

**BORDERLESS**MAGAZINE

## THE STATE OF IMMIGRATION NEWS IN CHICAGO

How journalists can better meet the information needs of immigrants and their communities

---



---

January 2021

[www.borderlessmag.org](http://www.borderlessmag.org)

## About Borderless Magazine

Borderless Magazine is a Chicago-based nonprofit news outlet reimagining immigration journalism for a more just and equitable future.

The nonprofit's work focuses on:

- **Reporting:** Borderless covers labor, justice, and advocacy issues impacting Midwestern immigrant communities through a lens of equity and resilience. In 2020, 94 percent of our stories were written, photographed, or illustrated by people from African, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, or Middle Eastern communities and half of our stories were published in a language other than English.
- **Pathways:** Borderless provides pathways for emerging journalists from immigrant and other marginalized communities to report on immigration and learn from professional journalists. We mentor emerging journalists through a mix of paid and unpaid internships, fellowships, and one-off projects. Our award-winning team gives mentees comprehensive training in interviewing, writing, research, and visual storytelling.
- **Immigration Reporting Lab:** Borderless gives journalists and newsrooms the tools they need to responsibly report on immigration. This includes our [As-Told-To Method](#), which helps journalists report with immigrants to better serve readers and the communities we cover. We provide training workshops to newsrooms and journalist associations, give other outlets the opportunity to republish our stories, and collaborate with other outlets on larger projects.

These three programs respond to the information and language needs of immigrants and aim to create a more representative media landscape that includes their voices and experiences.

Want to learn more? Email [info@borderlessmag.org](mailto:info@borderlessmag.org).

BORDERLESS MAGAZINE NFP IS AN INDEPENDENT, NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION.

Copyright © 2021 by Borderless Magazine NFP. All rights reserved.

Cover photo by Michelle Kanaar. Interior illustrations by Cha Pornea.

---

## Foreword

Borderless Magazine's "The State of Immigration News in Chicago" provides important insights about aspects of the urgent free expression issues that we at PEN America have long championed: rising threats to press freedom, breakdowns in civil discourse, and the continued suppression of specific voices.

Our information ecosystem is in distress with news outlets suffering decades of financial decimation; journalists are under attack, both physically and digitally, for trying to deliver critical stories to readers (just this summer, we witnessed over 700 attacks on reporters who covered protests around racial justice); and disinformation floods communities as people try to reckon with the challenges of coming together on issues of the day. PEN America is determined to mobilize communities to defend the cornerstones of our democracy.

Immigrant voices are essential in this fight. Borderless Magazine, in its quest to humanize stories of immigration, elevates the critical role of immigrants and immigrant journalists in fighting for democratic rights. The magazine's new report, "The State of Immigration Journalism in Chicago," is a valuable guide to understanding why immigration coverage is so vital. Having conducted listening sessions around Chicago — with community leaders and with readers alike — this report provides a roadmap for local media to better report stories about immigration and represent immigrants in its reporting.

In our own report ["Losing the News,"](#) PEN America asserts: "Local news plays an indispensable role in American civic life as a trusted source for critical information, a watchdog for government and corporate accountability, and a building block of social cohesion. As such, local journalism is a cornerstone of American democracy, serving as a driver of civic engagement and a guarantor of government integrity." Where the rubber meets the road in communities around the country, we need local data to help journalists understand and address their readers' needs. Borderless gives us just that. This new report details how to meet readers where they are, to report on complex issues around policies affecting immigrants, and to rebalance power inside and outside of local newsrooms to bring in immigrant voices.

Even as we move into a new political era, many of the challenges threatening free expression in the United States will continue to fester. But the fight for a more informed, engaged citizenry is expanding. Organizations like Borderless are doing work that matters, and we look forward to the path ahead together.

- [Nora Benavidez](#), PEN America's Director of U.S. Free Expression Programs



## Introduction

Chicago is a city of immigrants. Between 2014 and 2018 [over 1.6 million immigrants](#) lived in the metropolitan Chicago area. And [nearly one-third of households](#) in Cook County, Illinois include one or more immigrants.

