State of Immigrants in LA County

Executive Summary: January 2020
Acknowledgments

The USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration (CSII) would like to thank everyone involved in producing the first annual State of Immigrants in L.A. County (SOILA) report. The goal was to create a resource for community-based organizations, local governments, and businesses in their immigrant integration efforts. To that end, we sought the wisdom of a range of partners that have made this report what it is.

The work here—including data, charts, tables, writing, and analysis—was prepared by Dalia Gonzalez, Sabrina Kim, Cynthia Moreno, and Edward-Michael Muña at CSII. Graduate research assistants Thai Le, Sarah Balcha, Carlos Ibarra, and Blanca Ramirez heavily contributed to charts, writing, and analysis. Thank you to Manuel Pastor and Rhonda Ortiz at CSII, as well as Efrain Escobedo and Rosie Arroyo from the California Community Foundation (CCF) for their direction, feedback, and support that fundamentally shaped this report.

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We would also like to extend deep appreciations to the members of the CCF Council on Immigrant Integration for commissioning this report and for their feedback and suggestions along the way. A special thank you to all organizations interviewed for case studies who donated their time and expertise to further bolster our analysis.
Interviewees Overview

As a way to lift up the immigrant integration efforts of entities in L.A. County, we conducted a series of interviews that helped to document the life-changing work that various institutions are moving forward in L.A. County as well as inform the analysis of the report. Below is the list of interviewees:

- Anthony Ng, Former Immigrant Rights Policy Manager, Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Los Angeles (AAAJ)
- Apolonio (Polo) Morales, Political Director, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA)
- Araceli Campos, Executive Director, Miguel Contreras Foundation (MCF)
- Carolina Sheinfeld, Immigrant Relations Coordinator, Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE)
- David Rattray, Executive Vice President, Center for the Education Excellence & Talent Development, Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce and UNITE-LA
- Diego Sepulveda, Former Director, UCLA Labor Center - Dream Resource Center (DRC)
- Hussam Ayloush, Chief Executive Officer, Council on American-Islamic Relations - Los Angeles (CAIR), CA
- Jorge Gutierrez, Executive Director, Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement (Familia: TQLM)
- Nana Gyamfi, Executive Director, and Ben Ndugga-Kabuye, Research and Advocacy Manager, Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI)

Additionally, we created a case study for L.A. County’s My Health LA as an overview of a county-wide program that aims to fill in the healthcare gap for immigrant communities in L.A. To see what interviewees shared with us, please read the full report here: https://dornsife.usc.edu/csii/state-of-immigrants-LA.
Foreword

Immigrants from all over the globe have created a home in L.A. County for generations. In that time, both immigration policies and immigrant communities themselves have evolved dramatically. Some immigrant groups are large and long-settled, while others are newer and growing. A subset of immigrants have accessed higher education, invested in homes, or started a business. In these groups of homeowners, entrepreneurs, workers, and college graduates, there are immigrants who have naturalized, who are lawful permanent residents, or who are undocumented.

The State of Immigrants in Los Angeles (SOILA) report documents how immigrants are faring economically, if they are connected to and engaging in civic life, and how L.A. County creates a welcoming environment. It admirably attempts to cover many, if not, all facets of immigrant life and provides a base for further inquiry, action, and forthcoming work for L.A. County immigrant-serving institutions. SOILA is a project of the Council on Immigrant Integration, a body that pushes for a society fully inclusive of immigrant communities. As such, the council’s hope is that SOILA represents both what immigrant communities currently look like and lifts up L.A. County’s hard work to integrate immigrants who call this area home.

We hope this report can help move our County forward and push all of us to consider how improving outcomes for immigrants not only benefits their own families and communities, but improves the lives of all residents. In addition, we cannot address the needs of immigrants without addressing systemic racism and centering equity at the forefront of our work.

For this report, we collaborated specifically with CSII, to challenge and provide nuances to common immigrant narratives by applying a racial justice lens; by promoting the mutual interests of immigrant and native-born communities in the United States; and by supporting interethnic, intersectoral, and cross-movement collaborations in this research. Their work is in line with California Community Foundation’s mission to promote a future where all Angelenos thrive: this includes our immigrant community members for all that they bring to our region. With those values in mind, we are excited to produce SOILA this year and in the years to come.

Thank you for joining us in this effort.

