at a greater need for services. Local government and community organizations have stepped in to assist, but more can be done to provide tailored resources for the disadvantaged groups including the immigrants. By examining their needs — which this survey identifies — Denver can work to best help and empower its immigrant community and, by extension, boost the city's economic recovery.

Methodology

In administering this survey, five communities oversaw the development and implementation of the COVID-19 Community Impact Survey, including local officials from Atlanta, Austin, Denver, Louisville, and Tulsa, with the goal of survey at least 200 residents from each community.

Data Collection

The 43-item quantitative and qualitative survey was translated into 16 languages: Amharic, Arabic, Burmese, Chinese (simplified), Dari, French, Hmong, Karen, Kinyarwanda, Nepali, Portuguese, Somali, Spanish, Swahili, Vietnamese, and Zopau. In addition, multilingual community leaders and volunteers were recruited to provide interpretation via phone and in-person survey collection.

The Denver Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs (DOIRA) engaged immigrant communities with the survey in partnership with Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning and the Denver Immigrant and Refugee Commission (DIRC). DOIRA and Spring worked together to identify and collaborate with key community groups for survey outreach, including African Leadership Group, Asian Pacific Development Center, Athmar Park RNO, Denver Housing Authority (Sun Valley and La Alma-Lincoln Park), Denver Public Library PLAZA Program, Focus Points Family Resource Center, Hope Communities, Lutheran Family Services of the Rocky Mountains, Piñata de Aprendizaje, Una Mano, and Una Esperanza. Partners shared the survey with their participants at food banks, vaccination clinics, and virtual programs, and encouraged participants to engage their inner circles.

In total, we received 264 valid survey responses from adult residents in Denver. We did not collect personal information, such as names, telephone numbers, or any potentially identifying information, in the survey forms. Denver partners offered electronic gift cards as incentives for survey participants, but participants entered their email in a separate form used solely by city partners to issue gift cards. NAE did not match the email data with the survey data.

When participants provided responses to write-in or open-ended questions in a language other than English, we asked staff members who carried out the survey to translate the responses into English, if they were able, and input them into the online forms. For all non-English responses, we worked with our staff members, members of local organizations, and a professional agency to translate the content into English for our analysis.

Data Cleaning

After gathering the survey responses, we used a mixed approach of data science and manual review to identify and remove invalid entries. Using machine learning techniques, we looked for patterns and set our criteria for invalid entries based on city, referral organization, zip code, and demographics, as well as responses to the write-in fields and open-ended questions. We then went through the manual review of the entries in question and removed all the entries deemed invalid. For duplicate entries, which shared identical responses to all the questions, we kept the first entry and removed those that followed.