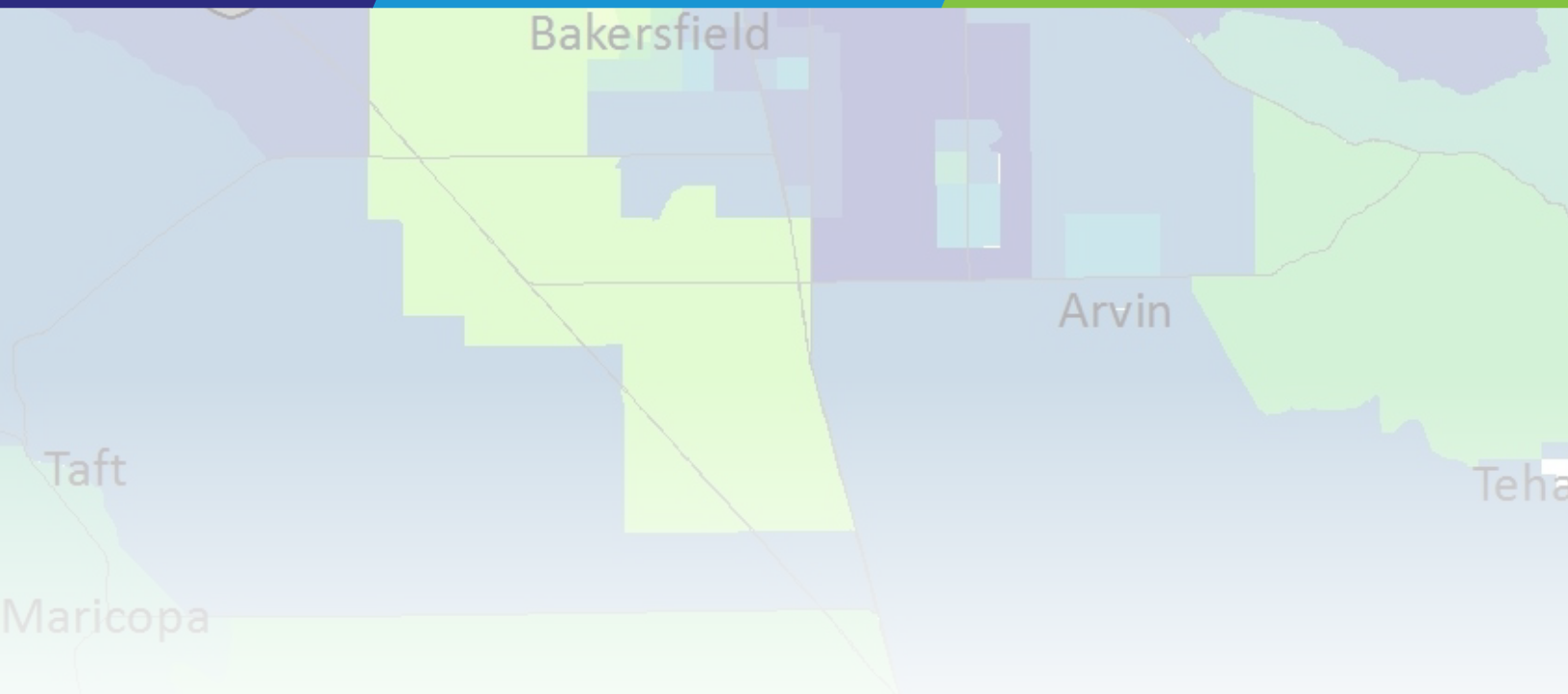
KERN COUNTY: GEOGRAPHY OF INEQUITY AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

October 2017



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Dear Colleagues,

There is plentiful data on the economic and social inequity found throughout the San Joaquin Valley. It is less common to see the evidence of inequity presented in tandem with evidence of the power of the people who are working to change systems and policies in order to create a more equitable region. This report, Kern County: Geography of Inequity and Opportunities for Action, commissioned by the San Joaquin Valley Health Fund and prepared by the UC Davis Center for Regional Change with funding from The California Endowment, does just that. It documents the systemic disparities created by a history of wealth concentrated in the hands of those who control access to Kern County's vast agricultural and industrial resources. Yet it is also full of hope. In addition to identifying policy opportunities in education, land use, health and the environment, it presents case examples of organizations that are working in Kern County communities to organize residents to bring about sustainable change.

The picture can look bleak. Kern County, with a population of more than 880,000, has an unemployment rate almost twice that of the state as a whole. It faces environmental woes, areas of concentrated poverty, disadvantaged unincorporated areas without services, insufficient primary health care providers, and a myriad of other problems. But the report's examples of community transformation demonstrate what a community can do when mobilized, as when the Committee for a Better Arvin secured funds from the Environmental Protection Agency to build a new drinking water well free from the groundwater pollution plume, and when immigrant parents, with the support of the Dolores Huerta Foundation, participated in Local Control Accountability Plan development. The inspirational stories show how community-based organizations and residents can change the trajectory of inequity when they have tools for effective community advocacy.

This report reveals the deep racial and social inequities in Kern County while also illustrating the power of community organizing for policy and systems change. We hope it motivates your action on behalf of the under-resourced and vulnerable communities of Kern County, and the broader valley, so that all residents of California can prosper.

Chet P. Hewitt
President and CEO
The Center at Sierra Health Foundation

Dr. Robert K. Ross
President and CEO
The California Endowment

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Opportunities for Action: Engaging Communities in Systems Change

Kern County's fertile soil and extensive oil and mineral deposits are a source of wealth, but prosperity eludes many of Kern's residents. These residents struggle to make ends meet on low-wage jobs and lack access to basic necessities such as clean air and water, healthy food, safe neighborhoods, high quality schools and health care. The stark inequities in Kern County and across the San Joaquin Valley are being addressed by organizations working to transform their communities into sustainable, prosperous, healthy and equitable places by empowering residents to inform local decision-making.

With funding from The California Endowment, the San Joaquin Valley Health Fund[1] commissioned the UC Davis Center for Regional Change to document conditions contributing to health inequities in Kern County, as well as efforts by nonprofit organizations to increase community capacity to advocate for policy and systems change initiatives that will increase social and health equity in Kern County and throughout the region.

Methods

Center for Regional Change researchers conducted more than 25 key informant interviews to identify policy and systems change opportunities to advance health equity through community action in Kern County. Interviewees included leaders in community-based and advocacy organizations, such as the UFW Foundation and the Center for Rural Legal Assistance, and representatives of public and private agencies, including First 5, school districts, health systems and the Department of Public Health. This report draws from information that emerged in these interviews as well as analysis of public secondary data and previously published research reports. In particular, the study uses the Regional Opportunity Index, which was developed by the Center for Regional Change to assess disparities in people- and placed-based opportunity across California. The report also draws on data presented in another report commissioned by the San Joaquin Valley Health Fund, with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Sierra Health Foundation and prepared by the Center for Regional Change, *California's San Joaquin Valley: A Region and Its Children Under Stress.*[2]

Cross-Cutting Themes

Analysis of interviews and other data revealed cross-cutting themes that were consistent with those identified in *California's San Joaquin Valley: A Region and Its Children Under Stress*. The following themes speak to the deeply entrenched nature of inequities in the region.