Antonia Hernández
President & Chief Executive Officer
California Community Foundation
Context and Overview

L.A. County has taken a long and arduous journey from pushing anti-immigrant policies in the latter half of the 20th century to being a place that expands health care coverage to all regardless of immigration status.1 In 1979, the police implemented Special Order 40, a mandate that prevented police involvement on issues of immigration status.2 Yet, despite this early precedent, L.A. still passed an unconstitutional anti-day laborer ordinance in 1994 i and did not hesitate in signing on to 287(g) agreements ii allowing for Sheriff cooperation with immigration enforcement from 2005 to 2015. The path to welcoming immigrants has not been linear. However, from Proposition 187’s passage in 1994, a ballot measure that sought to deny access to non-emergency services, to the TRUTH Act’s implementation in 2017 iii, L.A. County has shifted from creating a system of attrition for immigrants to embracing them as a community.3

How did Los Angeles become such a locus of change? To begin, Los Angeles has witnessed major demographic changes. From 1970 to 1990, a remarkable 23 percent of the nation’s new immigrants settled in Los Angeles County, a concentrated flow that made L.A. ground zero for debates about immigration and immigrants. Now, a little over a third of L.A. County’s population are foreign-born and, among them, around 80 percent have been in the country for longer than ten years. They are overwhelmingly people of color (about 86 percent) although a significant white immigrant population exists, as well. Immigrants are a vital and large part of our community, residing in homes from San Pedro to Sylmar, and working in cities from Santa Monica to Pomona.

Immigrants have become significant contributors to our economic strength. In the Los Angeles metro area (which includes L.A. and Orange counties), immigrants have a combined spending power of about $108.6 billion and pay around $38.2 billion in state, local, and federal taxes.4 Immigrant households make up about 30 percent of total household income in Los Angeles County and comprise a significant portion of our consumer base in Los Angeles.5

In addition, the inability of the federal government to provide a comprehensive, compassionate response to immigration meant that those working locally in government, non-profit, business, and foundations had to step in to create a supportive local infrastructure for growing immigrant populations. That longstanding infrastructure has driven much of the change that has taken place countywide over the decades. Furthermore, L.A. County has been home to a vibrant immigrant rights movement that has long been involved in not only federal, state, and local policy advocacy, but also service provision, leadership development, and organizing local immigrant communities.

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1 In 1994, the Board of Supervisors voted to eliminate solicitation in L.A. County’s unincorporated areas. See, https://ssrn.com/abstract=1907315.
2 In 2015, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to terminate the 287(g) program that allowed collaboration between the Los Angeles County Sheriff Department and federal immigration authorities. See, https://hildalsolis.org/los-angeles-county-supervisors-vote-to-end-10-year-old-287g-program-and-to-remove-immigration-agents-from-jails/.
3 The TRUTH Act (AB 2792) provides “Know Your Rights” information to individuals under Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody, requires that local law enforcement agencies provide an individual and their attorney a notification of an individual’s release date, and ensures records related to ICE access are subject to the public records act. See, www.iceoutofca.org/truth-act-ab-2792.html.
More recently, these sectors have come together to form more welcoming local responses to federal policy changes that are explicitly anti-immigrant. Some of these federal policy changes include determining eligibility for naturalization based on public service utilization, lowering caps for refugee resettlement, raising naturalization fees, attempting to include a citizenship question on the 2020 Census, and enacting other restrictions.

For example, California has pursued policies to protect immigrant families and workers through enacting bills such as California’s Senate Bill (SB) 946, known as the Safe Sidewalk Vending Activ and expanding Medi-Cal coverage for young adults via Senate Bill SB-104. These policies send a signal that the state is welcoming to immigrants and citizens alike. As one of the counties with the largest foreign-born populations and as a major economic powerhouse, Los Angeles is a leader in encouraging the state to pass legislation that supports immigrant families and addresses the challenges facing immigrant families under attack by federal policy.

L.A. County demonstrates its leadership through its public-private partnerships to address the needs of immigrant families. The L.A. Justice Fund represents one such effort, where partners like the County of Los Angeles, the City of Los Angeles, the Weingart Foundation, and CCF contribute funds for immigrant defense. Initially, the intention for the L.A. Justice Fund was to aid residents fighting deportation cases; however, families affected by Trump’s zero-tolerance policies are now eligible. Another cross-sector collaboration, “¡Protégete!...¡Ciudadanía Ya! Campaign,” brings together an array of private and public entities along with Spanish media to facilitate naturalization for Latino legal permanent residents.

