

# Unequal

# Consequences

The Disparate Impact of COVID-19 Across  
South Asian American Communities

saalt

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
Key Findings	6
<b>Illness, Wellness &amp; Livelihood</b>	<b>9</b>
Risk Factors: Examined	10
<b>Hot Spot Features</b>	<b>12</b>
California	12
New York City	14
Atlanta	16
Texas	17
Chicago	18
<b>Hate From the State</b>	<b>20</b>
Immigration	20
Domestic Violence	22
The Pandemic of Violence: Anti-Black Racism & Islamophobia	23
<b>Ongoing Actions &amp; Future Recommendations</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>30</b>



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across watershed moments of crisis, like 9/11, the 2016 presidential election, and now this COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that South Asian American communities have deeply divided experiences. The populations in our community who were primarily targeted after 9/11, most impacted by this Administration's racist policies, and most vulnerable to COVID-19 are the same populations marginalized by immigration status, class, caste, religion, and LGBT+ identity. While developing a shared narrative across these differences is valuable for building collective power, only by centering the experiences of these populations can we understand the magnitude and range of these crises.

Recognizing the gap between the reality our communities face and existing pandemic-mapping data, SAALT worked to capture the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. The report examines not only COVID-19 infection and fatality rates in South Asian American communities, but also intersections with escalating threats to immigration, workers rights, mental health, housing, language access, as well as hate violence and domestic violence.

This report looks at the impact this pandemic is having across our communities by centering accounts from local South Asian American organizations representing those most affected, as well as findings from our community survey that elicited nearly 400 responses. Our goal is to understand our communities' most urgent needs and to help inform ongoing organizing, mobilization, and advocacy toward both rapid response and long-term change.

We recognize that local organizations directly serving our communities are holding the significant load of managing this crisis. As a national organization SAALT has necessarily shifted our work to be supportive by:

- Expanding our tracking of hate violence incidents to include those resulting from pandemic-related xenophobia and discrimination.
- Providing increased access to and translation of critical COVID-19 resources.
- Evaluating the impact of COVID-19 federal legislation on South Asian American communities and sharing information with our communities about their rights.
- Monitoring the effect of COVID-19 government responses on voting and civil rights, especially for Muslim, Arab, and South Asian (MASA) communities.
- Advocating for policy solutions that address the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on undocumented, detained, domestic violence surviving, low-income, and Limited English Proficient (LEP) South Asian Americans.
- Hosting monthly forums with NCSO partners to assess needs and strategize.

## Key Findings

- South Asian Americans who were already vulnerable, whether due to their immigration status (refugees, undocumented, H-1B, J-1), their experiences with domestic violence, living with underlying health conditions, or unsafe working environments, have been most directly impacted by the pandemic. Every interviewee shared that, as a result, community members are experiencing mental health challenges.
- Data on COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths are currently incomplete as statistics are under counted in South Asian American communities, often labeled as “other Asian” or “unknown” race categories. Disaggregated data is critical in ensuring all communities receive timely and culturally appropriate care and resources.
- As of June 8, the city of New York’s Health Department found that 7.6% of the city’s coronavirus victims were of Asian descent. The Bangladeshi community, which makes up less than 8% of NYC’s Asian population, accounted for about 20% of those deaths. In addition, South Asian Americans are four times more likely to suffer from heart disease or diabetes than the general U.S. population, putting them at a greater risk of fatality if they contract COVID-19.
- Federal and state government agencies have neglected to provide Limited English Proficient (LEP) community members with culturally appropriate services and language accessible information, impeding access to government services and relief funds. South Asian American community organizations have been forced to step in to translate resources into multiple South Asian languages amid rapidly changing rules and guidance. Even with community organizations stepping in to support communities of color, 11 million undocumented immigrants, including 630,000 Indians and 56,000 Pakistanis, were left out of the CARES Act and unemployment benefits as part of COVID-19 relief packages. Overall, an estimated 16.7 million people who live in mixed-status households were left out, including 8.2 million U.S. born or naturalized citizens.

