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ARTICLE

Pandemic precarity: COVID-19's impact on Mexican and Central American immigrant families

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Abstract

Objective: This study examines the association of gender, parenthood, and marriage with reports of perceived pandemic precarity among Mexican and Central American immigrants during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fall 2020) to understand predictors of vulnerability in periods of crisis.

Background: Latinos/as, immigrants, parents, and women have faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Family structure, along with social expectations for gender (i.e., self-sacrificing femininity for women and hegemonic masculinity for men), parenthood, and marriage may explain perceptions of pandemic precarity—defined as the material deprivation and economic anxiety resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method: This study used data from the Hispanic COVID-19 Rapid Response Study ($n = 400$), a follow-up of the VidaSana Study of Mexican and Central American immigrants, to examine how family structure is associated with pandemic precarity (i.e., food, housing, and economic insecurity). Using linear regression models, average marginal effects (AMEs), and tests for group differences, we investigate the independent and interactive effects of gender, parenthood, and marriage on pandemic precarity.

Results: Men and parents reported the highest pandemic precarity. Fathers reported higher pandemic precarity than mothers. For men, marriage is associated with greater precarity, and for women, marriage is associated with less

Melissa J. García and Caroline V. Brooks are co-lead authors of this article.

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precarity, yet marriage increased precarity for those without children.

Conclusion: We discuss the importance and implications of examining gender along with family structure to understand how immigrant families were faring in response to the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

family roles, gender roles, Hispanic/Latino/a, immigrants, marriage, parents

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare long-standing social and economic inequalities in the United States. Among the most adversely affected by the pandemic have been historically marginalized groups, including immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and women (Perry et al., 2021). These groups have faced disproportionate *pandemic precarity*, or feelings of "material deprivation and economic anxiety resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic" (Perry et al., 2021, p. 1). Yet, little is known about the social factors that influence variations in pandemic precarity *within* historically marginalized groups, particularly among immigrant groups comprised of a large share of people who are undocumented and stratified into lower-income jobs. This study examines how gender and family structure are associated with perceived pandemic precarity among Mexican and Central American immigrants in Indiana during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fall 2020).

The research presented here makes several key contributions to the sociology of the family. First, there is a need to better understand how immigrant families respond to fast-changing economies and shifting family roles (Van Hook & Glick, 2020). Our study addresses this gap by examining how immigrants (1) perceive their financial situation during a period of crisis and (2) which roles within the family system experience the greatest burdens. That is, this study reveals who bears the psychological burden of providing for families' basic needs, including food, housing, and financial insecurity, when conditions are precarious. Moreover, we highlight within-group differences among a population that already faces marginalization by several intersecting statuses, such as being stratified in a low-income position, immigration status, and race and ethnicity, which may become more salient during a time of compounding crises (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, an anti-immigrant political climate).

Second, research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on families has provided unsettling findings on the gendered impacts of parenting and caregiving, wherein mothers are assuming unequal parenting arrangements and division of domestic/paid labor (Calarco et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2021). Recent research found that amidst the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, families were defaulting to traditional norms and expectations where women are responsible for caregiving tasks like maintaining family stability, and men are responsible for being the primary financial provider (Calarco et al., 2021). However, less is known about how gender norms of immigrants, such as *self-sacrificing femininity* or *hegemonic masculinity* and the pressures of the provider role, intersect with other dimensions of family structure—the combination of relationships through parenthood, marital, and partnership status—to create distinct social expectations. Likewise, it is unclear how family structure may operate distinctly from gender to impact well-being in times of crisis. Our research builds on these findings by examining gender and family structure, but also decouples family structure from gender to determine how different family arrangements influence precarity for immigrants. Third, our unique survey data make an empirical contribution to the sociology of the family as it yields insights from a

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hard-to-reach population living in a non-traditional immigrant destination, which could be useful as a comparison point for findings from historic immigration destinations. Overall, we theorize that social expectations may contribute to variations in reported pandemic precarity within Mexican and Central American immigrants by gender, marital status, and parenthood.

INEQUALITIES AND VULNERABILITIES BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Crises lay bare how social, economic, and political systems are organized in ways that perpetuate disadvantage. Indeed, Mexican and Central American immigrants have historically faced inequalities and experienced vulnerabilities that were only exacerbated during the pandemic (Laster Pirtle & Wright, 2021; Perry et al., 2021). For example, those with low-wage service jobs and limited access to health care experienced increased exposure to the virus (Chishti & Bolter, 2020a), underscoring that "societal reactions to viral pandemics are deeply rooted in social cleavages rather than biological fact" (Pescosolido et al., 2010, p. 5).

Indeed, Hispanic immigrant women have faced the highest unemployment rate at 21.1% during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by Hispanic US-born women (18.4%), US-born men (17.1%), and finally, immigrant men (13.9%) (Gelatt et al., 2020). Some attribute the steep increase in the unemployment rate for immigrant women to their overrepresentation in occupations that faced greater job losses during 2020, including the hospitality and food industry (Gelatt et al., 2020). However, there is limited research on the subjective experience of economic vulnerability among Central American and Mexican immigrants, with most research drawing exclusively on official unemployment data (Kochhar, 2020; Krogstad et al., 2020). Although data on job loss indicate one element of distress in response to the pandemic, this type of research does not capture food insecurity, housing precarity, or other more subjective aspects of financial well-being.