Yet another example is the “Census Call to Action” rally, which included more than 100 individuals from community organizations, unions, and government agencies throughout L.A. County. This effort highlighted commitments made to ensure that we count hard-to-reach populations, particularly immigrants, in the 2020 Census. L.A. County received $9.4 million for this outreach campaign to ensure full census participation. These, among many other strategies, propelled L.A. County forward in immigrant integration policies.

A fourth example underscores how local government strengthened its immigrant integration efforts by expanding its programming to meet the health and wellness needs of immigrants and their families. In 2015, the L.A. County Department of Mental Health created the Unaccompanied Minor’s Program to provide mental health services to unaccompanied youth. In 2016, the State of California passed SB-75, expanding Medi-Cal services to all children under 19 years old, regardless of immigration status. Finally, in 2018, the L.A. County Board of Supervisors voted to expand health care coverage provided through “My Health LA” to all residents, regardless of immigration status.

iv California SB-946, Safe Sidewalk Vending Act, establishes guidelines to regulate sidewalk vending. This bill went into effect on January 1, 2019, prohibiting penalties for sidewalk vending violations and permitting anyone currently or formerly prosecuted for a sidewalk vending violation to have a pending prosecution, sentence, fine or conviction dismissed. See, http://www.publiccounsel.org/pages/?id=0053.
The passage of these types of laws in California and Los Angeles, national bellwethers, can lead to a ripple effect across our nation. This is important as we attempt to meet the needs of our changing demographics. In 2010, 10 percent of California’s population was of retirement age, around 65 years or older; by 2060, 26 percent of the population will be of retirement age.\textsuperscript{12} As a nationwide trend, aging will create new labor demands across all sectors of the economy, from technology to manufacturing. However, it will especially create demand in service and health care jobs that support our aging populace—a sector that we call the “Caring Economy.” Simultaneously, our nation will become more diverse. By 2045, we will be a majority people of color nation driven in part by immigrants who are also creating families, developing communities, starting businesses, and likely forming a large portion of the workforce in the caring economy.\textsuperscript{13} Whether we should create a welcoming environment for immigrants is not a question that we should debate. Rather the question should be whether we are ready to pay the price for not being deeply committed to an integrated and inclusive L.A. County.

Understanding how a region’s immigrants are faring is a critical move to creating further inclusion in our county and our increasingly diverse state. We compiled the State of Immigrants in Los Angeles County (SOILA) report as a tool to guide dialogue about issues and opportunities facing immigrant communities. This report explores how we welcome immigrants, their economic mobility, civic participation, and demographics. SOILA 2020 provides a snapshot of the current immigrant population in L.A. County, which will serve as a baseline to help us answer questions in subsequent reports around how immigrants are faring across these different areas over time.

Immigrants are here to stay in the United States and particularly in Los Angeles. Whether migrating for economic opportunity or to escape political turmoil, they are part of our county’s economic and social fabric. Honoring their presence through humane immigrant integration policies and programs will not only benefit immigrants and native-born Angelenos alike, but it is also the way forward for Los Angeles and our nation.

### Immigrant Integration

USC CSII's structured this report around our framework for immigrant integration. This is used to assess if, and to what extent, immigrants are integrated well into their receiving community—something that is equally the responsibility of immigrants and the receiving community. We determine that immigrants are fully integrated into their communities by assessing:

- **Economic Mobility:** the ability to fully engage in the economy, obtain quality jobs, start businesses, and thrive economically;
- **Civic Engagement:** the ability to engage and participate in their communities; and
- **Warmth of Welcome:** the extent to which immigrants are welcomed by the receiving society.
The area now known as Los Angeles County is homeland to three tribes that predate California’s establishment: the Chumash, Tataviam, and Tongva. In addition, L.A. County is home to the largest population of Native Americans/Alaska Natives; more than any other county in the U.S. Today, L.A. County has a population of over 10 million people and about 36 percent, or 3.6 million residents, are foreign born. The majority of L.A. County’s population, around three-quarters, identify as people of color. Nearly 50 percent of L.A. County’s population identifies as Latino while about 15 percent identify as Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI). Nearly 27 percent identify as white and about 3 percent of residents identify as Multiracial or Other. About 8 percent of L.A. County’s population identify as Black. Although Black immigrants do not comprise a large portion of the foreign-born population, they do make up a sizable percentage of Black residents in L.A. County as explained in the report.

