

Fact Sheet: NYC COVID-19 Immigrant Emergency Relief Program

December 2021

Introduction

In April 2020, Mayor de Blasio announced a partnership with Open Society Foundations (OSF) to establish the New York City (NYC) COVID-19 Immigrant Emergency Relief Program (IERP). This Program was extended in September 2020 with financial support from the Robin Hood Foundation. Of the \$21.5 million fund allocated by these foundations, about \$19.5 million was distributed through a network of 34 provider organizations (who were directly contracted with the City to provide monetary assistance) and 26 referral partners from May 2020 to January 2021.¹ The program provided emergency monetary relief to many immigrant workers and their families who have been economically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic yet have been excluded from federal COVID-19 relief efforts. The Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA), in partnership with the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City, oversaw the implementation of the fund distribution.

The IERP assistance was available to individuals who could self-attest that they:

- (1) are a NYC resident;
- (2) have experienced job loss, reduced work hours, or increased expenses such as additional meals for children at home, due to the COVID-19 crisis;
- (3) are unable to afford food and groceries, rent/mortgage, utility/internet/phone/other bills, healthcare expenses, funeral/burial expenses, childcare expenses, or other expenses, due to the COVID-19 crisis,;
- (4) are not eligible for the Economic Impact Payment under the CARES Act; AND
- (5) are not eligible for unemployment insurance benefits

The fund directly reached about 26,000 individuals and created a citywide network of community-based organizations (CBOs) and worker centers who not only disseminated one-time emergency relief payments but also connected individuals with information and referrals for other resources they may be eligible for, such as SNAP, other types of cash assistance, the 2020 Decennial Census, rental assistance, and emergency food delivery programs.

This fact sheet provides: (1) a demographic overview of the IERP recipients based on the applicant survey collected by partner organizations at the point of intake, and; (2) the recipients' relief fund spending pattern based on the analysis of the deidentified data obtained from the program's pre-paid debit card vendor.

Findings from this program reinforce a 2020 report from U.S. Census Bureau's data² that finds that nationally, stimulus payments, enacted as part of economic relief legislation related to the COVID-19 pandemic, moved 11.7 million persons out of poverty during the pandemic. This data provides new evidence of the importance to enact more lasting expansions as well as more inclusive changes to the safety net.

Summary of Findings

Major program accomplishments include:

- Establishing a rapid response network of CBOs that went onto launch additional funding for excluded populations, including a third round of funds from the NYC Office of Economic Opportunity, NYC's burial assistance program, and FASTEN.
- Providing cash assistance to approximately 26,000 economically constrained undocumented immigrants in New York City: In fact, when counting those living in the same household with these

¹ The rest of the funding was used to support the provider organizations with staffing and other administrative costs. The OSF portion of the program ran from May 2020 through December 2020. The Robin Hood portion ran from September 2020 through January 2021.

² See <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/income-poverty-health-insurance-coverage.html> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/14/business/economy/census-income-poverty-health-insurance.html>.

recipients, the fund helped approximately 79,000 New Yorkers in total, over a third of whom were children.

- **Reaching workers left out of relief:** The program successfully reached undocumented immigrant workers in a short period of time, overcoming traditional challenges of conducting outreach to this population. Program recipients faced extreme economic vulnerability as they earned very low income and had little to no savings.
 - 85 percent of recipients reported job loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, and over half of these individuals had worked in essential jobs, e.g. domestic workers, food workers, and construction workers.³
 - Over half (55 percent) of recipients reported having no income at the time of their screening and about 86 percent reported having either no savings or savings of less than \$400.
- **Diverse reach citywide:** the program had a diverse citywide reach, serving people from over 150 countries and who speak about 75 different languages.
- **Referrals:** over half of the recipients received information about other available resources, such as food, rental assistance, and the 2020 Census.

