

The Mercury News Sunday



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Bay Area News Group

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NUMBERS SPEAK

DEATH DOES DISCRIMINATE

Poor, largely Latino neighborhoods bear disproportionate share of COVID-19 fatalities; wealthier areas suffer less

By **Leonardo Castañeda** and **David DeBolt**
Staff writers

An exclusive analysis of Santa Clara County death records shows the novel coronavirus is hitting hardest in the poor, largely Latino neighborhoods of East San Jose, where death rates are far higher than in wealthier areas.

According to records obtained by the Bay Area News Group, more than a third of the county's first 100 deaths occurred in just four ZIP codes on the city's East

Side. In the county's poorest ZIP codes, the death rate from COVID-19 is four times as high as in the wealthiest ZIP codes.

The death data are the most extensive released by any Bay Area county and illustrate outcomes in the county with the largest numbers of cases and deaths in the region. They offer insight into a phenomenon seen around the country and across the world: The toll of coronavirus is falling disproportionately on vulnerable communities, where residents — predominantly Latinos and Afri-

+ **Online:** Poorer neighborhoods in Santa Clara County have been hard-hit by COVID-19 deaths. See our interactive map at WWW.MERCURYNEWS.COM.

can Americans — have long been poorly served by existing health care systems, and where many — because of economic stress or the nature of their jobs — have been unable to stay safely at home amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The victims are working-class people like Candelario Suarez, who had no known health issues

when he died from COVID-19 last month, weeks after his wife contracted the virus; Arcelia Martinez, 65, a FoodMaxx cashier known for her big heart and cooking skills; and a 94-year-old retired carpenter and self-taught musician who arrived in San Jose from Sinaloa at age 20.

In less than three months, the novel coronavirus has claimed 128 lives in Santa Clara County, infected just over 2,300 people and caused the worst unemployment crisis since the Great Depression. Though families all over the county have been impacted, the virus's deadly toll has been uneven.

DEATHS » PAGE 9

COVID-19 DEATHS

East San Jose is the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic in the South Bay.

Santa Clara County
128 Coronavirus deaths in county in less than three months

In poorer ZIP codes
46 Deaths in ZIP codes where at least 25 percent of residents make less than 200 percent of the federal poverty limit

In richer ZIP codes
5 Deaths in ZIP codes where fewer than 10 percent of residents are below the poverty rate

CORONAVIRUS

She was on a ventilator, sedated

Her family was in mourning, unsure when or if they could break the bad news of their heartbreaking loss



PHOTOS BY RANDY VAZQUEZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Claudia Meza holds her granddaughter, Emily Rodriguez, 5, home in San Jose on Monday. Meza was released from Kaiser Permanente San Jose Medical Center after spending nearly seven weeks at the hospital being treated for COVID-19. She was unconscious in an ICU for four weeks

WAKING UP

TO A WORLD FOREVER CHANGED

By **Julia Prodis Sulek**
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SAN JOSE » Claudia Meza's family wasn't sure how to tell her. The doctors had warned them not to overwhelm her. After 49 days fighting the coronavirus in the hospital, most of them sedated with a breathing tube, the 51-year-old mother was confused, her memory hazy. She scrambled names and faces, even her own three sons at first.

Now, finally, she was coming home, but her children, niece and nephews needed to figure out the best way to deliver the devastating news. Maybe they should tell her right away, they thought, get it over quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid. Or perhaps they should wait until she's stronger.

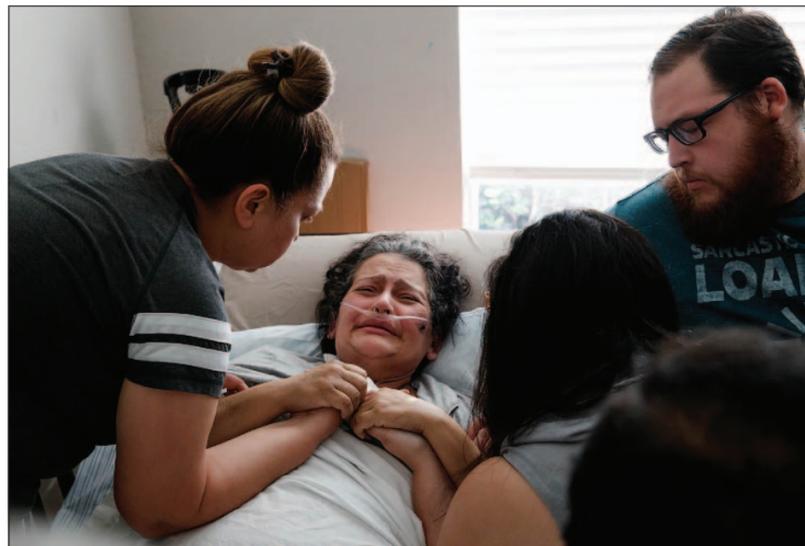
How were they supposed to explain that while Claudia lay unconscious in an ICU for four weeks, the coronavirus had taken her beloved sister and brother-in-law in the span of a week?

