

# Congress Does Not ‘Care’ About My American Family

Intentionally disqualifying millions of American citizens from much-needed stimulus funds during this unprecedented health crisis is both unnecessary and cruel.

By Dr. Jane Lilly López, *theappeal.org*

Both houses of Congress worked overtime in the second half of March to write and adopt the “CARES Act” (the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act), which the President signed into law on March 27. The CARES Act seeks to provide economic assistance to American families and companies through multiple relief efforts, including increased unemployment benefits, interest-free loans, delays for student loan payments, and cash relief to each American making \$99,000 a year or less. American families across the country are eagerly awaiting their cash relief payment, which the IRS began distributing this week.

But the fine print makes clear that Americans who file tax returns with family members who do not have a Social Security number, including millions of Americans with noncitizen spouses, do not qualify for cash relief. In my case, despite the fact that I paid over \$11,000 in federal income, social security, and Medicare taxes in 2019, I will not receive the \$1,200 due to me or the \$1,000 due for my two children because my husband does not have a Social Security number.

I am not alone. Millions of U.S. citizens file taxes or are claimed as dependents on taxes every year with spouses, parents, or dependents who do not have a Social Security number. We do this for a variety of reasons—because our family members are legally present in the U.S. on a temporary visa but have not yet been approved for permanent residency, because they live and/or work outside of the U.S., or because they are undocumented and do not qualify for legal immigration status. In most of these cases, our noncitizen family members are required to file taxes in the U.S. because they are immediate family members of U.S. citizens.

Due to this exclusion in the CARES Act, an estimated 8.2 million U.S. citizens who live in mixed-status households in the U.S. will be excluded from the cash stimulus. Congress, apparently, doesn’t “care” about us.

Intentionally disqualifying millions of Americans from much-needed stimulus funds during this unprecedented health crisis is both unnecessary and cruel. My research on mixed-citizenship American families suggests that the exclusion of our American families from this relief bill will yield long-lasting practical, patriotic, and political consequences. It also further contributes to the demonization of immigration and labeling of immigrants—and their citizen family members—as unworthy.

Mixed-status families are facing the same, if not more severe, economic consequences from the COVID-19 outbreak as other American families. Denying support to the U.S. citizen family members in mixed-status American families directly undermines the purpose of the cash stimulus to shore up the economy. Like other Americans, we would use that money to pay for essential goods and services that directly support our local economies. Less support for us during this time means that we—the American citizens in these families—will have fewer resources to provide for our basic needs



and may require support from other social welfare programs instead.

But beyond complicating the practicalities of surviving the COVID-19 pandemic, the “CARES Act” threatens to alienate mixed-status families by labeling all members of our families—including the U.S. citizens—as un-American. My research on mixed-citizenship couples suggests that the U.S. government’s treatment of citizens’ spouses is more important for engendering patriotism and a national sense of belonging than its treatment of the citizens themselves.

Thus, citizens whose spouses are rejected by the U.S. government internalize that rejection as a direct attack on themselves, not just their partners. With regard to the CARES Act, the only way to interpret this policy is as a rejection of our individual Americanness because of our family members’ non-citizen status. At a time when we most need Americans to unite, support each other, and make individual- and family-level sacrifices for the benefit of our

communities, Congress’ denial of our American identity will only push us away from society, even as we make the same sacrifices as other American families to support it.

Much like the current administration’s insistence on referring to COVID-19 as the “Wuhan virus” or “Chinese virus,” excluding the otherwise eligible family members of unauthorized immigrants from federal relief encourages bigotry and hatred toward citizens and noncitizens alike. Through this clause in the CARES Act, Congress has explicitly said that U.S. citizens with non-citizen family members are not “American enough” to qualify for relief. Like many recent changes to U.S. immigration laws, this exclusion from the CARES Act serves to needlessly punish us for living with and loving noncitizens. It feeds perfectly into the Trump administration’s rhetoric and policy efforts to mark immigrants and their family members as unworthy and unwelcome.

There is still time for Congress to reverse course. A simple amendment extending cash relief to adults and children with Social Security numbers—regardless of whether they file their taxes with or are claimed as dependents by noncitizens without a Social Security number—will fulfill the CARES Act’s goal of supporting every American in need. Including these forgotten Americans will cost less than \$6 billion, mere pennies when considering the Act’s \$1.8 trillion bottom line.

Our elected representatives should take note that their intentional snubbing of millions of Americans will, sooner or later, hurt them, too. As U.S. citizens, we have the right to vote, and we will make our voices heard. Members of Congress may soon forget erasing our American identity and denying our contributions to society, but we will not. If our congressional representatives really do “care” about Americans, they should act to make sure that all Americans qualify for this relief. Because if they do not, we will hold them accountable for labeling millions of U.S. citizens as un-American and unworthy of relief.

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