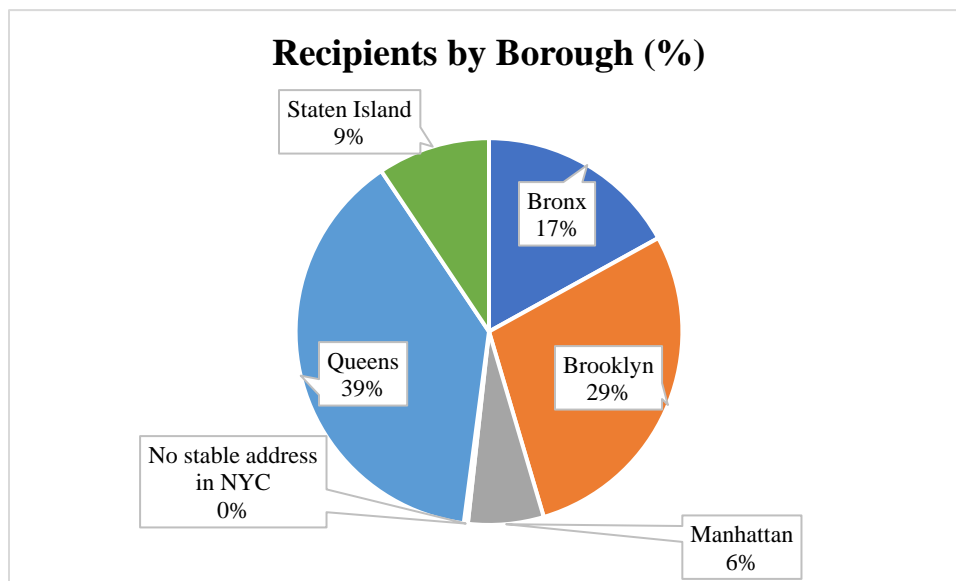
Findings⁴

Demographic reach.

In total, the program provided about 25,600 New Yorkers with direct financial relief. The funds supported these individuals along with an additional 53,300 people in their households - over half of whom were children. Thus, in total, we estimate that the cash assistance helped 78,900 New Yorkers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The program served undocumented immigrants across all five boroughs.

When compared against the breakdown of undocumented immigrant workers in NYC, the program recipients consisted of well-balanced mix of residents from all five boroughs, with a slight underrepresentation of residents from Manhattan.



Borough	% Served by Program	Undocumented Immigrants in Labor Force (%) ⁵
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³ We followed the definition of “essential workers” established by the New York State Governor’s Executive Order 202.6. See Empire State Development, “Guidance for Determining Whether a Business Enterprise Is Subject to a Workforce Reduction under Recent Executive Orders” (Last Updated October 23, 2020) <https://esd.ny.gov/guidance-executive-order-2026>

⁴ Based on program screening data through January 2021. In some instances, numbers have been rounded.

⁵ Based on 2019 1-year American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample as augmented by NYC Opportunity.

Bronx	17.0	18.7
Brooklyn	28.5	24.9
Manhattan	6.3	14.7
Queens	38.5	39.1
Staten Island	9.4	2.6
No stable address in NYC	0.3	N/A

Award Allocations and Household Sizes

The program awarded \$400 to a single household recipient, \$800 to a two-person household recipient, and \$1,000 to a recipient living in a household of three people or more and to any household with a child. If the person had received cash assistance from another source, the award amount was reduced by the amount they had previously received.⁶ The final data analysis shows that 50% of recipients received the maximum award of \$1,000.

Award Amount	Total Award Recipients	%
\$ 100.00	38	0.1%
\$ 200.00	82	0.3%
\$ 300.00	229	0.9%
\$ 400.00	6,400	25.2%
\$ 500.00	653	2.6%
\$ 600.00	416	1.6%
\$ 700.00	804	3.2%
\$ 800.00	3,577	14.1%
\$ 900.00	501	2.0%
\$ 1,000.00	12,689	50.0%

Household Size	Total Households	% of Households
1	5,525	21.7%
2	3,929	15.4%
3	4,839	19.0%
4	5,185	20.4%
5+	5,999	23.5%

