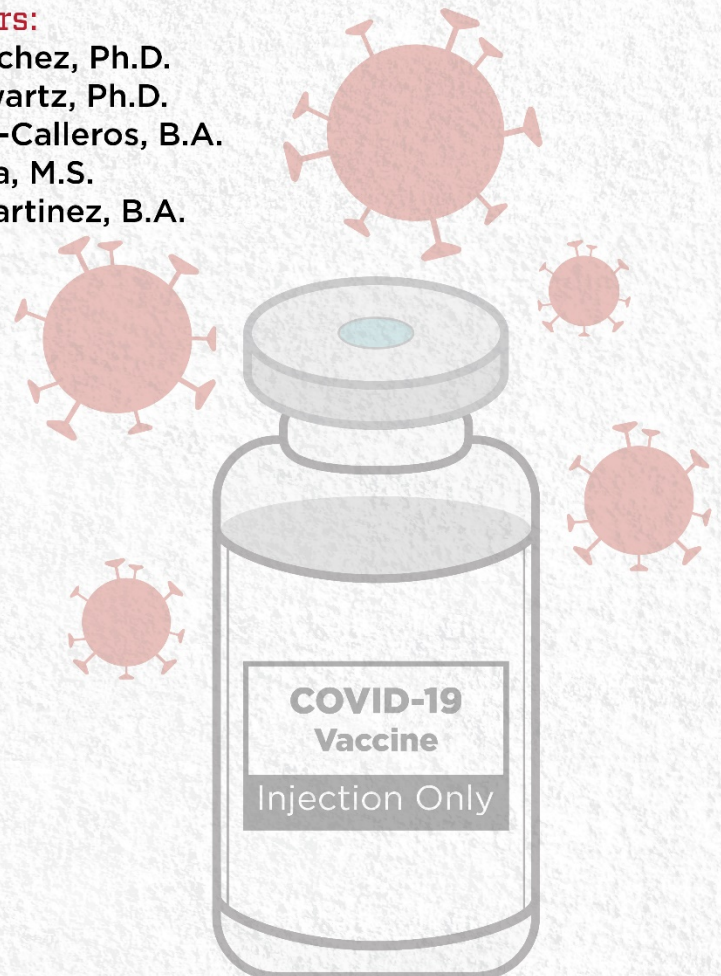


New Mexico's Immigrant Communities Need Reassurance: Being Vaccinated Will Not Make Them Vulnerable to Immigration Officials or Loss of Public Benefits

Authors:

Gabriel R. Sanchez, Ph.D.
Matthew Schwartz, Ph.D.
Betzaira Mayorga-Calleros, B.A.
Juan Peña, M.S.
Gabriel Elias Martinez, B.A.

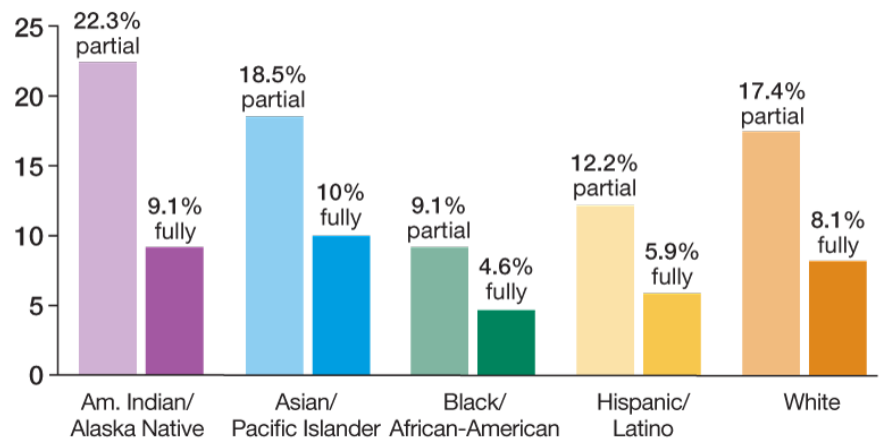


Introduction

New Mexico is a national leader in COVID-19 prevention and vaccine roll-out in regard to [percent of the population, and vaccine utilization](#) (NBC). New Mexico's governor, Michelle Lujan Grisham, has been [praised](#) for her [handling of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Early in the pandemic, she imposed a [riot law](#), to curb transmission rates in Gallup, New Mexico. The Navajo Nation, [which had one of the highest COVID-19 death rates in the country](#), now has one of the highest [vaccination rates](#).

While there is a lot to be proud of here in New Mexico, the road to herd immunity has several challenges. National research indicates the initial success in the first wave of vaccinations is partially due to the [demand for the vaccine being higher than the supply](#). [Less than half of New Mexicans have signed up for vaccines using the centralized vaccine portal](#). As the vaccine roll-out improves and vaccine eligibility expands, this trend will eventually reverse and many New Mexicans will remain vulnerable to the virus.

