An In-depth Exploration into the South Florida COVID-19 Experience:

A Community Resilience Project

Partnered with Shield America Now

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It is a rare occurrence that my mom drives me to my grandma’s house, but when she does, I always make sure to roll down the windows. How many times has she driven through these streets with me as a child? I know the turns she will take, down the worn roads, before she makes them. It has been months since I have been home after being away at Williams, and yet, the sound of the city outside of my window is as familiar to me as the lullaby my mom used to sing me to sleep to. Everything about my surroundings, from the dynamic people to the boldly painted houses, is familiar. The houses are packed so tightly that if not for the fences encompassing them, the neighbors could see clearly into the backyard from their windows. To an outsider, this might seem like an invasion of privacy, but to us, it is a comfort. The knowledge that there is always someone there, only a few feet away, provides a sense of warmth and security. Whether it is lending a cup of sugar or replacing a deflated tire, a helping hand will perpetually reach out. It is in the simple things that kindness makes itself known.

I find there is something to be said about Latinx, the way they just give and give and expect absolutely nothing in return. Family means more than blood; it consists of the people that love and support each other unconditionally. The kindness that every person exhibits is admirable. When they have nothing left to give, they willingly share a part of themselves. What is available for one person is available for all.
Flying back home after the coronavirus outbreak hit the United States I felt I had reached my safe haven. I live in Miami and have never seen my community falter. I expected to find the same shining spirit of resilience and collaboration at my home. I was wrong. And I was right.

As of yesterday, August 19th, Florida’s Department of Health confirmed there have been a total of 587,047 cases of Coronavirus in Florida. There have been 9,932 deaths. My county, Miami Dade County accounts for 148,093 cases and 2,166 deaths.\(^1\)

Every time I refresh the COVID report page for Florida new cases appear. When the coronavirus first spread no one foresaw the damage it would wreak on communities, the absolute destruction it would bring to businesses, or the personal impact it would bring to families.

The U.S News recently released an article titled “Miami Becoming ‘Epicenter’ of Coronavirus Outbreak” after Florida set a national record with more than 15,299 new coronavirus cases on July 12.\(^2\)

Miami Dade County, in South Florida, comprises 71% of its population identifying as Hispanic/Latinx.\(^3\) According to a report by SAMHSA, “The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic


has revealed deep-seated inequities in health care for communities of color and amplifies social
and economic factors that contribute to poor health outcomes. Recent news reports indicate that
the pandemic disproportionately impacts communities of color, compounding long standing
racial disparities.”

Florida is one of the many states where Latinx are showing a disproportionate level of
impact. Latinx make up 29.4% of all COVID-19 cases but only 18.5% of the U.S population.
Latinx account for a much higher number of COVID-19 cases than their percentage of the
population in regions across the country both in big cities and rural towns. That is one-third of all
cases. There have been 32,538 known cases of Latinx who have lost their lives to COVID-19.4

Mijente Support Committee is a digital and grassroots hub for Latinx and Chicanx
movement building that spoke up for Latinx lives. “Statistics are just a slice of what Latinxs are
enduring as COVID-19 tears through Black and Brown poor and working-class communities.
Since the COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared nearly five months ago, we have
experienced its devastating impact on our lives and livelihoods,” they stated. “Latinx are among
the hardest hit across the country; in some places, the virus is killing and infecting us at the
highest and fastest rates.”

4 “Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups,” Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), accessed August 21, 2020,
h.html.
In Florida, they are just over a quarter of the population but account for two of every five virus cases where ethnicity is known. And yet, even with all the death and the risks, there are people from our community going out there every day to fight this pandemic. These are the frontline workers. The healthcare and essential workers who have loved ones at home and continue to risk their safety for others.

One of the ways the community has rallied is through an emerging non-profit organization Shield America Now, dedicated to protecting frontline workers. Amanda Pina, a student at the University of Florida, built the nonprofit from the ground up when she saw a need in her community.

“When the virus broke out, people were scared and wanted to stay home, but I wished I could be out there doing something to help,” Pina said. “If you show people your kindness, they’re going to do an act of kindness back. I hope that something like this will inspire someone else to help the community too.”

Pina partnered with a manufacturing company Shield Safety Solutions LLC, and the non-profit organization Project K.I.T.E., which offer potential sponsors tax deductible benefits. She knew others who wanted to join the fight, recruited volunteers and the initiative Shield America Now, was born.