Countries of Origin and Language Preference

Program recipients identified about 150 countries as their countries of origin and about 75 languages as their preferred means of communication. By comparing the undocumented labor force population data in NYC to the program’s administrative data, we are able to discern where IERP has a good or “proportionate” reach across undocumented worker communities based on country of origin: IERP recipients were well-represented for groups from Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Korea, Haiti, and

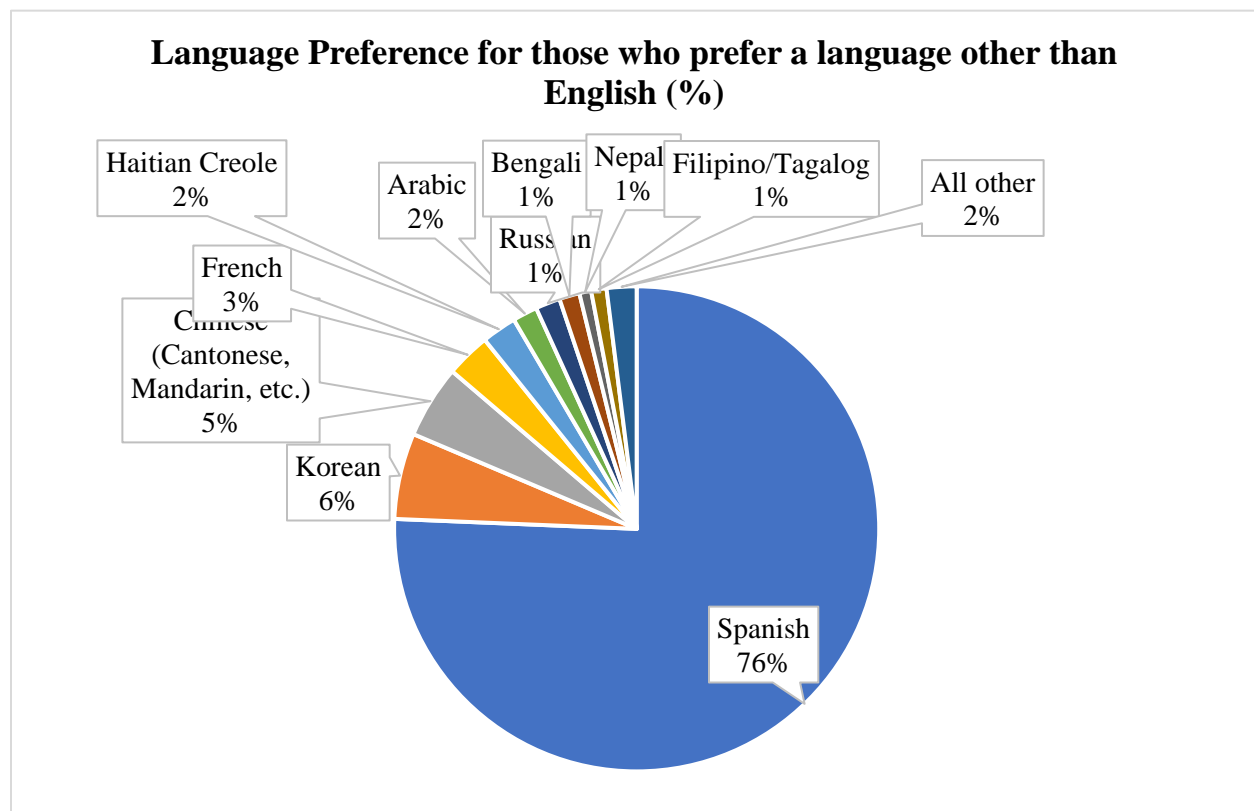
⁶ This program decision was made to ensure that the funding could reach as many new eligible individuals in financial need as possible. While most of the award recipients were ineligible for the existing federal or state cash assistance programs (such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) due to their immigration status, some had received other privately funded cash assistance programs prior to seeking assistance from this program.

Malaysia. IERP recipients were underrepresented for undocumented workers from China, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala.

