Uprooted and Interconnected: Pandemic Mutual Aid Initiatives

A thesis submitted by

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic devastated many communities in the United States and the world. Economic hardships, health challenges, and limited access to government benefits made it especially difficult for particularly vulnerable groups to survive and thrive during the pandemic. To cope, many people turned to their neighbors, leveraging social capital to exchange resources and care for one another. This thesis explores the mutual aid efforts that emerged and strengthened as a result of this crisis in one community in Massachusetts and another community in Connecticut through qualitative case studies and phenomenological research methods. The two case studies presented offer learnings about transformative resilience, relationality, feminism, and solidarity. Documenting these pandemic response efforts is essential in the policy and planning field because they highlight the ways in which community members addressed systemic inequities through community care. This research not only offers lessons of solidarity and reciprocity during the COVID-19 crisis, but it creates a bridge between language-isolated communities working to strengthen community resilience and practitioners interested in supporting and serving historically marginalized groups.

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Penn: Your support these last two years has been invaluable, and your teachings have changed my life. I am grateful for the opportunities you have provided in the classroom and in organizing spaces to imagine and practice new ways of living that center solidarity and empathy. Our mutual aid research helped me find a community, make new friends, and remember hope amidst challenging times. I'll always treasure the work we did together.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis explores the experiences of Latina immigrants involved in mutual aid networks in Connecticut (CT) and Massachusetts (MA) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It presents two case studies that explore the formation of mutual aid networks in each community and describe the many ways in which neighbors care for one another. It explores themes of intersectionality, feminism, relationality, and reciprocity. Furthermore, it discusses community cultural wealth and transformative resilience in the context of the COVID-19 health crisis exacerbated by systemic inequities in the US.

Background and Context

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted communities around the world in many ways; some lost family members and friends faced unemployment and dealt with unprecedented economic hardship (Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020). The US government provided many benefits to its citizens to mitigate those impacts, such as cash assistance for funerals, stimulus checks, and food access programs. Unfortunately, many immigrants did not qualify for such benefits (Page et al., 2021) and could not rely on a system that did not recognize their needs. Systemic barriers for those who did qualify for government benefits made applying for assistance programs and unemployment benefits challenging. In response to those challenges, individuals in many communities came together to care for each other.

Throughout history, mutual aid has been implemented as a reciprocal strategy for people to collectively survive many crises and transform their communities through solidarity practices and community care (Spade, 2020). During the COVID-19 crisis, the Latine immigrant communities of Massachusetts established their own mutual aid networks to care for neighbors and redistribute resources to ensure nobody would be left behind (Estrella-Luna & Loh, 2021). In 2023, Tufts Professor Penn Loh and I conducted a community action research study that explored these mutual aid efforts in Massachusetts (Loh & Casasola Mena, 2024). The Conectando-Vecinos (pseudonym) mutual aid network in this study is one example of many mutual aid efforts born during difficult times to address systemic gaps and respond to community needs. This network hosts culturally relevant events, runs a food pantry, accompanies each other to appointments, and fosters a sense of community and belonging for Massachusetts residents and newcomers.

Similar mutual aid efforts emerged in other cities across the US and other parts of the world. During the pandemic, Latina women immigrants currently living in Connecticut participated in food distribution efforts in their community and began hosting fundraisers, cultural gatherings, and advocacy events. In 2022, one of them established The Red Mariposa (pseudonym), a domestic violence prevention organization advocating for women's rights in CT and Oaxaca, Mexico (Reisman, 2023). Some co-ops and small businesses emerged from community mutual aid and empowerment efforts associated with another network named Angelic (pseudonym) including a food co-op, a cleaning co-op, and a small food business.

My thesis explores the mutual aid efforts of Latina immigrants through a case study and phenomenological approach to answer the following research question: In what ways did Latina immigrants participate in mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic across different communities in Massachusetts and Connecticut?

Subquestions include: What resources have they been able to access and/or leverage for community resilience? How did women in each community mobilize or not to address different challenges? How have their mutual aid efforts evolved and grown? What values and goals guided those efforts? What do these women envision for the future of their communities?

Participant Safeguarding and Use of Pseudonyms

To minimize potential risks to participants and protect their personal information, I use pseudonyms throughout this thesis. The locations of each case study have been replaced with two pseudonyms: Rinconcito, MA, and Longwater, CT. The names of all study participants have been anonymized. Their mutual aid networks, affiliations, and other organizations have been changed but continue to reflect the essence of their culture and values. In the following chapters, I will refer to the mutual aid network in Riconcito, MA, by the pseudonym of Contectando-Vecinos, and the networks in Longwater, Connecticut, by Angelic and The Red Mariposa. Additional information on how and which names have been changed can be found in the Methods chapter.

Purpose of the study

In the summer of 2023, I began working as a research assistant on an AmeriCorps-funded study on civic engagement and mutual aid led by Prof. Penn Loh. Through that community action research project, I gained an understanding of mutual aid and pandemic recovery grassroots efforts in Massachusetts. The 2023-2024 AmeriCorps study focused on documenting civic infrastructure and describing mutual aid efforts in a community in Eastern Massachusetts. By expanding on that work through my thesis, I was able to further explore the experiences of the Latina women who helped establish mutual aid initiatives and identify what values and cultural components were relevant to those mutual aid organizers.

The Rinconcito community in Massachusetts is not the only community where mutual aid efforts emerged or strengthened during the pandemic. Immigrant neighborhoods have been relying on each other to survive and thrive through mutual aid groups for many decades. Over 30% of the population in Connecticut identifies as Hispanic/Latine. Including the voices of Latinas who reside in Longwater, CT for a second case study allowed me to document the characteristics of Latine mutual aid efforts across two locations and involving various cultures. Mutual aid efforts in Longwater are primarily led by Mexican immigrants, some of whom identify as Indigenous Zapotec. On the other hand, many of the residents and community leaders who contributed to the establishment of Conectando-vecinos (the mutual aid network in the Massachusetts case study) are from Central American countries such as El Salvador and Colombia. The case studies highlight stories of mutual aid and center on women's experiences facing specific vulnerabilities and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Significance of This Research

Latine community members weave social networks in specific ways. Many stay connected to their places of origin while strengthening and supporting their communities as first responders and caretakers in the US. Their culture and values can strengthen their mutual aid and advocacy efforts in their places of origin and beyond. Some women are recognized as trusted community leaders for their engagement in solidarity practices, but not every story is documented or recognized. Even though many studies have documented the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and their relationship to mutual aid efforts, this study addresses a particular gap. It investigates pandemic resilience in US immigrant communities through mutual aid with a focus on Latine culture, values, and gender.

Personal Goals

My curiosity about how culture and values impact community resilience and my experience exploring the roots and future of existing mutual aid groups in Massachusetts inspired this thesis. I have much more to learn about mutual aid, as every community is unique and faces its own challenges. However, the primary goal of this research was to document the stories of pandemic first responders and uplift the stories of immigrant women dedicated to serving their community. An additional goal of this thesis was to explore transnational solidarity practices and Indigenous values of reciprocity and community care. Many answers to the complex issues our society faces can be found within the community; stories of people caring for one another not only give us hope but can serve as a blueprint for building resilient and safe

communities. I hope this thesis is a reminder that another world is possible and it already exists (Solnit, 2020).

Positionality

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, I was concluding my undergrad at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, NY, where I studied climate resilience and community-led disaster responses for four years. At the time, I was unaware I had been studying variants of mutual aid in the classroom and practicing them in real life with the Syracuse Latine immigrant community. Like many foreign-born residents, I did not receive a stimulus check nor was I eligible for food stamps or other government benefits in 2020. Immigrants faced increased vulnerabilities during the pandemic because of status and systemic inequities. Unlike many people, I was privileged enough to not have to worry about food security and healthcare. In fact, my friend Crispín and I would visit an urban garden on the south side of the city where he had planted corn, strawberries, radishes, and lettuce. Every Saturday, we would wear masks and stay six feet apart as we watered the plants and harvested the fruits and vegetables. Later, I would come home with a bounty of produce to share with friends and family, and my heart and kitchen felt full during a time of isolation.

In addition to tending the urban garden, Crispín also organized days actions and fundraisers to protect immigrant farmworkers in NY. Community members would often sell tamales at local churches to help cover the costs of legal immigration cases, housing, and medical care. We would gather supplies to celebrate birthdays from others in the community who were bakers and cooks, everyone had a gift and talent to contribute. This special community on the south side is living example of resilience and mutual aid.

Three years later, right before I started graduate school at UEP, Prof. Loh hired me for his AmeriCorps-funded mutual aid and civic engagement project in a predominantly immigrant community in MA. That summer, we conducted twenty interviews, many of them in Spanish. It was the first opportunity to leverage my native language for work since moving to the US. I am deeply grateful for the partnerships and friendships from the 2023-2024 AmeriCorps Mutual Aid community action research. I approached that initial project and this current study with an open mind and open heart, ready to learn from the community. The interviews became opportunities for reflection, for many of them it was the first time since 2020 in which they had a moment to process everything they had experienced during the pandemic.

These experiences helped me understand how many immigrants survive in the US, especially in times of crisis, and how community care and reciprocity practices can impact our lives. I feel honored to continue to work with Latina women, exchange stories in our native language, uplifting their voices and teachings of resilience and solidarity.

Thesis Overview

The first chapter of this thesis provides background and context for the area of focus of this study, which is mutual aid in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The significance of the study as well as my personal goals are also discussed in Ch. 1. The second chapter, introduces the research design of the study and dives deep into the selected qualitative methods: case studies and phenomenology theory. It also addresses research ethics and the strategies I implemented for safeguarding participants, including the use of pseudonyms. Chapter three, presents an analysis and synthesis of the current academic and grey literature on mutual aid. It

also discusses various frameworks central to this study such as relationality, community cultural wealth, transformative resilience, and feminism.

Chapters four and five present two case studies: Rinconcito, MA, and Longwater, CT. The case study of Riconcito (Ch. 4), explores how people were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, how immigrant women responded to the challenges they faced, and what resources they were able to leverage for their survival. The case of Riconcito tells the story of the Conectando-vecinos network, which has been shaped by community resilience, relationality, and reciprocity. It also describes the lessons learned and the barriers to providing and accessing resources within the context of that particular community. The case study of Longwater (Ch. 5), describes how a transnational feminist mutual aid network emerged from previous organizing and community care efforts led by immigrant and refugee women. It provides insights into the self-care and community care women have implemented in CT and Oaxaca to overcome barriers and thrive. This case illustrates how the dreams of migrant women come to life through solidarity initiatives.

Chapter six presents my interpretation of the results and the relationship between my findings and the existing literature and frameworks. Additionally, this chapter discusses the study's limitations and challenges. Finally, chapter seven summarizes my results and recommendations for future research, and it culminates in a succinct memoir for those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 2. Methods

This thesis explores women-led pandemic mutual aid efforts in two communities in New England, emphasizing the experiences of immigrant Latinas to understand and document mutual aid organizing initiatives. The project is an extension of the AmeriCorps research that I conducted with Prof. Penn Loh from 2023 to 2024. It expands on the 2024 report using various qualitative methods, including case studies, phenomenology, semi-structured interviews, and thematic coding. While immigrant Latinas are the unit of analysis of this study, various tools from phenomenological theories were incorporated into the study design to understand how participants experience mutual aid. Additionally, a descriptive case study approach drawing from Yin (2009) was implemented to provide insight into how and why mutual aid initiatives emerged and strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic in the two communities of interest.

Research Questions

The primary research question was: In what ways did Latina immigrants participate in mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic across different communities in Massachusetts and Connecticut?

Subquestions include: What resources have they been able to access and/or leverage for community resilience? How did women in each community mobilize or not to address different challenges? How have their mutual aid efforts evolved and grown? What values and goals guided those efforts? What do these women envision for the future of their communities?

Literature Review

The literature review highlights the work of scholars, community advocates, organizers, and feminist advocates found through Google Scholar, Jumbo Search, and independent bookstores. While my desktop research began with the term "mutual aid," it evolved into a quest that included books, recorded talks by activists, and scholarly work that explored the many shapes and forms of community care in the US, Latin America, and beyond. I sought articles written by advocates from historically marginalized groups who have directly participated in mutual aid and/or community organizing and have spearheaded efforts to document solidarity initiatives from the ground up. This review presents various frameworks critical to this study such as intersectionality, feminism, community cultural wealth, and transformative resilience. Finally, it highlights the present gaps in women and immigrant-led mutual aid discourse, thus paving the way for the research questions of this study.

Mutual Aid Case Studies

Yin's (2009) case study as an empirical inquiry approach provided a blueprint for answering the exploratory and explanatory research questions of this thesis. Through systematic interviews and document analysis, I investigated the phenomenon of mutual aid within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in two particular communities. While multiple case study analysis can allow the researcher to make comparisons, for this particular project I treated each case study as its own record given its unique characteristics. To center the experiences of the Latina research participants, I incorporated additional qualitative methods tools from Max van Manen's phenomenology theory, which centers experiential knowledge,

feelings of participants, and the essence of a phenomenon. In his book, he elaborates on the nuances of various phenomena including what he defines as care-worry:

> *"A much discussed question is whether specific emotions are innately affected and formed, or whether emotions are culturally determined… Batja Mesquita's (2022) empirical research seems to show that understanding people's emotional lives and behaviors requires immersing yourself in their realities across culturally, racially, and geographically divided worlds. But if the emotional experience of caring for others is largely culturally determined and socially influenced then it is quite possible that in many societies caring becomes an emotion that is eroding."* Max van Manen (2023).

Max van Manen (2023) encourages researchers to reflect on their own positionality, assumptions, and emotions that emerge during the research process through époche (bracketing and reduction). I implemented a reflective journaling practice after each interview and during the coding process, where I noted my feelings, lived experience, explanations, and perceptions. Writing down my thoughts allowed me to dissect my understanding and interpretation of the interview data I was gathered and analyzed for each case study. This process was particularly helpful in separating the experiences participants described to me from my own.

Case Study Selection

The two communities in Massachusetts (MA) and Connecticut (CT) were selected for case studies through convenience and purposeful sampling. Latine immigrants have established and participated in mutual aid efforts in both communities, focusing on resource sharing and solidarity initiatives. I chose to continue working with the Conectando-vecinos mutual aid network in the MA community because it is located in a predominantly Latine neighborhood, and I sought to deepen the reciprocal and non-extractive partnership I have built with them

through my work with Prof. Loh. The network's community care work has expanded since we last interviewed them, so I interviewed new members and followed up with two previous interviewees from the 2023-2024 AmeriCorps study. I have replaced the name of this community with Rinconcito, MA.

I selected a community in CT for a second case study because various mutual aid efforts in that city are co-led by Latine immigrants, who have established culture and relationships as pillars of their work. I will be referring to this community as Longwater, CT. All of the study participants engaged in solidarity efforts as part of pandemic response strategies. However, many of their organizing experiences precede the pandemic and have continued to grow in the last five years. Both case studies shed light on how immigrant women experienced the pandemic and the impact of mutual aid and community care in their lives and communities.

Frameworks for the Case Studies

The following theoretical frameworks and concepts laid the foundation for the case studies: mutual aid/ayuda mutua, transformative resilience, community cultural wealth, and intersectional feminism.

1) Mutual aid/ Ayuda mutua: Drawing from Spade (2020), the concept of mutual aid or in Spanish "ayuda mutua" refers to the organizing and movement-building efforts people (neighbors usually) participate in, with the purpose of addressing systemic inequities and meeting each other's needs through wealth redistribution and resource sharing.

2) Transformative resilience: Gotham and Campanella (2010) developed the concept of transformative resilience to guide studies of urban resilience and disaster response. This

concept sheds light on the diverse ways in which a community can shift or transform as it recovers from a shock, emphasizing the role of social capital and neighborhood connections in recovery. Some scholars such as Giovannini et al., have used it in the context of COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity for systemic transformation.

3) Community cultural wealth: Within critical race theory, this framework developed by Dr. Yosso (2008) outlines the cultural assets communities of color have, such as multilingual skills, community networks, resiliency, resistant capital, and their hopes and dreams. Many of these resources can be the seeds, nutrients, and water for solidarity efforts to grow in BIPOC communities.

4) Intersectional feminism: Intersectional feminism recognizes the "multiplicity of individual identities" and the necessity of "group politics" and offers a framework where feminists recognize the different struggles, privileges, and needs of women within the movement (Gökarıksel & Smith, 2017).

Data Collection

Qualitative Interviews and Participant Selection Process

To answer the research questions, seven qualitative interviews were conducted in the winter of 2025 and five previously conducted interviews from the 2023-2024 AmeriCorps project data set were re-analyzed. Interview data from a total of twelve interviews (ten

participants) was used for this research; four participants had engaged in mutual aid efforts in CT and six in MA, two of whom participated in follow-up interviews.

Interviewee #	Participant Pseudonym	Location (case study)	2023-2024 AmeriCorps participant	Interview Guide(s) # used	Participated in follow-up interview	Interview date(s) and location	Interview Language
W1	Consuelo	Rinconcito, MA	Y	1, 3	Y	Initial Interview via zoom on 07/07/2023. Follow up interview in person on 02/13/2025	English
W2	Rosa	Rinconcito, MA	Y	1,	N	Initial interview on 07/19/2023 in person	Spanish
W3	Angela	Rinconcito, MA	N	3	N	Initial interview on 02/13/2025 in person	Spanish
W4	Esperanza	Rinconcito, MA	Y	1,	N	Initial Interview via zoom on 07/17/2023	English
W5	Constanza	Rinconcito, MA	Y	1, 3	N	Initial Interview via zoom on 07/31/2023	Spanish
W6	Aurora	Rinconcito, MA	Y	1,	Y	Initial Interview in person on 07/07/2023. Follow up interview in person on 02/14/2025	Spanish
W7	Julia	Longwater, CT	N	2	N	Initial Interview via zoom on 02/16/2025	Spanish
W8	Dalia	Longwater, CT	N	2	N	Initial Interview via zoom on 02/26/2025	Spanish
W9	Cecilia	Longwater, CT	N	2	N	Initial Interview	Spanish

						via zoom on 02/21/2025	
W10	Patricia	Longwater, CT	N	2	N	Initial Interview via zoom on 03/01/2025	Spanish

Table 1 Summary of interviewee metadata

The previously conducted 2023-2024 AmeriCorps research project interviews were critical for understanding the mutual aid network and immigrant-led organizing landscape in Eastern MA. Five transcripts of semi-structured interviews from this data set were selected for my thesis. In addition to providing consent and demonstrating interest in continuing to participate in mutual aid research, the research participants had to meet at least three of the following criteria for their interviews to be selected for re-analysis:

- Interviewee was involved in mutual aid efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Interviewee led or established community care initiatives in MA
- Interviewee is an immigrant woman who identifies as Latina, bringing an intersectional perspective
- Interviewee shared experiences of mutual aid and solidarity in their country of origin

Additional data for the Rinconcito, MA case study was collected through two additional semi-structured interviews. The goal of the follow-up interviews was to include at least one new perspective and follow-up with a previous participant to gather additional insight on their gender perspectives and mutual aid pandemic experiences. In addition to providing consent and demonstrating interest in participating in mutual aid research, the research participants had to meet at least two of the following criteria in order to be invited to participate in an interview during the Spring of 2025.