The unique experiences of immigrant families also shed light on the value of the social safety net and the disadvantage that results from limited access to it. The Hispanic COVID-19 Rapid Response Study reflects a population who was profoundly affected by structural discrimination in that many were ineligible or otherwise unable to benefit from social safety nets provided by the government. For example, the CARES Act Relief Bill programs, such as the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) for unemployed workers, were made available only to immigrants with work authorization in the United States (Chishti & Bolter, 2020a). But even most immigrants with work authorization reported avoiding using any government programs due to fear that receiving assistance would prohibit a successful pathway to citizenship (Chishti & Bolter, 2020a). Consequently, immigrant families remained a key subgroup of the US population that were underserved by policies and programs meant to alleviate the economic pressures of the global pandemic (Berger & Carlson, 2020). Given the economic uncertainty during the onset of the pandemic, we theorize how gendered and familial social expectations may contribute to variations in reports of perceived pandemic precarity within Mexican and Central American immigrants. In the next section, we outline how gender, parenthood, and marriage may shape perceptions of precarity and propose formal hypotheses regarding how each status may work independently and intersectionally to shape pandemic precarity.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND GENDER

The main effects of gender, parenthood, and marriage

Family structure and gender may shape how Mexican and Central American immigrants perceive pandemic precarity. By family structure, we refer to the combination of relationships

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among household members biologically related or linked through marriage or partnership status (Pasley & Petren, 2015). Immigrants from Latin American countries arrive with their own gendered social expectations that inform the ways that immigrants relate to and act within their families (Chant & Craske, 2003; León-Pérez et al., 2021; Miville et al., 2017; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004), but these expectations may shift in new social and economic contexts (Abrego, 2009; Broughton, 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; León-Pérez et al., 2021; Menjívar et al., 2016). Specifically, periods of crisis and uncertainty that upend day-to-day social arrangements, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, may cause families to default to more traditional gendered social expectations (Calarco et al., 2021; Mize et al., 2021). In the following section, we outline how gender, parenthood, and marital status each directly affect pandemic precarity among Mexican and Central American immigrants.

Gender may shape perceptions of pandemic precarity by influencing gendered social expectations. Expectations of self-sacrificing femininity for immigrant women and hegemonic masculinity for immigrant men may guide behavior and affect perceptions of precarity based on their presumed roles and responsibilities within a family. For example, recent research addresses the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with women reporting taking on a disproportionate number of responsibilities and work-related burdens (Calarco et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2021; Mooi-Reci & Risman, 2021; Power, 2020). Furthermore, Hispanics tend to express more traditional gender attitudes, resulting in Hispanic women having higher reports of work-family spillover as they balance traditional feminine expectations and work obligations (Luhr et al., 2022; Roehling et al., 2005).

Research suggests that an ideal of self-sacrificing femininity often compels Latina immigrants to prioritize familial caregiving responsibilities, even if it jeopardizes their own needs (Abrego, 2014; Alcalde, 2010). Moreover, women who are relatively recent arrivals to the United States often face compounding social expectations, leading many to enter the workforce while continuing their caregiving role within the family (Alcalde, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Menjívar et al., 2016). Although taking on employment may provide financial independence, it may also cause strain as women must fulfill both their work and family-related responsibilities. Among immigrant women who work, many are often stratified into low-paying jobs with exploitative working conditions (Abrego, 2009; Cauce & Domenech-Rodríguez, 2002). Thus, gendered family expectations of self-sacrificing femininity and the pressures of caregiving may place greater responsibility for a family's financial well-being on women. Coupled with the economic conditions of employment, we would expect these expectations to lead to greater perceived pandemic precarity:

> **Hypothesis 1a.** Latina immigrants will report higher perceived pandemic precarity than Latino immigrants.

Although Latina immigrants are expected to sacrifice for their families, for Latino immigrants, hegemonic masculinity reinforces strong expectations regarding the "most honored way of being a man" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 835) and legitimates a system of patriarchy and the dominance of men in family and economic life. Hegemonic masculinity recognizes that although there may be multiple forms of masculinity (e.g., gay masculinity), there is a dominant form of masculinity that remains the most powerful and desirable version for men. Although men may not entirely embody hegemonic masculinity, it nonetheless serves as an ideal and guides behavior. For Latino men, hegemonic masculinity prescribes that a man serve as the economic provider for one's family (Behnke et al., 2008). The influence of hegemonic masculinity may be even more pronounced during periods of crisis and uncertainty when people tend to rely more heavily on traditional and socially prescribed gender norms and expectations (Calarco et al., 2021; Mize et al., 2021). Given these expectations placed on Latino immigrants through hegemonic masculinity and the pressure of the provider role, we present an alternative gender hypothesis:

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Hypothesis 1b. Latino immigrants will report higher perceived pandemic precarity than Latina immigrants.

Parenthood, generally, comes with challenges as the presence of children creates a higher financial responsibility to provide even basic necessities. In many ways, the pandemic has only exacerbated the strain of being a parent. For example, recent research has found parents have been significantly more stressed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic than adults without children (American Psychological Association, 2020). Additional research attributes negative mental health impacts to the added burdens of caregiving for their children during stay-at-home orders, closings of schools, and ongoing job losses (Kerr et al., 2021). Among Mexican and Central American immigrant parents, these concerns and burdens may be exacerbated as they are likely overrepresented in low-wage service occupations and/or occupations with minimal protections against COVID-19 (Chishti & Bolter, 2020a). Immigrant parents may be stretched thin with balancing work to continue to financially support one's children and increases in the demands of the home such as caring for school-aged children or assisting their children attending school online during school closures (Luhr et al., 2022). Based on recent research identifying the burdens and challenges parents have faced during the first year of the pandemic, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. Parents will report higher perceived pandemic precarity than individuals without children.