- A structural divide separates those who benefit from and control access to the region's abundant natural resources, and those who are impoverished by policy and planning decisions that have left them with inequitable access to these resources and other opportunities.

    - Social and health inequities exist across a number of dimensions including class, gender, race/ethnicity and immigration/documentation status, but are compounded when these dimensions intersect. Inequities are starkest for groups that face multiple forms of disadvantage. These groups are more vulnerable to social and environmental burdens, and have access to fewer resources.

- Political and economic leaders in existing power structures often are reluctant to view decision-making through an equity lens, which increases the need to build capacity among historically disenfranchised and vulnerable groups to advocate for policies and systems that improve conditions and opportunities for all.

- Community organizing and capacity building is hard, time-consuming work that does not produce immediate results. However, true and lasting change that promotes equity is unlikely to occur until the voices of disadvantaged residents are heard.

The following sections discuss these themes in greater detail.

The Geography of Inequity and Opportunity

Located at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, Kern County's fertile soil and abundant sunshine contribute to its second-place rank among California counties in terms of agricultural crop value.[3] Kern also sits atop large oil reserves, producing more oil than any other county in the nation.[4] Despite this wealth of natural resources, many of Kern's residents live in poverty and lack access to resources that promote health and well-being. In order for Kern County to truly prosper, a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities is necessary.

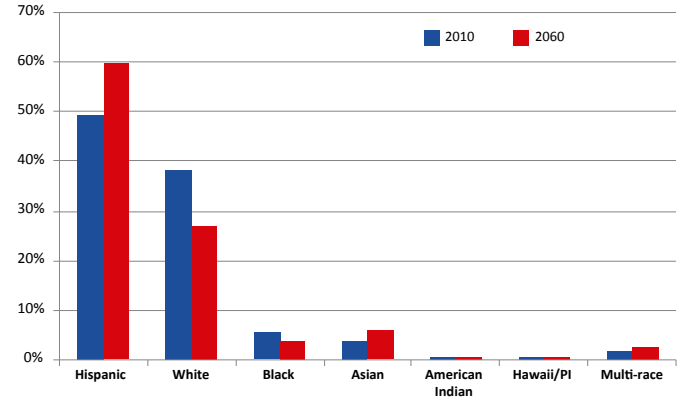
Numerous community-based organizations are working to build the capacity of immigrants, people of color and low-income populations to advocate for policies and systems that promote equity. These organizations follow in the footsteps of the farm worker movement, which has deep roots in Kern County. Under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta and Larry Itliong, the United Farm Workers (UFW) union utilized grassroots organizing techniques to build a social movement that advocated for higher pay, fair labor practices and the civil rights of farm workers. The UFW, headquartered in Kern County, became the largest union of agriculture workers in California and the Southwest, winning concessions from growers that included higher wages and better working and living conditions. Chavez, Huerta and Itliong recognized that true and lasting change would require more than harnessing the collective bargaining power of farm workers. As they organized, they educated workers about their civil rights and civic responsibilities, empowering them to participate in decisions impacting their communities. The UFW continues to organize and represent the interests of farm workers across the nation, while the UFW Foundation and Dolores Huerta Foundation focus on building the capacity of immigrants and other disadvantaged groups to advocate for equity and social justice. However, in recent years, the number of farm contracts and workers under UFW contracts has declined substantially, leaving many farm workers without workplace representation.[5]

The sheer size of Kern County – at 8,170 square miles it is the third largest county in the state – presents a challenge to organizations that help residents access resources and engage in civic opportunities. Rachel Vizcarra, Programs Assistant for UFW Foundation, alluded to this when she asked, *"How do you reach all of the different corners of Kern County, and make sure the message is passed on to everybody in the outlying areas [and that everybody] has access to the information, and to the resources, and the same opportunities and signs up for the programs that are available?"* The time and expense of traveling to distant meetings is just one of many barriers that suppress involvement by Kern's vulnerable residents in policy- and decision-making opportunities. This topic is addressed in greater detail in the Community Engagement Challenges and Opportunities section of this report.

Kern County Demographics

Kern County was home to nearly 850,000 people at the time of the 2010 Census, about 50% of whom were Hispanic/Latino and 40% were white (Figure 1), with African Americans (5%), Asians (4%; Filipinos and Indians are the two largest Asian ethnic groups), American Indians (1%), and other racial and ethnic groups (1%) making up the rest. Kern's population is expected to double by 2060, growing faster than the San Joaquin Valley region and the state as a whole. The Latino share of the population will continue to expand, constituting approximately 60% of the population by 2060. The Asian and multi-race populations are also expected to grow rapidly, but will remain a relatively small percentage of the total population.

Figure 1. Population in Kern County by Race/Ethnicity as a Share of the Total Population, 2010 (actual) and 2060 (projected)



Source: State of California, Department of Finance. P-1: State and County Population Projections by Race/Ethnicity, 2010, 2020, 2030, 2040, 2050, and 2060 (as of July 1). December 15, 2014.

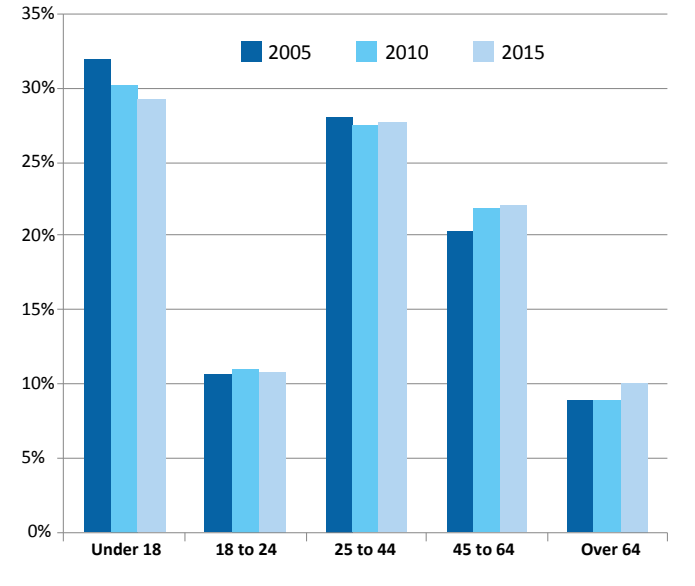
Roughly 20% of Kern County residents are foreign born, and approximately 40% of children have a foreign-born parent.[6] Children who participate in programs for English Learners at school reveal the county's cultural

diversity in the languages they speak at home: Spanish, Hmong, Punjabi, Arabic, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Korean, Cantonese and Russian, among others.[7] Kern County's ethnic diversity is often overlooked as a resource that can enhance social and economic conditions by increasing innovation, productivity and the presence of desirable amenities.[8] Those goals can be promoted by valuing diversity and facilitating immigrant integration in a culturally sensitive manner.

Kern County is young, with nearly 1 in 3 residents children under the age of 18 (Figure 2), but the youth share of the population is declining and the over-44 population is increasing. These trends mirror changes in the age distribution for California as a whole, although Kern residents are younger, with a median age of 31.4 years in 2015 compared to the statewide median of 36.2 years.

