



SOUTH CENTRAL VALLEY COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

LABOR, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND CIVIC ACTION

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iv
List of Figures	vi
Contributors and Acknowledgements	vii
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	8
The South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment	9
Methodology and Sample	11
Demographic Results	13
Respondent Characteristics	13
Immigration and Language.....	13
Race and Ethnicity.	15
Sex, Age, Marital Status.....	15
Educational Attainment.....	17
Work Experiences Results	18
Employers and Industries	19
Worker Earnings.	21
The Lowest Worker Earnings.....	21
Employer-Sponsored Health Insurance.	23
Unions and Workplace Conditions	25
Union Membership and Perceptions.....	26
California AB 2183, “Card Check” Law Familiarity.....	26
Many Farmworkers Required to Buy Work Equipment.....	29
Wage Standards Non-Compliance.....	31
Workplace Hostility	31
Loss of Work Hours and Unemployment	32
Environmental Work Interruptions.	32
Covid-19 Employment Disruptions.....	34
Injured Workers and Workers’ Compensation.....	35
Unemployment.....	35
Lack of Access to Unemployment Benefits.....	37
Support for an Unemployment Benefit System for Undocumented Workers.	37

Agricultural Workers	38
Child Labor in the Field.....	40
Start of Farmwork Career.....	40
Long Term Work Plans.....	41
<i>Family and Household Results.....</i>	41
Household Composition	42
Paid Workers in the Household.....	44
Estimated Household Earnings.....	44
Cost of Living Challenges	45
Government Action around Food and Housing Costs.	45
Daycare Needs and Challenges.....	46
Housing and Utilities.....	48
Rental Housing Cost-Burdens.....	50
Educational Experiences.....	52
Youth Higher Education Plans and Obstacles.....	52
Educational Resources and Experiences.....	54
Covid- 19 Public Emergency.....	56
Lack of Access to Pandemic Assistance Programs.....	56
High Interest Pandemic Loans.....	58
Continued Need for Assistance Programs.....	59
Support for a 1% Tax for Those with \$50 Million in Assets.....	59
<i>Health Coverage and Access Results.....</i>	62
Uninsured Household Members.....	62
Knowledge of Medi-Cal Eligibility Regardless of Immigration Status.....	62
Medical Care Utilization	64
Doctor Visits.....	64
Children Doctor Visits.....	65
Family Emergency Care	66
Dental Care Utilization	66
Dentist Visits.....	67
Children Dentist Visits.....	69
Covid-19 Deaths, Mental Health, and Healthcare Government Action.....	69
Deaths During the Covid-19 Pandemic.....	69
Knowledge about Mental Health Care Services.....	70
Government Action around Healthcare Cost and Access.....	71

<i>Community, Environment, and Climate Resiliency</i>	71
Top Community Concerns and Desired Investments	72
Vital Infrastructure and Neighborhood Safety	72
Drinking Water at Home and Work	74
Youth Community Recreational Opportunities	74
Incarceration Experiences	75
Quality Community Jobs	77
Support for Quality Jobs that Invest in Infrastructure and Community	77
Support for Job Creation by Industry	79
California Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund and Climate Government Action	80
Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund Priorities	80
Government Action on Pollution and Excessive Heat	81
Limited Knowledge about Most Energy and Carbon Management Industries	83
<i>Civic Action</i>	84
Ready to Vote, Despite Barriers	84
Voting Registration and Barriers	85
Recent Voting and Barriers	85
Community Involvement	88
Local Organizations	88
Civic Activities	88
Future Civic Action	89
Policy Change Activities	90
<i>Conclusion and Policy Implications</i>	92
<i>References</i>	97
<i>Appendix</i>	104
Appendix A. Random Selection Methodology	104
Appendix B. Recruitment and Response Rate	105
Appendix C. Respondents Willing to Attend an Issue Based Community Meeting, by Issue	106
Appendix D. "What is the Most Important Issue Facing Your Community?"	107
Appendix E. Infrastructure and Neighborhood Safety Community Issues	108
Appendix F. Other Issues Not Covered in Survey That are Important for Respondents, by Issue	109

List of Tables

Table 1. Nativity, Citizenship, and Language.....	14
Table 2. Demographics: Race and Ethnicity, Sex, Age, and Marital Status.....	16
Table 3. Highest Level of Education.....	18
Table 4. Employment Type and Industry.....	20
Table 5. Individual Work Earnings.....	23
Table 6. Employer-Sponsored Health Insurance Coverage and Cost.....	24
Table 7. Workers Without Employer-Sponsored Health Insurance Offered, by Top Ten Industries of Employment.....	25
Table 8. Labor Union Coverage and Perceptions.....	28
Table 9. Employer Non-Compliance and Hostility.....	30
Table 10. Households with Environmental Work Interruptions and Total Affected Workers, Past 12 Months.....	33
Table 11. Covid-19 Related Partial or Full Unemployment, Households with Workers.....	35
Table 12. Injuries and Unemployment.....	36
Table 13. Agricultural Workers and Employer Type.....	39
Table 14. Household Members and Children	43
Table 15. Number of Paid Workers in the Household.....	44
Table 16. Importance of Government to Address Cost of Living within the Next Two Years.....	45
Table 17. Childcare Provider Needs and Access.....	46
Table 18. Housing Type, by Renters and Owners.....	49
Table 19. Monthly Rent, Utilities, and Housing Cost Burdens.....	51
Table 20. Obstacles to Higher Education for Youth in the Household.....	53
Table 21. Educational Resources and Parent Experiences.....	55
Table 22. Access to Pandemic Relief Programs and Continued Need for Assistance.....	57
Table 23. Level of Support for Strategies to Address the California State Budget Deficit.....	60
Table 23a. Level of Support for Strategies to Address the California State Budget Deficit, Among Citizens Only.....	61

Table 24. Lack of Access to and Knowledge Regarding Medical Insurance.....	63
Table 25. Did Not Visit a Doctor or Dentist in the Last Year.....	68
Table 26. Importance of Government to Address Cost/ Access to Healthcare within the Next Two Years.....	71
Table 27. Importance of Government to Address the Quality of Drinking Water within the Next Two Years.....	74
Table 28. Rating of the Amount of Community Recreational Opportunities for Youth.....	75
Table 29. Length of Legal Sentence for Self, Immediate Family, or Household Member.....	77
Table 30. Support for Creating Quality Jobs To Build Infrastructure, Parks, Grocery Stores, and Other Technologies.....	78
Table 31. Support for Community Employment Opportunities, by Industry.....	80
Table 32. Support for Investment of Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds, by Areas.....	81
Table 33. Level of Concern About the Environment	82
Table 34. Importance of the Government to Address Environmental Concerns in the Next Two Years.....	82
Table 35. Informed Regarding Benefits and Risks of Expanding Energy and Carbon Management Industries.....	84
Table 36. Barriers to Voter Registration and Voting.....	87
Table 37. Local Organization Affiliation and Engagement in Civic Activities.....	89
Table 38. Policy Change Activities Respondents Would Engage In.....	91

List of Figures

Figure 1. Survey Respondents by City/Town and County (N= 3,922).....	12
Figure 2. Level of Support for Strategies to Address the California State Budget Deficit.....	60
Figure 3. Level of Support for Strategies to Address the California State Budget Deficit (U.S. Citizens Only).....	59
Figure 4. The Most Important Community Issues with at least 50 mentions (Open-Ended Responses (n=3,693)).....	73

Contributors and Acknowledgements

Report Authors

Jennifer E. Cossyleon

Paul Almeida, Principal Investigator

Study Contributors

First, we want to thank the south Central Valley community members who participated in the survey without whom the study would not have been possible. We also wish to acknowledge the following study contributors:

UC Merced Community and Labor Center:

Keila Luna

Sara Patino

Edward O. Flores

Rodrigo Alatraste-Diaz

Ana Padilla

Rasha Naseif

Dolores Huerta Foundation:

Dolores Huerta

Camila Chávez

Elizabeth Palencia

Yesenia Ocampo

Nicole Verdugo

Janeth Nava

Jonathon Escutia

Greg Dais

Acknowledgements

The Dolores Huerta Foundation recognizes the support of the Irvine Foundation's Community Economic Mobilization Initiative (CEMI) via the Sierra Health Foundation to offset a portion of the gift card compensation for respondents.

Executive Summary

The South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment was conducted by the UC Merced Community and Labor Center in collaboration with the Dolores Huerta Foundation. This community-based study provides a snapshot of the unmet needs of south Central Valley workers and families on the frontlines of an economic and environmental crisis, as well as their desire to participate in civic action. The survey was conducted from August 2023 to May 2024, reaching 3,922 participants through door-to-door-knocking, representing 20 communities in the California counties of Fresno, Kern, Kings, and Tulare.

The study examines the dynamics of the largely immigrant region; labor challenges, accelerating environmental hazards, and a limited social and economic safety net. It paints a picture of low wages, poor worker protections, and frequent climate-related disruptions to work; as well as economic and environmental health-related challenges like high utility costs, and the lack of access to clean water, healthcare, and safe streets and parks. At the same time, the study uncovers the interests of community members who aspire for better jobs and greater public investments in a healthier and more sustainable environment for all. The following are key research findings.

I. Demographics

- More than half (56%) of respondents were immigrants and over a third (39%) were non-citizens (n= 3,831).

- Among non-citizens, most (58%) were legal permanent residents indicating barriers to U.S. Citizenship.
- Nearly one in six workers (15%) were undocumented; 34% of farmworkers were undocumented, compared to 7% of all other workers (n=1,686).
- Most (82%) spoke a language other than English at home: 62% spoke Spanish as a primary or secondary language and <1% spoke Mixteco (21 respondents). Three percent spoke a combined 28 additional languages, including American Sign Language and six other indigenous languages (n= 3,922).
- Over one in four respondents (25%) had a primary school education or less (n= 3,912).

II. Worker Earnings

- Workers' annual earnings were generally very low—a median of \$30,000 in the past 12 months (n= 1,435), which is less than half of the individual median earnings among full time workers in California (BLS, 2025).
- Almost one in three workers (30%) labored in agriculture (n= 1,686). Farmworkers' median annual earnings were \$25,670 a year, much less than non-farmworkers' earnings (\$33,280). Notably, most farmworkers (77%) did not know who the farm owner was at their place of employment (n= 509).
- More than one in three workers (37%) experienced unemployment in the past twelve months (n=1,667); among those who experienced unemployment the median length was twelve weeks (n=1,063).

- Almost one in three households with workers (32%) experienced an employment interruption due to extreme heat, flooding, drought, or wildfire in the past 12 months (n= 2,709). Among farmworker households, nearly half (49%) experienced at least one similar work interruption (n=588).

III. Unions, Benefits, and Worker Protections

- An overwhelming majority (85%) of workers expressed favorable views of unions. The most commonly stated advantages were that unions improve working conditions (26%), and provide benefits (26%), legal support for workers (15%), worker protections (11%), and improve wages (9%); only 15% could not identify an advantage of a union (n=1,218).
- Workers paid a median of \$140 a month for employer-sponsored health insurance (n= 477), and among essential frontline workers, like farmworkers, janitors, and restaurant employees, only 39% to 50% had access to employer-sponsored health insurance benefits.
- Disability uptake was low—just 27% of workers applied for state disability insurance during their most recent injury requiring them to miss work (n= 588).
- A majority (71%) of respondents in Fresno and Kings counties expressed high support for creating and maintaining an unemployment benefit system for undocumented immigrants excluded from Unemployment Insurance (n= 1,965; This question was only asked to Fresno and Kings county respondents).

IV. Household Costs

- Renters spent a median of \$1,425 on rent and utilities each month (n= 1,528).
- Nearly two-thirds (62%) of workers were cost-burdened, paying more than 30% of their estimated household earnings on rent. More than one third (35%) of workers were *severely* cost-burdened, paying more than 50% of their estimated household earnings on rent (n= 626).
- Many expressed willingness to attend a community meeting to improve housing/ rental costs (45%) and the cost of utility/ energy bills (39%).
- Half of workers with children in daycare paid more than seven percent of their household income (above the threshold of childcare affordability as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) (n= 151).
- One in six parents (17%) requiring daycare for at least one of their children did not have a regular and consistent childcare provider (n= 191).
- Most (55%) respondents in Fresno and Kings counties showed support for creating a 1% tax for residents with more than \$50 million in assets and expressed the lowest support for cutting public services that many low-income persons rely upon (n= 1,957; This question was only asked to Fresno and Kings county respondents).

V. Healthcare Coverage and Access

- In more than one in four households (28%) at least one person was not covered by health insurance (n= 3,741).

- Nearly two of five undocumented respondents (39%) said they did not know low-income Californians were eligible for Medi-Cal Insurance regardless of immigration status (n= 531).
- Almost one in six (15%) of all respondents had not seen a doctor in the last year and 29% had not visited a dentist in the last year (n= 3,860- 3,882). Among *undocumented* respondents, 28% had not seen a doctor in the last year and 39% had not seen a dentist in the last year (n= 507-529), and among *undocumented farmworkers*, over one in three (35%) had not seen a doctor in the last year and almost half (49%) had not seen a dentist in the last year (n= 172).

VI. Environment, Climate Resiliency, and Community

- The top three stated community issues included infrastructure (e.g. road repair, street lights, sidewalks, flooding), neighborhood safety, and street sanitation (n= 3,693).
- The large majority expressed it was extremely or very important for government *tax dollar investments* to go towards creating quality jobs to build infrastructure including road repairs (91%), street lights (86%), sidewalks (82%), public transportation (78%) and sewer systems (76%) (n= 3,862- 3,892).
- Most (78%-80%) expressed it was extremely or very important for the government to take action to address *air pollution* in general, pollution from wildfire smoke, pollution from agriculture, and pesticide drifts within the next two years (n= 3,825- 3,872).

- More than four of five respondents (80%-83%) rated the importance of government action to address *drinking water* at work and home as extremely or very important (n= 3,769-3,890) and more than half (51%) would attend a local meeting about water quality (n= 3,203).
- The majority believed it was extremely or very important for the state to invest California Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds in clean drinking water (95%), community infrastructure protections from extreme heat (93%), protections from air pollution (92%), community infrastructure for flood control (91%), and more parks and recreational spaces (89%) (n=3,830-3,843).

VII. Civic Action

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) were currently or previously affiliated or involved with at least one local organization (n= 3,922).
- Over three-fourths (76%) said they would be willing to join a policy change activity, including but not limited to, displaying a yard sign, attending a training, hosting a neighborhood meeting, and meeting with an elected official (n=3,922).
- Four of five (81%) U.S. Citizens were registered to vote (n= 2,306).
- Almost all (97%) said they would be willing to attend a community meeting related to improving a policy issue (n= 3,203).
- More than half (53%) said they would be willing to attend a community meeting to address the issue of low wages—the highest percentage among any issue (n= 3,203).

In summary, south Central Valley residents and workers have low earnings, high household costs, and less access to a social and economic safety net. Yet, most residents have ties to local organizations, many are voters, and almost all expressed a willingness to attend meetings that would lead to policy change. As residents and workers continue to face increasing economic and environmental challenges, broad-based civic participation may provide opportunities to build consensus and achieve meaningful change. Our report finds that residents expressed the highest interest for attending a local meeting on the issue of higher wages and were also overwhelmingly supportive of government action to address health and environmental sustainability issues—such as clean water access, protection from air pollution, and quality jobs for infrastructure and climate disaster preparation (e.g. extreme heat and flood control). This report thoroughly examines findings from the largest survey of its kind in the region, delineates unmet needs in the region, and concludes by outlining policy recommendations.

Introduction

California's south Central Valley (SCV) is the most agriculturally productive region in the United States contributing vastly to the economy. Yet, its workers earn among the lowest wages with limited workers' protections and are disproportionately affected by climate change. The study counties of Fresno, Kern, Kings, and Tulare are home to over 2.5 million people, mostly immigrant Latinos, living in predominantly rural communities (State of California, 2024). Among the entire state, Fresno and Tulare are two of three California counties that have experienced persistent poverty since the 1980s (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). In the south Central Valley study areas, anywhere from 37 to 44 percent of wage earners earn under a living wage, even when adjusting for the local cost of living (Flores 2022). The region faces among the nation's worst air quality and contaminated drinking water and is experiencing grave impacts from climate change including accelerated warming, frequent and intense droughts, severe wildfires, more prevalent heat waves, and catastrophic floods (EPA 2025; American Lung Association 2024; Westerling et al 2018).

Exacerbating the agricultural work hazards and environmental circumstances, the Central Valley has the country's second lowest rate of primary care physicians and the lowest rate of specialists (Coffman and Fix 2025, p 8). Within this context, what do residents of the area perceive as the top issues affecting their workplaces, community, and the environment? Where do they want the government to allocate public investments? How are residents willing to engage to create the policy changes they require?

The South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment

The South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment is the largest representative survey of the most disadvantaged region in the country. The study provides a snapshot of the environmental and labor challenges facing residents in the rural region, their perspectives on public spending to remedy unmet needs, as well as their willingness to participate in civic action. The study reveals the need for community investments and disaster preventing infrastructure in areas that have experienced decades of disproportionate socio-economic marginalization and exposure to environmental hazards. It also points to the community action and collective visions of residents dispelling myths of complacency among a predominantly immigrant population.

The desire for civic engagement and social change is embedded in the history of struggles for economic and social justice in the south Central Valley. The region counts a rich tradition of mobilization for community and labor rights. In the early 1930s, a strike in the cotton industry stretched across Fresno, Kern, Kings, and Tulare counties involving up to 18,000 workers demanding higher wages, recognition of labor unions, and other rights (Weber 1996). In the 1960s and 1970s, Cesar Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and Larry Itliong founded and expanded the United Farmworkers (UFW) rural labor union in the heart of this region. By the late 1970s, the UFW had unionized 70,000 farm workers in the area (UFW n.d.). The UFW went on to battle harms from pesticides and trained a new generation of activists in labor and community organizing (Shaw 2008). At this same time and throughout the 1980s, multi-racial coalitions emerged in Bakersfield and beyond for political rights, housing, and de-segregation (Rosales

2024). In the 1990s and 2000s, major local actions took place over hazard waste storage and incineration, and other forms of pollution (Cole and Foster 2001). In the 2010s to the present, communities in the south Central Valley continue to organize for environmental justice, labor rights, and immigration reform (Mora 2022).