Percent partially or fully vaccinated by race/ethnicity



SOURCE: NMDOH

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Obstacles Facing New Mexico's Immigrant Communities

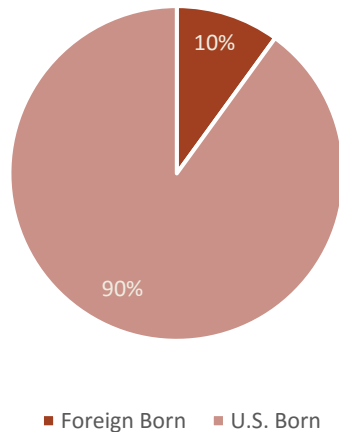
We begin a series of policy briefs that our team plans to release over the next several months with a focus on New Mexico's immigrant community. As we discuss in the following brief, this population faces unique challenges with vaccination due to perceptions that their immigration status may make themselves and their families vulnerable to unwanted attention from immigration officials and limited access to health insurance and health care.

In New Mexico, [nearly 10%](#) of the state's population is foreign-born, and [approximately 60,000](#) New Mexicans are estimated to lack documentation. The state's foreign-born community has been vital to the economy during the pandemic, but their high representation among essential employees makes them more vulnerable to the virus. [A survey of Hispanic families in New Mexico conducted last summer](#) found that 56% of Hispanic immigrants are essential employees that continue to work outside of the home- 7% higher than US-born Hispanics in the state. Whether they are in the healthcare industry, first responders, or our

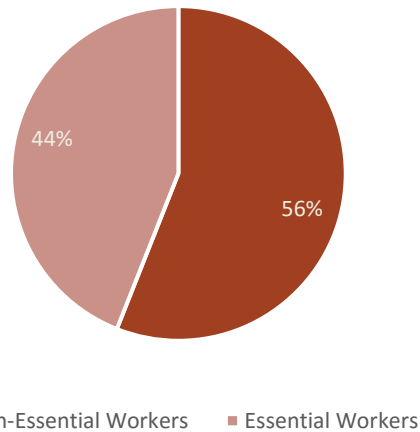
grocery store and restaurant workforce, immigrants are key members of the workforce in the state who, more often than not, are [not able to work from home](#). Removing barriers to vaccination among immigrants is critical to reaching herd immunity in New Mexico.

2020 New Mexico Latino Family Survey

Demographics in New Mexico



Immigrant Workers in New Mexico



Lack of Trust Among Immigrants is a Significant Challenge

More than half (53%) of the Spanish-speakers surveyed in a recent New Mexico DOH/CSP Rapid Response Exploratory Survey had not heard about vaccine registration. Over 75% had not registered for the vaccine. The climate of fear among immigrants in the United States, created by punitive immigration policies, has [contributed to vaccine hesitancy among immigrants](#), especially those who are undocumented.

The recent shift in federal policy has been significant and positive, the Biden administration recently released a [statement](#) assuring safety from ICE during COVID-related vaccinations and testing.

“ICE does not and will not carry out enforcement operations at or near health care facilities, such as hospitals, doctors’ offices, accredited health clinics, and emergent or urgent care facilities, except in the most extraordinary of circumstances.”

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, New Mexico’s Governor, Michelle Lujan Grisham has [reassured all New Mexican residents](#) that the information obtained will not be disclosed to any other government partners or agencies. The Governor has emphasized the importance of accessible testing and medical care related to COVID for the safety of everyone. This aligns closely with New Mexico’s early declaration as a [“State of Sanctuary” for Central American refugees](#) and continued attribution as a state with [immigrant-friendly/Freedom City policies](#).

These are powerful and important messages that can reassure immigrants in New Mexico that signing up for vaccination will not place them at greater risk with immigration officials. However, we have heard from many members of the immigrant community that this information is not widely known across the state. We must work together to ensure the facts

are communicated widely, in both English and Spanish, to combat misinformation that we have heard is rampant across the state. Although mistrust of the government may still be a hurdle, investing in public outreach communication efforts to make this information more well-known through trusted community leaders will provide immediate impact.

Accessibility to Health Insurance is a Structural Barrier Facing Many Immigrants

Despite assurances from the federal government that nobody will be turned away for a vaccine due to lack of health insurance, even some immigrants who are authorized may be reluctant to take advantage of a government-provided vaccine due to perceptions that not having insurance makes them ineligible for a vaccine. The Trump administration worked to [limit access to citizenship](#) for any immigrant who utilized public services, including health care. In December, the Department of Justice withdrew the rule, but confusion abounds. According to [research](#), the changing environment surrounding immigration policy has resulted in fear and reluctance from immigrants to use [public assistance programs](#). This fear could translate into fear of accessing the vaccine.

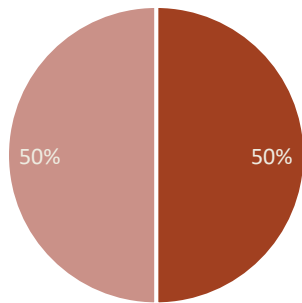
Furthermore, a recent [national survey of Latinos commissioned by Univision News](#) identifies that 46% of Latinos either believe that they are not eligible or not sure if they are eligible for the vaccine where they live. Among that population, 11% report that they believe their immigration status is why they are not eligible, despite immigration status not being a relevant factor for eligibility.

