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Resource Paper

# How Has the CARES Act Affected California's Filipino Families?

Katherine Nasol

## Abstract

This paper reflects how California's Filipino families have been affected by the CARES Act. As the Policy Director of the Bulosan Center for Filipino Studies, I draw on the center's policy briefs, which summarize existing literature; community testimonies; and preliminary findings from the center's Filipinx Count! Survey, which surveys Filipinos on their experiences with health care, labor, and immigration, among other issues. Using preliminary data gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, I illustrate the lived experiences of public policy in a time of a global pandemic through the lens of California's Filipinx diaspora.

## Introduction

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, otherwise known as the CARES Act, proved historic in the midst of a global pandemic. In a matter of months, the COVID-19 public health crisis quickly exposed and exacerbated systemic racial and economic disparities. Unemployment rates rose and businesses shut down. Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities were disproportionately contracting the disease due to generations of disinvestment in community infrastructure, particularly access to quality health care. Essential workers, from nurses to farmworkers, became vulnerable to getting sick due to little to no safety protections. The CARES Act was one of the first stimulus packages to respond to these crises.

This paper reflects how California's Filipino families have been affected by the CARES Act. The Filipinx population has been seen in news headlines due to the community's high presence in essential work, specifically the health care industry as nurses, caregivers, and home health

aides, as well as in farm work, postal work, and service work. Because many Filipinos are essential workers, with many lacking access to protections or health care, the Filipinx population has been dying at an alarming rate. (Wong, 2020). As a racialized, high-risk community, the article shares a key perspective on the COVID-19 crisis, one that relates to the many issues Black, Latinx, and other Asian Pacific Islander communities are experiencing. The paper, thus, offers an opening to broader cross-racial solidarity in combating the intersections of racism, economic injustice, and health inequality.

As the Policy Director of the UC Davis Bulosan Center for Filipino Studies, I focus my attention on California because of the center's proximity to the state's capitol in Sacramento. California is a key destination where the Filipino diaspora resides.<sup>1</sup> I draw on the center's policy briefs, which summarize existing literature, and preliminary findings from the center's Filipinx Count! Survey, which surveys Filipinos on their experiences with health care, labor, and immigration, among other issues.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, I draw from the center's *kwentuhans*, or talk stories, that the center's staff have conducted with more than fifty participants on how the Filipino community has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the data is preliminary, the *kwentuhans*, briefs, and survey data illustrate the lived experiences of public policy in a time of a global pandemic through the lens of California's Filipinx diaspora.

## Understanding the CARES Act

The CARES Act was signed into law in late March 2020, making it the third aid package passed by Congress to address the COVID-19 pandemic. It was significant for many reasons including (1) the Act being the largest stimulus package in the history of the United States and (2) the stimulus adopting political solutions that were once seen as lofty not too long before COVID-19 spread internationally (Delevingne and Schneider, 2020; Hiltzik, 2020). Policies like a Universal Basic Income, pushed by presidential nominee Andrew Yang, among others, became accepted and adopted in the bill as seen with the \$1,200 stimulus check. Despite the CARES Act's strides in providing mass government relief, there were many gaps, such as the exclusion of undocumented families from receiving much-needed financial aid (Narea, 2020).

## How Are Filipinos Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Various reports have discussed how Filipinos are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. A research briefing written by the

Bulosan Center found that undocumented Filipinos may be at greater risk to health issues because of their increased likelihood to live in overcrowded conditions and a lack of insurance and linguistic and cultural resources to access health care (Truman et al., 2009). Almost 1.5 million Filipinos live in California, approximately 26.5 percent of the state's Asian population, and the state's undocumented Filipinx population is estimated to be around 64,130 to 75,790 (Census Bureau, 2012; Taggug et al., 2020).

Secondly, Filipinos are overrepresented in health care and essential industries, making them more at risk of contracting the virus. In nursing alone, Filipinos make up 20 percent of California's nursing population due to the Philippines's mass labor export of nurses to the United States and around the world (Spetz et al., 2017). News reports around Filipino nurses from New Jersey to the United Kingdom have shown how Filipino health care workers are taking the toll in caring for patients during the pandemic, with many falling ill or dying because of the lack of personal protective equipment given by their facility (ITV Report, 2020; McFarling, 2020). According to the Filipinx Count! Survey, 13 percent of respondents report that their employers do not provide adequate personal protective equipment.

Beyond hospital settings, Filipinos are found in health care support occupations such as home health aides in skilled nursing facilities and caregivers in private homes (Bulosan Center, 2020). Almost one-third of Filipinos are employed in these kinds of jobs. Based on our responses, 41 percent of respondents state that members of their household work as health care professionals. The prevalence of Filipino health care workers along with the various reports of nursing homes being hot spots for COVID-19 suggest that Filipinos are at high risk for infection. Residential care facilities for the elderly have been known for failing to comply with basic labor standards and wage requirements. It is, thus, likely that patients and workers are not receiving the adequate equipment and protections needed. Additionally, Filipinos in many other essential industries such as agriculture, postal work, and service work are experiencing limited workplace protections and personal protective equipment while on the job.