The trust developed over time by the Dolores Huerta Foundation and the UC Merced Community and Labor Center with the community built the foundation necessary to administer an in-depth survey to truly inform policy and practice. Years before the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated inequity across the region, the Dolores Huerta Foundation led a community needs assessment and focus groups in three rural communities in the south Central Valley. Many of the same issues and priorities emerging from that study have continued, including the need for access to clean water, health care, and better employment benefits (McCleary, Lourdes, Chávez 2009).

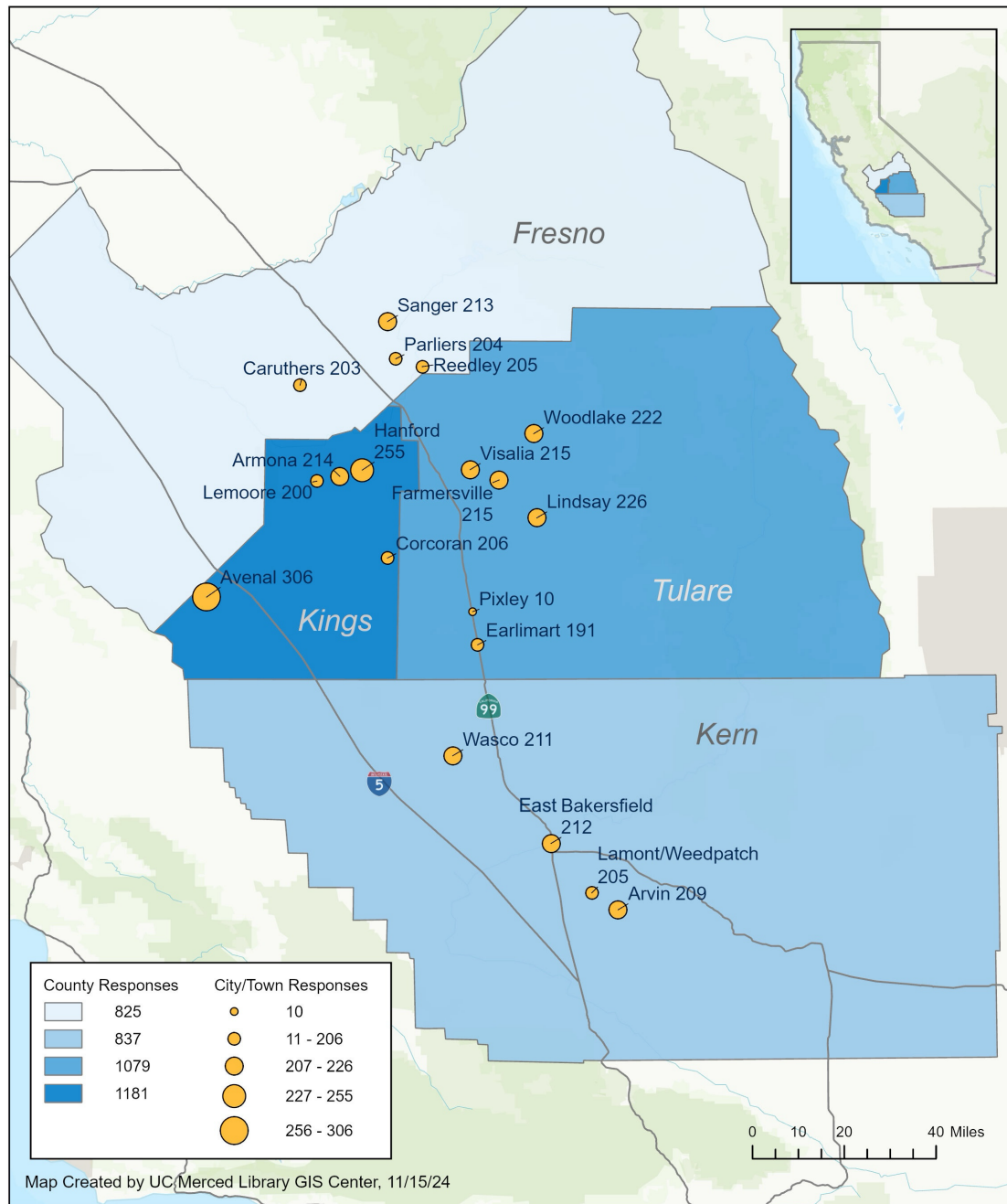
The current study offers a major contribution by examining the relationships between socio-economic conditions, including undocumented status, labor, health access, and the environment. Undocumented status is a social determinant that deeply affects people's lives and in survey research is often overlooked. Thus, the study provides insights absent even from the U.S. Census American Community Survey, the largest national household survey. Among these insights include such factors as undocumented status, employer standards non-compliance, knowledge regarding new policies directly affecting workers, access to relief and other benefits programs, and community priorities for public tax dollar investments in clean drinking water, the environment, infrastructure, and more.

Methodology and Sample

The South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment sample consists of 3,922 respondents. The survey was conducted in English and Spanish from August 2023 to May 2024 through random selection to reach a representative sample of the population within 20 communities located in the counties of Fresno (n= 825), Kern (n= 837), Kings (n= 1,181), and Tulare (n= 1,079) (See Figure 1). Researchers acquired every residential address in the sample area and randomly selected households to recruit one participant per household through door-to-door knocking (For more on Methodology, see Appendix A and for Response Rate see Appendix B).

Throughout this report, we compare study data to other major data sources including the American Community Survey- IPUMS (ACS) 2023 providing estimates within the combined four counties in the study for adults 18 and over. We also compare study data to the 2023 National Health Interview Survey, as well as national affordability thresholds set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Figure 1. Survey Respondents by City/Town and County (N= 3,922)



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Demographic Results

Respondent Characteristics

The south Central Valley Region is composed of a mostly immigrant and bilingual population, and many are non-citizens. Immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, often face barriers accessing services and have greater unmet needs. These challenges are coupled with hurdles related to language and community integration. Immigrants with language barriers are more likely to report poor health and stress related conditions, particularly within the first ten years of their arrival (Ding and Hargraves 2008). Moreover, the region generally has lower levels of formal education that further exacerbate socio-economic challenges. The sample size for this section ranges from 2,084 to 3,922.

Immigration and Language. In the study, 56 percent of respondents were immigrants born outside of the United States and overall 39 percent were non-citizens. The ACS suggests 28 percent of study area inhabitants were immigrants. Among immigrants in the study, 2,051 respondents were born in Mexico and 110 were born in 23 different countries across six continents including Cambodia, Canada, Columbia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Iran, Italy, Laos, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, United Kingdom, Venezuela, and Yemen. Seventy percent of *immigrants* in the study were noncitizens: 41 percent were legal permanent residents, 25 percent were undocumented, and four percent had a work permit (See Table 1). The high percentage of legal permanent residents suggests barriers to U.S. citizenship among immigrants in the region including bureaucracy, high cost, and long waiting periods.

Table 1. Nativity, Citizenship, and Language

	<u>SCV 2023-2024</u>	<u>ACS 2023</u>
Country of birth		
Mexico	53%	19%
United States	44%	72%
Other	3%	9%
n	3,862	-
Citizenship (immigrants)		
Naturalized U.S. Citizen	30%	-
Legal Permanent Resident	41%	-
Undocumented	25%	-
Authorized work permit	4%	-
n	2,084	-
Language/s spoken at home		
English only	17%	53%
Spanish	62%	40%
Mixteco	<1%	-
Another language	3%	-
n	3,922	-

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024 and IPUMS-USA American Community Survey 2023.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (82%) spoke a language other than English at home, either as a primary or secondary language (See Table 1). Spanish was the most spoken language other than English, with 62 percent speaking Spanish as a primary or secondary language. Thirty seven percent spoke only Spanish, and 17 percent spoke only English at home. The third most spoken language was Mixteco with less than one percent of respondents (21 respondents) speaking the language. Additionally, three percent of respondents spoke one or

more of a total of 28 other languages¹ including American Sign Language (ASL) and six other indigenous languages. ACS data indicates 53 percent spoke English at home and 40 percent spoke Spanish at home.

Race and Ethnicity. Respondents were predominantly Latino. Most (87%) identified as Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin (See Table 2). Ten percent identified as White (non-Hispanic), followed by Black/ African American (2%), Asian/Pacific Islander (<1%), other (<1%), Native American/ Alaskan/ Indigenous (<1%), two or more races (<1%). In the ACS, 55 percent identified as Hispanic, 30 percent as White (non-Hispanic), seven percent as Asian, four percent as Black/ African American, three percent as two or more races, less than one percent as other, and .4 percent as Native American/ Alaskan or Indigenous.

Sex, Age, Marital Status. Most respondents were women between the ages of 35 and 64 and were married. Sixty-one percent identified as female, 39 percent identified as male, and less than one percent as nonbinary (someone who does not identify exclusively as male or female)². While canvassers recruited participants at various times of the day, women answered the door and agreed to take the survey more often than men, resulting in a higher percentage of their participation in the study. For comparison, in the ACS, 49 percent were female, and 51 percent were male.

¹ Afrikaans, Arabic, Cambodian, Chatino, Dalabon, Dialecto, Filipino, French, Galician, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Hmong, Lao, Ilocano, Italian, Japanese, Khmer, Nahuatl Aztec, Persian, Portuguese, Punjabi, Purepecha, Q'anjob'al, Q'eqchi', Tagalog, Thai, and Zapotec.

² Lower case n indicates the number of respondents who answered the question.

Table 2. Demographics: Race and Ethnicity, Sex, Age, and Marital Status

	<u>SCV 2023-2024</u>	<u>ACS 2023</u>
Race and ethnicity		
Any Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	87%	55%
White (non-Hispanic)	10%	30%
Black /African American	2%	4%
Asian/ Pacific Islander	<1%	7%
Native American/ Alaskan/ Indigenous	<1%	<1%
Two or more races	<1%	3%
Other	<1%	1%
n	3,906	-
Sex		
Female	61%	50%
Male	39%	51%
Nonbinary/ other	<1%	-
n	3,915	-
Age		
18 to 34 years	24%	34%
35 to 49 years	30%	27%
50 to 64 years	29%	21%
65 and over	17%	17%
n	3,886	-
Marital status		
Married	55%	47%
Never married	26%	36%
Divorced	8%	9%
Widowed	6%	5%
Separated	5%	3%
n	3,904	-

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024 and IPUMS-USA American Community Survey 2023.

The median age of survey respondents was 47 years, with a range of 18 to 99 years of age, aligning somewhat closely with ACS estimates (See Table 2). The ACS median age among adults was 43. Study respondents were mostly married, following patterns of immigrants who are more likely than native born to ever marry and stay married (Mayol-Garcia, and Gurrentz 2021). The majority (55%) were married, 13 percent were divorced or separated, six percent were widowed, and 26 percent were never married. Comparatively, the ACS has a slightly lower percentage of married people (47%), divorced or separated (12%), widowed (5%), and a higher percent of those never married (36%).

Educational Attainment. Study respondents had lower levels of formal education and while one in five people in the region attended some college, they often did not finish a four year degree. Forty-four percent (1,698) had less than a high school education and over one in four had a primary school education or less (See Table 3). Twenty-seven percent graduated high school, 20 percent completed some college, 23 percent completed some or all primary school, 18 percent attended some high school, seven percent completed a bachelor's degree, three percent had a graduate or professional degree, and two percent had no formal schooling. In comparison to ACS state figures that do not include the study counties, the study areas had much lower levels of education (e.g. in comparison 22% of adults outside of the south Central Valley in California had a bachelor's degree compared to 7% of study respondents; See Table 3). Within the four study area counties, ACS indicates 28 percent graduated high school, 32 percent completed some college, seven percent completed some or all primary school, 10 percent attended some high school, 12 percent completed a bachelor's degree, six percent had

a graduate or professional degree, and four percent had no formal schooling.

Table 3. Highest Level of Education

	<u>SCV 2023-2024</u>	<u>ACS 2023</u>	<u>ACS 2023 (Rest of CA)</u>
No schooling	2%	4%	3%
Some primary school	9%	6%	4%
Primary school	14%	1%	<1%
Some secondary or high school	18%	10%	6%
High school graduate	27%	28%	22%
Some college	20%	32%	28%
Bachelor's degree	7%	12%	22%
Graduate degree or professional school	3%	6%	14%
n	3,912	-	-

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024 and IPUMS-USA American Community Survey 2023.

Work Experiences Results

Most wage earners were in the civilian labor force working full-time for a for-profit employer. The top industry was agriculture for primary employment and second for secondary employment. Workers generally earned low-wages, particularly women, agricultural workers, and undocumented workers. The majority of workers were not represented by a union, though they had mostly positive perceptions of unions, with room for more education about the benefits of membership. Work experience results follow patterns of employer labor standards non-compliance, worker injuries and high unemployment, and the limited access of workers to vital safety net benefits including employer-sponsored health insurance, which was often costly or unavailable, particularly for frontline essential workers. The uptake of Workers' Compensation and Unemployment Insurance was also low. Notably 15 percent of workers were undocumented and faced exacerbated work challenges including having among the lowest

earnings, more often being required to purchase their own work equipment, and were excluded from Unemployment Insurance, though results show high support for creating an unemployment benefits system for undocumented workers. Further, south Central Valley residents experienced environmental work interruptions in the past 12 months and during the Covid-19 public emergency, also affecting their earnings. This section has a sample size ranging from 68 (i.e. reported second job industry) to 3,922.

Employers and Industries

Forty-three percent of survey respondents (1,686) had worked for pay or profit in the past week and nearly four of five had a working household member. The overwhelming majority of wage earners (99%) were within the civilian labor force. Most worked for a for-profit company or organization (64%, See Table 4). Others worked for a local, state or the federal government (23%), identified as self-employed (8%), or worked for a non-profit organization (4%). Less than one percent of workers reported being in the armed forces. Five respondents indicated they worked without pay on a farm.

The top worker industry was agriculture. Table 4 shows the major industries workers identified working in, categorized by the research team using the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), which is the standard used by federal statistical agencies to classify business establishments. Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting encompassed one third of the open-ended responses, followed by Health Care/ Social Assistance (10%), Educational Services (9%), Full-Service Restaurants (6%), Retail Trade (5%), Construction (5%), and Manufacturing (4%).

Table 4. Employment Type and Industry

	<u>Percent</u>
Employment type	
For profit	64%
Local, state, or federal government	23%
Self-employed	8%
Non-profit	4%
Armed forces	<1%
Work without pay on a farm	<1%
n	1,583
Primary employment industries (top 9)	
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	34%
Health Care/ Social Assistance	10%
Educational Services	9%
Full-Service Restaurants	6%
Retail Trade	5%
Construction	5%
Manufacturing	4%
Warehousing and Storage	3%
Services to Buildings and Dwellings/ Private Households	3%
n	1,648
Number of jobs	
One job only	96%
Two or more jobs (most common second jobs)	4%
Health care and Social Assistance	22%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	15%
Self-employed	9%
Educational Services	9%
Did not specify	8%
n	68

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Four percent of workers (74) indicated working two or more jobs in the past week, working a median of 15 hours in their additional employment. The top four worker industries

among those who worked an additional job were Health Care/ Social Assistance, Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting, Self-Employed, and Educational Services (See Table 4).

Worker Earnings. Respondents worked a median of 40 hours per week at their main job and generally earned low wages. The median hours worked per week remained the same among men and women. Workers shared their individual pre-tax earnings based on hourly, daily, weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, or annual wages, whichever was easiest for them to calculate and report. Workers who shared hourly wages earned a median of \$16 an hour. Workers who shared daily wages earned a median of \$120 a day. Worker who provided weekly wages earned a median of \$600 a week. Workers who shared bi-weekly wages earned \$1,200 every two weeks. Those who shared monthly wages earned a median of \$2,500 a month. And last, those who shared an annual wage earned a median of \$30,000 a year.

Overall, the median estimated annual earnings of individual workers were \$30,000, accounting for the weeks they said they were unemployed. This is less than half of the median annual earnings among full-time workers in California (BLS, 2025). Seventy two percent of workers earned \$40,000 or less, 17 percent earned \$40,001 to \$60,000, and just 11 percent earned \$60,001 or more. Overall, the pre-tax individual annual earnings of workers in the study (\$30,000) were lower than estimates from the ACS (\$38,000) within the study counties, in part because there were more women in our sample who are typically paid less for the same work.

The Lowest Worker Earnings. Women, agricultural workers, and undocumented workers had lower individual earnings within the last 12 months in comparison to men, non-farmworkers, and workers with any other citizenship status (U.S. Citizen, legal permanent

resident, authorized work permit) (See Table 5). Women earned considerably less than men. The median annual earnings of men were \$32,240 and \$27,280 for women. Thus, the median annual earnings of women were 17 percent less than men.

Agricultural workers earned 26 percent less than non-farmworkers and similar earnings than undocumented workers. The median annual earnings of non-farmworkers were \$33,280, and the median annual earnings of farmworkers were \$25,670. The median individual annual earnings for all undocumented workers were \$25,384. Thus, undocumented workers earned slightly less than farmworkers, though there is considerable overlap (67 percent of undocumented workers were farmworkers).

Undocumented farmworkers in the study had among the lowest earnings with median annual earnings of \$24,000. Farmworkers with any other reported citizenship status had median annual earnings of \$26,961. Thus, the median annual earnings of undocumented farmworkers were 12 percent less than farmworkers with any other reported citizenship status.

