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THE FABRIC OF SLO COUNTY

UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERSITY AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF OUR IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY

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DIVERSITY COALITION
SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY



**The Fabric of SLO County: Understanding the Diversity and
Contributions of our Immigrant Community
January 2025**

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Introduction

Recent community disasters such as COVID, flooding, fires and heat waves have increased awareness in the community of the diversity of San Luis Obispo County's population. Heightened discussions over immigration policy and enforcement have also amplified the need to learn more about the complexities of our immigrant population. This is primarily a report on immigrants in our County, not the immigration system or issues at the border. Without knowing who our neighbors are, we cannot have a welcoming, healthy and prosperous community.

The lack of current and reliable information on immigrant families has hampered efforts to meet the needs of this population. Immigrants have been underrepresented in standard statistical surveys such as the Census, with multiple gaps in knowledge about the composition and characteristics of the evolving population. Moreover, the community lacks an overall understanding of who immigrants are in the county – when they came to SLO, where they came from, where they live and where they work.

The purpose of this report is to educate the broader community of policymakers, civic leaders, philanthropists, educational institutions and health and social services providers on the composition of and the diversity of needs of the immigrant population in San Luis Obispo County using current and reliable data.

This study reviews the history of immigration into the County, as well as the economic, social and educational statuses of the diverse population. It draws on Census data and local surveys and qualitative studies to identify the unmet needs and barriers to services faced by the immigrant community. The report will act as a data source to assist local public and private agencies in seeking and/or deploying funding to support the immigrant population in areas such as housing, health care, legal assistance, education, economic stability and family services.

We are a county of immigrants who live on the lands of the Indigenous Peoples of San Luis Obispo County, which includes the Salinan Tribe and the Yak tit'yu tit'yu Yak ti'hini Northern Chumash tribe. The indigenous peoples lived in this area millennia before any immigrants came to the area and claimed it as their own. Immigrants have been populating the region since the 1700's. The current immigrant populations are from all over the world including Latin America, Asia, Europe, Africa and North America, speak many different languages and represent diverse cultures.

Local philanthropies, nonprofits and agencies have joined to commission this report documenting and highlighting the immigrant population in San Luis Obispo County. Without MUST! Charities, The Community Foundation San Luis Obispo County, First 5 San Luis Obispo County, Diversity Coalition San Luis Obispo County and the County Board of Supervisors, this

project would not have been possible. All the conclusions and recommendations are those of the authors, and not necessarily the funders.

The data presented here are from the U.S. Census Bureau as well as numerous other statewide and local quantitative and qualitative reports. We use data on the immigrant population from the Census and American Community Survey, but also acknowledge that the documented undercounts in the Census may affect the reliability of the data. Most other surveys do not report on immigration statuses and using markers for immigration status such as language and ethnicity have limited value. Many non-English speakers, and most residents who indicate their ethnicity, e.g. the Latine population, were born in the U.S. We make recommendations on how to improve data collection.

The project was led by Joel Diringer, JD, MPH, a San Luis Obispo-based expert on immigration, community and farmworker data and policy. Joel is the project director on the San Luis Obispo Mexican Indigenous Study (2024). He was instrumental in the UC Merced Farmworker Health Study (2022), the COVID-19 Farmworker Health Study (2021), and the California Agricultural Workers Health Survey (2000). He has also written several community data reports including *How Are We Doing? A Summary of Community Data on San Luis Obispo County* (2018), and *Paradox in Paradise: Hidden Health Inequities on California's Central Coast* (2006). Joel is a co-founder of SLO County UndocuSupport and a member of the SLO Health Counts steering committee. More details can be found at diringerassociates.com.

Technical data assistance was provided by Ana Lucia Mendoza, MPH, and translation services by Erica Ruvalcaba-Heredia, PhD.

Terminology

Several terms are used interchangeably in public discourse, but they refer to distinct populations. Below is an explanation of key terms used in this report, along with a proportional Venn diagram to illustrate the size and overlap among these populations. For instance, while most agricultural workers are Latine, the majority of Latines are not agricultural workers.

Immigrant

An immigrant is someone who moves from their home country to live in another country, either permanently or for an extended period. Depending on the legal processes and the country they move to, immigrants may hold different statuses, such as permanent resident, refugee, or asylum seeker.

The U.S. Census defines immigrants as "foreign born," which includes both naturalized citizens and non-citizens. In this report, "immigrant" and "foreign born" are used interchangeably. However, the Census does not have data on undocumented immigrants, though estimates are made by researchers based on various Census variables.

Undocumented Immigrant

An undocumented immigrant is someone living in a country without legal authorization. This includes individuals who:

- Entered the country without proper documentation.
- Overstayed a valid visa.
- Lost legal status due to factors like a denied asylum claim or expired work permits.

Mixed-status Families

A mixed-status immigrant family is a family in which members have different immigration or citizenship statuses. This often means that some members are U.S. citizens or permanent residents, while others might be undocumented, have temporary visas, or are in the process of seeking asylum or other legal status. Mixed-status families face unique challenges because immigration laws affect different family members in different ways, especially regarding access to services, education, and healthcare, as well as risk of deportation for certain members.

Refugee and Asylee

Both refugees and asylees flee their home countries due to persecution, war, or fear of persecution based on factors such as race, religion, nationality, or political beliefs. The key difference is that refugees apply for refugee status outside the country they are fleeing, while asylees apply once they are inside the country or at its border.

The U.S. government sets an annual cap on the number of refugees admitted, but there is no limit on the number of individuals who may be granted asylum.

Latino/Latina, Latinx, Latine and Hispanic

These terms refer to people of Latin American descent, though they differ in their approach to gender inclusivity. None of these terms relate to immigration status.

- **Latino/Latina:** Gendered terms in Spanish, with "Latino" referring to males and "Latina" to females.
- **Latinx:** A gender-neutral alternative that avoids the traditional "-o" or "-a" endings, aimed at inclusivity, especially for non-binary and LGBTQ+ individuals.
- **Latine:** Another gender-neutral alternative, considered easier for Spanish speakers to use than Latinx.
- **Hispanic** refers to people who speak Spanish or are descended from Spanish-speaking countries. This includes Spain, Latin America, and Spanish-speaking Caribbean nations. Not everyone from Latin America are Latine, e.g. Brazilians. Members of indigenous communities may also not consider themselves Latine or Hispanic.

For this report, "Latine" is used as the standard term.

Farmworker

A **Farmworker** is someone who works directly on a farm, usually involved in tasks like planting, cultivating, and harvesting. In this report generally farmworker refers to field laborers, with distinctions made between:

- **Migrant Farmworker:** Moves regionally or across borders for seasonal work. Only thirteen percent of California farmworkers are migrants, including domestic migrants (32%) international migrants (46%), and newcomers who had been in the U.S. less than a year (20%).
- **Seasonal Farmworker:** Engages in agricultural labor during particular seasons but stays within a local area.

Indigenous immigrant

An **indigenous immigrant** refers to a person who belongs to an indigenous community or ethnic group from their home country and has migrated to another country, typically for reasons such as economic opportunity, conflict, persecution, or environmental challenges.

In San Luis Obispo County, the predominance of indigenous immigrants are from the southern Mexican states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. They usually speak variations of the Mixteco language, but may also speak Spanish and English. Other indigenous languages from Mexico spoken in the region include Triqui, Zapotec and Purepecha.

Immigration status v. ethnicity

Someone's ethnicity is often confused with whether they are an immigrant. In San Luis Obispo County, nearly 80 percent of those identified as Latino or Hispanic in the Census were born in the U.S., and only 20 percent are immigrants.

History of Immigration in San Luis Obispo County

San Luis Obispo County has a rich and varied history of immigration that mirrors broader historical trends in California and the United States. The region has seen waves of different immigrant populations over the centuries, shaping the cultural and economic landscape of the area.

- **Indigenous Populations:** Long before European contact, the region was home to indigenous populations, including the yak tit^yu tit^yu yak tit^hini (ytt) Northern Chumash Tribe, who lived in the coastal areas for thousands of years.
- **Spanish Colonization:** With the arrival of Spanish explorers and missionaries in the late 18th century, the area became part of the Spanish mission system, which dramatically altered indigenous life. Immigrants from Mexico followed and Spanish was the dominant language. California's first constitution, approved in 1849, was published in both English and Spanish. For its first 30 years, California was a bilingual state.
- **Anglo-American Migration:** The 19th century brought an influx of Anglo settlers following the Mexican-American War and California's statehood in 1850. This was a transformative time, bringing significant changes to land ownership and governance.
- **Chinese Railroad Workers:** In the late 19th century, Chinese immigrants arrived to work on the construction of railroads that connected California with the rest of the U.S. Many remained in the area, contributing to the agricultural and service sectors. Asian immigrants were subject to legal restrictions such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.
- **Japanese and Filipino Farm Workers:** Early in the 20th century, Japanese and Filipino immigrants became integral to the county's agricultural economy, particularly in vegetable and berry farming. Residents of Japanese ancestry suffered discrimination and forced internment into concentration camps during World War II.
- **Bracero Program:** During and after World War II, the Bracero Program brought Mexican laborers to the U.S. to work in agriculture, including in San Luis Obispo County. Many workers remained in the area after the program ended, and their families continue to contribute to the local agricultural industry.
- **Recent Immigration:** More recently, immigrants from Mexico and indigenous groups from southern Mexico, particularly from Oaxaca and Guerrero, have become an essential part of the region's agricultural workforce. Various other immigrant groups have come to the county, but in lesser numbers.

The county's immigrant history reflects broader patterns of labor migration, economic development, and shifting policies toward immigration.

Current Immigrant Demographic Data

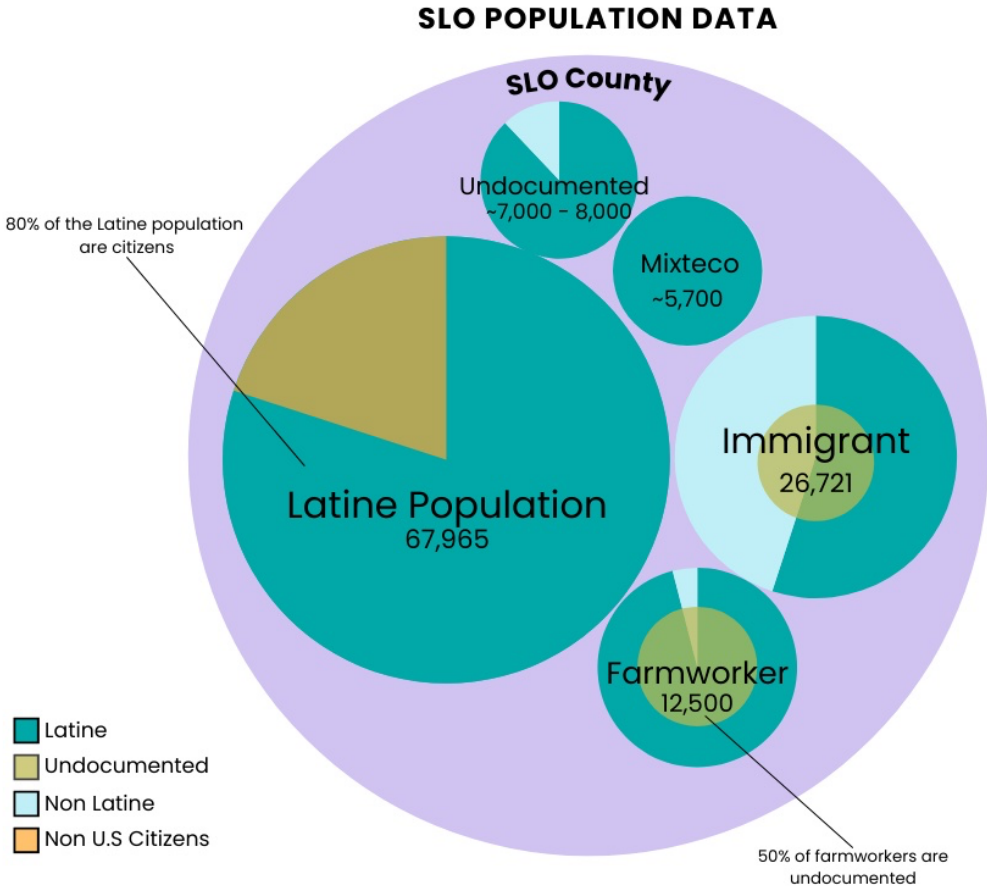


FIGURE 1: RELATIVE SIZES OF IMMIGRANT AND LATINE POPULATIONS

The diagram above depicts the relative size among various interconnected populations (both immigrant and U.S. born) in San Luis Obispo County and summarizes the data that is presented below. All circles of sub-populations are scaled to the size of the county overall. A few highlights of the data:

- The Census estimates that there are 281,712 residents of San Luis Obispo County.
- Immigrants comprise 10 percent of the overall population. 32% of the immigrants are non-Latine. Over half of immigrants are citizens of the U.S.¹
- The Latine population comprises 23% of the overall populations; 80% of Latines were born in the U.S.
- There are an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 undocumented immigrants in the County, or half of non-citizen immigrants.²

- There are estimates of 12,500 farmworkers in the County, 50% of whom are undocumented. Nearly all are Latine.³
- There are an estimated 5,700 Mixteco immigrants from Southern Mexico; most adults are farmworkers.⁴

Note that the data presented here come from different sources and methodologies, so the numbers may not add up.

