



TOWARDS A JUST AND EQUITABLE CENTRAL COAST



University of California Santa Barbara
BLUMCENTER
ON POVERTY, INEQUALITY, AND DEMOCRACY

USC
Dornsife
*Equity Research
Institute*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FOREWORD

Marcos Vargas, Executive Director of The Fund for Santa Barbara

Reimagining long-standing institutions and policies is one of the greatest challenges of our time. In our fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, systemic racism, and the destructive impacts of climate change, we recognize that the road to recovery cannot lead us back to the old normal. The time for transformative change is now.

We, on the California Central Coast, have certainly not been spared from the devastating impact of these calamities and must heed the call to take action. We have experienced our share of climate disasters, the legacy of racism, and the devastating human impact of the pandemic. While the region's prosperous economy, based in large part on thriving tourism, agriculture, and growing technology sectors, has benefited many of our residents, many more have been left behind—struggling without a living-wage job, affordable housing, or basic health care.

The Central Coast of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties has a long history of fostering grassroots movements for social, economic, racial, and environmental justice, and The Fund for Santa Barbara (The FUND) has supported many of these efforts through grant funding, capacity-building assistance, and as a trusted table for convenings and coalition building. Therefore, it was a natural expansion of our work to partner with two distinguished research centers, the UCSB Blum Center on Poverty, Inequality, and Democracy and the USC Equity Research Institute, to create an ongoing regional equity research initiative to support much needed policy advocacy and community organizing in the region.

Truly reflecting a broad regional and community-wide effort, this project could not have been carried out without a visionary Project Steering Committee of academic and community leaders, our Community Advisory



"The time for
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FOREWORD

Committee made up of representatives of 21 university, community, and philanthropic institutions from throughout the two-county region, and over 130 additional community members who participated in a series of 16 community consultations. We have been fortunate as well to be working in alignment with the UCSB Division of Social Sciences, with its commitment to fostering community-engaged, regionally relevant research. We also wish to thank the foundations and institutional supporters that provided generous funding for the effort. We extend our deep appreciation to all.

Guided by a transformative vision rooted in equity, sustainability, and justice, together we offer this initiative's first report, *Towards a Just and Equitable Central Coast*, with the hope that it serves as a starting point for discussion about the region's racial, economic, environmental, and political inequities. By providing data-driven analysis of the crises of inequity facing the counties of Ventura and Santa Barbara, we hope to help advance a shared regional vision that recognizes the unique struggles and aspirations of the Central Coast's peoples and communities. Moreover, we hope that the data provided in this report will serve as a benchmark to track progress over time towards a more just and equitable future.

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"¡Sí se puede!"

Yes, we can!"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Towards a Just and Equitable Central Coast

We are living in a time of unparalleled challenge on the Central Coast and throughout the world, as we grapple with the still unfolding consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, structurally embedded patterns and practices of systemic racism, and the immediately clear and present dangers of human-induced climate change. It is also a time to reassess and reorder our priorities in light of the long-standing inequities this confluence of challenges has brought so starkly into view. *Towards a Just and Equitable Central Coast* marks a critical first step toward initiating and framing that conversation, with research and analysis of equity indicators related to the social, economic, civic, and environmental well-being of our rapidly diversifying region, here represented by Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties.

The two-county region faces a multidimensional crisis of inequality that manifests

in wages and employment, housing, criminal justice, education, environmental exposures, and access to healthcare. This crisis weighs most heavily on working-class communities of color. The depth and extent of these inequities were brought to the surface by the devastating, racially disparate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, but they are rooted in structural trends, policies, and practices that have been shaping regional fortunes for decades.

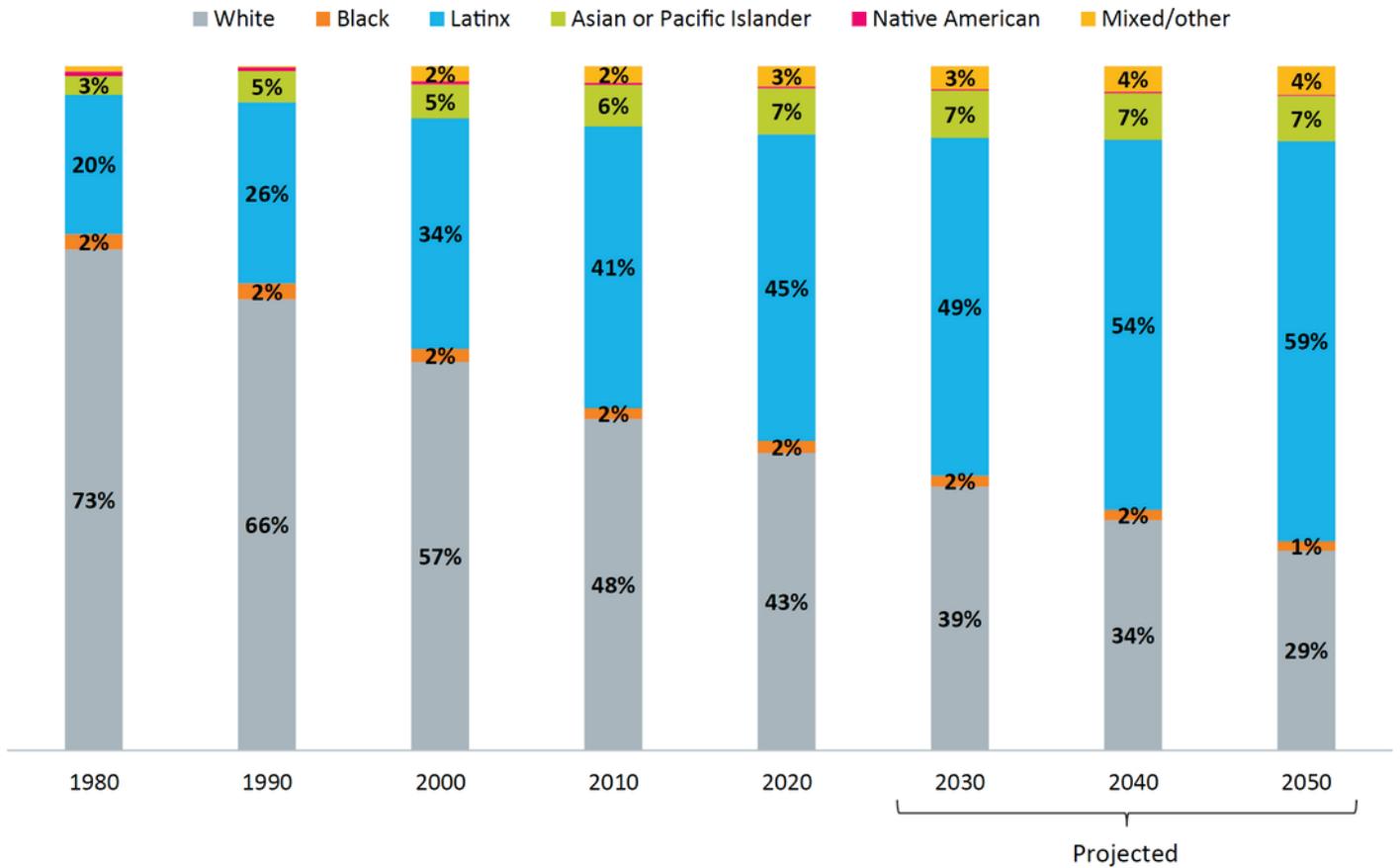
The inequality in the region's economy has taken shape amidst major transformations in its racial and ethnic demography. These intersecting developments are reflected in a labor market that is increasingly bifurcated along the lines of class, race, and immigration status. They are also reflected in the region's diverse but highly stratified residential patterns, which range from principally Latinx, indigenous migrant, and immigrant farmworker settlements to majority-white affluent enclaves