As of January 2016, Bakersfield was home to about 43% of Kern County residents. Another 22% lived in other incorporated cities, with the remainder in unincorporated parts of the county.[9] A detailed analysis of Census Bureau and county parcel data revealed that roughly 40% of residents in unincorporated areas, or 140,000 individuals, lived in disadvantaged unincorporated communities (DUCs) in 2013. These are "places that are densely settled, outside of city limits, and low income."[10] Some DUCs originated as farm worker camps and settlements and are still surrounded by agricultural land; others are adjacent to or encompassed by cities, yet do not receive services from them. In both cases, years of neglect and disinvestment, and lack of representation in decisions about the allocation of resources, contribute to living conditions that are unsafe and unhealthy. Many of the 96 DUCs in Kern County lack access to basic services typically provided by municipalities, such as clean water, sewer systems, sidewalks, streetlights, and adequate police and fire protection.

Figure 2. Age Distribution in Kern County, 2005-2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Table S0101, 2005, 2010, 2015

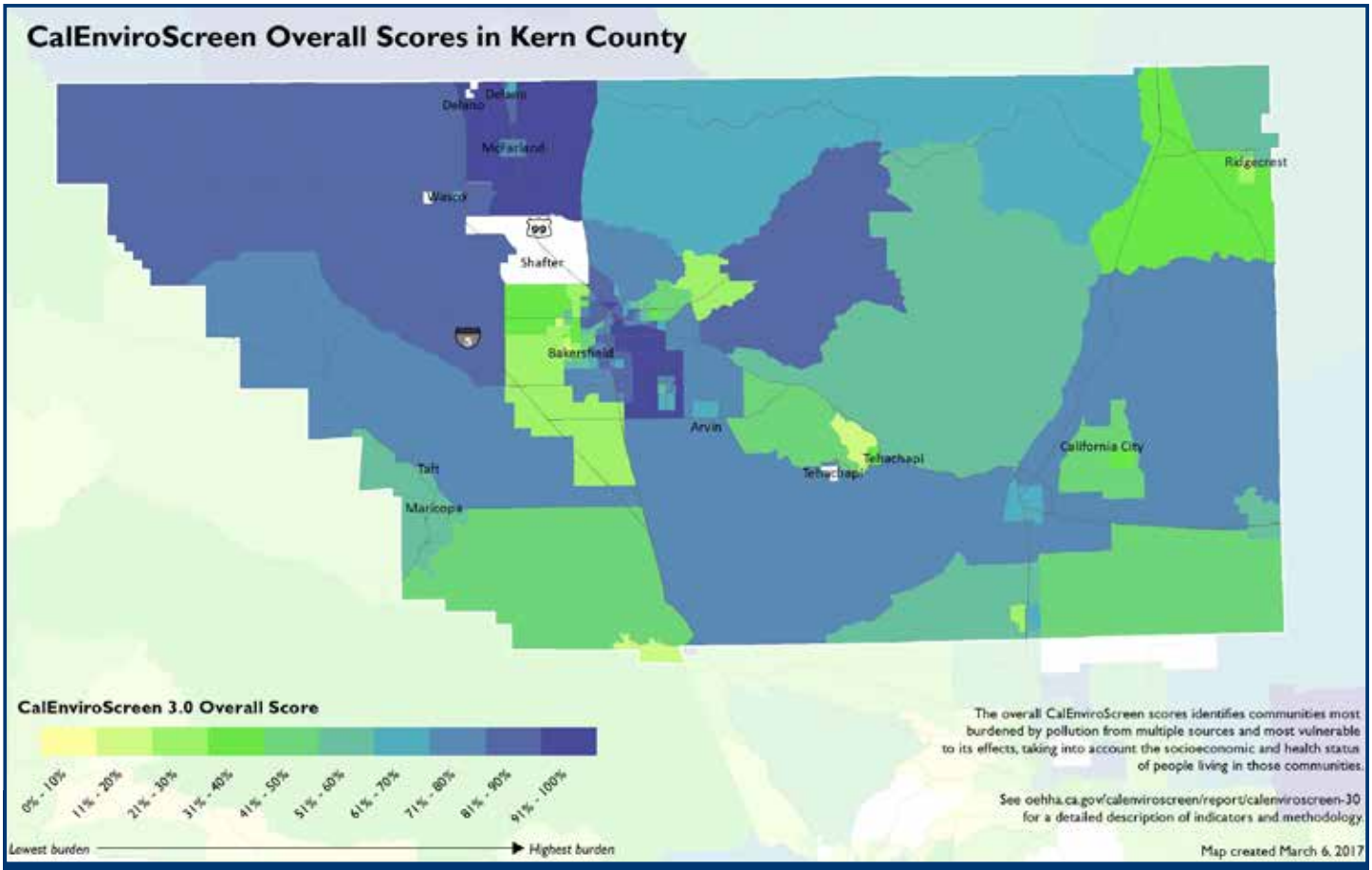
"What are we going to do to ensure that there's enough water as the population continues to grow in the state, and particularly in places like the Central Valley where you have a lot of small communities, low income, a lot of farm worker communities. How are we going to provide people with the basics?" – Ari Neumann, Assistant Director, Rural Community Assistance Corporation

Economic and Environmental Conditions Contribute to Disparities in Well-Being

Kern County derives much of its wealth from natural resources, but industries that use these resources – primarily agriculture, oil/gas extraction and mining – often have negative environmental impacts. These impacts are made worse by the county's climate and geography. Surrounded by mountains on three sides, with a major transportation corridor running through the county, harmful pollutants accumulate in the environment, contributing to some of the worst air quality in the U.S. Kern County had the highest levels of particulate matter (PM 2.5) of any county in the nation, and ranked third in terms of ozone pollution, for the years 2012-14.[11] Water quality and quantity impacts from agriculture and other industries exacerbated by drought and climate change threaten the health of Kern residents and the county's economy.

"We have serious water quality issues. We have horrible air. We have some of the worst air in the nation, and that causes illness and all kinds of other issues...The poorest communities often have the worst water and the worst air." – Michelle McLean, Superintendent, Arvin Union School District