The fastest growing immigrant group in Los Angeles County identify as AAPI, growing by 157,000 since 2000. Also important, and contrary to popular belief, is that the size of the Latino immigrant population in the County declined by 125,000 people over the same period. Immigrants have been in Los Angeles for a long time: 67 percent of lawful permanent residents (LPRs) have been in the United States for longer than 10 years and a similar amount (68 percent) of undocumented residents have also been in the U.S. for longer than 10 years. Because of their long settled nature, immigrants are a vital part of our family structures. There are around 886,000 undocumented immigrants in Los Angeles County, 852,000 U.S. citizens living with undocumented family members, and around 273,000 LPRs living with undocumented family members. Overall, nearly 20 percent of residents in Los Angeles County are either undocumented themselves or live with a family member who is undocumented.
Figure 1. Immigration Status by Race/Ethnicity, 2016

Source: USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Note: See “Data and Methods” section of full report for details on estimates of the undocumented and LPR population. Note: Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.

Figure 2. Immigration Status and Family Ripple Effects, 2016

Source: USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Note: Universe includes all households (no group quarters). See “Data and Methods” section of full report for details on estimates of the undocumented and LPR population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.
Immigrants are an untapped civic force.

It is clear that immigrants make up a large portion of L.A. County's population, yet there is more that can be done to strengthen the civic and political voice of immigrants throughout the county. Encouraging naturalization, identifying those who are eligible to naturalize, and building up a stronger immigrant electorate, for example, are aspects of civic engagement that could fundamentally shape politics and programs in Los Angeles County. Eligible-to-naturalize (ETN) individuals are immigrants who meet all citizenship requirements set by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Some of those requirements include being at least 18 years old at the time of applying for naturalization and being a lawful permanent resident for five years (or shorter if married to a U.S. citizen). Around 768,000 immigrants in Los Angeles County were eligible to naturalize in 2016, but had not yet done so. This combined with the 71,000 U.S.-born children with at least one immigrant parent who will become eligible to vote in 2020, makes clear that the immigrant-voter bloc is sizeable enough to determine policy outcomes for the rest of the county.

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**Figure 3. Eligible-to-Naturalize Adults by Race/Ethnicity, 2016**

![Pie chart showing percentage distribution of eligible-to-naturalize adults by race/ethnicity in 2016.]

Source: USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Note: Universe include all eligible-to-naturalize adults. See “Data and Methods” section of full report for details on estimates of the eligible-to-naturalize population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.
Within the naturalization process, there are clear racial inequities. People of color comprise the majority of ETN adults with around 69 percent identifying as Latino and 20 percent identifying as AAPI. About 9 percent of ETN adults identified as white. Yet in 2016, white immigrants had a naturalization rate of 82 percent, while Latinos had a naturalization rate of 58 percent -- a 24 percentage-point difference. The top countries of origin for the ETN population are Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, the Philippines, and China. Those from Mexico account for nearly 50 percent of the total ETN population.

One clear barrier to engagement experienced by the immigrant population is, of course, language. About 30 percent of all immigrant-headed households are linguistically isolated, defined as having no member age 14 or older who speaks English at least "very well." This figure rises to 32 percent for households headed by a lawful permanent resident, and 42 percent for households headed by someone who is undocumented. Therefore, is imperative that official documents, forms, meeting agendas, and other materials for civic processes are available in languages other than English. It is also vital that interpretation services are available at public events and meetings, and that immigrants have access to crucial resources that aid them in acquiring the English language.

Figure 4. Percent Linguistically Isolated Households, 2016

Source: USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Note: Universe includes all households. See “Data and Methods” section of full report for details on estimates of the undocumented and LPR population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.
Immigrants are the bedrock of the Los Angeles economy.