"The two county region
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and feature some of the most highly segregated metropolitan areas in the country. While Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties became majority BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) between 2000 and 2010 (Figure 1), increasing demographic diversity has not resulted in an equitable distribution of the region’s prosperity.

Figure 1: Population by race/ethnicity, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, 1980 to 2050



Key to sustaining regional inequities are employment practices that systematically undervalue the skills and contributions of the workers who drive the agricultural, service, and tourism industries which provide the foundation of the local economy. These practices have put the Central Coast at the leading edge of inequality trends that have gripped the nation for decades. Between 1979 and 2018, the highest-income earners in the region saw their real incomes grow by over 20 percent while the lowest earners in the region saw their incomes shrink by nearly 20 percent (Figure 2). This widening divide in wage-earning is bigger within the region than in the rest of the United States.

These widening disparities in wages and earnings have also been structured by race and gender, making BIPOC populations disproportionately vulnerable to economic hardship (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Real earned income growth for full time wage and salary workers, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, 1979 to 2018

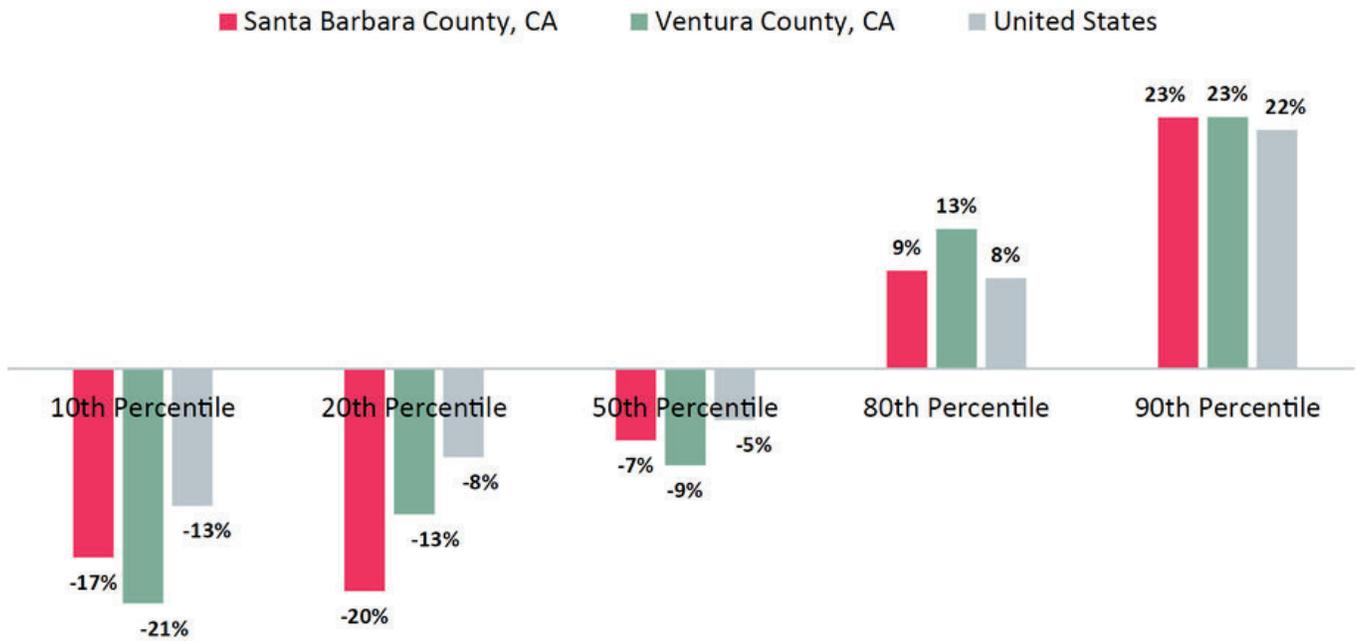
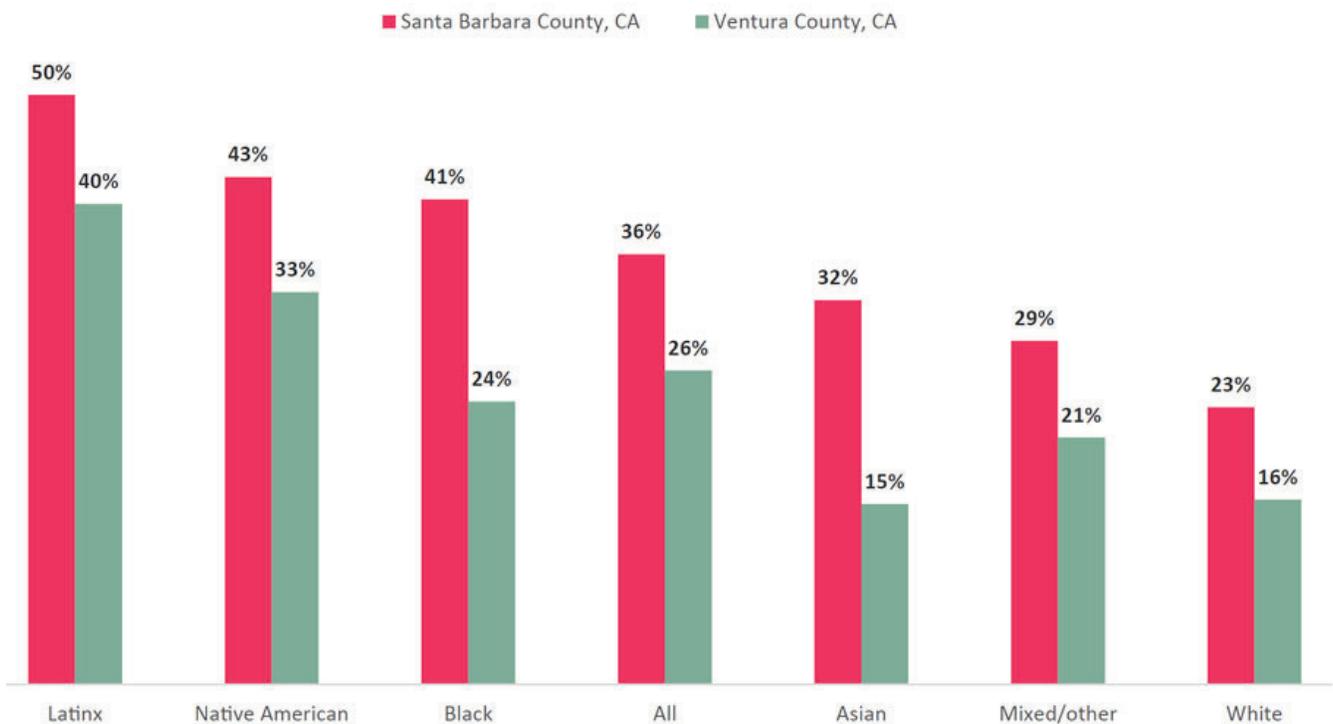
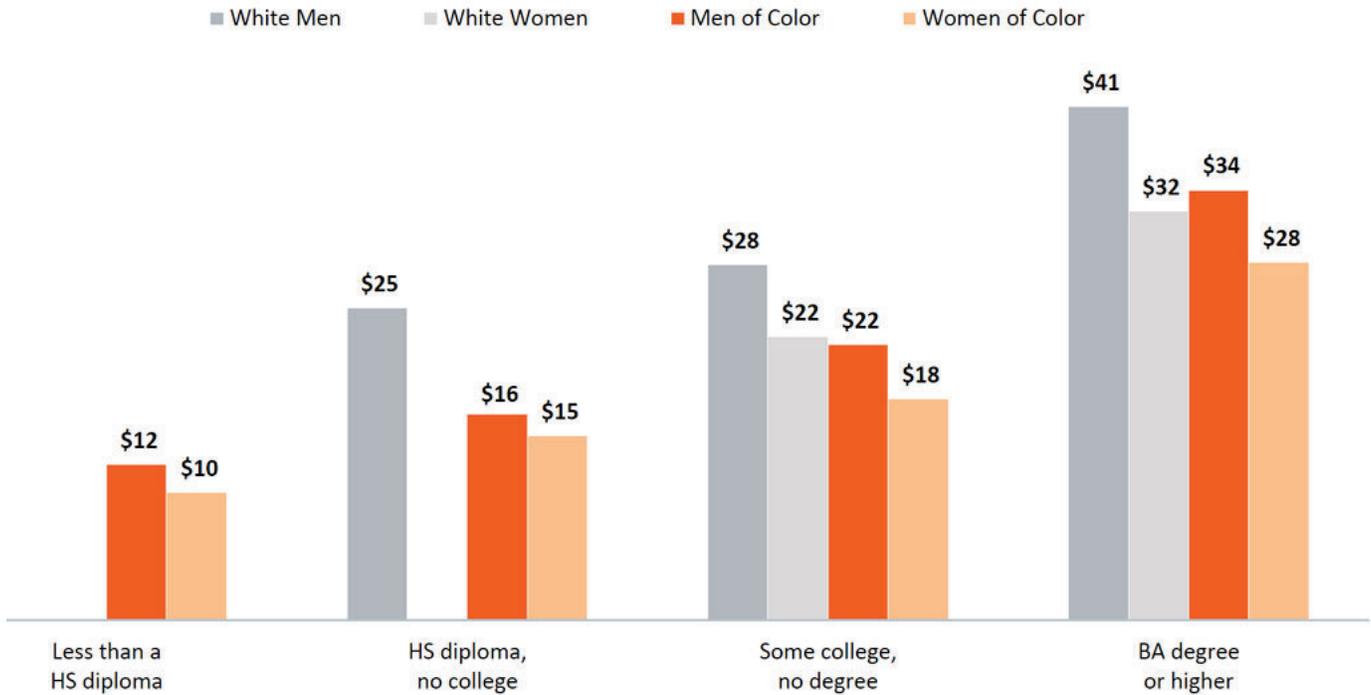


Figure 3: Economic hardship (below 200% Federal Poverty Level) by race, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, 2018



Communities of color also face systemic barriers to education. While closing the gap in educational attainment is vital, it is important to note that racial and gender inequality persist across levels of educational attainment (Figure 4). This strongly suggests that improved educational opportunity is an important, but by no means sufficient, response to rising income inequality.