Population Totals and Trends

San Luis Obispo County has a relatively small immigrant population compared to the state average, but it is still a significant portion of the local community. Representing nearly 10 percent of the population, or over 26,000 residents, immigrants come from all over the world. Over eight in ten immigrants have been in the U.S. for 15 or more years.

Immigrants are more likely than the overall population to be older, live in married households, and speak a language other than English at home. Immigrant households tend to be larger and have a larger percentage of adults compared to the general population.

Over two-thirds identify as Latine, but immigrants are not to be equated with the overall Latine population. Among the local 66,000 Latine residents, most are born in the U.S., with only about 20% born in a foreign country.

Out of a total county population of 281,712 people, nearly 10% (9.5% or 26,721 individuals) are foreign born. This is lower than the state average of 28%. Among the foreign born residents, over-half are naturalized citizens.

- 52% (13,915 individuals) are naturalized U.S. citizens.
- 48% (12,805 individuals) are not U.S. citizens.

Trends: Over the years, the foreign born population has fluctuated. In the late 1800s, foreign born residents made up about 22% of the county's population, but this figure dropped to a low of 5% by 1970. Today, the foreign born population stands at about 10%.⁵

As shown in the figures below, over the 10 years preceding 2022:

- The total population of immigrants and foreign born immigrants has dipped slightly, while the number of naturalized citizens has increased slightly.
- The median age of all immigrants has increased slightly, while the total population in the county has remained steady.
- Among the immigrant population, the percentage of elderly (65+) has increased slightly, the percentage of adults ages 18-64 has dropped slightly, and the percentage of children has remained steady.

- The percentage of immigrants identifying as Hispanic or Latino has dropped.

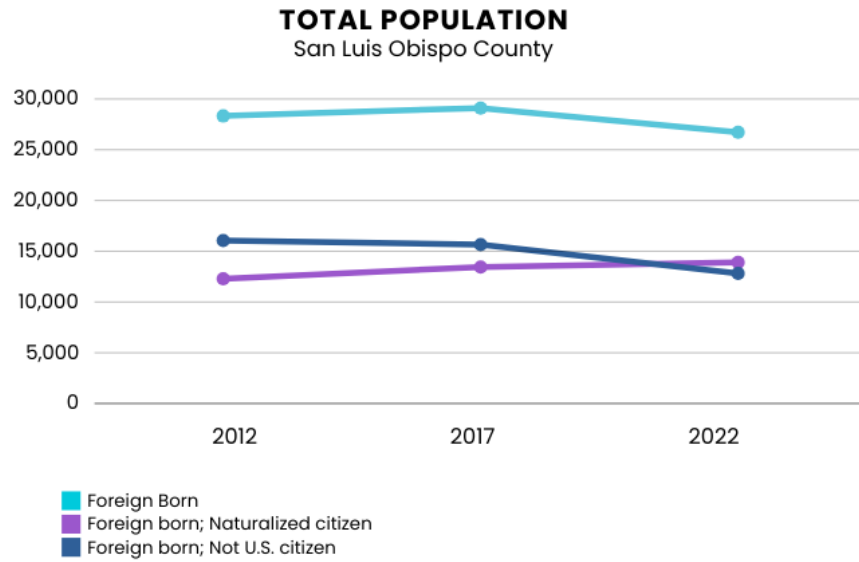


FIGURE 2: 10 YEAR POPULATION TRENDS

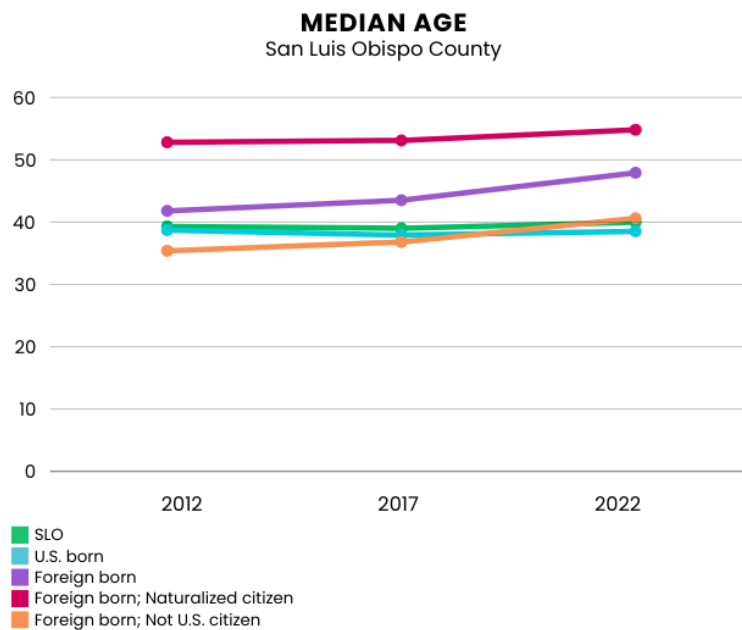


FIGURE 3: 10 YEAR MEDIAN AGE TRENDS

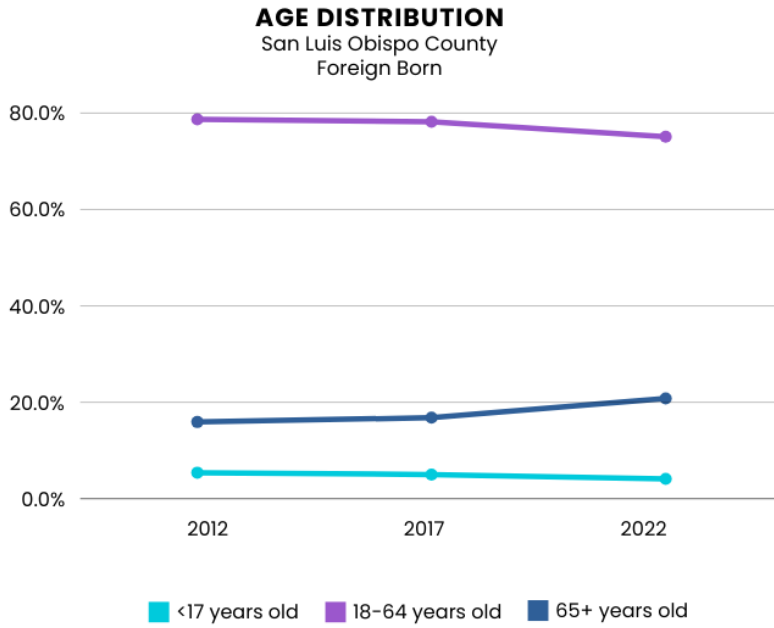


FIGURE 4: 10 YEAR AGE DISTRIBUTION TRENDS

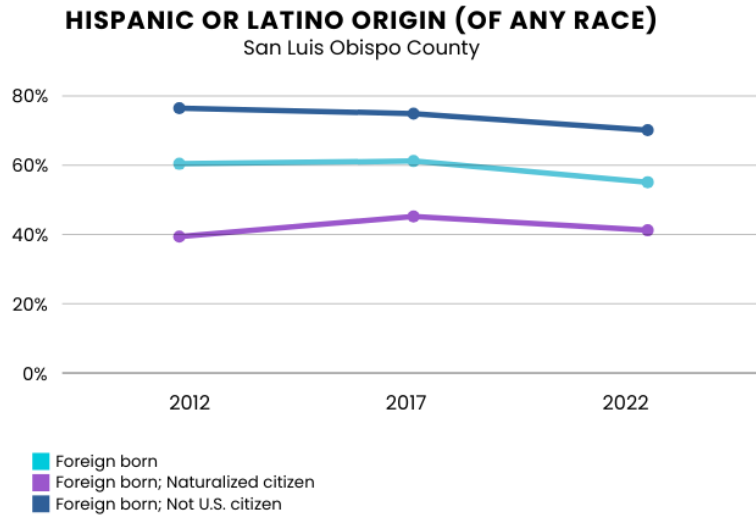


FIGURE 5: 10 YEAR ETHNICITY TRENDS

Origin of Immigrant Population

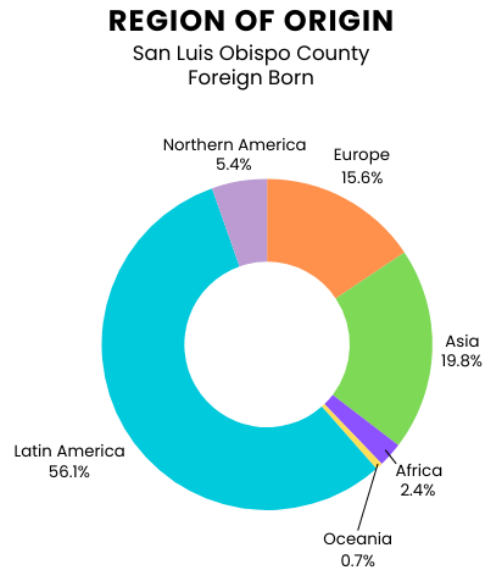


FIGURE 6: ORIGINS OF IMMIGRANT POPULATION

Immigrants in San Luis Obispo County come from diverse regions with about half from Latin America:

- 56% from Latin America
- 20% from Asia
- 16% from Europe
- 2% from Africa
- Less than 1% from Oceania

Year of Entry

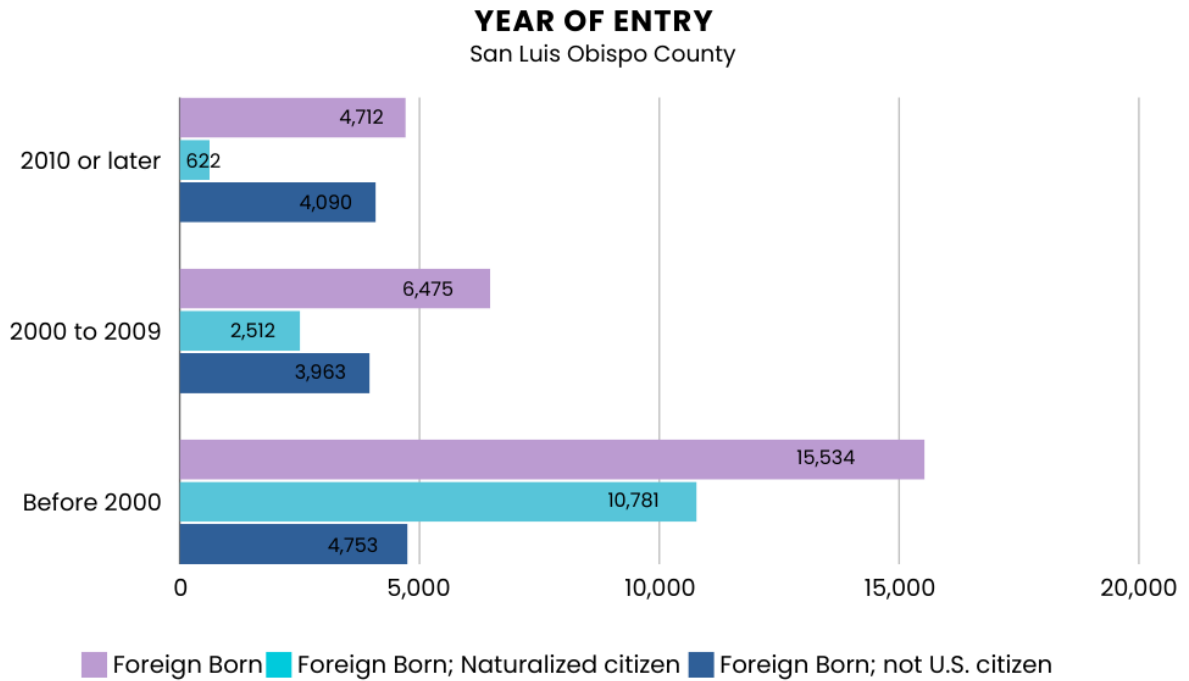


FIGURE 7: YEAR OF ENTRY INTO THE U.S.