- Top 10 countries of origin (accounting for about 74 percent of recipients):

	Place of Birth	% of Program Recipients	% of Undocumented Labor Force
1	Mexico	35.4%	22.0%
2	Ecuador	12.0%	7.0%
3	Colombia	4.5%	2.7%
4	Honduras	3.8%	2.7%
5	Korea	4.9%	2.2%
6	Guatemala	3.4%	5.2%
7	Dominican Republic	3.2%	8.6%
8	China	2.7%	11.3%
9	Haiti	2.1%	0.8%
10	Malaysia	2.1%	0.2%

- Language preference: majority (88 percent) of recipients preferred a language other than English. Majority preferred Spanish.



The program’s successful reach to diverse immigrant groups in NYC in a short period is notable given that immigrants are generally less likely to utilize government benefits they are eligible for⁷ and that undocumented immigrants are often harder for the government to engage with.⁸

The program reached many essential workers.

The following occupations accounted for over 80 percent of the recipients:

	Occupation	Recipients	Recipients (%)
1	Domestic Worker	6,687	28.0%
2	Restaurant/food service, e.g. food prep, delivery, etc.	5,088	21.3%
3	Construction, day laborer, contractor	3,797	15.9%
4	Service, e.g. nail salon, barber shop, etc.	2,170	9.1%
5	Retail, e.g. grocery store, pharmacy, etc.	999	4.2%
6	Street vendor	647	2.7%
7	Laundry and cleaning services	461	1.9%

The other top occupations of the program recipients included: automotive workers, taxi drivers, and those in administrative or clerical work.

The program reached economically vulnerable undocumented workers.

The survey data show that this program very successfully reached its target population of undocumented workers who had reported financial hardship because of the pandemic and were ineligible for federal supports. In fact, most of those individuals reported facing multiple types of economic crises at the same time, such as having no income while having no savings.

- **Significant job loss:** 21,700 or 85 percent of recipients reported job loss.
- **Little to no savings:** 86 percent of recipients had savings of less than \$400.
 - 76 percent had no savings at the time of their screening.
- **Low income:** Over half of recipients (55 percent) reported having no income at the time of their screening.
 - For recipients reporting some income at the time of their screening, their average income ranged from \$10,400 to \$26,000 annually, with the most common household size of over five. Those making below \$31,040 are considered living in poverty under the federal poverty guideline for a household of five.⁹

The devastating economic impact of the pandemic and the pressing financial need among this community were also clear in the overwhelming demand for the fund among the immigrant communities. The fund was first announced in April 2020 when partner organizations spent the next weeks completing trainings and conducting outreach and eligibility screenings, and the first card was distributed in mid-June 2020.¹⁰ By August 2020, over half (67 percent) of awards had already been spent.

Most recipients used the funds for cash, food, and clothing.

The funding was distributed in the form of pre-paid debit cards, which enabled the partner organizations to remotely implement the program while maintaining the safety of staff and fund recipients. All

⁷ National Immigration Forum (2018), Fact Sheet: Immigrants and Public Benefits, available at <https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-immigrants-and-public-benefits/>; Bipartisan Policy Center (2018), Immigrants and Public Benefits: What Does Research Say?, available at <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Immigrants-and-Public-Benefits-What-Does-the-Research-Say.pdf>

⁸ Bustamante, A. V., Fang, H., Garza, J., Carter-Pokras, O., Wallace, S. P., Rizzo, J. A., & Ortega, A. N. (2012). Variations in healthcare access and utilization among Mexican immigrants: the role of documentation status. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 14(1), 146-155. Reina, A. S., & Lohman, B. J. (2015). Barriers preventing Latina immigrants from seeking advocacy services for domestic violence victims: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Family Violence*, 30(4), 479-488.

⁹ The federal poverty level refers to the minimum amount of annual income that is needed for individuals and families to pay for essentials, such as housing, clothes, and transportation. For more information, visit <https://aspe.hhs.gov/2021-poverty-guidelines> (last updated January 26, 2021).