Yet, Chicago's local media is woefully under-serving immigrant populations in the region today.

There were over 130 local and national media outlets serving primarily immigrant audiences in Chicago in 2012. Today, just over half of those outlets remain.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, mainstream news programs and outlets which once offered nuanced or bilingual coverage of immigrant communities, like Chicago Public Radio's "Worldview" program and the Tribune's Hoy newspaper, have ceased operations in recent years.

The coronavirus pandemic has only accelerated this trend, with publications like [Future News](#) — the longest-running Arab American newspaper in the Midwest — [shutting down](#) and major outlets like [Univision](#) laying off staff.

These changes mirror a national trend in both the closure and contraction of local media outlets. Since 2004, about [1,800 newspapers have closed](#) nationwide.

Research has shown that civic engagement is directly tied to news coverage. When communities lose news coverage people [become less likely to vote or run for office](#). The loss of transparency and accountability created by journalists can also lead to increases in corruption, taxes, and misinformation.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences related to the loss of news coverage can be especially devastating for immigrant communities. Nearly half of all immigrants in Chicago were eligible to vote in the 2020 presidential election. Many more participated in civic engagement through voter registration drives and organizing up to and after the election.

---

1. According to an analysis conducted by Borderless Magazine based on the [Community Media Workshop's 2012 Ethnic Media Directory](#). CMW is now called Public Narrative.

2. See Margaret Sullivan's "Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy" for more.

Yet, in the absence of media engagement immigrants are targets of disinformation campaigns which are “helping plunge the country further into chaos and confusion,” according to Fadi Quran of Avaaz, a nonprofit that tracks disinformation.

Borderless Magazine has been reporting on and with immigrants in the Chicago area since February 2017. The magazine conducted listening sessions with leaders at immigrant-serving organizations and surveyed 47 of our readers during the summer of 2020 to better understand the needs of Chicagoans when it comes to news coverage of immigrant communities.

The magazine's research found that overall Chicagoans are disappointed in both the quality and quantity of local immigration news. When Borderless asked them to rate Chicago media's coverage of immigration on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being excellent and 1 being terrible, 68 percent of respondents rated quality of the coverage with a 6 or below.

Immigrants Borderless spoke to said journalists could better report on and meet the information needs of their communities by rethinking how they see immigrant communities. Specifically, by rebalancing power both within and outside their newsrooms.

---

## Key Takeaways

### **Journalists should:**

1. Produce more local coverage of immigration
  2. Publish stories in languages other than English
  3. Hire immigrants and first-generation Americans to report on immigrant communities
  4. Uplift more diverse voices
  5. Invest more time in explaining immigration policy
  6. Answer audience members' questions about immigration
  7. Focus on the experiences of individual immigrants
  8. Investigate the complex systems that impact immigrants
  9. Develop relationships, not fixers
  10. Respect the humanity and vulnerability of sources
-



## 1. Produce more local coverage of immigration

For too long journalists have seen people from immigrant communities as a niche group served by “ethnic media” rather than an important part of their core audience. Few local news outlets have immigration beat reporters and outlets that once regularly covered immigrant communities have closed shop. But in a city with a large immigrant population which lives and works alongside non-immigrants the topic should be covered by all newsrooms in the course of their regular coverage.

The local media’s neglect of immigrant communities is in part a reflection of journalism’s roots in [white supremacy and longtime exclusion](#) of Black, Latinx, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native voices in its reporting and its newsrooms.<sup>3</sup> Immigrant communities are often seen as “the other” when they are covered by the media. But immigrants are deeply rooted in the city of Chicago. Nearly 60 percent of immigrants living in Chicago have lived in the United States for [more than 15 years](#). One in three children in Chicago has at least one immigrant parent.

When immigration issues are covered by local media, they are often done so in spurts rather than in a consistent manner.