Immigrants are long term residents in this county. Eight in ten (82%) immigrants have been in the U.S. for 15 or more years. Of these, 58% arrived before 2000, and 24% arrived between 2000 and 2009. Only 17 percent have come since 2010.

Race and Ethnicity

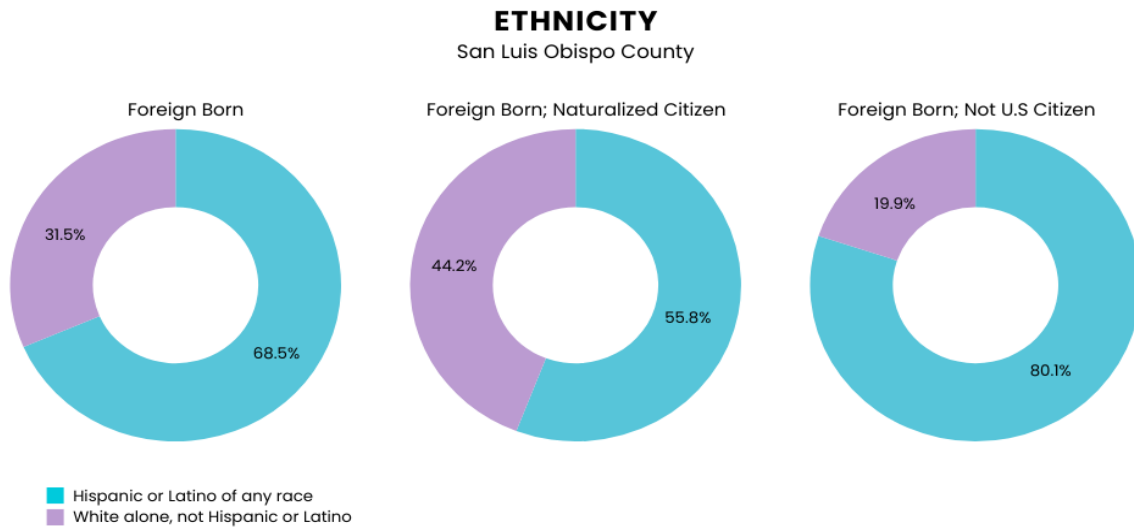


FIGURE 8: LATINE/NON-LATINE IMMIGRANTS

Latine individuals represent 69% of the immigrant population, with notable differences in citizenship status:

- 56% (7,765) of naturalized immigrants identify as Latine.
- 80% of non-citizen immigrants (10,257), including legal permanent residents and undocumented immigrants, are Latine.

RACE / ETHNICITY San Luis Obispo County

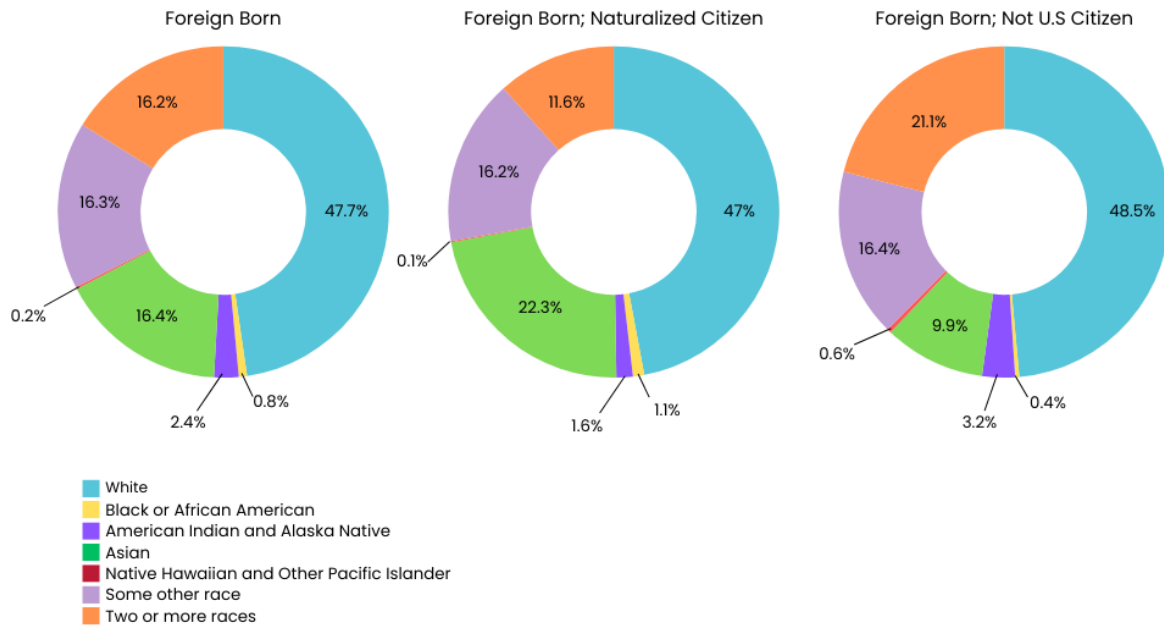


FIGURE 9: RACES OF IMMIGRANT POPULATION

Most of the foreign born population identifies as either White (48%, including many Latines) or Asian (16%). Nearly a third of immigrants identify as "some other race" (16%) or as belonging to two or more races (16%). Given the confusion in the race and ethnicity questions in the Census categories, the racial categories will change in the 2030 Census and are explained below.

Undocumented Immigrants

The U.S. Census does not collect data on undocumented immigrants, so estimates are based on other sources. (See section on data limitations). According to the most recent estimates, between 6,900 and 8,000 undocumented residents live in San Luis Obispo County.

Approximately, 70% of undocumented immigrants have been in the U.S. more than 10 years.⁶

- The USC Immigrant Data Portal research estimates that 6,900 undocumented individuals reside in the county using 2021 data.⁷ An additional approximately 9,700 U.S. citizens and lawful residents in the County live in households with undocumented family members. Overall, there were 16,600 residents who were undocumented or lived in a household with undocumented family member(s) in 2021.
- The Migration Policy Institute estimates that in 2019, 8,000 undocumented individuals lived in the county, with 7,000 from Mexico or Central America.⁸

- Based on these estimates, perhaps between 54% and 62% of the 12,806 non-citizen immigrants in the county are undocumented, although given the documented undercounts in the Census, the number may be higher.

Note that these estimates from 2019 and 2021 data may not include many of the newly arrived Mixteco population, 60 percent of whom reported coming to San Luis Obispo County after 2019.⁹ This population alone may add between 2050 and 4800 to the total number of immigrants in the County.

Distribution of Immigrant and Latine Populations in the County

	Total Population	Latine - number	Latine - percent	Foreign Born	% foreign born non-citizen	Spanish speaking households	Below FPL	Uninsured
San Miguel	3,172	2,010	65%	1,313	53%	56%	30%	20%
Shandon	1,168	761	60%	203	53%	50%	7%	11%
Paso Robles	31,490	11,958	38%	4,983	55%	20%	11%	10%
Atascadero	29,773	5,546	20%	1,165	27%	9%	9%	6%
Cambria	5,678	1,260	22%	681	48%	19%	9%	9%
SLO City	47,063	8,729	19%	3,765	48%	10%	32%	5%
Los Osos	14,465	2,290	16%	1,152	43%	7%	9%	7%
Arroyo Grande	18,441	3,646	20%	1,165	27%	3%	6%	5%
Oceano	7,183	3,359	47%	1,264	45%	27%	14%	9%
Grover Beach	12,701	3,979	31%	1,321	45%	25%	11%	10%
Nipomo	18,176	8,041	44%	2,854	45%	30%	7%	4%
	2020 Census			2022 5-year ACS				

FIGURE 10: DISTRIBUTION OF IMMIGRANTS IN SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

The immigrant population is spread across the county, with higher concentrations in the North County (Paso Robles, San Miguel, and Shandon) and the South County (Arroyo Grande, Oceano,

Grover Beach, and Nipomo). The North County has a higher percentage of non-citizen immigrants compared to the South County.

Language

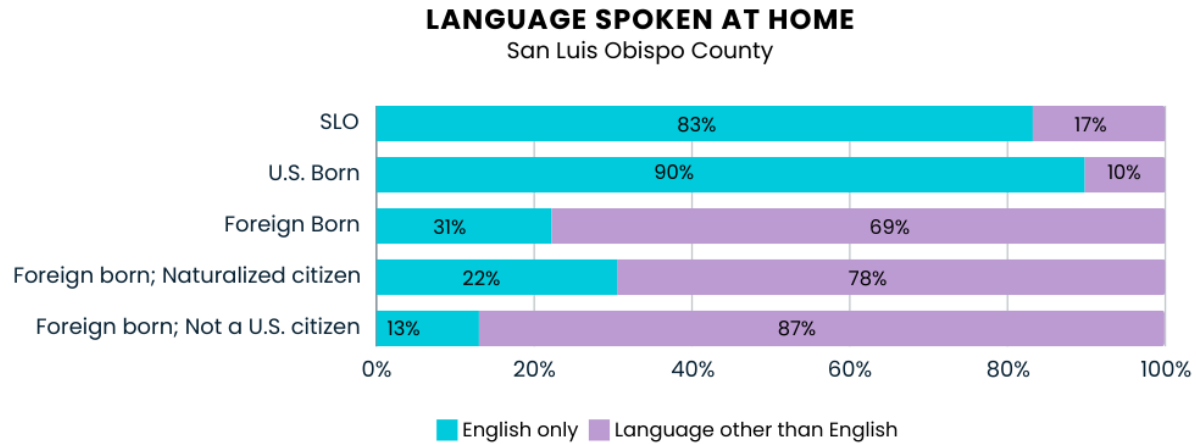


FIGURE 11: LANGUAGES SPOKEN AT HOME

Most immigrants (69%) speak a language other than English at home, with a majority of those speaking Spanish. About half of immigrants report speaking English “less than very well.”

- **Language Use:** 69% of immigrants in San Luis Obispo County speak a language other than English at home. This figure rises to 87% for non-citizen immigrants. In contrast, only 10 percent of U.S.-born residents speak a language other than English at home.
- Nine in 10 (87%) of the SLOMICS interviewees reported speaking Mixteco at home.
- 65% of non-citizen immigrants and 38% of naturalized citizens are Spanish speakers.
- **English Proficiency:** About 48% of immigrants report speaking English "less than very well," but this figure is much lower among naturalized citizens (28%) compared to non-citizens (61%).

