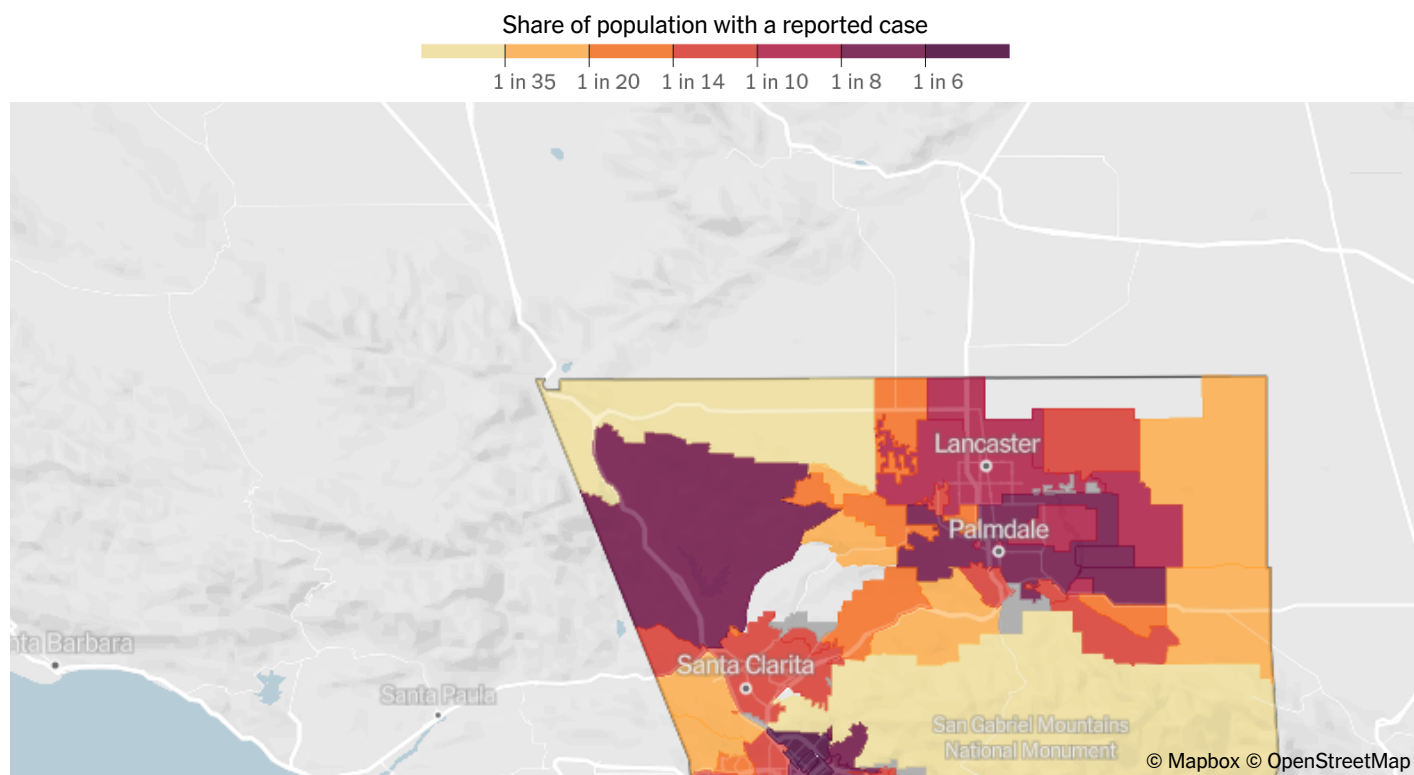


# In Los Angeles, the Virus Is Pummeling Those Who Can Least Afford to Fall Ill

By Jill Cowan and Matthew Bloch Jan. 29, 2021



Sources: Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Pasadena Public Health Department, City of Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Census Bureau

On a recent weekday afternoon, not long before officials eased strict orders to stay home, cars sped down Los Angeles freeways when they would normally crawl.