**"When we had a press conference in 2015, 50 people showed up, but when we had one last year only one or two people showed up. We still have a refugee crisis, but because it is not 'hot' in the news, the whole idea got dropped," said Suzanne Akhras Sahloul, the founder and executive director of the Syrian Community Network.**

In the absence of a trusted local news ecosystem covering immigration, people look both to the national media and non-media outlets for information. Our reader survey found that 18 percent of respondents get their immigration news from community leaders and nearly 69 percent of respondents get their immigration news from social media, including from journalism accounts and non-journalism accounts.

In this environment “fake news” and misinformation can easily take root and impact people both in and outside the immigrant community. Recent disinformation campaigns on social

---

3. See Frontline Solutions’ October 2020 report ["Equity First: Transforming Journalism and Journalism Philanthropy in a New Civic Age"](#) for ideas how journalists and funders can better support equity.

media have specifically targeted Spanish speakers and African-Americans, spreading rumors about election fraud and anti-refugee rhetoric.

The power of such rhetoric is made clear in recent hate crimes against immigrants, including the 2019 mass shooting in El Paso, Texas where a gunman killed 23 people and injured 23 others. The gunman had cited misinformation and white nationalist conspiracy theories perpetuated by right-wing media outlets in his manifesto.

Local journalists have a responsibility to their community to do a better job covering immigration.

**70 percent of survey respondents said, “There should be more local coverage of immigration in general” in Chicago**



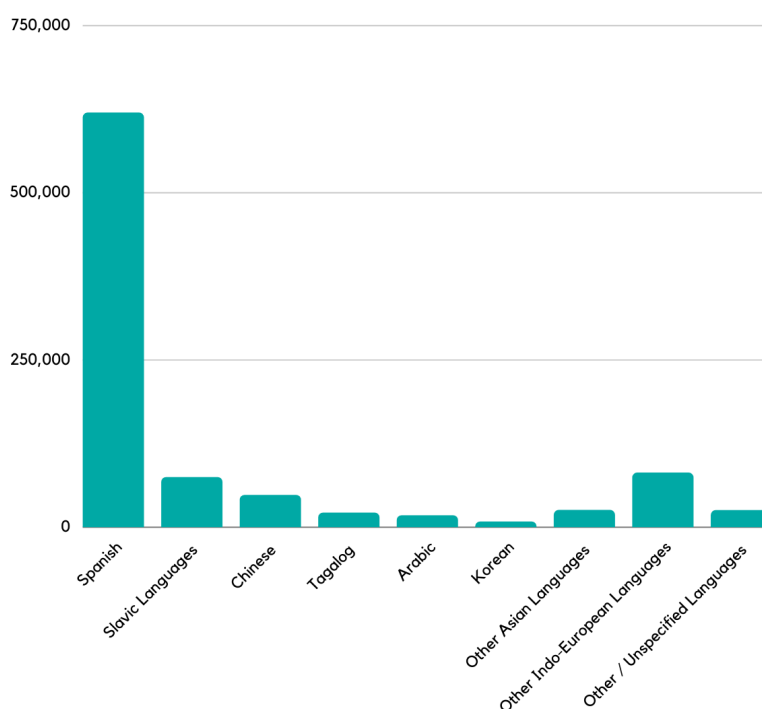


## 2. Publish stories in languages other than English

Chicago is a multilingual city and 36 percent of its residents speak a language other than English at home. (This compared to a national average of 22 percent). And nearly 15 percent of Chicagoans speak English less than “very well.”

Almost 25 percent of Chicagoans speak Spanish at home. Other commonly spoken languages include Mandarin, Cantonese, Polish, Filipino, and Arabic.

**LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME,  
CHICAGO 2014-2018**  
(NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS)



SOURCE: 2014-2018 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY FIVE-YEAR ESTIMATES.

When Chicago news outlets only publish in English, they are leaving over a third of their local audience in the dark. In order to increase access to their content and make journalism more equitable, newsrooms should make every effort to translate their content.

This is especially critical with stories focused on immigrant communities. Reporters must be able to share their stories with the people they interviewed or reported about. But when someone who speaks only Spanish is interviewed by a reporter who publishes a story only in English they are not able to see what was written about them.