- Interviewee led or established mutual aid initiatives in Rinconcito, MA
- Interviewee is an immigrant woman who identifies as Latina, bringing an intersectional perspective
- Interviewee raised themes related to culture and gender in the initial interview

Four virtual and semi-structured initial interviews were conducted with mutual aid participants based in Connecticut. The goal of these four interviews was to understand how immigrant-led mutual aid efforts emerged in Connecticut, how solidarity initiatives impacted participants, and what those opportunities have meant for immigrant women, as well as what prompted individuals to get involved. Furthermore, these interviews explored the values, gender perspective, and culture that shape community care. Interviewees were selected if they met all of the following criteria:

- Interviewee was involved in mutual aid efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Interviewee led or established community care initiatives in Longwater, CT
- Interviewee is an immigrant woman who identifies as Latina, bringing an intersectional perspective
- Interviewee is interested in participating in mutual aid research

The previously mentioned criteria were determined in alignment with the research question and sub-questions. Previous participation in mutual aid and community care activities, immigrant background, and gender and cultural identity are all critical aspects of the dive deep into the experiences of specific mutual aid participants. It is important to recognize that each participant's experience is one-of-a-kind, therefore findings are not necessarily representative of a greater population. Beyond mutual aid, various sub-themes emerged in the interviews, including women leadership, gender equity, self-determination, community care, social networks, transformational resilience, culture and values, and oppression within solidarity initiatives.

Participant Recruitment

Research participants who met the selection criteria were recruited via phone call, email, text, and social media in English and Spanish, leveraging pre-existing relationships from the AmeriCorps research project as well as my cultural community ties. The recruitment scripts are attached in the Appendix V.

Interview Format and Interview Guides

All participants could choose their language preference and interview location (in-person or on Zoom). As indicated in Fig. 2, two out of ten interviewees participated in interviews in English, while eight participated in interviews in Spanish. Seven interviews were conducted via Zoom, and five were conducted in person. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the consent form with the participants and answered any questions they may have had. The IRB-approved consent form is attached in Appendix IV. Once the participant agreed to participate and I confirmed consent to record video/audio, the question-and-answer portion of the initial and follow-up interviews began, lasting between 23 minutes and 57 minutes. Three different versions of the interview guide were developed for the data collection process. Fig. 2 provides information on which interview guide was used for each interview. The following section explores how each interview guide was developed and its purpose.

Interview Guide #1

The initial round of interviews during which Interview guide #1 was used, occurred in the summer of 2023 for the 2023-2024 AmeriCorps study. The central questions for that study were co-developed with five research partners and focused on the following topics:

- How did mutual aid efforts strengthen, emerge, and evolve since spring 2020?
- How did mutual aid efforts affect existing community groups in terms of their community engagement, organizational capacity, and relationships with other groups and stakeholders?
- What were the challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned from these mutual aid efforts?
- How have roles and relationships been changing through mutual aid among community groups, government, service providers, funders, and other partners?
- How has mutual aid been connected to community organizing and movement building?
- How can mutual aid efforts be strengthened and made more sustainable?
- What is our long-term vision for mutual aid and the network?
- What are some of the stories of mutual aid efforts that should be documented and not forgotten?

Interview Guide #1 focused on pandemic mutual aid experiences, activities, and collaborations with government, foundations, and social service agencies. It was co-developed by Prof. Penn Loh and me with the purpose of collecting qualitative data for the AmeriCorps project to answer the action research questions. Interview Guide #1 was translated to Spanish and used for 20 interviews in 2023. The five transcripts that were re-analyzed from the AmeriCorps study follow that guide, which is attached in Appendix I.

Interview Guide #2

This interview guide was designed specifically for the CT case study participants; it was inspired by Interview Guide #1 and included themes of mutual aid, community care, and resilience. Additionally, it included questions that delve into additional themes central to my thesis' research questions, such as the participants' culture, values, and background, and explored various issues impacting the participant's community. Moreover, it focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the participants and what actions they took to sustain

themselves and/or their community during the crisis. Interview Guide #2 was used for all the interviews that informed the Longwater, CT case study and is attached in Appendix II.

Interview Guide #3

Interview guide #3 explored experiences of mutual aid and was designed to be used for the 2025 interviews with participants for the Rinconcito, MA case study. Beyond community care and solidarity, it delved into community resilience and prompted the participants to share how the pandemic impacted them. Interview Guide #3 is attached in Appendix III.

Compensation

During the 2023-2024 AmeriCorps study, research participants who were not affiliated with a community action research partner received $100 visa gift cards for their participation in the project. For the 2025 interviews, participants received a $40 visa gift card for their participation in an interview.

Documents and Publicly Available Data

Prior to conducting the qualitative interviews, a document analysis approach was implemented to further understand the context and history of both regions. An analysis and review of COVID-19 reports and US Census data helped paint the picture of each community in the context of the pandemic. Media articles about the pandemic impacts in each community were selected using search engines. Complementary data was also harvested from local mutual aid groups' websites and social media.

Research Ethics

Following the IRB protocol for Human Subject Research, all consent documents for interviewee review were translated into their preferred language. While it is important to minimize the risks to all participants, special considerations were necessary to protect research participants who may be considered members of vulnerable groups, especially when discussing sensitive topics. Ensuring voluntary participation, transparency, clear communication, and informed consent was critical throughout this study.

The research protocol for this Tufts SBR IRB approved study #00005644 adhered to human subject research protection standards during all stages (recruitment, consent, review of findings). Due to the vulnerabilities of the participant population and the sensitive information that I was confided with, all the interview data, including participant names, quotes and affiliations, have been anonymized by using pseudonyms and removing biographical details, offering an additional layer of privacy protection.

Rinconcito, MA

- Conectando-vecinos: a mutual aid network that was born out of pandemic organizing efforts and collaborations across grassroots organizations, service agencies, funders, and neighbors
- Revivir: Pseudonym for an elderly care co-op
- Dedal: Pseudonym for a sewing co-op
- Eco-clean: Pseudonym for a cleaning co-op
- Sabor: Pseudonym for a food co-op
- Plaza del Sol: Pseudonym for a local town square

- Angler Market: Pseudonym for a seafood wholesale distributor
- Frutos Movement: Non-violent movement for migrant justice

Longwater, CT

- Angelic: Pseudonym for a local nonprofit with the mission of supporting immigrant and refugee women through education, trainings, and business development programming
- Red Mariposa: Pseudonym for a transnational feminist empowerment and mutual aid network based in Oaxaca and Connecticut
- Limpia Lindo: Pseudonym for a cleaning co-op

Data Analysis

All recordings and notes were translated (Spanish interviews were translated to English), transcribed, and stored in an external hard drive. The interview data was then categorized using a thematic analysis. A phenomenological approach was selected to capture the interviewees' personal experiences of mutual aid about their identity, gender, and culture. The goal of incorporating this approach was to identify common themes among individuals within each community and to discern the unique characteristics of mutual aid initiatives within each network. Simultaneously, a reflexivity and journaling practice was carried out during the research process to keep track of my personal views and perspectives after each interview and during the interview analysis phase. This particular strategy served as a tool to let the data guide my findings. The emerging themes from the interviews provided context for each case study, centering stories of mutual aid and pandemic resilience through the lens of the mutual aid participants.

Thematic Coding and Analysis

All interview notes and transcripts were initially reviewed to find themes and keywords aligned with the research questions. Then, those keywords (Fig. 2) were organized into broad categories to eventually establish a preliminary framework for data analysis.

Background	**Pandemic experiences**	**Mutual aid**	**Community and collective care**	**Challenges and issues**	**Visions for the future**
Culture	crisis	food	self-care	gender inequity	empowerment
matriarchy	isolation	accompanying	reciprocity	violence	trust
ancestral	communication	help	healing	assimilation	together
gender perspective	fear	support	women's voices	discrimination	dreams
transnational	relationships	education	housing	burnout	connections

Table 2 keywords from notes/transcripts

Codebook for thematic coding

1. **Background and identity**

- Where does she live? Where is she originally from?
- Cultural background, traditions, and values.
- Gender perspective: Gender roles, matriarchy, women's empowerment and leadership opportunities
- Discrimination/racism: Bias or exclusion experiences related to identity

2. Pandemic experiences and community support

- COVID impacts (personal and family)
- Pandemic community impact: How was the community impacted by covid (livelihoods, financially, health, etc)
- Access to resources: What resources were available and accessible (food, housing, financial support, or healthcare)
- Providing/receiving support: Involvement in mutual aid efforts
    - Before COVID:
    - During COVID:
    - After COVID:
- Solidarity/resilience: reflections on facing adversity and caring for each other

3. Mutual aid activities

- Types of support (provided or received): types of mutual aid activities (Food distribution, housing assistance, emotional support, legal aid, education)

4. Reflections and learnings of community care

- Self and collective care: How she sustains her emotional and physical well-being and cares for others

- Lessons learned: Key takeaways from mutual aid experiences.
- Relationality and interdependence: Reflections on relationships formed or strengthened or weakened through these efforts
- Collaboration and partnerships: Partnerships with other groups or individuals
- Power, hierarchy, and decision making: Collective decision making, conflict, or tensions in organizing spaces.

5. Challenges and issues of participating in mutual aid

- Barriers to accessing or providing resources: Challenges in receiving or providing aid.
- Burnout/emotional/physical toll: Signs of exhaustion or emotional burden.

6. Challenges and issues (gender, housing)

- Housing challenges
- Gender inequity: Gender-specific challenges and inequities

7. Continuing mutual aid efforts

- Sustaining organizing and community care: Ideas, hopes, and plans for sustaining mutual aid
- Dreams and visions for the future: futuring and imagining

8. Intersecting themes

- Emotions and resilience: Reflections and acknowledgement of specific emotions
- Language justice: Experiences with language barriers or multilingual organizing.
- Empowerment: boundary-setting, collective empowerment.

After all interview transcripts were coded using the above-mentioned framework and, quotes from participants were harvested as relevant. A research findings matrix was developed using Excel to organize the key findings from each interview for each of the case studies. The matrix was useful for visualizing how the variations and patterns of participants' responses within each theme and subtheme. Drawing from Yin (2009), I opted to anonymize all findings, implement pseudonyms, and follow the practices of the authors of Middletown and The Street Corner Society, which Yin highlights in his book.

Study Limitations

The findings reflect each community's particular context and the participants' perspectives. While my thesis is not representative of the broader landscape of immigrant communities and mutual aid networks, it sheds light on two specific networks that were

selected through purposeful and convenience sampling. Given that Spanish is the first language for most of the participants, the translation required careful review to ensure their stories were documented accurately.

Given that about 41% of the interview data for this study was extracted from existing interview transcripts from the 2023-2024 AmeriCorps study, it is essential to acknowledge that those interviews were conducted in 2023 to answer the initial study's research questions. However, more complex themes emerged in such interviews; therefore, re-analyzing those interviews provided valuable data for answering the new research questions.

While my cultural background, immigration experience, and gender allowed me to connect with potential participants and build trusted relationships with these groups, these intersecting identities may have influenced my understanding of specific frameworks and shaped my worldview and approaches to research. As previously discussed, reflexive journaling was an essential tool for noting emotions, dilemmas, questions, and personal perspectives that surface during the data-gathering and analysis processes.

These methods enabled me to address the research questions and facilitate an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of immigrant women in Rinconcito, Massachusetts (MA) and Longwater, Connecticut (CT) who were involved in mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. The case studies presented in the following chapter provide details on the community care initiatives in each community, as well as the essence of mutual aid for participants in those groups.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review contextualizes the research focus of this study by diving deep into community-led pandemic response efforts documented across the U.S. since 2020. This chapter examines the existing literature on mutual aid and explores themes of feminism, intersectionality, reciprocity, and resilience within solidarity initiatives. Furthermore, it highlights studies that have shown the impact of COVID-19 in immigrant communities and the institutional inequities that were brought to light during the pandemic. Additionally, the following paragraphs assess the scholarship that has studied reciprocity and mutual aid pre-pandemic, reviewing the work of U.S. and Latin American authors, researchers, and advocates who have examined gender and cultural norms related to community care. It highlights the nuances of how different cultures and groups practice mutual aid, presenting contrasting perspectives from scholars and advocates. Finally, this chapter contextualizes the frameworks relevant to this study, such as relationality, community cultural wealth, and feminism.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide have been well documented, along with responses from various levels of government, community groups, and other institutions (Peci et al., 2021; Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020; Dzigbede et al., 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2022). In many communities, COVID-19 exacerbated social, economic, and health inequities. While anyone could become infected with the virus, pre-existing health conditions and economic challenges made it more difficult for specific individuals to survive and recover. In addition to government benefits, community care, and solidarity practices became essential to the survival of those most vulnerable, reaching those who were overlooked and underserved by

the government (Spade, 2020; Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). The articles, books, and other literature in this chapter explore the concept of mutual aid in the United States, Latin America, and beyond.

As unemployment skyrocketed in the U.S. to 14.8% in April 2020 (Carter, 2020), government benefits became essential for families to feed their children, pay rent, and cover other household expenses (Falcettoni & Nygaard, 2021). Unemployment benefits and stimulus checks reduced poverty during the pandemic, which could have worsened without such interventions (Falcettoni & Nygaard, 2021). However, not everyone could access those benefits at the same rate (Bell et al., 2020). Triandafyllidou points out that "The pandemic and related international border restrictions have emphasized the existence of different layers of membership within each country" and synthesizes Horton's definition of a syndemic:

"The pandemic is actually a syndemic (Horton, 2020) – or, in other words, comprised of concomitant pandemics of the virus, racism, and the economic crisis – workers disproportionately from racial and ethnic minorities and who work for the lowest wages are to be expected to be hit the hardest by the virus…¨
Excerpt from Rosinska, A., & Pellerito, E. (2022). Pandemic shock absorbers: Domestic workers' activism at the intersection of immigrants' and workers' rights

Historically marginalized groups were hardest hit by delays in processing unemployment benefits (Bell et al., 2020; Falcettoni & Nygaard, 2021), complexities in the application process, and restrictive eligibility criteria. For instance, non-resident taxpayers were excluded from stimulus checks and unemployment benefits. Although some immigrant families with U.S.-born children qualified for government benefits such as SNAP and Medicaid, many opted out of

these programs due to fear of deportation after the passing of the public charge rule in 2019 (Page et al., 2020).

Such evident gaps and weaknesses in the U.S. government system manifested as disproportionately high infection and mortality rates among certain racial and ethnic groups (Obinna, 2021). Krishan (2022) argues that “Our systems, our societies, our actions, and our behaviours were a million wounds in a structural ecosystem that was rupturing at its sides.” Triandafyllidou (2022) concurs, mentioning, "The pandemic has exposed further fissures and dilemmas in our understanding of the limits and hierarchies of membership, belonging, and solidarity."

Studies such as Mackey et al. (2020) demonstrated that Black and Hispanic communities experienced significantly higher rates of COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and related deaths compared to whites. In addition to the fear of contracting the virus, marginalized groups struggled with food and housing insecurity. One study that quantified excess mortality in California showed that Latinos experienced disproportionate high mortality rates (31% above the baseline), and specifically, "Excess death rates were greatest for individuals born in Mexico or a Central American country" (Riley et al., 2021). Given their lack of access to government aid amidst the health crisis, community members from marginalized groups turned to each other as people often do in the face of disaster to support one another (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Mutual aid initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic grew out of pre-existing organizing efforts and strong social networks, providing new opportunities for wealth redistribution and resource sharing in affected communities (Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020; Loh et al., 2023; Carstensen et al., 2021).

Mutual Aid

Much of the discourse on mutual aid in the Global North has emerged from inquiries about how humans "confront a crisis" and work "outside the pre-set structures of the capitalist system." Dean Spade (2020) defines mutual aid as "collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them." He claims that our current systems create the crises we face. While Spade's work is relatively recent, many of these ideas are shared by other scholars who have studied and inquired about mutual aid from a progressive perspective for over a century. Emphasizing that beyond providing aid as charity, individuals can collectively fight the systems that are the core of the social and economic inequities we face.

Kropotkin (1902) discussed how mutual aid practices emerged in neighborhoods experiencing poverty in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Indeed, people have been caring for one another since the beginning of our time, especially in times of hardship. In the words of Solnit (2010), "Kropotkin's mutual-aid tribes, clans, and villages never went away entirely, even among us, here and now." Spade agrees that "there is nothing new about mutual aid" and that there are examples of mutual aid everywhere and in every movement. A recent study on queer mutual aid synthesized the impact of Black mutual aid societies that established a free breakfast program (Holloway et al., 2023). Additionally, scholars have pointed out that Latine (Rivera, 2022) and Chinese communities in the U.S. began practicing mutual aid in the 20th century; one example is the establishment of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) by trans women of color (Holloway et al., 2023). Whether practiced for community

survival, disaster response, social justice, or systemic transformation, all of the above-mentioned examples fall under the "mutual aid" umbrella.

Carstensen et al. argue (2021) that mutual aid networks sustain entire neighborhoods. Solnit (2010), who has studied communities impacted by natural disasters, suggests that disasters can ignite change and break down the barriers for what was preventing needed changes in society. During a crisis, neighbors activate, becoming both givers and recipients "in acts of care that bind them together" (Solnit, 2010). Kaba and Hayes (2023) agree that crises can be catalysts, "like an electrical current that reactivates a stopped heart, crisis can create a social fibrilization that re-enlivens our connectedness to other human beings and allows our compassion, imaginations and political will to flow more freely." Carstensen et al. (2021) argue the COVID-19 pandemic worked as "a trigger for a global display of our shared humanity" and note that community organizing creates the foundation for reciprocity practices. Moreover, in "Pandemic Solidarity," Sitrin (2020) refers to the stories of pandemic mutual aid as an "outward spiral" – that opens us up as humans through the fissures that the pandemic created, "the new world is already being created, but it is up to us to expand this creation, continuing to spiral outwards until… and then more."

The mutual aid case studies that Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar documented in *Pandemic Solidarity* are examples of the solidarity efforts community organizers established in the Global South to ensure community survival during the pandemic. However, many of those practices began long before COVID-19 hit. *Pandemic Solidarity* presents one of the core themes of my thesis: "decolonial solidarity in Turtle Island.” In one of the case studies, Indigenous mutual aid activists shared that "An anti-colonial and anti-capitalist world already exists" in one of the

Turtle Island case studies. Furthermore, the authors suggest that some groups do not need the words "mutual aid" as reciprocity is already embedded in their values and ways of living; one of the Indigenous contributors points out that "to encourage solidarity or mutual aid would be like encouraging breath."

Mutual aid networks already changed the ways of living in many communities, leading to emancipation and empowerment (Pleyers, 2021). Mutual aid groups worldwide say "solidarity not charity" (Pleyers 2021; Spade 2020). Pineda Gomez and Pineda Muñoz (2022) agree that community solidarity practices can support the livelihoods of those facing environmental and economic challenges.