Farmworkers paid by piece rate had among the lowest earnings. Seventeen percent of farmworkers reported being paid by piece rate or based on the number of units they produced. The median annual earnings of farmworkers paid by piece rate was \$24,200, showing that farmworkers paid by piece rate earned 32 percent less than non-farmworkers. Undocumented farmworkers paid by piece rate had the lowest median annual earnings of \$21,522, earning 43 percent less than non-farmworkers.

Table 5. Individual Work Earnings

	<u>Median</u>	
Estimated annual earnings (includes weeks unemployed)	\$30,000	
Unemployed in the last 12 months		
At least 1 week (All workers)	37%	
At least 1 week (Farmworkers only)	64%	
At least 1 week (Non-farmworkers)	26%	
n= 467-1,570		
	<u>Median</u>	<u>n</u>
Earnings among different groups of workers		
Non-farmworkers	\$33,280	969
Men	\$32,240	669
All workers	\$30,000	1,435
Women	\$27,280	763
Farmworkers, not including undocumented workers	\$26,961	287
Farmworkers	\$25,670	466
Undocumented workers	\$25,384	238
Farmworkers paid by piece rate	\$24,200	79
Undocumented farmworkers	\$24,000	166
Undocumented farmworkers paid by piece rate	\$21,522	30
n= 30- 1,435		

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024

These results show the economic cost of identifying as a woman, working as an agricultural laborer, and having an undocumented status in terms of annual earnings. Grappling with these results can lead to better informed outreach and advocacy.

Employer-Sponsored Health Insurance. More than two of five workers—and half of all agricultural workers—were not offered any healthcare coverage from employers, affecting them and their families. This is concerning given the high risk of health hazards exposures among south Central Valley workers. Forty-two percent of workers stated their employer did

not offer health insurance, while 58 percent indicated their employer did offer health insurance (See Table 6). Among workers with employer-sponsored health insurance, 60 percent had individual coverage and 40 percent had family included in the plan.

Table 6. Employer-Sponsored Health Insurance Coverage and Cost

	<u>Percent</u>
Employer does not offer health insurance	42%
Employer offers health insurance	58%
Individual only	60%
Individual and family coverage	40%
n= 966- 1, 674	

Monthly cost of health insurance (all)	\$140
Cost of individual coverage	\$100
Cost of family coverage	\$240
n= 386- 966	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024

When employer-sponsored health insurance was offered, workers tended to pay high monthly premiums. Overall, workers who indicated having healthcare coverage through their employers paid a median of \$140 per month, or \$1,680 a year, which is six percent of workers' median annual earnings of \$30,000. Premium costs ranged from \$3 to \$1,600 a month (See Table 6). As expected, workers whose families were included in their healthcare plan paid higher premiums. The reported median cost of monthly health insurance plans that covered family was \$240, while individual coverage alone cost a median of \$100 a month.

Table 7. Workers Without Employer-Sponsored Health Insurance Offered, by Top Ten Industries of Employment

	<u>% of Workers Without Employer- Sponsored Health Insurance</u>	<u>Top Industries of Employment in SCV</u>
Services to Buildings and Dwellings and Private Households	59%	2
Full-Service Restaurants	52%	3
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	50%	1
Health Care and Social Assistance	45%	4
Construction	45%	5
Retail Trade	41%	6
Warehousing and Storage	37%	7
Truck transportation, Air Transportation, and Services Incidental to Transportation	32%	8
Educational Services	23%	9
Manufacturing	15%	10

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

We examined the prevalence of employer-sponsored health insurance by industry among the top ten worker industries and found that essential frontline workers had the least access to employer-sponsored health insurance benefits. Essential frontline laborers work in close proximity to customers and co-workers and have greater exposure to infectious illnesses. Within agriculture, janitorial related work, and restaurants at least half of employers did not offer health benefits to workers in the study (See Table 7). Further, 45 percent of construction workers and 45 percent of healthcare and social assistance workers (e.g. medical assistants, elderly care, social workers, counselors) did not have employer offered health-insurance.

Unions and Workplace Conditions

Union Membership and Perceptions. Research consistently shows that unions increase wages and benefits, minimize wage theft, improve worker conditions, and have other health advantages for workers (Mishel 2012; Leigh and Chakalov 2021). The survey asked workers about union coverage, as well as the perceived advantages and disadvantages of forming a labor union. The majority of respondents expressed favorable views of unions. Still, there is room for union education among workers, particularly agricultural workers who are impacted by a recent “card check” law allowing them to vote by representation card away from company property. Results also indicate there continue to be some perceptions among workers that doubt the ability of unions to deliver substantial positive change in the workplace. There is an opportunity for unions to educate potential members and the wider public, and one area of particular interest for survey respondents is increasing wages (See Appendix C).

Generally, union coverage was low, though there was high interest in joining a union among farmworkers, if given the opportunity. Twenty percent of workers (332) indicated their main job was covered by a union contract, or employee association contract. Among only farmworkers, 11 percent (56), indicated being covered by a union. Fifty-three percent of farmworkers who were unrepresented by a union, said they would like to join an organization that protects farmworkers if given the opportunity.

California AB 2183, “Card Check” Law Familiarity. Though there was high interest among farmworkers to join a union, results show limited knowledge about a new law that could help to increase their unionization. The survey asked farmworkers about their knowledge of California AB 2183, explaining this new “card check” law allows farmworkers to vote for a union

by representation card, without having to vote at the workplace. In response to the question, “Are you familiar with this new law?” (and after providing the previous explanation), 79 percent replied “no,” and 21 percent replied “yes.” These findings highlight the importance of outreach by labor unions and community organizations around new policies affecting workers, particularly policies that could potentially reduce barriers to worker unionization, which improves wages and working conditions (Mishel 2012; Leigh and Chakalov 2021).

Workers generally expressed positive perceptions of unions. Most open-ended responses to the question “How would you define a labor union to someone who doesn’t know what it is?” included: providing worker benefits (16%), worker protections (14%), a third-party organization (10%), fighting for workers’ rights (6%), organized workers (5%), better wages (5%) and legal representation (4%) (See Table 8). Forty percent of responses indicated workers were not sure or not informed about unions, offering room for education.

Similarly, workers mostly expressed advantages of unions. The open-ended responses to the question “What might be an advantage of forming a union?” can be summarized as: better working conditions (26%), increased and/or better benefits (26%), legal support for workers (15%), worker protections (11%) and better wages (9%) (See Table 8). Notably, 15 percent of workers’ responses indicated workers were not sure or not informed of the advantages of forming a labor union, again indicating a gap in worker knowledge regarding the benefits of union membership.

Table 8. Labor Union Coverage and Perceptions

	<u>Percent</u>
How workers define a labor union (n=1,122)	
Not sure/not informed	40%
Union provides benefits	16%
Worker protections	14%
Third party organization	10%
Fights for worker rights	6%
Workers organize	5%
Better wages	5%
Legal representation	4%
Total	1,335
Perceived advantages of forming a labor union (n=1,218)	
Better working conditions	26%
More/better benefits	26%
I don't know	15%
Legal support for workers	15%
Worker protections	11%
Better wages	9%
Group unity among workers	2%
More opportunities	3%
Worker power	2%
Total	1,320
Perceived disadvantages of forming a labor union (n=1,157)	
I don't know	36%
There are no disadvantages	30%
Paying dues	16%
Union would not improve benefits	5%
Employer retaliation	5%
Disagreements (majority vs minority votes, between workers)	2%
Power dynamic concerns	1%
Worker lack of participation	1%
High need for communication	1%
Workers become less productive	1%
No support	1%
Business closure/limitations	1%
Time consuming	<1%
Total	1,161

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Notably, responses to both how workers define a labor union and the advantages of forming a labor union deprioritize better wages as a perception of what unions can accomplish. This provides helpful insight for future educational content given that unions significantly impact higher wages, and as further explained later, survey findings indicate that low wages is the number one issue with 53 percent of respondents stating they would join a community meeting to improve wages (See Appendix C).

Conversely, most workers were either unsure or stated no disadvantages of forming a labor union. In response to the open-ended question regarding the potential disadvantages of forming a labor union, 36 percent of all responses specified they did not know, 30 percent indicated no disadvantages, and 16 percent raised paying dues as a potential disadvantage of a union (See Table 8).

Considering that only 20 percent of workers were covered by the protections of a union, next we turn to results related to employers requiring workers to buy work equipment, other wage standards non-compliance, and workplace hostility.

Many Farmworkers Required to Buy Work Equipment. The survey asked farmworkers if they were required to buy their own equipment, which is an indication of labor standards non-compliance (CA Labor Code §6401). Thirty-two percent of farmworkers (164 workers) were required to buy their own work equipment. Among workers required to buy their own work equipment, 45 percent (70) indicated they were undocumented, showing that undocumented agricultural workers in the study disproportionately purchased their own equipment.

Table 9. Employer Non-Compliance and Hostility

	<u>All Workers</u>	<u>Undocumented Workers</u>	<u>Work Permit</u>	<u>Legal Permanent Resident</u>	<u>U.S. Citizens</u>
Employer non-compliance, past 12 months					
Did not always provide an itemized pay stub with wages	13%	10%	12%	14%	14%
Avoided paying you overtime at any point	10%	9%	7%	9%	9%
Paid you less than you had earned at any point	8%	6%	5%	13%	9%
Paid your wages late at any point	6%	6%	7%	7%	6%
Employer hostility					
Employer yelled at workers in the past 12 months (always, often, sometimes, or rarely)	10%	12%	7%	10%	9%
Have you ever been made to work against your will?	2%	4%	<1%	3%	2%
Have you ever been delayed from leaving your job?	1%	2%	<1%	<1%	1%
Has any employer ever taken identity documents away from you?	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
n	1,651- 1,658	248-290	41-44	326-330	986- 1,003

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Wage Standards Non-Compliance. Results show that workers had experienced wage standards non-compliance within the past 12 months. Though itemized pay stubs are always required, 13% percent of workers had an employer who never, rarely, sometimes, or often provided an itemized pay stub with their wages (See Table 9). Ten percent had an employer who had avoided paying them overtime, eight percent had been paid less than they had earned, and six percent had been paid late (always, often, sometimes, or rarely).

Workplace Hostility. Results also show workers experienced workplace hostility. Ten percent of workers had an employer who had yelled at workers within the past 12 months (See Table 9). Thirty nine workers (2%) said they had ever been made to work against their will through the use of force, fraud, and/or coercion. Twenty workers (1%) reported ever being delayed from leaving their job due to physical force, threats of harm, or legal threats. And four workers answered “yes” to the question: “has any employer, or anyone affiliated with your employer, ever taken your passports or identity documents away from you.”

We analyzed employer non-compliance and workplace hostility for each citizenship status of workers (See Table 9). We found no statistically significant difference between the non-compliance experiences among U.S. Citizens, legal permanent residents, work permit holders, and undocumented workers. This means that non-compliance seems to have affected all workers more or less at the same frequency regardless of immigration status. The results to the question about the prevalence of receiving an itemized paycheck stub from their employer among workers with varying citizenship status are insightful. Results suggest that the occurrence of informal “under the table” work among citizens and undocumented immigrants

were similar—undermining claims that undocumented immigrants are less likely to pay taxes on their wages.

Loss of Work Hours and Unemployment

The years 2023 to 2024 were the hottest years on record since the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration began documenting temperatures in 1850 (NOAA 2024; LA Times 2024). The winter of 2023 also brought historic flooding to the region, with Tulare Lake flooding fields and causing historic damage (CDP 2023).

Environmental Work Interruptions. Results show evidence of this accelerated climate change in the south Central Valley where many households experienced environmental work interruptions—especially households with farmworkers. Overall, 32 percent of study respondents’ households with paid workers experienced an interruption in their employment in the past 12 months due to extreme heat, flooding, drought, or wildfire. Specifically, 861 respondents’ households experienced at least one environmental work interruption impacting the employment of 2,148 workers within those households (See Table 10). For all environmental interruptions, when it affected a household, it tended to affect the majority of workers in the household—anywhere from 68-80 percent of household workers. Comparing farmworker and non-farmworker households, 49 percent of households with at least one farmworker experienced at least one work interruption in the past year, while 12 percent of non-farmworker households experienced at least one work interruption within the same timeframe.

Table 10. Households with Environmental Work Interruptions and Total Affected Workers, Past 12 Months

	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Frequency (Households Affected)</u>
Households with workers that experienced no interruptions	68%	1,848
Households with workers that experienced 1+ interruptions	32%	861
Extreme heat	24%	643
Flooding	17%	452
Drought	8%	215
Wildfire	4%	97
n= 2,679-2,709	-	

	<u>Percent of Workers in the Household Affected</u>	<u>Frequency (Workers in the Household Affected)</u>
Within Affected Households:		
Extreme heat	80%	995
Flooding	75%	676
Drought	80%	339
Wildfire	68%	138
Total	77%	2,148

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Extreme Heat. Among survey respondents, 24 percent reported that extreme heat caused a work interruption for anyone in their household within the past 12 months, affecting a total of 643 households and 995 workers in respondents' households (See Table 10). This means that of the households who experienced a work interruption due to extreme heat, 80 percent of workers in their households were affected.

Flooding. Seventeen percent reported that flooding caused a work interruption for anyone in their household within the past 12 months, affecting a total of 452 households and

676 workers in respondents' households. Of those households who experienced a work interruption due to flooding, it affected 75 percent of workers in their households.

Drought. Eight percent reported that drought caused a work interruption for anyone in their household within the past 12 months, affecting a total of 215 households and 339 workers in respondents' households. Of those households who experienced a work interruption due to drought, it affected 80 percent of workers in their households.

Wildfire. Last, four percent reported that anyone in their household experienced a work interruption due to wildfire, affecting a total of 97 households and 138 workers in respondents' households. Of those households who experienced a work interruption due to wildfire, it affected 68 percent of workers in their households.

Covid-19 Employment Disruptions. High levels of Covid-related employment disruptions were reported for Latino residents in the south Central Valley during the height of the pandemic (Almeida et al. 2021). Household workers in the study experienced job loss, a reduction in hours, or both during the Covid-19 public emergency. Thirty percent of respondents (910) indicated someone in their household had either lost a job or experienced a reduction in work hours because of the Covid-19 public emergency. Among households with at least one person working for pay or profit, 14 percent said one or more people experienced a reduction in work hours, seven percent experienced job loss, and seven percent indicated a household member had experienced both a reduction in hours and job loss (See Table 11).

Table 11. COVID-19 Related Partial or Full Unemployment, Households with Workers

	<u>Percent</u>
Working households that did not have a work interruption	70%
Working households that did have a work interruption	30%
1+ household worker/s with reduced hours	14%
1+ household worker/s with job loss	7%
1+ household worker/s with both reduced hours and job loss	7%
n	3,066

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Injured Workers and Workers’ Compensation. Wage earners experienced injuries on the job and infrequently had access to vital workers’ benefits. Fourteen percent of workers had at one point been injured on the job and among these workers, 75 percent had ever missed work due to a workplace injury (See Table 12). Reporting on their most recent injury, less than half of injured workers (49% or 116) applied for worker’s compensation, totaling only seven percent of all workers in the study. Among only the workers who had missed work due to a work-related injury, 27 applied for state disability insurance during their most recent case of injury— just two percent of all workers in the study.

Unemployment. As alluded to earlier when we reported on individual median annual earnings, many workers experienced unemployment within the past 12 months. Thirty-seven percent of workers (588) reported being unemployed for at least one week within the past year (See Table 12). Among workers who reported being unemployed at least one week in the past year, the median length was 12 weeks.

Table 12. Injuries and Unemployment

	<u>Percent</u>
Injuries	
Ever injured at work	14%
Ever missed work due to a work injury	75%
Applied for worker's compensation (most recent injury)	49%
Applied for state disability insurance (most recent injury)	27%
n=178- 1,687	
Unemployed in the last 12 months	
At least 1 week (All workers)	37%
At least 1 week (Farmworkers only)	64%
At least 1 week (Non-farmworkers)	26%
n= 467-1,570	
Unemployment benefits	
Applied for unemployment benefits in the past 12 months	24%
Qualified for unemployment benefits	91%
n= 171- 706	
Support for an unemployment benefit system for undocumented workers	
Extremely strong support	54%
Strong support	17%
Moderate support	12%
Little support	7%
No support	9%
n= 1,965	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Farmworkers experienced unemployment more frequently and for longer periods.

Among only farmworkers, 64 percent had experienced at least one week of unemployment in the past 12 months. Of the 588 workers who experienced unemployment in

the past 12 months, over half (301) were farmworkers (51%). Thus, farmworkers made up 30 percent of workers in the study but over 50 percent of workers who experienced unemployment in the past 12 months. Farmworkers also were unemployed for longer periods, with a median of 12 weeks unemployed in the past 12 months, compared to non-farmworkers who experienced a median of 10 weeks of unemployment within the past 12 months.

Lack of Access to Unemployment Benefits. Access to unemployment benefits was limited among workers. Nearly one-fourth of workers applied for unemployment benefits (24% or 178) in the past 12 months, and of those who applied, 91 percent (161 workers) qualified for benefits (See Table 12). Thus, only 27 percent of workers who reported being unemployed in the past 12 months applied and qualified for unemployment (a total of 161 workers of the 588 who said they had been unemployed for at least one week in the past 12 months).

Support for an Unemployment Benefit System for Undocumented Workers. Most respondents in Fresno and Kings counties expressed high support for creating and maintaining an unemployment benefit system for immigrants excluded from Unemployment Insurance, as proposed in California Senate Bill 2273. The survey shared with respondents that: 1) California employers pay \$302 million in taxes on behalf of undocumented immigrant workers; 2) research suggests that such a system would cost \$270 million to create; and 3) the proposed system would provide unemployed undocumented workers with \$300 per week for up to 20 weeks. Seventy-two percent of respondents expressed “extremely strong support” or “strong

³ This was one of two questions added in the second half of data collection that only included Fresno and Kings counties.

support” for creating and maintaining an unemployment benefit system for excluded immigrants, followed by 12 percent expressing “moderate support,” seven percent indicating “little support,” and just nine percent indicating “no support.”