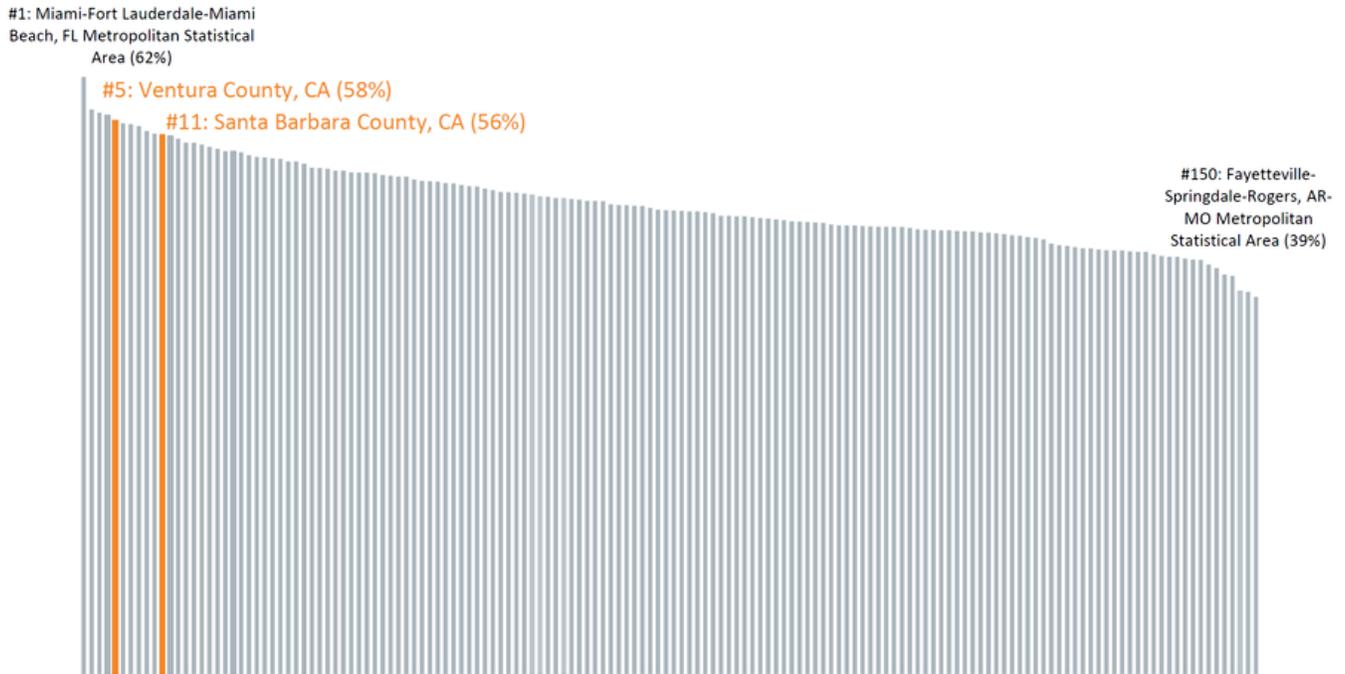
Figure 4: Median wage by educational attainment, race, and gender, Ventura County, 2018



A key driver of economic inequality in the region is the cost of housing. Housing costs have reached unsustainable levels as home prices and rental rates skyrocket to levels only the wealthy can afford. Data on rent-burdened households (those spending 30 percent or more of their income on rent) show that the region ranks as one of the most unaffordable places in the nation. Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties ranked 5th and 11th, respectively, among the largest 150 metro areas for their share of rent-burdened households (Figure 5). Low-wage workers, women, and people of color have paid an exceptionally high price, bearing the brunt of extreme rent burdens, overcrowding, and longer and longer commutes alongside constant threats of eviction.

Structural inequities have been compounded by a pattern of systemic racial injustice that denies people of color equal access to the rights, opportunities, and protections everyone needs to thrive. These injustices—and their consequences—have been manifest in a system of public safety that has done more to criminalize than to protect communities of color and in environmental practices that leave communities of color acutely and disproportionately vulnerable to the harms of pollution and climate change.

Figure 5: Top 150 metro areas ranked by rent burden, 2018



THE COST OF INEQUALITY

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the fundamental injustice of inequality in the region. From early on, it became apparent that its heaviest burdens would be borne by households already experiencing social and economic disadvantages—frontline or “essential” workers without the option to stay at home, shelter-in-place, and remain employed; undocumented workers and mixed status households ineligible for unemployment assistance; and people experiencing overcrowded or otherwise insecure housing conditions. Overwhelmingly, these conditions in employment (Figure 6) and housing (Figure 7) are experienced by people of color in our region. Cumulative data on COVID-19 cases by county show that communities of color have been most impacted (Figure 8).

The same BIPOC communities that have been disproportionately affected by COVID and the housing crisis also face significant obstacles to obtaining important services. The experience of pandemic made Central Coast residents acutely aware of the dimensions and growing significance of the “digital divide”—defined as the gap between those with full access to digital technology and those without— as schools, health care and service providers, businesses, and civic organizations turned to the internet to sustain essential activities. Data on the digital divide from 2018 show that Latinx and Black communities were the least digitally connected even before the pandemic began (Figure 9).

Figure 6: Frontline occupations by race, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, 2018

