

Citizenship & Employment Precarity

*A research project on precarious work
and immigration status in the GTA*

PANDEMIC PRECARITIES: IMMIGRATION STATUS, WORK, HOUSING, AND HEALTH AMONG CURRENT AND FORMER NON-STATUS RESIDENTS OF TORONTO

This report is dedicated to the memory of
Francisco Rico-Martínez (1958-2021)



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<https://cep.info.yorku.ca/fcj-cep-covid-19-project/> and
<https://www.fcjrefugeecentre.org/pandemic-precarities-report/>

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The project is directed by Luin Goldring (York University) and Patricia Landolt (University of Toronto) in collaboration with Francisco Rico-Martinez and Loly Rico, FCJ Centre. Diana Gallego and Natasha Rollings also directed the FCJ team. The authors are grateful to Natasha Rollings and Jessie Kohut for comments.

The FCJ-CEP survey was developed and tested by a team from the FCJ Refugee Centre, York University, and the University of Toronto. FCJ team members conducted the survey; Jana Borras analyzed the data.

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Pandemic precarities: immigration status, work, housing, and health among current and former non-status residents of Toronto

Introduction

One characteristic of global migration is widespread legal status precarity demonstrated by the growing range of noncitizen legal status categories and legal status trajectories that include temporariness and illegalization (Landolt & Goldring 2015; Goldring and Landolt 2021). In Canada, immigration status is a primary filter for access to work, social services and supports. An absence of status or temporary authorization means that migrants have little or no formal access to public healthcare, social services, or income support. However, access to some public services, for example, healthcare, may be negotiated and some municipal services are accessible to all (e.g., libraries).

Precarious status residents, including those without status, are de-facto members of our communities. Yet, while they live and work in the GTA, they are largely absent from analyses of pandemic impacts or planning for the 'recovery.' The "Non-Status migrant exclusion and responses under COVID-19 in the GTA" project is a collaboration between the FCJ Refugee Centre and a research team from York University and the University of Toronto lead by Professors Luin Goldring and Patricia Landolt. It examines impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on precarious legal status migrants⁽¹⁾ who live and work in the GTA. The project leverages an earlier collaboration between the FCJ Refugee Centre and the academic team and builds on the academic team's project on Citizenship and Employment Precarity (<https://cep.info.yorku.ca/>).

The goals of the project are to:

1. Study the experiences, impacts, and strategies of non-status individuals and their families in the GTA for dealing with the global pandemic
2. Contribute to knowledge about the differential impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns for this understudied and difficult to reach population
3. Generate knowledge relevant to FCJ and other organizations working with and on non-status migrants

The goals of the partnership are achieved using two research strategies. First, the research team developed and implemented a telephone survey among the non-status and previously non-status households receiving support from the FCJ Refugee Centre. Second, the team is conducting in-depth interviews with a subsample of survey respondents via zoom. A second report will include in-depth interview data.

The FCJ Refugee Centre has a long-standing practice of working with precarious status migrants with limited access to social services, resources, and social supports (FCJ Refugee Centre n.d.). FCJ provides open door support to all precarious status migrants regardless of status through programs that provide access to primary care, physical and mental health, and immigration orientation and referrals, and programs that address food insecurity, housing, and labour rights for those experiencing exploitation and trafficking (FCJ Refugee Centre n.d.)

(1) Precarious status includes people who lack authorization to live and/or work in Canada, as well as people with temporary and probationary statuses. The term captures the fact that government policies change, people may shift between government categories, and that legal status is relational: official categories may or may not correspond to ability to receive services and engage with local and other communities, as these are based in social relationships (Goldring et. al 2009; Landolt and Goldring 2015).

The FCJ-CEP Survey

The survey data provide a socio-demographic profile of the non-status population with which FCJ works. The survey examines the impacts of the pandemic on survey respondents by tracking pre-pandemic to pandemic changes in occupation, employment, and job loss rates; changes in immigration status; access to and use of health care and selected social services; housing conditions; and social networks and support. FCJ and the academic team expected that the pandemic would deepen the vulnerability of people whose lives and jobs were already precarious and wanted to learn how people were managing.