Agricultural Workers

Engagement in agricultural work was common among respondents and their households, with most working for a farm labor contractor without knowledge of who the farm owner was. Many farmworkers were undocumented, a considerable portion had witnessed children under 14 working in the field, and farmworkers tended to start agricultural labor young and see their work as a long-term occupation.

Thirty percent of workers (513) indicated they worked in agriculture in the past week (See Table 13). Most who worked in agriculture did not know who the farm owner was at their place of employment (77%), showing the lack of information farmworkers had concerning who employed them. Regarding their employer type, respondents predominantly worked for a farm labor contractor (65%), a farmer (20%), or they did not know (15%) (See Table 13).

Many agricultural workers were undocumented and over three fourths of undocumented respondents had agricultural workers in their households. Thirty-four percent of farmworkers were undocumented, compared to seven percent of all other workers. Among all respondents, 48 percent said at least one person in their household worked in agriculture within the past 12 months (See Table 13). Comparatively, 77 percent of undocumented respondents said at least one person in their household worked in agriculture within the past 12 months.

Table 13. Agricultural Workers and Employer Type

	<u>Percent</u>
Worked in agriculture in the past week (n=1,686)	30%
Employer type (n= 507)	
Farm labor contractor	65%
Farmer	20%
Worker does not know	15%
Farmworkers in the household (n= 2,948)	
0	52%
1	29%
2	14%
3	3%
4 +	2%
Farmworkers in the household, among undocumented respondents (n=466)	
0	23%
1	43%
2	24%
3	7%
4+	3%
Age farmworkers began farmwork (n=495)	
Under 14	10%
14-15	8%
16-17	13%
18-24	47%
25-34	15%
35-44	5%
45-64	2%
Age farmworkers plan to stop farmwork (n=461)	
Before age 25	<1
25-34	3%
35-44	4%
45-54	7%
55-64	21%
65+	64%

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Child Labor in the Field. Fifteen percent of respondents working in agriculture indicated they had seen children under the age of 14 working in the fields. While we cannot rule out that respondents may be speaking to their farmwork experiences in other countries, U.S. federal child labor laws within the agricultural industry are among the most lenient in the country.

In the U.S., the allowable working age of minors within non-hazardous agricultural jobs varies by state, with the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) setting federal minimum guidelines. In non-agricultural jobs, FLSA sets the minimum age for employment at 14 years of age. Within agriculture, however, FLSA permits *youth of any age* to work on small farms outside of school hours in non-hazardous jobs, with parental consent. Regardless of farm size, FLSA permits youth as young as 12 with parental consent and as young as 14 without parental consent to work outside of school hours in non-hazardous agricultural jobs (California is one of five states that raises this age to 18 when required to attend school). If employers have special waivers from the Secretary of Labor, youth as young as 10 years old may hand harvest outside of school hours for up to 8 weeks from June 1 to October 15.

Start of Farmwork Career. Many started their farmwork career young and had been working for decades in the industry. The median age at which respondents began to engage in farmwork was 18, with a range of 5 to 65 years of age. Thirty-one percent were under 18 years old when they began working in farmwork. Eighteen percent were under 16 years old when they started working in farmwork (See Table 13). Ten percent were under 14 when they started working in farmwork. Subtracting the number of years working in farmwork from their provided

age, farmworkers had spent a median of 25 years engaging in farmwork, ranging from less than a year to up to 62 years.

Long Term Work Plans. Farmworkers tended to see agricultural work as a long-term occupation. These workers indicated they planned to work as a farmworker until the median age of 65, which is the average age of retirement (67 is the full retirement age for people born in 1960 and later). Most (64%) planned to work until 65 years or older. Twenty-one percent planned to work past 54 years, and just seven percent planned to end their farm labor before the age of 45 (See Table 13). Twenty-five percent planned to work in agriculture until 68 or older. Additionally, 70 percent of agricultural workers indicated wanting to own their own farm one day, again showing support for farmwork as a long-term occupation.

Family and Household Results

Results indicate a number of socio-economic difficulties in the south Central Valley including larger households with children and elderly family members, low household earnings despite the majority of households having paid workers, and the high cost of living and daycare. Respondents expressed high support for the government to address the cost of housing, utility bills, and food—which many stated they could use assistance to obtain. This corroborates findings that the region leads the country with the most food insecurity and the least physical access to affordable fresh food despite producing the majority of crops to feed the nation (Valdez, Ramirez, Estrada, Grassi, and Nathan 2016). During the Covid-19 public emergency, most respondents faced a lack of access to assistance programs, leading some study households to incur high-interest debt many still owed. Most respondents supported instilling a

1% tax on the wealthiest Californians as a potential funding source to address the state budget deficit. The sample size for this section ranges from 191 (i.e. children requiring but do not have access to a childcare provider) to 3,915.

Household Composition

Households⁴ in the region tended to be larger, composed of workers, and predominantly included children. The household size of respondents ranged from one to twenty, consistent with the prevalence of larger households in the region. The average number of people living or staying under the same roof as the respondent was 4.1 (including the respondent), which is slightly larger than the study area ACS household average of 3.2. Notably, among only foreign born community members, the average household size in the ACS was four.

Most lived in households with children under the age of 18. Fifty-five percent of respondents (2,121) lived with at least one child under 18 (See Table 14). The average number of children in the household was 1.2, ranging from zero to twelve children. While results show that most respondents lived primarily with their own children (78%), 588 people (31%) said at least one child in their household was not their child.⁵ Last, 29 percent of respondents' household members were children under 18 (this does not include adult children that may have resided in the household).

⁴ A household was defined as the number of people living/ staying under the same roof, including the respondent.

⁵ To calculate the number of children living in respondents' households who were not their children, we subtracted the number of children that were their children from the total number of children living in their household -- 190 respondents indicated the number of children living in their household that were their own children was higher than the total number of children living in their household. These were removed from the calculation, due to error.

Table 14. Household Members and Children

	<u>Percent</u>
Household members	
1	6%
2	17%
3	18%
4	22%
5	19%
6	10%
7	4%
8+	3%
n	3,900
Children in the household	
0	45%
1	18%
2	18%
3	12%
4+	7%
n	3,871
Children in the household (respondents' children)	
0	22%
1	22%
2	25%
3	20%
4	7%
5+	3%
n	2,139
Children in the household (not respondents' children)	
0	70%
1	13%
2	11%
3	4%
4+	2%
n	1,927

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Results indicate potential household compositions where multiple families lived together due to financial necessity, multi-generational households, young adults living with underage siblings, and blended families. Moreover, 13 percent of respondents lived with and cared for an elderly person in their household.

Table 15. Number of Paid Workers in the Household

	<u>Percent</u>
0	21%
1	35%
2	30%
3	9%
4	4%
5+	1%
n	3,883

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Paid Workers in the Household. Most respondents lived in households where at least one person performed work for pay or profit. Seventy-nine percent of respondents (3,066) indicated at least one person in their household were wage earners (See Table 15). Thirty-five percent had one person in their household who worked for pay or profit, followed by two people (30%), three people (9%), and four or more people (5%). Notably, these figures do not include household members receiving other forms of income (e.g. retirement, disability).

Estimated Household Earnings. The estimated median household earnings among respondents in the past 12 months was \$50,400, which is somewhat similar to the four county estimates from the ACS of \$46,000, and much lower than the California estimated median

household income of over \$96,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2023b). To estimate household earnings, we multiplied respondents’ individual work earnings in the past 12 months (deducting earnings from the number of weeks they reported being unemployed) by the number of workers in the household. Thus, the estimated median household earnings provide a calculation that assumes workers in the same household would roughly earn the same earnings. While no estimate is perfect, this avoids the under-estimation that often occurs when asking one person about the entire households’ income. As noted, our estimated household earnings were higher than ACS estimates, making the cost burden analysis we later present even more pronounced.

Cost of Living Challenges

Table 16. Importance of Government to Address Cost of Living within the Next Two Year

	<u>Extremely Important</u>	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Important</u>	<u>Somewhat Important</u>	<u>Not at all Important</u>
Affordability of housing	70%	18%	9%	2%	1%
Cost of utilities	68%	21%	8%	2%	<1%
Affordable food	70%	19%	8%	2%	1%
n= 3,897-3,915					

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Government Action around Food and Housing Costs. Four of five people shared resounding support for the government to address the cost of housing, utilities, and food within the next two years (See Table 16). At least 88 percent of respondents indicated it was either “extremely important” or “very important” for the government to address the affordability of housing, utilities, and food. Moreover, respondents expressed a high willingness to attend

community meetings related to some of the highest financial stressors including housing/rental costs and the cost of utility/energy bills (See Appendix C).

Daycare Needs and Challenges. The availability and cost of daycare impacts the work prospects of south Central Valley residents, as well as the educational outcomes of children. Overall, results show that one in seven parents required daycare, a portion of families had unmet daycare needs, and for half of wage earning parents in the study the cost of daycare was unaffordable.

Table 17. Childcare Provider Needs and Access

	<u>Percent</u>
Households with children that did not require daycare	86%
Households with children that did require daycare	14%
Children requiring daycare	
1	52%
2	30%
3	12%
4	4%
5	<1%
6	<1%
n	217
Requires but does not have childcare (number of children without a provider)	
0 (had a consistent provider for all children requiring care)	83%
1	10%
2	2%
3	4%
4	1%
5	<1%
n	191

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Among respondents with their own children in their households, nearly 14 percent (225) reported requiring daycare⁶ for at least one child. Among these respondents, over half required daycare for one child (52%), 30 percent for two children, twelve percent for three children, and six percent for four to six children (See Table 17). On average, respondents required daycare for just under 2 children (1.7).

One in six parents did not have the childcare (used interchangeably with daycare) they required. Seventeen percent of parents indicated they did not have a regular and consistent childcare provider for at least one child requiring care (See Table 17). In part, this gap in daycare access could be explained by the high cost and or limited availability of childcare. Among parents, 83 percent had a regular and consistent childcare provider for the number of children requiring childcare.⁷

Many parents could not afford daycare, based on their estimated household earnings. Parents in the study spent a median of \$100 a week on daycare, including 56 parents who spent \$0 a week, and a median of \$148 when not including parents who paid \$0 a week. The benchmark for affordability, as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is paying no more than seven percent of the household income on childcare (Federal Register 2024). For half of workers in the study with children in daycare, their daycare costs were

⁶ The survey did not differentiate between infant, toddler, preschool, or school-age daycare.

⁷ This was calculated by subtracting the number of children who had childcare from the number of children requiring childcare for each respondent. We removed 10 responses where respondents indicated they had childcare for more children than they indicated needed childcare due to error.

unaffordable,⁸ meaning that they paid more than seven percent of their estimated household earnings on daycare (See Section on Estimated Household Earnings).⁹ Moreover, 42 percent of workers paid 12 percent or more on daycare. These findings are in line with data from the National Database of Childcare Prices (NDCP), which show that within Fresno, Kings, Kern, and Tulare counties, households paid an estimated 19 to 28 percent of their income on infant childcare, 15 to 17 percent on toddler childcare, and 12 to 14 percent on preschool childcare (Department of Labor 2022).

Housing and Utilities. Most respondents were homeowners and lived in a house. Including both renters and owners, most respondents lived in a house (91%), seven percent lived in an apartment and two percent lived in a mobile home (See Table 18).¹⁰ Three people lived either in a garage or in a backyard house. Though renters and owners tended to live in a house, owners made up the greatest percent of people living in a house (62%). Renters made up the greatest percent of people living in apartments (96%).

⁸ Five included cases paid more on childcare than their estimated household earnings. The 56 parents who paid zero were included in the analysis. Note the affordability analysis limits calculations to respondents who reported income information from paid work and the number of workers in their households.

⁹ To calculate how many workers had unaffordable daycare, we multiplied workers' weekly daycare cost by 52 weeks (assuming their child/ren went to daycare year-round) and divided this number by each workers' estimated annual household earnings (See section on Estimated Household Earnings).

¹⁰ Study canvassers made note of the dwelling unit that best described where respondents lived.

Table 18. Housing Type, by Renters and Owners

	<u>Renters</u>	<u>Owners</u>	<u>Total</u>
House	38%	62%	91%
Apartment	96%	<1%	7%
Mobile home	61%	39%	2%
Total	43%	57%	100%

n= 3,917

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Among the over two in five respondents who were renters, the cost of housing and utilities were generally high. Forty-three percent of respondents (1,673) were renters and spent a median of \$1,425 on rent and utilities combined. Renters’ median monthly rent was \$980, and their average monthly rent was \$998. The cost of rent ranged from nine renters who reported paying zero up to \$2,600 a month (See Table 19). Renters spent a median of \$400 on utilities per month (identical to owners who also spent a median of \$400 a month on utilities).

Only a small group of tenants had utilities included in their monthly rent (See Table 19). Trash was included in the rent for 20 percent of renters. Water was included in the rent for 18 percent of renters, followed by gas for 12 percent of renters, and electricity for 11 percent of renters. Thus, 75 percent of renters did not have any utilities included in monthly rent, adding an additional housing cost— regardless of whether or not they experienced frequent power outages.

Power Outages. Rural residential areas tend to experience longer power outages in comparison to urban areas due to longer power lines, weather damage, and limited repair capacity. Most survey participants (67%) experienced a power outage and power disruption

once or twice in the past year. Four percent had experienced a power outage monthly within the past year. A total of 19 respondents (<1%) experienced weekly or daily power outages in the past year.

Rental Housing Cost-Burdens. An estimated 62 percent of workers in the study were housing cost burdened, and 35 percent were *severely cost burdened* (See Table 19).¹¹ The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines cost burden as housing costs (including utilities) exceeding 30 percent of the monthly household income and severe cost burden as the same housing costs exceeding 50 percent of the monthly household income (HUD 2025). Low wage stagnation is the clearest cause of why working community members are burdened by the costs of housing and other basic needs. In the study counties, anywhere from 37 to 44 percent of wage earners earned under a living wage, even when adjusting for the local cost of living (Flores 2022).

Overall, survey results show a greater housing cost burden in the south Central Valley, compared to national estimates. Across the U.S., 49 percent of renter households were cost burdened, and 26 percent of renters were severely cost burdened (Harati et al 2025, p 10). Among Latinos alone, 53 percent of renter households were cost burdened (U.S. Census Bureau

¹¹ To calculate whether a worker was cost burdened or severely cost burdened, we divided their monthly cost of rent plus utilities by their estimated monthly household earnings over the past 12 months (See section on Estimated Household Earnings). If workers paid more than 30 percent of their estimated monthly household income on housing costs, they were cost burdened. If they paid more than 50 percent of their estimated monthly household income on housing costs, they were severely cost burdened. This limits analysis to respondents who reported both income information from paid work and the number of workers in their households. Approximately 10 percent of included cases paid more in rent and utilities than their estimated household earnings, possibly covering the difference with other non-work sources of income.

2024b). In California, there were only 24 affordable rental homes for every 100 extremely low income renter households (Harati et al 2025, p 18). In the study counties, the hourly wage necessary to afford a two bedroom residence at the 40th percentile of rent in the area was anywhere from \$26.54 to \$28.94 an hour (Colon-Bermudez, Emmanuel, Harati and Renzi 2025).

Table 19. Monthly Rent, Utilities, and Housing Cost Burdens

	<u>Median</u>
Main housing costs	
Rent	\$980
Rent and utilities	\$1,425
Utilities	\$400
n=1,528- 1,609	
	<u>Percent</u>
Did not have any utilities included in total rent costs	75%
Had any of the following utilities included in total rent costs:	
Trash	20%
Water	18%
Gas	12%
Electricity	11%
n=1,653- 1,659	
Percent of estimated household income spent on rent and utilities	
Not cost-burdened (30% or less)	38%
Cost-burdened (more than 30%)	62%
Severely cost-burdened (more than 50%)	35%
n= 626	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

High housing costs coupled with low earnings affect households' ability to pay for other necessities and impact families' wellbeing, educational outcomes, employment stability, and at worst, are associated with an increased risk of death (Airgood-Obrycki et al 2022; Sandel et al 2016; Newman and Holupka 2015; Desmond and Gershenson 2016; Graetz et al 2024).

Educational Experiences

Youth Higher Education Plans and Obstacles. Overall, the college aspirations of youth in respondents' households were high, despite the perceived barriers to pursuing higher education. The results show that the majority of youth in respondents' households had plans to attend college, and the high cost of tuition was the greatest perceived barrier.

Most respondents with children in their households (83% or 1,468) indicated youth in their household had plans to attend college. Encompassing youth with plans to attend college and those who did not plan to attend college, 18 percent (318) said youth in their households faced obstacles that discouraged them from pursuing higher education, particularly cost considerations that arguably could be ameliorated with higher earnings among household workers in the region. The greatest obstacles to higher education included: the high cost of tuition (72%), lack of transportation (43%), concern over being accepted into an institution of choice (34%), access difficulties (31%), and or family obligations (19%) (See Table 20).

Table 20. Obstacles to Higher Education for Youth in the Household

	<u>Percent</u>
High cost of tuition	72%
Lack of transportation	43%
Concerned that they won't get in	34%
Difficult to access	31%
Family obligations	19%
Other write-in responses:	29%
<i>Additional cost (books or housing)</i>	12%
<i>Health or disability concerns</i>	5%
<i>Immigration status</i>	3%
Total	709
n	312

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Ninety respondents shared an open-ended response regarding a barrier including: the cost of books or housing (12%), a health disability or concern (5%), or immigration status (3%). Notably, 94 percent of respondents who mentioned youth in their household faced an obstacle that discouraged them from pursuing higher education also indicated youth in their household had plans to attend college. Respondents could be referring to different youth to answer each question or it is plausible that the perceived barriers did not derail household youth college attendance plans.