## Key Findings

- 85% of respondents to SAALT's community survey are worried about immigration - specifically being able to travel outside of the U.S., as well as the status of green cards, H-1B work visas and student visas.
- For individuals experiencing domestic violence, the stay-at-home orders have worsened abusive situations. Every survivor-support organization SAALT interviewed explicitly named a drastic increase in gender-based domestic violence. At the same time, survivor support organizations are committed to challenging the role of law enforcement and emphasized that survivors most often do not want to go to the police.
- Technology plays an important role in setting up a remote infrastructure for organizations to provide safe and secure support to communities during the stay at home orders. For domestic violence organizations like Daya, ApnaGhar, and SAHARA, there has been an increased need for affordable laptops, phones, and accessible internet as their services require secure digital platforms for case management. Additionally, tens of millions of Americans still do not have access to or cannot afford quality internet service. Federal funding does not cover the internet as a utility but for many senior citizens, survivors of abuse, students, and working-class South Asian Americans, the internet has been a useful tool to stay connected to the community and to ongoing relief efforts.
- Despite sizable and growing South Asian populations in the South, the region has limited formal avenues of support dedicated to South Asian Americans, outside of religious and cultural institutions.
- South Asian American community organizations are, once again, filling in the gaps in access to health, food, housing, and employment as a remedy to failing government social infrastructure.



**ILLNESS WELLNESS & LIVELIHOOD:****HEALTH & FRONTLINE WORKERS****COVID-19 Infection Rates & Risk Factors**

Clusters of COVID-19 infection and fatality rates impacting South Asian Americans have been reported in Queens, Brooklyn, and the West Ridge neighborhood of Chicago - all areas with large working class South Asian American populations. But more comprehensive disaggregated data on South Asian Americans' infection rates, hospitalizations, and fatality rates is virtually nonexistent. The impact of COVID-19 on South Asian Americans is likely being undercounted due to [misclassification in official COVID-19 statistics](#), since they are often lumped into the "Asian" category, "Other Asian" category, or "Other/Unknown" categories. Despite the lack of data, South Asian Americans are prone to a number of different risk factors that both increase their exposure to COVID-19 and increase their risk of hospitalization or death.



The staff at Hamdard Center in Chicago are mostly essential workers, and have been organizing clinics to provide their community members with testing support and other pandemic-related resources. Here, two staff stand outside a tent where they conducted testing in May.

## Risk Factors

### Heart Disease & Diabetes

Pre-existing conditions such as hypertension, obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and chronic lung disease, that are known to increase risk of COVID-19 severity, are common among South Asian Americans. In March 2020, [nearly 90%](#) of Americans hospitalized with COVID-19 had at least one underlying medical condition, [including in New York](#), home to one of the largest populations of South Asian Americans in the U.S. South Asian Americans are [four times more likely](#) to suffer from cardiovascular conditions and heart disease than the general U.S. population. Almost [1 in 4](#) South Asian Americans have diabetes or hypertension.

### Lack of Protections for Frontline Workers

It is no coincidence that COVID-19 is devastating the same communities that also do essential work. Essential workers, [the vast majority of whom are women](#) and people of color, are risking their lives during the pandemic to provide critical services to our communities — all while making unliveable wages and receiving limited health-care benefits. Many South Asian Americans serve on the frontlines as healthcare, fulfillment center, hospitality, and gig economy workers, and consequently have had limited access to benefits or safety equipment. Despite being deemed at risk and working under precarious conditions, essential workers have limited access to proper protective equipment, hazard pay, or additional support by employers or the state. Nearly [45,000,000 people filed for unemployment](#) at some point during the pandemic and [5.4 million American workers lost their health insurance](#).

### Lack of Language Support

The COVID-19 health crisis has highlighted a critical gap in getting timely, in-language public health and government relief information to immigrant and Limited English Proficient (LEP) communities. South Asian American community organizations have been forced to step in to produce translation for government agencies amid rapidly changing rules and guidance.

## Risk Factors

### Crowded Housing & Multi-Generational Living

The risk of contracting COVID-19 is also heightened by the fact that many South Asian Americans live and/or work in dense urban areas. As of June 2020, [Cook](#), Los Angeles, and [Queens](#) had the highest number of confirmed cases of COVID-19. These counties also host the largest concentration of South Asian Americans and are primarily working-class communities.

### Barriers to Testing

Limited employment or lack of employment is leading to fears around seeking medical care or even testing in the South Asian American community. Only 10.6% of SAALT's survey respondents indicated they had been tested for COVID-19. Many survey respondents were able to afford medical aid (roughly 89%), but fewer (85%) were actually able to receive it. Survey respondents also detailed their communities' experiences with COVID-19: only 71% of survey respondents whose family members or community members sought testing received it, while 6% sought testing and did not receive it, and 6% had symptoms but did not seek testing.

Nearly a tenth of all survey respondents indicated that they would not seek testing, even if it was available and affordable, fearing unemployment or community stigma. One individual noted that their BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) friends were explicitly refused testing; thus, the respondent themselves did not seek testing.