Figure 3. CalEnviroScreen 3.0 Map

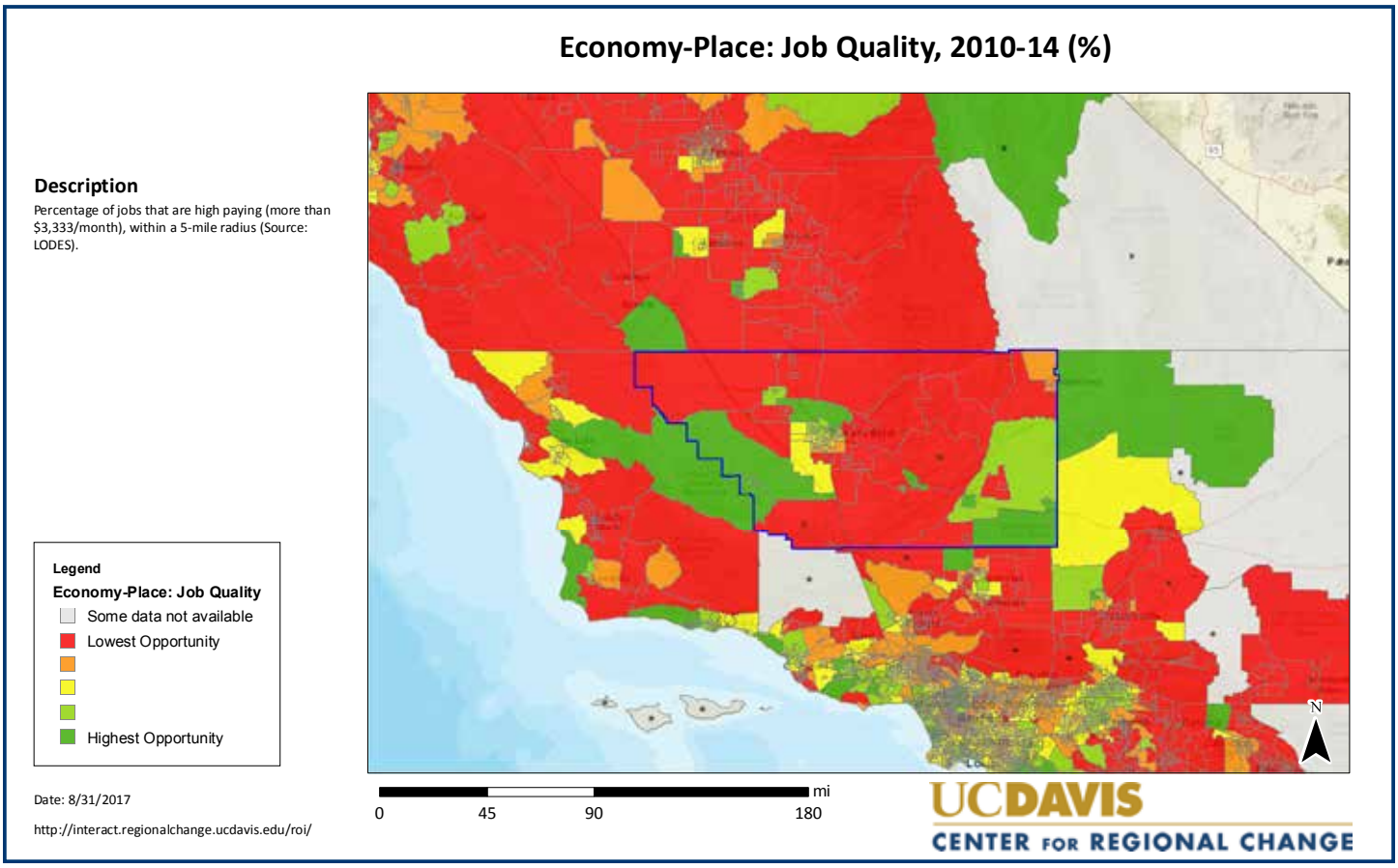


While portions of Kern County have low pollution burden/low vulnerability (yellow and green census tracts), parts of the county with sensitive and vulnerable populations also suffer from a high pollution burden (light blue – dark blue census tracts). Sensitive populations include low-birthweight infants, people with asthma and people with cardiovascular disease. Vulnerable populations are characterized by low socioeconomic status (poverty, unemployment, low education), linguistic isolation and high housing costs in low-income households.

In addition to poor air and water quality, oil wells, hazardous waste facilities and other sources of toxic pollution tend to be concentrated in low-income communities and communities of color.[12] The co-occurrence of pollution burden and social vulnerability is evident in Figure 3, which shows that much of Kern County has high pollution burden in areas with high concentrations of vulnerable populations. Research confirms that Latinos and low-income residents in the San Joaquin Valley are more likely to live in areas served by contaminated water supplies, are more likely to be exposed to pesticides at work, and their children are more likely to attend schools exposed to pesticide drift, compared to white and wealthier residents.[13]

Despite the risks that oil extraction pose to the environment, the economic benefits – and downside – of the county's oil deposits cannot be overlooked. High oil prices buffered Kern from the worst impacts of the Great Recession, but the county is now reeling from the effects of plummeting prices. Cutbacks in oil production at existing wells and a halt in new drilling contributed to Kern's high unemployment rate, which stood at 9.9% in December 2016, about twice the statewide unemployment rate of 5.0%.[14] Tax revenues declined as the price of oil fell by two-thirds from the end of 2014 to the end of 2015.[15] In response, county officials have declared a budget emergency and are reducing vital services.[16]

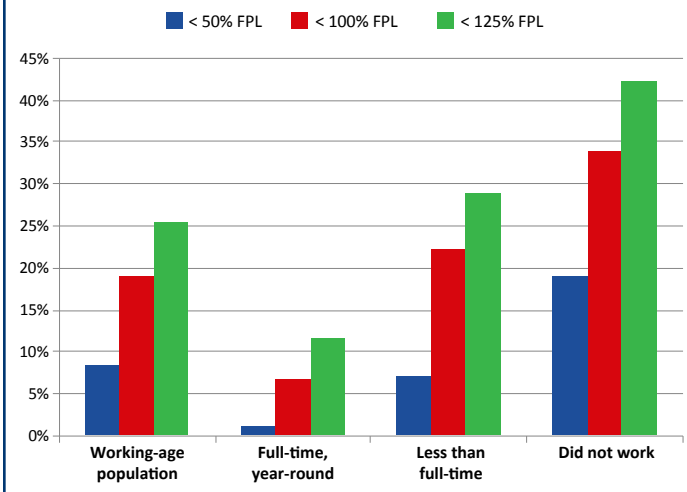
Figure 4. Regional Opportunity Index Job Quality Indicator (percentage of high-paying jobs within 5 miles)



Limited economic opportunities further exacerbate conditions for Kern residents, while a shortage of highly educated workers limits expansion opportunities for high skill-based industries.[17] The Regional Opportunity Index job quality indicator (Figure 4) reveals that, outside of Bakersfield, Edwards Air Force Base and the west side oil fields, the rest of the county has a lower percentage of high-paying jobs (those that pay more than $3,333 per month) compared to the state average. The percentage of Kern County adults over the age of 25 who have at least a bachelor's degree is 16.2%, half the state average of 32.3%. High levels of educational attainment increase earning potential, but a lack of high-quality job opportunities for those without advanced degrees contributes to disparities in income. Median annual income for college graduates living in Kern County is nearly $60,000, about twice the median for high school graduates and three times the median income for those with less than a high school degree.[18] Among those with the lowest incomes are undocumented immigrants and farm workers, who experience low hourly wages, seasonal employment, intermittent hours, and heightened vulnerability to wage theft and other workplace violations.[19] The Center for Migration Studies estimates that about half of the approximately 42,000 undocumented immigrants in the labor force in Kern County in 2013 worked in the farming industry,[20] which would struggle to maintain profitability without their labor.