The team completed surveys with 195 people from March to June 2021⁽²⁾. All survey participants were receiving support from FCJ, mainly through the food security program⁽³⁾. This report is based on initial results from the survey. It offers insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic affects non-status and formerly non-status migrants living in the GTA.

The sample was generated using a list of FCJ food security program recipients, supplemented with people in other programs. FCJ staff contacted potential survey participants; 195 agreed and completed the survey. Response rates varied due to scheduling issues, concern over confidentiality, and people being busy with employment and household activities.

The number of people in the food security program rose steadily after it began in February 2020. From February to April of that year, approximately 15 new families were registered for the program every week. The program provided weekly food support for roughly 615 families (or 1837 people) from December 2020 to September 2021, when it ended.

1. Situating the survey participants

FCJ-CEP survey respondents were drawn from a population of people severely impacted by COVID-19. They went to FCJ for basic supports when individuals

and families lost income or were already receiving services and support from FCJ. The food security program was one of a handful of programs in the GTA offering support for those with precarious immigration status, ineligible for government assistance, or other means of financial support.

Profile of survey respondents

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents are women (73%), and just over a quarter are men (27%). This may be a function of gendered availability and willingness to participate in the survey. More than half of the participants are highly educated, meaning they received a college diploma, university degree and/or graduate degree. Yet, despite their educational credentials, they are employed in sectors that are considered unskilled and precarious. For example, 40% of the participants who had a university degree upon arrival in Canada worked in cleaning or janitorial jobs before the COVID-19 pandemic.

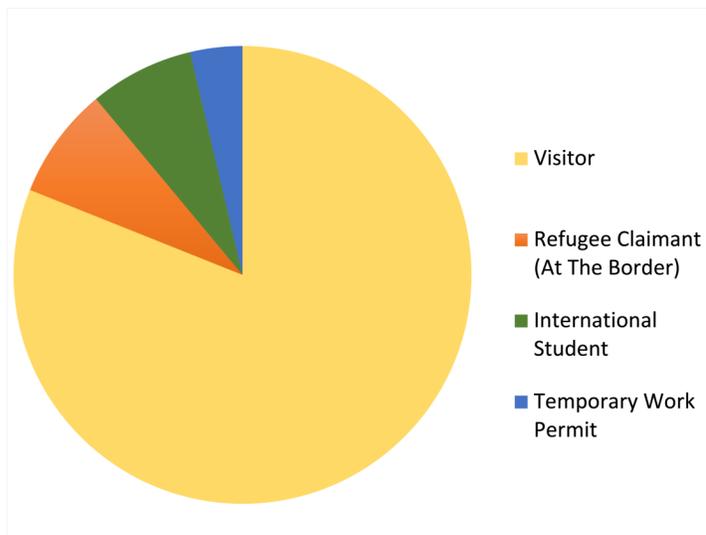
Most of the survey participants were recent newcomers: 71% had been in Canada for less than five years. However, their time in Canada ranged from thirty-seven years to less than a year. The geographic origins of the participants are quite diverse: they migrated from forty-three countries. Most participants (58%) were from Latin America, followed by 18% from the Caribbean, 14% from countries in Africa and a small proportion from South and Southeast Asia, the United States, European countries, and the Middle East.

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All of the survey participants entered Canada with temporary immigration status. Upon arrival, 79% of the participants were Visitors, followed by participants who were Refugee Claimants (8%), International Students (7%), and Temporary Migrant Workers (4%). The sample shares a common mode of entry; however, the respondents have had different precarious legal status trajectories over time. By the time of the survey, most participants had experienced changes in their immigration status, primarily to other forms of precarious status. At the time of the survey, 67% of the participants were non-status, meaning they lacked any authorized residence or employment permit. At the same time, a small proportion (12%) of the participants was in the process of securing some form of authorized status, whether temporary, through a refugee claim, or in a bid for permanent residence on Humanitarian and Compassionate grounds (H&C). A smaller share (3%) had valid temporary authorization as Visitors or International Students. Finally, 10.7% of the participants had secured authorized permanent status (e.g., approved H&C, permanent residence permit, Canadian citizenship).