### Lack of Age-Based Protections

Seniors are also at risk of experiencing complications, with nearly [8 out of 10](#) COVID-19 deaths occurring in adults 65 years and older. Since the onset of the pandemic, seniors have been experiencing food insecurity, income insecurity, and social isolation. South Asian American organizations, like India Home, have stepped in to fill the role of unreliable state agencies who have neglected to provide community members with culturally appropriate services and language accessible information.

## HOT SPOT FEATURE: CALIFORNIA

As of September, California has surpassed New York for the nation's highest COVID-19 positive case count. While the statewide rate for testing positive is 5.7%, Los Angeles County and the Central Valley have hit all-time highs with some areas seeing 20% positive cases. The Central Valley, the country's most important agricultural region, is also home to a dense immigrant population where many Black and brown workers live in cramped apartments. Coronavirus has been ravaging working class communities of color across the state and government relief efforts including financial assistance have been limited.

California based community organizations like SAHARA, Maitri, and Jakara Movement have been building power in South Asian American immigrant communities for years; they have expanded their efforts to further support their communities living in these hotspots during the pandemic. Language access, barriers to accessing government relief funding, financial instability, needs for rental assistance, and mental health instability were issues that repeatedly came up within their constituents' communities since the pandemic began.

### SAHARA

SAHARA is a gender-based violence survivor support and community organization based in Southern California. Since the pandemic began, they have been focused on providing the local South Asian American community with in-language support and information on public benefits, social security, Medi-Cal and Medicare, unemployment benefits, and citizenship and visa applications.

Since the onset of the pandemic, SAHARA has also seen a 22% increase in calls from survivors of domestic violence, with Community Engagement Manager, Sarah Manjra, adding, *"Kids and moms are at home, and with dad becoming unemployed, there's increased violence between parents and kids, or between spouses. As a result, our 24/7 hotline has people calling at all hours of the day, significantly more than before. There's also a drastic and dangerous increase in the amount of child abuse taking place. Many mothers are trying to get out of abusive situations, but too many factors are preventing them from leaving -- including fear of losing custody of their children or reliance on their abuser's income."*

## Maitri

Maitri works to support survivors of domestic violence in Northern California. In an effort to keep pace with the rise in domestic violence that they observed, Maitri has maintained its helpline for 24 hours each day, with live service from 9 A.M. - 3 P.M. everyday, and voicemail monitoring with call-backs every 2 hours otherwise. This is in addition to a legal helpline that is also in place. Like other community organizations, Maitri is also balancing the current crisis with the demands of existing inequities. They have monthly volunteer meetings where they discuss these intersectional issues. Recognizing that poverty and economic insecurity affects all survivors and that many are currently in financial distress, Maitri staff are providing a great deal of rental assistance through existing county programs and community funding.

Zakia Afrin, Manager of Client Advocacy Programs at Maitri, said, *“Since COVID-19 has made it very difficult for people in abusive relationships to leave, and caused major financial setbacks for those who just came out of abusive relationships, it has resulted in a mental health ‘crisis’ among survivors because they are now re-traumatized. The additional burden on women is huge right now — managing jobs, relationships, households, etc.”*

## Jakara Movement

In March 2020, Jakara Movement, located in the Central Valley, hired nearly 250 organizers to help support in-person 2020 Census efforts with the goal of reaching out to 300,000 individuals across the state of California. When the pandemic emerged, they began to re-evaluate their purpose as a community-based power building organization given the inability to organize in person.

Deep Singh, Executive Director of Jakara Movement, explains how pivoting to pandemic relief efforts was inevitable for the organization: *“Pre-pandemic, Jakara Movement was engaging on issues of workers rights, mental health support and our engagement has only increased since COVID-19. The ecosystem for South Asian American organizations is already so tiny in the Central Valley and even tinier within specific language communities. There was no other Punjabi speaking organization, so we had to do this work regardless.”*

## HOT SPOT FEATURE: NEW YORK CITY

The virus itself may not discriminate, but neighborhoods with high concentrations of Black, Latinx, and South Asian working-class communities still face the deepest disparities in access to testing and healthcare and deaths caused by COVID-19 across the U.S., especially in New York City. Community organizing, mutual aid networks and mutual aid funds remained robust throughout the height of the pandemic in New York, and are still able to provide much needed resources, relief and support to immigrant communities where the government failed. India Home, Indo-Caribbean Alliance, CAAAV, and Adhi-kaar cited rental hardship, crowded housing, social isolation, language barriers, and high infection rates as the core issues their community members have been facing.