In Pacoima, a northeastern San Fernando Valley neighborhood, brightly painted storefronts along Van Nuys Boulevard were mostly closed. There was no line alongside a trail of signs advertising rapid Covid-19 tests.

In Los Angeles County, the impacts of the pandemic have been relatively diffuse, with millions of residents suffering and grieving in isolation across a famously vast sprawl. Lockdowns — some of the nation's most stringent, credited with saving thousands of lives — have kept Angelenos apart for months on end.

But recently, as Los Angeles County has become the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States, the astonishing surge has reinforced the virus's unequal toll, pummeling poorer communities of color. Experts say that deeply rooted inequality is both a symptom and a critical cause of Covid-19's overwhelming spread through the nation's most populous county.

“The challenge is that even before the surge, we had unevenness in Los Angeles County and in the state of California — we had smoldering embers in parts of our community all the time,” said Dr. Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, the vice dean for population health and health equity at the School of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. “Our interconnectedness is part of the story.”

County officials recently estimated that one in three of Los Angeles County's roughly 10 million people have been infected with Covid-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. But even amid an uncontrolled outbreak, some Angelenos have faced higher risk than others. County data shows that Pacoima, a predominantly Latino neighborhood that has one of the highest case rates in the nation, has roughly five times the rate of Covid-19 cases as much richer and whiter Santa Monica.

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Experts point to a combination of factors that have made the uneven impacts of the virus tragically predictable across the country, an imbalance that is often magnified in California.

The essential workers who risk getting sick on the job are more likely to be Latino and more likely to live in overcrowded houses and apartments without space to isolate, experts have said throughout the pandemic.

Their jobs — including those in warehouses, food processing plants, restaurant kitchens and factories — are likely to be lower paid, and workers are less likely to be able to take time off when they're sick.

“It's a double whammy for these workers: Covid, and unemployment or underemployment,” said Daniel Flaming, president of the Los Angeles-based nonprofit Economic Roundtable.

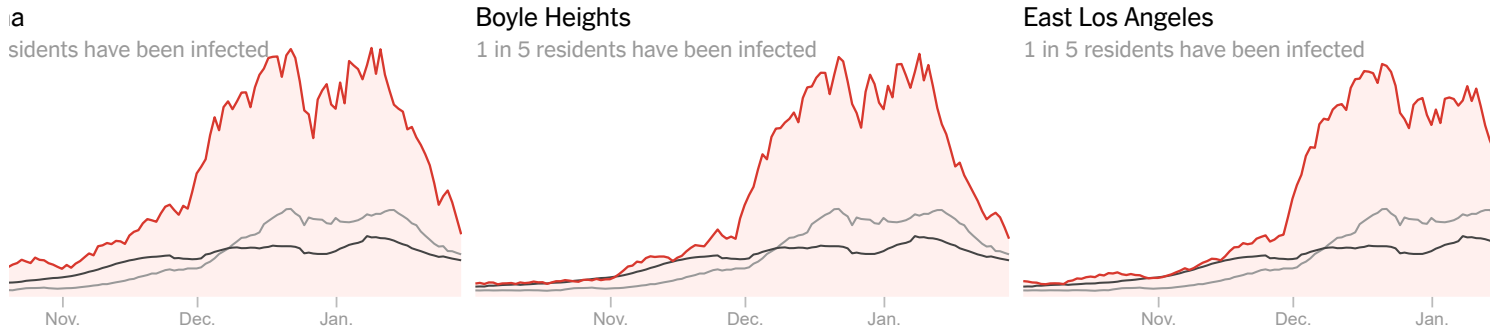
Los Angeles County, long plagued by a gaping chasm between its rich and poor, has a particularly large service sector that requires workers to interact face-to-face with customers, Mr. Flaming said.

“Latino or African-American workers predominantly in service jobs are providing services to more affluent neighborhoods where there's more capacity for consumption,” he said. “So the income polarization is certainly a factor.”