FIGURE 1: Status on Arrival to Canada



Source: FCJ-CEP Survey (2021)

2. The harmful impact of COVID-19 on Work and Employment

Precarious status migrants experience precarious working conditions and job insecurity, characterized by lower wages, lack of ability to control schedules, dangerous working conditions, and exploitative and/or predatory employers and employment practices (Anderson 2010; Goldring and Landolt 2011; Villegas 2014). Non-status migrants are often stuck working in labour market sectors that are considered "unskilled" and "demeaning" despite possessing higher education (Basok et al., 2014; Alcaraz et al., 2021).

According to Statistics Canada (2020), approximately 3 million jobs were lost due to the COVID-19 shutdown between February 2020 and April 2020, a period of peak unemployment. Racialized minorities were more likely to work in sectors severely impacted by the pandemic resulting in higher unemployment rates compared to non-racialized Canadians (Statistics Canada 2020). Less well documented and understood is the impact of the pandemic on precarious status migrant workers and families.

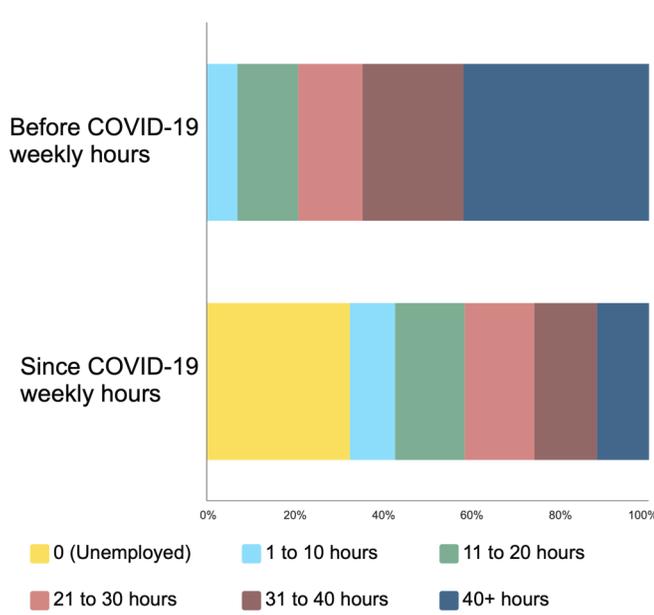
In 2020, the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change reported that many migrants were concerned about the potential loss of income due to COVID-19 (MWAC 2020). The FCJ-CEP survey confirms that the COVID-19 shutdown negatively impacted many precarious status migrants. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 131 participants or approximately two-thirds of the 195 respondents were employed. Pre-pandemic employment rates varied by gender: 73% of the male respondents were employed, in contrast, 64% of female respondents were employed. Among those who were employed, 65% were working full-time (more than 30 hours per week). Most were working in the following sectors: cleaning/janitorial services (35%), construction/trades (19%) and manufacturing (11%).

During the pandemic, the employment rate for survey participants dropped significantly. At the time of the survey, 41 of the 131 pre-COVID employed participants

reported they became unemployed during the pandemic (31%). The most cited reason for the loss of employment was being laid off.

While many participants lost their jobs during the pandemic, a small portion of respondents gained employment. Prior to the pandemic, 54 participants were unemployed. At the time of the survey, 24% of pre-pandemic unemployed women had found work in the cleaning/janitorial sector, while 18% of previously unemployed men had jobs.

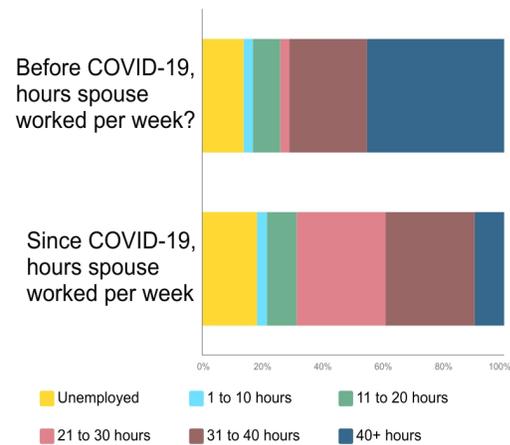
FIGURE 2: Hours of Work per Week Before and Since COVID-19



Source: FCJ-CEP Survey (2021)

The respondents were also asked about their partners' experiences during the pandemic. Of the 195 participants, 39% were living with a spouse/partner at the time of the interview. The survey reveals that the respondents' spouses/partners experienced a decrease in the number of hours worked per week. Before COVID-19, 40% of spouses/partners worked more than 40 hours per week, but since the pandemic, only 8% were working 40+ hours. The results show that respondents (and partners) experienced a significant loss of employment and income during the pandemic.