Immigration enforcement, especially fear or risk of deportation impacts utilization of public resources, including [lower use of Medicaid](#). The reduced uptake of public experiences extends beyond undocumented immigrants and also affects [mixed-status families](#), including U.S. citizen children and other family members. Furthermore, research suggests that punitive or restrictive state immigration policies may also contribute to health disparities [among U.S. citizen children](#) living in mixed-status families.

These are significant obstacles due to lower accessibility for immigrants to health insurance. Despite impressive gains in health insurance among Latinos through the Affordable Care Act, unauthorized immigrants are explicitly excluded from purchasing health insurance coverage through health exchanges and also excluded from Medicaid, Medicare, and the Child Health Insurance Program. Here in New Mexico, it is estimated that [at least 40% of noncitizen immigrants](#) in the state lack health insurance compared to 9% of U.S. citizens in New Mexico.

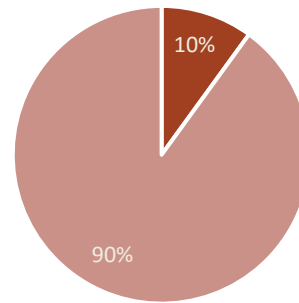
Consequently, while fewer than 10% of US citizens were uninsured in 2018 [more than 40% of the undocumented lacked health insurance](#), with estimates in New Mexico suggesting that [nearly 50% of the undocumented population](#) is uninsured. Members of our team [have found that Latino immigrants are more likely to not only lack access to health insurance when compared to US-born Latinos](#), but also reported lower levels of doctor visits. The lack of access to health insurance among this population also places them in a position to have [more concerns about the potential costs of obtaining a vaccine](#). This limited access to health insurance can directly impact vaccination, as fears about the costs of the vaccine have permeated among the public.

Health Coverage of Immigrants in New Mexico



■ Uninsured ■ Insured

Health Coverage of U.S. Citizens in New Mexico



■ Uninsured ■ Insured

What Can We do to Help Address These Challenges

Although the challenges we have discussed are significant, there are fortunately some steps that can be taken to address them and improve vaccination rates among New Mexico's immigrant population. This includes increased and improved communication to this segment of the population to provide assurances that they do not need to be concerned with their information being shared with immigration officials and that they will not be turned away from vaccination registration due to not having health insurance.

Our team is attempting to help with this collective effort through the creation of infographics in both English and Spanish that provide simple and direct messages tackling these specific issues. By working alongside organizations that have trust within these communities, we hope that these info-graphics will be well received well and can help improve knowledge levels about the vaccination process and alleviate fear. There is [initial evidence](#) that having town-hall meetings in Spanish yields vaccination uptake. We can use our Spanish language infographics to help build on this momentum.

We commend New Mexico's Department of Health for recently integrating [mobile vaccination clinics](#) in their overall vaccine dissemination strategy. This will help overcome transportation obstacles facing many New Mexicans, particularly those that live in rural areas of the state. While this intervention will indirectly improve vaccination rates among immigrants this could be accelerated by defining immigrants as a high-risk category in vaccine rollouts similar to other states, including [Arizona](#), [Virginia](#), [New Jersey](#), [Connecticut](#), [Illinois](#), [Utah](#), [New York](#), [Oregon](#), [Washington](#), and [Nebraska](#). Furthermore, as the state moves toward opening up vaccine access to the full population, offering in-person vaccine registration, and eventually vaccination, in high trafficked areas and after work hours and the weekend will help increase uptake among immigrants.

Finally, our team intends to investigate more robust strategies to improve trust in the vaccination among all New Mexicans, including immigrants. This will include conducting original research (surveys and focus groups) to test messages that can improve the trust that the vaccine is safe and will improve the state's ability to fully open up businesses, schools, and recreation outlets. Reaching a high level of vaccination across the state is vital to our ability to see these things happen, and our team hopes to help make this a reality by providing the research infrastructure to support the wider efforts to see New Mexico remain a

role model for other states as we continue the push forward in the fight against the COVID-19 virus.

About Our Author Team

[Gabriel R. Sanchez, Ph.D.](#) is a Professor of Political Science and Founding Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Chair in Health Policy at the University of New Mexico, Director of the UNM Center for Social Policy, and a Non-Resident Fellow of the Brookings Institution.

Matthew Schwartz, Ph.D., is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the UNM Department of Internal Medicine and a Fellow at the UNM Center for Social Policy.

Betzaira Mayorga-Calleros, B.A., is a doctoral student of Political Science and a Fellow at the UNM Center for Social Policy.

Juan Peña, M.S., is a doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology and Doctoral Fellow at the UNM Center for Social Policy.

Gabriel Elias Martinez, B.A., is a doctoral student of Political Science and a Fellow at the UNM Center for Social Policy.