Lack of economic opportunity, especially for those without a college education, helps explain the county's high rate of poverty. Nearly 20% of working-age Kern residents had incomes below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in 2015, which was $24,257 for a family of four.[21] Because the cost of living in California exceeds that in many other parts of the nation, a higher poverty threshold provides a more accurate view of the extent of poverty. One-quarter of working-age adults in Kern County had incomes below 125% of the FPL in 2015 (Figure 5), approximately $36,000 for a family of four. More than 10% of full-time workers had incomes below 125% of the FPL, rising to nearly 30% among part-time workers. Close to 10% of working-age adults lived in deep poverty, with incomes below 50% of the FPL, or roughly $12,000 for a family of four.

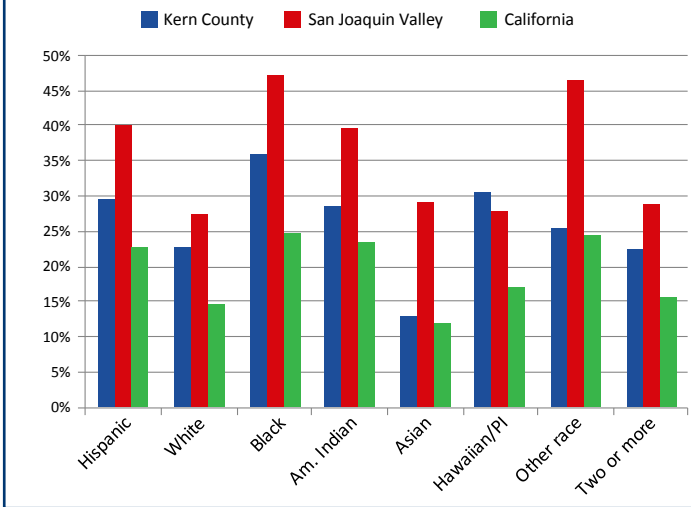
Figure 5. Poverty Level by Work Status, Kern County, 2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Table S1703, 2015

According to research and analysis conducted for the *San Joaquin Valley Fair Housing and Equity Assessment*, the majority of San Joaquin Valley residents living in poverty are also living in areas of concentrated poverty. The report cites economic patterns, historical land use and zoning, and housing discrimination as ongoing contributors to these conditions. Furthermore, areas of concentrated poverty in the Valley have disproportionately high non-white populations and very low access to opportunity.[22] As is the case across California, poverty is more prevalent among people of color in Kern County, with rates of 30% or more for Hispanics, Blacks and Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders (Figure 6). Across racial and ethnic groups,

Figure 6. Poverty Status by Race, 2011-15



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Table S1701, 2011-15.

poverty rates tend to be lower in Kern County than the San Joaquin Valley as a whole, but remain higher than the state average.

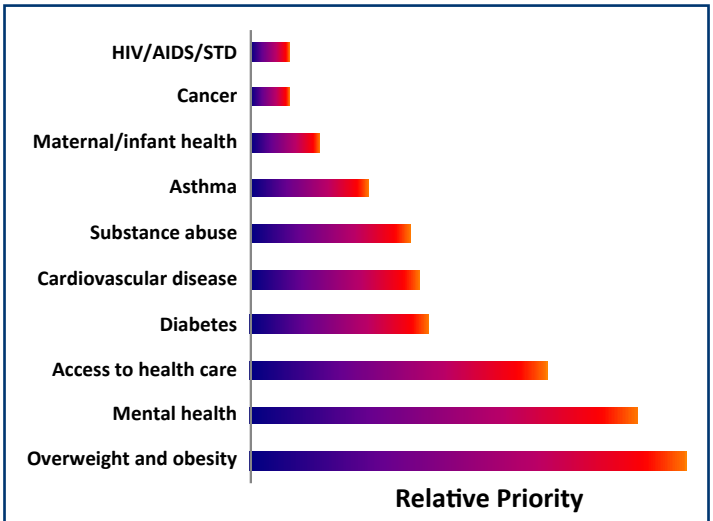
Economic and Environmental Conditions Contribute to Disparities in Health

Serious economic and environmental challenges contribute to the poor health of Kern residents. Kern County ranks near the bottom (52nd out of 57 reporting counties) on health outcomes that include length of life, low birthweight and perceived health. The County Health Ranking system measures "the many factors that, if improved, can help make communities healthier places to live, learn, work and play."[23] Kern County received the lowest possible ranking for health behaviors that contribute to poor health outcomes, including smoking, obesity, teen births and sexually transmitted diseases. It ranked 50th on clinical care, largely due to the shortage of health care providers (primary care physicians, dentists and mental health care providers) in the region. In addition, a significant proportion of Kern County residents do not have access to or cannot afford employer-based or private insurance. About 45% of Kern County residents are covered through Medi-Cal and approximately 8% are uninsured.[24] These individuals have limited options when seeking health care due to a shortage of providers willing to accept them as patients.

> *"Even though undocumented children can now qualify for full scope Medi-Cal...there's huge waiting lists to see a Denti-Cal or Medi-Cal provider. That's a big issue in Kern County."*
> – Shelley Northrop, Health Services Coordinator, Kern County Superintendent of Schools

A Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA)[25] completed in 2016 conducted a forum in which 38 community leaders identified significant health needs in Kern County and ranked them using the Relative Worth method. Participants included representatives from public health and other government agencies, schools and nonprofit organizations that serve specific parts of the community identified in the regulations – the medically underserved, low-income and minority populations. Forum participants allocated a fixed set of points to the health needs based on the size and seriousness of the problem. The top 10 priorities identified in this manner and presented in Figure 7 mirror the health behavior items contributing to Kern's low County Health Ranking score.[26] Overweight/obesity was identified as the top health

Figure 7. Kern County Community Health Priorities



Source: 2016 Community Health Needs Assessment.

need by the participants, followed closely by mental health and access to health care. Forum participants also prioritized diabetes, cardiovascular disease, substance use and asthma as significant problems, followed by maternal and infant health, cancer, and HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. There is some overlap between the priorities identified in the CHNA and those identified in the report commissioned by the San Joaquin Valley Health Fund, with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Sierra Health Foundation and prepared by the Center for Regional Change, *California's San Joaquin Valley: A Region and Its Children Under Stress*, but residents from under-resourced communities in the latter study prioritized determinants of health, such as economic and environmental conditions, over health conditions. For example, community members in that study emphasized the lack of access to fresh, healthy, affordable food rather than obesity as a key challenge.