FIGURE 3: Spouse/Partner Number of Work Hours per Week Before and Since COVID-19



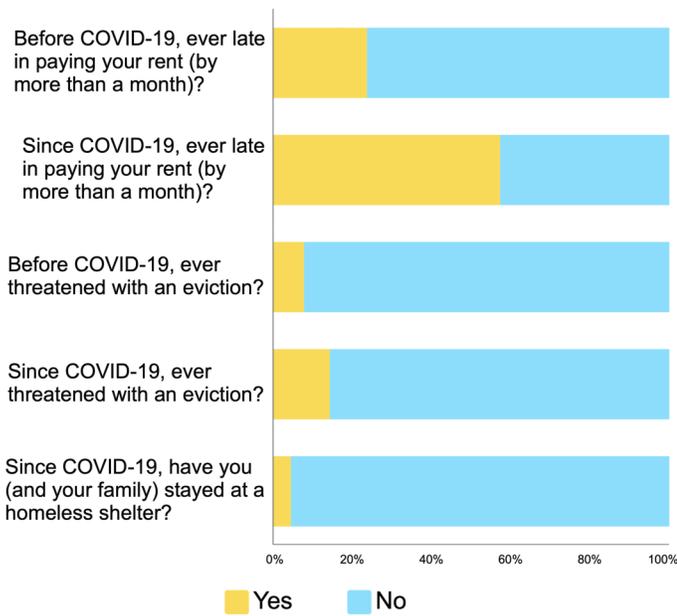
Source: FCJ-CEP Survey (2021)

3. Precarious status migrants and housing during COVID-19

During the pandemic, migrants experienced housing insecurity (OECD 2020). A recent report revealed that in New York City, four out of ten migrant families were at risk of losing their housing due to the pandemic (Castro, Smith, & Rayas, 2021:8). The FCJ-CEP survey shows that the share of survey participants who experienced housing difficulties increased significantly during the pandemic, particularly their ability to pay rent on time.

Before the pandemic, only 21% of the participants reported that they had been late paying rent by more than a month. However, since the start of the pandemic, the proportion of respondents who reported paying their rent late by more than a month increased significantly, to 53% of participants. In addition, since the pandemic, 13% of the respondents had been threatened with eviction by their landlord. Moreover, 4% reported having stayed at some type of homeless shelter since the start of COVID-19. These results show that the respondents were having more difficulty paying rent and risked losing their housing because of changes in their economic situation, which were a result of the pandemic.

FIGURE 4: Housing Insecurity Before and Since COVID-19



Source: FCJ-CEP Survey (2021)

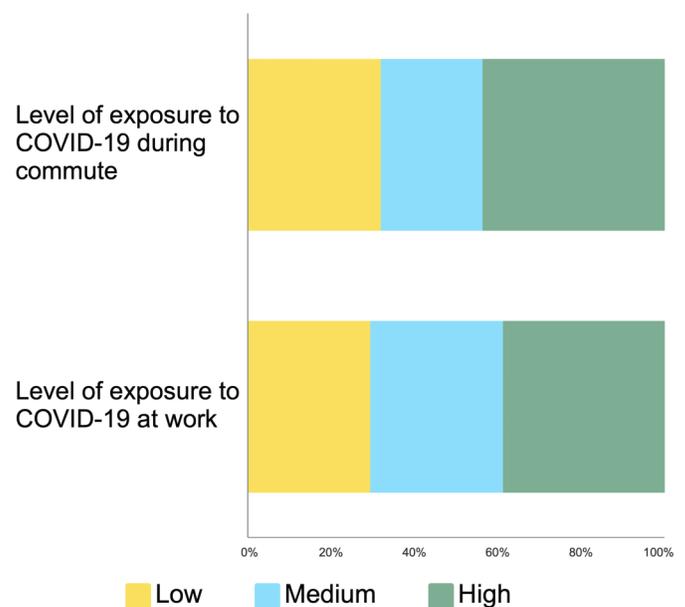
4. The health impacts of the pandemic on precarious status migrants