Though parenthood may operate as a structural form of stress, other aspects of family structure, like marriage, may be protective against precarity during times of crisis. Research finds marriage, through associations with social integration and social control, provides protective benefits for health, including lower levels of stress, compared to those who have never been married or were formerly married (Perry, 2016; Rendall et al., 2011; Siegler et al., 2013; Ta et al., 2017; Williams, 2003). Another potential benefit may be financial stability in that spouses can supplement each other's income during gaps in employment and wages compared to those who are single and thus at an economic disadvantage (Ta et al., 2017). For example, Ta et al. (2017) find single individuals reported higher economic-related stress than married individuals. Given the literature on the potential benefits of marriage, we generate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Individuals who are married will report lower perceived pandemic precarity than those who are single.

The interactional effects of gender, parenthood, and marriage

Although it is critical to first understand the main effects of gender and family structure on perceived pandemic precarity, examining gender, parenthood, and marriage on their own does not fully capture the potential intersectional effects of multiple statuses. We contend that aspects of family structure and gender cannot be truly separated from one another, nor do they exist in a vacuum. Our theoretical approach brings together research on the sociology of family, gender, and immigration to examine how the effects of gender, parenthood, and marriage intersect to influence pandemic precarity. Toward this end, it is first important to consider how previous literature has examined the interactive effects of gender, parenthood, and marital status.

An abundance of literature documents how gendered social roles intersect with the obligations of parenthood to produce unique social expectations and circumstances for mothers and fathers. Although immigrant women are generally tasked with upholding cultural expectations of self-sacrificing femininity (Abrego, 2014; Alcalde, 2010), these expectations are exacerbated by the pressures of motherhood. Motherhood is highly venerated for Mexican and Central

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American immigrant women and exceptionally important in Latin American culture (Abrego, 2009; Abrego & Menjívar, 2011; Chant & Craske, 2003; Menjívar et al., 2016). Immigrant mothers are expected to make sacrifices for the sake of their families to maintain high social status (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011; Menjívar et al., 2016), fulfill caregiving responsibilities for their children (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004), and act as the community brokers to foster social integration on behalf of the entire family (Cervantes & Menjívar, 2020), placing an enormous burden on immigrant mothers that may be heightened in times of crisis, such as a pandemic.

Similar to how expectations of self-sacrificing femininity may be intensified by parenthood, so too may be the pressures of the provider role. Masculinity is not an identity fixed or rooted in an individual; instead, masculinity is constructed and reconstructed in different social, cultural, and historical settings (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The social expectations of immigrant men are shaped by the migration process and continue to shift during settlement with changing social and economic contexts (Broughton, 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Kelbert & Hossain, 2014). Through this process, one aspect of masculinity that may become more salient for immigrant men is fatherhood. In a qualitative study of Mexican-origin fathers, many report that the most important parts of being a father is being a provider for the family and being hard working (Behnke et al., 2008). This suggests that being a father may amplify expectations of providing for one's family. Although immigration may usher in a shift toward more gender egalitarianism (Behnke et al., 2008), the masculine ideal of being a provider for one's children persists. We argue that in the context of fatherhood, the pressures of the provider role associated with hegemonic masculinity may be activated to create heightened expectations of providing financially for one's family. Given how these gendered social expectations are so closely tied to parenthood, and the expectations of parenthood are gendered, we arrive at the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 4.** The effect of gender will depend on parenthood status, such that fathers will report higher perceived pandemic precarity than mothers.

In addition to the multiplicative effects of gender and marriage, gendered social expectations may also interact with marital status to uniquely influence perceptions of precarity. From a social exchange perspective, traditionally normative attitudes toward marriage positioned men in charge of finances and women in charge of domestic work (McDonald, 1981). Although this dynamic has certainly shifted over time with more women entering the workforce, these underlying social patterns may persist in heterosexual couples, particularly in times of crisis, such that the wife may be more likely to handle domestic labor and focus on caregiving, while the husband is employed and takes on the role of financial provider (Miller & Sassler, 2010). Similar to how men face heightened expectations of the provider role when they have children, we argue that married men may face increased expectations of financially providing for their spouses (Behnke et al., 2008). In this way, being married amplifies cultural expectations of masculinity and providing for one's family in a way that may lead to the increased salience of financial concerns. As times of uncertainty may be associated with a reliance on traditional gendered norms, in the case of the pandemic, couples may default to these traditional gender roles in marriage providing women a sense of financial security as they are further removed from daily work, and for men greater financial pressure as it is more likely to become their sole responsibility to provide for their families.

> **Hypothesis 5.** The effect of marriage will depend on gender such that married men will report higher perceived pandemic precarity than married women.

Finally, we highlight the potential interactive effect of marital status and parenthood. Marriage can function as both a source of strain and a source of support, depending on its broader social

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context and the meaning placed on marriage itself (Perry, 2016; Turner & Turner, 2013; Umberson, 1992; Wheaton, 1990). For parents, being single is associated with increased levels of stress (Cooper et al., 2009), whereas married parents have instrumental and emotional support from a partner. A single parent must assume the sole responsibility for caring for a child—an increased burden in the wake of the pandemic likely associated with both emotional and financial stress (Dunatchik et al., 2021)—a married parent is typically able to rely on their spouse for assistance. Yet, although a marriage may be a source of support for those who have children, research indicates the association between marriage and well-being may be contingent on other social factors (Grundström et al., 2021). For example, among individuals without children, having a spouse may mean more social support but also another individual to worry about. The individual is no longer only concerned with financially supporting themselves, but also the financial well-being of their spouse. Regarding the marriage and parenthood interaction, we hypothesize:

> **Hypothesis 6.** The effect of marriage will depend on parenthood status such that married parents will report lower perceived pandemic precarity than unmarried parents.