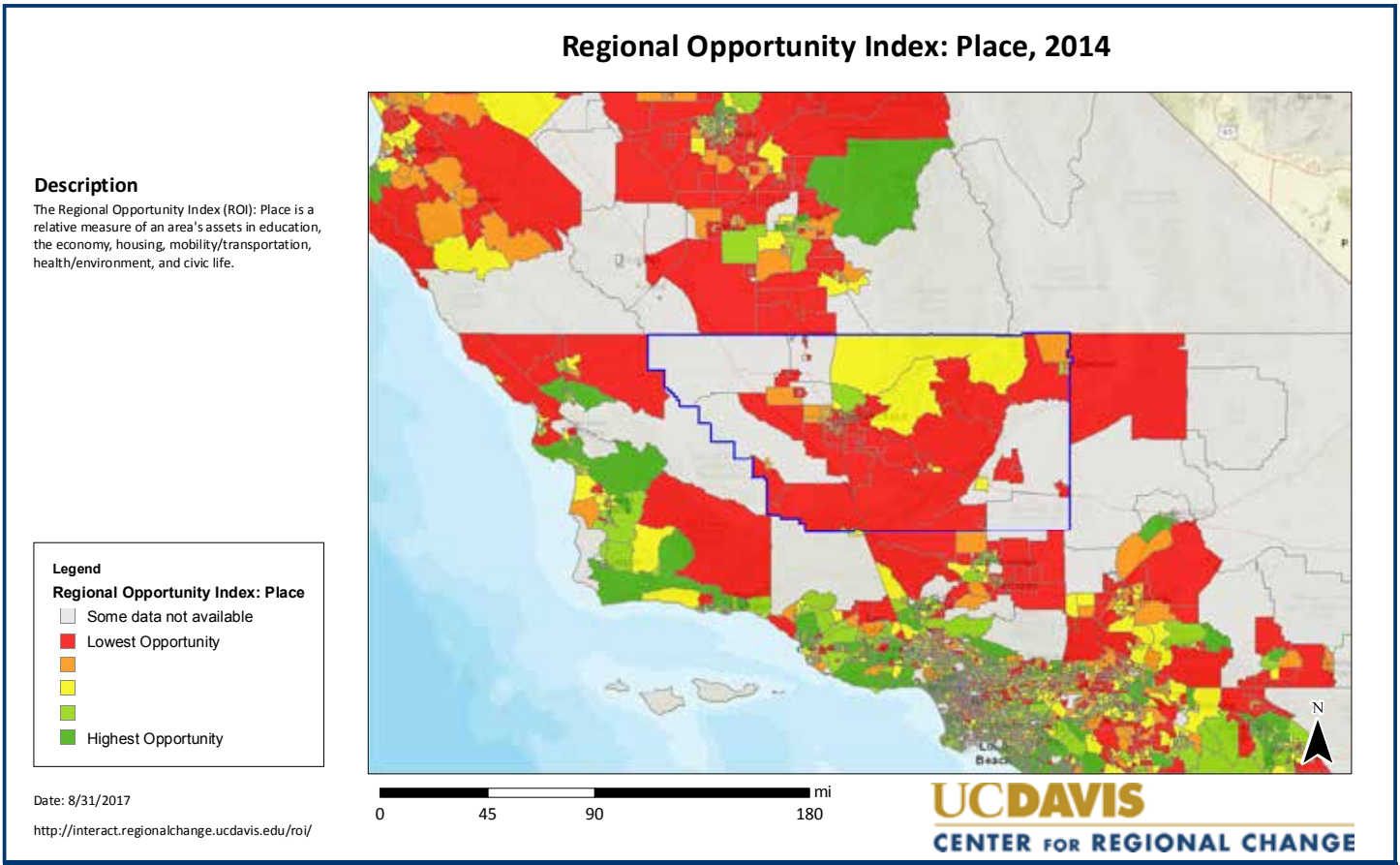
When asked to name the underlying factors that cause poor health, community members whose perspectives are documented in *California's San Joaquin Valley: A Region and Its Children Under Stress*[27] and the Kern CHNA forum participants identified lack of access to fresh, healthy, affordable food; lack of recreation opportunities; lack of safe spaces to engage in exercise; and barriers to health care such as cost, transportation, provider shortages, lack of culturally competent services and, most importantly, poverty. Limited economic opportunities make it difficult for residents to access basic necessities like food, housing and clothing, and contribute to stress, substance use and crime. Analysis of the County Health Ranking data for California supports this assessment, as socioeconomic factors do a better job of explaining health outcomes than health behaviors, clinical care or the physical environment.[28] Declining economic standing is driving an increase in "deaths of despair," mortality caused by self-inflicted harms such as drug overdose, alcohol poisoning and suicide. A recent report from The California Endowment and the Center on Society and Health notes that Kern County has seen a dramatic rise in these stress-related deaths since the 1990s. According to one of the report's authors, "Household incomes have been stagnant and poverty rates have been climbing in these counties over a period of many years. Stress, anxiety and depression are taking their toll on this population. The economy is literally costing lives."[29]

Mapping Geographic Disparities

Within Kern County, there is substantial geographic variation in access to resources that promote health and well-being. The variation can be clearly seen in Regional Opportunity Index maps. The Regional Opportunity Index consists of two dimensions. The first, referred to as People Opportunity, combines data about the relative level of resources possessed by individuals in a census tract, and compares the tract to the statewide average. Data include level of education, employment status, income, housing, health, and social and political engagement. The second dimension is called Place Opportunity. It describes the relative level of institutional and physical resources available in each tract. The Place Opportunity score is comprised of measures of educational and economic opportunities; housing adequacy and affordability; access to health care, banks and grocery stores; air quality; and civic and social opportunity. Indicators in each of these domains combine to provide a holistic snapshot of community well-being.

"I really think the wage gap is the biggest issue right now in keeping people from being food secure...we have a wage disparity here that's very severe. It's very severe. According to the real cost measure, 34 percent of people in our county can't make ends meet... and 87 percent of the people who can't make ends meet have at least one full-time job in their family."
– Jill Egland, Vice-President of Community Impact for United Way of Kern County and founding member of the Kern Food Policy Council

Figure 8. Regional Opportunity Index Place Opportunity in Kern County



Much of Kern County experiences low levels of placed-based opportunity (red and orange census tracts), including most of Bakersfield and surrounding cities, the agricultural areas in the northern and western parts of the county that include the communities of Delano, Wasco, Shafter and Taft, and the large, lightly populated mountainous areas in the south and east. Kern's low Place Opportunity scores are a reflection of its low scores in the education, economy and health/environment domains of the Place Index.

Disparities in economic, environmental, infrastructure and other resources in the Place Opportunity dimension are reflected in the large swaths of Kern County that have very low Place Opportunity scores (Figure 8). Census tracts that perform worse than the state average are red and orange in color; tracts that are at or above the state mean are yellow and green. The low degree of place-based opportunity in Kern County was confirmed by Joseph Williams, Director of the Kern Chapter of Faith in the Valley, who stated that conversations with more than 300 Kern residents revealed that *"Jobs was the number one issue. Jobs and affordable housing were the emerging theme. Then public safety and infrastructure."*

