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COVID-19 and the U.S. Federal Government vs. Undocumented Immigrants: How the U.S. Excludes Undocumented Immigrants from Financial Relief Amid a Global Pandemic

As we reached the Coronavirus Pandemic's first anniversary, Americans continue to face economic troubles. The federal government has approved only three stimulus checks in the last eleven months. Contrary to public belief, these stimulus checks have been made available only to certain U.S. citizens while leaving out U.S. citizens from **mixed-status families** (a family that includes members with different citizenship or immigration statuses.) Furthermore, although undocumented immigrants make about 11 million of the U.S. population, they have received nothing from the federal government.



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Although anti-immigrant rhetoric argues that people without legal status within the U.S. do not pay taxes and thus should not be eligible for federal aid, this is untrue. Undocumented workers use an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN). An **ITIN is created for tax purposes**, and does not substitute a social security number; someone with an ITIN cannot use it to receive government assistance. **The IRS reported in 2015** that undocumented immigrants paid more than \$13.6 billion in federal taxes using an ITIN, along with billions of dollars in state taxes. Yet undocumented immigrants do not have access to taxpayers' benefits such as social security and medical care.

As if that is not enough, **undocumented workers play an integral role** in keeping the nation running and fighting the pandemic's deadly nature. According to the Department of Homeland Security, **sixty-nine percent** of undocumented immigrants are deemed essential workers and have kept the country going, and the study shows that seventy percent of essential workers have lived in the U.S. for more than ten years. **California** alone heavily relies on undocumented workers. The golden state is home to about 2.5 million undocumented **residents**, 1.75 million of which are undocumented **workers**.

Stimulus 1: The CARES Act

The **CARES Act** was the first emergency stimulus bill that Congress passed in March 2020. This **\$2 trillion package** was dispersed to individuals throughout the U.S. but excluded undocumented families. The Act excluded people without social security numbers who file taxes with an ITIN. Even though undocumented workers paid taxes, Congress cut them off of any federal assistance. Moreover, Congress's exclusion extended beyond undocumented workers. The CARES Act also made U.S. citizen children from mixed-status families ineligible for aid, effectively excluding certain U.S. citizens from receiving federal relief. Despite being labeled essential workers and paying federal taxes, millions of undocumented workers went without relief. **It is estimated** that 14.4 million people in mixed-status families were excluded from the CARES Act, including 5.1 million who had some form of legal status.



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Stimulus 2

Months later in December 2020, Congress passed a **\$900 billion package**. Similar to the CARES Act, Congress excluded undocumented persons. However, Congress did expand relief in one aspect: persons married to an undocumented person were eligible to receive a check so long as the household income was less than \$150,000.

Despite the slight expansion, U.S. citizen children of undocumented persons remained excluded. Again, Congress ignored the hardships that undocumented and mixed-status families faced and continue to face due to COVID-19.

Stimulus 3: The American Rescue Plan

Just recently, **Congress** passed the American Rescue Plan in March 2021. This **\$1.9 trillion** relief bill will give Americans who make less than \$75,000 a year a one-time payment of \$1,400. Similar to the December stimulus bill, **undocumented people married to U.S. citizens** will receive stimulus checks. Additionally, **U.S. citizen children of undocumented parents** who filed taxes with an ITIN will be eligible for relief for the first time, which means that 2.2 million additional people will now get stimulus checks. However, **Congress still excluded 9.3 million** undocumented workers and taxpayers. **Undocumented immigrants** continue to make up significant portions of front-line workers and are among those affected the most by the pandemic yet continue to be ignored by the government.

Relief at a State Level: California's Stimulus

Although the federal government consistently excluded the undocumented community from economic relief, those living in California will be included in a state stimulus bill. Just February 23, 2021, **Governor Newsom signed a \$7.6 billion** Coronavirus relief package. This package includes \$600 one-time payments for people who make less than \$75,000 and use an ITIN to file their income taxes. Undocumented Californians can claim the payment as a tax credit when they do their taxes. California will therefore include undocumented workers in their stimulus package.



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Calling the Federal Government to Action

The federal government must follow in California's footsteps. Not only should the **Biden Administration and Congress take action** to control the pandemic, but they should also make decisions that include the undocumented community. Lack of access to health care, ineligibility for many government relief payments, and job instability leaves undocumented immigrants especially vulnerable amid the pandemic. A path to legal status is the ultimate goal, but initial steps such as accepting an ITIN number for stimulus purposes and medical care are suggested.

The **House recently passed** two immigration bills and the Senate is expected to vote on them soon. These bills would create a pathway for citizenship for some undocumented immigrants. **H.R. 6** (The American Dream and Promise Act of 2021) would provide a pathway for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients and TPS (Temporary Protected Status) holders. H.R. 6 could make about 4.4 million people eligible for permanent residence. **H.R. 1603** (the Farm Workforce Modernization Act) would make farmworkers, their spouses, and children eligible for legal status so long as they continue employment in the agriculture sector. An estimated **1.2 million workers** in this sector would be eligible. H.R. 1603 would also make changes to the **H-2A** agricultural guest worker program. Although a good step in the right direction, these two bills are not enough to serve our undocumented community.

The Biden Administration **formally introduced** the U.S. Citizenship Act to Congress. The Act is more comprehensive than the two bills that the House just passed. Among other things, the **U.S. Citizenship Act** would introduce a pathway to citizenship for all undocumented people alike who were physically present in the U.S. before January 1, 2021. This includes DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients, TPS (Temporary Protected Status) holders, particular farmworkers, and undocumented people who have U.S. citizen children to name a few categories. Millions of undocumented immigrants would benefit if Congress passes this Act. We need comprehensive immigration reform now.

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