Immigrants are an integral part of a variety of L.A.’s industries. Immigrants make up 44 percent of all workers. In addition, at least 20 percent of the people employed in any major industry are immigrants. In many industries, including construction, agriculture, other services (except public administration), manufacturing, and wholesale trade, immigrants account for over half of the workforce.24

Despite the large presence of immigrants in the workforce, they still suffer from economic inequalities. Immigrants have a generally high employment rate, but nonetheless are still in poverty. One in five foreign-born workers, and more than one in three undocumented workers experience working poverty. We define working poverty as working full time, but having a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. When broken down by race, the inequalities are especially apparent. About 41 percent of Latino undocumented immigrant workers are working poor, which is three times the rate for the general population.25

Figure 5. Industry by Status, 2016

Source: USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Note: Universe includes the employed civilian non-institutional population age 16 or older. See the “Data and Methods” section of the full report for details on estimates of the undocumented and LPR population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.
Wage inequalities provide more context to data on poverty. The median hourly wage across full-time wage and salary workers in Los Angeles County is $20, while the median hourly wage for foreign-born workers is $16. This general trend is present for immigrants even when accounting for differences in educational attainment and immigration status. With the exception of naturalized citizens who have a bachelor’s degree or higher, those who are legal permanent residents, naturalized citizens, and undocumented residents make measurably less than their U.S.-born counterparts regardless of education. The difference is especially apparent in the case of undocumented residents with a bachelor’s degree or higher who are paid $11 less per hour than their U.S.-born and naturalized citizen counterparts. This disparity in wages does decrease as the immigrant population settles, yet wage disparities remain between the U.S.-born population and immigrants who have been in the United States longer than 30 years. In addition to directly affecting the livelihood of immigrant workers, low wages lead to lost purchasing power that hurts the economy as a whole.

Figure 6. Working Poverty Rate by Status, 2016

Source: USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Note: Universe includes the civilian noninstitutional population ages 25-64 not living in group quarters who worked at all during the year prior to the survey. See the “Data and Methods” section of the full report for details on estimates of the undocumented and LPR population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.
There is better, more robust infrastructure for welcoming immigrants, however these structures may not be in place everywhere.

Integral to immigrant integration, warmth of welcome describes how host communities, society-at-large, and governments receive and welcome immigrants. The way that host communities perceive and welcome immigrants play an important role in the types of immigrant-related policies, programs, and services that local governments implement. Schwartz and colleagues find that in a positive and warm context of reception, immigrants feel welcomed and have better access to resources that aid upward mobility, employment, and the development of supportive and positive social relationships. By contrast, immigrants in a negative and cold context of reception face more difficulties finding employment and establishing healthy social ties due to discrimination and a lack of resources, which can then hinder integration. In such contexts, immigrants are also often the target of exclusionary policies that deliberately thwart their political, social, and economic integration into communities and society. This concept can also be expanded to assess the intersection of different marginalized identities with immigration status, like Black, transgender, queer, and gender non-conforming communities. Identifying these unique intersections ensures services and policies cater to their specific needs. In that vein, the work of organizations like Familia: TQLM and the BAJI are crucial in ensuring that marginalized immigrant communities receive the necessary resources to thrive.

Some potential indicators of the openness of a receiving society include its capacity to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) services, as well as social supports to immigrants. Adult ESL enrollment has

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**Figure 7. Adult Enrollment in ESL Classes, 2014 - 2015 through 2017 - 2018**

![Chart showing adult enrollment in ESL classes, 2014 - 2015 through 2017 - 2018](chart_url)

increased since 2014-2015, hitting a peak of around 86,000 during the 2016-2017 academic year. During that same time, there were about 2.2 million adult immigrant residents who spoke English less than “very well.” In terms of social supports, Los Angeles has one of the largest immigrant populations across California; however, coverage in terms of immigrant serving organizations is less robust when compared to other counties. There are approximately three immigrant-serving organizations per 100,000 non-citizen immigrant individuals in L.A. County, compared to ten organizations per 100,000 non-citizen immigrants in Alameda County. Granted, this could also be due to other factors such as organizational consolidation and may not reflect the full coverage of immigrant serving organizations across the county.

One recent piece of legislation affecting all cities was SB-54, also known as the California Values Act. Passed and signed into law in 2017 during a time of increasingly discriminatory immigration enforcement under our current administration, SB-54 bars state and local law enforcement agencies from utilizing their resources to aid federal immigration enforcement agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Though passed at the state-level, localities have responded differently with some cities and school districts passing resolutions in alignment with SB-54 and others challenging it. In some cases, cities have even passed and implemented progressive policies that strengthen SB-54’s core values of protecting immigrants and their safety. What was most common locally, however, was the lack of an official directive supporting or challenging SB-54.