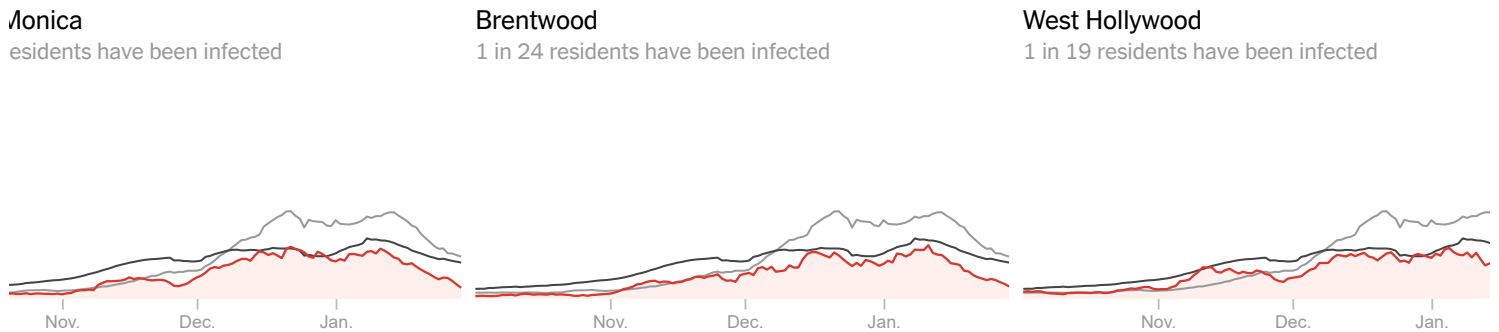
While the median household income is about \$43,000 in Boyle Heights, a Latino enclave where longtime residents have fought gentrification, in Brentwood, home to Hollywood celebrities, the median income is about \$120,000. One in five Boyle Heights residents have gotten Covid-19, compared with one in 25 Brentwood residents.

### New cases in high-risk areas of Los Angeles County

Neighborhood or city (7-day average) California U.S.



### New cases in lower-risk areas



Source: Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

Senator Alex Padilla, who was appointed this month to fill Vice President Kamala Harris’s vacant seat, grew up in Pacoima, the son of a short-order cook and a housekeeper. Seeing the uneven effects of the pandemic, particularly on predominantly Latino communities like the one where his family still lives, “I can’t help but take it personally,” he said.

The problem, experts say, is that once the prevalence of the virus is high enough in any neighborhood, it puts everyone who lives there in danger, even if people are cautious and follow public health guidance.

Such was the case for Leonila Olivares, 45, who lives with her four children in Pacoima.

In December, she and her 10-year-old daughter contracted Covid-19, but she’s unsure how. She had been strict about wearing masks and had stopped gathering with her siblings and their families, she said, and she’d tried to keep her distance from other shoppers at the grocery store. She

had stopped working at a garment factory in 2019 because of a disability. Nevertheless, she and her daughter were among more than a dozen members of her extended family in the area who contracted the virus.