Immigrants are more at risk of COVID-19 infection due to factors such as living in inter-generational families without sufficient space, the high cost of housing, poverty, and overrepresentation in jobs where physical distancing is difficult (OECD 2020:1). In Ontario, immigrants account for 43.5% of all the COVID-19 cases (Guttman et al. 2020). A 2020 report on COVID-19 in Ontario showed that testing rates for immigrants and refugees were lower than the Canadian-born population, and immigrants and refugees have a higher rate of positivity (Guttman et al. 2020:7). Among immigrants who were refugee dependents, humanitarian and compassionate or public policy consideration cases, and in "other" immigrant categories, only 3.7% had been tested, yet 9.5% of this population tested positive for COVID-19 (Guttman et al. 2020:9).

The FCJ-CEP survey reveals additional patterns of concern. A majority (81%) of the survey respondents reported having no OHIP coverage. This is not surprising given their immigration status. The lack of coverage is

alarming since at least 26% of all respondents tested positive for COVID-19 or were exposed to a household member who contracted the virus. Respondents were concerned about being exposed to COVID-19. A significant proportion reported having medium to high exposure to the virus. For example, 61% of the participants reported medium to increased risk of COVID-19 exposure during their commute to work. In addition, 57% reported medium to high risk of COVID-19 exposure at their workplace.

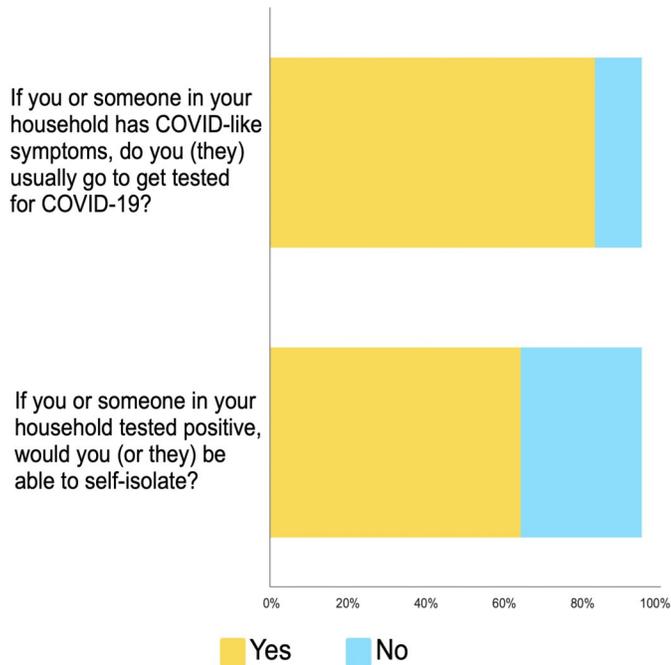
FIGURE 5: COVID-19 Reported Level of Exposure



Source: FCJ-CEP Survey (2021)

Respondents have been highly responsive to public health measures during the pandemic. Eighty-three percent (83%) reported that they usually got tested for COVID-19 if they or someone in their household experienced COVID-19 like symptoms. Their ability to isolate was mixed: 64% of respondents said that they could self-isolate when someone in their household contracted the virus. The question was posed in general and does not allow us to determine whether that meant isolating in a bedroom and having someone bring food, for those living with others, and whether that included not sharing washrooms.

FIGURE 6: COVID-19 Testing and Self-Isolation



Source: FCJ-CEP Survey (2021)

The pandemic has had a significant negative impact on the health and well-being of survey respondents.