Acceptance and success in college requires adequate preparation stemming from high school, primary school, and as research shows even preschool and early learning shape the educational outcomes of youth, particularly among lower-income households (Reynolds, Ou,

and Temple 2017). The following paragraphs delve into the perceived educational resources and experiences among south Central Valley parents and students.

Educational Resources and Experiences. A considerable portion of respondents indicated inadequate school funding and were motivated to engage civically around the quality of public schools. Specifically, nearly one-third of respondents (31%) expressed that the schools in their community did not receive adequate funding from the state and almost half (47%) would be willing to attend a local meeting regarding the quality of public schools (See Appendix C). While results show room for some potential improvement of educational resources and parent experiences, generally perceptions were positive.

In response to the question, “Do you feel children in your household are receiving adequate support with the following resources in their school?” 62 percent indicated children received adequate support with special education. This includes Individualized Educational Programs (IEP) for students requiring specialized instruction, and “504 plans” which outline student accommodations (See Table 21). Seventy percent indicated children in their households received adequate support regarding a school psychologist, 72 percent with bilingual education, 78 percent with tutoring and counseling, and 80 percent with either parent engagement or school supplies and books (respondents could also indicate NA or not applicable for these questions). Altogether, 41 percent of respondents indicated *any* of the school resources just described were inadequate. Because of the low number of NA responses for the special education question, it is possible that respondents misunderstood the questions in this section regarding educational resources and experiences.

Table 21 shows parents’ experiences in their children’s schools, which were mostly positive, including feeling welcomed, somewhat frequent parent engagement, and only a small proportion had contact with school disciplinary personnel. Most parents (88%) indicated they felt welcomed in their child’s school. Forty-four percent of parents had ever participated in a parent engagement committee at their child’s school and or district. Just five percent of parents (or their child) had ever been in contact and/or referred to law enforcement/ student resource officers in their school.

Table 21. Educational Resources and Parent Experiences

Children in the household are receiving adequate support with the following school resources:	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>NA Response</u>
Special education, IEP, 504s	62%	22%	16%
School psychologist	70%	16%	14%
Bilingual education	72%	16%	12%
Counseling	78%	12%	10%
Tutoring	78%	12%	10%
Parent engagement	80%	10%	10%
School supplies and books	80%	10%	10%
n= 2,075- 2,095			
Do you feel schools in your community receive adequate funding ?	55%	25%	20%
n=3,826			
Parent experiences with the local school system			
Do you feel welcomed in child’s school ?	88%	5%	7%
Have you participated in a parent engagement committee ?	44%	48%	8%
Have you or child had contact and/or been referred to student resource officers?	5%	95%	-
n= 1,623- 1,649			

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Covid- 19 Public Emergency

Lack of Access to Pandemic Assistance Programs. In addition to disrupting the school experiences of youth, the Covid-19 public emergency heightened household cost burdens, in part, because of the work disruptions the pandemic caused (See Section on Covid-19 Employment Disruptions). Yet, respondents reported limited access to pandemic relief. Most respondents' households (58%) did not receive any assistance from a government or charitable pandemic relief service or program (See Table 22). Given the higher prevalence of non-citizens in the study, we compare the assistance received among citizens and noncitizens.

The low receipt of pandemic relief among survey respondents could be affected by the fear of “public charge” among non-citizens (who make up 39% of the total study sample). Public charge refers to a U.S. immigration determination of whether a potential green-card holder would likely primarily depend on the government for assistance, which could be a barrier to permanent residency. Current federal rules do not consider “supplemental or special purpose payments- such as payments for childcare, energy assistance, disaster relief, pandemic assistance, or for other specific purposes” a public charge (NILC 2023). However, overall anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions could make people hesitant to access any kind of relief. A comparison between citizens' and noncitizens' receipt of assistance shows that both groups had limited access to assistance. Fifty-five percent of citizens did not receive any pandemic assistance, while 59 percent of non-citizens also did not receive any pandemic assistance (See Table 22).

Table 22. Access to Pandemic Relief Programs and Continued Need for Assistance

	<u>Percent</u>	
Pandemic relief received (all)		
No assistance received	58%	
Food assistance	24%	
Financial assistance	21%	
Utility bills assistance	6%	
Rental assistance	2%	
Pandemic EBT	2%	
Other assistance (write-in)	1%	
Total	4,603	
n= 3,845		
Pandemic relief received (U.S. citizens and non-citizens)		
	<u>Citizens</u>	<u>Non-Citizen</u>
No assistance received	55%	59%
Food assistance	26%	22%
Financial assistance	23%	20%
Utility bills assistance	7%	4%
Rental assistance	3%	2%
Other	3%	4%
n	2,309	1,495
	<u>Citizens</u>	<u>Non-citizens</u>
Any pandemic assistance received among respondents making less than \$30,000	86%	56%
n	177	174
	<u>Percent</u>	
Received a high interest pandemic loan	5%	
Continued need for relief:		
Food assistance	74%	
Utility bill assistance	46%	
Financial assistance	40%	
Rental assistance	25%	
Other needed assistance (write-in)	<1%	
Total	2,034	
n	1,240	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Citizens' receipt of pandemic assistance was only slightly higher for all major categories including food assistance, utility bill assistance, financial assistance, and rental assistance, compared to non-citizens (See Table 22). However, when we remove workers making at or above \$30,000, which is the estimated median annual earnings among workers in the study, we notice the gap widens among citizens (86%) and non-citizens' (56%) receipt of pandemic assistance. In other words, pandemic assistance was largely out of reach particularly for non-citizens who tended to have lower earnings, potentially because of the fear of public charge (See Table 22).

Moreover, given that respondents could mention receiving more than one service or program, 29 percent of citizens indicated their household received one type of pandemic assistance (28% among non-citizens). Ten percent of citizens indicated their household received two types of assistance (9% among non-citizens), and two percent of citizens said their household received three types of assistance (1% among non-citizens).

High Interest Pandemic Loans. A portion of respondents took out a high interest loan during the Covid-19 public emergency, with considerable loan amounts that some were still paying off. Five percent of respondents (179 respondents) indicated they or someone in their household had taken out a high-interest loan during the Covid-19 pandemic. The mean loan amount borrowed was \$11,905 and the median loan amount borrowed was \$7,000. At the time of the survey, 77 percent of respondents (136 respondents) indicated they were still paying off this high-interest loan, with a mean of \$9,875 still owed on the loan or a median of \$4,850 still owed on the loan.

Continued Need for Assistance Programs. One of three respondents expressed the continued need for assistance programs, particularly food assistance (See Table 22). Thirty-three percent (1,240) indicated their household still needed at least one type of government or charitable relief service or program that was available during the pandemic. Among these respondents, 74 percent indicated their household still needed food assistance, followed by utility bill assistance (46%), financial assistance (40%) rental assistance (25%), or other type of needed assistance including home repair, disability assistance, daycare assistance, expanded pandemic unemployment, job access, and pandemic unemployment (<1%). Respondents could indicate more than one service or program, thus percentages do not equal 100%.

Support for a 1% Tax for Those with \$50 Million in Assets

To address the state budget deficit, respondents expressed the strongest support for creating a one percent tax for residents with more than \$50 million in assets and the lowest support for cutting public services that many low-income persons rely upon. The survey shared that the State of California had an estimated \$68 billion budget deficit and asked respondents in Fresno and Kings counties to state their level of agreement with four strategies to address this deficit.¹² Most agreed with creating a tax for millionaires and 56-82 percent disagreed with raising taxes on everyone, doing nothing, or cutting public services. Specifically, 55 percent stated they “strongly agree” or “agree” with “creating a one percent tax for residents with more than \$50 million in assets” (See Table 23 and Figure 2).

¹² This was the second of two questions added in the second half of data collection that only included Fresno and Kings counties.

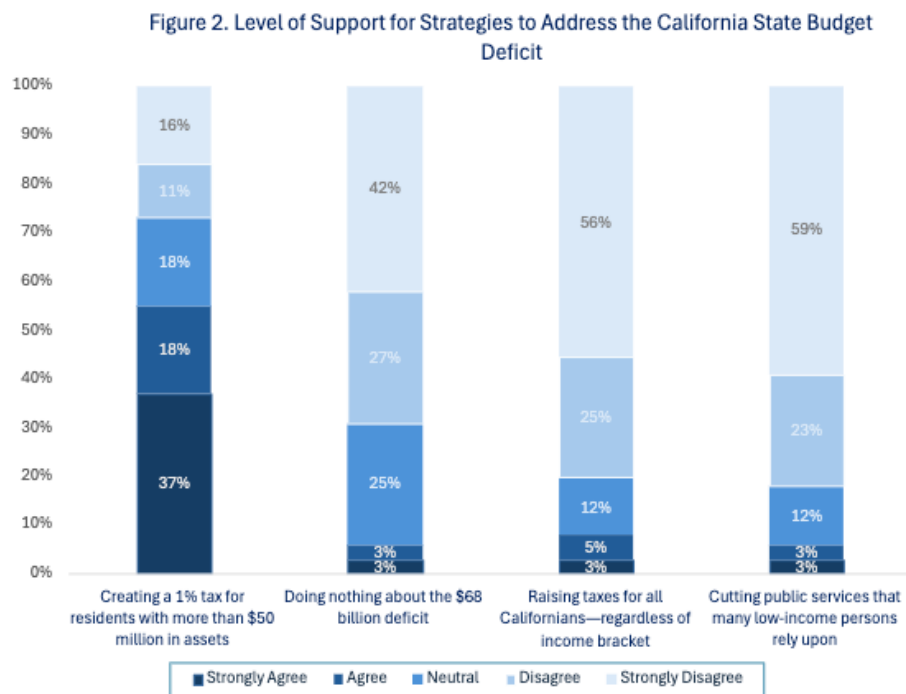
Comparatively, 56 percent “strongly disagree” with raising taxes regardless of tax bracket. Sixty-nine percent “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with “doing nothing about the \$68 million budget deficit.” An overwhelming 82 percent indicated they “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with a strategy to cut public services.

Table 23. Level of Support for Strategies to Address the California State Budget Deficit

	<u>Strongly Agree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>
Creating a 1% tax for residents with more than \$50 million in assets	37%	18%	18%	11%	16%
Doing nothing about the \$68 billion budget deficit	3%	3%	25%	27%	42%
Raising taxes for all Californians—regardless of income bracket	3%	5%	12%	25%	56%
Cutting public services that many low-income persons rely upon	3%	3%	12%	23%	59%

n = 1,951-1,968

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

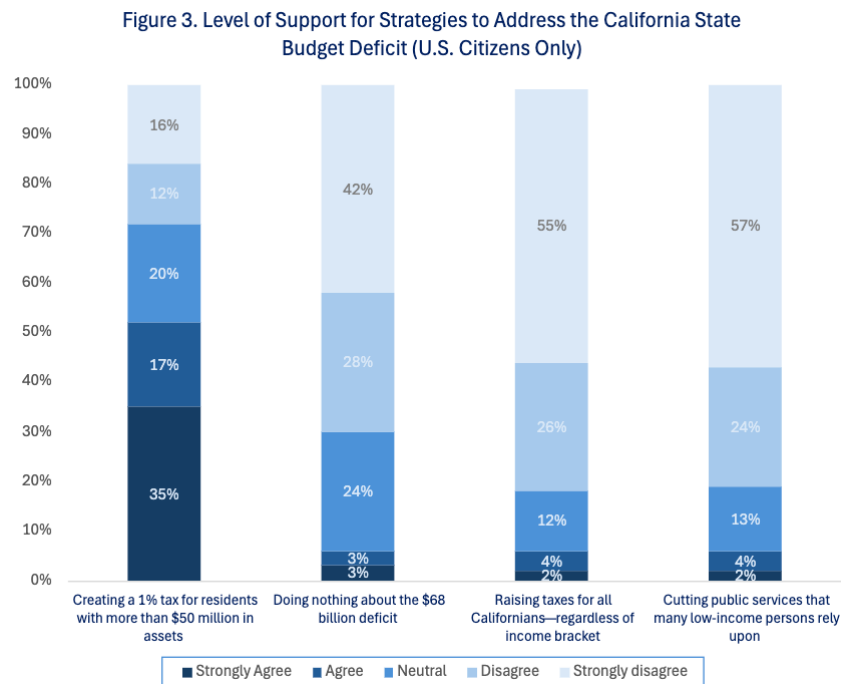
We repeated the analysis only among U.S. Citizens and find that the results are nearly identical (See Table 23a and Figure 3). To address the state budget deficit, U.S Citizen respondents expressed the strongest support for creating a one percent tax for residents with more than \$50 million in assets and the lowest support for cutting public services that many low-income persons rely upon.

Table 23a. Level of Support for Strategies to Address the California State Budget Deficit, Among Citizens Only

	<u>Strongly Agree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>
Creating a 1% tax for residents with more than \$50 million in assets	35%	17%	20%	12%	16%
Doing nothing about the \$68 billion budget deficit	3%	3%	24%	28%	42%
Raising taxes for all Californians—regardless of income bracket	2%	4%	12%	26%	55%
Cutting public services that many low-income persons rely upon	2%	4%	13%	24%	57%

n= 1,277-1,286

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Health Coverage and Access Results

Health is a vital aspect to wellbeing, and access to healthcare is particularly important given the existing work and environmental hazards in the south Central Valley. Health coverage and access results show many households have uninsured members and there is a lack of knowledge about Medi-Cal eligibility regardless of immigration status, particularly among undocumented respondents. Medical and dental care utilization is lower in the region than most national estimates, community knowledge about mental healthcare services are limited, and most respondents want the government to address the cost and access to healthcare. The sample size for this section ranges from 138 (i.e. dental visits among children of undocumented farmworkers) to 3,904.

Uninsured Household Members. Over a quarter of respondents had at least one household member who did not have health insurance.¹³ Twenty-eight percent lived in households where at least one person was not covered by health insurance, followed by two or more people (16%), three or more people (6%) and four or more people (3%) (See Table 24).

Knowledge of Medi-Cal Eligibility Regardless of Immigration Status. Respondents' knowledge of medical insurance eligibility regardless of their immigration status was limited, particularly among undocumented people. Starting in 2024, California low-income residents of all ages and regardless of immigration status became fully eligible for Medi-Cal Insurance,

¹³ To calculate this, we subtracted the number of household members who were covered by health insurance from the total number of people in the household. We removed 105 responses from this analysis whose response to the number of insured household members was larger than the total number of household members due to error.

which includes a range of medical, dental, mental health, and vision benefits. A quarter of respondents (25%) who had work authorization (U.S. Citizens, work permit, legal permanent residents) said they did not know low-income Californian's were eligible for Medi-Cal Insurance regardless of immigration status (See Table 24). Among only undocumented respondents, 39 percent (205) said they did not know low-income Californian's were eligible for Medi-Cal Insurance regardless of immigration status, indicating the need for public education, particularly among impacted community members.

Table 24. Lack of Access to and Knowledge Regarding Medical Insurance

	<u>Percent</u>
Uninsured household members	
0	72%
1	12%
2	10%
3	3%
4	2%
5+	2%
n= 3,741	
Did not know Californian's were eligible for Medi-Cal Insurance regardless of immigration status	
Respondents without work authorization (i.e. undocumented)	39%
Respondents with work authorization	25%
n= 524- 3,816	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Medical Care Utilization

The survey inquired about respondents' doctor visits within the last year, as well as doctor visits for their children (when applicable). Coupled with lower household health insurance coverage rates, the Central Valley has the country's second lowest rate of primary care physicians and lowest rate of specialists (Coffman and Fix 2025), inequitably affecting residents' access to care.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that adults and children visit a doctor or other healthcare professional at least once a year. National estimates indicate that 15 percent of adults had not visited a doctor in the past 12 months (National Center for Health Statistics 2024). Among children 18 years and younger, national estimates show that only five percent had not visited a doctor for any reason in the past 12 months (National Center for Health Statistics 2024b).

Doctor Visits. Among all respondents, one in seven had not visited a doctor in the past year, which rose to over one in four among undocumented respondents, and over one in three among undocumented farmworkers. Specifically, 15 percent had not visited a doctor in the last year for themselves (See Table 25) aligning with national estimates. However, among farmworkers, 24 percent had not visited a doctor in the last year for themselves. Among undocumented respondents, 28 percent had not visited a doctor in the last year for themselves. And last, 35 percent of undocumented farmworkers had not visited a doctor in the last year for themselves. These findings align with previous research showing that farmworkers,

undocumented respondents, and particularly undocumented farmworkers have added barriers to accessing a doctor for themselves (Farmworker Health Study 2023).

Children Doctor Visits. Among all respondents, and among undocumented respondents alone, around one in seven had not visited a doctor for their child in the past year. However, this figure dropped to nearly one in nine among the children of farmworkers and undocumented farmworkers. Specifically, 14 percent of respondents with children indicated at least one of their children had not visited a doctor in the last year (See Table 25). Among undocumented parents, 15 percent indicated at least one of their children had not visited a doctor in the last year. Farmworkers and undocumented farmworkers indicated visiting the doctor for their children in the past year more frequently, compared to the entire sample of parents. Twelve percent of either parents who were farmworkers or parents who were undocumented farmworkers said at least one child had not visited a doctor in the last year. Thus, compared to national figures (five percent of children under 18 had not visited a doctor in the past year), children in south Central Valley have a considerably higher lack of access. Yet, findings suggest that accessing a doctor for their children may be less of a barrier for undocumented respondents, farmworkers, and undocumented farmworkers than accessing a doctor for themselves (See Table 25 for comparison). Arguably, doctor visits for children may be more of a priority for these parents given their own experiences with limited access to a doctor. Additionally, school physical requirements may also affect the frequency of doctor visits among respondents' children.

Family Emergency Care. On average, respondents or their family members had visited the emergency room one time in the last 12 months, ranging from zero times to 46 times within that time frame, showing that emergency care may be the only source of medical attention for some community members in the region. Among respondents who visited the emergency room at least once, on average those respondents had visited the emergency room twice in the last 12 months.