The case studies in *Pandemic Solidarity* align with the findings from the 2023-2024 AmeriCorps mutual aid and civic infrastructure report, which documented the many forms mutual aid can take, such as food distribution, cash aid, community building events, and neighbor check-ins (Loh & Casasola, 2024). Beyond direct assistance, solidarity and mutual aid efforts can take a political force of their own (Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020), helping us build movements (Spade, 2020). However, transformative change and collective action are needed before a crisis hits (Kaba & Hayes, 2023).

According to Pleyers (2021), recent history shows that grassroots mutual aid and solidarity initiatives can become the seeds of social and political transformation. The Latin American scholarship included in this review highlights learnings from solidarity crisis responses beyond the United States. Pleyers (2021) presents evidence of the political and social impact of solidarity initiatives from the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City and the ollas populares, or soup kitchens, that re-emerged in Chile during the pandemic. A recent ethnographic study by Leetoy

and Gravante (2021) documented the resurgence of soup kitchens, also known as ollas populares/ollas comunitarias, across Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of mutual aid.

Leetoy and Gravante acknowledge the historical relevance of ollas populares, which have been around since the 1980s and 1990s in large Latin American cities; their primary purpose has been to feed low-income people who were struggling because of the privatization of public services and neoliberal policies. Leetoy and Gravante (2021) conclude that ollas comunitarias can become "potential citizen labs where people are not just fed but interact, collaborate, and help one another" and add that "citizenship and ethics of care must not be separated concepts but an integral part of one another." Moreover, they emphasize that the pandemic reminded us that we must "take seriously the route of ethics of care for promoting community resilience and the transformation of the city as a collaborative space" (Leetoy and Gravante, 2021).

Community and Reciprocity Practices in LATAM

Scholars argue that civic engagement can promote the creation of social capital. Collective care cannot proliferate nor be sustained without the relationality that makes up social networks (Leetoy and Gravante, 2021). Pleyers (2021) mentions, "Mutual aid networks do so much more than preparing food or going to the grocery store to do shopping. They rebuild social networks (tejido social) and regenerate a sentiment of communality (*Comunalidad)* through which citizens can see their neighborhood differently."

Each community practices reciprocity and solidarity in its own unique way. While anthropologists in Latin America have studied the concepts of mutual aid, *Comunalidad*, *Tequio*,

amongst others, in an attempt to draw conclusions about collective work practices, it is important to recognize the diversity within each of these concepts (Secretaría de Cultura & Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2019) and their historical roots.

Comunalidad as a cultural value was born in Oaxaca due to social struggles in the 1970s and 1980s (Magallanes Blanco & Rodriguez Medina, 2016). Pleyers defines the concept of *Comunalidad,* as an Indigenous world vision that centers on the art of living together, fighting together, and collectively sharing resources. Magallanes Blanco and Rodriguez Medina (2016) argue that *Comunalidad* has a few essential elements: madre tierra, consensus/assembly, collective work/cargo, ceremonies, and mutual aid. Diaz Gomez (2004) claims that Western academics and politicians might perceive a community as a group of individuals in the same place, "an arithmetic community." In contrast, for Indigenous peoples, community transcends spatial and physical realms; community means being in relationships with nature and people, with interdependence at its core (Diaz Gomez, 2004).

Another Indigenous cosmovision that centers reciprocity is *Tequio,* which precedes colonization and capitalism and has been practiced in various Mexican Indigenous communities for centuries. Ronquillo Arvizu (2019) emphasizes the diversity of *Tequio* practices and perspectives, which various scholars have also studied. *Tequio* can be practiced in many ways and mean different things, such as helping out a neighbor, caring for and hosting people, sharing money and knowledge for the betterment of one's community. The physical labor people put towards sustaining and developing their land (Díaz, 2021). According to a community member from San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca, the practices of *Tequio* "activate a mechanism of social articulation that consists of mutual support among the members of a

community to achieve certain objectives that benefit all those who participate in it" (Tobón Mentado, 2017).

In a review of "Trabajo colectivo en el siglo XXI: formas y contextos entre grupos étnicos de Oaxaca," the author (2019) cites Julio De la Fuente's definition of *Tequio* as "the backbone of progress, not only material but in general, of numerous communities." Many communities have built roads, schools, places of worship, and businesses due to their collective work and *Tequio* practices (Quintero, 2004). Two ecotourism cooperatives located in coastal Oaxaca practice *Tequio* as a way of sharing resources and responsibility (Ronquillo Arvizu, 2019).

Pineda Gomez & Pineda Muñoz (2022) conducted a community action research study in Guerrero focused on *Tequio* as an Ancestral Indigenous cultural practice to "highlight the importance of solidarity work and cooperative relationships in the face of the individualism that prevails today." The authors mentioned an evident need to "rethink human relations based on individualism and promote solidarity practices for collective well-being." The mutual aid practices associated with *Tequio* have been passed on through generations and carried by migrants who have been forced to leave their communities in search of new opportunities (Quintero, 2004). Oaxaca, for instance, is one of the Mexican states with the most significant numbers of people fleeing their homes to move to the US (Quintero, 2004). In a study that explored the communication strategies of immigrants, Quintero (2004) documented that "what distinguishes Oaxacan immigrants is their ability to stay connected to their values, history, traditions, and community," achieving a strong social "cohesion and identity."

While many scholars have studied the history and benefits of *Tequio*, some authors have pointed out that *Tequio* has been at the root of conflict in some communities (Pineda Gomez &

Pineda Muñoz, 2022; Andrei Ixcamparij Rivera, 2022; Gómez Peralta, 2005). These practices have sustained oppressive systems and exploited neighbors for unpaid labor (Gómez Peralta, 2005). If community members refuse to collaborate and practice *Tequio,* they could face sanctions (Gómez Peralta, 2005) and jeopardize leadership opportunities (Pineda Gomez & Pineda Muñoz, 2022). A scholar pointed out that people might be coerced into participating in *Tequio*, knowing that if they refused, they could be denied medical and healing benefits (Gómez Peralta 2005). In some communities in Chiapas, *Tequio* has been an exclusionary practice that only men can partake in (Ixcamparij Rivera, 2022). Participating in *Tequio* and other community service duties requires time and having enough resources to share with others; many men facing poverty cannot take time off work to volunteer for their communities (Ixcamparij Rivera, 2022). Scholars have found that those who regularly donate time, labor, and resources are praised and will often be remunerated with power within their neighborhood's assembly (Ixcamparij Rivera, 2022). Gómez Peralta (2005) critiques *Tequio*, arguing that it transfers the state's responsibilities to the people and is a system that relies on exploitation and coercion. Others hope for more inclusive reciprocal practices that allow returning migrants, women, and low-income residents to participate (Ixcamparij Rivera, 2022).

Feminism and Women in Mutual Aid

Scholarship on gender, care ethics, and feminism is abundant in the United States and Europe. In Latin America, some academics and activists have been documenting how women sustain their communities in many ways, including through mutual aid. Nicolas (2021) pointed out that it is important to consider how "community practices have excluded women from participating in certain traditions," which has limited the studies of *Comunalidad* and women-

led mutual aid. While women-led collectives and mutual aid activities have not consistently been recognized, in the last twenty years, some scholars across Latin America have been documenting their contributions. According to Pineda Gomez and Pineda Muñoz (2022), Nahua women share their language, history, values, and worldview, preserving their ancestral culture. In Zitla, Guerrero, women participate in *Tequio* by feeding their families and neighbors, making pottery, and weaving for textile crafts (Pineda Gomez & Pineda Muñoz, 2022). Gender leadership roles and norms have been changing in some regions of Oaxaca, where many men migrate, leaving their families at home, creating more opportunities for women (Maldonado & Artía 2004).

According to Maldonado and Artía (2004), "The absence of men has enabled women to have an increasingly important role in the public affairs of their communities," such as *Tequio* and asambleas, overcoming the stereotype of the passive and submissive woman. Latina women searching for leadership opportunities whose husbands migrated to the U.S. because of NAFTA are organizing co-ops to meet their needs, such as co-op La Nueva Vida and Mujeres Productoras Co-op (Ferguson, 2009).

Beyond financial and career growth, mutual aid feminist groups have provided opportunities for women to provide emotional support and care to one another. In Puebla, Mexico, Comaletzin, an Indigenous and mestizo women-led violence prevention non-profit, has been doing popular education around women's rights and safety (de Alva & Gloria, 2013). In Chile, people have come together to support sexual violence survivors through mutual aid groups practicing tender care, queer solidarity, and feminist popular education (Núñez & Rebolledo, 2020). In Colombia, women have participated in mutual aid efforts that are vital to

their emotional and psychological well-being as survivors of armed-conflict violent attacks (Villa Gómez et al., 2016).

One U.S.-based scholar inquired about feminist mutual aid efforts in Latin America in the early 2000s and their benefits and challenges. Advocating for what she calls 'solidarity justice,' Ferguson (2009) highlights the work of Elige, a Mexican feminist group that started advocating reproductive freedom and gender justice and later included class inequities and LGBTQ rights in their fight. Ferguson's (2009) vision of feminist solidarity justice embodies the values of bell hook's transformational sisterhood and suggests that solidarity can surpass liberalism by centering the collective well-being across ethnic, racial, and background differences.

According to Sweetman, "Feminist solidarity strengthens the power of women to challenge gender-based violence, abuse, marginalization, and poverty" and reduces the risks associated with "isolated resistance." Furthermore, the author argues that feminists and progressive development organizations draw on collective power to overcome domination by elites across the world, "Feminist solidarity and collective action are both aims in their own right, and ways of working to attain gender justice and women's rights, not only in developing countries but also in the global," (Sweetman, 2013).

Intersectionality

Rosinska and Pellerito (2022) demonstrate that “the Covid-19 pandemic emphasized that real public health cannot be divided into sectors based on income, ethnicity, or immigration status.” The syndemic Rosinska and Pellerito refer to shed light on the consequences of facing a pandemic in a broken system, one “that is already largely out of

balance and historically rooted in unequal treatment." Recognizing class, race, gender, and other inequities is essential to building inclusive movements that address intersecting issues and benefit those historically marginalized. Hankivsky (2014) synthesizes the scholarly work on intersectionality, a term coined by civil rights activist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. Oriented towards movement building and system transformation, "intersectionality conceptualizes social categories as interacting with and co-constituting one another to create unique social locations that vary according to time and place" (Hankivsky, 2022).

In *Feminising the Economy: Metaphors, strategies, politics,* Gibson-Graham (2003) discusses intersectionality and highlights the work of Mattingly (1998, 1999) on the unintended side effects of feminism that create inequities amongst women depending on status, race, class, disability, and other characteristics. Watson et al. (2004) examined the nexus of disability justice and feminism; they found that "feminism has failed to adequately include the disability perspective in the feminist agenda, or has done so in unhelpful ways." Watson et al.'s (2004) study is relevant to this thesis, arguing that relationality and interdependency "draw attention to the mutual needs embodied in caring activities and caring responsibilities," transcending giver-receiver binaries.

Reciprocity, Interdependence, and Relationality

Reciprocity and relationality are essential to the survival and growth of our communities; without these values, humans continue to experience the harms of capitalism and individualism (Brown, 2017). Escobar et al. (2024) propose that we remake ourselves, calling for a shift in "the embodied experience of being alive from one of scarcity, supremacy, and separation to one of ease, generosity, and belonging." The authors claim that "at its heart,

relationality points to the radical interdependence of all things" (Escobar et al., 2024). Indigenous scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer (2024) emphasizes that "all flourishing is mutual, and for Brown (2017), "Interdependence is iterative."

In her book *Emergent Strategy,* Adrienne Maree Brown (2017) highlights the relational work of advocates, scholars, and movement builders who "have been and are critical of these ways we socialize each other and have offered solutions." According to Kimmerer (2024), we can meet each other's needs by creating "intentional communities of mutual self-reliance and reciprocity" (Kimmerer, 2024). In *Loving Corrections,* Brown (2024) further explores the meaning of connections and relationships of all things and beings, advocating for interdependent, nourishing, and just relationships that allow people to "find dignified ways of being in communities." Kimmerer (2024) states that gratitude and connection are the currency of a gift economy. A gift economy that based in reciprocity can nourish human relationships with each other and also our connection to the earth. Reciprocity and reconciliation are essential components of Sacred Civics living, acknowledging that "People, land, and nature in all forms, are considered sacred, worthy of merit, and having agency," sustaining communities where everyone and everything collectively flourishes (Engle, Agyeman, & Chung-Tiam-Fook, 2022, p.4)

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso's definition of community cultural wealth (fig.1) draws from critical race theory: "Community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression." Community cultural wealth is comprised of six different kinds of capital:

aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). Scholars argue that "resistant capital demonstrates how migrant communities actively push back against oppressive structures and systems."

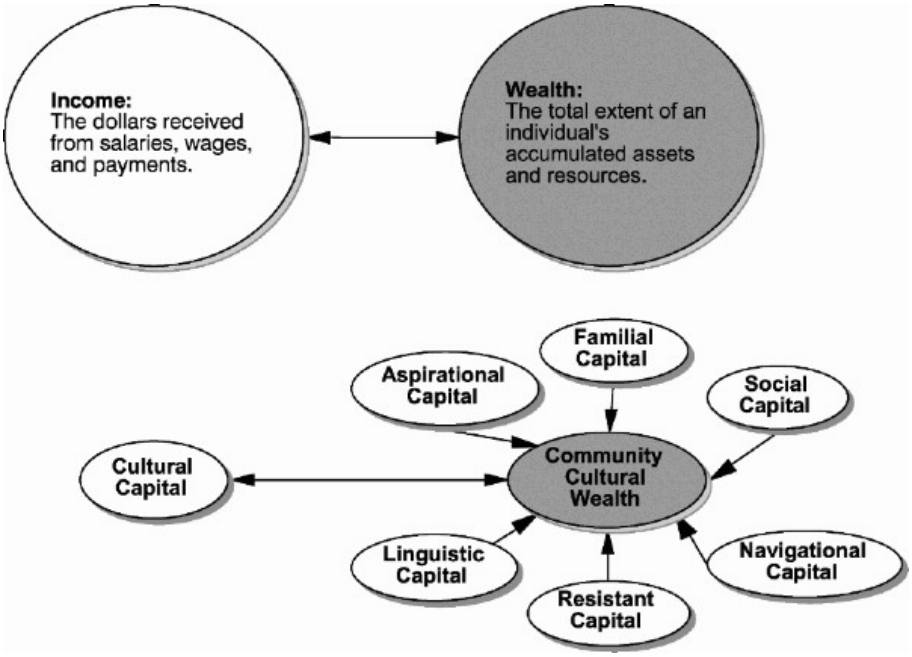

Figure 1. Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model

A study on community resilience by Gotham and Campanella (2010) identified the social networks essential for self-reliance in a natural disaster, such as coalitions, families, schools, and other neighborhood organizations. The authors argue, "Organizations and networks form neighborhoods and communities; together, they form learning loops in which people respond to and drive social change through interactions with institutions, state officials, and public policies" (Gotham & Campanella 2010). Familial capital, for instance, is essential to migrant families as they leverage connections to foster a sense of belonging and navigate complex systems (D'Costa et al., 2024). This theory is relevant to this thesis because it recognizes the experiential and cultural knowledge, as well as the social capital, of communities, which contributes to their resistance and resilience.

A recent phenomenological study examined the pandemic virtual learning experiences of Latine migrant youth (D'Costa et al., 2024). Their findings showed that in light of the systemic gaps that impacted them during the pandemic, "Migrant youth used their aspirational and navigational wealth to negotiate the complexity of virtual learning during the pandemic" (D'Costa et al., 2024). Another phenomenological study by Grosso Richins et al. (2021) found that Latine parents utilize their social, cultural, and linguistic capital to support their children's development and learning processes. Finally, a third study on Latino community cultural wealth showed that Latine parents "utilized their familial and social capital to gain educational resources for their children" (Guzmán et al., 2018). The above-mentioned studies demonstrate the intergenerational impact cultural wealth can have in a community as well as the uses of each capital for navigating systemic inequities Black, Indigenous, and people of color face in the U.S.

Social Capital, Resilience and Resistance

Migration and Transnationalism

Scholars have inquired about the reasons for migration and the transnational relations of migrants for decades. Verbena et al. (2023) argue that people migrate for a better life, but in their new home communities, they face significant challenges due to social inequities and unfair systemic structures. As people leave their countries of origin, they identify communication pathways to stay connected to their homes and new social networks.

Guarnizo et al. (1999) define transnationalism as “patterned, multifaceted, multilocal processes that include economic, sociocultural and political practices and discourses that (1) transcend the confines of the territorially bounded jurisdiction of the nation-state; and (2) are

an inherent part of the habitual lives of those involved." Transnationalism often involves the exchange of tangible and intangible resources. Findings from a study conducted in New York and Los Angeles suggested that some Colombian migrants who have spent extended periods in the U.S. may experience fragmented solidarity and mistrust due to social capital loss (Guarnizo et al., 1999). Social capital and connections can contribute to the well-being of migrants throughout their travel journeys and in their new homes.

Various scholars have documented the how social networks are related to the values of reciprocity and solidarity. Madrigal C. and Madrigal J. (2024) argue that transnational social networks "promote development in countries of origin, drive sizable remittance economies, and facilitate transnational activities." However, the experiences of migrants are as diverse as their countries of origin and social context. One study pointed out that for Salvadorians, informal networks were "usually proven ineffective in providing steady aid" upon arrival to places like Northern California (Mitchell, 2004). A recent study that focused on the immigrant experience of Colombian women demonstrated that social networks provided them with emotional support and resources to navigate the immigration system and helped them foster a sense of belonging (Madrigal C. & Madrigal J., 2024). Nora Hamilton, who studied Salvadorian migrant communities from a political science standpoint in the early 2000s, argued that "ethnic social networks facilitate new immigrants' 'learning the ropes'" but, can also "limit the prospects and opportunities of immigrants" (Hamilton, 2001).

Some studies in particular (Nicolas, 2021; Mercado, 2023) examined sociocultural practices that people from the Indigenous diaspora practice across what Nicolas (2021) refers to as settler-colonial states (Mexico and the United States). Various examples of transnational

civic engagement and community care have been documented in academia. Such as Oaxacan Zapotec and Mixe migrants who brought their *Tequio* and *Guelaguetza* (solidarity) practices to the US "to transform their engagement in a transnational, diasporic, and deterritorialized space that they have named Oaxacalifornia," (Mercado, 2023). Nicolas (2021) explores *transborder Comunalidad*, defining it as "the Indigenous epistemology and practice of communal belonging and being across generations in diaspora." For the Zoochina-LA Zapotec community described in Nicolas' study, *Comunalidad* is vital "not only as theory but as an Indigenous praxis that is necessary for Indigenous longevity."

Even though scholarly work on Mexican Indigenous diaspora/diasporic cultural practices is limited, Salvadorian immigrants and second-generation Salvadorians have had even more challenges documenting transnational cultural community practices and civic engagement. Two recent student-led projects (an undergraduate thesis and a PhD dissertation) shed light on the stories of Salvadorian immigrants (Juarez, 2024; Trujillo, 2017), recognizing current gaps in this field and the value of reclaiming their cultural identity through storytelling. Some Salvadorian migrants continue to politically engage with their community after migrating, but the "nature of diaspora outreach, and legacies of state-society relations" create challenges for migrant-state civic engagement efforts (Burgess, 2012).