Household Composition

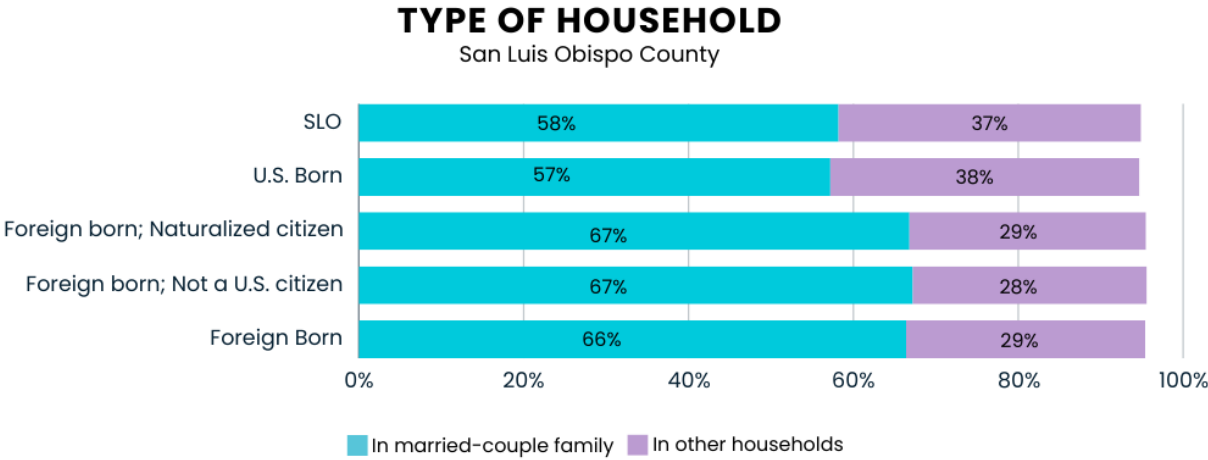


FIGURE 12: MARRIED AND OTHER HOUSEHOLDS

Immigrant households in San Luis Obispo County are more likely to have married couples than the general population, and they tend to be larger. Two-thirds (66%) of immigrants live in married-couple households, compared to 58% of the overall population.

- Family Size:** The average family size for immigrant households is 3.8, compared to 2.9 for the overall population.

Household Size

The average household size for immigrants is 3.3, compared to 2.5 for the overall population.

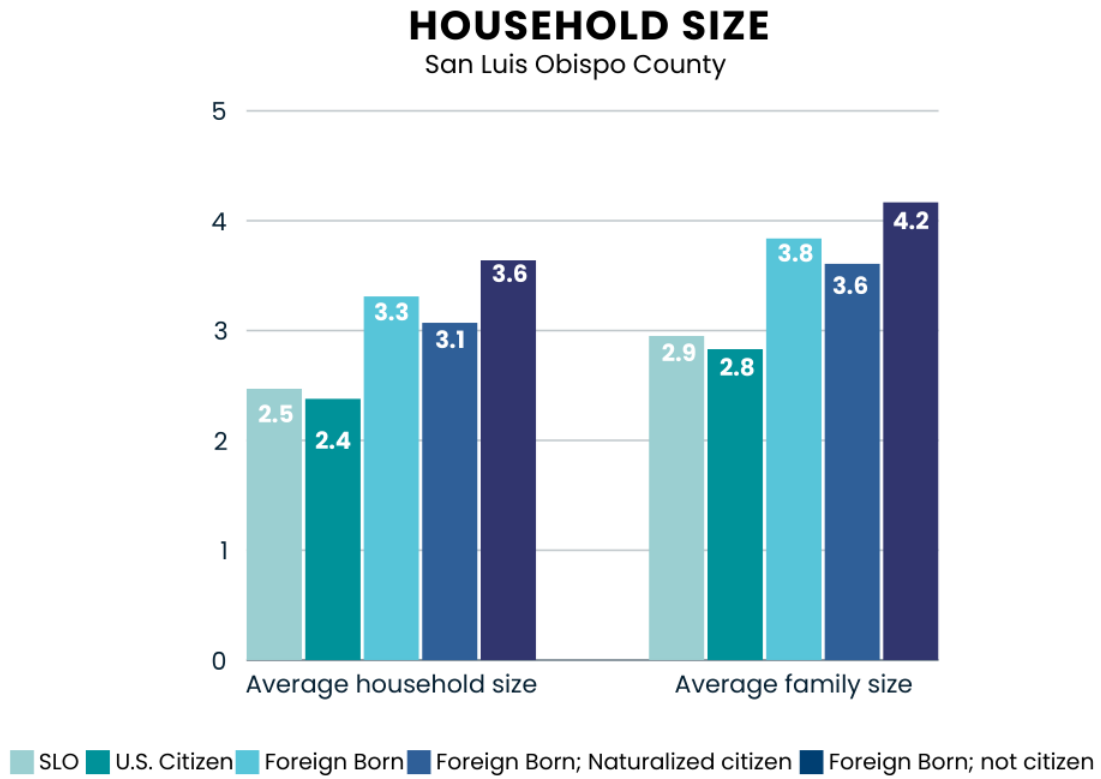


FIGURE 13: HOUSEHOLD SIZE

Median Age

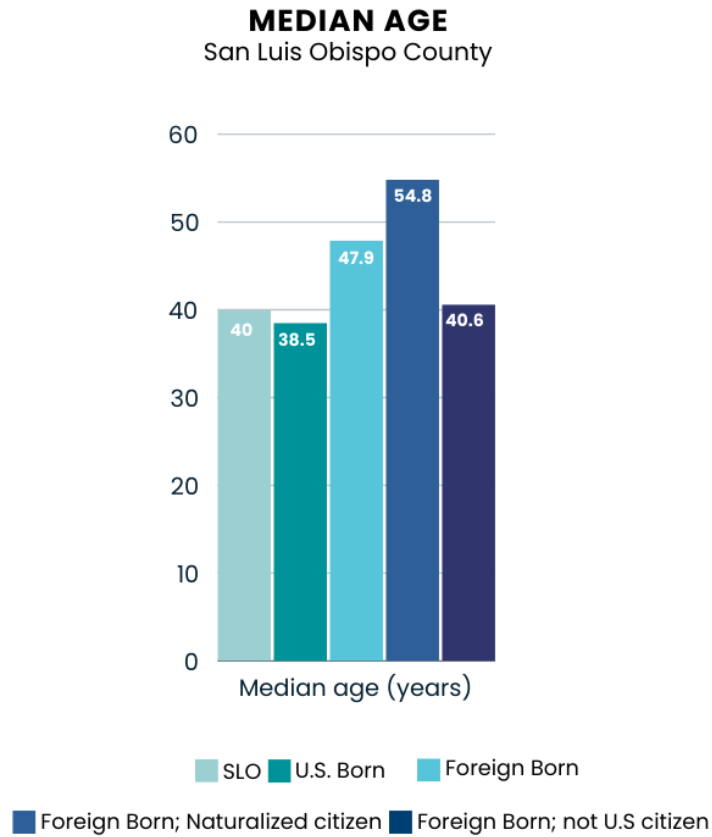


FIGURE 14: MEDIAN AGE

Immigrants are older than the SLO population as a whole. The median age of all immigrants is 47.9, compared to 40 for the overall population. Naturalized citizen immigrants are older on average (54.8) than non-citizens (40.6).

Age Distribution

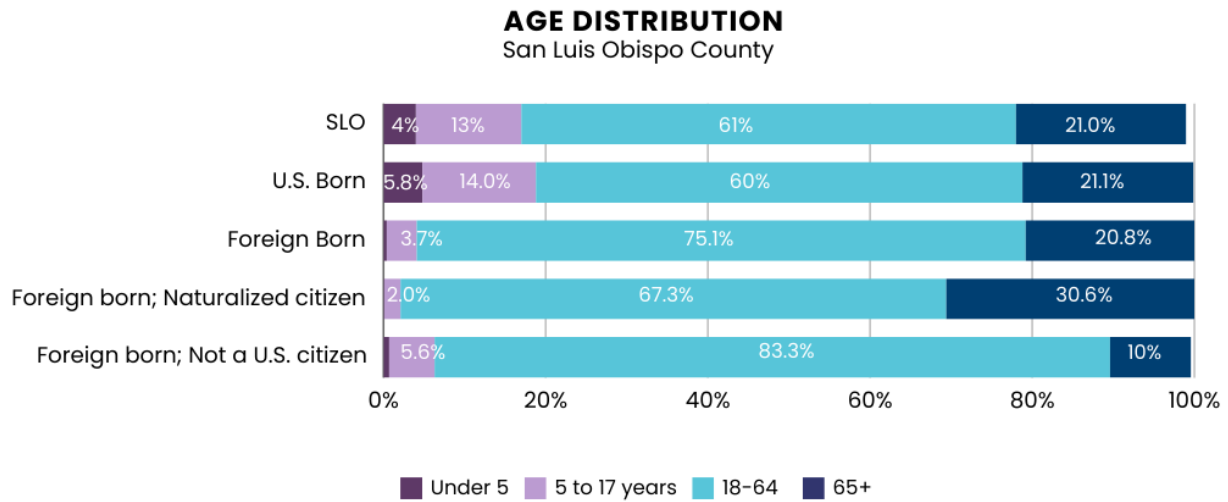


FIGURE 15: AGE DISTRIBUTION

The immigrant population in the County has many more adults 18-64 (75%), compared to the population as a whole (61%). Nearly 80 percent of immigrants are under age 65, a figure comparable to the overall population. They also have a fewer percentage of children (5%), compared to 17 percent for the total population.

There are significant differences between immigrant citizens and non-citizens. The foreign born citizens have lower percentage of adults (67%) than the noncitizen immigrants (83%). A further breakdown of the average age for children and youth is above.

Special Populations

Farmworkers

- San Luis Obispo County relies heavily on farmworkers to support its \$2.5 billion agricultural industry. Farmworkers are the backbone of the county's wine and grape production, among other crops.
- Estimates suggest there are between 9,000 and 15,000 farmworkers in the county.¹⁰
- There are also an increasing number of temporary foreign workers through the H-2A visa program, with 1,185 H-2A workers approved for the county.¹¹
- Demographics: The majority (84%) of California farmworkers are from Mexico, with 4% from Central America. Nearly all (96%) identify as Hispanic, and approximately 9% are indigenous.
- Approximately one-third (34%) of undocumented immigrants, and one-quarter of legal permanent residents in San Luis Obispo County work in agriculture.¹²
- Approximately 40 percent of those in the entire agricultural industry are immigrants, according to our calculation of ACS data.
- Documentation Status: Less than half (49%) of California farmworkers have work authorization, with the remainder being undocumented.¹³
- Thirteen percent of California farmworkers are migrants. Among them, one-third (32%) were domestic migrants, almost half were international migrants (46%), and 20 percent of migrants were newcomers who had been in the U.S. less than a year.¹⁴

Mexican Indigenous Families

San Luis Obispo County is home to a significant population of Mexican indigenous immigrants, primarily from the state of Guerrero. The 2023 San Luis Obispo Mexican Indigenous Community Study (SLOMICS) estimated that there are between 3,430 and 8,000 Mexican indigenous immigrants in the county.¹⁵

Household Composition: The average household size for indigenous families is seven people, often spanning multiple generations. Most individuals live with a spouse/partner (63%) and have children under 18 (65%). Of those with children, 87% reported having children under the age of five.

Indigenous families are primarily employed in agriculture, working in the wine and strawberry industries. However, they face extreme financial challenges, with 80% of respondents in SLOMICS reporting earnings of less than \$2,500 per month.

Families with Children

Data from the Central Coast Regional Equity Initiative show that many Latine and Asian American youth under the age of 18 live with one or more undocumented parents. In San Luis Obispo County, 24% of Latine children live with one or more undocumented parents. Overall, 11% of children in the County live with at least one undocumented parent.¹⁶

Many immigrant families in the county face higher poverty rates, particularly non-citizen families with children. Approximately 21% of non-citizen families with children under 18 live below the poverty level, compared to 9% of all families in the county.