Third, Filipinos suffer a greater prevalence for specific kinds of health issues that render them more vulnerable should they contract COVID-19. For instance, Filipinos are at a greater risk for respiratory issues. The community has a high lifetime asthma prevalence and Medi-Cal asthma hospitalization rates according to a study by the California

Department of Public Health (2013). Filipinos also hold a higher prevalence for fair or poor health, with many being obese or overweight and having high blood pressure, diabetes, or asthma (Adia, 2020). The Filipinx Count! Survey shows, for instance, that 55 percent of respondents state that they or a member of their household are at increased risk for COVID-19.

Lastly, the Filipinx community is experiencing poverty and economic insecurity. According to the 2019 AAPI California Workers survey, Filipinos make up 24 percent of the Asian Pacific Islander population who struggle with poverty. Seventy percent of the survey's respondents reported experiencing difficulties paying their rents or mortgages, cutting back on food expenses to save money, or not having enough money to pay the bills (Ramakrishnan, 2019). With mass unemployment on the rise and uneven economic relief and tenant protections, Filipinos are likely to experience financial difficulties during this time.

### CARES Act's Effects on California's Filipinx Community

Although the CARES Act expanded safety net programs, unemployment benefits, and resources for small businesses, it largely has not done enough to address the needs of California's Filipinx immigrants and their families.

One of the largest gaps highlights how more than 70,000 Filipinos were likely left out of COVID-19 testing, treatment, and economic relief because of their undocumented legal status. Undocumented workers were not eligible to receive many of the bill's benefits because qualification is based on filing tax returns for 2018 and 2019 and whether the individual has a Social Security number. Beyond the Filipinx community, undocumented workers work in essential industries such as health care, care giving, service, and farm work, leaving many essential workers with no safety net if they are to lose their job or contract COVID-19. This extends to undocumented youth and students who have been deemed ineligible to receive relief funds after Betsy DeVos issued a regulation in early June to block undocumented students from accessing CARES Act Relief Grants (Whistle, 2020).

For those with tenuous legal statuses, such as those on H1B or J1 visas or for those applying for a green card, receiving legal relief has been difficult. According to one Filipina worker who lost her job during the COVID-19 pandemic, she shares that she is worried about applying for benefits because she does not want to jeopardize her green card application:

In our green card application, we're getting hit really hard. There are lots of emails that are sending us about housing assistance but I cannot apply for a housing assistance because right now, if you are going to apply for any government aid or government assistance, you will not be granted a green card because of that.

Public charge has been an issue well before the pandemic, and in a time where benefits are needed, immigrants are stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to finding government relief. In California, Governor Newsom announced the California Disaster Relief Assistance for Immigrants program, which offers a one-time direct payment of \$500 for undocumented people. Yet, during the first day of the program's opening, many were left waiting for funds, with calls neglected for hours (Ortega, 2020). The exclusion of undocumented immigrants in the CARES Act highlights the various hoops noncitizens must jump through to receive assistance.

Another gap has been the fact that Filipino families living in areas with high costs of living may not have received enough support. California is one of the most expensive regions in the country and Filipino immigrants are concentrated in these areas of immense wealth and inequality. The top three counties with the highest Filipino populations are Los Angeles County, San Diego County, and Santa Clara County. These counties alone, which also have the highest costs of living in the state, are home to more than half a million Filipinos (American Community Survey, 2018). Moreover, these counties are some of the state's largest "hot spots" for the coronavirus (California Department of Health, 2020). Because direct payments are not adjusted to area median income, the Act's direct payments of \$1,200 have not been enough to support Filipinos who live in "hot-spot" counties with the highest costs of living. For instance, in each of the three counties, the median rent is higher than \$1,300 (see Table 1).

These California regions have long been at risk for homelessness, gentrification, and displacement of low-income and immigrant communities. As COVID-19 evictions rise due to eviction moratoriums that will soon expire, many families are at risk for not being able to pay rent and potentially losing their homes. The check, which was issued early on in the pandemic, likely has not been enough to cover the costs of housing as well as payments for food and other basic necessities.

The CARES Act has, thus, fallen short in responding to Filipinos experiencing poverty and economic insecurity due to mass unem-

County	Filipinx Population	% of Residents Paying at Least 30% of Income on Rent	Median Monthly Rent
Los Angeles County	342,125	55%	\$1,390
San Diego County	158,900	54%	\$1,569
Santa Clara County	91,408	45%	\$2,126

Source: Data gathered by author from American Community Survey 2018.

ployment and the rising costs of shelter and aid. According to the 2019 AAPI Worker Survey, 50 percent of the Filipino respondents reported that they are worried they will be unable to afford housing and 59 percent say it has been difficult to find affordable housing in the places they want to live. These issues are likely exacerbated because of unemployment and risks for eviction.