Pandemic Immigrant-led Mutual Aid

In the United States, many immigrants experience a high risk of COVID-19 exposure through their day-to-day work as domestic workers (Rosinska & Pellerito, 2022). The structural barriers and socioeconomic inequities immigrants face due to their race, income, ethnicity, and

immigration status contribute to their vulnerability (Rosinska & Pellerito, 2022). Many immigrant workers got laid off as a result of the pandemic:

> *"A cleaner, a nanny, or a care assistant is a foreign element in the home in non-pandemic times – often crossing class, ethnic, or race boundaries when entering the employer's household. During a period of state-mandated stay-at-home orders, these workers become intruders into the safe 'bubble' of the private home and another potential 'vector' of the disease. Accordingly, many employers who had the option of working from home (or were laid off) decided they did not need cleaning or care services for their children, thus making whole categories of workers expendable with little or no warning. It is another moment in the history of the ways in which 'contamination' and 'purity' have been written onto the bodies and work lives of immigrants more broadly (Boris, Chap. 4, this volume)."* Excerpt from Rosinska, A., & Pellerito, E. (2022). Pandemic shock absorbers: Domestic workers' activism at the intersection of immigrants' and workers' rights

Immigrants in the U.S. turned to community organizations and workers centers, which provide services and advocacy opportunities for addressing systemic deficiencies. Marina Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar documented many of these efforts in the book Pandemic Solidarity. Susan, a contributor to the Turtle Island chapter, mentioned that the North Bay Organizing Project she works with in California "operates culturally centered mutual aid projects," including Latine Sanacion practices because "culture precedes structural change." This group, in particular, focuses on caring for undocumented neighbors; they facilitate wealth redistribution through undocufund and have a housing task force for rent tenant protections. La Colectiva de La Comida, also highlighted in the book, is a group based out of Oregon that focused on local food security and autonomy in light of the pandemic.

Civic Engagement and Community Care

Some scholars have also explored the organizing and advocacy efforts led by immigrants for workers justice and immigration reforms. Verbena et al. (2023) claimed that resilience as a factor for civic engagement had been left out of the collective action research, and examined the factors associated with immigrant collective civic action. They explored the role of community resilience in a study where more than half of the participants in their convenience sample were women. Drawing on the social identity model of collective action, also known as SIMCA, and integrating group resilience into the model, their results "confirmed the ethnic/national identity–efficacy pathway to collective civic action, but not the ethnic identity–injustice or the ethnic identity–group resilience pathways" (Verbena et al. 2023).

In Massachusetts, Massachusetts Jobs with Justice and Matahari set up a fund to support undocumented workers (Estrella-luna & Loh, 2021). Rosinska and Pellerito pointed out that, "Both the NDWA and many worker centers across the country offered some version of a mutual aid program in which members could receive weekly food deliveries, masks, and PPE, or apply for cash assistance grants." Not only did worker rights groups provide additional services and resources to their communities during the pandemic, but they also organized for immigrant justice and health campaigns (Rosinska & Pellerito, 2022). The Brazilian Workers Center in Boston, SEIU, and other social justice groups fought for driver's licenses for all in a collaborative campaign to pass the Work and Family Mobility Act in 2019 (Rosinska & Pellerito, 2022).

Transformative Resilience

Gotham and Campanella developed transformative resilience as an analytical tool or a "heuristic device to examine how different urban ecosystems can adapt, adjust, renew, and

transform in response to trauma." Their community resilience findings indicate that humans have an opportunity to learn from traumatic experiences and transform their communities as they reorganize themselves after a disturbance (Gotham & Campanella, 2010). Similarly, policy analysts in the EU have been researching the impacts of COVID-19 on societies and the opportunities for systemic transformation that emerged due to the pandemic (Giovaninni et al., 2020).

While resilient communities can transform their environment through collective action, "collective action can support the resilience of groups and communities" as well (Verbena et al, 2023). Some scholars consider collective action a form of civic engagement (Verbena et al, 2023; Loh & Casasola, 2024) as these solidarity strategies prompt individuals to advocate for human rights, justice, and equitable public policy.

Conclusion

This review presents findings from scholarly work on mutual aid (including its diverse practices), the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the challenges Latine immigrants face in the US. Furthermore, it introduces various frameworks and theories for this thesis: intersectionality, feminism, community cultural wealth, and transformative resilience. The above-mentioned concepts and frameworks are essential for this study, which will explore the experiences of Latina immigrant women who engaged in mutual aid in one community in MA and another community in CT. While scholarly work on mutual aid boomed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to grow, gaps in transnational mutual aid networks remain.

Mutual aid scholars and advocates are interested in future studies that explore how hierarchies and other forms of systemic oppression manifest in mutual aid networks and

movement-building spaces. Moreover, literature on transformative resilience, specifically how structural inequities can be challenged and addressed by social networks, is critical. There is a need for more studies that explore mutual aid from a gender and culture perspective and interrogate how community-led initiatives contribute to a sense of belonging and leadership opportunities for historically marginalized groups. By approaching this study in an intersectional and culturally conscious way, this study will highlight insights from participants of mutual aid initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic to inform future solidarity practices and community resilience studies.

Chapter 4. Case Study 1: Rinconcito, Massachusetts

This hyperlocal case study explores the experiences of residents living in Rinconcito, a predominantly immigrant community in Massachusetts, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from the interview findings of eight different interviews with six participants, the following sections highlight the history of MA and COVID impacts, how immigrant women experienced the pandemic in the community of Rinconcito, how they became involved in mutual aid, and describe the organizing landscape of Rinconcito.

History and Demographic Background of Massachusetts

Located in New England, Massachusetts has a painful history as "one of the original Thirteen Colonies" (*A Profile of Massachusetts*, n.d.) and the first colony to legalize slavery (*Project CommUNITY: Brief History of Race, Racism in Massachusetts*, n.d.). According to ACS 2023 data, Massachusetts has a population of 7,001,399 people; 13% identify as Hispanic, 66% white, 7% Black, 7% Asian, 5% two or more races, and 1% other. The median household income is $99,858, and 10.4% of the residents live below the poverty line (*Census Profile*, n.d.).

This territory is the home of the Massachusetts, Nipmuc, Wampanoag, and other tribes, who have been fishing, hunting, grieving, and raising and nourishing their families for centuries, surviving the impacts of violent settler colonization ("Indigenous Peoples History Hub," 2025.; M*ASSACHUSETTS INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY RESOURCES*, n.d.).

In the words of Moonanum James, a member of the Wampanoag tribe and co-leader of the United American Indians of New England:

> *Often, historians will say that it was disease that wiped out so many thousands of our people – entire villages – as though the problem was that we had weak immune systems. But our*

decimation cannot be called an accident…They did not merely fade into the mists of time."
("Indigenous Peoples History Hub," 2025)

White settlers displaced Indigenous tribes from their land and were likely responsible for a severe plague which killed close to 80% of the Indigenous population in Massachusetts and New England in 1616 *("Indigenous Peoples History Hub," 2025).*

About the Rinconcito Community

Riconcito is a densely populated community in Massachusetts and a state-designated Environmental Justice community. Its median household income is lower than the statewide median, and the majority of its residents are renters. Rinconcito has been impacted by gentrification since the early 2000s. Many of the residents work in construction, food service, and other essential services.

More than half of the residents of Rinconcito are foreign-born. It's a place where many languages are spoken, and cultural foods and celebrations are present all around. One interviewee describes her experience living in Riconcito, "I felt so at home in Riconcito, with the community, with the immigrants that were starting to come in, the atmosphere, the connections were so amazing. And so I stayed in the area. I've been here 32 years. Out of those 32 years, I've been doing outreach for 20 years."

Many immigrants see Riconcito as "the community that welcomed them" as newcomers, where they have been able to connect with other people from their countries of origin. One interviewee shared that when she lived in El Salvador, everyone knew each other in their block, and they brought that sense of community to Rinconcito because it was a "natural

part of their roots." A local organizer shared that Riconcito's cultural mix reminds her of New York City, where she grew up.

However, moving to Rinconcito and starting a new life there was not easy for them. One interviewee spoke about the racism she experienced, "It was very difficult coming to a new culture, a language. We experienced racism because we were the first Latinos that were coming here." She added, "This country was built by immigrants who came here and built this country. However, within the community and within the mutual aid, we share values and we respect values. You know all, these values, the family values, the religious values, it's respected and shared." Many people have to work multiple jobs to afford rent and basic services; Esperanza said, "We work for any money they can give us. We had to work three jobs, and they don't care. I've been doing this work for this year is 34 years and I got tired of fighting the system. I think it's the time for us to create our own because I don't see any difference in 34 years."

These social and economic difficulties, compounded by everything that COVID-19 brought, created additional vulnerabilities and challenges for the people of Rinconcito during the pandemic. Organizers have played a crucial role in sustaining their community (Fig.2), fostering solidarity and reciprocity, leveraging local resources, and empowering community members to imagine and co-create new ways of living.

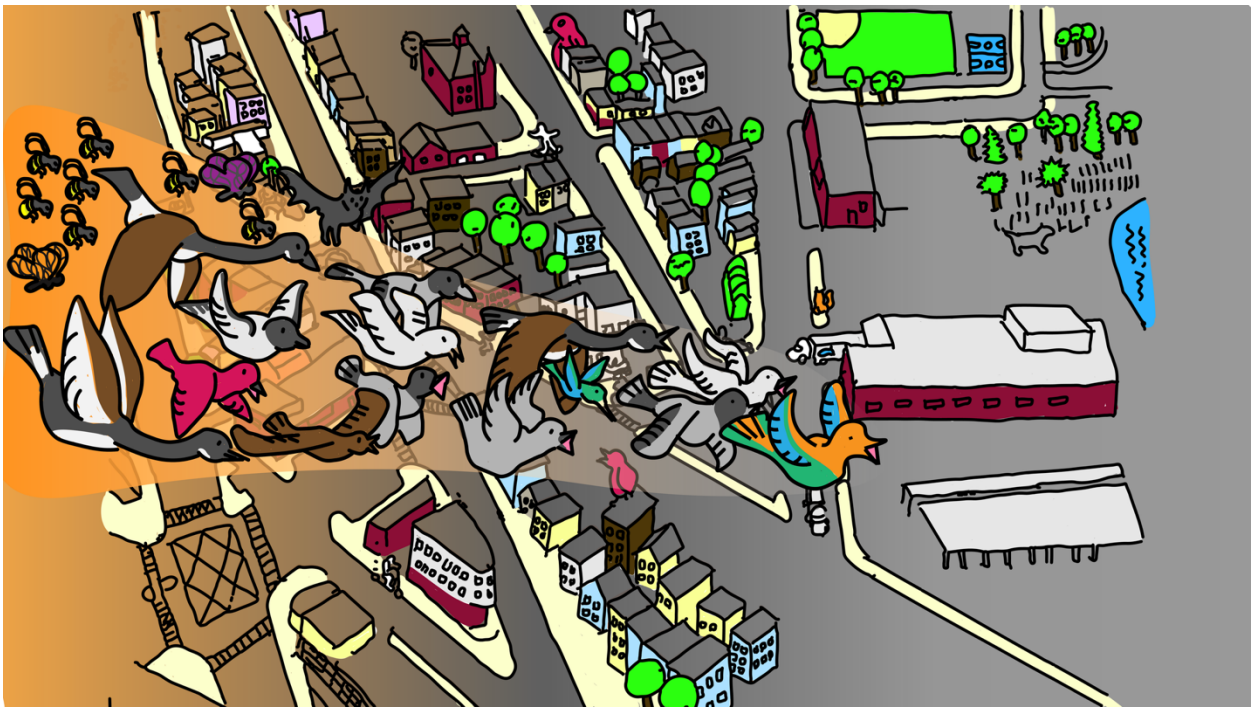

Figure 2. Title: *Here Comes The Flock! (Morales, J., 2024)*[1]

COVID-19 Pandemic Landscape in MA

In 2020, Massachusetts was hit by COVID-19. This disease had a profound impact on the communities across the state (Fig. 3. and Fig. 4.). Scientific studies have shown that occupational segregation resulted in a higher risk for COVID-19 exposure (Hawkins, 2020). Other factors, such as income and access to clinical care, were strongly associated with COVID-19 exposure and mortality outcomes (Magesh et al., 2021).

[1] "*Here comes the flock!* is an image of a group of birds, insects, and mammals, representing action, movement with Community, and unity. I reflect on my experiences with the dedicated organizing groups for immigrants and the conversations we had at the network about our visions of our community. The birds remind us that we must care for one another to fly freely as a Community," (Morales, 2024).

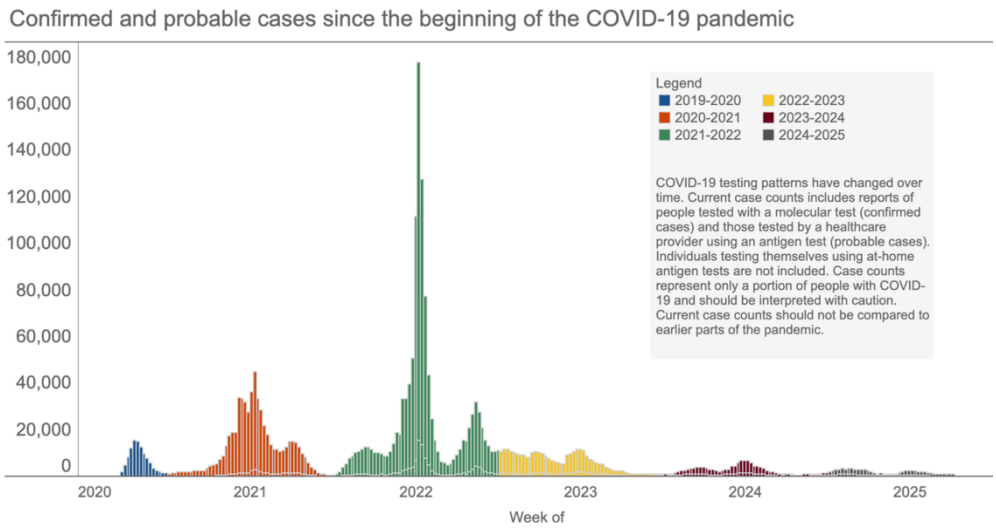

Figure 3. Confirmed and Probable Weekly Cases Since the Beginning of the Pandemic in Massachusetts.[2]

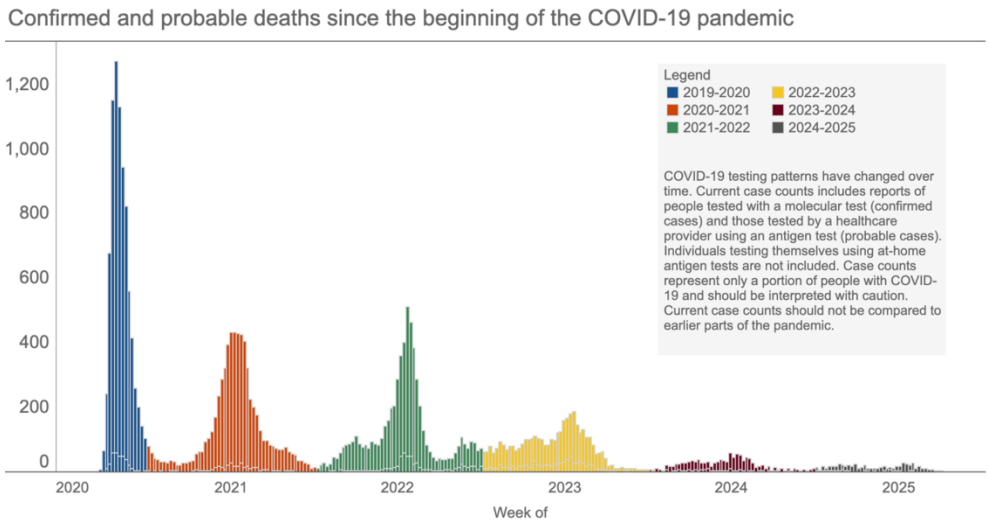

Figure 4. Confirmed and Probable Weekly Cases since the Beginning of the Pandemic in Massachusetts.[3]

COVID-19 data from the Bureau of Infectious Diseases and Laboratory Sciences shows that Black and Hispanic residents experienced the highest COVID-19 mortality rates (fig. 5).

[2] Results from at-home antigen tests to check for COVID-19 are not included in this figure. The reported case counts do not reflect all people who have been infected and should be interpreted with caution. (*COVID-19 Reporting | Mass.Gov*, 2025)

[3] Results from at-home antigen tests to check for COVID-19 are not included in this figure. The reported case counts do not reflect all people who have been infected and should be interpreted with caution. (*COVID-19 Reporting | Mass.Gov*, 2025)

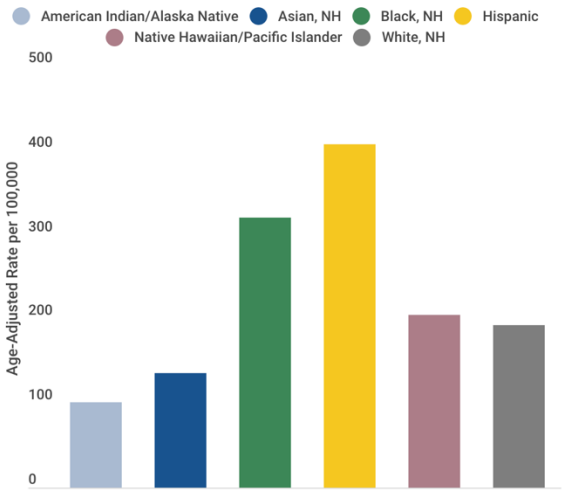

Figure 5. Age Adjusted COVID-19 Mortality Rate from Jan 1st, 2020-Dec 31st 2021 (COVID-19 Pandemic | Mass.Gov, 2022)

In March 2023, Gov. Maura Healey declared the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency in Massachusetts as of May 11th, 2023. However, that same year, many people continued to contract the virus (*Healey-Driscoll Administration Announces End of COVID-19 Public Health Emergency in Massachusetts | Mass.Gov*, 2023). Fig. 6. Shows COVID-19 positivity rates from reported cases during a two-week period in late 2023; at that time, the dominant Omicron subvariants EG.5 and BA.2.86 were being transmitted (*Omicron, Delta, Alpha, and More*, 2023).