Immigrant families are also more likely to have more than one worker in the household, increasing the need for affordable childcare. On average, non-citizen immigrant households have 1.7 workers, compared to 1.2 for all households in the County.

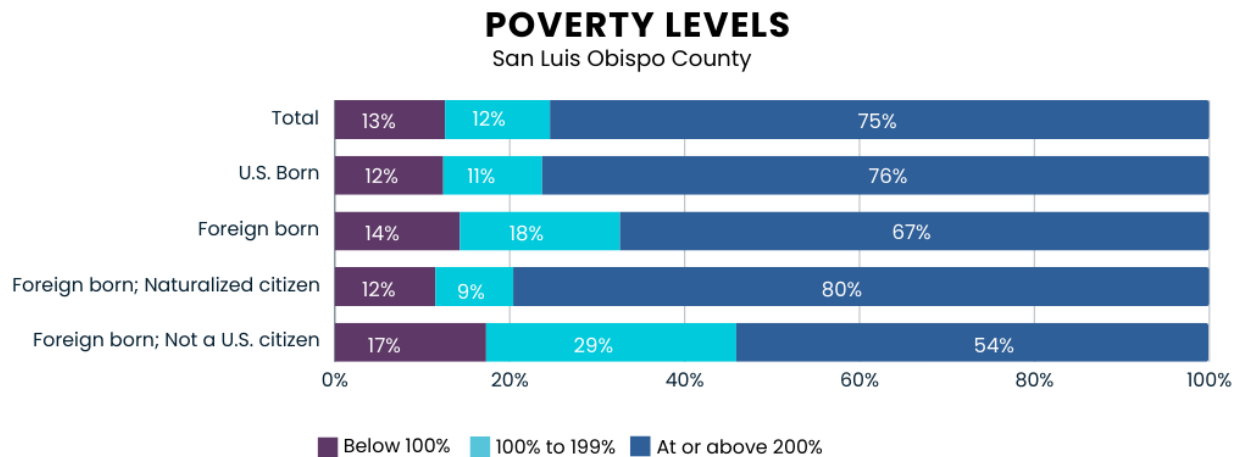


FIGURE 16: POVERTY LEVELS

Age Distribution of Children and Youth

In the County, there are 3207 children and youth through age 24, born outside the US. Only a very small number of these children are under age 5: 107, of which 90 are not citizens. There are 989 immigrant children between the ages of 5 and 17, of whom 717 are not citizens. There are far more transitional age youth ages 18 to 24 (2111) than children under 18 years of age.

Interestingly, there are far more English language learners in the schools (4,098) than the total number of foreign born children between the ages of 5 and 17 (989), indicating that most of the English language learners were born in the country.

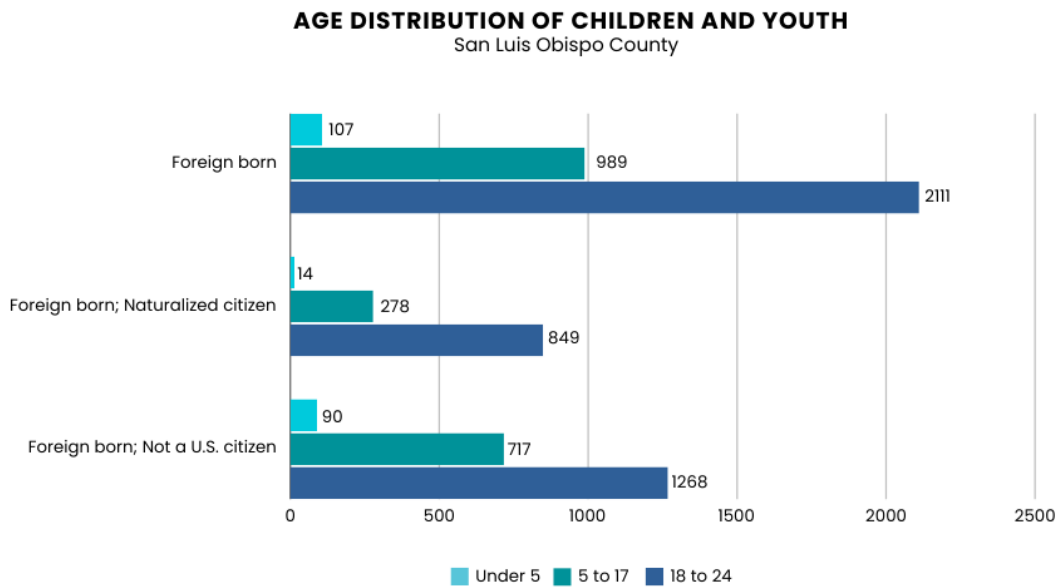


FIGURE 17: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Policies and Barriers Impacting Immigrant Participation in Programs

Immigration status is a significant factor in determining access to basic rights and services, including employment, healthcare, education, and social services. Immigration status impacts eligibility for public programs, complicating immigrants' ability to participate fully in community life.

Immigration Law

The U.S. immigration system is complex and often challenging for immigrants to navigate. For those who entered the country illegally or overstayed their visas, adjusting their status is difficult. The system primarily favors those with close family ties and higher educated professionals. Even when eligible, many wait decades for visas.¹⁷

The last major comprehensive immigration reform occurred in 1986 with the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which legalized millions of undocumented immigrants. Since then, immigration reform has eluded Congress, and the most recent bi-partisan legislation got wrapped up in the presidential election and died. Changes made by Executive Orders have met with limited success and are subject to court challenges and shifting political winds.

Incremental changes in immigration policy have been made for certain groups, such as refugees from Afghanistan, Haiti and Cuba, victims of domestic violence, and undocumented individuals brought to the U.S. as children (often referred to as "Dreamers" or "DACA" recipients). However, for most undocumented immigrants, there is no clear path to legal status.

Few immigration legal services are available in San Luis Obispo County. Catholic Charities provides limited immigration and citizenship services in the county, and several organizations in Santa Barbara County that will serve SLO County residents. There are also several private immigration lawyers for those who can afford their services.¹⁸ Cal Poly and Cuesta College students, staff and faculty may obtain legal assistance through various campus programs.

DACA

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, created by executive order in 2012, provides temporary protection from deportation and work authorization for certain undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children. It also allows DACA recipients to receive Medi-Cal in California as well as Covered California benefits. While DACA offers some benefits, it does not provide a path to citizenship. Due to legal challenges, no new DACA applications are currently being accepted, although existing recipients can renew their status.¹⁹

The suspension of new applications for DACA have left thousands of "Dreamers" without legal status, affecting their ability to work, travel and obtain health coverage. It has also affected undocumented student enrollment in California's public universities and colleges.²⁰

In San Luis Obispo County, there are fewer than 1,000 DACA recipients, though the exact number is not publicly available.²¹

Visas for victims of crime and domestic violence

The U nonimmigrant status (U visa) is set aside for victims of certain crimes who have suffered mental or physical abuse and are helpful to law enforcement or government officials in the investigation or prosecution of criminal activity. The legislation was intended to strengthen the ability of law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute cases of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking of noncitizens and other crimes, while also protecting victims of crimes who have suffered substantial mental or physical abuse due to the crime and are willing to help law enforcement authorities in the investigation or prosecution of the criminal activity. Unfortunately, there is a cap on the number of U visas that may be issued in any year and there is a years-long backlog of processing of U-Visa applications.

Similarly, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) allows an abused spouse or child of a U.S. Citizen or Lawful Permanent Resident or an abused parent of a U.S. Citizen to self-petition for lawful status in the United States, receive employment authorization, and access public benefits.

Barriers Identified by Immigrants

In 2021-23, SLO County UndocuSupport together with the Central Coast Coalition for Undocumented Student Success (CCC-USS) held listening sessions in Spanish and Mixteco with Latine immigrants to identify barriers to accessing services. Key concerns raised included:

- Lack of affordable housing.
- Limited access to medical care.
- Childcare issues.
- Language barriers, particularly the need for more interpretation services in Mixteco and Spanish.
- Fear of discrimination, racism, and distrust of institutions.
- Cost of food and utilities.

These findings are echoed in other local reports, such as the 2023 Community Health Assessment and the Immigration Resource Hub Implementation Plan, which highlighted the difficulties Spanish and Mixteco-speaking residents face when accessing services.

Eligibility for Programs

Immigrants in the United States face significant challenges accessing public benefits, with eligibility often dependent on their legal status. Programs such as CalFresh (SNAP or Food Stamps) and Medicaid (Medi-Cal) exclude undocumented individuals, though eligible family members in mixed-status households can apply.²²

California has been more progressive than other states in extending benefits to undocumented residents. This has been a major reversal since the Proposition 187 era in the 1990's of attempting to deny social services and education to undocumented persons. California has opened government programs to undocumented residents more than any other state. For example, undocumented residents can apply for Medi-Cal, driver's licenses, and some disaster assistance. However, barriers remain, particularly in accessing social services and employment protections.

Studies have shown the benefits of extending benefits to undocumented immigrants. As a result of extending health benefits to undocumented children, the proportion of non-citizen children who reported being in excellent health after the expansion increased by 10 percentage points from 20% to 30%.²³ A Stanford Graduate School of Business study found that issuing driver's licenses to unauthorized immigrants may have a significant effect in improving traffic safety. The researchers estimated that extending drivers licenses saved \$3.5 million in property damage costs because there were 4,000 fewer hit-and-run accidents.²⁴

Barriers to Services

Knowledge of Available Resources: Many immigrants, particularly those who do not speak English, struggle to find accurate and up-to-date information on available services. This gap in knowledge is especially pronounced for undocumented immigrants. To address this, SLO County UndocuSupport created an online Immigrant Services Guide that helps service providers, family members, and advocates connect people to local resources.²⁵

SLO County UndocuSupport also conducted a year-long process working with the community to develop a plan for an immigrant resources hub. The plan, released in August 2024, addresses the challenges faced by immigrants through creating an inclusive, welcoming, accessible Resource Hub for immigrant and other vulnerable community members to connect, receive support and access services, celebrate their cultural heritage and enjoy the abundance of San Luis Obispo County. SLO UndocuSupport is currently seeking partners to further develop the hub.

Language Barriers: Language barriers continue to be a major obstacle in receiving services. The SLOMICS study found that 42% of the Mexican indigenous population reported language as a barrier to healthcare. Many services are only available in English or Spanish, but indigenous

immigrants, such as Mixteco speakers, may not speak either language. Additionally, Mixteco is an oral language, with many variants, meaning written materials are ineffective.²⁶

Spanish speakers who do not know English, commonly immigrants, are often denied jobs and face harassment due to their immigration status. Those who are not English/Spanish-fluent miss information about education and training opportunities, job postings, social services, public health announcements, and other resources key to their financial and personal well-being.²⁷

A recent report from the California Health Care Foundation found that Californians with limited English proficiency often report fair or poor health status, experience discrimination within the health care system, and more likely identify as Latine/x. They frequently have trouble understanding health care providers and are less likely to access telehealth services or have a usual place to go for care. They are also more likely to have lower incomes, be uninsured, or enrolled in public health insurance programs and 23 percent are unaware of their right to an interpreter.²⁸

Trust, Fear, and Feeling Welcome: Distrust of institutions is a persistent barrier to accessing services. Immigrants, particularly undocumented individuals, often avoid seeking help due to fears of deportation or discrimination. These fears are compounded by negative experiences in their home countries or within the U.S. legal system.

Proposed changes to the “public charge” rules in 2019 had a chilling effect on immigrants' willingness to access public services, even if they were legally eligible. Although these rules have since been reversed, many immigrants still fear that using public benefits could affect their immigration status.

The proposed changes aimed to make it more difficult for immigrants to qualify for legal permanent residency or entry into the U.S. if they were deemed likely to rely on public assistance programs. The rules expanded disqualifying programs from what were previously limited to cash assistance, to a broader array of public benefits, such as receipt of Medicaid (Medi-Cal in California) and housing assistance.