**"Folks would love to see stories in their languages like Khmer, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Hindi and Urdu," said Justin Valas from Asian Americans Advancing Justice Chicago.**

**"There's something that's affirming about seeing someone's story in their language."**

**53 percent of survey respondents said, "There should be more stories written in languages other than English" in Chicago's news coverage of immigration**



### 3. Hire immigrants and first-generation Americans to report on immigrant communities

The journalism industry does not reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of America. [A 2019 study of journalism outlets](#) by the News Leaders Association found that

- 7.12 percent of the overall workforce was Black (compared to [13.4 percent](#) of the U.S. population)
- 7.36 percent of the overall workforce was Hispanic/Latinx (compared to [18.5 percent](#) of the U.S. population and [29 percent of the Chicago population](#))<sup>4</sup>
- 5.14 percent of the overall workforce was Asian (compared to [5.9 percent](#) of the U.S. population)
- 0.45 percent of the overall workforce was Middle Eastern or North African (compared to [0.3 percent](#) of the U.S. population)

Not everyone who reports on immigration needs to be an immigrant. But reporters with immigrant backgrounds have social capital, language skills, and cultural literacy that can give them greater access to and insights about an immigrant community compared to a journalist without that background. When a reporter can talk to someone in their native language or shares a cultural background or knowledge of a local community, they can produce deeper, richer stories.

**77 percent of survey respondents said, “There should be more stories written by immigrants,” and 40 percent said, “There should be more stories written by the family members of immigrants” in Chicago’s news coverage of immigration.**

---

4. Hispanic is used by the News Leaders Association as a catchall term, but generally means people who speak Spanish. Latino or Latinx is a more inclusive term that includes people of Latin American ancestry who don’t necessarily speak Spanish. For a deeper dive into the controversial use of Hispanic and Latino when it comes to surveys, see [Pew Research Center’s analysis](#).

---

## 4. Uplift more diverse voices

Immigrants are an extremely diverse population. But you wouldn't know that from reading the news. Instead of painting immigrants with a wide brush, take the time to learn about Chicago's rich immigrant communities and build up your source list.

**"Instead of feeding on stereotypes or a specific immigrant experience, I wish journalists would present all the complexities and diversity in the immigrant experience," said Helena Olea, the associate director for programs at Alianza Americas.**

For example, 29 percent of Chicago's population and nearly half of all Chicago Public School students identify as Latino. But this population is ethnically and racially diverse. It includes both people from immigrant backgrounds — whose families came from Mexico, Cuba, and other Latin American countries — and non-immigrant backgrounds like Puerto Ricans, who are American citizens. Latinos in Chicago include undocumented immigrants, green card holders, citizens, asylum seekers, and holders of "nonimmigrant" visas, like U Visas.

**"The media is not doing enough to share the factual coverage of how much the economy has been bolstered by immigrant and refugee communities," said Radhika Sharma Gordon, manager of education and outreach at Apna Ghar.**

**57 percent of survey respondents said, "Journalists should incorporate more diverse voices" in Chicago's news coverage of immigration.**



## 5. Invest more time explaining immigration policy

President Trump has taken more than 400 immigration executive actions since taking office. Rules around immigration change weekly as new orders come down and are challenged or overturned in court.

Chicagoans want journalists to help them understand this quickly shifting landscape and to give them the context to understand why the changes matter. This includes talking about the policies of past presidents and how U.S. foreign policy is driving people to leave their homes and come to our country.

**"We need to discuss foreign policy decisions!" an Assyrian immigrant and researcher who asked not to be named told us.**

**"What if the people who are seeking refuge in the U.S. are coming from countries that are being sanctioned by the U.S. or other countries? Do we deny them simply because they are coming from a sanctioned country without listening to their full story? It is like telling half of the story without the complete picture."**

**68 percent of survey respondents said, "There should be more stories explaining immigration policy" in Chicago's news coverage of immigration.**

---

## 6. Answer audience members' questions about immigration

If Chicago media outlets begin to see immigrants as a core part of their audience they can better respond to their information needs. This includes answering their questions about immigration policy changes, services, and more in their language.