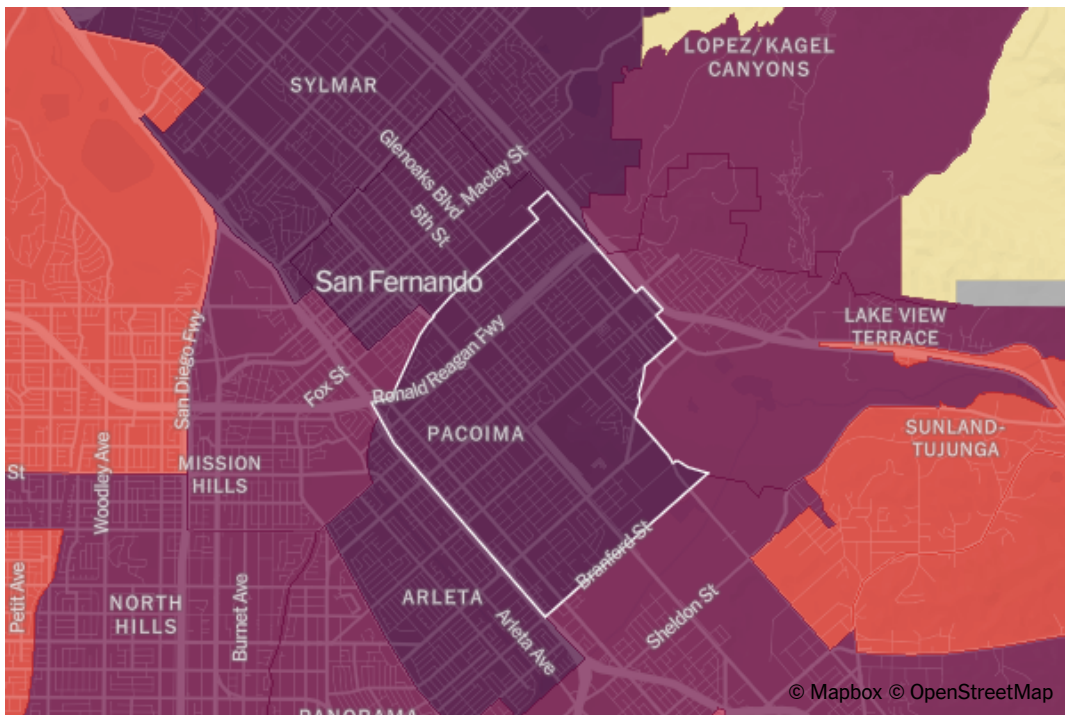
She said it has troubled her to see people standing too close in mobile Covid-19 testing lines and she's asked people to give her space at the market. Ultimately, though, she said she decided all she can worry about is keeping herself and her children safe.

"It's not going to be me against the world," she said in Spanish.

**One of the nation's highest case rates**

Pacoima, Los Angeles, has a population of 76,979 with 97% nonwhite and/or Hispanic residents and a median household income of \$56,000

	TOTAL	SHARE OF POPULATION
Cases	<b>15,851</b>	1 in 5 people
Deaths	<b>156</b>	1 in 493



Share of population with a reported case  
 1 in 35   1 in 20   1 in 14   1 in 10   1 in 8   1 in 6

Sources: Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, U.S. Census Bureau

Laura Hidalgo, the leader of a Covid-19 outreach team for the Pacoima-based nonprofit Meet Each Need With Dignity, interpreted for Ms. Olivares. Ms. Hidalgo said that for many Latino immigrants, close-knit extended families provide a crucial support system.

So in the months leading up to the winter surge, public health messaging about the need to stay away from everyone — no dropping food off at your daughter's home and staying for 15 minutes to chat, no going into your parents' house to check on them — was met with some resistance in the hard-hit neighborhoods where Ms. Hidalgo works.

Recently, though, that's changed, as deaths have soared and hospitals in the region have been inundated.

"I see a lot more fear in people," Ms. Hidalgo said. "What we're seeing, still, is that a lot of families don't have any other choice but to continue business as usual."

Edward Flores, an associate professor who has researched the impacts of the pandemic on workers for the Community and Labor Center at the University of California, Merced, said that even though California has issued some rules aimed at keeping workers safe, they've too often gone unenforced until it's too late.

Now, as Los Angeles County officials once again move to allow businesses to reopen, experts say the clock is ticking to not only vaccinate workers, but to also implement more sustained protections.

Those must include federal aid that goes directly to frontline workers and affected communities, Mr. Padilla, the senator, said.

"These are not stimulus checks, these are survival checks," he said.

Mr. Flores said he's been especially dismayed by the fact that most undocumented workers have gone without aid.

He has also been frustrated, he said, to see so much discussion about individual behaviors when it's long been clear that systemic forces are making certain people more vulnerable than others.

"We get locked in these conversations about, well, someone doesn't wear a mask," he said. "We're almost one year into this, and part of me worries we haven't really learned as much as we should have."