In the years after the 2021 reversal of the changes to the “public charge” rules, the Urban Institute found that:

- About a quarter (23.6%) of adults in mixed-status families avoided safety net programs last year due to concerns about green card status.
- Adults with children in their families were twice as likely to avoid these programs compared to those without children.
- Over 10 percent of adults in families where all members were U.S. citizens or green card holders also avoided safety net programs because of these concerns.²⁹

In California, immigrants are still reluctant to apply for Medi-Cal despite the recent eligibility expansion, as well as food resources. The SLO County Food Bank interviewed 350 SLO County

residents and service providers in 2022, to better understand the food access challenges faced by Latines, seniors, unhoused individuals, and low-income residents. The survey found that distrust and stigma are key barriers to accessing food. This was particularly significant for Latine residents who expressed reluctance to access English-only hunger relief services.³⁰

Topic Areas of Concern for Immigrants

Labor and Industry

Economic Contributions of immigrants: Immigrant communities, including those without documentation, contribute significantly to the local and state economy through taxes and labor. Over half (55%) of all California workers are immigrants or children of immigrants.³¹ Undocumented Californians paid nearly \$8.5 billion in state and local taxes in 2022, according to estimates from the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP). This includes the sales and excise taxes paid on purchases, the property taxes paid on homes or indirectly through rents, individual and business income taxes, unemployment taxes, and other types of taxes.³² Yet, undocumented residents do not benefit from the bulk of their contributions and are excluded from many programs such as Social Security and unemployment insurance due to their status.

Where Immigrants Work: The agriculture, construction, hospitality, and food service sectors rely heavily on immigrant labor. Immigrants are much more likely to work in agriculture, construction, and the hospitality sector than the U.S. born population. Naturalized citizens are more likely to work in health and education than the U.S. born population.

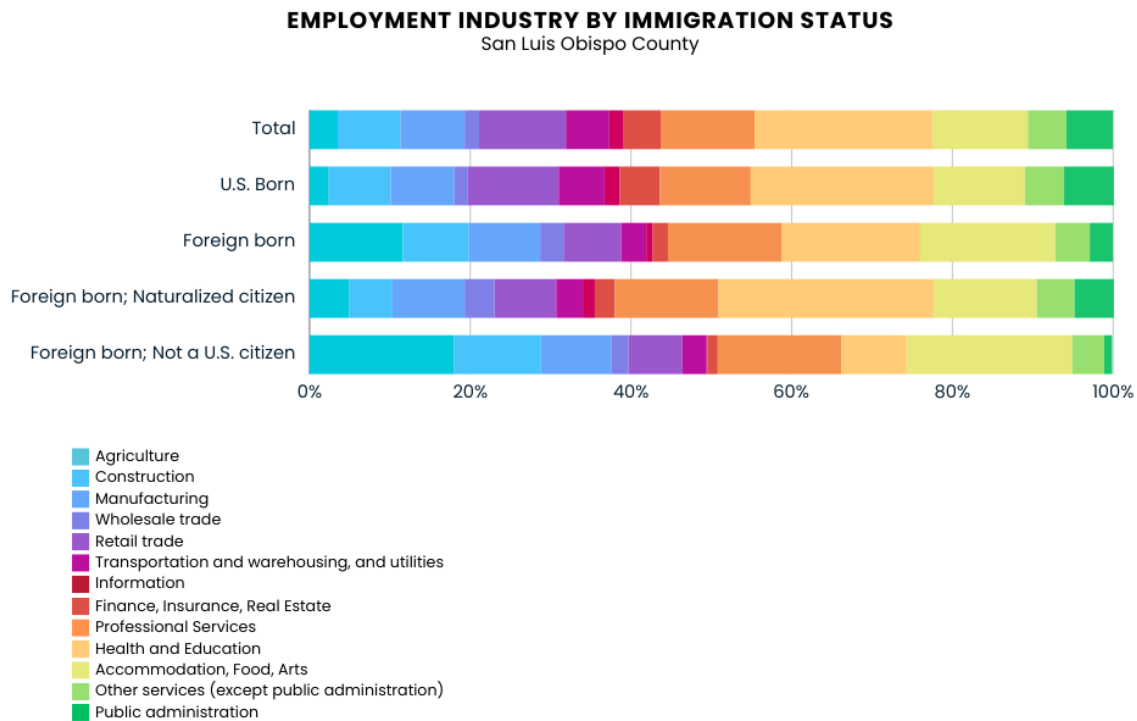


FIGURE 18: INDUSTRIES WHERE IMMIGRANTS WORK

The jobs in which Latine immigrants predominate on the Central Coast are as follows:

- 92% of farmworkers
- 54% of cooks
- 54% of construction laborers
- 49% of food preparation workers
- 48% of janitors
- 38% of truck drivers
- 32% of childcare workers³³

The industries in which immigrants work vary by immigration status. According to data from the Central Coast Regional Equity Initiative, nearly half (47%) of undocumented immigrants in San Luis Obispo County, work in agriculture and construction, as compared to 34% of legal permanent residents and 8% of naturalized citizens.³⁴ The National Association of Home Builders reports that immigrants comprise 40% of the construction workforce in California.³⁵

More research is needed on the industries that rely on immigrants since the Regional Equity report does not provide data for the hospitality industry, nor does it indicate the jobs that non-Latine immigrants have.

Wages: Immigrants in San Luis Obispo County earn significantly less than the general population. The median hourly wage for immigrants is \$18, compared to \$28 for all full-time workers in the county. Among the lowest mean hourly wage jobs in the county in 2023 were farmworkers (\$19.09), maids and housekeepers (\$19.03), and food preparation workers (\$18.97).³⁶ Undocumented workers in the Central Coast region earn between \$13 and \$14 per hour.

The United Way's **Real Cost Measure** for San Luis Obispo estimates that a family of four needs an annual income of \$97,982 to meet basic living costs such as housing, food, transportation, and healthcare. This figure is more than double the income earned by most immigrant workers in low-wage sectors.³⁷

Unemployment Insurance: Undocumented workers are ineligible for unemployment insurance, even if they contribute to the system through payroll taxes. This leaves them vulnerable during layoffs, natural disasters, and personal emergencies, with no financial safety net. A recent legislative proposal (SB227), known as the **Safety Net for All Workers**, would have allowed undocumented workers to receive up to \$300 per week in unemployment benefits for 20 weeks, was recently vetoed by the Governor.

Housing

The lack of affordable housing is one of the most pressing concerns for both immigrants and the general population in San Luis Obispo County. This challenge is particularly severe for non-citizen immigrants, who face additional barriers when trying to secure housing.

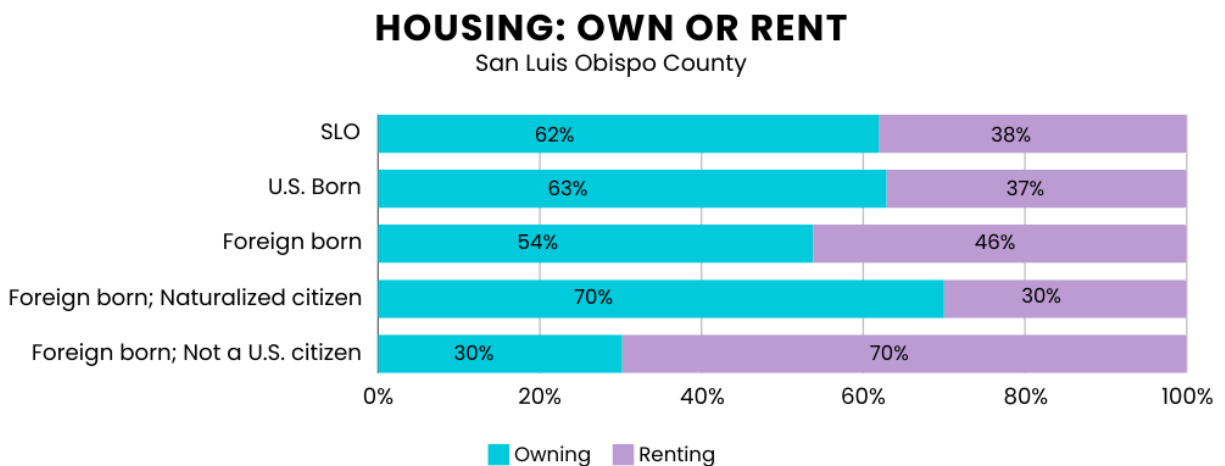


FIGURE 19: HOME OWNERSHIP

Home Ownership: Only 30% of non-citizen immigrants in the county own homes, compared to 62% of the general population and 70% of naturalized immigrants.

- Undocumented immigrants can legally own property, but securing financing and loans remains a significant challenge.

A recent legislative proposal aimed at expanding homeownership opportunities for undocumented residents was vetoed by the California governor. This bill would have expanded the California Dream for All program to offer subsidized loans to first-time undocumented homebuyers.

Overcrowding and Homelessness: Although there are few reports of outright homelessness among immigrants, overcrowded living conditions are more common. In the SLOMICS, families reported having as many as 11 people living in a single bedroom. On average, these immigrant households in the county contain seven individuals living in two bedrooms.

According to the American Community Survey (ACS), 25% of non-citizens in San Luis Obispo County live in overcrowded conditions (more than one person per room), compared to just 4% of the overall population.

The 2024 SLO County Homeless Point in Time Count found that only five percent of those interviewed listed their preferred language as Spanish, with three additional languages listed as

preferred: Tagalog, Mixteco and Choctaw. Latines composed 19 percent of the sheltered homeless persons and 17 percent on the unsheltered. A major caveat is the survey questionnaire was in English only, and very few surveyors spoke Spanish, although they had access to a phone language line. There are a large number of homeless persons in the Santa Maria riverbed, who anecdotally include a high percentage of farmworkers. It should be noted that the Point in Time Count does not measure overcrowding, “coach-surfing” or housing conditions.³⁸

GROSS RENT AS A PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

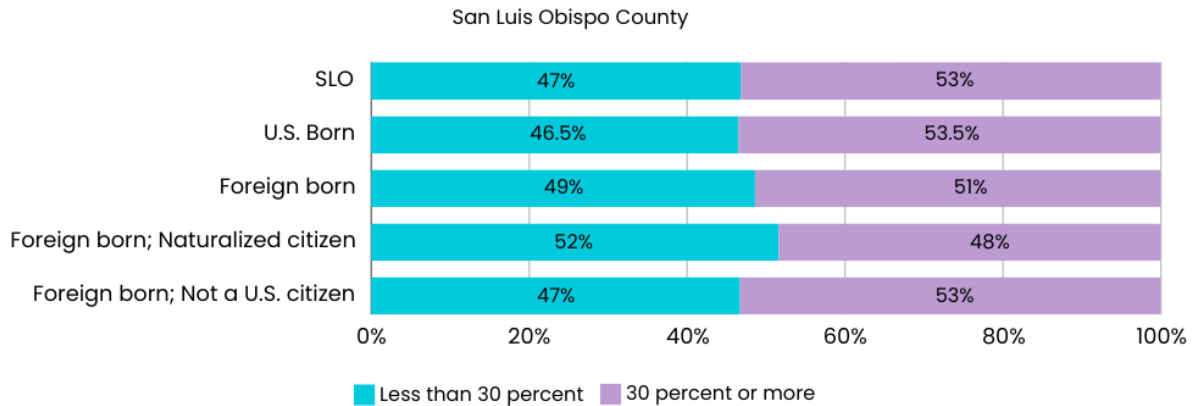


FIGURE 20: RENT BURDENS ON FAMILIES

Rent Burden: High rental costs impact the immigrant population significantly. More than half of non-citizens (53%) spend over 30% of their income on rent, which is similar to the burden faced by the general population. However, Spanish-speaking residents report higher struggles with paying rent. The 2023 Community Health Assessment found that 38% of Spanish-speaking respondents were unable to pay their rent at some point in the past year, compared to only 15% of the general population.³⁹

Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for most federal housing programs, including rent subsidies. Mixed-status families may qualify for partial housing assistance for eligible family members.⁴⁰

Additional barriers include high upfront deposits for rentals, the lack of social security numbers and no formal credit history.