### India Home

India Home is a senior center in New York, which has been providing culturally appropriate meals, virtual programming, and overall support to South Asian American seniors experiencing income insecurity and social isolation in the pandemic. Program Director, Shaaranya Pillai, noted the unique role that India Home has during the pandemic, *“We are reaching out to the community in many ways. Existing relief programs from the government lack cultural competency and are under-accessed by our communities. Nonprofits like ours are able to bridge that divide and are doing essential work. The impact of the pandemic on the South Asian American community is under-recorded, but South Asian American nonprofits are meeting these communities’ needs. It’s not easy for this population - they get hit in a totally different way, and that social isolation is a big reason for what we do.”*

### Indo-Caribbean Alliance

Prior to COVID-19, the Indo-Caribbean Alliance had been working closely with allies at Jahajee Sisters and Chhaya Community Development Corporation, both of whom serve South Asian and Indo-Caribbean New Yorkers. Jessica Chu-A-Kong noted that collaboration and solidarity have been crucial, *“Our communities are also known to have high rates of diabetes and other underlying conditions so we have been helping people connect to free prescription delivery as well as partnering with local residents who were sewing and distributing free masks near our office in Richmond Hill, Queens.”*

## CAA AV

CAA AV is a pan-Asian community-based organization in New York City that works to build the power of poor and working-class immigrants and refugees. One of the largest public housing developments they work with engages around 200 Bangladeshi American families. With the [state unemployment rate at 15.7%](#), many of CAA AV's constituents are struggling to pay bills, and are at risk of losing their housing. *“Our entire South Asian American base lives in public housing. Many of them can't afford rent or their cost of living — and people have applied to the rent hardship program, but because the application is in English, many haven't been able to access it. In addition, people often don't qualify because they haven't been out of work long enough, or can't prove loss of income,”* said CAA AV's Executive Director, Sasha Wijeyeratne. CAA AV remains steadfast in their advocacy that funding for public housing is imperative in addressing systemic issues such as health, safety, and language justice.

## Adhikaar

The Nepali-speaking communities, like other Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) communities, have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 health crisis. By late March, neighborhoods in Queens with particularly high concentrations of the Nepali-speaking community like Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, and Corona, were considered the epicenter of the New York City outbreak. The Adhikaar team worked around the clock to respond to cases, deaths and support for testing and quarantine needs, phone-banking over 1,500 members in a week. A vast majority of their members lost their jobs or were working as essential workers and in response, Adhikaar worked from March through August to deliver care packages, food, and PPE to over 700 households and emergency relief funds to over 600 community members, distributing nearly \$500,000.

Adhikaar's rapid response is connected to broader base building to strengthen community power and their long term vision for social justice and human rights for all. This looming uncertainty faced by APIAs sheds a light on the way communities of color remain among the most vulnerable groups in this country. Adhikaar continues to organize and advocate for their long term vision of social justice and equitable change.

## HOT SPOT FEATURE: ATLANTA

As with many of the sun belt states, COVID-19 cases were low in the beginning months of the pandemic, but early reopenings led to virus surges by June and July in Atlanta. Global Mall, a South Asian American shopping mall in the city of Norcross, just outside Atlanta, hosted a food drive led by the Walia hospitality group throughout April and May to address growing food insecurity in the community. On the first day of the food drive, hundreds of cars lined up before the starting time of 10 AM, wrapping around the Global Mall building and backing up traffic on Jimmy Carter Boulevard. Despite Atlanta's sizable and growing South Asian American population, there are limited formal avenues of support dedicated to South Asian Americans, making it challenging to gauge the pandemic's impact on the community and for community needs to be addressed outside of informal family and friend networks and religious institutions. Two key Atlanta-based non-profits, Raksha and Burmese Rohingya Community of Georgia (BRCG) cited financial insecurity, rental hardship, barriers to accessing government relief funding, and mental health as issues their community members were facing.

### Raksha

Raksha is a South Asian American community organization that serves as a major resource hub for pan-South Asian American communities with a focus on providing support to a constituency of over 300 survivors of gender-based violence. Executive Director, Aparna Bhattacharya, noted that, *"From a healing perspective, for the individuals who get counseling, it's a totally different impact...there's the emotional support and the connection that you don't get from the screen. That's the hard part."* Her major worries about Raksha's clients are increased food insecurity, anxiety over making rent payments, and the emotional impact of being isolated and alone.