Conclusion

The state of immigrants in L.A. County is complex. Organizations that connect with and advocate alongside immigrant communities know this. However, in order to reach our goals of creating a society where immigrants from all backgrounds can thrive, we must intentionally and consistently promote integration in all sectors and at all levels. With that said, SOILA is a point of reference for when someone asks: “How are Los Angeles immigrants doing in education? Are there differences based on status? How about ethnicity? Are they becoming more diverse? How are Los Angeles County cities welcoming and integrating them?”

To accomplish this, our annual SOILA report will have a different focus each year. Given how critical immigration law is to our communities, one future focus of this annual report is likely to be civic engagement or the impact of threatened and actual deportations. Los Angeles housing costs make topics like housing affordability, gentrification, and displacement another important focus. Federal changes to both health insurance and public charge determination also encourage us to look at access to, and use of, health care. These topics and others necessitate a deeper dive into the state of immigrants. Even though there are further issues to explore, we are hopeful that the first State of Immigrants in Los Angeles County Report provides a baseline for understanding the meaningful place that immigrants have in our county. L.A. County is a home where we break bread, work alongside, and build families with immigrant Angelenos. It is a place where we empower ourselves when we create a safe, welcoming environment, community, and government that centers equity for all.

With equity and full inclusion in mind, we encourage L.A. County institutions, organizations, elected leaders, and constituents to consider the following recommendations in our movement toward immigrant integration and inclusion.
1 Continue to integrate and protect immigrants in our community

Immigrants across L.A. County are being attacked on many levels through national policy, restricted movement, reduced access to crucial public services, and negative media coverage. Local governments have a responsibility to provide a sense of stability and step in where federal enforcement is increasingly making immigrant welfare more precarious. Los Angeles has come a long way. We now have a County Office of Immigrant Affairs, and L.A. County and many cities have implemented “sanctuary” policies to help shield immigrants. However, loopholes that allow for information sharing and cooperation still remain for many local jurisdictions. Some cities have taken steps to close loopholes and implemented local non-cooperation policies that are stronger than SB-54. Policy efforts such as these must continue and spread throughout L.A. County in this political climate and beyond.

2 Invest in more data collection including a full Census count in 2020

Although expansive, the data used in this profile only provides a baseline of the issues that intersect with the lives of immigrants. Much more data on health access, service utilization, and social climate are needed to assess where immigrants stand in today’s society. Through data we can identify crucial gaps and decide where to allocate resources. In addition, redistricting—a vital process in maintaining the representativeness of the electorate—affects the political power of immigrants and their families. This is why the Census and efforts to have a complete count—like the “We Count Los Angeles” campaign—are so important. It is anticipated that many immigrants will be afraid to complete the census this year. County and city agencies must double down on efforts to provide support to organizations working to expand the participation of hard-to-count communities.

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3 Invest in expanding civic engagement opportunities and promote naturalization
Registering voters and facilitating civic engagement are concrete steps to strengthen the voice and power of immigrants. Naturalization backlogs have always existed, but have worsened since 2016. The current federal administration has made the process of naturalization even stricter and is seeking to make it even more expensive. More resources and assistance should be provided to immigrants, especially to those without the financial resources to obtain assistance on their own. In the meantime, we should support opportunities for immigrants to serve on boards, commissions, and other decision-making bodies where their voices are needed. Last, we should explore avenues at the state level to create de-facto state citizenship. This includes opening certain public elections to immigrants. For example, cities like New York and San Francisco allow non-citizens to vote in school board elections. Given the number of immigrant families touched by the school districts throughout Los Angeles, this is one area where we can enfranchise entire communities.

4 Support the physical and mental health of immigrants
Many immigrants in today’s climate face insecurity. Feelings of hyper-alertness and trauma are commonplace. Los Angeles has made critical strides by including immigrants in My Health LA, a no-cost health care program available to residents of L.A. County who cannot afford health care. The provision of these services is a milestone that should be celebrated and continuously expanded to meet the evolving needs of Angeleno immigrants. For example, healthcare providers and community based organizations are providing mental health services for immigrants, but challenges still persist in fully meeting the mental health needs of immigrant communities, particularly for undocumented immigrants. For example, many immigrant communities may be afraid to access vital services for fear of jeopardizing their status. Now, more than ever, we need to grow our capacity to address both the physical and mental health of our community members. To do so, we must ensure that we reduce the barriers and fears immigrants have in accessing these crucial services.