Health

Immigrant populations in San Luis Obispo County face numerous barriers to accessing healthcare, including cost, language, transportation, and distrust of the U.S. healthcare system.

Access to Healthcare: Over half (53%) of Spanish-speaking residents surveyed in 2023 delayed seeking healthcare due to cost, compared to 40% of all respondents. Similar trends are seen in dental care, where 51% of Spanish-speaking residents delayed treatment, compared to 33% of the general population.⁴¹

Almost all interviewees (>99%) in SLOMICS indicated that they could not access Western medical care at some point in San Luis Obispo County. Fewer than half (46%) of those interviewed had ever had a physical exam, only a third (35%) had ever had a dental exam, and very few (16%) had ever had an eye exam. Transportation (48%), cost (48%) and language challenges (42%) were the most frequently reported barriers to accessing care among the Mixteco population.

Health Insurance: Health insurance is a critical factor in reducing healthcare costs, but undocumented immigrants have historically been ineligible for many programs. California's Medi-Cal program has expanded in recent years to cover undocumented children, young adults, and now, as of 2024, all low-income undocumented residents regardless of age. The expansion to cover adults 26-49 will benefit an estimated 700,000 people statewide. In January 2024, 2,337 SLO County undocumented residents ages 26-49 received full scope Medi-Cal benefits under CenCal Health through an adjustment of status from restricted scope Medi-Cal to full scope. State data show that there were 2,841 enrollees as of June 2024.⁴²

However, gaps remain. A UC Berkeley Labor Center report estimates that 520,000 undocumented Californians will remain uninsured, either because they earn too much to qualify for Medi-Cal or lack access to employer-based insurance.⁴³ Undocumented residents are not eligible for Covered California, and legislative efforts to remove immigration restrictions failed this year.

Among farmworkers, a UC Merced analysis found that nearly half (44 percent) of California farmworkers are over the income threshold for Medi-Cal and will remain uninsured after current coverage expansion.⁴⁴

Cultural barriers: Many immigrants rely on traditional medicine to meet their health needs. In the SLOMICS study, 65% of Mexican indigenous respondents reported visiting traditional healers, such as curanderos, due to barriers accessing Western healthcare.

Mental health: Stress and anxiety are serious issues for low-income populations in general, but more so for immigrants. Immigrants face the stress of migration from family and familiar environment to a new country where immigrants often face legal restrictions, limited job

opportunities, unfamiliar systems and racism and discrimination. Immigration itself is a social determinant of health.⁴⁵

Limited local data exist on mental health issues facing the immigrant population, but the following data show high levels of mental health challenges.

- Spanish-speaking respondents in the 2023 Community Health Assessment faced heightened stress, anxiety and depression when compared to English-speaking respondents.⁴⁶
- The Mexican Indigenous farmworkers surveyed in the SLOMICS in San Luis Obispo County reported suffering from mental and emotional distress: especially stress (estrés, 40%), sadness (tristeza, 36%), and anger (coraje, 25%).⁴⁷
- Nearly 20 percent of respondents in the UC Merced Farmworker Health Survey reported feeling nervous, anxious or on edge. Nearly one in three (29%) reported have at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), and 30 percent had more than four childhood adverse experiences.⁴⁸

There is a general shortage of mental health providers in SLO County, and insufficient Spanish speaking providers. The County Behavioral Health Department provides services in Spanish as does Community Health Centers and other community agencies. Stigma, distrust and cultural barriers limit the use of these services.

Available programs and services: Additional health programs are available to the undocumented population. These include public health services such as immunizations, WIC, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, breast and cervical cancer programs, the Child Health and Disability Program, and California Children’s Services.

Many providers are also available to uninsured undocumented residents. The Community Health Centers has a sliding scale for uninsured individuals, Noor Clinic provides care to the uninsured, as do reproductive health clinics. Hospitals have “charity care” policies that cover some medical debt, and emergency rooms must screen all persons and provide care to a person with an emergency medical condition, regardless of ability to pay.

Cultural medicine: Many immigrants rely on traditional medicine to meet their health needs. In the SLOMICS study, 65% of Mexican indigenous respondents reported visiting traditional healers, such as curanderos, due to barriers accessing Western healthcare.

Food and Hunger

Food insecurity disproportionately affects the immigrant community in San Luis Obispo County. Language barriers, immigration status, and economic hardship all contribute to higher rates of hunger among immigrant families. Trust issues and fear of public charge consequences prevent many immigrants from accessing food aid programs, despite eligibility.

Hunger and Food Access: Nearly two-thirds (64%) of respondents in the SLOMICS study reported experiencing hunger or being unable to afford food within the past 12 months.

Feeding America data also show that 17% of Latine residents in San Luis Obispo County were food insecure in 2022, compared to just 7% of white non-Hispanic residents.⁴⁹

Programs: A variety of food programs are available in San Luis Obispo County, including WIC (Women, Infants, and Children), school meal programs, and food distributions from the SLO Food Bank. However, CalFresh, the state's primary food assistance program, is not available to undocumented residents, though mixed-status households may qualify for prorated benefits. The California Food Assistance Program is also available for lawful temporary residents, victims of trafficking and those who are considered "permanently residing under color of law" (PRUCOL).

Education

Education plays a critical role in the economic mobility of immigrant communities. However, many immigrants in San Luis Obispo County face barriers to educational attainment and access to resources.

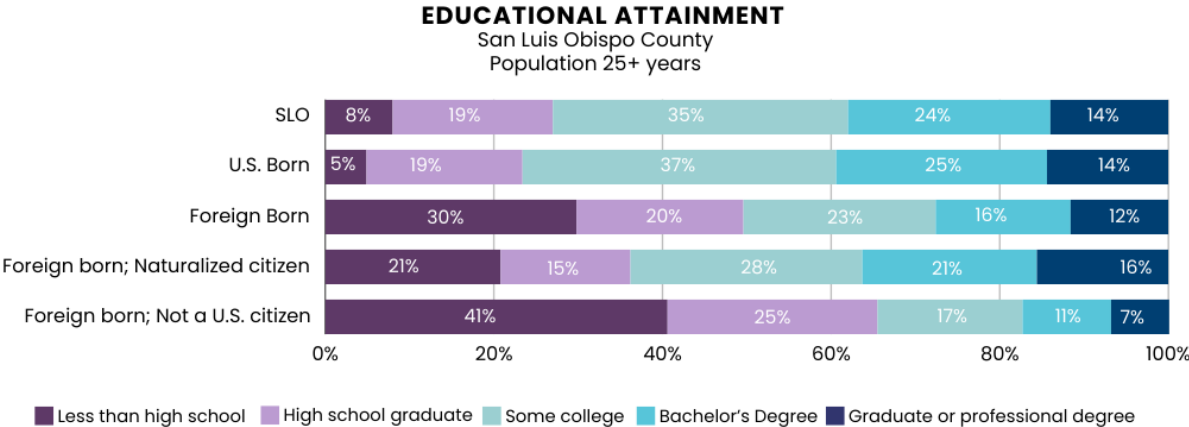


FIGURE 21: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Immigrants in San Luis Obispo County, particularly non-citizens, often have lower levels of formal education compared to the general population.

Low Educational Attainment: Approximately 41% of non-citizen adults in the county have less than a high school education, compared to just 8% of the overall population. At the other end of the educational spectrum, 17% of non-citizens have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 38% of the general population.

In the SLOMICS study, one in five respondents (21%) reported no formal educational attainment, while 44% had completed only grade school. Just 10% of respondents had completed high school, further highlighting the need for education and vocational training programs tailored to immigrant populations.

English Language Learners

Language acquisition is a key challenge for immigrant students in San Luis Obispo County.

- English Learners:** There are 4,098 English learners (EL) in county schools, representing 12.6% of the student population. When combined with students who began as English learners but are now classified as "fluent English proficient," the number rises to 8,362.

Spanish is the predominant native language for 91% of English learners, with smaller numbers speaking Mixteco, Arabic, Filipino, Vietnamese, and other languages.

- **District Variation:** The percentage of English learners varies widely among school districts, with some districts showing large disparities. For example, Paso Robles has 20.3% English learners, while neighboring Templeton has just 2.7%. The districts with the highest percentages of English learners include Coast Unified (Cambria, 38.2%), San Miguel (37.8%), and Shandon (43.5%).⁵⁰
- **Adult English learners:** English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are provided throughout the County through Cuesta College, the San Luis Coastal and Lucia Mar School Districts, SLO County Libraries, and other nonprofit organizations such as Literacy for Life.

Dual-language immersion programs

Dual immersion programs provide bilingual education to both Spanish and English speaking students to provide fluency in both Spanish and English and foster cultural competency. There are three such programs in San Luis Obispo County in San Luis Obispo, Baywood and Paso Robles.

Higher Education

In California, undocumented students are eligible for in-state tuition through Assembly Bill 540, and they can apply for state-based financial aid. Local institutions such as Cal Poly and Cuesta College offer programs to support undocumented students, including the **Dream Center** at Cal Poly and the **Monarch Dream Center** at Cuesta.

Additionally, the **Central Coast Coalition for Undocumented Student Success (CCC-USS)** advocates for policies that support undocumented students and challenge anti-immigrant ideologies in education.

In 2023, the California legislature proposed AB2586, which would allow undocumented students at public colleges and universities to work on campus addressing a key barrier for undocumented students who are currently barred from employment due to federal immigration laws. The Governor vetoed this bill.

Income Assistance

For many immigrant families, access to adequate income is a persistent challenge, particularly for those working in low-wage sectors. Public assistance programs are limited for undocumented immigrants, further exacerbating financial hardship.

Most undocumented immigrants work in the low wage sectors of agriculture, hospitality and household services (e.g. landscaping, personal care). They are not eligible for unemployment insurance, nor Social Security, although they pay into both systems. The acceptance of public income support can also affect any future ability to change one's immigration status under the public charge rules.

Eligibility for Assistance: Undocumented immigrants are largely excluded from federal income assistance programs, though certain benefits are available for "qualified" immigrants (lawful permanent residents, refugees, asylees, and others). These benefits include Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Social Security.

California offers some financial support for immigrants through state programs like:

- California's Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI), which provides aid to elderly and disabled immigrants.⁵¹
- Undocumented immigrants who file tax returns using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) are also eligible for the California Earned Income Tax Credit (CalEITC) and the Young Child Tax Credit (YCTC). In 2023, about 9% of CalEITC claimants were ITIN filers.⁵²

Financial services and literacy

Having access to and an understanding of the U.S. financials systems – banking, loans, business start-up, credit, consumer reporting, tenant screening and debt collection – is essential to the economic well-being of the immigrant population. Yet, language barriers deny financial services to 25 million people with limited English proficiency. Consumers with limited English proficiency are more likely to be foreign-born, to be noncitizens, and to live in poverty or financial precarity than their English-speaking counterparts.⁵³ While some bilingual services exist through financial institutions and community organizations, they can be strengthened on all levels.

Disaster Assistance

Immigrants, particularly those without legal status, are disproportionately affected by natural disasters and other emergencies. They often face significant barriers to receiving disaster relief, despite being among the most vulnerable populations during such events.

COVID-19 Pandemic Response

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the inequities in disaster relief. Federal stimulus payments initially excluded immigrant households if even one member was undocumented,

regardless of the status of other family members. While this exclusion was later reversed, the delay caused significant hardship for many immigrant families.

In response, non-governmental organizations and the State of California stepped in to fill the gap. SLO County UndocuSupport provided over \$300,000 in direct financial assistance to immigrant families excluded from federal benefits. Similarly, California launched a \$500 million support program for immigrant families affected by the pandemic.