### Burmese Rohingya Community of Georgia (BRCG)

The BRCG represents a community of more than 500 Rohingya people, with the majority concentrated in Clarkston, a town in metro Atlanta known for having one of the largest refugee communities in the U.S.. BRCG's President, Ayub Mohammed, emphasized the economic duress their community members are facing, *"There are many people who have lost their jobs, some who have limited hours, some who are independent contractors like Uber drivers. They're not getting paid. And if they're unemployed, many of them are not qualified for state aid."*

## HOT SPOT FEATURE: TEXAS

Texas is a microcosm of the country, where individuals [eagerly protest](#) to return to the “norm” while economic stability is at the direct expense of human lives. Billionaires became [\\$565 billion richer](#) during the pandemic [while workers protested](#) for hazard pay and protective equipment. Texas Lieutenant Governor, Dan Patrick, suggested that the elderly [should be willing to die](#) to save the economy for their grandchildren. Data has revealed stark racial disparities in which communities of color have been deemed disposable in the name of the economy. As of July, [Latinx Texans make up the largest percentage of coronavirus deaths at nearly 49%; nearly 66% of all Texans who have died of coronavirus have been people of color.](#)

### Daya

Daya is a Houston-based domestic violence organization and has been distributing groceries and direct relief funds, as well as providing technology for survivors to access counseling, case management, and legal services. While the number of clients has not changed drastically since the pandemic began, reports of domestic violence have become more frequent, and services like safety planning are occurring almost every day — a shift from the pre-pandemic rate of these services being requested once every few weeks. Approximately 90% of DAYA’s clients did not receive stimulus benefits so the organization also set up a network of support for pro-bono legal attorneys to advise clients about their options. Executive Director, Rachna Khare, shared Daya’s commitment to providing confidential services, saying, *“The domestic violence services field is adapting to the new lived reality due to COVID-19. At Daya, we are ensuring that our clients have access to confidential services, regardless of the mode of delivery. Our staff is committed to protecting and maintaining the safety of our clients as we provide remote services.”*

### Austin-Based Activists

In Travis County, Austin, there have been 17,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19. Among those who felt the financial hit most acutely were South Asian American drivers who work for the ride sharing company, RideAustin. Megha Uppal, an Austin-based community organizer who works with these drivers added, *“So many of them are out of work, and can’t access government aid because of their immigration status. Even for NGOs who want to support them there are language barriers and a lack of understanding about how to access stimulus money.”*

## HOT SPOT FEATURE: CHICAGO

As the country reckons with growing cases of COVID-19, the city of Chicago remains a hotspot for cases amongst communities of color. While cases amongst South Asians remain aggregated under the larger Asian American umbrella, anecdotal testimonies reaffirm that South Asian Americans in Chicago have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. ApnaGhar and Chicago Desi Youth Rising have cited housing, language access, and financial relief for undocumented individuals as core issues facing their communities.

### ApnaGhar

ApnaGhar works with domestic violence survivors in Chicago. At the onset of the pandemic, they received an influx in calls for support, and had to quickly mobilize to implement a secure text-based helpline for individuals living with their abuser(s). ApnaGhar has also continued to build relationships with the neighboring Rohingya Community Center (who has since lost funding), Muslim Womens Resource Center, and the Bangladeshi American community on Devon Avenue to understand the communities' greatest needs. ***"We are thinking about how communities come together and how we can make a more concerted effort to unite together under a pan-South Asian American identity across class and religious lines,"*** said Neha Gill, Executive Director.

### Chicago Desi Youth Rising (CDYR)

Early on in the pandemic, the West Ridge area of Chicago had one of the highest confirmed rates of COVID-19. CDYR, which empowers youth to combat racial, economic, and social inequity, began a rapid response relief fund for service workers on Devon Avenue impacted by job loss. They fundraised and distributed \$50,000 to community members, prioritizing undocumented individuals, gig workers, and those who did not qualify for unemployment. Himabindu Poroori, an organizer with CDYR noted, ***"The frustrating thing is, that fund money ran out in the blink of an eye. We have to cancel rent: that's the only solution. Rent is killing people."*** Bindu expressed frustration about the gap between wealthier South Asian American communities and those in West Ridge, saying, ***"All oppressions are intertwined: caste and religion follow you overseas and push you in an enclave that is restricted by caste, class, religion - insulating you as a community. The disconnection between different caste and religious communities in Devon-area neighborhoods and the suburbs is so violent. It's not happenstance; it's not because families in poverty want to stay disconnected from resources."***



