

Migrants aren't to blame for COVID-19

This is no time to crack down on immigration

By [Justine Calma](#) | [@justcalma](#) | Mar 27, 2020, 8:15am EDT

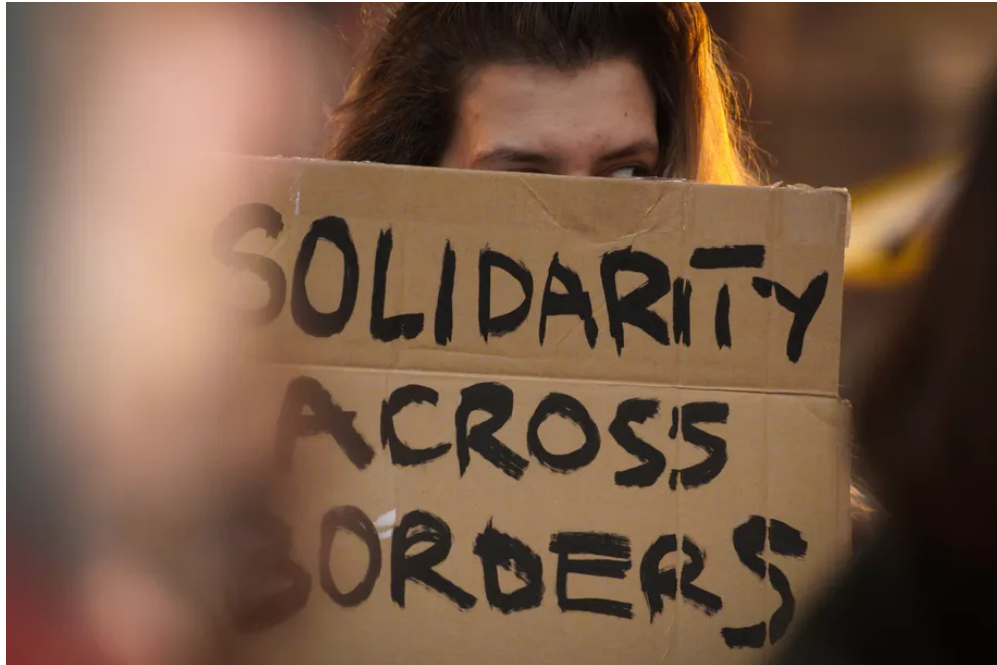


Photo by Jaap Arriens/NurPhoto via Getty Images

To get myself through the pandemic, I've been summoning everything I've learned about surviving in a new world as an immigrant. I left the Philippines as a kid to join my parents in California. "Walang tiyaga, walang nilaga," my grandma used to say. Strictly translated, it means "no perseverance, no stew." That lesson on weathering hardship recently took on new meaning.

I'm not just worried about the virus. Reports of hate crimes against Asian Americans are up, while President Trump continues to characterize the disease as "foreign" and "Chinese." Some of my friends are worried about heading outside not only because of the virus, but because of the racist slurs hurled at them.

Jiayang Fan 





Filipinos, like other immigrant groups, tend to be overrepresented in jobs on the front lines of the pandemic. The Philippines [sends more nurses abroad](#) to staff the world's health care systems than any other country in the world. Filipinos also make up a [third of all cruise ship workers](#) and, in China, are the [largest group](#) of migrant domestic workers. The service industry that delivers food to our doorsteps relies on immigrants, too.

IMMIGRANTS ARE OVERREPRESENTED IN JOBS ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE PANDEMIC

Many of the neighborhoods where people of color and immigrants live have [more air pollution](#), which can be deadly during outbreaks of a virus that affects the lungs. For instance, Latinos are over [51 percent more likely](#) to live in counties with dangerous levels of smog than non-Hispanic whites. That can lead to chronic conditions such as asthma that make someone especially vulnerable to COVID-19. Pollution has also been linked to [heart disease](#); people with serious heart conditions are also at higher risk of getting seriously sick from COVID-19.

There's more. Some immigrants are afraid to seek care because they are worried that they will endanger their own immigration status by doing so. Under [a new rule](#), a person who uses public benefits like Medicaid can be denied a green card. This doesn't apply to permanent residents renewing their green cards, but misinformation is already stopping people from getting care. After pushback from Democrats, US Citizenship and Immigration Services said it [wouldn't penalize green card applicants](#) for getting treatment or testing for COVID-19. ICE announced on the 18th that it [won't "carry out enforcement operations at or near" health care facilities](#); advocates and doctors worried that the [fear of getting swept up by ICE](#) might keep people from getting care. But that might not matter if people are too afraid to see a doctor.

With any disaster, some people are hit first and worst. There are parallels between the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental injustice, says Mustafa Santiago Ali, who led the EPA's efforts to address environmental racism and injustice under the Obama administration. In both crises, the people facing the greatest risk are often people of color, working class families, and the poor. "More of our folks are going to die disproportionately," he says, meaning black, brown, and indigenous communities. The people calling the shots don't come from the places that are most affected — so they often don't understand what's happening on the ground. They might even make decisions that make things worse.