DATA AND METHODS

To test our hypotheses, we use data from the Hispanic COVID-19 Rapid Response Study, an extension of the longitudinal VidaSana Study investigating relationships between Hispanic immigrants' social networks and health (approved by the Indiana University IRB #1703740862A022). Eligible respondents were from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, or El Salvador and had immigrated to the United States within 6 months of the baseline wave or had been in the US for at least two years and referred into the study by another respondent.

These data represent a novel and unique sample. Notably less work has studied Mexican and Central American immigrant populations in the US Midwest compared to traditional immigrant destinations (Flippen & Farrell-Bryan, 2021). This sample is comprised of primarily recent immigrants, presenting a rare opportunity to study the lives and impact of a pandemic among a population that has only recently settled in the United States. Despite the Midwestern region having a presence of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans since the beginning of the twentieth century, this region became a minor-emerging gateway starting in the 1990s, which saw a fast-growing foreign-born population (Flippen & Farrell-Bryan, 2021). Currently, the US Midwestern region has a foreign-born population of 7.3%, and among the foreign-born population, 34% hail from Latin American countries. Most immigrants from Latin American countries primarily arrive from Mexico, but there is a growing Central American population as many immigrants continue to flee insecurity, poverty, and political instability in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua (O'Connor et al., 2019).

The complete VidaSana baseline cohort consists of 547 respondents, and the Hispanic COVID-19 Rapid Response Study data consist of a subset of 400 respondents (73.1% of the full sample). VidaSana participants were asked to complete four interviews in either English or Spanish at baseline, 6, 12, and 18 months. Data collection for the larger project, the VidaSana Study, began in August 2017, and all VidaSana participants had completed the baseline survey by April 2020. The study relied on community-based sampling techniques where participants were recruited from Hispanic-serving cultural institutions, churches, and school events, as well as advertisements in Spanish-language media throughout Indiana. Detailed sampling, recruitment strategies, and where data were collected are described in an article focusing on the study's methodology (Lopez-Owens et al., 2018).

With the onset of the pandemic, the VidaSana Study expanded to collect an additional wave of data, thus beginning the Hispanic COVID-19 Rapid Response Study, henceforth referred to as the "COVID wave." Data collection began in September 2020 and continued through November 2020 with the goal of examining the impact of the pandemic on Mexican and Central Americans' lives across multiple domains—social relationships, socialization, anxiety, addictions, and the ability to seek health care. Participants were interviewed via telephone and were given a choice to complete the interview in Spanish or English, with all participants completing the interview in Spanish. Interviews were intended to take about 30 min and those who completed the COVID survey were compensated $20 for their time. Participants completing the Hispanic COVID-19 Rapid Response Study interview were in various stages of the VidaSana panel as the main VidaSana data collection was ongoing. The average respondent had participated in three waves of data collection prior to the COVID wave. As demographic information was not asked during the COVID wave, pandemic precarity is the only variable used from the COVID wave. All other variables are derived from the most recent wave where the data is available. At the time of data collection during Fall 2020, immigrant families in the Midwest simultaneously contended with a surge of reported COVID-19 cases and a tense political climate, particularly around the topic of immigration, leading up to the 2020 Presidential election (Chishti & Bolter, 2020b; New York Times, 2021). These intense pressures likely heightened the uncertainty felt by Mexican and Central American immigrants and justify the importance and need to collect data and conduct this study.

Measures

Pandemic precarity

Our outcome measure of interest is the pandemic precarity index (Perry et al., 2021). This variable captures perceptions of precarity due to COVID-19 and consists of three items intended to capture different elements of economic insecurity due to housing, food, and finances: (1) *COVID-19 has made me worry that I may not have a place to live*; (2) *COVID-19 has made me worry that I may not have enough money to buy food*; and (3) *COVID-19 has made me worry about my finances, in general*. Each item is coded on a four-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), such that higher scores indicate greater precarity. For the index, scores are averaged across all items if respondents answered at least two out of the three items (applies to only two respondents). For example, a score of 4 indicates that a respondent strongly agreed COVID-19 has made them worried about not having a place to live, not having enough money to buy food, and about finances in general (high pandemic precarity), whereas an average score of 1 means the respondent strongly disagreed COVID has made them worry about these things (low pandemic precarity). The Cronbach's alpha for these items is 0.83. As a sensitivity check, we independently predicted each item in the precarity index. We do not find any substantial differences among these models. They can be found in Supporting Information Appendix A, Tables 1–3.

Independent variables

We examine three binary variables that capture different elements of family structure: parenthood status, marital status, and gender. Parenthood indicates whether a respondent has any children (1) or not (0). Respondents were given four options for their marital status: single, married or living as married, divorced/separated, and widowed. For these analyses, we collapse these categories into married or living as married (1; henceforth referred to as "married" for

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simplicity) compared to all other categories (0; henceforth referred to as "single" for simplicity). Less than 7% of respondents indicated they were either widowed or divorced in the most recent wave. Small cell sizes prevent us from conducting additional analyses with a more detailed measure of marital status. Sex is a binary variable composed of males (0) and females (1). In addition to the main effects of each variable, we also examine the interactions between each of these variables in our models. Due to small cell sizes, we were unable to conduct analyses with a three-way interaction term.