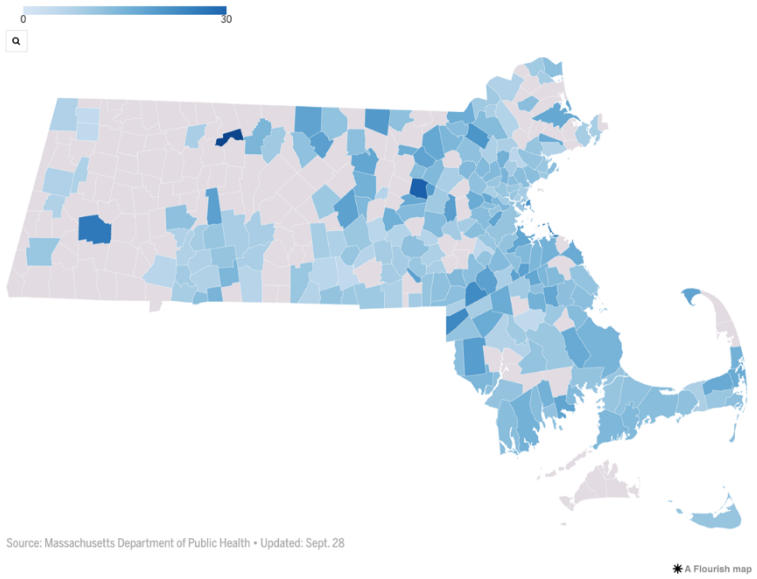

Figure 6. MA COVID-19 Positivity Rates from Reported Cases Data from Sept 1st 2023- Sept 23rd 2023 by County (Huddle et al., 2023)

The MA Department of Public Health has been compiling data on infection rates, confirmed cases, hospitalizations, and deaths since the beginning of the pandemic. The coronavirus numbers only reflect a portion of the everlasting effects of the virus.

How Were the People of Rinconcito Impacted by COVID-19?

Angela, a mother and community organizer, describes COVID-19 as "a virus that doesn't discriminate against anything, sex, race, religion." She worked at a laundromat during the pandemic, where she contracted the virus. It was excruciating seeing everyone in her family sick at the same time; her husband almost died, and it took about a month for her family to recover. After her family got sick, she joined mutual aid organizing efforts. Her friend had started making a list of volunteers who wanted to help bring food to families who were infected, and Angela signed up to help. When asked about her pandemic experiences, Angela shared that COVID-19 took a toll on her mental health "I would wonder how the people, the

children, the people who had children my family, were doing." She mentioned that seeing the community, *her community* so impacted, was very painful.

Rosa, another community organizer and mother originally from El Salvador, led pandemic mutual aid efforts in Rinconcito. Rosa saw so many needs in her community: "I think it was so many things that maybe it would be hard to describe, but it was economic needs, food needs, housing needs, health needs, emotional needs." She mentioned she felt like it was her and other community members who were the first to respond to the crisis: "Even though the government was not responding responsibly, neighbors were responding responsibly." With support from her colleagues, they were able to set up lists of neighbors in need and volunteers who could respond.

Her friend, Esperanza, who established a co-op incubator in MA and supported Rosa in these efforts, mentioned, "We wanted to concentrate in the community that we already work with and the people that we already know because our capacity is very small and the need of those people are huge." She noticed that "a lot of people didn't have health care, they were coming to us saying, we go to the emergency room, but we don't really have health care and we are afraid to go there."

Consuelo, a Puerto Rican native, mother, and domestic violence survivor, spoke about the loneliness she felt during the pandemic: "When everything shut down, I felt alone. I felt helpless, scared. I didn't want to be stuck at home. I couldn't be with my grandkids or family. So I would call people whom I had had contacts with by phone just know how find out how they were doing." For Consuelo, checking in with neighbors was vital.

While some families missed their relatives because of confinement mandates, others had to say goodbye too early, while some did not even get to say goodbye. A long-time housing justice organizer, Constanza saw many families burying loved ones. Aurora, a worker's rights advocate, devoted her life to taking care of her community during the pandemic; she helped coordinate funerals when families lost loved ones due to COVID-19. Angela mentioned that it was harrowing seeing people who "could not bury their relatives, people who were taken away and never saw them again, maybe through a screen, they called us, they asked us questions, and I think that is something that cannot be erased."

Unemployment also became a critical issue in Rinconcito and had long-lasting impacts. Constanza narrated how many people became unemployed: "it was hard; people didn't have resources." Consuelo pointed out that for newly arrived immigrants, "The challenges and struggles were getting harder because of lack of resources... we have managed, taking one day at a time, we have managed to support people, refer them to resources, empower them stay either no matter how hard and difficult their daily life becomes. Together we are better."

Mutual Aid as Pandemic Response in Rinconcito

Some organizers in Rinconcito grew up seeing mutual aid and other solidarity practices happening all around them in their countries of origin. Angela proudly remembers her ancestors and the mutual aid practices that her family participated in, such as *trueque*, "My dad would say, *we have to feed the pigs because we are going to exchange them for chickens. Or we would exchange eggs for corn for soup,* so I bring that with me." Another interviewee mentioned how her neighbors would often help the mailman figure out who lived where in her community: "when someone was sick, people noticed, and everyone helped each other."

Angela added that in Central America, people have "a culture of attachment, of being together, of sharing. And so that part comes from my roots." Esperanza spoke about cooperativism: "one of the values of cooperativism is mutual aid." It is essential to put those values and principles in practice in her day-to-day life by supporting each other.

As health and economic challenges became more severe in Riconcito during the pandemic, women organizers came together to support their community. Aurora highlighted how those who were most impacted shared everything without hesitation and were so grateful to receive support. The people of Rinconcito were not prepared for COVID-19 because they were already living paycheck to paycheck. Rosa helped coordinate food distribution, neighbor check-ins, and arrange funerals, while Aurora helped people fill out unemployment applications, food stamps applications, and stimulus check documents. They saw how difficult it was for mothers to feed their children during the pandemic. They joined efforts with other organizers and concerned neighbors to redistribute groceries and meals to those who needed them most.

Organizers established a block captain system for community leaders to report on the needs of their block and coordinate aid distribution. Aurora remembers those moments with pride: "We started to come together and set up captains for each street, and the captain of each street was going to be aware of his neighborhood, regardless of what was going on. That's how we started to get involved because we thought a lot about our people." Esperanza recalled the community outreach and resource redistribution in which she participated; they organized the contact information of families according to those most in need, set up a committee in charge of reviewing who was receiving money and how, and distributed cash aid.

These efforts became the backbone of a mutual aid network that flourished during the pandemic and has continued to grow since. Rather than providing one-way aid, the network has fostered community relationships and empowered neighbors to support one another.

Food Accessibility

According to Angela, the mutual aid organizing committee of Rinconcito had block captains as reps; many people would meet on Zoom to plan logistics, and others who were not part of the organizing committee depended on the planning. Rosa and Angela were part of the logistics group, which included food delivery. They coordinated with local chefs and food trucks and provided delicious food to sick families. Aurora was also part of that group. She recounted that, "We started with five families and we had more than 3,000 families. And my house, well, I was the only one delivering. My house was a collection center. Everything that came in food arrived at my house, I had to protect myself and practice social distance when I delivered the food. Rosa would just call me and tell me that so much food was going to arrive today and I would receive it and organize it. I worked 24 hours a day, I did not rest." While Latina women led these efforts, white neighbors regularly dropped off bags of groceries for Aurora to distribute, and many of them were assisting with food delivery. Angela mentioned that she was one of the people who collaborated with white volunteers who supported with meal pick-up and drop-off logistics.

Constanza started as a block captain and later established her own food distribution network. In the pandemic's early stages, she provided food to approximately 35 families, but that number continued to grow over time. "We had to figure out how to find supplementary food resources because we were not getting enough donations to feed the families," Constanza

said. Constanza has been able to redistribute groceries that would otherwise go to waste and ensure that neighbors who have disabilities or struggle with cancer have healthy foods to eat. Even though people wonder why Constanza volunteers every week to distribute groceries, she sees the difference her work makes in her community, especially given that "everything is so expensive right now and people can barely make rent."

Co-ops and Community Empowerment

During the first year of the pandemic, the network raised $ 100,000 (interview with Esperanza). However, beyond providing cash aid, they wanted to empower community members affected by COVID lay-offs to create new sources of income. After realizing a check of $200 could only do so much, Esperanza started wondering how they could support their families in growing their income. She thought of the opportunities that could result from providing families with the ingredients they needed to make and sell pupusas or pizzas. These families could donate 50% of the food to those in need and sell the other 50% to make some money.

This win-win strategy was implemented to address diverse needs, "we put together people who were thinking about the same thing and started figuring out how they could start the co-op. So a lot of Dedal (sewing co-op) and Eco-clean (cleaning co-op), Sabor (food co-op) and stuff like that, they started during the pandemic as a result of the work." In fact, Esperanza mentioned that many of the co-ops that are part of the solidarity economy ecosystem in the region started during the pandemic because "we were trying to say, okay, this is a crisis, but how we can convert this in an opportunity for people."

People noticed a need for elder care since older people in the neighborhoods were very isolated. "A lot of them needed to go and get prescription drugs, and they couldn't go, and they were more afraid to go out because of their age and stuff like that." Esperanza worked with the co-op Viviré to establish a group of immigrant nurses to care for the elderly.

Members from the co-op Dedal gathered to make masks and sell them using donated fabric. Esperanza recounted this as "a very beautiful mutual aid experience" and emphasized that "it was not just us trying to help the community, but all the people outside reaching out to us and helping us to help the community."

Constanza is also part of a cleaning cooperative that stayed open during the pandemic. Constanza learned to believe in her own co-op project and faced many challenges; registering her co-op was challenging because, for a long time, she did not have a social security number even though she had been paying taxes. Through community connections, she was able to get some help and successfully registered her co-op at City Hall.

Consuelo is proud to teach people to fight for what they believe in: "We're the people, and they have the power to get that through them. It's a challenge, but it does because when we were doing the licensing rallies at the state House, we would go inside, and the people that couldn't go inside or couldn't go had a lot of power showing up, and the amount of people that will come made a big difference." For Consuelo, "empowerment is a big word because when you empower somebody and when you teach somebody to become their own advocate, things will happen."

Emotional Support

Angela focused on listening and providing emotional support to teens, women, men, and mental health practitioners. She recounts a moment where she sat down with a therapist who needed support: "I listened to her. But in her eyes, I saw intense pain and I let her talk. I let her talk and when she finished talking, the only response I gave her was, and I said to her, *Hey, Diana, and who helps you?*"

Esperanza helped coordinate efforts to bring people of all ages together during the pandemic. "Children were getting really depressed because they didn't have much to do and stuff like that." There was a need for food, income, and a sense of belonging. In an effort to address all three, families made some pizzas to sell in the community and make some money, and then kids used the boxes as canvases for art contests.

Emotional support and community-building efforts have continued to flourish since the early days of the pandemic. For example, there is a crafting group for women to participate in arts and crafts and a community-empowerment group for those who want to connect with each other and provide moral support during difficult times.

Workshops and Trainings for Navigating the System

In addition to helping people fill out unemployment applications, food stamps applications, stimulus checks documents, mutual aid organizers have coordinated community education workshops on various topics such as:

- How to make a resume
- How to apply for a driver's license
- How to use zoom, set up an email address, and use other tech tools
- How to access your medical record and create a Mychart account
- How to become a license childcare provider, navigate finger printing and criminal checks
- CPR trainings
- Know your rights trainings

- ESL classes

They have also established language learning circles and opportunities for neighbors to access document translation resources at an affordable rate; Esperanza mentioned, "We partner up the Latinos that wanted to learn English with the other people that wanted to learn Spanish. It was a 17-month program, and we had a graduation. At the end of the day, the graduation, they each gave a speech on the language they learned. It was amazing."

Health

During high-covid, organizers prioritized community education efforts to address misinformation about the vaccine and connect people with resources. The network partnered with the local health center to offer additional health resources to the community.

"Every time that somebody called and said, we don't have health insurance, and we don't know what to do, stuff like that, we have the referral to this particular person who were helping them to actually get involved and get healthcare." (Interview with Esperanza)

<u>Domestic Violence Prevention and Support for Women</u>

For Consuelo, it means a lot to be able to support women; she often accompanies people to court, helps with translation, and stays with them during the most challenging parts of the process when they need to get a restraining order. Before joining the mutual aid network, Consuelo worked as a hospital outreach worker, supporting immigrant women victims of sexual and domestic violence access resources.

Esperanza said that various organizers worked to spread information on domestic violence prevention during the early days of the pandemic. They printed flyers in English and Spanish and collaborated with a Senator and the YMCA to share them.

Gender equality is essential for Aurora, who currently represents all the nannies in MA in a national campaign through the National Domestic Workers Alliance. Aurora is working to develop more women leaders; she has been involved in efforts to empower domestic workers (house cleaners, child care givers) by providing trainings and resources on their rights: "it doesn't matter whether they are a woman or a man, they still have the same rights." Workers can join Zoom trainings to learn about their legal rights and how to advocate for themselves in the workplace. Aurora mentioned, "I have 43 women right now in a chat who are nannies who worked in the home, who are being given all the training and information on where the resources are available."

Angela is also committed to empowering women. She often encourages women to read, learn, and explore crafts at home. She loves to see women start small businesses, earn their own income, and leverage their network connections to grow their own businesses.

Challenges and Barriers of Mutual Aid

<u>Burnout, exhaustion, and managing competing priorities</u>

Community organizers became first-responders, many of them felt like they were on call 24/7. Rosa recalled “if it was dawn, dusk, talking on the phone, coordinating, we would go shopping far away from here to prepare the baskets, to give to the volunteers, to prepare checks, to give them everything. The community was too much work.” Their non-profit

campaigns and tasks were put on the back burner, since they had to lead mutual aid pandemic work in Rinconcito.

Trust Building

One interviewee highlighted the dangers of "providing false hope to people about the capacity of the network." Consuelo mentioned that as a team member of the network, building trust has been very critical, and it has evolved over time in the community. As the network has flourished, new challenges have emerged. With that, it has been crucial to assess how mutual aid organizers can respond while also setting boundaries and taking care of themselves. The community became familiar with the network over time, but it took five years to build deep trust. "In every bag of food or box of food or test that we left at people's doors, we left a little flyer with our number," Consuelo mentioned. Now, the network has coffee hours where neighbors can stop by to chat, volunteer, or get help. One of the team members mentioned that every week, many neighbors want to visit the network's office: "There are three or four neighbors who want to join us every Friday, every week because they love it here. But sometimes we get so many neighbors, and because the space is small, we don't have many chairs."

<u>Self-care and Community Care</u>

During high-COVID periods, Aurora wore PPE when distributing food to protect herself as she was exposed to those who were ill. Esperanza noticed how people were getting burnt out in the community, and emphasized the need for recognizing the work community leaders were taking during the crisis.

“For us, it was just to let them know that we acknowledge all the work that they were doing in the community, that they were giving so much to the community that we want also them to feel like we can help each other. It's not just about us helping the community, but how we can help each other and kind of make us feel that our work is important” (interview with Esperanza)

Reciprocity was present in the community. Aurora explained, “We came together with our people and were able to share what we had. It didn't matter if we had a piece of bread, but that, I would cut that bread in half or how many families I had, and that's how we divided it. If we had eggs, we had three or four cartons, we divided that among us. And that was one of the nicest parts, that we did see a response from and I think the community was satisfied until now, people are grateful to us. I know we're not here for someone to thank us, because that comes from us doing it and this is the best thing we have right now.” Esperanza added that “Just to see people flourishing even in the middle of the pandemic and having dreams and putting together their experiences, that to me, was mutual aid. It was not just us helping the community, but the community returning all that gratitude and all the things. It makes us feel like it's worthwhile.”

Constanza values supporting each other: "Like spiderwebs, we are creating networks so that when the water comes, it does not sweep us." One of the network leads, Consuelo mentioned that they care first for each other as coordinators, "Self-care is important. We're there for each other. We support the neighbors as a group." Another member of the team, Angela, added, "We'll be careful as a team to look out for each other. We give each other our two weeks' holiday and if any of the colleagues, maybe they need a week, and if they're ill it's no problem either." Angela feels they take care of each other as a team living by their values, "Because that's our job, to take care of ourselves. Why? Because how are we going to take care of others if we are not capable of taking care of ourselves?" Aurora added that learning to take

care of herself and others was critical and led to collaboration within the community. "For me, it was very impressive how our community, how our people collaborated."

Opportunities for Collaboration

Many partnerships across grassroots advocacy, service organizations, existing coalitions, funders, community leaders, and other actors were born and strengthened during the pandemic. Aurora worked with the Coalition of Domestic Workers to redistribute stimulus checks from donors to families in need “because many domestic workers clean houses, they were out of work, and they were also victims of COVID” and needed groceries; “if there were five or six people who had donated stimulus checks, it was divided among those people.”

A local urban farm assisted with food distribution efforts; other community leaders focused on providing culturally relevant foods. A housing advocacy group did outreach on the MA eviction moratorium, and a community services organization fundraised to sustain the network. Some even worked with groups across the entire state, exchanging knowledge over the phone on how to set up mutual aid networks and serve their community. Organizers vividly remember those critical conversations where they decided to collectively take care of their community.

> *“There was a change in the room that people started to believe in organizations because that was the most beautiful thing, that they believed that they could be helped, that we did collaborate with them and we are still collaborating with them.”* (Interview with Aurora)

The spirit of collaboration and reciprocity has continued to strengthen over time in Riconcito. A team member of the network mentioned that neighbors can make a request in their mutual aid chats and another neighbor drops off what is needed at their door; “So it's a

wonderful connection. Yes. And we feel that there is a wealth within the community itself. We feel that the whole resource is within ourselves and that it can be a gold mine" (interview with Angela).

Lessons Learned

One organizer described the pandemic as a learning experience that allowed for more self-growth, empathy, and love, but at the same time, it was painful. "If I look at it from the negative side, well, I was one of the people who are alive because of a miracle, right?" (Interview with Angela).

Many interview participants agreed that COVID-19 allowed new connections to grow within the community; Esperanza mentioned, "I think we were able to get to know each other better. To understand that we are complementing our work. That if we work together for the same community, we can actually do great things." Aurora shared that getting to know each other was "the best thing that could have happened" as people got to know their neighbors, overcoming fear and, in some cases, even prejudice. Angela highlighted how the pandemic was an opportunity for people from different races and backgrounds, whether white, Salvadoran, or Colombian, to learn to trust each other.

> *"it was COVID that brought many families together with us as community leaders at that moment. So, that was one of the best parts."* (interview with Aurora)

Angela remembers that when the COVID lockdown ended and everything started to reopen, those involved in mutual aid figured these efforts had to keep going. People said, "May this [does] not stop here, may this network of mutual aid continue!"

Some women feel like the pandemic was an opportunity to unite and build something special for the community. Rosa felt like after high-covid, things had changed, and things *should change; she* believes "it is possible to build a better world, a different world." A world where people come together as a community (interview with Aurora). A world where people can feel and experience more empathy (interview with Angela). According to Esperanza, people gained an awareness of the challenges the community is facing and how neighbors can come together to build something different, "a different system."

Many of them have visions, hopes, and dreams about their community's future. They want to keep supporting their neighbors and empowering each other.

> *"We can do keep doing what we're doing. I mean, empowering the people, bringing people together, acknowledging people's ideas and sufferings and trying to instill hope and install safety in them, the more you involve the community and the people, your neighbors, teaching them what it is to receive and to give back, and everybody has something to give back. Everybody has something to give back to the community, to their neighbors."* (Interview with Consuelo)

Angela is proud of the interdependence and unity that is present in the network, "the network itself doesn't have a headquarters. The network is like us, 'the frutos movement' [referring to a migrant justice movement], we don't have we don't have headquarters because we embody the movement as the community."