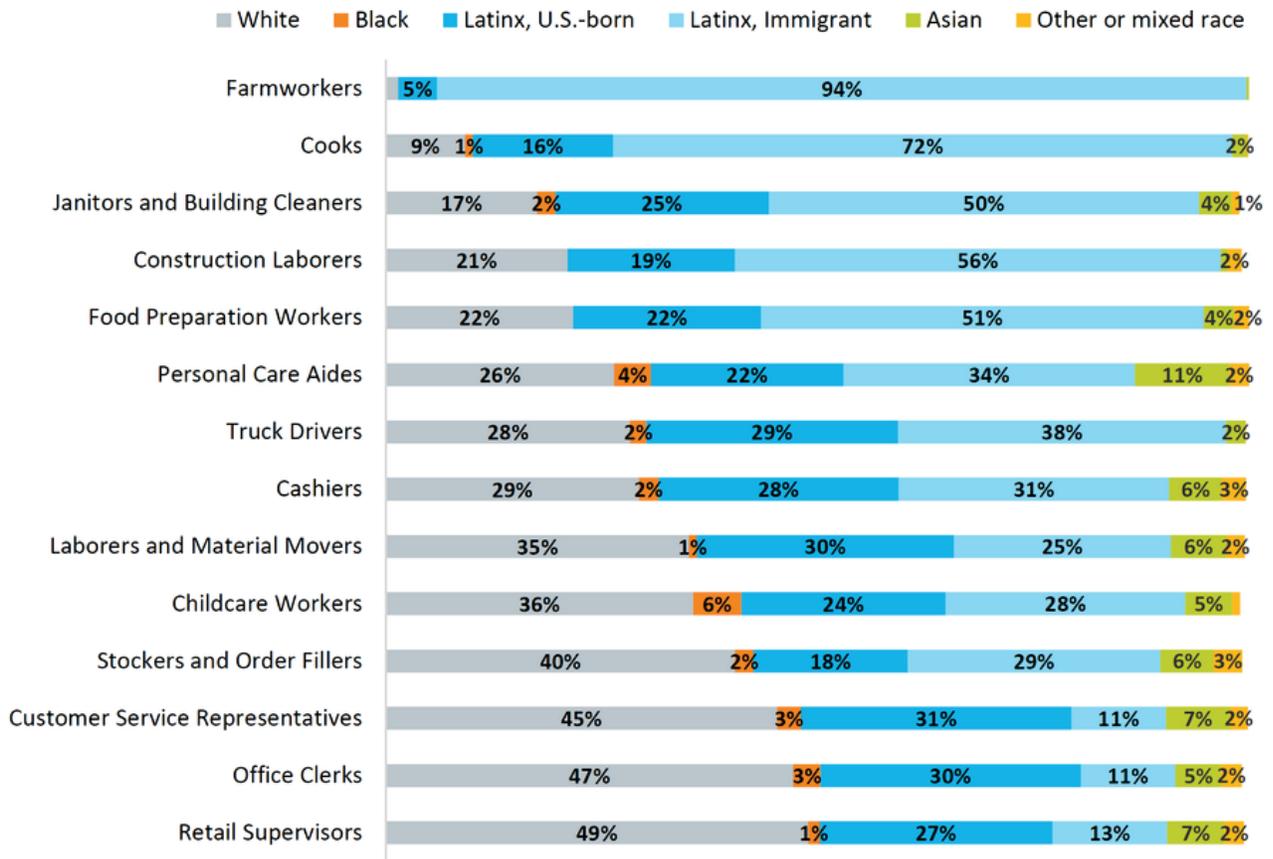


Figure 7: People in overcrowded households by race and nativity, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, 2018



Figure 8: COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people by county, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, March 12, 2020 - May 25, 2021