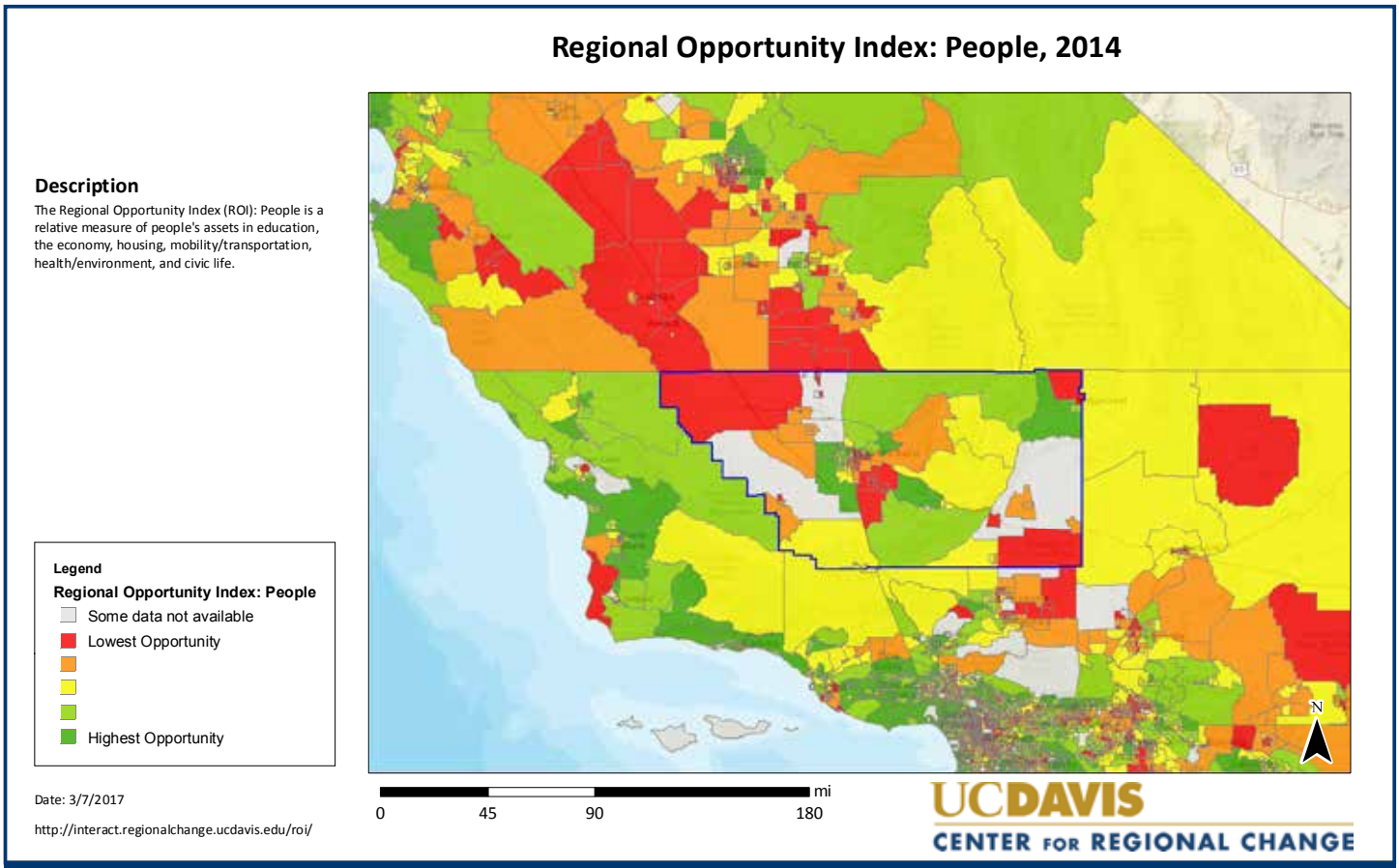
"On a fundamental, emotional level, people feel the injustice. Why is my air – why am I struggling so hard to take a breath? Why do I work in the fields all day and come home, and not have access to vegetables and fruits? These are things no one needs to be taught. I think that where the non-profit support comes in, is helping provide education about the actual tangible health effects, not just the sense that something is wrong" – Marisa Lundin, Co-Director, Community Equity Initiative, California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.

Disparities in the resources held by individuals in the county are demonstrated by the map of Regional Opportunity Index People Opportunity scores (Figure 9). Census tracts with lower levels of People Opportunity than the state mean are displayed in orange, while tracts with the lowest levels of opportunity are in red.

People living on the west side of Highway 99, in tracts that are displayed in green, tend to do better in terms of education, economic opportunity and health/environment. On the east side of Highway 99, and in areas around Wasco, Shafter and Taft, levels of opportunity are much lower in these domains.

In summary, Kern County has a wealth of place-based economic resources from agriculture, oil and other industries, but these resources do not benefit all residents. People of color and immigrants are most likely to experience environmental injustice through exposure to contaminated air and water, economic injustice with low wages and substandard housing, and social injustice with inequitable access to health and education resources. These inequities stem from the cumulative impacts of earlier planning and policy decisions that cannot be bandaged over; new approaches are needed to redress these issues. The next section identifies promising policy and systems change opportunities, followed by some examples of the ways in which local organizations are building community capacity to participate in opportunities such as these.

Figure 9. Regional Opportunity Index People Opportunity in Kern County



Low levels of People Opportunity exist in east Bakersfield, Lamont and Arvin, and in the largely rural northwestern, northeastern and southeastern parts of the county. Tracts with the lowest levels of People Opportunity (red tracts) tend to have low scores in all domains, while those that are doing slightly better but still below the state mean (orange tracts) tend to do relatively well in the housing and usually at least one other domain.

Policy and Systems Change Opportunities

Overcoming Kern County's significant economic, environmental and health challenges will require sustained efforts to forge new policies and restructure ineffective systems. Policy development holds great promise to improve community outcomes when it is informed by the experiences of communities that experience the greatest inequities. Underrepresented populations are increasingly engaged in local decision-making forums thanks to the grassroots organizing and capacity-building efforts of community-based organizations. This approach empowers residents to exercise greater community ownership and increases capacity to influence decision-making for lasting solutions. Such an approach is needed in order to address systemic issues and ultimately create a more equitable county and region.

Through interviews and a review of policy briefs and other materials, we identified the following areas as presenting prime opportunities to enact policies that have the potential to improve community well-being and increase health equity in Kern County. These opportunities differ in the extent to which they address systemic inequalities and in the manner in which they permit and encourage community engagement. Nonetheless, each has been identified as having the potential to make a meaningful difference in advancing equity.

Education Policy

Local Control Funding Formula

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), enacted by the state legislature in 2013, increased funding to districts serving high concentrations of low-income, English Learner, homeless and foster youth student populations, while providing more flexibility and accountability in how districts allocate funding. As part of LCFF, school districts are required to develop and adopt a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) describing how the district plans to meet state education priorities in accordance with specific metrics and local goals. An important component of LCFF is that parents and community stakeholders must be involved in the development of and annual updates to the LCAP, and school districts must provide relevant data to inform this activity. By facilitating community input on how to meet the needs of disadvantaged students, and informing funding allocation, community groups can leverage LCFF to reshape education systems in ways that promote more equitable outcomes and improve community health. For example, community stakeholders have successfully advocated for school-based student wellness centers and parent resource centers paid for with LCFF supplemental funds.