## HATE FROM THE STATE

### Immigration

#### Worker Visa Bans

The COVID-19 pandemic has dismantled what little was left of the U.S. immigration system. The Trump administration has summarily ended asylum, as northern and southern U.S. borders remain closed for non-essential travel under the guise of “national security.” Under a global economic recession, the Trump administration extended their ban on worker visas, barring nearly [525,000 foreign workers](#). The visa ban blocks a wide variety of jobs including H-1B, J-1, and seasonal workers in both exchange and au pair programs. With national unemployment rates higher than the 2008 “Great Recession”, as many as [250,000 guest workers](#) could lose their legal status by the end of June 2020. H-1B visas, like many other work visas, are tied to a specific location and employer, and any changes to job status — including reduction in wages or remote work policies — violate visa requirements. As places of worship have been closed around the country, Jakara Movement has been supporting R-1 visa religious workers with direct relief, given that many of these individuals are ineligible for unemployment benefits. Immigrant workers in these industries already experience difficult working conditions, while earning below market wages, facing restriction of movement, and having limited pathways to citizenship. The pandemic has reaffirmed the belief that we must advocate for a labor migration model that respects and prioritizes the human rights of workers and their families, [elevating labor standards](#) not just for South Asian American workers but all workers.

#### Student Visa Restrictions

In response to universities across the country shifting to online courses as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, ICE issued a directive targeting international students on F-1 and M-1 visas. The directive, which was reversed a few days later, stated that students currently enrolled in universities which moved to online courses in the fall must depart the country or take other measures to remain in the country, such as transferring to a different school offering in-personal instruction. There are hundreds of thousands of F-1 students from South Asian, African, and Latinx countries who felt the chilling impact of the uncertainty around their decision to pursue their education or risked falling out of status.

## Undocumented Population

South Asian Americans are also one of the fastest-growing groups of undocumented workers. While data is limited, there are at least [630,000 undocumented Indian Americans](#) and [56,000 undocumented Pakistani Americans](#) left out of the government's relief efforts (CARES Act) and state unemployment benefits. For the millions of individuals incarcerated, including 24,000 detained migrants, the pandemic continues to be disastrous as it rapidly spreads in crowded and unsanitary detention facilities and prisons across the country.

## Detention

In prisons and detention centers across the country, incarcerated people are contracting COVID-19 while forcibly inhabiting inhumane conditions. Nearly 1,500 individuals in California's [San Quentin State Prison](#) tested positive for coronavirus; nine people have since died. San Quentin, like most other prisons and detention facilities in the U.S., [has done little to nothing to protect the people it has incarcerated from contracting the virus](#). [South Asians](#) in U.S. detention facilities have always been harassed and abused, [dealing with inadequate language access, medical neglect, Islamophobia](#) — and now, they also have to deal with the fear of contracting a fatal virus.

At the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, WA, detained migrants, including at least six South Asian women, described pain from breathing in toxic fumes due to undiluted chemical cleaners in poorly ventilated areas. In the Adelanto Immigration Detention Center, this same practice has caused [bleeding and pain](#). From the lack of protective equipment to the deliberate overcrowding of facilities and slow response rate to treat sick patients, it is no surprise that [researchers at Johns Hopkins](#) have found that incarcerated people are 550% more likely to get infected than the general population, and three times as likely to die from COVID-19. Under the [#FreeThemAll campaign](#), thousands of doctors and advocates continue to demand the release of all people currently detained by ICE; cease of interior enforcement; elimination of ICE check-ins; free access to phone and video calls for those in detention; and assurance that all facilities are prioritizing the health and well-being of people detained. The government can and must release all people from detention and prisons immediately so they can return home safely.

## Domestic Violence

For individuals experiencing domestic violence, the stay-at-home orders have worsened abusive situations, as partners and families have been forced to live in close proximity. With their shelters and apartments already at maximum capacity, ApnaGhar partnered with the state of Illinois to provide hotel rooms for survivors, a strategy that many survivor support organizations have adapted.

The reliance on police is particularly challenging for South Asian American domestic violence organizations and has historically been a subject of deep consideration in the field, especially now with the much more widely accepted reality of police violence, thanks to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Our interviews with domestic violence service organizations revealed that survivors rarely want to go to the police, as found by a [2015 study conducted by the National Domestic Violence Hotline](#), which showed that among the women surveyed who had previously called the police after experiencing partner abuse: 1 in 4 would not call the police in the future; more than half said calling the police would make things worse; and more than two-thirds said they were afraid the police would not believe them or do nothing. The study also showed that women who did end up calling the police only did so after multiple victimizations, demonstrating how critical early intervention is in addressing domestic violence. For this very reason, it is important that South Asian American community organizations working adjacent to domestic violence service providers understand this landscape.