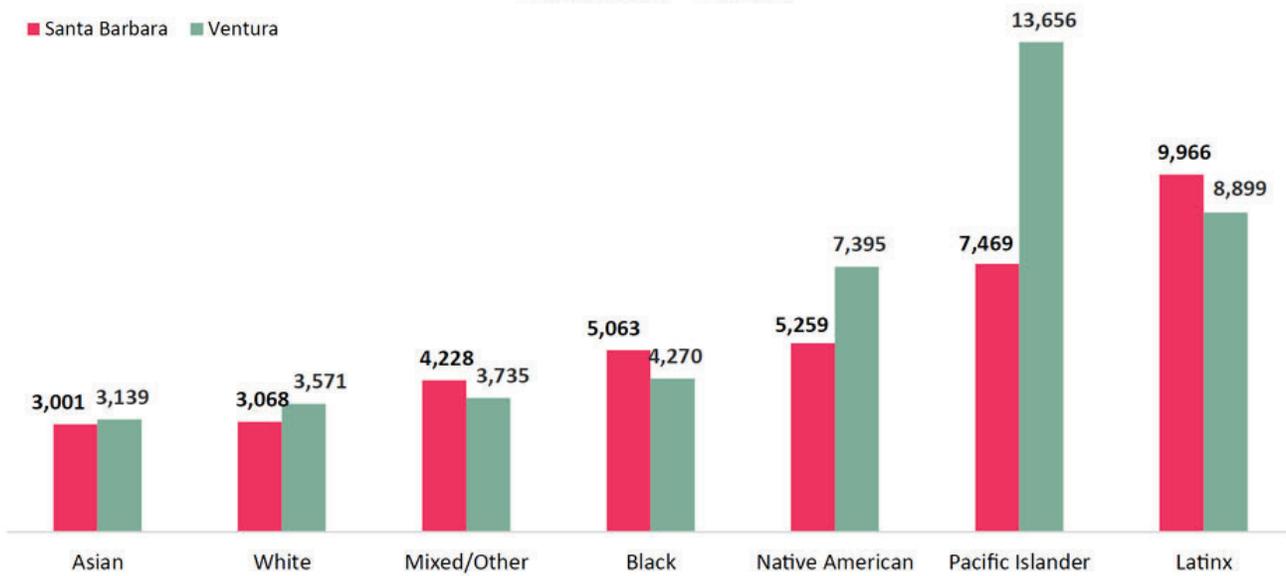
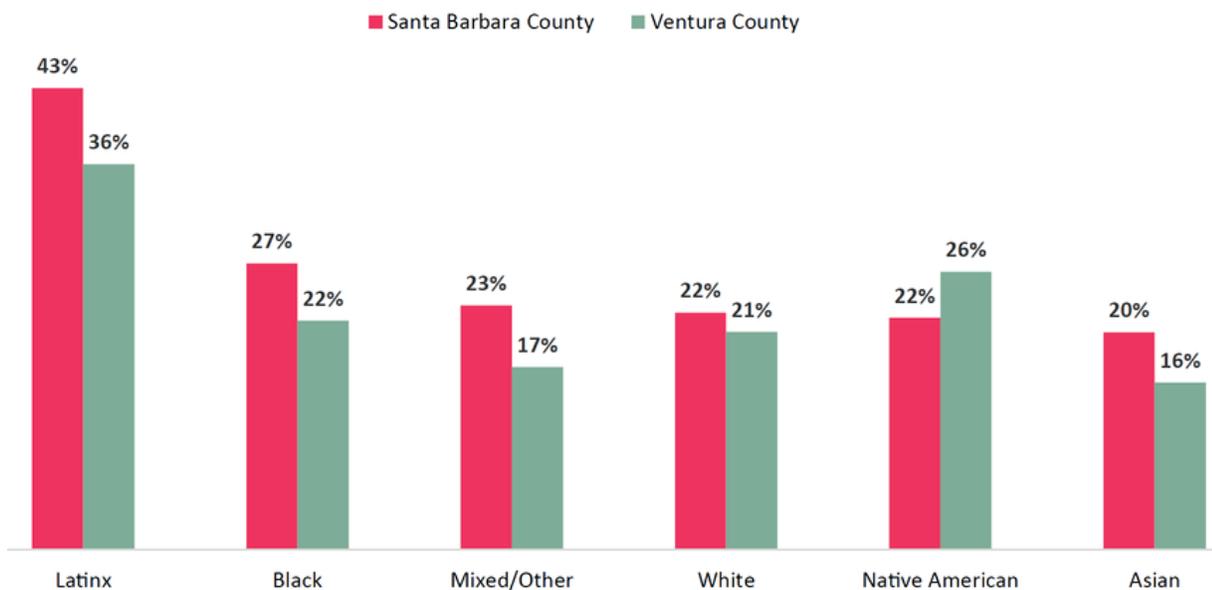
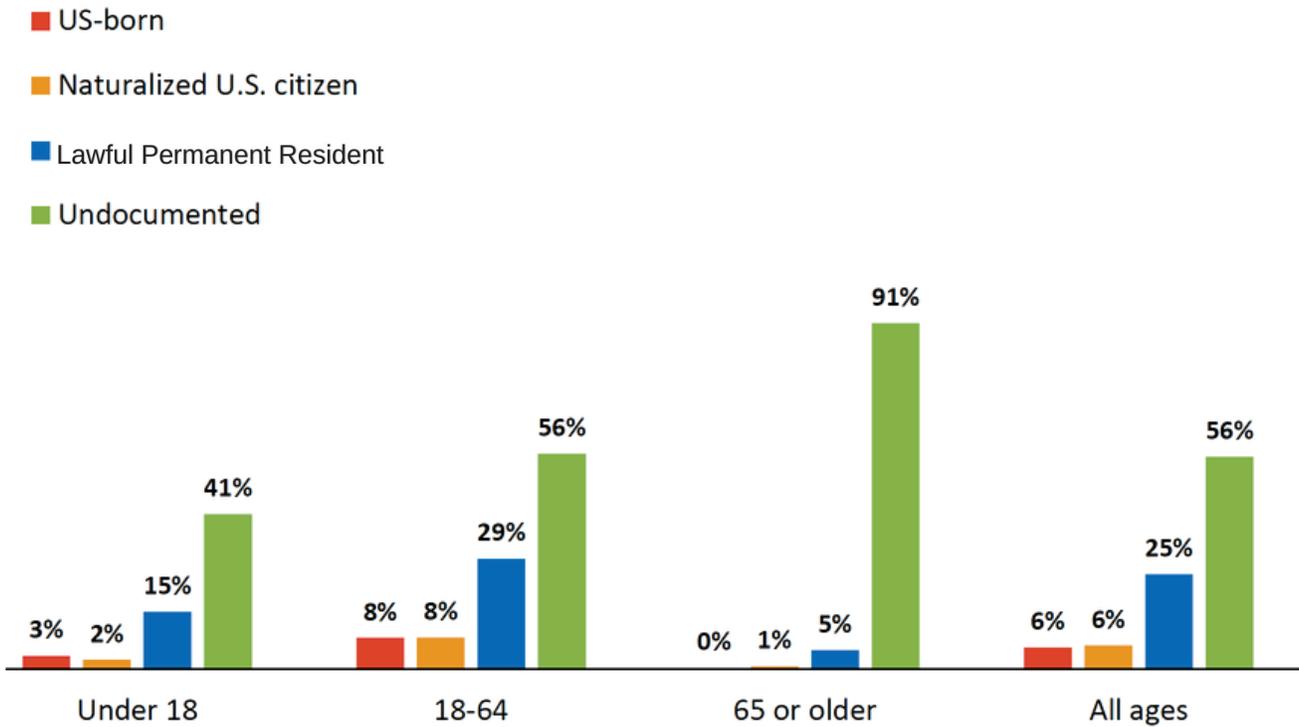


Figure 9: Households without a high-speed internet connection, a computer, or both, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, 2018



COVID-19 has also been a stark reminder of inequality in access to healthcare. Among adults ages 18–64, Latinx residents are over four times as likely to lack health insurance as white residents. The divide is even more dramatic by immigration status (Figure 10). Undocumented immigrant residents have the highest proportion of uninsured individuals, with a particularly extreme gap among seniors.

Figure 10: Percent with no health insurance by immigration status & age, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, 2018