Control variables

In addition to our key variables of interest, we examine the effect of several other variables identified by prior research as associated with precarity, including age and income (Perry et al., 2021). We examine age in years (measured only at baseline), a binary variable for whether the respondent completed at least a high school degree, and an indicator variable of unemployment in the most recent wave of data collected before the COVID wave. Recency of migration is measured as shorter-term versus longer-term immigrant with shorter-term (0) referring to those who had immigrated within the last 6 months, and longer-term (1) referring to immigrants who had been in the United States for at least 2 years. The variable was created through recruitment criteria—that respondents either had to have immigrated to the United States within the past 6 months *or* have been residing in the United States for at least 2 years since they immigrated and were recruited from the social networks of other study respondents. This distinction was settled on due to the practical difficulties of finding more longer-term immigrants (i.e., more than 5 years in the United States) within the networks of recent immigrants. Recency of migration was included to account for the effect of recent arrivals who may be experiencing heightened precarity due to their recent settlement in the United States. Therefore, some immigrants may be more vulnerable to perceived pandemic precarity compared to their peers who have resided in the United States for a longer period, which may provide more stability and resilience during times of crisis. Household income over the past year was also measured at the most recent wave of data collection before the COVID wave. It is constructed as a categorical variable with categories $0–9999; $10,000–19,999; $20,000–29,999; $30,000–39,999; $40,000–49,999; and $50,000 or more. For analysis, income categories were coded to their midpoint in tens of thousands of dollars. By including income in our models, we hope to control for the effect of one's financial situation *before* the pandemic to distinguish the effects of family structure on general financial worries from pandemic precarity. We conducted further supplementary analyses using several different measures of financial well-being prior to the COVID wave, such as a different financial well-being scale. Results are largely consistent and provided in Supporting Information Appendix B, Tables 1–3.

Analytic strategy

To investigate our research questions, we begin with descriptive statistics of the sample (Table 1) and then conduct linear regression models using the pandemic precarity index as our outcome of interest (Table 2). Regression models use listwise deletion, which drops 13 cases, all of whom were missing income data, bringing our analytic sample to 387. In the first model of Table 2, we include all our independent and control variables without any interaction terms. Each subsequent model includes one interaction term between two of our three key independent variables. Model 2 includes an interaction term between parenthood and gender; Model 3 includes an interaction term between marital status and gender; and Model 4 includes an interaction term between parenthood and marital status. For Models 2–4, we calculate the

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average marginal effects (AMEs) of both variables in the interaction and examine the predicted values of pandemic precarity for each group, using post-hoc analyses to test for significance between the categorical variables rather than interpret the coefficient of the interaction term.

AMEs provide several advantages for interpreting results (Mize, 2019). First, AMEs allow us to interpret the effects of independent variables in the natural metric of the outcome variable (in this case, as predicted pandemic precarity scores). Additionally, AMEs facilitate the interpretation of our non-linear interactions by allowing us to see how (or if) the effect of one variable (i.e., marital status) is different at distinct values of another (i.e., men compared to women). Although our hypotheses only address one side of each interaction based on theoretical motivation, we test for both sides of each interaction consistent with best practices to provide a complete picture of the inter-related nature of our independent variables (Mize, 2019).

Finally, we conducted several sensitivity analyses to examine these processes among sample of only women, only men, and only parents. We found patterns among the main effects are largely the same as the full sample. However, we are significantly limited by small sample sizes and have insufficient power to reliably conduct analyses with interaction terms among these subsamples. We do, however, present these results in our Supporting Information Appendix C.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics of the sample. On average, respondents have a three out of four pandemic precarity score, indicating a moderately high level of worry about COVID's effects on their financial precarity. Almost three-quarters of the sample are women, 83.5% of participants are parents, and 68.7% are married. On average, respondents are about 35 years old, and approximately half of the sample completed at least a high school education. We found 10.6% of respondents were unemployed in the last wave of data collected before the pandemic, and yearly household income averaged approximately $30,400. The sample from VidaSana does not entirely reflect the broader population of foreign-born Hispanics in the United States. Though the sample has similar levels of educational attainment, this sample is younger, and has higher rates of marriage and unemployment (Noe-Bustamante & Flores, 2019).

Our baseline model examines the main effects of parenthood status, gender, and marital status. As seen in Table 2, Model 1, we found that, on average, women have pandemic precarity

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics ($N = 387$).

	Mean/percent	SD	Min.	Max.
Pandemic precarity index[a]	2.98	0.93	1.00	4.00
Parenthood[b]	83.40%	–	0.00	1.00
Marital status[c]	68.70%	–	0.00	1.00
Female[d]	72.80%	–	0.00	1.00
Age, Wave 1	35.10	10.74	18.00	70.00
High school degree	49.10%	–	0.00	1.00
Unemployed pre-COVID	10.50%	–	0.00	1.00
Recency of migration[e]	37.40%	–	0.00	1.00
Household income in $10,000	3.04	18.50	5.00	60.00

[a]The pandemic precarity index is a composite scale of three items that have been standardized.
[b]Parenthood status: 0 = no children, 1 = those with children.
[c]Marital status: 0 = single or unmarried, 2 = married or living as married.
[d]Gender: 0 = male, 1 = female.
[e]Recency of migration: 0 = shorter-term immigrants, 1 = longer-term immigrants.