Dental Care Utilization

The survey asked respondents about dental care visits for themselves and their children (when applicable) within the past 12 months, showing particular barriers for farmworkers, undocumented respondents, and undocumented farmworkers and less for their children.

The CDC recommends that adults and children have at least a yearly check-up and professional cleaning. A recent publication indicates that the south Central Valley counties in the current study (Fresno, Kern, Kings, and Tulare) had among the lowest utilization rates in the state of California (Huang and Liu 2025). Other research finds that residents of rural areas are less likely to have preventative dental visits, particularly Hispanic adults (Cha and Cohen 2021). Some of the barriers to dental care in rural areas include the limited availability of dentists, transportation issues, and cost (Luo et al. 2021).

National estimates indicate that 35 percent of adults had not visited a dentist in the past 12 months (National Center for Health Statistics 2024c). Among children aged 2-17 years, national estimates indicate that only 13 percent had not visited a dentist in the past 12 months (National Center for Health Statistics 2019). Hispanic children from low-income families tend to

visit the dentist less than non-Hispanic White or Black children from low-income families (17 % compared to 13% White and 14 % Black) (National Center for Health Statistics 2019).

Dentist Visits. Among all respondents, over a quarter had not visited a dentist in the past year, which rose to almost two in five among farmworkers and undocumented respondents, and up to nearly half among undocumented farmworkers. Specifically, 29 percent of respondents had not visited a dentist in the last year for themselves (See Table 25), lower than the national figure of 35 percent. Among farmworkers, 39 percent had not visited a dentist in the last year for themselves. Among undocumented respondents, 39 percent had not visited a dentist in the last year for themselves. And last, 49 percent of undocumented farmworkers had not visited a dentist in the last year for themselves. These findings highlight the added barriers to accessing a dentist for farmworkers, undocumented respondents, and particularly for undocumented farmworkers—even more so than access to a doctor.



Table 25. Did Not Visit a Doctor or Dentist in the Last Year

	<u>Percent</u>
No doctor visit	
All respondents	15%
Farmworkers	24%
Undocumented	28%
Undocumented farmworkers	35%
n= 172-2,882	
No child doctor visit	
All respondents	14%
Undocumented	15%
Farmworkers	12%
Undocumented farmworkers	12%
n= 138-2,526	
No dentist visit	
All respondents	29%
Undocumented	39%
Farmworkers	39%
Undocumented farmworkers	49%
n= 172-3,860	
No child dentist visit	
All respondents	18%
Undocumented	16%
Farmworkers	14%
Undocumented farmworkers	13%
n= 138-2,529	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Children Dentist Visits. Among all respondents, over one in six had not visited a dentist for their child in the past year—and similar to doctor visits, the children of undocumented workers, farmworkers, and particularly undocumented farmworkers had higher rates of dentist visits in comparison to the entire sample. Specifically, 18 percent of respondents indicated at least one of their children had not visited a dentist in the last year, slightly higher than national estimates of the lack of dentist visits among Latino low-income children. Comparatively, as shown on Table 25, 16 percent of undocumented workers indicated at least one of their children had not visited a dentist in the last year, followed by 14 percent of farmworkers, and 13 percent of undocumented farmworkers.

Every year 92 million work hours and 34 million school hours are lost due to unplanned emergency dental care visits, many which could be prevented (Kelekar and Navaal 2018; Navaal and Kelekar 2018). Beyond access, researchers suggest that being unable to pay for routine dental care may be the reason patients seek care only when absolutely needed. Among both adults and children, income is a strong predictor of whether there is a loss of hours working or attending school. One solution proposed by the California Oral Health Equity Coalition (2025) is to authorize dental therapists in California to expand access to quality, affordable, and culturally relevant oral health care and create accessible pathways into the dental workforce for people from the south Central Valley and other communities most affected by inequities.

Covid-19 Deaths, Mental Health, and Healthcare Government Action

Deaths During the Covid-19 Pandemic. A portion of survey respondents experienced family loss during the Covid-19 pandemic. Six percent (217) reported having lost a household

member due to Covid-19, potentially affecting their own health outcomes. From 2020 to 2023, California had 1.2 million Covid-19 reported deaths (CDC 2023). The study counties had 78,990 Covid-19 reported deaths: 33,704 deaths in Fresno County, 27,860 in Kern County, followed by Tulare County with 13,496 deaths, and Kings County with 3,930 deaths (CDC 2023). Thus, the study counties make up seven percent of California's Covid-19 deaths from 2020-2023.

Research suggests that the death of a family member is tied to an elevated risk of physical and mental health decline (Verderi et al. 2020).

Knowledge about Mental Health Care Services. Despite the high need, 40 percent of respondents did not know where to receive mental health care services. The lack of knowledge about mental healthcare services is concerning given that mental health is tied to experiences disproportionately faced by study respondents including low earnings, the heightened risk of infection and death from the Covid-19 pandemic, the lack of access to safety net programs, limited access to food and other resources, and high levels of deportation, family separation, and discrimination. The Farmworker Health Study (2023) finds that 67 percent of respondents expressed a high level of fear of family separation due to deportation.

Using data from the National Health Interview Survey, a recent study finds that Latinos had among the highest probability of having depression or anxiety and had high unmet mental health care needs between 2020 and 2021. The authors conclude that: "Hispanic respondents' mental health was the most consistently harmed during the pandemic, with their disadvantage relative to White respondents in particular remaining throughout the study period and being

demonstrably higher for most of the pandemic period compared to the mental health disadvantage of other respondents” (Thomeer, Moody, and Yahirun 2023, p 972).

Government Action around Healthcare Cost and Access. Most respondents believed government action to address cost and access to healthcare was highly important within the next two years (See Table 26). Sixty-seven percent ranked addressing the cost of healthcare, followed by access to healthcare (65%) as “extremely important.”

Table 26. Importance of Government to Address Cost of and Access to Healthcare within the Next Two Years

	<u>Extremely Important</u>	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Important</u>	<u>Somewhat Important</u>	<u>Not at all Important</u>
Cost of healthcare	67%	19%	10%	2%	1%
Access to healthcare	65%	20%	11%	3%	1%
n= 3,896- 3,904					

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Community, Environment, and Climate Resiliency

Results related to community experiences and the environment indicate the majority of respondents expressed concern related to vital weather shielding infrastructure and safety, many wanted more recreational opportunities for youth, and there were overall low levels of incarceration experiences among respondents and their families. Most were concerned about the environment, pollution, and water quality at work and home. Many expressed support for investing public dollars towards high quality infrastructure and industry jobs, climate resiliency, and for the government to address unmet road, water, transportation and youth education and recreational needs. Results indicate low levels of incarceration experiences among

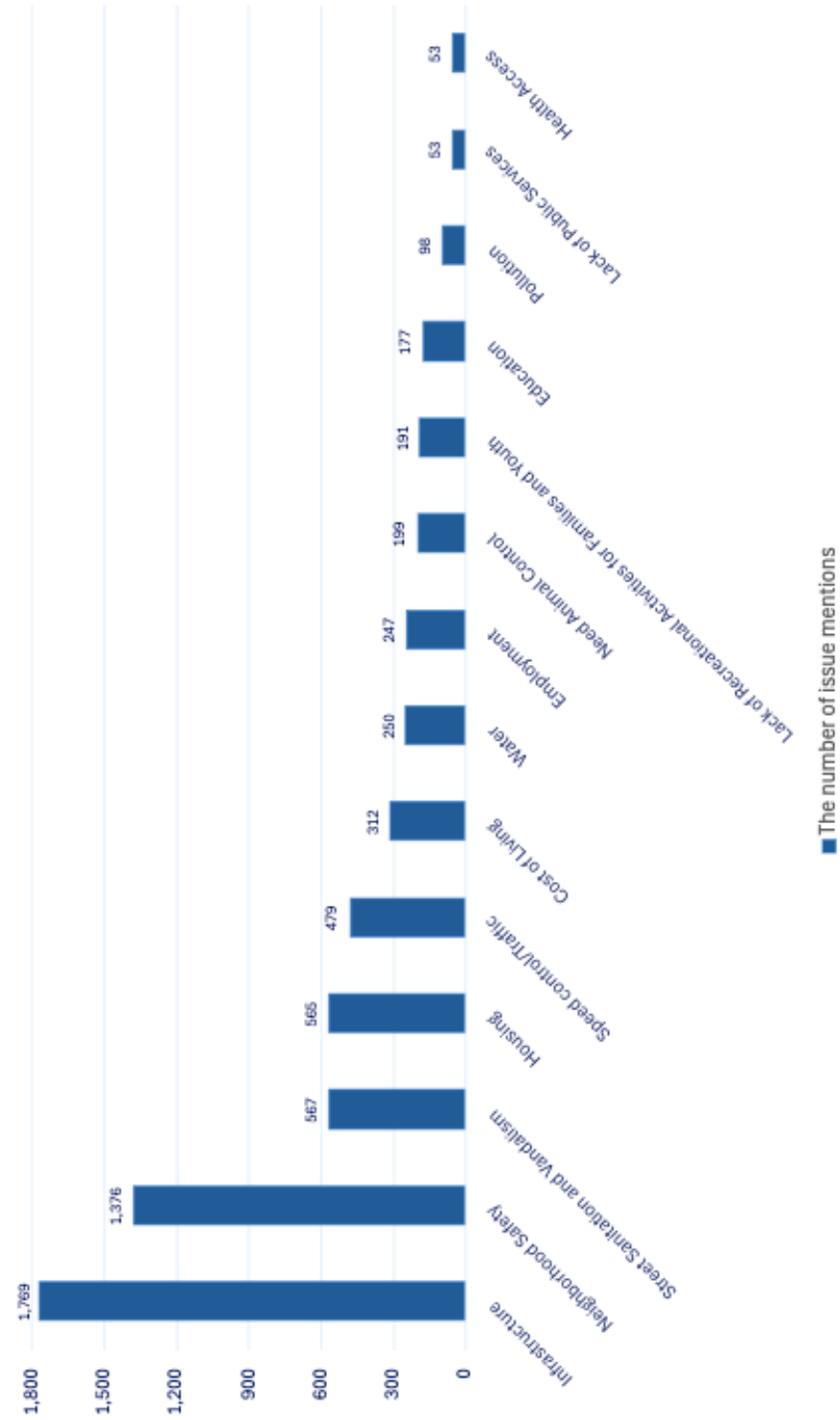
respondents— consistent with data on largely immigrant populations. The sample size for this section ranges from 199 (i.e. length of legal sentence) to 3,922.

Top Community Concerns and Desired Investments

Vital Infrastructure and Neighborhood Safety. Responses to the first survey question confirm survey findings throughout in that they express high support for public investments in infrastructure, increasing neighborhood safety, access to clean water, good jobs, the environment, and more. Results point to the need for government action and public dollar investments on vital infrastructure and reducing economic hardships and its consequences. Responses from the open-ended question: “What is the most important issue facing your community?” are telling of the concerns survey-takers had top-of-mind before any topic areas were introduced. The top four issues shared by respondents, who frequently mentioned more than one issue, included: infrastructure, neighborhood safety, street sanitation, and housing (See Figure 4 to see all responses with at least 50 mentions, as well as Appendix D/E).

Most community issues responses were related to infrastructure and neighborhood safety. Among the infrastructure issues mentioned (1,769), 45 percent were related to road repairs (45%), street lights (32%), and sidewalk repairs (10%), followed by the lack of sidewalks (7%), flooding issues (6%), and parking concerns (<1%) (See Appendix E). Among the neighborhood safety issues (1,376), most were related to a lack of overall safety (26%), high crime (16%), and violence (13%), followed by gangs (12%), the need for more police patrolling (11%), drugs (9%), theft (6%), gun violence (4%), and the need for more “Neighborhood Watch” initiatives (3%).

Figure 4. The Most Important Community Issues with at least 50 mentions (Open-Ended Responses) (n= 3,693)



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Drinking Water at Home and Work. The overwhelming majority of respondents expressed the high importance of government action around addressing the quality of drinking water at home and work within the next two years. This is not surprising given the region faces high levels of contaminated drinking water, including nitrate contamination of groundwater that has been found to cause cancer and adverse birth outcomes (Westerling et al 2018). Eighty to eighty-three percent of survey respondents rated the importance of government action to address the quality of drinking water at work and at home as “extremely important” or “very important” (See Table 27).

Table 27. Importance of Government to Address the Quality of Drinking Water within the Next Two Years

	<u>Extremely Important</u>	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Important</u>	<u>Somewhat Important</u>	<u>Not at all Important</u>
Quality of Drinking Water					
At home	64%	18%	9%	4%	4%
At work	62%	18%	10%	4%	6%
n= 3,769- 3,890					

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Youth Community Recreational Opportunities. South Central Valley residents expressed the desire for more youth community recreational opportunities. Nearly a third of respondents (32%) rated the amount of recreational opportunities for youth in their community as either “very poor” or “poor” (See Table 28). While youth recreation is associated with positive youth development, access to this recreation is not always equitably at reach, and requires intentional investments (Reed, Hanna, Bai and Agans 2022).

Table 28. Rating of the Amount of Community Recreational Opportunities for Youth

	<u>Percent</u>
Very good	10%
Good	22%
Acceptable	37%
Poor	19%
Very poor	12%
n	3,862

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Incarceration Experiences

Although social science research highly correlates crime with the existence of unmet needs, neighborhood disinvestment, and limited youth recreational activities, results indicate low levels of incarceration experiences—consistent with data on largely immigrant populations. Though generally reflecting low levels of incarceration, one of the effects of a criminal record among respondents was perceived voting disenfranchisement (9% of respondents who indicated a voting registration barrier mentioned a criminal record as a barrier, as noted in the Civic Action section). California law allows people with prior felony convictions to vote, as soon as they end a state or federal prison term, including those on parole, probation or supervised release (and in some cases while in a local detention facility) (Vote California n.d).

Just seven percent of respondents (291) indicated someone in their immediate family or household had ever been to jail or prison, including themselves. The median year in which they or someone in their household or immediate family had *last* been in jail or prison was 2017, with incarceration experiences spanning as far back as 1980 (214). The survey asked

respondents who reported having a personal, familial, or household incarceration experience described above a series of questions regarding legal representation, ongoing trial experience, and length of incarceration sentences.

Concerning legal representation, 86 percent of respondents with a personal, familial or household incarceration experience indicated having a public defender while only 14 percent indicated having a private attorney. This finding is in line with research that highlights the racial disparity prevalent in criminal legal processes that often leave Latino and Black defendants with less favorable outcomes given the limits of public representation including high caseloads (Gottlieb 2021).

Among community members who had been sentenced within respondents' immediate family or household (including themselves), 56 percent had been sentenced for less than a year (See Table 29). Twenty-three percent had been sentenced for one to two years. Sixteen percent had been sentenced from three to ten years, and six percent had been sentenced for ten years or more. Thus, in 79 percent of instances, community members had legal sentences of two years or less. While the survey did not inquire about offense severity or types, these figures are consistent with the predominance of lower-level offenses.

Nine percent (25) indicated someone in their family or household were currently on trial. Twelve of those 25 people reportedly on trial were at the time of the survey currently incarcerated for varying length of times, ranging from less than a month to 12 years—with 67 percent having been incarcerated for two years or less.

Table 29. Length of Legal Sentence for Self, Immediate Family, or Household Member

	<u>Percent</u>
Less than a month	24%
Less than a year (>1 month, <1 year)	33%
1-2 years	23%
3-4 years	9%
5-6 years	3%
7-8 years	3%
9-10 years	<1%
11+ years	6%
n	199

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

These lower level offenses could be in part attributed to fines and fees related to the court involvement processes that contribute to the criminalization of low-income defendants (Pager, Goldstein, and Western 2022). In short, minor offenses resulting in unpaid fines can lead to new warrants, work barriers, more debt, garnishment of funds and more, disproportionately affecting economically marginalized communities like residents of the south Central Valley.

Quality Community Jobs

Support for Quality Jobs that Invest in Infrastructure and Community. Most (58% to 91%) expressed high support for creating quality jobs to build and repair vital infrastructure and to increase community amenities like parks and recreation areas, grocery stores, and community access to high speed Wi-Fi and electric charging stations. Specifically, respondents expressed the highest support for the government to invest tax dollars to create quality jobs to improve

Table 30. Support for Creating Quality Jobs To Build Infrastructure, Parks, Grocery Stores, and Other Technologies

	<u>Extremely Important</u>	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Important</u>	<u>Somewhat Important</u>	<u>Not at all Important</u>
Road, Transportation, and Sewer Infrastructure					
Road repair	73%	17%	6%	2%	1%
Streetlights	68%	18%	8%	3%	2%
Sidewalks	63%	19%	11%	4%	3%
Public transportation	56%	22%	14%	5%	3%
Sewer systems	56%	20%	13%	7%	5%
Build Parks and Grocery Stores					
Parks and recreation areas	56%	22%	13%	5%	3%
Nearby grocery stores	53%	20%	15%	8%	4%
Other Technologies					
High-speed Wi-Fi/ Internet	44%	23%	19%	7%	7%
Electric charging stations	41%	17%	15%	12%	15%

n= 3,862- 3,892

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

roads (91%), followed by street lights (86%), sidewalks (82%), public transportation (78%) and sewer systems (76%) (See Table 30). Seventy-eight percent said it was “extremely important” or “very important” for the government to invest tax dollars to create quality infrastructure jobs to build parks and recreation areas. Similarly, 73 percent of respondents indicated it was “extremely important” or “very important” for the government to invest tax dollars to create quality jobs to build grocery stores. Finally, 67 percent of respondents said it was “extremely important” or “very important” for the government to invest tax dollars to create quality jobs

to advance high-speed Wi-Fi/ internet and 58 percent of respondents said it was “extremely important” or “very important” for the government to invest tax dollars to create quality jobs to build electric charging stations.