For many domestic violence survivors, financial instability remains a huge concern and Daya has distributed over \$100,000 directly to survivors in direct cash transfers. The city of Houston granted a \$650,000 fund for their city's women's shelters and domestic violence organizations to provide hotel stays to survivors, since shelters have become less accessible during the pandemic. Additionally, U visa applications, Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) protections, and asylum cases have been put on hold for the foreseeable future, leaving many people ineligible for benefits and putting them at even more risk of exploitation or abuse. This chilling effect has been felt across immigrant communities even when the Trump Administration's policies are rescinded or challenged in court.

## The Pandemic of Violence:

### Anti-Black Racism & Islamophobia

Black, Indigenous, and communities of color are experiencing two deadly pandemics: racism and COVID-19. Racist and Islamophobic rhetoric, state sanctioned violence, along with centuries of divestment from meaningful social services has led to a disproportionate increase in violence against our communities. We live in a society in which our government's prolonged failure to invest in community care has only proliferated deaths caused by Covid-19.

A [Pew study](#) found that Asian and Black Americans are more likely than other groups to report race or ethnicity related hate since the coronavirus outbreak. In the U.S., in April alone, there were more than 3,000 reported incidents of hate violence targeting Asian Americans. Additionally, nearly 60% of Asian Americans say they have seen or been affected by a xenophobic reaction to Covid-19.

In India, there has been a surge in [coronavirus-driven hate violence](#) fueled by Islamophobia. Equality Labs found that the hashtag #CoronaJihad appeared “[nearly 300,000 times](#)” and was likely “[seen by 165 million people on Twitter.](#)” These tweets were cited in violence, including [against a paralyzed Muslim man](#) in Valsad, Gujarat. At SAALT, we have expanded our hate violence database to track incidents in response to COVID-19 discrimination. And, we are working with our partners in the National Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA) to develop effective national responses that do not continue to rely solely on police.

It is clear that the violence and organized abandonment is intentional by design and that we are the only ones who keep us safe. During the height of the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter uprisings, Jakara Movement organized [political education](#) segments addressing anti-Black racism, policing and prisons, and how Sikhs benefit from anti-Black racism through systems like [racial capitalism](#). They also created short in-language videos addressing ways in which non-black South Asian Americans play a role in the movement for Black lives and in dismantling anti-Black racism. Jakara Movement continues to meet the immediate needs of its constituency while remaining responsive to ongoing movements, recognizing that the two are inherently linked.

Protest looks different during the pandemic; ASATA has adapted by bringing hand sanitizer with them to rallies.



Instagram user [@winniethepuj](#) created this sign in preparation for a Black Lives Matter protest in her NYC neighborhood.



## ONGOING ACTIONS & FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

### Emergency Direct Relief Funds

- COVID-19 direct relief packages must go further to meet the needs of all immigrants regardless of immigration status and communities of color who are disproportionately impacted, to ensure that they have access to crucial economic, health care, and housing supports.
- In any COVID-19 legislative measures Congress decides to move forward, they must divest from all immigration enforcement and invest in the health and safety of the public, including immigrants and border communities.
- **Take Action** by calling on your Member of Congress to [#DefundHate](#) and invest in healthcare, education, and housing programs; and [demand they pass the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions \(HEROES\) Act](#), a COVID-19 relief package.

### Hate Violence

- Community organizations should be funded to provide wraparound services to survivors of hate violence and build community defense models and other preventive measures over time.
- Bystander intervention and de-escalation trainings should be implemented as tools to help keep our communities safe from incidents of interpersonal violence.
- Federal, state, and local hate crimes legislation must include a restorative justice component to provide an alternative sentencing provision that allows some perpetrators of violence to undertake educational classes or community service related to the harmed community.
- Congress must pass the Jabara Heyer No Hate Act which seeks to address underreporting of hate crimes and would help close gaps in data collection by local state and federal law enforcement agencies.
- Share [COVID-19 and Policing resources](#) to support investment in community safety and mutual aid instead of increased criminalization and policing.
- If you have experienced an incident of hate violence or bias, we encourage you to [report the incident](#) and access [these resources](#).