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TABLE 2 OLS coefficients of family structure on pandemic precarity.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Base	Parent × gender	Married × gender	Parent × married
Female	−0.21 (0.10)*	−0.10 (0.22)	0.18 (0.21)	−0.24(0.10)*
Parenthood status	0.46 (0.13)***	0.54 (0.20)**	0.40 (0.14)**	0.81 (0.19)***
Marital status	0.01 (0.10)	0.01 (0.10)	0.41 (0.21)+	0.50 (0.22)*
Age	−0.02 (0.00)***	−0.02 (0.00)***	−0.02 (0.00)***	−0.02 (0.00)***
Recency of migration	−0.24 (0.09)**	−0.24 (0.09)**	−0.23 (0.09)*	−0.25 (0.09)**
High school education	−0.34 (0.09)***	−0.34 (0.09)***	−0.33 (0.09)***	−0.32 (0.09)***
Unemployed Pre-COVID	0.33 (0.15)*	0.32 (0.15)*	0.30 (0.15)*	0.31 (0.15)*
Household Income	−0.01 (0.00)**	−0.01 (0.00)**	−0.01 (0.00)**	−0.01 (0.00)*
Parent × female		−0.13 (0.25)		
Married × female			−0.51 (0.24)*	
Parent × married				−0.63 (0.25)*
Constant	3.87 (0.21)***	3.82 (0.23)***	3.66 (0.23)***	3.67 (0.23)***
R^2	0.154	0.154	0.164	0.168
BIC	1026.08	1031.74	1027.35	1025.42

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.
$^{+}p < .10$;
$^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

scores 0.21 points lower than men, holding all else equal ($p < 0.05$), leading us to accept Hypothesis 1b and reject Hypothesis 1a. Being a parent is associated with a 0.46-point increase in pandemic precarity ($p < 0.001$), or approximately half a standard deviation increase, supporting Hypothesis 2. There is no significant main effect of marital status, leading us to reject Hypothesis 3. We also found increased age ($b = -0.02$; $p < 0.001$) and having completed at least high school ($b = -0.34$; $p < 0.001$) are associated with significantly lower precarity scores, whereas being unemployed prior to the pandemic is associated with increased precarity ($b = 0.33$, $p < 0.05$). Greater income is associated with a statistically significant albeit substantially minimal decrease in precarity ($b = -0.01$; $p < 0.01$).

Next, we investigate the interactive effect of parenthood and gender on pandemic precarity. As seen in Table 2, Model 2, parenthood has a significant and positive main effect on precarity scores ($b = 0.54$; $p < 0.01$), albeit there is no significant main effect of gender. We rely on average marginal effects to effectively interpret the interaction effect. In Table 3, Model 2, fathers have higher predicted precarity scores of 3.23 than mothers (AME = 3.00; $p < 0.05$). Mothers and fathers have significantly higher predicted pandemic precarity scores compared to men and women without children (AME = 2.69 and 2.59, respectively). These findings demonstrate that the effect of gender depends on parenthood status leading us to accept Hypothesis 4; among non-parents, gender has no significant effect on precarity, yet gender is significant among parents.

We next examine the interaction of marital status and gender on pandemic precarity in Table 2, Model 3. We found a positive main effect of being married ($b = 0.41$, $p < 0.10$), but again there no significant main effect of gender. Examining the group differences in pandemic precarity scores in Table 3, Model 3 again assists our interpretation. We found married men have significantly higher precarity scores than all other groups ($p < 0.10$), and there are no significant differences in precarity scores across married women, unmarried women, and unmarried men. This indicates that the effect of marriage depends on gender; marriage significantly increases precarity for men, but there is no significant effect of marriage among women. This

supports Hypothesis 5, where we anticipated that married women would report lower pandemic precarity than married men. We also found evidence that the effect of gender depends on marriage; whereas married men have higher precarity scores than married women, there are no significant gender differences in pandemic precarity among the unmarried.

Finally, in Table 2, Model 4, we examine the interaction of parenthood and marital status on pandemic precarity. We found that being a parent increases precarity for the unmarried ($b = 0.81$; $p < 0.001$) and being married is similarly associated with increased precarity for non-parents ($b = 0.50$; $p < 0.05$). In Table 3, we examined the AMEs of parenthood and marital status and found that those who are unmarried and without children have a predicted precarity score of 2.35, which is significantly lower relative to all other groups ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, there are no significant differences in predicted precarity scores for married non-parents (AME = 2.85), non-married parents (AME = 3.16), and married parents (AME = 3.03). Therefore, though we did not find married parents reported lower perceptions of pandemic precarity compared to unmarried parents as predicted, we found evidence that the effect of marriage depends on parenthood status in that marriage increases precarity for those without children has no significant effect for parents, leading us to partially accept Hypothesis 6. While we did not find evidence that married parents reported lower pandemic precarity than unmarried parents, to sufficiently assess whether the effect of marriage depends on parenthood, we must examine both sides of the interaction (see Mize, 2019 for an in-depth explanation). This includes both if there is a difference in precarity among married and non-married parents *and* if there is a difference in precarity among married and non-married non-parents. Given that we did not find a difference in precarity among married and non-married parents but did find a

TABLE 3 Group differences in predicted pandemic precarity.

	Model 2: Parent × gender		
		AME	**Contrasts**
a	Non-parent men	2.69	c, d+
b	Non-parent women	2.59	c, d
c	Fathers	3.23	a, b, d
d	Mothers	3.00	a+, b, c
	Model 3: Married × gender		
		AME	**Contrasts**
a	Unmarried men	2.81	c+
b	Unmarried women	2.99	c+
c	Married men	3.22	a+, b+, d
d	Married women	2.90	c
	Model 4: Parent × married		
		AME	**Contrasts**
a	Non-parent, single	2.35	b, c, d
b	Non-parent, married	2.85	a
c	Parent, single	3.16	a
d	Parent, married	3.03	a

Note: The "contrasts" column reports which contrasts are significant at $p < .05$. Any contrast that includes "+" indicates significance at $p < .10$.
AME = Average Marginal Effect, which represents the average predicted pandemic precarity score for each group, holding all other variables constant.

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difference between married and non-married non-parents, we still find evidence to support the first clause of Hypothesis 6, that the effect of marriage does depend on parenthood. In the next section, we discuss the implications of these findings within the context of gendered family norms.