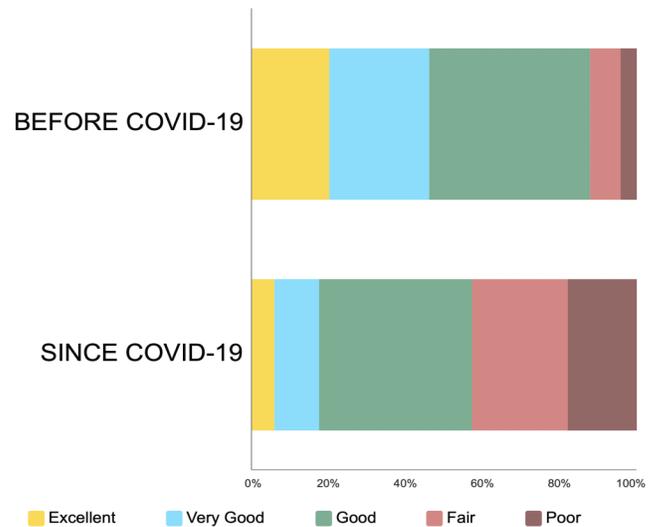
The survey asks respondents a question about self-rated health, a reliable and commonly used indicator of health status. Thinking about their health before the pandemic, 19% of the participants reported their health as excellent, 25% as very good, and 41% as good. Only 8% rated it as fair and 4% as poor. However, with the pandemic, these numbers changed drastically. Only 6% of the participants reported having excellent health, followed by 11% very good, 38% good, 24% fair and 17% poor.

The share of those reporting “good” health remained similar, but the shares at either end of the scale changed dramatically.

5. Social Supports and Coping Strategies

Precarious status migrants are often excluded from government funded programs and benefits (e.g., CERB) available during the pandemic (Hudson 2020; Wells

FIGURE 7: Self-Rated Health Before and Since COVID-19

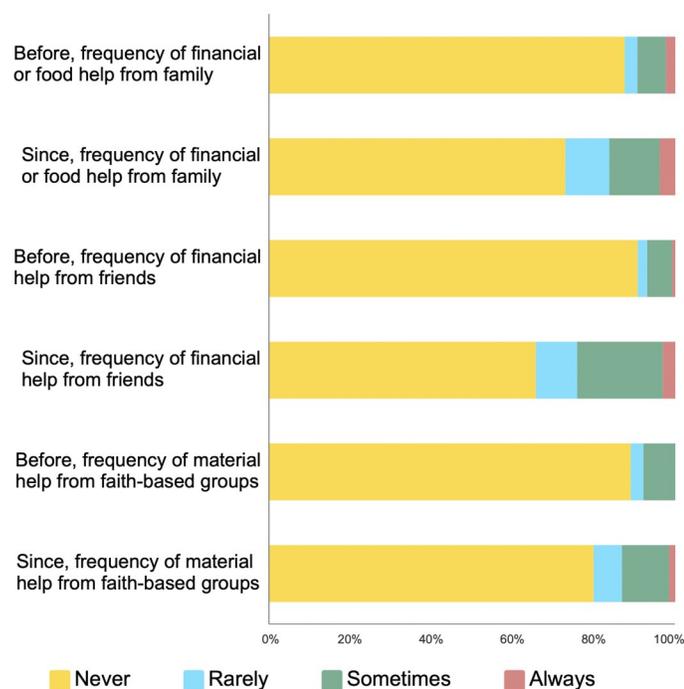


Source: FCJ-CEP Survey (2021)

2020). In the absence of state support, people may turn to other sources. All survey respondents were accessing a variety of supports from FCJ related to language, housing, food, and/or immigration status. The survey asked about additional sources of support. Respondents were asked how often they received help from the following sources: family and/or extended family, friends, and faith-based groups -- before and during COVID-19. The survey found that friends and family became an increasingly important source of support after the pandemic began.

Before the pandemic, 57% of the participants reported that they never received any financial (or other forms of help) from their family or extended family, while 2% reported rarely receiving help. On the other hand, 5% reported receiving help sometimes, and 2% reported always receiving help. However, since the onset of the pandemic, more participants reported receiving help from family or extended family. Notably, 3% reported “always” receiving help, and 8% reported this happened “sometimes.” Both numbers are significantly higher than before the pandemic. Unfortunately, the survey does not capture how many family members the respondents had in Canada.