Support for Job Creation by Industry. Half to over three fourths of respondents indicated support for community employment opportunities within nine out of eleven industries, with the highest support for solar power/ energy. Of the eleven most prominent economic and workforce development initiatives introduced to the region, respondents expressed the least support for ag tech. Seventy-eight percent indicated they would like to see community employment opportunities within solar power/ energy (See Table 31). Sixty-eight percent expressed support for community employment opportunities within the technology industry. Sixty-seven percent supported community employment opportunities within the warehouse/ distribution industry, followed by 61 percent support within land and or oilfield clean up, 59 percent within the wind power/ energy industry, 58 percent within the high-speed rail industry, 53 percent within the carbon management industry, and 52 percent within the electrification industry (e.g. installing charging stations). Last, half of respondents supported community job opportunities within the biofuels industry, followed by 49 percent within the hydrogen industry, and 25 percent within the ag tech industry (e.g. replacing human labor with new technologies).

Table 31. Support for Community Employment Opportunities, by Industry

	<u>Percent</u>
Solar power/ energy	78%
Technology	68%
Warehouse/distribution	67%
Land and or oilfield clean up	61%
Wind power/energy	59%
High speed rail	58%
Carbon management	53%
Electrification	52%
Biofuels	50%
Hydrogen	49%
Agtech	24%
n	3,922

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

California Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund and Climate Government Action

Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund Priorities. The Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds are allocated by the state and California State agencies. This is one of the first representative surveys asking residents in disadvantaged communities how they would prefer the funds be invested. Most all respondents (89% to 95%) rated it highly important for the state to invest in clean drinking water, protections from air pollution, climate resilience, job creation, community infrastructure and more parks and recreation spaces through the California Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) (See Table 32). The GGRF generates around \$3 billion in public funding each year through California’s Cap and Trade program to help achieve the climate goals of the state including reducing greenhouse emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving

public health and the environment, especially in marginalized communities. State law (SB 535 and AB1550) directs at least 25 percent of the funds to be invested in projects benefiting and located within disadvantaged communities, where most of the current study was carried out.

Table 32. Support for Investment of Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds, by Areas

	<u>Percent</u>
The following were extremely or very Important to invest in:	
Access to drinking water	95%
Community infrastructure- extreme heat	93%
Protections from air pollution	92%
Job creation	91%
Community infrastructure- flood control	91%
More parks and recreational spaces	89%
n= 3,830-3,852	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

The overwhelming majority (95%) of respondents indicated it was “extremely important” or “very important” to invest in access to clean drinking water. Ninety-three percent found it “extremely important” or “very important” to invest in community infrastructure protections from extreme heat. Ninety-two percent said it was “extremely important” or “very important” to invest in protections from air pollution, followed by job creation (91%), community infrastructure for flood control (91%), and more parks and recreational spaces (89%).

Government Action on Pollution and Excessive Heat. Most respondents expressed concern regarding the environment and raised the importance of the government addressing specific environmental concerns including excessive heat days, pesticide drifts, and various

types of pollution within the next two years. Over half (52%) indicated they were “extremely concerned” or “very concerned” about the environment (See Table 33) .

Table 33. Level of Concern About the Environment

	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cumulative Percent</u>
Extremely concerned	24%	24%
Very concerned	27%	52%
Somewhat concerned	36%	87%
Not at all concerned	13%	-
n	3,918	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Table 34. Importance of the Government to Address Environmental Concerns in the Next Two Years

	<u>Extremely Important</u>	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Important</u>	<u>Somewhat Important</u>	<u>Not at all Important</u>
Excessive heat	60%	23%	12%	3%	2%
Pollution in general	60%	20%	12%	5%	3%
Pesticide drifts	56%	22%	12%	5%	5%
Pollution from wildfire smoke	56%	20%	13%	6%	5%
Pollution from agriculture	58%	19%	13%	5%	4%
n=3,760-3,872					

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

The majority (76% to 83%) wanted timely government action related to the environment. Respondents rated it “extremely important” or “very important” for the government to address environmental issues within the next two years including excessive heat

(83%), pollution in general (80%), pesticide drifts (78%),¹⁴ followed by pollution from agriculture (78%), and pollution from wildfire smoke (76%) (See Table 34).

Limited Knowledge about Most Energy and Carbon Management Industries. Results specify respondents had the most awareness of the benefits and risks related to solar power, with less awareness related to other energy and carbon management industries. The survey indicated policy makers were discussing expanding many new energy and carbon management industries in the Central Valley including solar power, wind power, carbon capture and sequestration, direct air capture, hydrogen energy, biofuels, and dairy digesters. Then the survey asked respondents about whether or not they were informed about the potential benefits and risks for each industry.

Most respondents indicated they were informed about the potential benefits and risks related to the expansion of solar power (62%), followed by a decline in knowledge regarding wind (38%), biofuels (24%), hydrogen energy (22%), carbon capture/ sequestration (21%), dairy digesters (18%), and direct air capture (18%) (See Table 35). This creates opportunities for educating the public on these industries and their potential environmental benefits and risks. This is critical in the sense that most of the proposed carbon management facilities in the state are slated for the southern Central Valley, especially in Kern County. Similar to the earlier findings regarding worker benefits and labor unions, much more investment in outreach by

¹⁴ The survey explained that pesticide drifts occur when pesticide dust or droplets leave the field on which they are applied.

community based organizations is needed in the area of public education regarding the risks and benefits of carbon capture technologies.

Table 35. Informed Regarding Benefits and Risks of Expanding Energy and Carbon Management Industries

	<u>Percent</u>
Respondents felt informed about the potential benefits/ risks for the following:	
Solar power	62%
Wind	38%
Biofuels	24%
Hydrogen energy	22%
Carbon capture/sequestration	21%
Dairy digesters	18%
Direct air capture	18%
n= 3,833- 3,886	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Civic Action

Though lower levels of education and immigration experiences are often associated with less civic participation, study respondents expressed high levels of civic action, voter registration, and recent voting with some barriers. Respondents were willing to engage in collective efforts to improve many of the community issues they raised throughout the survey. The sample size for this section ranges from 50 (i.e. mentions of voting barriers) to 2,965.

Ready to Vote, Despite Barriers

Respondents expressed high levels of and propensity for civic action, indicating they were ready to act to see movement towards their visions of equitable community investment. Respondents' civic action includes positive recent voting patterns, participation in local

organizations, and a keen interest in a range of community involvement activities. Most were registered to vote, most had been involved with a local organization, many had engaged civically within their communities, and the majority expressed a willingness to engage in a future policy change activity.

Voting Registration and Barriers. While the majority of citizens were registered to vote, the biggest barrier to registering was disinterest. Eighty-one percent of respondents who identified as U.S. Citizens were registered to vote. Among citizens not registered to vote, the survey asked an open-ended question to understand their barriers (57 percent shared a barrier). Fifty-six percent of those who shared a barrier said they were not interested (See Table 36). Nine percent said they had a criminal record. Eight percent expressed being uninformed. Seven percent said they either did not have time or their vote did not matter/ they had mistrust in the government. Six percent said they were not eligible for an unstated reason. Two percent or less said a barrier was either their age or work, health issues, transportation or language.

Recent Voting and Barriers. Similarly, while the majority voted recently, some respondents mentioned voting barriers in the past five years including mostly needing some type of assistance. Among U.S. citizens, 56 percent voted in the November 2022 primary elections. Also, among U.S. citizens only, three percent (70 respondents) indicated that in the past five years they had faced any difficulty in trying to vote. Fifty respondents shared an open-ended barrier: 16 percent said they either needed some type of assistance (e.g. finding a poll location, filling out paperwork), or had issues with the mail in ballot (e.g. forgot a signature or ballot did not arrive on time) (See Table 36). Fourteen percent said they were either not in

favor of any candidate or had transportation issues. Twelve percent said they had no time, eight percent mentioned health barriers, and six percent either indicated a criminal record as a difficulty or they said they were uninformed about the candidates. Four percent stated they were either not eligible for an unstated reason or were not registered (though California has a Conditional Voter Registration law allowing for registration on voting day).



Table 36. Barriers to Voter Registration and Voting

	<u>Percent</u>
Voter registration barriers	
Not interested	56%
Criminal record	9%
Uninformed	9%
No time	7%
Not eligible	7%
"Vote doesn't matter"/distrust in government	7%
Age	2%
Work	2%
Health issues	<1%
Transportation	<1%
Language barrier	<1%
n	247
Voting barriers in the past 5 years	
Needs assistance	16%
Issues with mail-in ballot	16%
Not in favor of any candidate	14%
Transportation issues	14%
No time	12%
Health barriers	8%
Criminal record	6%
Uninformed on candidates	6%
Not eligible	4%
Not registered	4%
n	50

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Community Involvement

Local Organizations. Most respondents were community involved, particularly with churches. Among all respondents, 64 percent (2,511) indicated any current or previous affiliation or involvement with at least one local organization. Among these, most indicated involvement or affiliation with a church (68%), followed by sports teams (20%), school volunteer (17 %), school group (15%), a non-profit organization (13%), community-based organization (9%), labor union (9%), recovery or self-help group (3%), neighborhood association (3%), a veteran's group (2%), or another type of organization (<1%) (See Table 37). Respondents could select more than one, thus percentages do not total 100.

Civic Activities. Many respondents had also been involved in civic activities including predominantly attending a community meeting, which is a crucial tactic for community organizing. Fifty-eight percent of respondents had attended a community meeting (See Table 37). Forty-six percent indicated they had volunteered for community service. Twenty-four percent had ever attended either a school board, city council or board of supervisors meeting. Fifteen percent had ever attended a rally or demonstration. Twelve percent had ever met with or called an elected official or state official, and three percent had ever engaged in canvassing or door-to-door knocking to Get Out the Vote. Respondents could select more than one, thus percentages do not total 100.

Table 37. Local Organization Affiliation and Engagement in Civic Activities

	<u>Percent</u>
Local organizations (previous or current affiliation)	
Church	68%
Sports teams	20%
School volunteer	17%
School group	15%
Non-profit organization	11%
Youth clubs	10%
Labor union	9%
Community-based organization	9%
Recovery or self-help group	3%
Neighborhood association	3%
Veterans group	2%
Other	<1%
Total	4,226
n	2,511
Civic activities (ever)	
Attended a community meeting	58%
Volunteered for community service	46%
Attended school board, city council or board of supervisor meeting	24%
Attended a rally or demonstration	15%
Met with or called an elected official or state official	12%
Canvassed/door-to-door knocking to Get Out the Vote	3%
Total	2,889
n	1,832

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Future Civic Action

The prospects of future civic action among respondents were strong. Nearly 3,000 respondents said they would be willing to participate in at least one civic action activity to make

local policy changes related to a community issue and 97 percent said they would be willing to attend a community meeting to improve a policy issue (See Appendix C). Thirty one percent said they would be willing to engage in one activity, 16 percent would engage in two activities, and 17 percent would engage in three activities.

Policy Change Activities. Most were open to engaging in a policy change activity, with many citing more than one potential activity that added up to a total of 9,019 policy change activities among all respondents. Seventy-six percent of respondents were willing to engage in at least one activity (See Table 38). Fifty-nine percent indicated they would be willing to attend a neighborhood meeting (See Appendix C for the list of concerns respondents would be willing to attend a community meeting for including the top three policy issues: low-wages, crime/security, and water quality). Forty-eight percent would display a yard sign, 41 percent would either attend a training or would invite a friend or family member to a neighborhood meeting. Thirty-one percent would share information with neighbors about policies affecting their community, 27 percent would attend a virtual neighborhood meeting online, 22 percent would host a neighborhood meeting. Twenty percent would meet with a local elected official about changing local policies. And 16 percent of respondents would be willing to participate in a voter registration campaign. These policy change activities have the potential to rapidly expand the participation of other community members.

Table 38. Policy Change Activities Respondents Would Engage In

	<u>Percent</u>
Attend a neighborhood meeting	59%
Display a yard sign	48%
Attend a training	41%
Invite a friend or family member to a neighborhood meeting	41%
Share information with neighbors about policies affecting your community	31%
Attend a virtual neighborhood meeting online	27%
Host a neighborhood meeting	22%
Meet with a local elected official about changing local policies	20%
Participate in voter registration campaign	16%
Other activity	<1%
Total	9,019
n	2,965

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Findings from the south Central Valley Community Needs Assessment provide a call to action within a region that has high desires to civically engage. The report highlights labor challenges in the region, including the low earnings of workers, their limited rights and economic safety net, as well as their experiences of workplace non-compliance, accelerating environmental hazards, and work interruptions. It notes the economic burdens of utility costs, rent, and food. The report points to the hardships of families in the region, including access to healthcare, clean water, and safe streets, sidewalks, and parks. These findings should be used to inform the work of local governments, community-based organizations, and efforts focused on increasing workers' rights and the health and well-being of families in rural California and beyond. To this end, results by county may be found by scanning the QR code at the end of this report. Given the wide span and scope of the survey, insights should inform policies and practices related to labor, health, the environment, drinking water, infrastructure, education, and more. The following are selected policy implications that arise from the study findings.

1. Make Policy Decisions to Create Healthier Communities

The health of south Central Valley residents is directly tied to improving air quality and drinking water, protecting and increasing access to health and dental care, and prioritizing the health and safety of workers. Results indicate widespread support for investing in climate resiliency, establishing more green community spaces, and spending public funds on clean drinking water through the California Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. Concerning healthcare, state legislators must protect Medi-Cal expansions that provide coverage to undocumented

immigrants and invest in outreach to educate communities about their eligibility. Recruiting and retaining medical and dental providers in the region along with lowering out of pocket costs for patients is crucial. In California, dental access can be expanded through the authorization of dental therapists to provide routine dental exams and procedures under the supervision of a dentist. Further, the state should allocate public resources to raise and oversee the adherence to industry work standards related to the health and safety of workers (e.g. heat safety), particularly farmworkers who face among the most hazardous work conditions with the lowest healthcare utilization rates. Specifically, the state could invest in improving worker non-compliance reporting, labor standards enforcement, remedying the investigations backlog, and instilling better measures and penalties to guard against employer retaliation.

2. Promote Workers' Economic Security

Economic security, including living wages, expansive workers' rights, and an economic safety net for all, would increase the stability of families and allow community members to better meet their current and long-term needs. Many south Central Valley workers, despite working full-time, earned low wages (annual median earnings were \$30,000) and experienced job instability with little retirement preparedness. Annually, workers spent a median of three months unemployed, often they were required to buy their work equipment, and many farmworkers had no plan to ever stop working, indicating retirement insecurity. Essential frontline workers—of all genders—deserve a living wage that allows their households to pay for necessary expenses without the need for assistance programs that this study finds were out of reach during the COVID-19 pandemic for most respondents.

The state should prioritize employers who pay living wages, exercise transparency with workers, and meet and exceed health and safety standards (e.g. high road employers) when awarding contracts and grants. The state could also create a retirement program for seniors excluded from Social Security and design and maintain an unemployment benefits system for undocumented workers, which received widespread support from study respondents. To work towards increasing workers' rights, the state should invest public resources to reduce barriers to worker unionization, collective bargaining, and worker organizing—and spread awareness about AB2183, which allows farmworkers to vote for a union by representation card. To address the state budget deficit, the state should seriously consider a 1% tax on Californians with more than \$50 million in assets and avoid any cuts to programs that low-income community members rely upon—as widely supported by study respondents.

3. Build Infrastructure and Good Jobs

Infrastructure and climate resiliency investments must be tied to creating good jobs while prioritizing workers in socially and economically disadvantaged communities. Investments in roads, and in weather and pollution shielding infrastructure projects were top priorities among study respondents, which simultaneously should create high-quality employment opportunities in the region. Nearly one in three households with workers experienced an employment interruption due to extreme heat, flooding, drought, or wildfire in the past year. The majority of respondents rated it extremely or very important for tax dollars to go towards creating quality jobs to build infrastructure including road and sidewalk repairs, parks and recreation areas, and public transportation. Most respondents believed it was extremely or

very important for the state to invest funds to build protections from air pollution, and community infrastructure for extreme heat and flood control to increase climate resiliency. Within these future projects to build protections from air pollution, extreme heat, and flood control, the state should invest in workforce training and development and high road economic development programs recruiting workers from disadvantaged communities (e.g. the south Central Valley). High road employers and programs prioritize quality jobs with higher wages, safe working conditions and benefits, environmental sustainability, and worker-focused trainings.

4. Support Workforce Participation

Consistent workforce participation requires having access to essential needs including food, affordable childcare, housing and utilities as well as opportunities for increased education. Half of workers in the study faced unaffordable daycare costs, and the majority of working renters were housing cost burdened given that their estimated household earnings did not keep pace with their expenses. The large majority of respondents indicated it was extremely or very important for the government to address the affordability of housing, utilities, and food in the next two years. Almost one third of respondents indicated schools in their community did not receive adequate funding from the state, and many shared the obstacles youth in their households faced when pursuing higher education, including high costs and transportation. Reducing barriers to higher education, fully funding childcare subsidy programs, and establishing a living wage for childcare workers with necessary benefits would prioritize families in the region and beyond. Further, ensuring that elderly and disability care

workers in California are paid a living wage is essential to reducing the shortage of providers and prioritizing the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors and families.