¹⁰ The first card transaction through this program was dated June 12, 2020.

individuals had the option of withdrawing cash in full or partial amounts loaded on their card. They could also use the card as a debit or credit card at any location that accepted Mastercard. Usio did not charge fees to individuals using the card for debit or credit purchases, but the recipients who wanted to withdraw cash from an ATM machine paid usage fees to Usio and to the ATM operator. After the initial round of funding, additional funds were added to each card to cover part of these ATM fees. Additionally, recipients were not charged any ATM surcharge fees if they used an Allpoint ATM.¹¹

As of September 1, 2021¹², \$15.6 million of the total distributed funding of \$16 million¹³ has been spent. Our analysis of the spending data shows that the funding was used in the following manner:

- **Cash withdrawals:** About \$9.1M (58 percent) were cash withdrawals.
 - Average withdrawal amount is \$274 per transaction.
 - Average ATM fee is \$2.20 per transaction.
- **Purchase transactions:** The remaining \$6.1 M (39 percent) were spent on purchase transactions. Top purchase transactions are:
 - Grocery and food locations, e.g. supermarkets and restaurants (42 percent),
 - Clothes and shoes (12 percent), and
 - Money transfers (i.e. money orders, Western Union, bill pay) (4 percent)
- **3rd Part Bill Payments:** \$177K (1.1 percent) went directly to 3rd Party Bill Payments

The breakdown shown above closely aligns with the survey data below that shows how recipients had said they would use their funds.

What recipients reported needing support for	# of recipients	% of recipients
Rent/mortgage	23,257	91%
Food and groceries	18,532	72%
Utility, internet, phone, and other bills	17,553	69%
Healthcare expenses	3,779	15%
Childcare expenses	2,650	10%
Funeral/burial expenses	608	2%
Other	241	1%
Remittances	35	0.1%

The program recipients’ use of cash assistance to meet their basic needs, such as food, housing, and utilities, is in line with the nationwide survey response regarding how individuals used their Economic Impact Payment. A June 2020 national household survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau found that 80 percent of respondents had reported using their stimulus checks on food and 77.9 percent on rent, mortgage and/or utilities, including gas, electricity, cable, internet, and cellphone.¹⁴

Most people had heard about the program through a Community-based Organization (CBO).

As part of the intake survey, recipients were asked to identify the source of information about the program. The launch of the program was covered by a New York Times article and a press release.¹⁵ However, in order to protect the safety of both applicants and the frontline staff at the height of the pandemic and to address privacy concerns raised in light of the federal administration’s anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, the list of provider organizations was not publicized. Instead, the program relied on the 60 partner organizations themselves, who had deep ties to immigrant communities, to do proactive

¹¹ <https://www.allpointnetwork.com/locator.html>

¹² The latest data available at the time of publication.