Lastly, the CARES Act's \$100 billion allocation toward hospitals has not been enough to protect health care workers on the front lines, many of which include Filipino workers. The CARES Act allocation includes \$16 billion to the Strategic National Stockpile to increase the availability of equipment such as ventilators and protective gear—a demand largely advocated by unions like National Nurses United (2020). Yet, the allocation falls short to provide necessary resources and protections. Hospital beds cost about \$108,000, and states are purchasing ventilators for upward of \$50,000 (Schwarz and Neuman, 2020). In a recent analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation, it has also been found that hospitals with the highest share of private insurance revenue received a disproportionately high share of total funds, leaving many health care facilities that take care of vulnerable patients on Medicaid struggling to pay staff and for protective equipment (Schwarz and Damaco, 2020). Fortunately, the Department of Health and Human Services has released \$15 billion in COVID-19 relief funds to Medicaid providers that did not receive payments from the initial \$50 billion, which includes assisted living facilities and home health providers (Spanko, 2020). With California in a \$54 billion deficit and major budget cuts toward schools and health care, it still remains unclear how hospitals and health care facilities will be able to cope with the shortfall (Botts, 2020). These cuts include slashes in the Medi-Cal budget leaving many undocumented and poor seniors at risk, but also the many Filipino health care workers in hospitals

and health care facilities vulnerable to infection.

### Moving Forward through the Portal

This article is a brief snapshot of the lived experiences of public policy during the global pandemic from the lens of California's Filipinx community. The CARES Act demonstrates the exclusion of noncitizens in government relief and public policy, and the neglect of racialized workers and their families who are on the frontlines caring for the sick—workers who are falling ill themselves. The experiences of the state's Filipinx community exposes the larger racial and economic injustices faced by not only Asian American communities but also by Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities more broadly.

As the pandemic and the uprisings for the Movement for Black Lives exposes structural violence on various levels, this time is also, as Arundhati Roy (2020) puts it, a portal. Public policies are ways in which systems of oppression can be codified, or it can be a process of building a new world. Already, abolitionist policies are being put forth—the Minneapolis City Council has called to defund their police department, and many other large cities, such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, are shifting local budgets away from funding police departments, funding that has often been bloated. Instead, budgets are shifting towards investing in programs, from schools to health care, that will benefit Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities (Stockman and Elignman, 2020). I offer the following policy recommendations as communities move toward cross-racial solidarity and relief across marginalized populations:

**Passing the HEROES Act:** As stimulus checks from the CARES Act have begun to run out for many families, local and state governments have been the main line of defense in providing unemployment benefits, food assistance, and other necessary social safety nets. Acting as a supplement to the CARES Act, the Heroes Act (2020) would be a \$3 trillion stimulus package that would provide more than \$1 trillion toward necessary federal agencies, and state, local, tribal, and territorial governments. Many of these local and statewide systems have had their reserves depleted, including California, and the Act would help provide funding to key statewide programs, including the Disaster Relief Assistance for Immigrants program. The Act would also provide funding toward SNAP, hazard pay for essential workers, relief for small businesses and students,



and the expansion of eviction and foreclosure moratoriums.

**Reallocate Funding Away from Police Departments and toward Expanding Social Safety Nets Regardless of Status:** Activists across the country have been pushing for the defunding of local police departments due to the systemic racial violence toward black communities. As communities call for much-needed relief, I recommend reallocating funding away from police department budgets, which have often been disproportionately funded as compared to other services, and toward key social programs, such as personal protective equipment, free testing, resources for distance learning, COVID-19 eviction moratoriums, and financial relief for renters, small businesses, and essential workers. These forms of relief must also be accessible regardless of status.

For Filipinos in California, many are already at the frontlines of pushing forth the previously mentioned recommendations. They, in partnership with other marginalized communities, are creating policies that allow for thriving futures after the crisis. For instance, Filipino health care workers a part of the California Nurses Association and National Nurses United have been instrumental in pushing for increased personal protective equipment in health care facilities while calling for Black Lives Matter (Burdyk, 2020). Filipino caregivers and domestic workers a part of the California Domestic Workers Coalition are pushing to pass SB 1257, which would provide safety and health protections for domestic workers and day workers (Mejia, 2020). Filipinos are co-conspirators in organizing their communities to pass policies that stem from a racial and economic justice agenda, policies that will not only benefit California's Filipinos but also Black, Indigenous, and people of color. As policy makers and advocates develop public policies in a pandemic reality and beyond, the leadership and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities must shape this worldmaking—indeed, it is the only way we can move through this portal toward genuine liberation.

## Notes

1. The UC Davis Bulosan Center for Filipinx Studies is one of the first research centers of its kind that focuses on studying the histories and experiences of Filipino America and the Filipino diaspora more broadly. Much of the center's research focuses on issues affecting the Filipino American community such as immigration, workers' rights, and health care.
2. The Filipinx Count! Survey is a survey created by the UC Davis Bulosan Center for Filipinx Studies. The survey is a response to the lack of data collection around Filipinx health and well-being. The last survey conducted on such issues was twenty-five years ago. The survey asks participants on issues such as access to health care, quality-of-life issues, workplace-related topics, and immigration, among other topics. Participants were recruited through community partnerships with organizations across the state of California and nationally. Currently, the survey has gained more than 900 respondents.

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