How would they begin to tell her how drastically everything in their lives had changed?

"She's waking up," her son Giovanni Sanchez said, "to a completely different world."

When she came home Monday, Claudia Meza had been hospitalized for almost seven weeks,

FAMILY » PAGE 8



Claudia Meza, center, holds the hands of family members at home after finding out her sister Mercedes Hartwig and brother-in-law Richard died of the coronavirus while Meza was in the hospital. Meza was sedated with a breathing tube when they died.

TESTING

What it's like to get a nasal swab

By **Leonardo Castañeda**
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Nasal swab tests, the somewhat clinical name for the primary way to check for COVID-19, are almost universally described with one word:

Uncomfortable.

But thousands of Bay Area residents will have to come to terms with having a long Q-tip-like swab put far deeper inside a nostril than they would expect, or hope, if the region is to meet Gov. Gavin Newsom's goal of 1.5 tests for every 1,000 residents every day — among the preconditions for easing shelter-in-place rules.

How easy is it to find a testing site and get tested? Two Bay Area News Group reporters set out to see.

In San Francisco, the county has made testing available for free to any essential workers who live or work in the city, as well as to anyone who has come in close contact with a COVID-19 patient or who is ex-

SWAB » PAGE 9

TESLA TO LEAVE?



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Elon Musk

Tesla CEO Elon Musk says his car company will leave California and sue Alameda County over coronavirus lockdown orders that have kept the Fremont factory closed. "Frankly, this is the final straw," Musk tweeted.

See Page B1.

NEWS ON THE GO

Download Bay Area News Digest from the app store for your iPhone.

INDEX

BusinessE1
ClassifiedsC4

LocalB1
LotteryA2
ObituariesB10

OpinionA10
PuzzlesB14
TVB16

WEATHER

H: 73-77 L: 49-51
Full report on B20



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Family

FROM PAGE 1

since March 17 — the day the Bay Area began its first-in-the-nation COVID-19 lockdown. Back then, her husband had yet to be furloughed from his truck driving job, her sons' schools were closed for only a few days, and her younger sister, Mercedes Hartwig, was home in the Central Valley with her husband, Richard.

Now, Claudia was leaving Kaiser Permanente San Jose, a coronavirus survivor wheeled through a hospital corridor to the applause of doctors and nurses who fought like hell to save her. In less than three months, the disease has killed more than 79,000 people in America. And some early studies have shown how unlikely it is to go home after lengthy ICU stays on a ventilator, much less for four weeks.

Those like Claudia who somehow do recover must learn to breathe on their own again in a new world of lost jobs and lost school years.

When the ambulance pulled up to her apartment building in South San Jose, Claudia's extended family was waiting outside. She was coming home — and just before Mother's Day.

Doctors had suggested she recuperate at a skilled nursing facility, where she could be treated for her memory and muscle loss but would still be restricted from receiving visitors. Her family was adamant: Claudia had been quarantined long enough. And there was no way they would tell her about the deaths of her sister and brother-in-law over FaceTime. Now more than ever, she needed the ones she loved the most.

'Did you miss me a lot?'

"Welcome home!" they cheered as paramedics pulled out the gurney. Claudia looked bewildered at first and shielded her eyes from the sun.

Her eldest, Giovanni, 26, and his cousin, Roxana Flores, 48, — who was raised like a sister to Claudia — felt particularly anxious. The two had been preparing for her arrival, making room for a hospital bed, wheelchair and oxygen machine.

The weeks without her had strained the family. Claudia was the undisputed head of the household, and without her daily direction, "it was like everybody was lost," Roxana said. Her two younger sons were on their own figuring out online schooling. And with her husband out of work for a month, everyone worried about paying the rent.