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3 The backlog in citizenship applications, increase in processing times, and proposed changes to the citizenship application are preventing eligible immigrants with voting rights from naturalization. See the National Partnership for New Americans full report, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1t1oW06zc97qBpeXq93f5ycjJFjdBAlo6/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1t1oW06zc97qBpeXq93f5ycjJFjdBAlo6/view).

4 In November of 2019, the Trump administration proposed new regulations to raise the fees for citizenship applications. The fee increase is proposed to rise from $725 to $1,170. See, [https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-11-12/citizenship-immigration-costs-naturalization](https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-11-12/citizenship-immigration-costs-naturalization).
5 Get the business sector more firmly into the fight for immigrant integration
Integration is everyone’s business—but it is especially business’ business. Immigrants make up large sectors of our economy, and many of our industries would not operate if not for our immigrant communities. It is time for businesses to become more engaged. Some in the business community are stepping up and working to advocate for pro-immigrant programs and policies. For example, the Chamber of Commerce in Los Angeles has focused on creating a cradle-to-career talent pipeline through their educational affiliate UNITE-LA and improving access to government contracts for small businesses, many of which are owned by immigrants and people of color. As a state, we have passed significant pieces of legislation to aid immigrant workers such as SB-1159, which allows immigrants to apply for state business licenses. These programs are helpful but uptake is low. More should be done to support these types of partnerships, connect immigrants to these existing opportunities, and reduce barriers.

6 Implement economic strategies that are more inclusive of immigrants
Many of the economic development strategies employed throughout the County focus specifically on poverty alleviation and connecting populations to jobs or education. However, more work can be done to make these efforts inclusive of immigrant Angelenos. Social and legal barriers associated with their immigration status may make participating in formal economic settings difficult. This is part of the reason that self-employment and entrepreneurship are such important pillars for many immigrant communities. With that said, many immigrants are still unable to access financial capital to start businesses or make new investments and it was only recently that street-vending, a lifeline for many immigrants who are not able to participate in the formal economy, was legalized in the City of Los Angeles. Key factors for economic development in a region with a large number of immigrants include providing resources to encourage naturalization, decreasing workplace discrimination, and connecting under-skilled workers to good jobs as key issues to address as part of economic development.

In addition, understanding the impact of asset building and the barriers that immigrants face to accumulating wealth can help different entities in the County develop adequate services and programs. For example, the Mexican American Opportunity Foundation’s (MAOF) asset-building program works to help individuals decrease debt, increase savings, and build credit through direct services and referrals in East and South L.A. They also offer small-dollar lending with reasonable interest rates. This allows their clients to pay their loans, avoid taking new loans in the future, and build credit that can enable them to purchase a home or further their education. Financial institutions should explore and implement creative and strategic solutions that engage existing immigrant financial strategies, like the MAOF program, lending circles, more holistic credit checks, and community-owned banking.
7 Launch a campaign to shift the tenor and tone of the media’s conversation around immigrants

Media coverage across the political spectrum has not adequately depicted the humanity of our current immigrant population. There should be investment in messaging and communication of immigrant issues to the public. Organizations such as the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley and the California Immigrant Policy Center are engaging in efforts to identify what types of messages resonate with those who might hold anti-immigrant views and may potentially build support for immigrants. Efforts to improve messaging and shape narratives can also include funding youth organizations and grassroots partners to invest in more dynamic messaging campaigns for efforts such as get-out-the-vote and Census 2020 campaigns. Furthermore, developing stronger relationships with residents through deep community engagement and canvassing can potentially create inroads into communities that have less favorable attitudes on immigration policy. Funders and local governments should support the type of research, programming, and organizing that gets to the heart of American values and helps to build unified communities.