"MORE OF OUR FOLKS ARE GOING TO DIE DISPROPORTIONATELY"

Now, the Trump administration is using the pandemic as an excuse to push hard-line immigration policies it would have pursued anyway, says Sarah Pierce, an analyst at the Migration Policy Institute. "[They're] really taking advantage of this moment, even though it's a questionable decision to pour resources into that," she says. "Maybe we should be concentrating more on finding masks for doctors and nurses than we should be on kicking asylum seekers out of the country."

Pierce thinks more people will lose their work authorization or violate their visas because US Citizenship and Immigration Services has [shut down its offices and suspended in-person meetings](#) that immigrants must attend to keep their legal status. That means more people could face deportation or detention in facilities that, [like prisons](#), can become hotbeds for disease. While immigrant rights advocates are calling for detention centers to shut down, the Trump administration is using them to fearmonger.

People in detention could pass the virus on to customs and border patrol officers, and "even the United States population as a whole," US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar said in a March 20th briefing on the pandemic. "Migrants in [detention] facilities are drawing on an American healthcare system that is already fighting the coronavirus pandemic," he added. That day, the administration announced it would begin to remove anyone crossing US borders illegally, including people seeking asylum, immediately [without due process](#).

I've heard this crap my whole life: that immigrants take more than we give — whether that's overburdening health care, snatching jobs, or whatever — so let's send them away.

Racism and xenophobia has always threatened my existence in this country.

THAT "US VERSUS THEM" FLAVOR OF FEARMONGERING IS COMMON IN EPIDEMICS

That “us versus them” flavor of fearmongering is common in epidemics. Italian immigrants were [scapegoats](#) for the New York City polio epidemics in 1907 and 1916. Cholera was called “Asiatic cholera” in the 1800s and tuberculosis called the “Jewish disease” in the 1900s. Thousands of people died from AIDS before the Reagan administration began taking the epidemic seriously in the mid 1980s, after [making callous jokes](#) about the disease referred to as “gay plague.”

“With this new virus, something was triggered that is always latently there, under the surface, which is this fear of the other and the idea that bad things come from elsewhere,” York University professor Roger Keil [told The Verge in February](#).

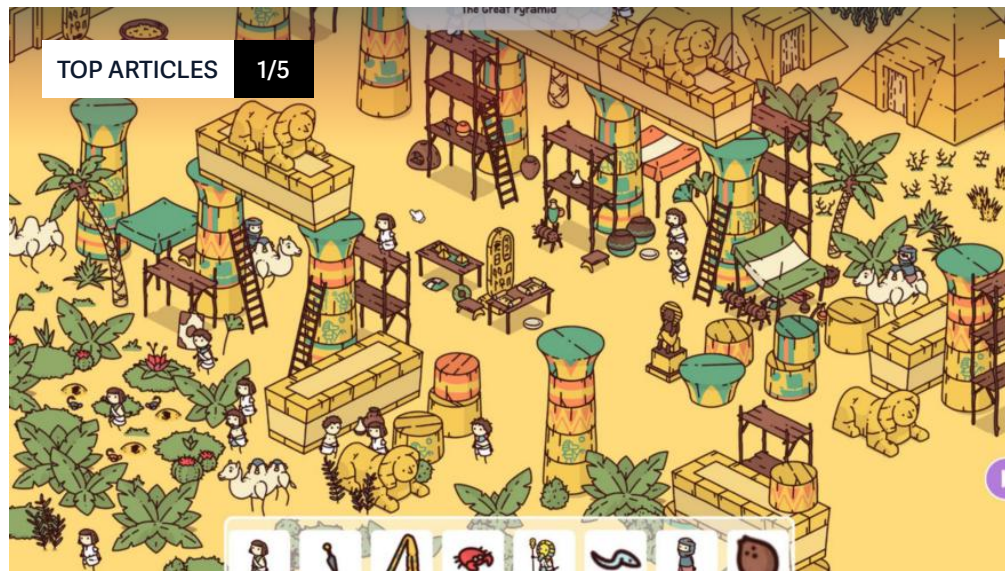
The virus is already spreading in the US; it’s useless to scapegoat migrants at our borders when we now have more cases of COVID-19 [than any other country](#) in the world. The Latin American country with the most cases of COVID-19 is Brazil, which had 2,433 cases [on the 26th](#) — just over a tenth of the number of infections in New York City alone. It seems likelier that migrants in detention centers will get sick *here*. And deporting people who were infected in the US back to other countries means spreading the disease further.

Shifting blame onto others does nothing to keep Americans, including myself, safe. It’s a waste of energy when every moment matters in our response to the crisis. I’ve watched New York City’s local officials plead daily for ventilators and federal assistance. As someone who calls this place home, this is terrifying. My mom and many of my aunts are nurses in the US; they need more masks and medical supplies to keep people healthy.

DIVISION ONLY MAKES DEALING WITH DISASTER HARDER

Division only makes dealing with disaster harder, both Ali and Pierce told me. Another lesson I’ve learned from my community is that the only way we beat the odds is when we show up for each other. My aunt, uncles, cousins, and grandmothers stepped in to take care of me in the Philippines until my parents were on solid footing and could send for

me. Together, they got me here to where I am today. The only way to get through this crisis will be to do so together, too. My mom and aunties will take care of you when you get sick. Make sure to take care of them, too. They're immigrants, and we'll need them.



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