But all the hardships of these past seven weeks were overshadowed by the deaths of Mercedes and Richard, who died a week apart in early April. The Vietnam War vet and his wife of 33 years — whose story was featured last month by the Bay Area News Group — were one of California's first married couples to die from the coronavirus.

Was it too soon to tell her?

The paramedics settled Claudia in her bedroom and hooked up the oxygen. Fighting off the virus had left her so physically and emotionally fragile, she could barely sit up on the edge of the bed.

A rough scab had formed on her cheek where the ventilator pad had been pulled off. Across the room, a statue of the Virgin Mary sat atop a curio cabinet filled with her figurines of angels and saints. The sun streamed in from the window.

Crowding the doorway, the relatives took turns, one by one, approaching Claudia.

Her 5-year-old granddaughter, Emily, who shares the room across the hall with her parents, went first.

"I missed you," Emily said. In her blue princess dress, she climbed up on the bed and nuzzled her head into her grandmother's chest.

"Did you miss me a lot or a little?" asked Claudia, her voice muffled from behind her surgical mask.

"A lot."

Giovanni came next. After his mother was hospital-



Claudia Meza holds the hand of a medical worker as she is released from Kaiser Permanente San Jose Medical Center on Monday. She returned home from the hospital to a new world of lost jobs, lost school years and a family tragedy.

ized, he moved back from Long Beach, where he was working as an accountant, to help care for his younger brothers, come what may. He hugged his mom and broke into tears. "You look beautiful," he told her.

Then came his little brothers, Gabriel, 16, and Adrian, 14, both star students whose aspirations for their spring track seasons evaporated when everything was shut down.

"You're home," Gabriel said, choking up. "You're home."

"I love you," Adrian said, as his mother caressed his back.

Waiting patiently in the doorway was Claudia's husband, Juan Meza, who himself had recovered from coronavirus symptoms that left him so weak he nearly fainted. The couple, who had met salsa dancing nearly 20 years ago, embraced tenderly.

Claudia's children all knew how lucky they were to be celebrating this bedside homecoming. Just weeks ago, their cousins were collapsing into their parents' open caskets. But the emotional reunion wasn't over. Claudia's sister, Aida, 68, the eldest of the three sisters, stepped forward last.

Giovanni braced himself next to the guardian angels, straining to hear if this would be the moment Claudia would recognize that Mercedes wasn't there. Roxana held herself up along the wall, certain that the memories, the family connections, would come flooding back. But the moment passed quietly. The two sisters simply cried in each other's arms.

'Wasn't anyone closer'

Why one sister died and the other survived is as difficult to explain as the virus itself. They were 10 years apart but so close they talked nearly every day. The sisters loved music and dancing.

"There wasn't anyone closer to her," Giovanni said.

They had immigrated to San Jose from El Salvador in the early 1980s with their parents and siblings and became U.S. citizens. When the Hartwigs moved to the Central Valley in the early 2000s, the families remained close. The Hartwig kids considered Claudia a second mother. The Meza kids called Mercedes "Mama Mecky."

Claudia had just started a new job in early March as an administrative assistant at Sacred Heart church in San Jose when she fell ill with a fever, cough and upset stomach. On the phone, she commiserated with Mercedes about their shared symptoms. They didn't know how they became infected — maybe Claudia picked it up while working as a driver for Uber and Lyft. They had last seen each other in mid-February at a family birthday party, and other family members were also getting sick.

By mid-March, schools were closing, San Jose Sharks hockey games were canceled, and Mercedes at her home in Lathrop became more worried about her sister in San Jose than herself. She sounded so weak on the phone, she told Claudia's husband, and

urged him to rush her to the emergency room.

Within a few days, both sisters were having such difficulty breathing they were each in a hospital, 76 miles apart.

From their hospital beds, the sisters managed to talk once more on the phone before Mercedes was rushed to the ICU for a breathing tube. They never spoke again.

Within days, it would be Claudia's turn to be hooked up to a ventilator, and she quickly texted her eldest son: "If I don't make it, please take care of your siblings."

"Why would you say that? Don't say that," Giovanni replied. "You will be fine. Just have to stay positive. You are healthy and you are young. Just rest and try your best not to freak out."