FIGURE 8: Sources of Help Before and Since COVID-19



Source: FCJ-CEP Survey (2021)

Participants were also asked about receiving help from friends. Before the pandemic, 60% of the participants reported they never received help from friends and 2% reported rarely receiving help during the pandemic. On the other hand, 4% reported that they sometimes receive help from friends, while 1% reported always receiving help. During the pandemic, some of the participants reported that they had received help from their friends. At the start of COVID-19, the number of participants who reported "never" receiving help from friends dropped to 43% while 7% of the participants said they "rarely" received help, 14% responded "sometimes," and 2% reported "always" receiving help. These results indicate that more respondents were receiving support from their friends since the onset of the pandemic.

In addition to family and friends, the survey also asked the participants if they received help from any faith-based groups before and during the pandemic. Nearly six out of 10 (58%) reported never receiving help from this source before the pandemic; this fell slightly to 53% during the pandemic. Before the pan-

demical, 2% reported they rarely received help, and 5% did so sometimes. More participants reported receiving help from faith-based groups since the pandemic began: These proportions rose to 5% and 8%, respectively, while 1% said they always received help. Thus, the share of participants seeking help from faith-based groups increased, though less than the share that sought support from friends.

6. Conclusion

The FCJ-CEP Survey contributes to the emerging literature on how different populations are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent reports have shown that racialized Canadians are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 due to their vulnerable employment, housing insecurity and higher levels of poverty (Statistics Canada 2020). In Ontario, 4 out of 10 people who tested positive for COVID-19 are immigrants (Guttmann et al., 2020). This is concerning because immigrants represent 25% of the population in Ontario (Guttmann et al., 2020), and are thus over-represented among those testing positive for the virus.

The FCJ-CEP survey results show that the pandemic has significantly worsened the social and economic well-being of migrants with precarious legal status, in part because they experienced insecurity related to loss of employment and income, and housing insecurity. COVID-19 has also had a significant negative impact on their physical and mental health. The impact of the pandemic on this population is troubling. It is particularly difficult for migrants who are currently non-status and have limited to no entitlement to healthcare and other services. It is not surprising that the pandemic has had such grim effects on them, as they are excluded from most public support programs meant to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic.

The food security program at FCJ offers food and reduces pressure on recipient's budgets. The research team learned from early open-ended interviews that recipients of the program welcome food deliveries and

grocery cards. However, funding for the food security program will not continue, although income and food insecurity persist.

From a public and community health perspective, the negative impacts on individual and family health and well-being are vitally relevant for wider communities. The public health implications undoubtedly explain why COVID related health protections, including testing and vaccines, were made available to all, regardless of status in the Ontario. However, other measures confine non-status and other migrants to bad jobs, little legal recourse when things go wrong, and the need to rely on food and income support from a small array of municipal and non-government organizations that cannot sustain these activities over the long run.

What other kinds of responses can local and other levels of government, employers, and other stakeholders adapt to mitigate the negative consequences of precarious legal status for migrants and their families and communities more generally? That is a topic that deserves attention. In August 2021, the City of Toronto launched the Toronto for All campaign. Designed as a public education campaign, the goal of Toronto for All is to increase understanding of the realities and lived experiences of precarious migrants living in the city. It also reiterated Toronto's Access Without Fear policy, as a Sanctuary City, wherein City services are available to all regardless of immigration status. Unfortunately, it is difficult to measure the impact of this policy because of challenges associated with researching vulnerable populations that avoid being identified (Hudson 2021).

In the meantime, public health officials and many healthcare workers will continue to play a role in providing access to care for precarious status migrants,

usually on an ad-hoc basis (Landolt 2020). To design effective and systemic campaigns and policies, the public needs to better understand why and how members of their communities are living without status and other precarious status situations. That is an important step in building public knowledge and support for policy change. Recognizing that immigration policies contribute to the ongoing generation of migrant precarity can help people understand this as a systemic issue, not one of individual failure or "illegal" or criminalized behaviour. Precarious migrants are part of a long-term group of workers and residents in our cities; they are our friends and neighbours. They often perform essential work but are not included or counted as members of society. They are often invisible, or if visible, misunderstood. Proposals to mitigate inequitable treatment based on legal status, as with other often overlapping dimensions of social location and inequality, must start with recognition.

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