This study and its policy implications highlight the interconnections of labor, the environment, and health. Policy change and implementation require government action in partnership with community-based organizations closest to directly impacted communities. These communities, largely low-earning immigrant working families, are experiencing increasing threats of family separation, necessitating interventions that bolster the rights of all workers and communities at large. Only then will policy and public investments truly be aligned with the needs of families across the region

References

- Airgood-Obrycki, Whitney, Alexander Hermann, and Sophia Wedeen. 2022. “‘The Rent Eats First:’ Rental Housing Unaffordability in the United States.” *Housing Policy Debate*, 33(6), 1272–1292.
- Almeida, Paul, Venise Curry, Edward Flores, and Ana Padilla. 2021. “Fresno Speaks 2020: Covid-19, Public Safety, and Civic Engagement in Fresno. Final Report to the Fresno County Civic Engagement Table.” Merced, CA: *UC Merced Community and Labor Center*.
- American Lung Association. 2024. “State of the Air.” Accessed June 12, 2025 from: <https://www.lung.org/getmedia/dabac59e-963b-4e9b-bf0f-73615b07bfd8/State-of-the-Air-2024.pdf>
- Vote California. n.d. “Voting Rights: Persons with a Prior Felony Conviction.” Shirley N. Weber, Secretary of State. Accessed May 7, 2025 from: <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/pdfs/voting-rights-persons-with-prior-felony-flyer.pdf>
- Center for Disaster Philanthropy (CDP). 2023. “California Storms.” Accessed June 14, 2025 from: <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/california-storms/>
- California Labor Code §6401. “Chapter 3. Responsibilities and Duties of Employers and Employees [6400 - 6413.5]” Accessed April 3, 2025 from: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB§ionNum=6401
- California Oral Health Equity Coalition. 2025. “Dental Therapists Advance Oral Health for All Californians.” Accessed August 25, 2025 from: [COHEC.org](https://cohec.org)
- Coffman, Janet and Margaret Fix. 2025. “California Physicians: 2025 Edition.” *California Healthcare Foundation*. Accessed April 21, 2025 from: <https://www.chcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/PhysiciansAlmanac2025.pdf>
- Centers for Disease Control. 2023. “Distribution of Covid-19 Deaths by Race Category, County and State.” Accessed April 25, 2025 from “https://data.cdc.gov/National-Center-for-Health-Statistics/Provisional-Covid-19-Deaths-by-County-and-Race-and/k8wy-p9cg/about_data

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2023. "Provisional Covid-19 Deaths by County and Race and Hispanic Origin." *National Center for Health Statistics*. Accessed May 2, 2025 from: https://data.cdc.gov/National-Center-for-Health-Statistics/Provisional-Covid-19-Deaths-by-County-and-Race-and/k8wy-p9cg/about_data
- Cha, Amy E. and Robin A. Cohen. 2021. "Urban-Rural Differences in Dental Care Use Among Adults Aged 18–64." NCHS Data Brief, No. 412. Hyattsville, MD: *National Center for Health Statistics*. Accessed April 7, 2025 from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db412.htm>
- Cole, Luke W., and Sheila R. Foster. 2001. *From the Ground up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Colon-Bermudez, Dan Emmanuel, Raquel Harati, and Katie Renzi. 2025. "Out of Reach: The High Cost of Housing." *National Low Income Housing Coalition*.
- Cossyleon, Jennifer E. "Injured Workers' Access to Medical Provider Network (MPN) Physicians in the San Joaquin Valley." Merced, CA: *UC Merced Community and Labor Center*, December.
- Department of Labor. 2022. "The Price of Childcare by County." Women's Bureau. Accessed January 5, 2025 from: <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/women.s.bureau.department.of.labor/viz/CountyFactsheets/Childcareinthecounties> and "National Database of Childcare Prices." Accessed June 12, 2025 from: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/topics/featured-childcare>
- Desmond, Mathew and Carl Gershenson. 2016. "Housing and Employment Instability Among the Working Poor." *Social Problems*, 63(1), 46-67.
- Ding, Hongliu and Lee Hargraves 2009. "Stress-Associated Poor Health Among Adult Immigrants with a Language Barrier in the United States." *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 11(6): 446-52.
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). 2025. "San Joaquin Valley." Accessed September 2, 2025 from: <https://www.epa.gov/sanjoaquinvalley>
- Farmworker Health Study. 2023. "Farmworker Health In California: Health in a Time of Contagion, Drought, and Climate Change." Merced, CA: *UC Merced Community and Labor Center*.

- Federal Register. 2024. "Improving Child Care Access, Affordability, and Stability in the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)." Accessed April 22, 2025 from: <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2024-04139/p-63>
- Flores, Edward. 2022. "The Future of the State: Kern County's Young, Growing, Diverse Population and Dynamic Economy." Merced, CA: *UC Merced Community and Labor Center*, May. Accessed May 29, 2025 from: https://clc.ucmerced.edu/sites/clc.ucmerced.edu/files/page/documents/future_of_the_state.pdf
- Fresno County. 2023. "Covid-19 Confirmed Covid-19 Associated Deaths, June 2, 2023." Accessed April 25, 2025 from: <https://www.fresnocountyca.gov/files/sharedassets/county/v/3/public-health/covid19/covid-19-data/mortality-reports/2023/06-02-2023-covid-19-mortality-report.pdf>
- Gottlieb, Aaron. 2021. "Making Gideon Count? Public Defender Resources and Felony Case Outcomes for Black, White, and Latinx Individuals." *Race and Justice*, 13(4), 506-529.
- Graetz, Nick., Carl Gershenson, Sonya Porter, Danielle Sandler, Emily Lemmerman and Mathew Desmond. 2024. "The Impacts of Rent Burden and Eviction on Mortality in the United States, 2000-2019." *Social Science & Medicine (1982)*, 340, 116398.
- Harati, Raquel, Dan Emmanuel, Katie Renzi and Andrew Aurand. 2025. "The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes." *National Low Income Housing Coalition*, March.
- Housing and Urban Development (HUD). 2025. "Definitions." Accessed April 22, 2025 from: https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/cp/CHAS/bg_chas.html#:~:text=Cost%20burden%20%E2%80%93%20Monthly%20housing%20costs,exceeding%2030%25%20of%20monthly%20income.
- Huang, Yilan and Honghu Liu. 2025. "Estimating County-Level Dental Care Utilization Among Adults In California Using Multilevel Modeling with Raking Approach. 2025. *Archives of Public Health* 83, 183.
- Kelekar Uma and Shillpa Naavaal. 2018. "Hours Lost to Planned and Unplanned Dental Visits Among U.S. Adults." *Preventing Chronic Disease: Public Health Research, Practice and Policy*, 15 (4): 1-7.

LA Times. 2024. "As California Swelters, Climate Officials Declare Summer 2024 the Hottest on Record." Hayley Smith, September 6 Accessed June 14, 2025 from: <https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2024-09-06/summer-2024-was-earths-hottest-on-record>

Leigh, Paul J. and Bozhidar Chakalov. 2021. "Labor Unions and Health: A Literature Review of Pathways and Outcomes in the Workplace." *Preventative Medicine Reports*, 24:101502, December.

Luo Huabin, Qiang Wu, Ronny A. Bell, Wanda Wrigh, Sara A. Quandt, Rashmita Basu, Mark E. Moss. 2021. "Rural-Urban Differences in Dental Service Utilization and Dental Service Procedures Received Among US Adults: Results from the 2016 Medical Expenditure Panel Survey." *Journal of Rural Health*, 37(3):655–66.

Mayol-Garcia, Yeris and Benjamin Gurrentz. 2021. "Foreign-Born People Are Older When They First Marry, Less Likely to Remarry Than Native-Born." *U.S. Census Bureau*, May 3.

McLean, Caitlin, Lea J. E. Austin, Marcy Whitebook, and Krista L. Olson. 2024. "Early Childhood Workforce Index 2024. *Center for the Study of Childcare Development*. Accessed May 28, 2025 from: <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2025/05/Early-Childhood-Workforce-Index-2024.pdf>

McLeary, Roseanna, Mayra Lourdes Gonzalez, and Camila Chávez. 2009. "Community Needs Assessment: Arvin, Lamont, and Weedpatch, CA." *The Dolores Huerta Foundation*, September.

Mishel, Lawrence. 2012. "Unions, Inequality, and Faltering Middle-Class Wages." *Economic Policy Institute*, August 29 . Accessed April 21, 2025 from: <https://www.epi.org/publication/ib342-unions-inequality-faltering-middle-class/>

Mora, Maria De Jesus. 2022. "Sustained Mobilization for Immigrant Rights: A Comparative Case Study of the San Joaquin Valley." *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change* 46:109-137.

Munos, Silvia and Caitlin McClean. 2025. "Immigration Policies Harm the Early Childhood Workforce and the Communities they Serve." *The Center for Law and Social Policy*, April 22.

Naavaal, Shillpa and Uma Kelekar. 2018. "School Hours Lost Due to Acute/Unplanned Dental Care." *Health Behavior Policy Review*, 5(2):66-7.

- National Center for Health Statistics. 2019. "Table DentCh. Dental Visits in the Past Year among Children Aged 2–17 Years, by Selected Characteristics: United States, Selected Years 1997–2019" and "Figure 1. Dental Visits in the Past Year among Children aged 2-17 years, by Percentage of Federal Poverty level: United States, 2009-2019." Accessed April 7, 2025 from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/hus/topics/dental-visits.htm>
- National Center for Health Statistics. 2024. "Percentage of Doctor Visit in the Past 12 Months for Adults Aged 18 and Over, United States, 2019, Jan-Jun—2024, Jan-Jun." *National Health Interview Survey*. Accessed April 7, 2025 from: https://wwwn.cdc.gov/NHISDataQueryTool/ER_Biannual/index_biannual.html
- National Center for Health Statistics. 2024b. "Percentage of Having a Doctor Visit for Any Reason in the Past 12 Months for Children Under Age 18 Years, United States, 2019—2023." *National Health Interview Survey*. Accessed April 7, 2025 from: https://wwwn.cdc.gov/NHISDataQueryTool/SHS_child/index.html
- National Center for Health Statistics. 2024c. "Percentage of Dental Exam or Cleaning in The Past 12 Months For Adults Aged 18 And Over, United States, 2019, Jan-Jun—2024, Jan-Jun." *National Health Interview Survey*. Accessed April 7, 2025 from: https://wwwn.cdc.gov/NHISDataQueryTool/SHS_adult/index.html
- National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC). 2023. "Public Charge: What Advocates Need to Know." *Protecting Immigrant Families Coalition*, December. Accessed April 16 from: <https://pifcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/What-Advocates-Need-To-Know-December-2023.pdf>
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) 2024. "2024 Was the World's Warmest Year on Record." January 10. Accessed June 14, 2025 from: <https://www.noaa.gov/news/2024-was-worlds-warmest-year-on-record>
- Newman, Sandra J. and Scott Holupka, C. 2014. "Housing Affordability and Investments in Children." *Journal of Housing Economics*, 24 (June), 89-100.
- Reed, Katrina, Steven Hanna, Sunhye Bai and Jennifer P. Agans. 2022. "Outdoor Recreation as an Asset for Youth Development in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 14 (1).
- Reynolds, Aurthur J, Suh-Ruu Ou, and Judy A. Temple. 2018. "A Multicomponent, Preschool to Third Grade Preventive Intervention and Educational Attainment at 35 Years of Age." *JAMA Pediatrics*, 172(3):247-256.

- Rosales, Oliver. 2024. *Civil Rights in Bakersfield: Segregation and Multiracial Activism in the Central Valley*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Sandel, Megan, John Cook, Ana Poblacion, Richard Sheward, Sharon Coleman, Janet Viveiros and Lisa Sturtevant. 2016. "Housing as a Healthcare Investment: Affordable Housing Supports Children's Health." Washington, DC: *National Housing Conference & Children's Health Watch*. Accessed April 22, 2025 from: <https://www.opportunityhome.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Housing-as-a-Health-Care-Investment.pdf>
- Shaw, Randy. 2008. *Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chávez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Thomeer, Mieke Beth, Myles D Moody, and Jenjira Yahirun. 2023. "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Mental Health and Mental Health Care During The Covid-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, 10: 961–976.
- United Farm Workers (UFW) n.d. "UFW Chronology." Accessed July 23, 2025 from: <https://ufw.org/research/history/ufw-chronology/>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), U.S. Department of Labor. 2025. "Median Weekly Earnings, Full Time Wage and Salary Workers, California. BLS Data Viewer. Accessed June 12, 2025 from: <https://data.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LEU0252881506>
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). 2025. "San Joaquin Valley." Accessed March 10, 2025 from: <https://www.epa.gov/sanjoaquinvalley>
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2023. "Persistent Poverty in Counties and Census Tracts." May 09. Accessed April 21, 2025 from: <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/persistent-poverty.html>
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2023. "California, Median House Household Income 2019-2023." U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts. Accessed June 12, 2025 from: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CA/INC110223>
- State of California. 2024. E-6. "Population Estimates and Components of Change by County — July 1, 2020–2024." Department of Finance. Sacramento, California, December 2024. Accessed April 21, 2025. <https://dof.ca.gov/forecasting/demographics/estimates/e-6/>

- U.S. Census Bureau. 2024b. "Nearly Half of Renter Households Are Cost-Burdened, Proportions Differ by Race." Press Release number CB24-150, September 12. Accessed on April 22, 2025 from: <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024/renter-households-cost-burdened-race.html>
- Verdery, Ashton M, Emily Smith-Greenaway, Rachel Margolis, and Jonathan Daw. 2020. "Tracking the Reach of Covid-19 Kin Loss with A Bereavement Multiplier Applied to the United States." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America* (PNAS) 117 (30) 17695-17701. Accessed March 5 2025 from: <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2007476117>
- Weber, Devra. 1996. *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Westerling, Leroy, Josue Medellin-Azuara, Joshua Viers. 2018. "San Joaquin Valley Summary Report. California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment." *University of California, Merced*. Accessed March 10, 2025 from: https://www.energy.ca.gov/sites/default/files/2019-11/Reg_Report-SUM-CCCA4-2018-003_SanJoaquinValley_Preview_ADA.pdf
- Valdez, Zulema, Susana A. Ramírez, Erendira Estrada, Kathleen Grassi, and Stephanie Nathan. 2016. "Community Perspectives on Access to and Availability of Healthy Food in Rural, Low-Resource, Latino Communities." *Preventing Chronic Disease: Public Health Research, Practice, and Policy*, 13: 160250.

Appendix

Appendix A. Random Selection Methodology

The study was approved by an Institutional Review Board in June of 2023 and data collection began in August of 2023 until May 2024. The study used random sample selection. The sample was generated from the population of residential street addresses from the 2020 U.S. Census in twenty communities in the counties of Fresno, Kern, Kings, and Tulare. Only one person per household was eligible to participate in the survey among the randomly selected households. We required survey participants to be 18 years old to participate.

Researchers collaborated with the Dolores Huerta Foundation (DHF) to create the survey instrument and prepare for data collection. DHF staff participated in trainings led by the UC Merced Community and Labor Center and Principal Investigator Paul Almeida. These trainings incorporated necessary research components of screening, recruitment, consent, and data collection. The trainings also helped to finalize the survey instrument before launching the study.

Appendix B. Recruitment and Response Rate

The Dolores Huerta Foundation took the lead on administering the survey through house-to-house door-knocking recruitment. Participants could select to take the survey in English or Spanish and the survey took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. Most respondents (55%) took the survey in Spanish and 45 percent took the survey in English. During the consent process, survey canvassers ensured their participation was voluntary, they offered an opportunity for the participant to ask any questions, and they advised respondents they could skip any question. Participants received a \$40 gift card upon completion.

While administering the survey, DHF team members used tablets to input data into Qualtrics. They also kept track of the number of people they reached at their doors who declined to take the survey. The response rate was 45 percent, reaching a total of 8,761 people and administering 3,922 surveys.

Appendix C. Respondents Willing to Attend An Issue Based Community Meeting, by Issue

	<u>Percent</u>
Low wages	53%
Crime/security	52%
Water quality	51%
Quality of public schools	47%
Air pollution	47%
Immigration reform	46%
Housing/rental costs	45%
More parks and recreational spaces	40%
Cost of utility/energy bills	39%
Protection from extreme heat days	39%
Protection from flooding	37%
More entertainment opportunities	36%
Access to healthcare/medical attention	36%
Police accountability	33%
Infrastructure improvement	32%
Pesticide risks	32%
Climate adaptation	28%
LGBTQIA+ equality	16%
"Not interested" or "would not attend for any issue"	3%
Other	<1%
Total	22,692
n	3,203

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Appendix D. “What is the Most Important Issue Facing Your Community?”

	<u>Percent</u>
Infrastructure	27%
Neighborhood safety	21%
Street sanitation and vandalism	9%
Housing	9%
Speed control/traffic	7%
Cost of living	5%
Water	4%
Employment	4%
Need animal control	3%
Lack of recreational activities for families and youth	3%
Education	3%
Pollution	2%
Lack of public services	<1%
Health access	<1%
Police accountability	<1%
Other	<1%
Transportation	<1%
Food	<1%
Mental health/ rehab support	<1%
Community action	<1%
Funding	<1%
City management	<1%
Total	6,541
n	3,693

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Appendix E. Infrastructure and Neighborhood Safety Community Issues

“What is the Most Important Issue Facing Your Community?”

	<u>Percent</u>
Infrastructure Alone:	
Road repairs	45%
Streetlights	32%
Sidewalk repair	10%
Lack of sidewalks	7%
Flood issues	6%
Parking	<1%
Total	1,769
n	1,256
Neighborhood Safety Alone:	
Lack of safety	26%
High crime	16%
Violence	13%
Gangs	12%
Need police patrolling	11%
Drugs	9%
Theft	6%
Gun violence/ shootings	4%
Neighborhood watch	3%
Total	1,376
n	1,151

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Appendix F. Other Issues Not Covered in Survey That are Important for Respondents, by Issue

	<u>Percent</u>
Neighborhood safety	24%
Infrastructure maintenance	15%
Street sanitation and vandalism	12%
School improvements	10%
Recreational activities for youth	9%
Cost of living and housing	8%
People experiencing homelessness	8%
Quality jobs and wage increases	4%
Animal control services needed	4%
Healthcare access	3%
Police accountability	3%
Other	3%
Public services for low-income families	3%
Access to clean water	3%
Immigration reform	2%
Assistance for senior citizens	2%
Government accountability	2%
Air pollution	2%
Community engagement needed	2%
More businesses needed	1%
Taxes	<1%
Access to food	<1%
Total	1,011
n	838

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the South Central Valley Community Needs Assessment 2023-2024.

Scan this QR code to view the full report, including Appendix G
with findings by county.