Of COVID-19 patients with symptoms, about 20% are so severe they need hospitalization, and, of those, about a quarter require a ventilator. How many of those end up dying remains difficult to gauge. Early studies from China, Italy and Seattle showed death rates among patients on ventilators ranging from 81% to 26%.

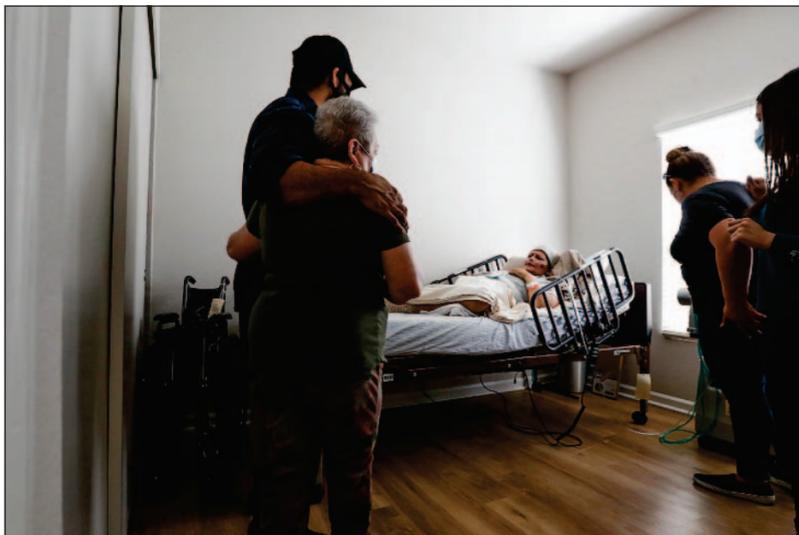
For the Meza and Hartwig families, only one statistic mattered: where one mother on a ventilator would live and the other would die.

'Thought we were going to lose all three'

The sisters had maddening ups and downs during their lengthy hospital stays.

"We thought we were going to lose Claudia when my Aunt Mercedes was getting better," said their niece, Roxana. "Then things got switched around."

While Giovanni moved home and Roxana became Claudia's family advocate, the Hartwig children were frantically keeping up with the decline of their parents. But when they received a call the morning



Family members surround Claudia Meza at her home in San Jose on Monday. The family struggled with how they would tell her that her sister and brother-in-law had died.



Mercedes and Richard Hartwig, seen in 2012 or 2013, died a week apart of COVID-19.

of April 1, they were unprepared: Their father, already weakened from diabetes and a previous heart condition, had died suddenly of a heart attack and pneumonia brought on by the coronavirus after five days at the VA Hospital in Palo Alto.

A week later, when doctors switched her ventilator after a blockage had formed, Mercedes' vital signs plunged. With their mother near death, the Hartwig children were given the rare privilege of a hospital visit. They suited up in protective masks and gloves and, from the other side of a sliding glass door, said goodbye.

The family feared Claudia would be next. "We thought we were going to lose all three of them at the same time," Roxana said.

"We prayed to God to show mercy," said the Hartwigs' son, Rene, 34.

At Kaiser, the medical team knew the tragedy that had befallen Claudia's sister and brother-in-law. They kept the family's secret — and fought to avoid a twin tragedy.

But Claudia's condition was perilous. The virus had triggered a condition called Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome, flooding her lungs with fluid and plummeting her oxygen levels.

"She was working so hard to breathe, she was in danger of injuring her own lungs," said Dr. Paul Waldron, the Kaiser infectious disease specialist who oversaw her case. A ventilator helped, but at first she needed its full power, 100% oxygen — "a dangerous situation."

Doctors tried treating her with the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine but didn't see any clear improvement. They lay her on her stomach to relieve pressure on her lungs. Then, a second problem presented itself: a blood clot formed in her right arm and threatened to lodge in her lungs.

Blood thinners relieved that issue, but Claudia needed more medication when her blood pressure plunged, endangering her kidneys, liver, brain and heart.

After so much time on a ventilator, which can permanently damage the trachea, doctors prepared for the next level of care: surgery to insert a breathing tube into her windpipe.

But then, Claudia's lungs improved, and finally, she could breathe on her own again.

"She struggled for every breath when she was in the hospital," said Dr. Sarala Raja, who oversaw the last days of Claudia's care. "When she recovered, it was the greatest joy."