<u>Reciprocity and Solidarity Continue in Rinconcito After the Pandemic</u>

The community of Rinconcito continues to face new and old challenges every day. Gentrification, wage theft, and unemployment, amongst other issues, require collaboration in the community to help neighbors get through difficult times. However, organizers are proud of

their network and the hope it brings to the community. For Consuelo, it is very significant to be able to provide a "safe space, a trusting environment where people feel comfortable to come and trust us," she added, "I always remember in the back of my head that one person, a neighbor in New York, made a difference and kept me alive. And so that's what I wanted to do, give back to them."

Angela feels privileged to serve and work with her neighbors daily (fig. 7). To her, mutual aid is a learning experience that allows people to open their hearts and listen to the community, "here we provide all services for free. It's true that we are given a stipend, but it's not much. That's the work we do because we don't stop. It's not just the two days we're in here (at the office), it goes on. I mean, you get more and more connected and you fall more in love with the work."

Figure 7. Title: Mutual Aid Community Conversation (Morales, J., 2024). Image reads "When will we be expelled? Where are we going? How much time do we have left to stay?[4]

[4] "The network facilitated five community conversations, asking participants, "What is your question about the future of our community and your role in it? where I sat and listened and created this art illustration of neighbors. The colors are coffee-inspired because the space is like a second home where you can Enjoy a cup of coffee with bread, the participants are in a comfortable space and like "*Here Comes the Flock!*" an isometric point of view of "Angler Market"

Esperanza believes that for mutual aid to work, "you have to make people independent, show people that they have something to give back, to contribute. So the human part of somebody, it transforms, it gets better." Angela mentioned that everything people contribute to their community helps sustain the neighborhood. Supporting local businesses is important, "If the people of Rinconcito leave, then everything will collapse," which is why it is so important to "stay in Solidarity with our neighbors and help them somehow to get through" (Interview with Consuelo).

Consuelo recognizes that their work is so critical, and it is getting harder every day, but getting through will take two things: "Having empathy and being an ally. So, we count on our allies in our community, and we have a lot. We have a chat of a group of allies who is composed of social workers, there's a lawyer, people who are with the community who are willing to step in to protect, because our job is to look out for our community, and their job is to make sure they get home safe to their family." The compassion, empathy, and shared love for the community keep all the members of the mutual aid network in Rinconcito motivated to support their neighbors; people want to stay in the community and help "everybody that comes here to try to make a better life" (Interview with Consuelo).

and "Plaza del Sol" area of Rinconcito is on the background where the neighbors are in the sky above like urban planners or architects making decisions on the future of Rinconcito". (Morales, J., 2024)

Chapter 5. Case Study 2: Longwater, Connecticut

Mutual aid does not have to be exclusive to one place; it can encompass connections and resources within a single network, multiple networks, and beyond. Drawing from the mutual aid experiences participants described in their interviews, this case describes how immigrant women have participated in feminist community care initiatives. For some participants, mutual aid is a core component of their culture in their places of origin. They led food distribution efforts before and during the pandemic, rallies, and participated in worker rights organizing and domestic violence response.

Some of the case study participants, including the network founder, moved to the US during the pandemic. When they arrived in Longwater, CT, they connected with other immigrants and refugee women who provided them with support and care, allowing them to get back on their feet and establish their own co-ops, businesses, and a nongovernmental organization. This created a domino effect where these organizers could leverage their experience and mutual aid work back home to continue helping women in their new community. The case study explores the experiences of the Angelic network members and dives into how they founded the Boundless Network, a transnational mutual aid network in CT and Oaxaca.

Background

In New England, Connecticut has a population of 3,675,069 people (*US Census Bureau QuickFacts*, n.d.). While 63.3% of its residents identify as White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, 13.1% identify as Black, 18.6% as Hispanic/Latino, and 5.2% as Asian (*US Census Bureau QuickFacts*, n.d.). Regarding income and poverty, CT has some of the highest levels of income

inequality in the US (“Charting CT,” 2024); the median household income is $93,760, and 10.3% of the population lives in poverty conditions. Additionally, 15.4% of the population is foreign born and 23% speak a language other than English at home (*US Census Bureau QuickFacts*, n.d.).

Longwater is a city in Connecticut with a legacy of slavery and segregation. Many enslaved people were forced to build the wealthy institutions that continue to drive racial inequities, including income disparities and lack of opportunities for Black and brown families to this day (*Our Fight*, n.d.). In recent years, many working-class neighborhoods have experienced gentrification, and new development have displaced families from their homes. The pandemic brought many financial challenges to the residents of Longwater. Many lost their jobs, and demand for emergency housing services skyrocketed (CT*DataHaven*, 2022). Renters, women, and immigrants faced many challenges during the high-covid era and continue to support one another today.

How Were Community Organizers Impacted by COVID-19?

Originally from Guatemala, Patricia is a mother, organizer, and business owner. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she worked at a laundromat. For Patricia, isolation was the most challenging part of getting the virus, but her pre-existing conditions also made her COVID-19 experience more severe. Patricia contracted the virus six times; her family was sick for months, and she experienced much panic. She continues to deal with the effects of long COVID in 2025.

Julia, a single mother from Mexico, remembers the pandemic as a time of fear, thinking, "I have my children; I don't want to die because you see lots of people dying everywhere." She was afraid of getting COVID and the vaccine; she remembers seeing much fear in the

community, especially at schools. For Julia, "COVID was another challenge the community had to face and keep working." She used to work in food service, and her workplace stayed open; the line of customers was long, and she was forced to work overtime to keep up with the demand, as many food service places had closed. Her boss gave the employees 3 masks for two weeks, "I thought it was disgusting, because I mean, you sneeze and you get all that on you, but it's like they were scarce at the beginning too. They were very expensive at the beginning and there were about 15 of us employees, so I think it was going to be expensive." Right when the pandemic began, Julia's kids' dad got deported, one of her children started middle school, and she felt like she just had to keep going, "As an immigrant and a housewife, you have to do everything."

At the same time, almost 3,000 miles away, Cecilia and Dalia faced their own challenges in Oaxaca. Dalia, a community organizer, therapist, and anthropologist, was starting a new job and finishing her thesis when things began to shut down. However, not everyone could afford to stay home, and not everyone wanted to: "there were neighbors who kept going to work, and there were people who kept going out," she mentioned. According to Dalia, people experienced the pandemic in different ways. Social class was a critical factor that shaped those experiences, "many people were afraid of going outside, and people received funding to get groceries, but they would order them online, like having the food delivered somewhere, but nobody wanted to volunteer to distribute food."

Another challenge Dalia highlighted was access to medical care. Many people continued to work because they could not afford to stop. " They exposed themselves, got sick, and they could not rest or relax or anything." She remembered, "There were people who were street

vendors, who would faint on the street because they had a fever, they had the virus, and they couldn't even think about going to the doctor, because they needed money and needed to eat."

"So, I think that it was experienced in different ways, because someone might say: Well, I lost my job, okay, but I could stay at your house and you still had food, but there are people who didn't even have that. So, I think it shapes health. I think that many people who died also died because of their social class." (interview with Dalia)

Cecilia, who also lived in Oaxaca at the time, initially felt okay when the pandemic began but, at the same time, was navigating the loss of her husband and trying to figure out how she would sustain herself and her child after her husband's passing. She felt blessed to have food, shelter, savings, and time to spend with her kid. However, when her savings ran out, she began to worry. Cecilia also saw many people struggling to access food during the pandemic.

In their community, domestic violence (DV) became very noticeable. Dalia mentioned that the emergency response groups worked with women, but reporting processes for DV incidents faced systemic delays, "There was no response. There was nowhere to refer them from the hospitals." With confinement measures, men were forced to spend longer hours at home, putting women already in abusive relationships more at risk: "If she was already in a bad relationship, there's more room for some moment of violence to erupt." Another issue that became clear was that men utilized their power to decide who got to leave the house: "Men were the ones going out to buy things, that they were the ones taking risks, that they were the ones going to the supermarket. They were exercising their power to be the only ones going out. So, once again, the ones who remain isolated and locked away are the women, but it is not because they want to serve and help. They're using the power they have to decide who comes out of isolation." Moreover, "there were several dynamics like that, which became stronger. Issues of sexual assault, as well as neighbors breaking into neighbors' houses. Young women, if

the mother is a single mother and went out to bring food, someone breaking into her house to assault them. So, there was a lot of that, too. People already knew that people were in the house, and there were opportunities for malice," Dalia concluded.

Community Care Initiatives

Food Distribution During the Pandemic

Patricia found a local mutual aid collective online that distributed groceries to needy families and signed up for a grocery box. The collective would gather weekly to distribute groceries so people did not have to leave their homes. She also offered to participate in the food distribution efforts, knowing how much of a difference it had made to her, “It was a relief to be able to receive (food) because where I worked at the time did not provide paid time off.” For Patricia, helping her neighbors has always been a priority: “We have never said no to anyone who has asked us for help. So, for us, it was essential (to support) as a family, and we still do it. We try to stick together and always help others.”

Cecilia and Dalia spoke about the food distribution initiatives they led in Oaxaca before migrating to Connecticut. Cecilia mentioned that their childhood home became a distribution center, where she and her sister, Dalia, unloaded trucks full of donations and packaged grocery boxes for families.

“WhatsApp groups started to pop up asking, "What can we do?" I had always been involved in organizations because I studied Psychology and I have been involved in providing psychological support to women, survivors of violence, but also to victims of torture, survivors of torture. So, I was officially part of a support network for torture survivors in an organization in Oaxaca. So, through that, they contacted me to hold meetings about what we could do for the community. So, I was helping with logistics, where the food supplies were going to be collected, which were the collection centers.” (Interview with Dalia)

Dalia would coordinate efforts to assemble grocery boxes and move them from one distribution center to the collection centers and the homes where they would be delivered. Her job as a mutual aid logistics coordinator entailed working with Comites de Vida Vecinal or Neighborhood life committees, "I was in contact with the committees, to send the food, see if they had already distributed their packages, confirm that people had received them and check that all the food parcels were sent and that the deliveries were transparent." Dalia added, "I offered my house as a collection center and for them to bring food. Then I also invited my neighbors to come and collect the food, and they were going to my house."

Cecilia mentioned that people would bring diapers, hand sanitizer, facemasks, and more supplies to their house, saying, "The house had really already become a support center without really being one." One day, a politician showed up with some food donations and small bags. Another time, they were notified that a truck of donations from Sinaloa was coming, and they needed help unloading the truck at Cecilia's house since she lived on a main street. Cecilia said, "When I arrived, it was a trailer, it wasn't a truck, it was a trailer with things. We had to call our family and get women into that trailer. There must still be photos somewhere, unloading oil, sardines, and beans. We had to rent tables, which, in the end, we were never charged for, to pack food boxes with the family. We had to organize ourselves like you are going to pack food boxes for children, you are going to pack food boxes for adults, or you are going to pack boxes of cleaning products because we couldn't keep up. Vans would come out with white plastic bags full of food for people. So, today, when I see it, I say: I can't believe it; I mean, how did we do it? there really weren't any, there were about six men I think and all the rest were all women. I think we were already putting together the last food boxes sitting down, and I was

almost at my last breath." Cecilia says much of their mutual aid experience from Oaxaca informs what they do today in Longwater.

Trainings, Empowerment, and Organizing Opportunities

In Longwater, when Patricia and her family became members of the local mutual aid collective, her husband and son began delivering food to elderly neighbors. Through the collective, she met a woman who introduced her to Angelic, an organization dedicated to empowering immigrants and refugees through trainings and organizing.

About Angelic

Concerned about the limited education and work opportunities available to refugees and immigrants in Connecticut, the co-founders of Angelic established a training center adjacent to a cafe to provide resources for immigrant women. Angelic's community cafe helps fund their efforts and offers a space for gathering and organizing. Since its inception, Angelic has trained over 120 women, providing 100 hours of paid classes, cafe work experience, career coaching, and ESL support. When Patricia initially heard about Angelic, they were looking for new fellows to join their 6-month leadership development program; she never imagined what would come to fruition after joining the program.

Patricia, Dalia, and Julia met at Angelic through the fellowship program. It has been a space for them to learn, grow, and build community. Patricia mentioned she started at Angelic in 2021; she was able to take their English as a second language classes, computer science, and cooking classes, "It's six months of training from Monday to Friday, and they pay attention to each one fellow, they give you the attention you need to get started. They interview you to figure out what you are looking for; if, for example, my thing was cooking, then if I needed to

get a license to open my business, they help you open your business. Also, the health and safety people are in the classes, and they continue to guide you; even after four years, they continue to see how my business is going and how they can continue to help me. According to Julia, "At Angelic, you feel the affection, you feel the empathy. So Angelic, is a very, very beautiful, respectful, equitable, quality place with the community, more than anything with the immigrants and refugees."

Julia started at Angelic in 2023, "the mission of Angelic is for women to come out with a different way of thinking, not wanting to work for McDonald's or restaurants like that, but to start working on something you like." She could take classes on Zoom, participate in art healing workshops, take public speaking lessons, and worker's rights and law training. She was excited to share the tech skills she learned at Angelic with her peers and believes that "We all have a gift, we all have knowledge, wisdom, so we explore what we know how to do. And there are many women who work from home, so Angelic has supported us a lot and sees us as community leaders."

Angelic is incubating co-ops to help those who were graduating from their program start their own business. Much of what Julia learned at Angelic and her network allowed her to establish a Mexican food co-op where she could leverage her ancestral cooking knowledge. Patricia started her own food business when she graduated and often collaborates with other fellows when she gets large orders or when people in her community need work. Cecilia, who also graduated from the program, started her cleaning co-op. Cecilia said her friends helped her make flyers and business cards and do outreach. Cecilia remembered that "At that time I wasn't thinking about a cooperative, it wasn't like what it is today with Limpia Lindo, it was simply

about having a job." Julia added that the fellows, "support each other in growing, it's the good leaders who help us learn what we teach, the little we know and we learn from other colleagues, because each one has to teach another." They have a council of alumnas who take care of each other and especially support incoming students.

Dalia started her fellowship shortly after she moved to CT from Oaxaca, "I applied for this program and that's what this program is for, so that you can take that break in your life that the economy doesn't allow you, because you work and work and work. So, how to be able to have that pause and reflect on what you are doing and rethink what you want to do. So, they, as always, have this question: What is your dream?." After struggling with depression, she had an opportunity to remember her lifelong dream at Angelic, "I remembered I had this dream of working, founding an organization with women, and then, I started to reconnect with it."

Dalia remembered seeing transnational organizations in California and hoping to build something like that here., "I was so inspired by the projects in California, because there are great stories about how land and territory have been reclaimed, how people in California continue to hold their positions (cargos) in the community in some way and stay connected." She added "When I observed the organizations here, I said: But the work here with immigrants is like helping them achieve the American dream, that is, assimilating, forgetting about their country, their homeland. I would say: If I were to do something, I would like it to be something that encouraged people to return, encouraged them to reconnect with their culture, encouraged them to recognize their roots and not simply to want to assimilate or strengthen the system." Inspired by her dream and the work of organizers in California, Dalia leveraged the resources at Angelic, her experiences as an organizer, and her knowledge as a trained

psychologist to establish Red Mariposa, a non-profit dedicated to supporting Indigenous and Latina women in the US and Mexico. Her friends from Angelic helped her launch the Red Mariposa and coordinate the activities and organizing work of the network.

About the Red Mariposa

Cecilia describes the Red Mariposa as her sister's dream, which they have had the opportunity to support. "We kind of joined her dream. Her idea is, first of all, to work with women who live with violence, to help them in the first instance through therapies, workshops so that they can learn." The Red Mariposa coordinators provide training and support for women to identify the violence and help those who want to get out of violent situations both in Oaxaca and in Connecticut, "Our biggest dream is to set up a shelter in Oaxaca to be able to have ancestral systems of physical restoration for women, such as Temazcal (Ancestral healing steam bath), handmade soaps, massages, and therapies. That is the main dream, and we are starting with the women we have close to us." The Red Mariposa also provides traditional healing practices, talks, and programs to survivors of gender-based violence, "There are programs for five women where we work with them through the emotional part first, recognizing violence, grow an awareness, learn how to defend themselves and know that they are not alone."

The Red Mariposa also wants to provide well-paying jobs for women. "Oaxaca is a state that, unfortunately for us, still experiences too much violence, where women have no opportunities." Cecilia mentioned that she and Dalia are committed to supporting women in Oaxaca, "we bring many clothes from Oaxaca that we sell here. We pay the artisans fair prices, and we try to get people here to pay fair prices. And the money we collect goes to the

network's funds and what we need. We've even had some T-shirts hand-embroidered, again by Oaxacan hands. So, it's part of the commitment that a woman can sell us three blouses and that maybe for us it's not much, but for her it can be a month's worth of food, of being able to feed her children." Cecilia talked about the importance of recovering the craftmanship on Oaxacan artisans, "it is part of what we, well of the dream that we hope to achieve one day and that little by little, step by step it is being achieved."

Though the network was Dalia's brainchild, Dalia took on a leadership position at Angelic. Now, Julia and Cecilia have been leading its work. Cecilia mentioned that for her, "it is a great commitment to defend women's rights, always. Now more than ever, my commitment is and always will be to put the safety of women first, always."

Julia talked about how "We are going to help each other, and there are always many chats where a woman has experienced violence and needs shelter, and then they communicate with the network, for example. The network helps with shelter and information, and former Angelic students help with food. Julia added that the network also offers help in emergency situations when people are looking to move apartments or find a new place to live.

The Red Mariposa has facilitated healing opportunities such as making drums to play music, Temazcal visits, fire burning, and opportunities to process grief and trauma. The coordinators had a week-long retreat where they learned about healing practices. "We all learned a lot about healing as in individual, global, but also society. As people, we can have our truth and also know that everyone's feelings matter, but how they affect different issues, individually, as a group, and as a society, and how to try to solve them."

Challenges and Issues

Navigating Burnout

During the pandemic, Cecilia experienced exhaustion and pain for weeks after unloading food donations and packing grocery boxes. For Dalia, it has been critical to accept she cannot do everything and be everywhere all the time: "maybe I can take a moment to say: Okay, I couldn't (organize) this week, I'm going to set aside a day of the week when I'm going to catch up, read the agenda, and determine what I can contribute and what I can't contribute. And also trust that there will be more people and that people will rotate. If we all give 100% right now, at the end of the year there won't be anyone left with energy."

Dalia mentioned that organizing work can be very demanding; people feel like, "If you don't come, we're going to kick you out of the chat. No, if you don't come to the meeting, we're not going to give you the emergency number. If you don't come to the meeting, we're not going to give you information about what happened at the meeting. In other words, it's like this demand to be present, which comes more from the ego of the organizers and this need to control people, but it's unsustainable." For her, it is essential to recognize everyone's boundaries and talk about people's capacity and well-being. Finding more sustainable ways to organize, including self-care, is really critical. Dalia highlighted that "it can be exhausting and draining for women organizers to want to do so much. Women should not feel obligated to give 100% everywhere all the time. Wanting to be good in everything is a practice that hurts us and it is okay for women to not want to be in spaces that demand so much all the time. Sometimes women will want to focus more on family, other times on community, other times on work, and it is okay."