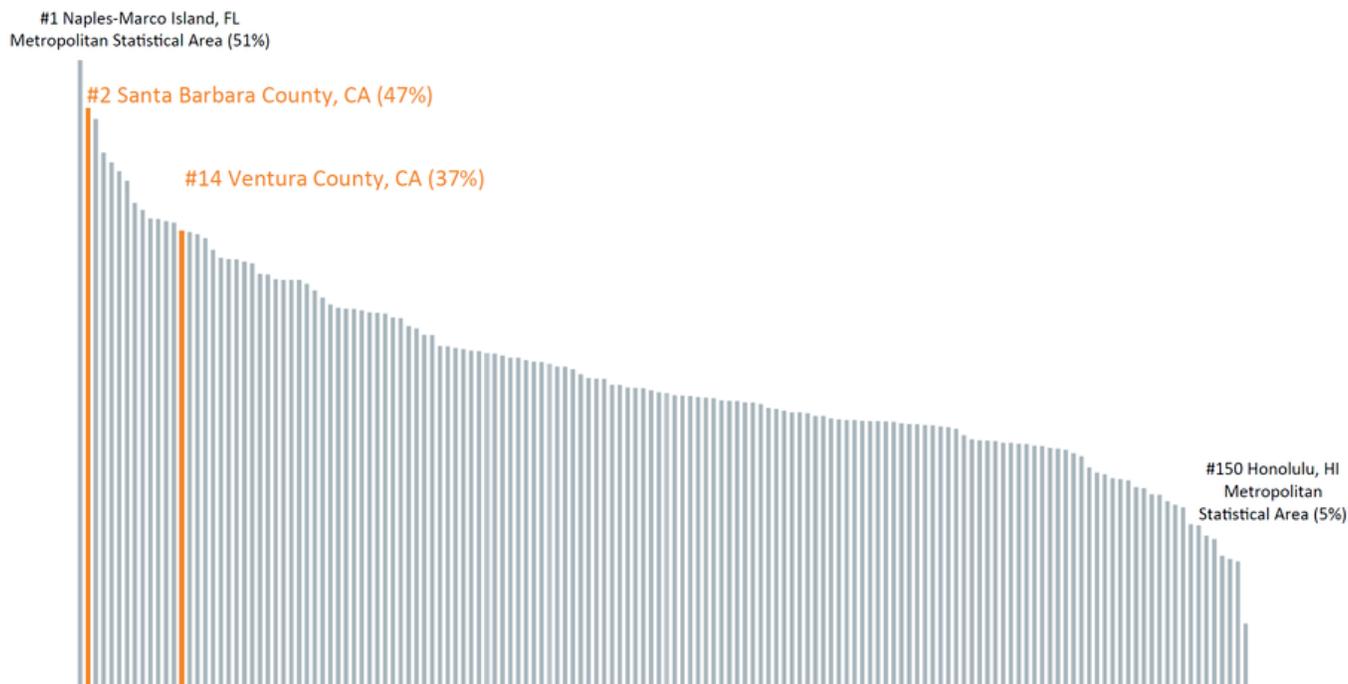
The inequities highlighted by the pandemic are a reflection of the inequality that has shaped the region for decades. In areas including healthcare, employment, housing, and access to digital technology, significant action is needed in order to achieve equity for all residents in the region.

UNEVEN POLITICAL VOICE

The need for concerted action is reflected in the region’s well-established tradition of intersectional social justice organizing in which people of color—and youth in particular—have played an essential role. However, Central Coast progressive change coalitions face critical impediments to political mobilization that must be addressed as well. One obstacle is the persistence of the racial generation gap—a term coined by political demographers to capture the divergence in the racial and ethnic composition of the nation’s rapidly diversifying, increasingly BIPOC youth (under age 18) and gradually diversifying but still predominantly white senior (age 65 or older) populations. A considerable body of research has tied this demographic divergence to a growing sense of social and

cultural distance between older and younger generations and to diminished support among seniors—who are far more likely to vote than younger generations—for spending on education and other youth-serving public investments. Though diminishing elsewhere in CA and, more gradually, the nation, the racial generation gap remains exceptionally high in our region (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Racial generation gap, top 150 metro areas, ranked by largest to smallest gap, 2018



Adding to the political imbalances associated with the racial generation gap is a parallel imbalance in the activation of the electorate, notably (though not exclusively) along the lines of race and ethnicity. Even in the 2020 Presidential election, when region-wide voter turnout was record-breaking across all groups, whites in Santa Barbara and Ventura voted at significantly higher rates than voters of color, accounting for more than 2/3rds (68 percent) of the ballots cast despite representing 59 percent of the electorate. Importantly, this is not a reflection of disparities in registration, which closely reflect the demographics of eligible voters in the region thanks in no small part to targeted voter registration drives.

Challenging though the racial generational and voter mobilization gaps may be, they are by no means insurmountable. For one thing, demographically-rooted political tensions are subject to change—through public outreach, education, and coalition-building across racial groups and generations. Community-based organizing can occur around the vital importance of investing in youth in order to ensure the current and future vitality of the region. Demography, that is, need not be destiny.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Central Coast Regional Equity Initiative

On the Central Coast as in the U.S. and the wider world, the disparities brought to light by the global pandemic, racial uprisings, and climate change-related disasters are a sign of a deeper, political and civic failure to address the inequities that have shaped social, economic, and civic life for decades. They are also a stark reminder of how inequality makes us more vulnerable to crisis and disaster—in no small part by undermining the sense of shared fate and common purpose required for an effective response. As we look to the post-pandemic future, then, it is imperative to set our sights appropriately: not on a return to an inequitable “normal,” but on a transition to a just and equitable future on the Central Coast. Justice and equity—full inclusion of all residents in the economic, social, and political life of the region, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, or neighborhood of residence—are not only crucial values in their own right, but essential for regional health, prosperity, and sustainability.

The Regional Equity Initiative calls for large public investments in opportunities and social protections for historically underserved communities and an honest reassessment of resource allocations that have privileged the interests of more advantaged constituencies. We must imagine and act upon policies that push beyond the boundaries of narrowly construed political possibility to lay the groundwork for transformative change.

Such change is not something we can achieve alone; the Regional Equity Initiative will rely on commitments from progressive change organizations, businesses, public and private employers, service providers, educators, researchers, and philanthropic organizations alike. Now is the time for us to take a transformational approach to investing in regional equity, a just and adequate infrastructure of opportunity and social provision, and an economy that works for all. We invite you to join us in this effort and to advance equity in the Central Coast region.



"Change is not something we can achieve alone."

PRINCIPLES & PRIORITIES

for Research and Action

1 Respect the rights and experiences of Indigenous people

It is important to acknowledge that the Central Coast region is on the traditional, unceded homelands of the Chumash and Tataviam people. We acknowledge and support their ongoing struggles for political rights, cultural recognition, and land protection by recognizing the historical experience of colonization, enslavement, violence, and resource extraction that established the region, and honoring the knowledge, cultural traditions, and resilience that have sustained Native communities over time. As we look to the future planning and development of the region, it is critical that we also center Native principles of stewardship and reciprocity between the land and the lives it sustains. Indigenous peoples, perspectives, and experiences must be centered in processes of acknowledgment and accountability, and in the frameworks we bring to regional equity, environmental, and democratic organizing.

2 Center equity and justice as foundational economic values

This starts with an economic vision that recognizes freedom from want and a justly compensated workforce as signposts of economic strength, that respects workers' rights to labor in dignity, and that embraces goals such as closing racial and gender wage gaps as benchmarks of regional economic success. It calls for public and private investment in strategies that improve labor standards for traditionally undervalued but essential workers and that promote access to high-quality job opportunities for historically marginalized communities. Equity and prosperity can and should be embraced as mutually supportive goals, but only when guided by active measures to assure that the benefits of prosperity are widely and equitably shared.