DISCUSSION

Overall, family structure is linked to perceived pandemic precarity during COVID-19. Parents and men reported the highest levels of perceived pandemic precarity, yet the extent to which marriage is protective against or increases perceived pandemic precarity is contingent on other dimensions of family structure. For men, family ties (either to spouses or children) increased reports of perceived pandemic precarity. For women, however, only children increased precarity, whereas marriage had no effect on precarity.

Regarding gender, we proposed two competing hypotheses: we posited that gendered social expectations through self-sacrificing femininity for Latina immigrants could create heightened perceptions of pandemic precarity (Hypothesis 1a) or that hegemonic masculinity ideals for Latino immigrants could heighten perceptions of pandemic precarity (Hypothesis 1b). We found that immigrant men, on average, report higher levels of perceived pandemic precarity compared to immigrant women, which leads us to accept hypothesis Hypothesis 1b and reject Hypothesis 1a. This finding supports the perspective that Latino immigrants may fall back on normative scripts of hegemonic masculinity during shifting economic and social conditions (Broughton, 2008; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which for men means demonstrating responsibility and integrity through hard work to provide for their family (Mirandé, 2018; Ojeda & Piña-Watson, 2014). For Latino immigrants, the pressure to fulfill this expectation might be more challenging to achieve during times of crisis, reflecting the salience of ethnicity and class-based definitions of masculinities. It may also be the case that the pandemic-induced worries Latina immigrants are experiencing, such as increased caregiving responsibilities, may not be captured in our measurement of perceived pandemic precarity, which focuses on financial concerns, thus contributing to this finding. Alternatively, self-sacrificing femininity may contribute to Latina immigrants reporting lower levels of perceived pandemic precarity because they consider pandemic-related burdens related to their normative social expectations for caregiving (Abrego, 2014; Alcalde, 2010), and women may have become accustomed to living under the pressure of precarious circumstances while fulfilling caregiving responsibilities.

Gendered patterns of perceived pandemic precarity could also be attributed to remittance practices—the monies an individual sends to another individual or household in the sender's country of origin for their economic well-being (Abrego, 2009; Ratha, 2023). Despite our data not containing information on remittances or the physical location of family members, prior research indicates immigrants are often part of transnational families that carry expectations of sending money back to their home country (Abrego, 2009). Even though women typically send smaller but more consistent remittances than men (Abrego, 2009), men sending money to family in their country of origin has important implications for how men are viewed in fulfilling their provider role (Dreby, 2010). Furthermore, it is important to highlight that immigrant men have a higher likelihood of having spouses and/or children residing in their home country compared to women (Arenas et al., 2021). This would certainly heighten perceptions of precarity beyond having parents or extended family on the other side of the border. Such circumstances may also contribute to our gendered findings because men may have felt greater pressure to fulfill the provider role by sending remittances during the global crisis. We must also note, however, that the effect of gender seems to be contingent upon other aspects of family structure.

We found consistent evidence that for both men and women, the responsibility of children means parents face heightened perceptions of pandemic precarity compared to those without

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children and is consistent with our hypothesis (Hypothesis 2). Regardless of gender, having children carries the expectation of ensuring children's overall well-being, which requires economic resources for day-to-day living. In light of the economic uncertainty that characterized the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, parents may be less certain of their ability to satisfy expectations of financially supporting their children. We argue that the pressures of caregiving among immigrant mothers and the pressure of providing among immigrant fathers intersect with social class to shape how parents financially support their children. In a sample that is mainly low-income, we find that parenthood significantly increases perceived pandemic precarity, even after controlling for pre-pandemic measures of economic security, such as unemployment and income. Our findings regarding the pressure of parenthood align with recent research examining parenting pressures during the first year of the pandemic (Brown et al., 2020; Calarco et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2021; Luhr et al., 2022).

Regarding marital status, our findings did not support our hypothesis that marriage was associated with lower perceptions of pandemic precarity compared to those who are single (Hypothesis 3). However, though unexpected, because research finds marriage provides both physical and mental health benefits through instrumental and social support (Ta et al., 2017; Umberson et al., 2013), it does point to how the effect of marriage might have become more pronounced in tandem with other statuses. Therefore, showing the importance of examining interactions that combine various aspects of family structure and gender.

Turning to our results on such interactions, we found support for our hypothesis on gender and parenthood, stating that the effect of gender will depend on parenthood status, such that fathers will report higher perceived pandemic precarity than mothers (Hypothesis 4). Indeed, we found significant gender differences in pandemic precarity among parents. Furthermore, results show that fathers report greater perceived pandemic precarity compared to mothers. Among non-parents, there were no significant differences by gender, but both mothers and fathers have higher perceived pandemic precarity scores relative to non-parents regardless of gender. Given the large emphasis in the literature on mothers and the pandemic (Calarco et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2021; Mooi-Reci & Risman, 2021), we address concerns about the well-being of fathers and their intersecting statuses, specifically Mexican and Central American fathers during times of crisis. Our finding that fathers report greater perceived pandemic precarity than mothers is consistent with the hegemonic masculinity perspective. In such times, immigrant fathers adopt a provider role out of necessity for their families, suggesting many have internalized ideas of hegemonic masculinity, and their masculinity is also shaped by social, cultural, and historical settings (Broughton, 2008; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Overall, this research speaks to the pressures associated with fathering in immigrant families (Van Hook & Glick, 2020) and how intersecting statuses shape perceptions of precarity for immigrant men (Doucet & Lee, 2014; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020).