Advocacy, Resistance, and Assimilation

The heavy burdens of organizing and its toll on women's bodies stem from deeper systemic issues. For example, Cecilia felt angry seeing the lack of support from the Mexican government during the pandemic. Julia began her journey as a community organizer through her own experience surviving abuse in the workplace. She has participated in rallies and training, yet she feels that "in some spaces, I am listened to, and I have leadership, in others, I don't, and it's sad. Sometimes, among Hispanics ourselves, it's like power issues and stuff, and I don't like that very much."

The same system that fails people forces them into assimilation. Dalia remembers that "In Oaxaca, you fight with your whole body," but in the US, "the organizers, even though they're Latino, they're already very rooted in white practices, like they've assimilated." She spoke about how her Indigeneity and her roots keep her grounded in a system that erases people or forces them to erase themselves, "It's a huge internal struggle. It's not easy emotionally. I think I feel very lucky to have grown up in Oaxaca and to have had the opportunity to come here as an adult, with a lot of grounding already under my feet, because I do understand that it must be very difficult not to have that grounding and to be overwhelmed by all that questioning." She mentioned that as people try to assimilate, they distance themselves from who they really are and what they stand for. For Dalia, rejecting capitalism, the American dream, and consumerism is part of her roots. She is proud of where she comes from, "for me, presenting myself was with my embroidered blouses, with my traditional dress, with my braids, that's what it dressing up means to me. So, I continued to do that and sometimes women, friends, would say to me: "Hey, but you have to look more professional so

that people respect you," And what does that mean? People have to learn, students have to learn that someone who is a professional can also look like me. And that a person with embroidered clothes and braids can also be a professional."

Gender Inequity and Violence

Cecilia mentioned that no crisis should ever silence women, and people should recognize that "the power that men exercise is precisely because the woman feels that she cannot and that nobody is going to support her." For her, as a domestic violence survivor it is very important to support women who are not able to leave abusive situations as well as women who have been able to leave, and those who are fighting for the rights of women.

"Unfortunately, we live in a horrible patriarchy that is a disgrace to be in and that has forced us to defend our leadership as women, our position and the respect that we deserve as women. So, it shouldn't be like that, but we always have to be defending it. So, it's difficult, but at the same time it's a motivation to keep doing it." (Interview with Cecilia)

Dalia mentioned that these systems of oppression are still present in organizing spaces that lack a gender perspective: "there is harassment, there is discrimination, there is all the micro-sexism that arises and that one is seeing. One knows about it, one is aware of it, and people say to you: *Don't say anything because we have a crisis right now and right now we can't be dealing with women's complaints*. Women have to fight another fight within the fight and deal with so many commitments and responsibilities that drain their vital energy." That is why Dalia works to create spaces through the network where women can recharge that vital energy.

For Cecilia, being there for other women, helping them, listening to them, and collaborating with them is invaluable. She mentioned that she is committed to defending women's rights and their voices and fighting for transformative justice: "We need to create awareness to dismantle the patriarchy even in solidarity spaces."

Self-care and Community Care

For Dalia, providing opportunities for women to recharge and foster collective care is critical, "it's about sharing, giving each other that care, that attention, that affection, and remembering that we also deserve to be cared for and to take care of ourselves." Julia believes that Latinos are very strong, and the challenges people face make them stronger, but holding so much can also be detrimental. Patricia mentioned that for her, having more self-love is important, and it is something she had to learn in her adult life, "in our countries, they don't teach us how to love ourselves properly. So, I have two daughters, and I want them to love themselves first before anything else. And I instill that in them."

In addition to self-care, community care is essential for people to survive and thrive. Dalia's instinct as an organizer is to "create spaces for co-existence" as an antidote to violence, "we have to create or we have to make strategies to be safe, but not isolated." For example, during the pandemic it was important for people to check in with one another and rotate "making it a point of intention which family is taking care of others, let's check that we are all well and maybe I'll spend a week at my aunt's house, who is also taking care of herself, and we can swap houses as families to keep each other emotionally and mentally cared for," Dalia added.

Patricia does extensive outreach about Angelic and the Red Mariposa. "That's why I focus a lot on letting the community know that these resources exist so that these women can be happier and healthier. I mean, it's all related because I've had pre-existing conditions for 20 years, and these last four years, I can say, have been my best years of health because I feel motivated."

Lessons Learned

Cecilia's experience helping out after earthquakes through disaster relief initiatives, supporting and feeding organizers in education justice campaigns, and working in a co-op town in Mexico has taught her that "solidarity is fundamental in any area of our life... it is one of the most important values in any business, in any company, in any circle, even in the community; it is one of the most important values for me." She has noticed that "sometimes you receive more from the people for the people than from the government itself" and mutual aid can be something beautiful.

Julia mentioned, "if everyone felt love, there wouldn't be so many problems. From the smallest things, like how to support each other so that other people grow, there would be no wars or any of that ugly stuff we see."

Dalia highlighted the importance of being aware of how being resilient and overworked all the time can impact people's lives: "We are wearing ourselves out generationally, and the way forward will be to unlearn that and learn what it is possible to be well, what it is possible to be healthy."

Patricia believes that "Together, anything is possible. One person alone cannot do things like support the community; it takes a group, and I feel that support is what we women need most. Sometimes, we leave because of the family we come from, sometimes because of fear, right? But that's the learning. It has shown me that together, we can do it. I always tell them from the bottom of my heart that only together will we do it, yes."

Strengthening Solidarity Initiatives

Cecilia remembers how the dream of the co-op village where she used to work as an accountant in Oaxaca came to life and how the values of unity, respect, and reciprocity can strengthen a community and help build local wealth. Cecilia dreams of helping her sister establish a women's shelter and growing the network. She also wants to create more opportunities for immigrant women to join her cleaning co-op.

Dalia wants to "create pods to follow up with each other, call each other, and monitor how everyone is doing" and establish a collective strategy for sustaining the work: "One organization leads for three months, another organization leads for another three months, a different one for three months, and we keep that pace."

"It's important that people stay in touch. We have several groups. Several chats where we talk to each other and any job opportunity, anything that comes up, seminars, forums. We go to all of that. Now that they've started with cooperatives, we're getting involved too and we're inviting all the colleagues to follow suit. I've also given work to some colleagues. Yeah. That's also what we do, we give opportunities." (Interview with Patricia)

Patricia mentioned that sometimes the people who have the most resources do not want to help organize because they are too busy, "But there are also people who don't have as much and yes, I feel that they donate their time or whatever, or look for ways to help people."

Relationality

Patricia has met so many people since 2020 and has noticed so much love in her community and how they have been able to help people get through and grow, "It's not that we are going to be providing them with a paycheck every month. No, we have to push them to also consider their future." Patricia's friendships and the connections she made through organizing and Angelic have empowered and comforted her, "I feel a very sincere friendship from all my peers and all the people who are not peers, but whom I have met because they have been in the fight, because they have been in the struggle. So, I feel one with all those people, I feel very calm and grateful to be able to be part of all this. Yes, I will never deny that they have completely changed my life."

Dalia talked about cultivating relationships slowly and confidently, providing support and information when people need her. She felt like "The relationships between people, I think it feels very cold here, like a very impersonal environment, very strange. And over there (in Oaxaca) it's like everything is very warm, a lot of togetherness, a lot of love, a lot of partying, a

lot of passion for reflection, for discussion, for debate, like you fight with your whole body and here it's like it's very cold."

Dreams and Collective Futuring

Dalia sees a need for survivors of Indigenous violence to access traditional Indigenous healing resources, “I would like us to have a base in Oaxaca, to have a shelter that is beautiful, that is a house with traditional architecture, where women can learn trades and be like a halfway house for women who are leaving experiences of violence. And at the same time, if they make traditional clothes and everything there, they can send them here and we can sell them here and there and we can employ women who are survivors of violence in the shop and they can exchange recipes for traditional medicine, they can teach each other on Zoom or whatever, have that exchange and that reconnection also with traditional forms of healing,”

Patricia is excited to see the businesses flourish, **“**the idea is that the business grows so that we can employ the girls who come after me, that their dream is to open their own business and we can help them get started, so that they see that it is possible. And we always talk about that with the Angelic Network, they know that we are going to support everyone who comes”

Chapter 6. Discussion

As scholars and interview participants highlighted, the COVID-19 pandemic was "just another crisis" for already stressed and overburdened populations (Carstensen et al., 2021; interviews with Julia and Cecilia). While the response from government institutions was not as effective as it should have been, the community-led mutual aid efforts were able to meet immediate needs and recognize the challenges people faced throughout the pandemic. Carstensen et al. (2021) noted that years of groundwork laid the foundation for effective grassroots organizing and collaboration during the pandemic, as women assumed leadership roles in their community to serve and care for sick and overburdened neighbors.

All interview participants shared an interest in community care and civic engagement but within the participant pool, individuals have different backgrounds, values, and experience mutual aid in unique ways; there is no single story. The participants were born in various communities across Latin America, including Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, and Puerto Rico. One of the participants mentioned she identifies as Indigenous Zapotec and does not identify as Latina (Dalia); another participant also spoke about her Zapotec ancestry but identifies as Latina (Cecilia); other participants see themselves as part of the Latino/Hispano community in the US (Angela, Julia, Patricia, Consuelo, Cecilia). Many of them came to the US territory as young adults. While their experiences cannot be generalized to the entire Latina immigrant population, residents from their countries, or communities of origin, their nuanced stories highlight cultural values and identity components that have been critical to their community care and mutual aid work.

During the interviews, seven spoke about their motherhood (Consuelo, Rosa, Cecilia, Julina, Patricia, Angela, Constanza), and two indicated they are single mothers (Julia, Cecilia). Multiple participants shared their current or previous experience in service jobs, including house-cleaning, food service, mental health service, accounting, and public health outreach. Five described their work as incubating or starting co-operatives (Esperanza, Patricia, Constanza, Julia, Cecilia). All participants spoke about their community organizing and mutual aid initiatives during their interviews; some of these experiences preceded the COVID-19 pandemic and took place in their communities of origin. At least eight participants described gender justice initiatives they had participated in or led in great detail (Consuelo, Angela, Esperanza, Aurora, Dalia, Cecilia, Julia, Patricia), and five of them shared their experiences advocating for workers' rights (Aurora, Julia, Patricia, Esperanza, Angela). Four participants expressed concerns about housing inequity as a result of the pandemic and gentrification (Consuelo, Angela, Aurora, Rosa), and nine of them talked about the challenges with food affordability and accessibility during the pandemic (Cecilia, Consuelo, Aurora, Julia, Constanza, Esperanza, Rosa, Angela, Patricia).

Mutual Aid Networks in Practice

Women-led mutual aid initiatives based on generosity, abundance, inclusion, and reciprocity saved countless lives across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sitrin, 2020). Some practitioners and scholars believe that the mutual aid networks that emerged during the pandemic were better poised to take care of the people than the government itself (Sitrin, 2020). This can be attributed to mutual aid being an antidote against dependence on institutions and government (Spade, 2020), as it recognizes and leverages community cultural

wealth (Yosso, 2005) and experiential knowledge. Despite the responsibilities associated with actively participating in a mutual aid network, solidarity efforts encourage people to take collective ownership over broader systemic issues (Spade, 2020), creating opportunities for community empowerment and self-determination.

For Aurora, her local mutual aid network is "a resource and the right arm of her community." Julia sees the network of Angelic as "a great example of support in the community," and Angela thinks mutual aid is an "opportunity to heal and learn from the people themselves." For many participants of this study, mutual aid is a way of life. Listening to their neighbors, distributing food, caring for sick ones, and sharing information deepens their connections to their community, weaving networks of reciprocity and care.

Collective Care and Power

Feminist Solidarity and Resistance

Sweetman (2013) defines feminist solidarity as "the principle of mutual support between individuals, groups and organisations working on gender equality and women's right." In contrast, bell hooks argues what it takes to build a solidarity feminist movement:

> *"Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment"* (bell hooks, 1986)

Study participants such as Dalia, Consuelo, Constanza, and Cecilia are building a feminist solidarity moment anchored in mutual support. As survivors of abuse and community leaders, they are challenging the practice of victimization by fighting for an inclusive feminist movement

that destroys the patriarchy even in so-called “solidarity spaces.” Consuelo and Dalia have supported and empowered women for many years; they have worked with Indigenous women, poor women, migrant women, and across racial groups. The work of their mutual aid networks highlighted in the case studies of this thesis, where solidarity justice becomes a practical normative principle to live by, exemplifies the Solidarity Justice Paradigm of Ferguson (2009).

Accompanying women to court, teaching them new skills, creating crafting and healing circles, and supporting them in developing their own businesses are all examples of mutual aid embodying feminist values. These initiatives also recognize the barriers migrants face when trying to access government benefits (Estrella-luna & Loh, 2021; Rosinska & Pellerito, 2022), as well as reproductive and mental health resources. Organizers in MA and CT have worked to ensure women who need help, can access it through the network regardless of race, immigration status, income, and other socioeconomic factors.

Local and Transnational Liberation, Justice, and Healing

In her interview, Dalia spoke about how important it is for women to heal and recharge; she quoted author Marcela Lagarde on how care work affects women. While it can be rewarding to take care of others, women can feel drained, burnt out, and without any accessible opportunities to recharge. Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2003) discussed how market economies are sustained by nurturing activities. This layer of the economy that makes the public and private sectors run is often invisible, perpetuating cycles of extraction and oppression. However, the seeds and values (cooperation, sharing, care, solidarity) of a new economy can be found at the heart of this invisible layer.

Sweetman (2013) argues, "Creating opportunities for women to come together and simultaneously provide for themselves and their dependents while in each other's company is an important act of supporting the growth of feminist solidarity." The fellowship program at Angelic allows women to learn new skills, pursue their dreams, and start new businesses to sustain their livelihoods. The Red Mariposa organizers started with a dream of creating an organization to support survivors of violence and artisans in Oaxaca. This network emerged from the organizing work at the Angelic program and supports women's liberation in CT and Oaxaca through traditional healing practices and economic opportunities.

Similarly, women in Riconcito are fighting for better working conditions for domestic workers, including nannies, and helping women establish their own co-ops. For many participants, the pandemic was an opportunity where they were able to stay employed through their co-ops or establish new co-ops or small businesses to secure an income. Establishing a co-op with friends and colleagues reduces the financial risk and administrative burdens immigrant women would otherwise face if they tried to start a business on their own. These alternative models, however, are nothing new. Cecilia discussed her experience working as an accountant in the field of natural resource management in the mountains of Oaxaca. In this region, an alliance of eight towns operates solely through worker-owned co-operatives, which Cecilia referred to as "community enterprises." Her experiences of solidarity and worker advocacy from her time in Oaxaca inform her current role in the Red Mariposa, through which she continues to support the craftsmanship and businesses of fellow Oaxacan women, as well as her cleaning co-op in Longwater. Schmid (2020) documented "kin-based" enterprises in the US Southwest where immigrant women have leveraged their lived experiences of cooperativism to

develop alternative transnational agriculture business models. These alternatives, rooted in trust and coalitions, not only help women sustain their livelihoods as immigrants but also empower them to secure fulfilling jobs that are safe, well-compensated, and fulfilling.

Recovering, Rebuilding, and Re-imagining

Mutual Aid as a Transformative Resilience Practice

Some participants mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis that created many opportunities. People learned to work together, redistribute resources, find gifts and talents in the community, and develop new projects. For Esperanza, the pandemic was a time of opportunity, during which people flourished and pursued their dreams through mutual aid.

Creativity and collective problem-solving amidst a health crisis brought endless possibilities for community members. Things changed with the pandemic, and people chose not to go back to the systems that had already failed them before. Instead, they built something new. Whether through block captain or pod systems, grocery distribution efforts for the elderly and sick, and neighbor check-ins, neighbors activated and developed creative solutions to critical and sometimes life-threatening problems. Referring to Mexico City, García and Gravante (2023) stated that "the pandemic has made evident the urgent necessity to restore the city's collectivistic social imagination as a locus for solidarity, social interactivity, and empathy." However, these opportunities for collaboration and transformation were not limited to a specific location- community engagement strengthened during the pandemic in migrant communities (Verbena et al., 2023). As discussed in our previous report, mutual aid was the

engine that powered civic infrastructure efforts during the pandemic in a community in eastern MA (Loh & Casasola, 2024).

Opportunities for Sustaining Mutual Aid

"We need groups and networks that do not disappear after the peak of the crisis, but instead become part of an ongoing, sustained mobilization with the capacity to support people and keep building pressure for bigger wins." (Spade, 2020)

One of the study participants, Angela, dreams of seeing many more mutual aid networks emerge, where people heal together and listen and support each other. Cecilia wants to welcome more immigrant women to her co-op and collaborate with Dalia and the Red Mariposa organizers to establish a shelter for women in Oaxaca. Consuelo wants to continue "empowering the people, bringing people together, acknowledging people's ideas and sufferings and trying to install hope and install safety in them, the more you involve the community and the people, your neighbors, teaching them what it is to receive and to give back, and everybody has something to give back."

Through self-care and collective care, participants have already been able to sustain their pandemic mutual aid initiatives for years. Preventing dependency and burnout at its core is essential to ensuring the sustainable growth of mutual aid efforts during and before the next crisis. Many of them highlighted that when COVID-19 cases began to decrease, people in their communities continued to struggle for various reasons, including unemployment, rising housing costs, food accessibility, and affordability, among others. Community organizers in CT and MA are nurturing new leadership in the community, empowering others to participate, and fostering self-determination.

Study Limitations and Challenges

Methodological Limitations

The first limitation of this study was the predetermined eligibility criteria participants had to meet. Since demographics were a significant part of these criteria, the interviewee pool did not include mutual aid organizers from various ethnicities, cultural background, and genders. This restriction limited the overall scope of the study. Although I considered broadening the scope of the eligibility criteria to include additional perspectives on how the mutual aid networks emerged in each community of study, making those changes would call for a reassessment of the initial research questions. The findings presented in this thesis are only reflective of the lived experience of the ten women who participated in this study and cannot be generalized to broader populations.

The second limitation was related to how and where interviews were conducted. Initially, I had planned to meet with participants in person but offered the option to meet over zoom if they preferred. Multiple participants voiced concerns about leaving their homes to meet in person during the first two months of 2025 when I was conducting the interviews. I found that the in-person interviews I conducted were much longer than many of the Zoom interviews, and participants were more open to reflecting and providing insights about their experiences when we shared a coffee in a safe space during the interview than when we spoke virtually.