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5 Emily Castellanos, “Alumna Leads Effort to Assemble, Provide Face Shields to Health Care Workers in Need,” CASE NEWS, June 16, 2020, https://casenews.fiu.edu/2020/06/12/alumna-leads-effort-to-assemble-provide-face-shields-to-health-care-workers-in-need/?fbclid=IwAR2x51MTsWMKuQnuhzscet0-JNYatWhrvsp2ZwYG8s9k9b_HjIewFrE8QUs.
Thalia Gonzalez, a team member of the nonprofit expanded on how it all began. “Shield America now is an Initiative of Project Kit, a nonprofit organization geared to helping children. Shield America Now is under them because children can have families that are first responders or affected by COVID-19,” she said. “It trickles down in a certain way. We want to provide shields to medical professions to keep them safe while they try to keep everyone safe.” Gonzalez explained that every aspect of Shield America Now is based in South Florida. The production, the assembly, and the distribution are all local.

She said that the organization is planning to expand beyond Florida and extend its help to more than healthcare workers to meet community needs. Gonzalez said the organization is taking a holistic approach when it comes to assessing how to support their community.

“We are protecting the people that we can, not just the nurses and doctors. Making sure that we help the sanitation people and everyone that works in the hospital who can be exposed to coronavirus. The patients, the orderlies, people taking them to scans, we are trying to make sure that they are protected as well,” she said. “We are shifting our mission into protecting everyone that comes into contact with it. This is where I can see Shield America Now protecting those with lower socioeconomic status because oftentimes they do work as a janitor in the hospital. People need to think about them too.”
Latinx workers are largely employed in service or production jobs that cannot be done remotely. They often work jobs that are not amenable to teleworking and use public transportation that puts them at risk for exposure for COVID-19. They perform jobs that require interaction with the general public.⁶

Most non-Hispanics whom the clinic has tested have been working from home or staying home because they have been furloughed, or laid off, typically with unemployment benefits. They were able to keep a distance from everyone but immediate family members. The majority of Latinx patients, on the other hand, have remained on front-line jobs, and many are residing in crowded or precarious dwellings.⁷

Gabby Llerena, Initiative Assistant Director of Shield America Now, said that the organization has a focus on distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) to healthcare and frontline workers given that it is crucial and the government has not done much about it. “Workers for supermarkets, sanitary services, and other essential purposes have been given face shields. These are the people that are meeting our communities needs, we are more than happy to return the favor,” she said. “Healthcare workers are battling with it every single day but it is important to remember it is not only healthcare workers who are essential.”

Llerena said she was inspired to join because her community consists primarily of blue-collar workers, the people putting themselves out there. She saw no difference between her own family, friends, and strangers in her community being the ones that are cleaning the hospital. She said that Latinx and immigrants take care of all of the essential jobs that predominantly white communities do not tend to do.

Llerena added that Latinx tend to put on a strong front and act like the pandemic does not affect them. Their histories and their upbringings have forced them to never show vulnerability. She emphasized having people there to tell them to care for themselves has shown a positive impact in the community. “Hispanic communities are built on helping each other out, we are family-centered,” she said.

Gonzalez wholeheartedly agreed, she said that basing Shield America Now in a predominantly Hispanic location had a big impact on the way the organization operated. “The Hispanic way is that if one of us has a problem then we all have a problem and we are all going to work together to fix this problem. That’s just our way of life,” she said.

“The Hispanic community is looking for an outlet. What can we do? We are seeing our abuelo’s and abuela’s getting affected by this. Everyone wants to do something. It is just a lot of people knowing that we need to help our family and channeling it into helping other families.”
Shield America Now runs solely on volunteer work. Volunteers help fundraise and reach out to sponsors including medical organizations such as United Healthcare that have donated funds to their cause. Gonzalez feels that the familiarity and grounding culture that Hispanics share link us. “We are all so interconnected, especially here in Miami, since I feel it is so small. Everyone knows someone in the medical field either here or at another location, and you never know who might be willing to donate or who needs aid.”

Gonzalez spoke about her connection to a frontline worker, a cousin, who is a doctor in Georgia. She reached out and asked if her cousin needed any shields. Gonzalez explained personal contacts are one of the primary ways they reach out to donate and gain sponsors. She added that Shield America Now also distributes from South Florida to others in need if contacted. As an organization, they are planning to expand nationally.

“Just because we have to physically distance does not mean we all can’t give back in one way,” she said. “You could just see the gratitude on their faces that someone was helping cover them. Someone had their back. It is all about the feeling in my heart when giving back, it is the best way for me to cope with this pandemic.”

