

# Los Angeles Times

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To the judges,

Reporter Brittny Mejia had reported on the chaos the pandemic had unleashed from supermarkets to hospital ICUs when she turned her attention on the tiny one-bedroom apartment in South Los Angeles of the Zubia family. The family consisted of Jose Guadalupe Zubia, a 59-year-old mechanic, and his two daughters and two sons, who lived crammed together, along with two dogs. Only the father had tested negative for COVID-19. Mejia was determined [to tell the story of his children's desperate efforts to protect him](#) after they got infected with the virus. "It's easily spread as it is. When you're living in such a small spot, it's even harder to keep yourself away from somebody," his daughter, Joanna, 29, said. "What could we do?"

Like many Latino families, the Zubias lived in overcrowded housing. Jose slept in a surgical mask and cracked open a window beside his bed. Two sons, who slept in the living room with their father, also kept their masks on all night. One pulled the covers over his head, hoping to keep the infection from spreading. Jose's daughters shut themselves in the bedroom they shared. Despite their collective efforts to protect their father, he would end up being infected by COVID-19. On Nov. 25, 2020, during a brutal winter surge of the virus, he died.

Mejia documented the way COVID-19 brought disproportionate deaths to LA's poorest communities, often spreading through dense apartment complexes overcrowded with multi-generational immigrant families. She and a team of reporters set out to understand how this happened; it took them on a 100-year journey into the city's twisted history. They quickly discovered a paradox at the very heart of Los Angeles County – that behind its reputation for suburban sprawl, swimming pools and cul-de-sacs, it was also the most overcrowded housing among large counties in the United States.

Mejia knew there were other Zubia families. Eventually, she and housing reporter Liam Dillon and data reporters Gabrielle LaMarr LeMee and Sandhya Kambhampati teamed up to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fatal consequences, with death rates in L.A.'s most overcrowded neighborhoods at least twice as high as in those with ample housing. The crowded conditions have been a century in the making, with local leaders designing Los Angeles in a way that made these circumstances inevitable. Over generations, those who paid the highest price for these conditions – and for the urban planning that had helped cause them – sat on the lowest rungs of L.A.'s socioeconomic ladder. Within the crowded confines of their neighborhoods, COVID-19 advanced without mercy: orphaning children, killing breadwinners and shattering families.

It didn't have to be this way. The reporters documented how L.A. leaders could have addressed deplorable living conditions for the region's poorest residents with more apartments, taller buildings and public housing. They chronicled how these powerbrokers saw those ideas as contrary to the Southern California lifestyle they were creating. Repeated warnings about the consequences of overcrowding were ignored. Mejia, Dillon, LeMee and Kambhampati went over historical books, scholarly journals, oral histories, census and public health data, archival city records and newspaper clippings to tell the story of this monumental civic failure. They examined seminal moments in L.A.'s history and interviewed people who lived these moments.

With painstaking effort, the reporters held a mirror to a city that long ago used labor of the working poor to create an image of Southern California as a sunny slice of the American dream while failing, time and again, to protect them from the consequences of what they designed.

We are proud to submit their work for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin E. Merida". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'K' and 'M'.