FEMA and Disaster Assistance

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) generally leads disaster relief efforts, but services for undocumented immigrants are limited. While undocumented individuals are eligible for some short-term assistance (such as shelter, medical care, and legal services), they are generally excluded from direct cash aid. Mixed-status households, where some family members are U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents, may qualify for certain forms of aid.⁵⁴

Non-governmental organizations like the American Red Cross provide emergency relief to all individuals, regardless of immigration status, and can often offer a lifeline for immigrant communities during disasters. Additionally, California has provided interim relief in specific cases, such as the recent flooding in Planada, Merced County, which disproportionately affected immigrant farmworker communities.

Climate Change

The effects of climate change—including extreme heat, wildfire smoke, and drought—disproportionately impact low-income and immigrant communities. Outdoor workers such as farmworkers and construction workers are particularly vulnerable to heat-related illnesses, with foreign born workers facing additional risks due to language barriers and concerns about their immigration status. A 2024 study commissioned by the SLO County Public Health Department found that farmworkers' risk of heat-related deaths is 35 times higher than workers in other industries.⁵⁵

Foreign born farmworkers are particularly at risk of heat-related illness because of language barriers or concerns about their immigration status, which could hinder access to heat safety information and reduce their willingness to report heat related illness. Furthermore, farmworkers are commonly paid by the amount they harvest, which can dissuade them from taking breaks for shade or water.

The SLO Farmworker Outreach Task Force has identified several key programs to address these challenges, including:

- Resilience Centers for disaster relief.
- Air Quality and Extreme Heat Monitoring.
- Resources to Address Disaster-Related Stress and Mental Health.

To enhance farmworker safety, the Governor recently sign SB 1105 which requires an employer to provide paid sick days to an agricultural employee who works outside and requests the paid sick leave to avoid smoke, heat, or flooding conditions created by a local or state emergency.

Digital literacy

As access to services and educational opportunities become more electronic, the importance of broadband internet connectivity heightens. Many programs, such as unemployment insurance, require on-line applications. Limited English-speaking households are less likely to have an internet subscription, as are renters, persons with lower incomes, and lower educational attainment.

Household income and educational attainment of the householder, key indicators of socioeconomic status, are closely linked to computer ownership and internet subscription. In San Luis Obispo County in 2021, approximately 90 percent of lower income households below \$75,000 had a broadband internet subscription compared to 98 percent of higher income households. Similarly, 86% of households with less than high school or equivalency education had a broadband subscription compared to 98 percent of households with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Nationally, 16 percent of households earning \$25,000 or less were smartphone-only, compared to 5 percent of households earning \$150,000 or more; 17 percent of households headed by a householder with less than a high school diploma were smartphone-only, compared to 7 percent of households headed by a householder with a bachelor's degree or higher educational attainment.⁵⁶

In the SLOMICS, 95 percent of respondents reported having a cell phone, but only 70 percent had regular access to the internet. Two thirds (66%) expressed preferences for receiving health information by WhatsApp video or audio, or text messages.

Trends for the Future and Implications of Findings

As San Luis Obispo County's immigrant population continues to diversify, several key trends are emerging that will shape the future of the county's economy, public services, and social fabric.

Increased Fears and Distrust among Immigrants

As discussed above, there is a high degree of distrust and fear of accessing services and programs. With the recent discussions of increased immigration enforcement, the anxiety and reticence to engage with local services, employers and institutions. As shown with the proposed changes public charge regulations in 2018, there was a drop-off in the use of health services among immigrants that persisted long after the proposal was dropped in 2021.

Population and Demographic Shifts

The immigrant population, while currently smaller than in many other parts of California, is likely to increase, particularly with continued migration from Latin America and indigenous communities in Mexico. The county's overall demographic makeup will become increasingly diverse, and this will necessitate new approaches to public services, healthcare, and education.

Demographic shifts in San Luis Obispo County have been more gradual, with the majority of the population (67%) still identifying as non-Latinx White. However, the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) population has seen a significant increase. In 2021, one in three residents identified as BIPOC, compared to about one in four in 2000. This increase has been particularly pronounced in the Latinx community, which grew from 10% of the population in 1980 to 23% in 2021. Additionally, while the Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI) population remains a smaller segment of the county, the AAPI residents has increased by 50% since 2000.⁵⁷

Immigrants in California today are more settled and established than they were in 1990. They are much more likely to be naturalized citizens (54% in 2022 vs. 31% in 1990), have lived in the US longer (62% have lived in the US for over 20 years compared to 22% in 1990), and are more likely to speak English (42% speak only English or speak English very well, compared to 24% in 1990).⁵⁸

Generational Progress

Over successive generations, immigrant communities in the U.S. show significant upward mobility in education, income, and occupational status, alongside increased social integration and cultural adaptation.

Education: Second-generation immigrants often achieve higher levels of education than their parents, reaching or exceeding national averages, while third-generation immigrants maintain similar or higher educational attainment.

In California the adult children of immigrants (i.e., second-generation adults) tend to be much more highly educated than their parents. Almost all (93%) second-generation adults age 30–39

are high school graduates, compared to only about two-thirds (65%) of immigrant parents age 60–69. While second-generation adults are also more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than their parents’ generation (36% vs. 28%), they are less likely to do so than other US-born adults (48%).⁵⁹

Income and Occupation: Income levels and job positions improve notably across generations, with second-generation immigrants moving into middle-class or higher economic tiers. Third-generation immigrants typically secure positions in professional and managerial roles.

Children of immigrants from almost all countries do better economically than the average child of people born in the United States. Immigrants’ children are able to catch up to children of US-born parents and exhibit significant upward mobility, even if they grew up in poverty.⁶⁰

Social and Civic Integration: Civic engagement and social integration increase with each generation, with successive generations of immigrants participating actively in voting, community activities, and even public office.

For example, the number of Latine members of the California Legislature has increased significantly since 1992 where there were seven Latine in the 120-member California Legislature. By 1996, the California Latino Legislative Caucus had doubled to 14. Today, there are 38 members, 21 of whom are women.⁶¹

Voting increases over the generations but seem to dip in the third generation. The share of Latine youth who vote increases from the first to the second generation, but interestingly the third generation is less likely to vote. 28 percent of second generation Latine voted in the past two national elections, but only 24 percent of third generation Latines did so.⁶²

In 2021, there were 5,890 eligible-to-naturalize adults in San Luis Obispo County. Knowledge about the process, eligibility, legal support, and financial support can impact an individual’s likelihood to naturalize and their ability to participate in civic and electoral processes.⁶³

Workforce and Economy

Immigrants are integral to San Luis Obispo County’s agricultural, construction, hospitality and service industries. Their role in the workforce will remain crucial as these sectors evolve. The agriculture industry in San Luis Obispo County contributes over \$2.5 billion to the local economy.⁶⁴ Similarly, the tourism industry which relies heavily on immigrant labor generated \$2.3 billion in the county.⁶⁵

Labor shortages in agriculture, exacerbated by climate change, an aging workforce, and crackdowns on undocumented workers, may drive further reliance on immigrant labor, including the use of temporary foreign workers through programs like H-2A. However, rising wages and the increasing cost of living may push some immigrant families out of the county, especially if affordable housing remains scarce.

Conclusion

San Luis Obispo County's immigrant population is a vital component of the region's economic, social, and cultural fabric. However, this community faces significant barriers related to legal status, access to services, and economic inequality. The challenges of housing affordability, healthcare access, and wage disparity particularly affect immigrants, especially undocumented individuals and those in low-wage industries. Addressing these issues requires targeted policy efforts, enhanced community support, and greater access to resources such as language services and healthcare.

By investing in these areas, San Luis Obispo County can not only improve the quality of life for its immigrant population but also strengthen its overall economic resilience and social cohesion. Comprehensive data collection, inclusive policies, and community-building initiatives will be essential to supporting a more equitable future for all residents.

Sources and Limitations of Data

The data in this report were primarily derived from the **U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) 2022 Five-Year Estimates** and the **2020 Decennial Census**. Additional sources include local surveys, research reports, and data from state and federal agencies. However, several limitations should be noted:

1. **Census Undercount:** Immigrant populations are often undercounted in both the decennial Census and the ACS due to fear, mistrust, language barriers, and mobility. The Census Bureau has acknowledged that the Latine population in California was undercounted by 3.54% in the 2020 Census. Researchers have estimated that there would be a 12 percent undercount of first- and second-generation Latines in the 2020 Census. Up to one in four farmworkers were left out of the 2020 Census and The undercount has far-reaching consequences in apportionment of legislative districts, allocation of public funding, and a distortion of the nation’s demographic profile.⁶⁶
2. **Small Sample Sizes:** Many local surveys and statewide databases have small sample sizes for San Luis Obispo County, making it difficult to obtain reliable data on smaller populations, particularly undocumented immigrants and indigenous groups. For example, the **California Health Interview Survey (CHIS)** interviewed only 238 households in the county, limiting the statistical reliability of the results.
3. **Language Barriers:** Data collection efforts often fail to capture information from non-English and non-Spanish-speaking immigrant populations, such as Mixteco speakers. In many cases, survey instruments are only available in English and Spanish, excluding individuals who speak other languages.
4. **Data on Immigration Status:** Many studies do not include information on immigration status, making it difficult to assess the needs of undocumented immigrants. Where possible, this report has used language preference and other markers as proxies for immigration status.
5. **Estimates of Undocumented Immigrants:** Estimates of the undocumented population are based on statistical modeling, which involves assumptions that can introduce uncertainty. Researchers use methods such as “logical edits” and probability assignments to estimate undocumented populations from Census data. However, these estimates are subject to error, especially in smaller geographic areas like San Luis Obispo County.
6. **Race and ethnicity data:** Currently, the Census asks two separate questions: one about whether a person is "Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin," and another asking respondents to select their race from a list that includes categories such as White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. In the 2030 Census, a significant change will be made, and the race and ethnicity questions will be combined into a single question. This adjustment will allow respondents to select multiple categories if they feel that more than one applies to their identity. The new format aims to reduce the reliance on the “some other

race” option, which has been widely used by people who found the existing categories inadequate.⁶⁷

Recommendations to Improve Data Collection and Accuracy

1. ***Enhance Census Participation:*** Increase outreach to immigrant communities to ensure more accurate census counts. This includes providing multilingual resources and building trust within immigrant communities. Specific activities and strategies can be found in a Census Bureau Community Outreach Toolkit.⁶⁸ In prior Censuses, the State of California and other organizations have funded community based organizations to conduct outreach to traditionally undercounted populations. The Census Project is a network of national, state, and local organizations that support an inclusive and accurate Decennial Census and American Community Survey. Its website provides policy and technical strategies to improve the Census.⁶⁹
2. ***Collect More Language Data:*** Improve data collection on the languages spoken by immigrant populations, including indigenous languages like Mixteco, to better tailor services and resources.

In September 2024, Senate Bill 1016, the Latino & Indigenous Health Disparities Reduction Act was signed into law by the Governor. The legislation requires the state’s health department to collect and detail health data specific to Latino and Indigenous Mesoamerican subgroups, enabling a more accurate understanding of their unique health needs. SB 1016’s intent is to move policy and research away from generalized, aggregated data, and provide more specific data for previously undercounted populations.

3. ***Local Surveys and Data Collection:*** Conduct more multi-lingual local surveys to gather detailed data on immigrant populations, including their economic, health, and social conditions. Incorporating questions on immigration status and language will provide more accurate and actionable insights. In addition, further research is needed on the industries in which immigrants work and their economic contribution the the county.
4. ***Race and Ethnicity Data:*** Ensure that future surveys and studies include more detailed race and ethnicity data, especially for indigenous immigrant groups who may not identify as Latino or Hispanic.

For further information, please contact Joel Diring, Diring and Associates, 805.544.7722, joel@diringerassociates.com. The report may found online at the Community Foundation website: www.cfsloco.org, and www.diringerassociates.com.

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