Gonzalez said that quarantine and social distancing have proved to be moderate barriers to the growth of the organization, but that it has shone a light on those who truly want to help and they have continued to preserve.
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Gonzalez touched on the interconnectedness that has helped lead a community into making a vision into a reality, Shield America Now. It is that connection that ties our lives to one another, which makes us care. And it is the absence of those ties that have led us into the crisis that we are in now. This pandemic is fought and fed by interdependence and connection. South Florida has proved to be a microcosm of all that is wrong and all that is right in this country.

I have informally surveyed my community as best and I can, and in my experience everyone I have asked knows of someone that has had COVID-19. Whether it was a close relative, a friend of a friend, or a coworker, I have received an overwhelming number of reports from people confirming their personal connection to this virus. This is only my personal experience, everyone's relation to the pandemic is subjective. My narrative will be different than yours but I can only tell you what my truth is. My community, my family has suffered, is suffering. Objectively we are dying by the thousands. Yesterday there were 9,932 deaths. Today there are 10,048 deaths.

Personally, I can tell you the stories of grief-stricken families. I have seen families who could not host a funeral for their loved ones because of social distancing. I can tell you stories of people that have gone out to social gatherings and restaurant diners, thinking they could not possibly be affected and weeks later learned that they tested positive and their friends tested
positive. I can tell you stories of my great grandmother who has not left the house since March 16th. 154 days trapped in her house because she is 98. She would die if she got COVID-19. On her birthday we stood on her driveway, a very long distance away and sang happy birthday as loudly as we could. How it might be her last birthday and her son could not hug her.

I have a personal connection to someone that has contacted the virus. Two months ago my mom’s best friend and his mom came back positive, his mother age 78 died.

Age-adjusting elevates the mortality rate (above the actual rate) for Latinos more than any other group—revealing that COVID-19 is stealing far more Latino lives than we would expect despite this group’s relative youthfulness.⁸

My friend’s mother, who cleans houses, fears she will contract the virus and bring it home to her children, but she will not stop working because she is undocumented and cannot afford not to work.

If Latinos are undocumented, they cannot collect unemployment, which may compel them to work even when they feel unwell, facilitating the spread to their co-workers.⁹

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Last month my aunt, Lizet Rodriguez, her husband, and her two children, ages 1 and 4, contracted the virus.

I asked my aunt how she was coping. “I am lucky,” Rodriguez said. Not because she tested positive but because she is grateful she got paid work leave off. Her husband, a construction worker, did not.

According to Pew Research, about six in ten Latinos (59%) have reported that they or someone that they or someone in their household has taken a pay cut or lost a job -- or both due to the coronavirus outbreak. About two-thirds of employed Hispanic adults (66%) say they would not get paid if the coronavirus caused them to miss work for two weeks or more.  

The Rodriguez family were not only struggling with their health, they were and are still struggling with their finances. “You never think it is going to be you that comes back positive, I was obsessive about taking care of myself because of my kids but I work at the bank. I come in contact with dozens of people every day, there was nothing I could do about that,” she said. Her recent COVID tests came back negative and she goes back to work next week with no other option if she wants to pay the bills and put food on the table for her children.

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Public health experts say Latinos may be more vulnerable to the virus as a result of the same factors that have put minorities at risk across the country. Many have low-paying service jobs that require them to work through the pandemic, interacting with the public. A large number also lack access to health care, which contributes to higher rates of diabetes and other conditions that can worsen infections.\(^\text{i}\)

As Latinx, it is hardwired in us to protect our community. This pandemic is devastating because there is no way to truly shield your loved ones from it.

In Miami, I have personally felt that I have witnessed all sides of the spectrum. When we are looking at statistics it is easy to see the coronavirus rates and the percentage of the Latinx population that has tested positive and discount South Florida as entirely irresponsible. To label it an emerging epicenter for the coronavirus outbreak.

After all, the alarming statistics are easy to look up. Numbers are undeniable. It is difficult for someone from the outside to understand that South Florida is made up of a community that goes beyond the numbers. It is made of people.

What you don’t see is all the good. The strength and bonds that tie us together, that keep us connected through a global pandemic. On the opposite side of the spectrum are the neighbors

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lending anything they can, entire churches and congregations praying for the sick people in the hospitals that they have never met, the college students that start nonprofit organizations and recruit hundreds of volunteers for this cause. There is widespread fear, and widespread loss. Many people are left with no options so they must do what they can.

My community is flawed in many ways, but it is important to show that while you will never see a detailed, colored-coded graph depicting acts of kindness, the selfless acts Latinx people do, it does not mean they are not happening. A daily war against death, against marginalization, against health, economic, social disparities that have put us in the position we are in today. And yet, my community works small little miracles every day.
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