A woman appears in her dream

During Claudia's first night home, son Giovanni and his cousin Roxana took turns sleeping on the floor next to her. When she woke up, Giovanni immediately texted his cousins.

"She's crying right now saying that she's had dreams," he wrote. "She said it was a lady who was sick also & was telling her that everything was going to be okay."

"Sounds like mom paid her a visit," Edward Hartwig, 29, the youngest sibling, texted back.

At 2 a.m., Giovanni texted Edward's sister, Naomi: "She wants to see you."

The next afternoon, the three Hartwig children gathered outside the Meza home and discussed their strategy.

"The key is not to overwhelm her," said Edward, who drove in from the family home in Lathrop, where he is going through his parents' things. "It's best to play it by ear. For all we know, we could walk in and it could all come rushing back."

"I don't know if I have the courage to tell her what happened," Rene said.

"If we tell her today, will she remember tomorrow?" Edward asked. "If we tell her and it breaks her heart and we have to break her heart again ..."

The three steeled themselves and entered their Aunt Claudia's room. She greeted them with a smile. Naomi, 32, asked how she was doing and mentioned that she had been on a phone call for her work as a music teacher at Presentation High School.

"You're a teacher?" Claudia asked. "There's a lot I don't remember. I see names. I see faces."

Claudia talked about the pain in her fingers and the back of her head, which had rested for weeks on a pillow. They talked about how she had missed the popular Netflix series "Tiger King." Giovanni played the Latin salsa classic, Willie Colon's "El Gran Varon," one of his mother's favorite songs from her childhood.

As the time passed, Claudia recounted the loneliness

she felt in her quarantined room, the fears of moving into the ICU, the confusion when she woke up to the news that she had been hospitalized for nearly two months when it only felt like days. "I was kind of lost because I couldn't remember anything," she said.

But she remembered the nightmares: She was screaming and no one could hear her.

With the afternoon winding down and still no mention of Mercedes, the cousins drifted into the living room and tried to make sense of their exchange. "It's very peculiar," Giovanni said. "The memory, the mind, it's a strange thing."

"I'm anxious," Naomi said, fiddling with her mother's gold heart-shaped necklace she had been wearing since the funeral.

"Dropping something like this on her could set her back," Edward said. "I wish there was a handbook."

Just then, they heard a wail from the bedroom.

'Your mom ... I remember'

The Hartwig children rushed in first. Naomi knelt next to the bed and leaned in close, holding Claudia's hand.

"Your mom," Claudia said. "I remember."

She remembered whom Naomi and her brothers belonged to. She remembered that Mercedes was in the hospital. Was she OK?

Naomi, inches away, paused for a moment, then gave her a knowing look, an almost imperceptible shake of the head. The meaning was clear.

Claudia broke into sobs. "No she didn't."

Naomi caressed her aunt's arm, stroked her hair — and waited for the next question she knew would come.

"How's your dad?" Claudia whispered.

Naomi gave her the same quiet look.

"He passed?" Claudia said, bewildered. "Oh my God, no."

She coughed as she cried. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

'Be strong for each other'

Rene explained that their mother was unconscious and died before they could tell her that their father had passed away. They told Claudia about how social distancing rules meant only 10 relatives were allowed to attend the funeral.

"When you get better, we'll celebrate her," Roxana interjected. She dabbed the tears from Claudia's cheeks.

As the sun began to set and the room darkened, they all remained at her bedside, the brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, the husband, the granddaughter.

At this moment, what was happening outside — the shuttered storefronts and empty parking lots, the teetering stock market and skyrocketing unemployment rate — was a world away.

How the family would pay their bills, how quickly Claudia would regain her strength, were all questions for another day.

What mattered now were the people Claudia loved most, the ones she hadn't seen or touched for nearly two months, right here in this room. As she gathered her breath and stopped shaking, the wise matriarch the family had so desperately missed gently re-emerged.

"I need you guys just to stay together please," she told them. "Don't fall apart. Always follow each other. Be strong for each other. Love each other."

"My mom would have wanted that," Rene said.

"In a minute, in a second," Claudia said, "you're here and then you're gone."

The room fell quiet. The secret had been shared, the burden lifted.

Outside, a man pushing an ice cream cart caught the attention of Claudia's granddaughter.

"Who wants ice cream?" said Claudia's husband, Juan.

One by one, the cousins left her bedside and walked outside into the fading light.

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