People who work at nonprofits that serve immigrant communities expressed their frustration at how hard it was to provide critical services to immigrants in the absence of a strong local media ecosystem.

**"I think the Spanish-speaking media could do a lot more to provide information to people and to provide resources. Like where do you look for a good lawyer? What do you do if you're undocumented and want to become documented? That's the kind of information that people need," immigrant storyteller Nestor Gomez told Borderless in [an interview earlier this year](#).**

**57 percent of survey respondents said, "There should be more stories explaining how to apply for visas or immigration programs" in Chicago's news coverage of immigration.**



## 7. Focus on the experiences of individual immigrants

The media has power to shape and challenge narratives about immigrants. A [2018 report by the University of Pennsylvania](#) on mass media and American attitudes toward immigration found that the most impactful and well-read journalism about immigration focused on individual immigrants rather than immigration policy.

Stories that emphasized negative aspects — like President Trump [calling immigrants criminals](#) — were more memorable than stories highlighting positive aspects. This means journalists should be cautious when framing a story.

"Due to basic human psychology, balanced coverage will not necessarily produce balanced outcomes," wrote Diana C. Mutz, the study's author.

Local immigrant leaders we spoke to echoed this idea and asked journalists to "look at all this richness [immigrants] bring to our city." By focusing on the diverse individual stories of immigrants journalists can produce more accurate and truthful reporting.

**"Media should cover more positive stories about how immigrants are providing a positive influence in this country, not just the negatives," said Miguel Sarmiento, a migrant education services director at the Illinois Migrant Council.**

**49 percent of survey respondents said, "There should be more stories that highlight the experiences of individual immigrants" in Chicago's news coverage of immigration.**

---



## 8. Investigate the complex systems that impact immigrants

Immigration is more than just ICE. The United States has the [largest immigration detention system](#) in the world. The federal government spent \$28.7 billion on immigration enforcement in 2019 compared to the \$18.4 billion spent collectively on the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, Secret Service, U.S. Marshals Service, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives that same year.

Journalists should learn about the complex system of immigration courts, private and public prisons, local and federal government departments and private nonprofit organizations that are carrying out the federal government's immigration policies. In order to hold these systems accountable, newsrooms need to invest in reporters who can specialize in immigration. It is rare for a Chicago area newsroom to have a reporter dedicated to covering immigration. Instead, [general assignment reporters or reporters used to covering criminal justice, politics, or even religion are assigned to immigration stories](#).

**"Not only is there not enough reporters covering immigration but the immigration coverage, in general, is simplistic," said a representative of an immigrant-serving organization at one of our listening sessions who asked to remain anonymous. "Many reporters do not have the legal background or historical background to explain what is at stake in the story."**

Local newsrooms should spend the time developing immigration as a beat. News leaders should give reporters and editors the training and support they need to be true watchdogs.

**"There are connections between the criminal justice system and immigration that need to be looked into by reporters," said Rey Wences of Organized Communities Against Deportation. "We do not want to criminalize or victimize the person, but instead focus more on ICE, for example, and investigate more into their actions"**

**62 percent of survey respondents said, "There should be more investigations into the immigration system" in Chicago's news coverage of immigration.**

## 9. Develop relationships, not fixers

In international reporting, fixers are people who are hired by foreign correspondents to help arrange a story. They help foreign reporters understand a particular community or issue and allow the reporters to sidestep the challenging work of learning a culture or language. Fixers often arrange interviews with sources and help a reporter choose the focus of their story.

In the United States, journalists often treat immigrant community leaders as unpaid fixers when it comes to reporting on immigrant communities. Reporters who don't usually cover these communities rely on pseudo fixers to help them report, fact check and interview sources.

If you don't speak the language of someone you want to interview, ask your editor to hire an interpreter. Community leaders are not getting paid for the time they spend finding you a source or interpreting an interview. Respect their time and avoid helicopter journalism by spending time getting to know people at organizations, churches, and community groups.

