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NEW YORK

A Toll of Coronavirus in New York Is a New Group of Orphans

Although statistics are hard to come by, experts say the scale of the losses is likely staggering



Roberto Tobias Jr. lost both of his parents to Covid-19 this spring. An aunt was appointed the 17-year-old's guardian.

PHOTO: ANDREW SENG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By [Akane Otani](#)

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The last time Roberto Tobias Jr. talked to his father he put on a face mask and shield, gloves and a gown. Then the 17-year-old entered the room in Mount Sinai Queens where his father, Roberto Sr., 72, lay dying of Covid-19 complications. He kissed him on the forehead and told him it was OK to let go. He promised to do his best; he'd find a way to finish high school.

A month later, he got a phone call while at a park with friends. His mother, 61, had just died. She, too, had gotten the coronavirus—likely at home, where she used up vacation days from her nursing job at a Harlem hospital to look after her husband when he first fell ill.

Mr. Tobias Jr. hung up the phone, trying his best to act normal, but his friends knew the worst had happened.

“I was emptied at that moment,” he said.

The coronavirus pandemic has ravaged families, and it’s difficult to figure out exactly how many children have lost a caregiver or have been orphaned, but experts say the scale of the losses is likely staggering. For every one death caused by coronavirus, roughly nine people will lose a grandparent, parent, sibling, spouse or child, according to a July study written by researchers from Pennsylvania State University, the University of Southern California and the University of Western Ontario.

The pandemic has disproportionately affected Black and Hispanic communities, as well as lower-income families, who often have no choice but to continue working outside the home.

Social workers and therapists say they have been inundated with phone calls from relatives asking how to help grieving children.



Lizbeth Martinez, center, with her family in March. Both of her parents have been hospitalized because of the virus, leaving her to care for her younger siblings.

PHOTO: LIZBETH MARTINEZ

“Children are asking who will be taking care of me, or will it happen to me, or will it happen to the next person who is taking care of me...and it’s not so easy to answer those questions because we don’t have the answers,” said Gilly Cannon, director of children’s bereavement services at Maryland-based nonprofit CaringMatters.

The Administration for Children and Families, a division of the U.S. Department for Health and Human Services, said it doesn’t collect data on the cause of death for caregivers that leads to a child entering foster care. Children must have a legal guardian until age 18. If they don’t have a relative who can be one, local child welfare officials enter them into the foster care system.

In New York City, an area hit early by the pandemic, the Administration for Children’s Services has given guidance to social workers at hospitals on how to find relatives in the event of a caregiver dying, so they’d be able to potentially place children with family instead of moving them into the foster care system, a spokeswoman for ACS said.



‘Although I’d like to act like it, I don’t know a lot of what I’m doing,’ Mr. Tobias Jr. said.

PHOTO: ANDREW SENG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Pureza Capriles, Mr. Tobias Jr.’s aunt, was appointed his guardian. She has helped him find a lawyer to help parse through his parents’ will and handle Social Security benefits. Ms. Capriles will also handle the funds that Mr. Tobias Jr. has raised through an online campaign for his future college tuition bills.

“Although I’d like to act like it, I don’t know a lot of what I’m doing,” he said. “I’m only 17.”

He said he is determined to earn a scholarship to go to Columbia University and dreams of becoming a neurosurgeon. And he hopes to take on his late father’s role of sending money

back to their extended family in the Philippines.

“I want to take on that mantle for him,” Mr. Tobias Jr. said. “I promised him I’d do my best.”

“I hate that this is happening,” said Lizbeth Martinez, a 16-year-old in Atlanta. Over the summer, her mother and father were both admitted to the hospital because of coronavirus—leaving her alone to try to juggle her part-time job at a Subway franchise with taking care of her two younger brothers and her grandmother at home.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What resources have you found to support people in need during the pandemic? Join the conversation below.

Before getting sick, Ms. Martinez’s mother picked up jobs cleaning office buildings. Ms. Martinez’s father, a mechanic, remains in an intensive care unit. Her mother was discharged late July, although she remains in weak condition.

Ms. Martinez says she worries a lot about how she can stay in school and how she can keep her job while taking time off to care for her family.

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