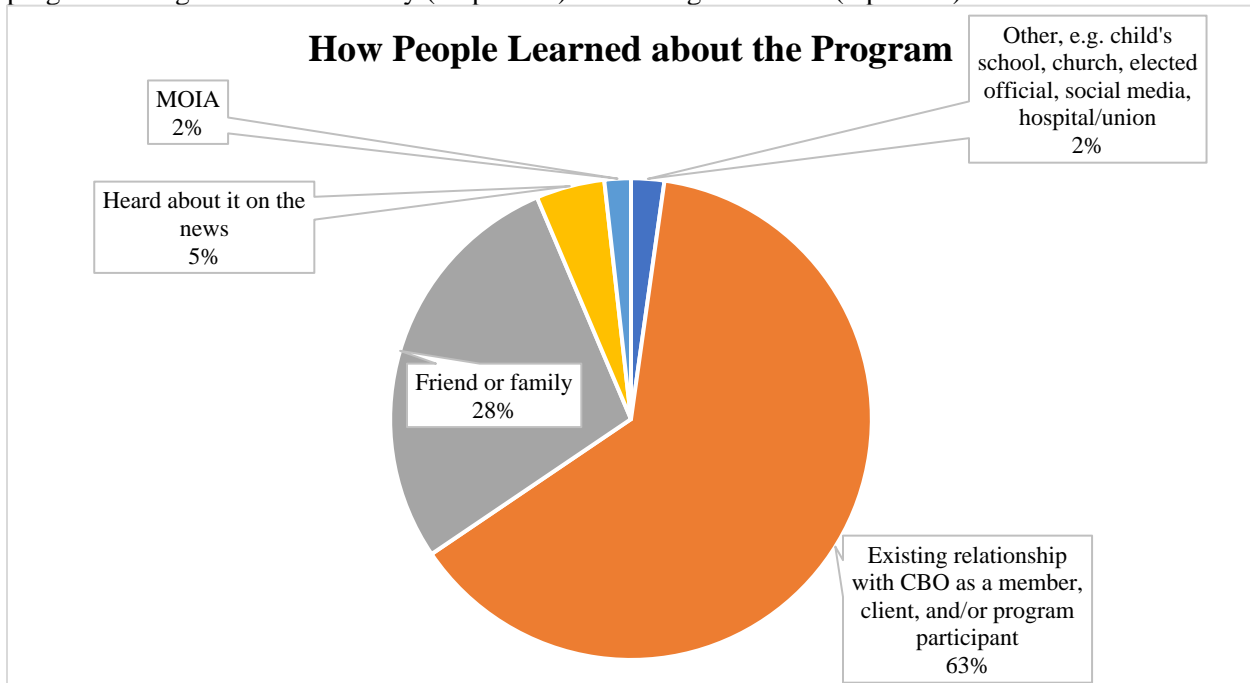
¹³ Expenditure data is based on administrative data through the Usio payment provider. It excludes about \$3M that was allocated to providers who used their own separate payment platforms.

¹⁴ Perez-Lopez D. and Bee C.A. (June 24, 2020), Majority Who Received Stimulus Payments Spending Most of It on Household Expenses, U.S. Census Bureau, available at <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/06/how-are-americans-using-their-stimulus-payments.html>

¹⁵ <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/262-20/mayor-de-blasio-new-york-city-covid-19-immigrant-emergency-relief-program-open>

outreach and identify individuals in need. As a result, most recipients said that they had learned about the program through a CBO.

The survey result also shows that this outreach strategy allowed the program to successfully reach immigrants in need, with a balanced mix of those who had existing relationships with the partner organizations and those who did not. While the majority (63 percent) had heard about the program because they had an existing relationship with a participating CBO, recipients also learned about the program through a friend or family (28 percent) and through the news (5 percent).



Over half of program intakes led to more information about other service referrals.

MOIA prepared a resource guide for immigrant communities during COVID-19, which is available both online¹⁶ and in a hard copy format, the latter of which was translated into 25 different languages. The guide includes a concise description of benefits, eligibility for immigrants, and the website, hotline, email, or other ways in which users can contact responsible agencies to obtain more information. The resource guide was shared with the partner organizations who utilized it to advise the fund applicants about the existing city resources and make referrals as needed. The administrative data show that most of the fund recipients received additional services.

The program also helped recipients complete the 2020 Decennial Census, which at the time, was facing challenges in outreach due to confusion and fear among immigrant communities about how the data would be used by the federal government.

- **Census.** 50 percent of recipients (11,978 people) had not responded to the 2020 Decennial Census at the time of the screening but were connected to support and more information on how to complete the Decennial Census.
- **Referrals.** 69 percent (or about 17,700 people) received information from a MOIA resource guide about other supports available to immigrants.

Conclusion

The IERP is a first step in understanding the benefits of providing cash assistance to undocumented New Yorkers through a network of CBOs. These findings are important to inform future programs and

¹⁶ <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/immigrants/help/city-services/resources-for-immigrant-communities-during-covid-19-pandemic.page>

outreach to undocumented populations as well as for continued advocacy for permanent and ultimately inclusive recovery programs at the government level.