Representatives from immigrant-serving organizations who participated in our listening sessions recalled times where they were asked to quickly find sources for a reporter only to have the reporter not use the source in their story. They asked that journalists be more transparent in their reporting process and communicate with sources and the people who found them when and how their quotes would be used in a story.

When journalists see immigrant leaders as trusted sources rather than unpaid fixers, they are more likely to build a relationship with them and explain to them the sometimes complex way stories are put together. Trust comes from a place of honesty and respect, and journalists need to take the time to earn that trust.

---

## 10. Respect the humanity and vulnerability of sources

A study by Define American and the MIT Center for Civic Media found that between 2014 and 2018 major U.S. newspapers used dehumanizing labels to refer to immigrants at a steadily increasing rate. Denigrating terms for people include “illegal immigrants,” “anchor babies,” and “criminal aliens.” Denigrating descriptions of migration include talking about a “surge of immigrants,” a “wave of immigrants,” and “catch and release.”

Journalists must be thoughtful about using humanizing and accurate words when talking about immigrants and resist mirroring the language used by extremist anti-immigrant organizations and white supremacists.

Reporters and photographers should be conscious of power differences that exist between them and the people they cover. They should take time to explain the reporting and publishing process to people they interview and check in with them throughout the process to make sure they understand how their words and images will be used. Reporters and photographers should talk to their editors about what options they can offer people to protect their or their family's safety. This may include not printing a person's full name, using a pseudonym, taking photos of their hands or back only, or using an illustration instead of a photo.

When Chicago journalists take the time to see immigrants as a vital part of their audience and valuable sources of information and stories, the local media will more accurately reflect the richness of our city.

**"The media has not only underrepresented immigrants but misrepresented immigrants ... The media tends to make immigrants look like a homogenous group. There are so many different types of immigrants, forms of immigration, and many stories in front of us in people we see every day that are yet to be told," said Karan Sunil, an Indian immigrant and the director and writer of the local comedy web series Code-Switched.**

---

## Looking Forward

This past year has been challenging both for Chicago journalists and immigrant communities as we face the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, and an economic recession. Amongst the pain and struggles of the present, we find reasons to hope.

Media outlets, students, and entrepreneurs are increasingly recognizing the importance of publishing in Spanish. Chicago's neighboring suburb of Cicero got its first bilingual Spanish-English publication in [Cicero Independiente](#) in July 2019. And in January 2020 DePaul University students launched the Spanish-language news site [La DePaulia](#) as a sister publication to the college's main newspaper. Then in May, the Chicago Sun-Times launched a Spanish-language news site [La Voz Chicago](#) after experimenting with a Spanish print supplement to their newspaper.

While these additions to the local media ecosystem are promising, there is still much work to be done. Newsrooms need financial support to hire additional reporters and [translators](#) who can work in multiple languages to meet the information needs of immigrant communities.

Local outlets also need help from trainers and other experts who can support people throughout the newsroom to better report on immigration, since we know most journalists covering immigration issues are not doing so as their full-time beat.

Together, we can make Chicago's local media more inclusive, responsive, and accessible to our immigrant communities. We look forward to taking the next steps with you.



## Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by [Borderless Magazine's](#) Diane Bou Khalil, Nissa Rhee, Michelle Kanaar, and Alex V. Hernandez as a project of our Immigration Reporting Lab. Borderless Magazine's Claudia Hernández translated this report into Spanish. Special thanks to Borderless Magazine's board of directors including Sebastián González de León, Lekisha Gunn, Yana Kunichoff, Sarita Muley, Kavitha Selvaraj, and Jessica Ramos for their input. Thanks to the [Tow Center for Digital Journalism's](#) Andrea Wenzel for sharing her wisdom and advice on our summer survey.

We are indebted to the many people and organizations who took the time to talk to us about the state of immigration news in Chicago.

This study was funded in part by grants from [PEN America](#), the [Robert R. McCormick Foundation](#), and [Borealis Philanthropy's Racial Equity in Journalism Fund](#).

---