## Language Access

- Government agencies, health institutions, and funders must provide sufficient funding to ensure materials and services are accessible to limited English proficient (LEP) communities.
- Congress must pass the [Coronavirus Language Access Act](#) introduced by Senators Hirono, Casey, and Harris to provide COVID-19 resources accessible to the 25 million LEP individuals, individuals with disabilities, and older Americans. Language assistance services must be available for all relevant South Asian American languages.
- Take Action by sharing in-language resources for South Asian Americans, [including SAALT's resources](#).

## Tech Access & Data Security

- Congress must ensure that COVID-19 data collection and the role of technology companies are subject to oversight to ensure that the public health emergency is not misused to surveil and harm our communities.
- Follow [COVID-19 FOIA Project](#) for more on COVID-19 tech surveillance.
- Elected officials must remain vigilant against policies that sanction racial profiling and surveillance.
- Federal funding must cover the internet as a utility and all residents of the U.S. including territories should have access to fast and affordable broadband internet.

## Black Lives Matter

Non-Black South Asians have a duty to address and fight anti-Black racism on both systemic and interpersonal levels. Below are some ways you can show up to defend Black lives:

- Follow the [Vision for Black Lives](#), a guideline made by Black leaders that outline Black communities' needs, and [take action](#).
- Advocate for demands mentioned in the [Movement for Black Lives COVID-19 Platform](#).
- Understand and address the roots of [anti-Black racism](#) in South Asian communities.
- Host and participate in cross-regional and intergenerational [dialogues and actions](#).
- [Redistribute resources](#) to support Black communities.

## ONGOING ACTIONS & FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

### Health

Federal, state, and local government agencies must provide equitable and affordable healthcare for all Americans regardless of immigration or employment status.

Government agencies and health institutions must:

- Collect, analyze, and publicly report [disaggregated data](#) by age, race, sex, and socio-economic status on those who have been tested, hospitalized, or have lost their lives to COVID-19;
- Ensure free and widespread testing, treatment, and eventual vaccination for all people;
- Ensure affordable access to care and enhance federal Medicaid assistance;
- Provide additional support for people with disabilities, seniors, and other vulnerable populations.

Take Action by following [Asian Pacific Islander American Health Forum](#) and demand that policymakers protect health care rights for all.

### Housing

- All rent, mortgage, and utility payments accrued during COVID-19 should be automatically forgiven and never owed. While an eviction moratorium is critical during this crisis, it does not prevent evictions or displacement in the future ([Housing Justice for All](#)).
- State Governors must issue a statewide rent freeze for all renters for two years.
- [#CancelRent](#) policy must apply universally to everyone, and come with emergency relief for existing social housing, including manufactured homeowners, those who live in single family homes, subletters, or roommates.
- State agencies must urgently and permanently rehouse all unhoused individuals and families in any vacant housing under the [#ReclaimOurHomes](#) campaign
- Take Action by [calling your Representative today](#) and tell them to pass [HR 6515](#), the Rent and Mortgage Cancellation Act, and by following [CAAAY](#) and [Right to the City](#) for more [#CancelRent](#) actions.

## Immigration & Detention

- All practices and policies that elevate risk for immigrant communities must be suspended including the public charge rule, in-person immigration court proceedings and immigration enforcement, detention, and deportation.
- Federal agencies must:
  - Reduce the number of people who are incarcerated in prisons, jails, and immigration detention facilities to reduce the spread and impact of COVID-19;
  - Guarantee safe conditions and ensure that transparent plans are in place to address the crisis in prisons, jails, and immigration detention facilities;
  - Cease all local enforcement operations, including civil enforcement and criminal referrals;
  - Eliminate ICE check-ins, use of electronic monitoring, and mandatory court appearances;
  - Make phone and video calls free for people connecting with their loved ones;
  - Ensure all prisons, jails, and detention centers are prioritizing the health and well-being of people incarcerated.
- Take Action by joining [the #FreeThemAll campaign](#) and calling your local officials to release people at the detention center or county jail near you immediately.

## Workers' Rights

- Government agencies and employers must provide all workers, regardless of status, with adequate worksite protections; access to necessary testing; treatment and vaccines; permanent living wage; expanded paid and sick leave; and treat workers with dignity.
- All taxpayers must be eligible for benefits, including cash payments, unemployment insurance, housing assistance, and more.
- Essential workers with DACA and TPS must have their work permits auto-extended during this crisis.
- Take Action by following [DRUM](#), [Adhikaar](#), [Jakara Movement](#), and [South Dakota Voices for Peace](#) for more.

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View our accompanying pieces:  
COVID-19 & South Asian Americans: Factsheets  
[Mapping COVID-19 & South Asian Americans](#)

Learn more at [saalt.org](https://saalt.org).

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