Another limitation was related to back and forth language translation and sense-making of the experiences participants shared with me in their preferred language. Languages have nuances and colloquial terms that are unique to each culture. In fact, linguistic diversity is very

common in Spanish and identifying the nuances of Salvadoran, Colombian, and Guatemalan Spanish was critical for translating quotes and stories accurately. Even when things were translated with the outmost care, some ideas may have gotten lost or misinterpreted. To address this limitation, I provided all research participants an opportunity to review the research findings and quotes I aimed to include in this thesis prior to its publication. While this step was time-consuming (conducting interviews in Spanish, translating and analyzing them in English, and translating them back to Spanish for their review), it increased the validity of my findings and allowed participants to provide final consent, knowing the context in which their stories would be documented.

Ethical Considerations

It is important to acknowledge that all study participants had provided consent to have their names, affiliation, other identifiable information included in this thesis. However, for safety reasons, their identifiable information was anonymized and replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Moreover, participants spoke about the current challenges their communities are facing, they shared their feelings, concerns, and information on new mutual aid efforts they are implementing. Due to the sensitivity of that information and to safeguard participants, those insights could not be included in this thesis.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the research findings and limitations of this study, researchers may consider the following recommendations for future work. First and foremost, allowing participants to review draft case studies and provide feedback on those can verify the accuracy of the data and ensure the descriptive narrative tells their stories in a way that resonates with their lived experiences.

Future studies on pandemic resilience should include insights from evaluation studies of city or state pandemic response initiatives such as vaccination campaigns, funding streams, rent moratoriums, and other pandemic relief aid. Coupling policy evaluation with civic-led pandemic response efforts can shed light on the gaps in government programs and how organizers mobilized to address those specific gaps in a town or state.

Researchers aiming to partner with grassroots organizations and collaborate with vulnerable groups for a thesis, report, or project should focus on building trusted relationships before the study begins. Archiving and documenting are critical practices for remembrance, but they must occur with consent and trust from frontline communities. Resisting extractive research practices by inquiring about the community's needs, capacity, and hopes instead of approaching them with demands and more work can help establish the foundation for reciprocal and authentic long-term partnerships.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

Salient Findings

This study illuminated various salient findings regarding mutual aid and pandemic resilience. First, the COVID-19 pandemic certainly brought health challenges, uncertainty, and fear to many homes. Vulnerable populations who were already overburdened or economically disadvantaged because of historic inequities and discrimination encountered even more difficulties during the pandemic. Although the federal government provided some pandemic relief measures, most immigrants were not able to reap the benefits of these programs. In light of those barriers, people came together to care for their own. The case studies highlight the work of women in Rinconcito and Longwater who organized to protect their neighbors during the COVID-19 crisis and since then continue to redistribute resources, empower their neighbors, and build new ways of living that align with their values of empathy, collective-care, and justice. Participants are proud of the work they have done to take care of their neighbors, ensuring people access food, have the necessary information to navigate bureaucratic systems, and know who to talk to when they need help. There is community cultural wealth within their neighborhoods and networks, and everyone has something to contribute.

Second, beyond establishing a one-way charity model, immigrant women in Rinconcito and Longwater are empowering others to learn new skills, start new businesses, and pursue their dreams. Through trainings and workshops, community members are healing as they overcome oppressive narratives about what it means to be an immigrant, the kinds of jobs they should be taking, and how they should be treated in the spaces where they live, work, and play.

They are leveraging talents and gifts from within the community to grow and reclaim

their power. Whether its establishing or incubating co-ops, creating new food distribution networks out of someone's home, inviting others to sell their products a local market, participants have found ways to make their dreams a reality by leaning on each other and collaborating.

Third, organizing spaces including existing neighborhood groups, coalitions, and even friend groups can become seedbeds for solidarity initiatives. When people live by their values and invite others to join them in the fight for a more just world, movements flourish. Relationality plays a critical role in sustaining these movements and initiatives because it centers accountability and reminds us that we are all interconnected.

Fourth, crises can be catalysts for building a new world. Unprecedented challenges force people to solve problems creatively, illuminating new paths for overcoming difficulties. The pandemic reminded us that systemic inequities are present in our world, as it is no coincidence that low-income, Black, and Latino populations were the most brutally hit. It also reminded us about our humanity, the importance of human connection, self-care, and collective care. The study participants decided to stick together in a time of isolation and fear and work together to dismantle systems of oppression responsible for many of the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. What brought people together was love and empathy for one another.

As we face new challenges, we must remember these lessons and ask ourselves: Can we hold on to our shared humanity and compassion in a world where fear-mongering wants to take center stage? If all systems fail, what or who will rescue us? Will we remember love and care for each other?

Pandemic Remembrance

To this day, there is no specific date to remember those whom COVID-19 impacted; the people who became ill, those who passed away, and the unsung heroes/sheroes who saved lives during the most critical pandemic years. I hope this thesis reminds us that visibility and remembrance matter, and our collective memory is a treasure of lessons, insights, and power. May we remember what we experienced, what we feared, what we lost, and what we found within ourselves and within our communities. As we remember the lessons learned, may we turn to our neighbors to offer and receive care, love, and joy as acts of resistance in a world that seeks to push us further apart.

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Appendix I

Interview guide #1

Previously drafted by Prof. Loh and edited by PCM for the AmeriCorps Mutual Aid Research Project: Impact of COVID-era Mutual Aid Initiatives on Civic Infrastructure in Metro-Boston Interview Guide [June 2023]

~45-60 minutes

Goals

- *Record stories of experiences of mutual aid during the pandemic [what happened and how]*
- *Hear reflections and thoughts on those experiences and how they have affected them as individuals, the organizations/groups they are a part of, and the broader community*
- *Prompt thoughts and ideas on opportunities and challenges for building on mutual aid efforts into the future*

Agenda

1. Introductions and review of informed consent (5 min)
    a. Introduce interviewers
    b. Provide an overview of the project and partners
    c. Review consent information and ask for consent if not provided previously
    d. Ask if ok to record audio
2. Interviewee Background information (5 min)
    a. Tell us how you are connected to East Boston [how long have you lived here]
    b. What community group(s) are you involved in and why did you become involved with them?

3. Looking Back: Mutual Aid Experiences (20-30 min)
    a. Tell us the story(ies) of how you (your organization) was involved in mutual aid [meeting needs and caring for one another] during the pandemic.
        i. How and why did it start?
        ii. Who was involved and how? What did you do?
        iii. How did people both contribute and receive (or not)?
        iv. What did it feel like to be a part of this work?
        v. How did these efforts change over time?
    b. Reflections and Lessons Learned
        i. What were the biggest challenges? Biggest opportunities?
        ii. How did these efforts affect you and your organization(s)? The broader community?
        iii. How did these efforts change the way that people and organizations work together with government, service agencies, funders, and other partners? How were they different from "normal" times?
        iv. What are the most important lessons you learned or are taking away from these mutual aid experiences?
4. Looking Forward (15-20 min)
    a. How can the mutual aid efforts you were involved in be sustained and strengthened for the future?
    b. What is needed to support more mutual aid, reciprocity, and solidarity?
    c. How can/should government, service providers, funders, and other partners be involved in supporting mutual aid, reciprocity, and solidarity?
5. *Closing (5 min)*
    a. Any other thoughts you want to share?
    b. Who else should we be talking to?

Appendix II

<u>Interview Guide #2</u>

Uprooted and Interconnected: Pandemic Mutual Aid Initiatives

Agenda

1. Introductions and consent
2. Interviewee background
    a. Can you share a bit about where you grew up? When did you move to [your community]?
    b. Where you worked and lived during the pandemic?

    c. Have you been affiliated with any community groups? If yes, What prompted you to join this group? What is your role?
3. How did the pandemic affect you and your community?
4. How did your group respond to those challenges?
    a. What has the role of [your community group] been in your community?
5. Experiences of solidarity, mutual aid, and community care
    a. What resources could you access and/or leverage for community resilience?
    b. How did you and your group members of mobilize or not during the pandemic?
    c. What opportunities for collaboration within your group have stemmed from this crisis, if any?
    d. How did pandemic response efforts evolve and grow?
    e. Do you think your background or values inform your engagement in mutual aid?
6. What has been most significant to you about these solidarity efforts?
7. Future of [your community group]
    a. In what ways could [your community group] continue carrying out x,y,z activities?
    b. Which other issues are currently impacting their communities? How are they addressing those problems?
    c. What are some of the ways in which [your comunity group] could continue contributing towards resiliency efforts in [location]
8. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Appendix III

Interview Guide #3

Uprooted and Interconnected: Pandemic Mutual Aid Initiatives

Agenda

1. Introductions and consent
2. Interviewee background
    a. Can you share a bit about where you grew up?
    b. When did you move to [your community]? What prompted you collaborate with/join [your group]?
3. Experiences of solidarity, mutual aid, and community care
    a. What resources could you access and/or leverage for community resilience during the pandemic?

    b. What opportunities for collaboration within your group have stemmed from this crisis, if any?
    c. How did those pandemic response efforts evolve and grow?
    d. Do you think your background or values inform your engagement in mutual aid?
4. What has been most significant to you about these solidarity efforts?
5. Future of [your network]
    a. In what ways could [your group] continue carrying out x,y,z activities?
    b. Which other issues are currently impacting their communities? How are they addressing those problems?
    c. What are some of the ways in which [your group] could continue contributing towards resiliency efforts in [location]
6. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Appendix IV

Consent form

Locations and names of organizations have been replaced with pseudonyms.

TUFTS UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY
Uprooted and Interconnected: Pandemic Mutual Aid Initiatives

Principal Investigator: Paulina Casasola Mena, Graduate student, MS Environmental Policy and Planning
Faculty Advisor: Penn Loh, Distinguished Senior Lecturer and Director of Community Practice
Phone: 6178179985
Email: paulina.casasola_mena@tufts.edu

You are being asked to voluntarily participate in a research study on mutual aid experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Please find below information about this research for you to carefully consider when deciding whether or not to participate. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide whether to participate.

Purpose. Immigrant neighborhoods have been relying on each other to survive and thrive through mutual aid groups for many decades. Many immigrants faced more complex challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but mutual aid efforts helped communities survive, thrive, and transform the system through collective action. Our previous study based in Rinconcito focused on documenting and describing mutual aid efforts and the story of

Conectando-Vecinos. The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of the Latina women who helped establish mutual aid collectives and solidarity networks in MA and CT. The case studies explored in this study will highlight the values, cultural component, and trajectories of the mutual aid groups, as well as the experiences of their members who built resilience in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic through mutual aid.

Duration. It is expected that your participation will last 1-2 hrs from February 2025-March 2025.

Procedures and Activities. You will be asked to participate in a 45-60 min interview in January-February 2025, and review the findings from your interview in February-March 2025.

Risks: The discomforts associated with this research include possible emotional stress when recounting challenges brought by COVID-19. I do not anticipate any harm resulting from your participation in this study, but there is a risk that you could accidentally share information about disagreements or conflicts that you have had with others that you do not want to be public . You can withdraw from this study at any time or request that your information be anonymized.

Benefits: As a result of your participation, you will contribute to the documentation of mutual aid and solidarity efforts in the region, offering learnings for other community organizers and practitioners.

What is this study about?
For my thesis at Tufts University, I am conducting a study on pandemic mutual aid initiatives in immigrant communities. The purpose of the research is to explore the experiences of community members who identify as Latina women in leading and participating in mutual aid. You are being asked to participate because you have been identified as a community leader in Rinconcito/Longwater engaged in solidarity and mutual aid efforts. You are one of ten participants to take part in this study. Your participation in the study is expected to last 1-2 hours. The study is supported by Tufts Department of Environmental Policy and Planning (Tufts UEP), who is sponsoring this research.

What will happen during this research?
If you agree to be in this research, you will be asked to participate in a 45-60 min interview and asked to review the findings from said interview at a later date. The interview will be recorded using zoom and iphone voice memo, and transcribed using zoom and Otter.ai. I can meet in person or on zoom, if you need Spanish interpretation, I will conduct the interview in Spanish. Together, I will review the consent form and process with you, and answer any questions you may have about the study. If you agree to have your interview recorded, I will store any audio files, notes, and transcripts in a password required Box folder.
Before the interview begins, I will ask you to sign or grant verbal consent. Then, I will proceed with the interview questions. You will be asked a series of open-ended questions about your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and with the mutual aid/solidarity group you are

affiliated with. You can take the time you need to answer the questions and you can skip any questions at any point. Additionally, I will not be asking any questions about your immigration status or any other members' in the community.

For participants from our AmeriCorps Mutual Aid 2023-2024 study
I will re-analyze the interviews from the our previous study through a gender and culture lens for this project. I would like to incorporate some of your previous contributions into my thesis. Please let me know if you'd like to learn more about how the transcript from your last interview may be reviewed and used.

What will you do to protect my privacy?
The results of the study may be published, the researchers will ask for separate permission to include information that could identify you. You will have an opportunity to review the findings from your interview at a later date and request that any identifiable information is removed. I will email you a document with the findings from your interview and you will have one week to review and let I know if you want any identifiable information removed. Otherwise, I will assume you agree to be cited and have identifiable information in the final thesis document.

If identifiers are removed from your identifiable private information during this research, that de-identified information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without your additional informed consent.

Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, I can never fully guarantee your privacy will be protected. If you tell us something that makes us believe that you or others have been or may be physically harmed, I may report that information to the appropriate agencies

Individuals and organizations responsible for conducting or monitoring this research may be permitted access to and inspect the research records. This includes Tufts Social, Behavioral & Educational Research Institutional Review Board (Tufts SBER IRB), Penn Loh (Faculty Advisor), and Paulina Casasola Mena (Student and PI), and any other members of the research team working with Penn and Paulina.

What are the risks or discomforts associated with this research?
The discomforts associated with the research are possibly experiencing stress when reflecting on the challenges of COVID-19, community work, and migration. You can choose to not answer some of the questions and withdraw consent at any point. You may accidentally share information you do not want to be public as it may harm you or others. If you do not want identifiable information to be published in this thesis, you can let me know, and I will anonymize the findings from that interview.
In addition to these, this research may have risks or discomforts that are unknown at this time. If in the future I become aware of any additional risks or discomforts that may affect you, I will tell you.

To minimize risks, you will have an opportunity to review the interview findings and quotes I plan to include in my thesis. You will either receive an email or a printed out copy with your interview findings and quotes, and will be given one week to review and make changes.

How might I benefit from this research?
There are no personal benefits beyond contributing the documentation of mutual aid initiatives. Participating in this study may be beneficial to the group you are affiliated with, or be helpful for your own record-keeping and reflection purposes. You may be able to utilize the findings from this study to support future funding applications and advocacy campaigns.

What is the compensation for the research?
You will receive a $40 visa gift card for participating in this study either via email or by hand after the interview.

What will happen if I choose not to participate?
It is your choice to participate or not to participate in this research. Participation is voluntary and can stop at any point. There will be no penalties, consequences, or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose to not participate or leaving the study at any time. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your relationship with Paulina Casasola Mena, Penn Loh, or Tufts UEP.

If you withdraw from the study, the data collected to the point of withdrawal will be immediately destroyed upon receipt of your verbal or written notice.

Who do I talk to if I have questions?
If you have questions, concerns, or have experienced a research-related injury, contact the research team.

An Institutional Review Board ("IRB") is overseeing this research. An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you have questions about your rights or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact theTufts Social, Behavioral, and Educational Research IRB.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT
I have read and considered the information presented in this form. I confirm that I understand the purpose of the research and the study procedures. I understand that I may ask questions at any time and can withdraw my participation without prejudice. I have read this consent form. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study.

I agree to be audiotaped YES (initial) ____ NO (initial) ____

I agree to be videotaped YES (initial) ____ NO (initial) ____

I agree to be quoted by name
in any research related publications
YES (initial) ____ NO (initial) ___

I agree to allow use of audio/video
in presentations or publications YES (initial) ____ NO (initial)

I agree to use of audio/video for
educational purposes including _____ YES (initial) ____ NO (initial) ____

Appendix V

Recruitment

Email

Subject: You are invited to participate in a research project on mutual aid

Dear [participant],

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in a research study on experiences of mutual aid and pandemic resilience. This project is an extension of a previous mutual aid study Prof. Penn Loh and I conducted in 2023-2024, you can learn more about it here. This project is sponsored by the Tufts University Department of Environmental Policy and Planning. The goal of this research is to document and explore the experiences of immigrants involved in mutual aid and solidarity initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic through a gender and culture lens.

To inform this research, I will be conducting voluntary interviews with individuals who have participated in mutual aid initiatives and self-identify as Latina immigrants. You have been identified as a critical stakeholder in the solidarity movement ecosystem of MA/CT, and I would like to hear more about how you experienced the pandemic and what led to your involvement in mutual aid initiatives.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 45-60 min interview in-person or on zoom. The interview can be conducted in Spanish and it will have open ended questions. You can choose to not answer certain questions and you are under no obligation to participate, as your involvement in this project is voluntary.

Please review the attached consent form and if you are interested in participating in an interview, let me know so we can schedule a time and location to meet.

Please let me know if you have any questions,

Paulina Casasola Mena

Text

Hi [name of participant],

You are invited to participate in a research study on mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. This project builds on a 2023-2024 mutual aid study I conducted with Prof. Loh, you can learn more about it here. The goal of this study is to explore experiences of pandemic mutual aid and solidarity initiatives through and gender and culture perspective.

If this interests you, we can schedule a 45-60 min interview either in-person or over zoom. The interview can be in Spanish to accommodate language preferences. Your participation is voluntary.

Would you like me to share a consent form with additional details about the study and your role as a participant?

Paulina Casasola Mena

Social Media

Hi [name of participant],

I'm currently working on a research project on mutual aid, and want to invite you to participate in this study. The research project is about experiences of mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. This project builds on a 2023-2024 mutual aid study I conducted with Prof. Loh, you can learn more about it here. The goal of this study is to explore experiences of pandemic mutual aid and solidarity initiatives through and gender and culture perspective.

If this interests you, we can schedule a 45-60 min interview either in-person or over zoom. The interview can be in Spanish to accommodate language preferences. Your participation is voluntary, we can anonymize your data, or you can decline to participate.
Would you like me to share a consent form with additional details about the study and your role as a participant?

Paulina Casasola Mena

For Previous Study Participants

Dear [Participant],

I hope you are well. I am following up on the study you participated in last year about mutual aid in Rinconcito. I would like to invite you to participate in a new research project, which is a continuation of this work, which builds on the AmeriCorps mutual aid study and aims to explore further the experiences of immigrants who participated in mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on gender and culture. The Tufts Department of Environmental Policy and Planning is sponsoring this project.

If you are interested, I would like to invite you to participate in a follow-up interview where we will further reflect on your experiences. This interview is expected to last 45-60 min and can be conducted in your preferred language via Zoom or in person.
As a reminder, participation in an interview is voluntary. You can choose whether or not you want to schedule an interview or request any part of the interview not be recorded or included in the research. If you decide to participate in an interview, you will have one week to review the findings and quotes from your interview, and let me know if you'd like any information removed.

Additionally, I will re-analyze the interviews from the AmeriCorps study through a new lens for this project. I would like to incorporate some of your previous contributions into this research. Please let me know if you'd like to learn more about how the transcript from your last interview may be reviewed and used.

Please review the attached consent form and let me know if you have any questions.

Warmly,

Paulina