Considering the gender and marriage interaction, our study supports our hypothesis that the effect of marriage will depend on gender, such that married women will report lower perceived pandemic precarity than married men (Hypothesis 5). Results indicate the effect of gender is only significant for those who are married, though there is no significant gender difference among those who are unmarried. We found married men report more perceived pandemic precarity compared to all other groups, meaning that for Mexican and Central American immigrant men, having a spouse or partner is associated with greater perceived pandemic precarity, whereas there is no significant effect for women. This finding specifically highlights the importance of examining interactions with various combinations of family structures. Like our explanation for fathers, the gendered social expectation for men to be the primary economic provider places greater pressure on husbands to fulfill this expectation with each layered family obligation, including having a spouse and children. Therefore, we argue that because of the pandemic, Latino immigrant men with family ties, such as having children and a spouse, may struggle to

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fulfill the gendered social expectation of the provider norm associated with hegemonic masculinity, thus heightening perceptions of pandemic precarity.

We hypothesized the effect of marriage would depend on parenthood status such that married parents would report lower perceived pandemic precarity than unmarried parents (Hypothesis 6). Though we did not find that marriage significantly influenced perceptions of pandemic precarity for parents, we did find that marriage influenced pandemic precarity for non-parents. Specifically, marriage increases precarity for those without children, whereas marriage had no significant effect for parents. For single parents, perceived pandemic precarity appeared to be were higher compared to other groups, which aligns with previous research on single parents (Cooper et al., 2009), but there was no statistical significance compared to married parents or those who were married and without children. Those who are unmarried and have no children had the lowest levels of perceived pandemic precarity compared to all other groups. We found it surprising that among those without children, being married was associated with increased perceptions of pandemic precarity compared to those who were single and without children. It could be that being married among immigrant non-parents represented an additional person to worry about, rather than someone with whom to share responsibility (Grundström et al., 2021). Single immigrants without children may have benefited from decreased familial responsibilities, thus diminishing perceptions of pandemic precarity. Indeed, supplementary analyses suggest single immigrants without children reported feeling lower levels of attachment, obligation, and propensity to make sacrifices on behalf of one's family relative to other groups, lending support to this theory. Overall, these findings were unexpected as they run counter to ideas of social ties providing support in times of crisis and present a potential direction for future research.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

As with all studies, our findings have limitations. First, we only measure pandemic precarity at one point in time, prohibiting us from establishing causality. Second, the parenthood variable only asks whether a respondent has any children or not, and the data do not have additional information about whether children are living in the United States with their parent or in their country of origin. Third, not having information about respondents' immigration status (i.e., undocumented, temporary work authorization, US resident, naturalized citizen, or US-born citizen) limits our ability to fully understand these respondents' social and economic positions. However, this omission was purposeful; we did not collect information on immigration status to protect respondents during a contentious political time and to increase trust of study personnel. Furthermore, we conducted supplementary analyses using respondents' fear of authority as a proxy for immigration status and found our results are robust (Supporting Information Appendix D). For similar reasons, our data also does not have information on whether participants' family members have varying immigration statuses. Future data collection on this information could help us determine whether respondents are members of a mixed-status family and whether family members shared financial assistance received from any pandemic-related government relief programs that might moderate or mediate pandemic precarity. Future research should examine how mixed-status families fare and share resources during times of crises. Finally, our research has sharply focused on a specific population group in the US Midwest; this feature may limit the generalizability of our findings, which might not apply to traditional immigrant gateways whose receiving context may have greater co-ethnic community resources compared to non-traditional contexts (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). However, we also view this as a strength of our study as it contributes to the literature on new immigrant destinations and specifically in understanding how immigrants fared in new destinations during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Flippen & Farrell-Bryan, 2021).

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Despite these limitations, our findings make important theoretical and methodological contributions to family science by focusing on the economic strains experienced by Mexican and Central Americans immigrant families in the United States during a time of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to expose how existing social inequalities that have historically affected disadvantaged groups, including Mexican and Central American immigrants, are compounded in the face of crisis (Klinenberg, 2002; Perry et al., 2021; Waters, 2016). Examining how family structure and gender influences the extent of pandemic precarity among Mexican and Central American immigrants provides novel insights into potential mechanisms driving social and economic inequalities. Moreover, this study makes an important contribution by examining perceived precarity, given that precarity alone could be interpreted as an objective condition. This study goes beyond reports of job loss and captures other aspects of precarity such as food insecurity, housing precarity and subjective aspects of financial well-being, as well as examining within-group differences of perceived precarity. In doing so, our research engages with the literature on family and immigration and bridges the two—presenting a step forward for both subfields.

Further research should address how Mexican and Central American immigrants fare in terms of different dimensions like psychological distress and overall well-being. For example, this research could examine how immigrants' family roles shape their perceptions in other aspects of the pandemic, such as how Mexican and Central American immigrant mothers may fare worse than fathers and those without children during the first years of the pandemic in terms of increased caregiving burdens, perceived stress, or mental health outcomes. The pressures of the pandemic might manifest through different family roles.

Overall, our results show that Central American and Mexican immigrant men and parents report the highest pandemic precarity, yet these effects largely depend on other dimensions of family structure. Fathers report higher pandemic precarity than mothers; and for men, marriage is associated with greater precarity, yet for women, it is associated with less precarity; and for those without children, marriage also increases precarity. Given the pandemic's toll on traditionally disadvantaged groups, it is important to examine patterns of precarity and within group variations to understand COVID-19's impact on Mexican and Central American immigrants. Understanding who is bearing the burden of the pandemic is important for social service agencies and organizations to allocate and provide resources to alleviate precarity for immigrant families during the ongoing pandemic and in its aftermath.

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