8 Scale up from the County and scale out to smaller cities to adopt immigrant affirming policies

Much of what is in the news about immigration focuses specifically on the City of Los Angeles and the City of Long Beach. These are the two largest cities in our county and are also major immigrant centers. However, there are still significant immigrant populations in many of our county’s smaller cities and unincorporated areas. While not every city government will have the capacity to create an Office of Immigrant Affairs, the County Board of Supervisors and the L.A. County Office of Immigrant Affairs have the largest capacity to create consistency across all of these areas. They can, and should, encourage region wide strategic thinking and policymaking on how to thoughtfully integrate our county’s immigrant populations. This could include unique and novel programming that the County can initiate. The San Francisco Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs, for example, provides grants to non-profit and community based organizations in areas like: Language Access, Citizenship and Naturalization, and Census 2020 community outreach and education grants. They also have worked to help employ undocumented youth through their DreamSF Fellows. The County could replicate these programs and help to provide education and naturalization assistance in areas that are not well-resourced by community-based organizations.
9 Adopt a racial justice lens for immigrant integration efforts

The work of immigrant integration should be intertwined with the fight for racial justice. Many in the immigrant rights field understand that the full integration of immigrants cannot happen without addressing racial inequalities and injustices that currently exist. Addressing racism is important for immigrant integration because: 1. Anti-immigrant sentiment is driven by racial anxiety (as shown by data on the number of hate crimes targeting people of color); 2. Systems of dehumanization are common for marginalized groups (e.g., immigrant detention and over-incarceration); and 3. Our vision of economic mobility for immigrants does not mean hopscotching other marginalized groups, but rather changing structures to promote justice and opportunity that lifts everyone up. Just as we are saying immigrant integration is everyone’s business, we are saying that challenging racism—especially anti-Black racism—is immigrants’ business. As noted earlier, hate crimes that target people based on race often include anti-immigrant language and vice versa. There is a joint interest in reducing barriers for people of color and immigrants. We have an opportunity to create a much broader approach to racial and economic justice that supports Black immigrant coalition building, quality jobs, and wages and pushes back against harmful economic narratives that position immigrants as an economic threat and continue to entrench Black communities in poverty.

10 Lead the nation on immigrant integration

Although much of the power to provide deportation relief and create a path to naturalization is located at the federal level, Los Angeles can distinguish itself as a world-class city that models how welcoming attitudes and an inclusive economy is the way for all of us to thrive. Legislation like SB-54 lays the groundwork for a type of state and municipal citizenship that allows immigrants to carry out their lives without fearing criminalization. The architects of this bill owe their success to many of the municipalities who took the first steps to reduce ICE cooperation for non-violence offenses. In the same manner, cities need to continue to push the envelope by adopting forward-thinking policies and programs that, for example, expand healthcare for all immigrants or push the state to expand tax credit programs and state cash/food assistance programs.
Endnotes


5 USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. Universe includes all households. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.


15 Los Angeles City/County Native American Indian Commission.

16 USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. Note: Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.
USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2000 Census and 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. Data for 2016 represents a 2012 through 2016 average.

USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2000 Census and 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. Data for 2016 represents a 2012 through 2016 average.

USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation. See the “Data and Methods” section of the full report for details on estimates of the undocumented and LPR population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.

USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation. See the “Data and Methods” section of the full report for details on estimates of the eligible-to-naturalize population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.

USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average and reflect the number of U.S.-born children with an immigrant parent who will turn age 18 in 2020. The number of children with at least one immigrant parent only captures those whose parents live in the same household. As a result, this understates the voting potential of those turning 18 who have at least one immigrant parent.

USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation. The naturalization rate is calculated as the ratio of naturalized adults to the sum of naturalized and eligible-to-naturalize adults. See the “Data and Methods” section of the full report for details on estimates of the eligible-to-naturalize population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.

USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation. Universe includes the employed civilian non-institutional population age 16 or older. See the “Data and Methods” section of the full report for details on estimates of the undocumented and LPR population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.

USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation. Universe includes the civilian noninstitutional population ages 25-64 not living in group quarters who worked at all during the year prior to the survey. See the “Data and Methods” section of the full report for details on estimates of the undocumented and LPR population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average.

USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration analysis of 2016 5-year American Community Survey microdata from IPUMS USA and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation. Universe includes civilian non-institutional full-time wage and salary workers ages 25 through 64. See the “Data and Methods” section of the full report for details on estimates of the undocumented and LPR population. Data represent a 2012 through 2016 average. Values are in 2016 dollars.


30 Cort, “Spurred to Action or Retreat.”


33 Health Services Los Angeles County, “My Health LA.”


State of Immigrants in LA County

Executive Summary

January 2020

Please note that USC CSII will be changing our center’s name in 2020 to reflect our commitment to equity research that advances immigrant integration and racial justice. Please stay tuned for the official announcement in early 2020.