3 Invest in inclusive, universally accessible infrastructures of opportunity and social provision

A just and equitable region rests on more than an inclusive economy. It requires a robust infrastructure of social investment—in systems of care, opportunity, civic connectedness, and political engagement—that promotes health, education, and human development, assures equal justice for all, and provides assistance in times of need. The vast disparities in access to adequate, affordable quality health care is but one of the major fault lines brought to the surface by the region's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. All Central Coast residents should have access to basic rights and social goods, such as health care and quality education, which requires accommodating for diverse language, cultural, and technological needs as well as making them available regardless of income, citizenship, or immigration status.

4 Advance racial and intersectional justice

Racial and intersectional justice inform all aspects of equity work, and cut across multiple issue areas, in efforts that seek change at the systemic level. A growing number of intersectional justice initiatives in the region focus on the needs—and draw on the leadership—of youth, who represent the fastest-growing segment of the region's BIPOC population and who have heightened public awareness of how systemic problems of chronic underfunding, criminalized behavior, and discriminatory disciplinary protocols have fed into the school-to-prison pipeline and otherwise failed to nurture students from historically marginalized groups. In these and aligned initiatives, advancing racial and intersectional justice means emphasizing nurturing, culturally relevant learning environments; fully inclusive access to services, educational, and employment opportunities; and restorative approaches to discipline and public safety.

Recognize, respect, and protect immigrant rights, civic integration, and political voice

5

Whether they are recent arrivals or long-standing residents, immigrants are an integral part of the Central Coast region, as contributors to the regional economy, community organizers, educators, students, parents, and neighbors. Fully achieving equity and justice in the region requires that all immigrants, regardless of citizenship status, have full access to the social safety net, emergency relief, and the legal protections accorded workers and tenants. Local political systems should be made more aware, responsive, and accountable to immigrant communities, through immigrant-inclusive organizing, naturalization, and voter registration campaigns.

Protect tenants, preserve communities, and make housing affordable for all

6

The crisis of affordable housing has been woven into the fabric of everyday life on the Central Coast, in the form of out of reach home prices, heavy rent burdens, long commutes, rising numbers of unhoused, unsheltered people, and years'-old affordable development targets gone unfulfilled. It's long since time we stop pretending this crisis can be resolved without massive investments of public resources and reordering of regional priorities to construct and otherwise make available housing that is safe, accessible, and affordable, that adheres to standards of environmental sustainability, and that respects the rights of tenants to live free of the threats of eviction, arbitrary rent hikes, and gentrification.

Be a leader in environmental and climate justice

7

There is no denying that climate change and environmental crises are a reality in the Central Coast. While communities vary in their response resiliency due to factors of inequity, environmental burdens adversely affect all communities regardless of race or affluence. The region has a long history of fighting against offshore drilling, fossil fuel power plants, a proposed liquefied natural gas terminal, and the use of hazardous pesticides on commercial farms. More action is needed to invest in public transportation, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and protect local infrastructure from the ravages of climate change. Stronger collaboration between the original stewards of the region's land and water, the Chumash and Tataviam people, and environmental and social justice groups within the region can show the rest of the country dynamic pathways forward toward a more sustainable and just environment.

Bridge digital divides for underserved communities

8

Full and unencumbered digital access is no longer simply a matter of consumer choice in societies that have turned to internet-based modes of learning, health and service provision, communication, and civic engagement, as we have on the Central Coast. It is a basic necessity for full participation in economic, social, political, and civic life. Bridging digital divides starts with the recognition that internet access is an essential public good, bringing public responsibility to provide affordable and equitable access to all individuals, households, and communities that lack the income, technological, and other resources necessary to attain it. It also requires active steps to gauge and remedy the learning losses, social and civic isolation, and service disparities that stem from disparities in connectivity.

9 Create platforms for collaborative, community-engaged equity research

The data featured in this report, gathered in consultation with our community networks, provide aggregate indicators of the equity trends and challenges facing the Central Coast and offer some sense of what it would mean to address them on a region-wide scale. While the need for such indicator-based analysis continues, it is also a jumping off point for a broader program of research that builds regional capacity—and the more variegated, community-rooted knowledge base—for inclusive and equitable planning, policy development, and political action. In addition to the region's academic and independent research institutes, such a program will rely extensively on engagement with too-often unheard community voices, experiences, and expertise from community organizations—especially when it comes to understanding the mechanisms and day to day realities of inequality, collecting ground-level data, and identifying priorities and levers for change. Deepening and diversifying our knowledge base in this way also enhances the capacity to build a shared understanding of the region's problems and prospects, generate alliances across issue areas, and track progress towards equity and justice over time.

10 Build from our victories

Building a just and equitable region requires a long-term commitment, a willingness to confront entrenched forces of resistance, and the often-painstaking work of organizing coalitions on multiple fronts. It draws vital energy from accomplishments along the way. Recent victories give cause for hope. Activists successfully pressured state and local governments to increase funding for tenant protections, affordable housing, and services for the unhoused during the pandemic. Environmental organizations and activists created a carbon-free renewable energy program and established a diversified climate justice network. Grassroots organizations collaborated to provide greater assistance to immigrant families who have faced significant loss as a result of natural disasters. These victories are only a small portion of the overall transformative change that is needed, but they nevertheless demonstrate that such change is possible when communities organize the public, persuade stakeholders, form alliances, and apply political pressure to those in power.

11 Open avenues to participatory democracy

While progress in key areas has been made in recent years, these victories have only been possible because of sustained, targeted organizing campaigns that make concrete demands and electoral strategies to hold elected officials accountable. Broad-based, but unfocused, support for change often loses when the status quo is supported by powerful interests. Organizations rooted in the region's diverse communities are needed more than ever to empower marginalized groups by activating new and occasional voters to build electoral power, pressuring reluctant lawmakers, and building coalitions across groups that have historically been excluded from the political process. Advancing equity on the Central Coast also calls for an expanded toolkit for realizing the region's democratic potential, such as participatory budgeting, equity impact standards, and other measures to promote community engagement in public decision making.

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