LCFF is new and school districts are still learning how to engage community stakeholders in a meaningful way. In the words of Erika Brooks, former Education Program Manager at the Dolores Huerta Foundation, LCFF is *"a learning process for everyone; for community members and for school districts to really make community members and parents feel welcome, and engaged, and really feel that their voices are heard when they ask for something... of course we know that not all recommendations are going to be part of the LCAP, but when parents feel that their recommendations are acknowledged, and that they're really taken into consideration, that's a good thing."*

With only loose guidelines on the form that stakeholder engagement must take, and with limited oversight and accountability mechanisms for upholding LCAPs, there is no guarantee that LCFF will lead to meaningful reforms. Community organizations play an important role by helping districts authentically engage parents and community members in the LCAP process, monitoring LCAP implementation to ensure that community priorities are being addressed and that funds intended to add or improve services for high-need students are indeed reaching them.

Investment in capacity building around LCAP development can be leveraged to increase community engagement more broadly. The knowledge and skills required for effective LCAP participation transfer directly to other governance processes, a point made by several of our informants. Participation in school leadership roles empowers parents and opens the door to other forms of civic engagement, as noted by Arvin Union School District Superintendent Michelle McLean, who expressed the importance of *"...getting people engaged in school site governance, and then, ideally, you would want to see your parents and community members then running for school boards, because they're the ones that set policy, and have a bigger voice at the state level."*

Other Education Policy and Systems Change Opportunities

Participation on school site councils and English Learner Advisory Committees, school district and county boards of education, community college district governing boards, school bond oversight committees, and city, county and state governments all represent important opportunities to advocate for more equitable education opportunities. Community members can use these forums to advocate for policies that hold promise for reducing disparities in community well-being, including the expansion and improvement of early childhood education opportunities, the equitable distribution of school construction bonds, the expansion of career and technical education offerings, locating community college campuses in disadvantaged communities, and removing barriers that make it difficult for community college students to transfer to four-year universities.

Photo courtesy of Building Healthy Communities – South Kern

Land Use Policy

General Plan Update

California law requires that each county and city in the state develop, adopt and periodically update a general plan,[30] which outlines a comprehensive land use strategy and guides both short- and long-term growth and development.[31] There is no set schedule for updating general plans, but municipalities generally find it necessary to update their plans every 10 to 15 years as new data become available and growth patterns shift.[32] When a city or county general plan is updated, this presents a prime opportunity to influence policy and long-term community change. The Kern County General Plan update is currently under way and has been a focus of many local organizations and community leaders.[33]

The general plan includes a minimum of eight state-mandated elements. It also can include additional elements that the county or city deems significant. The eight mandated elements include: Land Use, Open Space, Conservation, Housing, Circulation, Noise, Safety and, as of October 2016 when SB 1000 became law, Environmental Justice. Optional elements include: Health, Air Quality, Capital Improvements/Public Facilities, Community Design, Economic/Fiscal Development, Energy, Flood Management, Geothermal Resources, Parks and Recreation, and Water. Optional elements serve as key opportunities to incorporate planning guidelines that equitably address community health and well-being. For example, the City of Arvin included a health element in its general plan, which has encouraged significant changes to policy and development efforts, including the installation of a new park, the creation of community gardens, and corner store conversions. Additionally, the Kern County Department of Public Health Services has been asked to provide advice on the inclusion of a health element in the general plan that would focus on the social determinants of health. Examples such as these demonstrate the potential impact that land use and planning processes can have when decision makers are responsive to community needs.

It is important to recognize that policy processes such as the general plan update are often inaccessible to community members with little experience or knowledge of local governance. People may not understand the relevance or significance of these planning decisions. As Marisa Lundin, Co-Director of California Rural Legal Assistance's Community Equity Initiative, which

focuses on addressing inequitable living conditions in disadvantaged unincorporated communities, said, *"A lot of the changes that we're looking at in these communities do come in the form of these dry, 30-year planning documents and land use policy decisions. So it's a question of how to bridge that, something that is just by its very nature, very inaccessible to people. How do you make it accessible?"* This is where local organizers and advocates see potential for community engagement and empowerment.[34] Through outreach and education about the significance of these planning processes and land use decisions, residents can see where their input is needed and how their lived experiences can help inform these critical decisions.

Photo courtesy of California Rural Legal Assistance

Health Policy

Health Care Access

With great uncertainty surrounding the future of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and Medicaid funding, community organizations are participating in discussions with local health systems, county government and state legislators to determine how to provide health care to those who may lose their health insurance if the ACA is repealed – a number that could top 100,000 in Kern County.[35] ACA repeal would also have negative impacts on the economy. It is estimated that 5,000 health care jobs would be lost, and health care suppliers and local businesses where health care workers spend money would lose business. The total economic impact of ACA repeal in Kern County is projected to be a loss of $359 million.[36] Prior to the 2016 presidential election, numerous organizations in Kern County had been involved in efforts to extend preventive care to undocumented adults and others who remained uninsured, uniting under the #Health4All banner. They are now fighting to protect ACA by telling stories about how ACA has helped save lives, holding rallies and educating state and federal lawmakers about the importance of affordable health insurance for all.

Another tactic that holds promise to improve health equity in Kern County is strengthening the health care safety net by pursuing better coordination of care between the county hospital, community clinics and hospital emergency rooms in order to provide better, more cost-effective health care for the uninsured and underinsured.[37] Health advocates point to the Accountable Communities for Health (ACH) model, proposed by the nonprofit organization Community Partners, as a framework that promotes multi-sector collaboration to improve health outcomes and reduce costs.[38] ACH calls for health systems, health plans, public health, community-based organizations, schools and other partners to integrate their efforts to improve the health of the entire community, with particular attention to achieving greater health equity among its residents. The ACH framework can be leveraged to tackle multiple, interconnected issues that contribute to health and well-being, such as poverty and education, given its attention to short-term, intermediate and long-term health outcomes. Unlike the education and land use policy areas, where community input is mandated by state law, there are fewer avenues for community members to influence health policy. Community groups and advocates therefore face the critical challenge of finding or creating opportunities to elevate the voices of disadvantaged community members in pursuit of equitable health policies. Joseph Williams, Director of the Kern Chapter of Faith in the Valley, spoke about bringing stakeholders together to *"dissect how our county is implementing global payment plan[39] and how they're picking their hospital authorities. A lot of the people on the Authority Board are ag and oil and all the special interests. How does that represent our community, which is 70 percent Latino and the rest white and Asian, Native American, and Black?"*

Healthy Living Environments

Health equity requires equitable access to healthy living environments, which can be pursued through a variety of programs and policies. Examples include school wellness plans that expand resources for physical education and include a commitment to serve healthy meals made from locally sourced ingredients, and joint-use agreements that permit the use of school grounds for health-promoting activities such as farmer's markets and recreation programs that encourage physical activity.

To address structural factors that undermine community health and contribute to health disparities, advocates can urge municipalities to incorporate health considerations into their programs, policies and planning guidelines. Kern County Superintendent of Schools Health Services Director Shelley Northrop noted that *"it's a different time, and people are more open to health initiatives"* such as the inclusion of a health element in general plan guidelines (as described in the Land Use Policy section), and the adoption of a Health in All Policies framework "[embeds] health, equity, and sustainability considerations into government decision-making processes so that healthy public policy becomes the normal way of doing business."[40]

Environmental Policy

Environmental Monitoring and Enforcement

Grassroots organizations have become powerful and effective environmental watchdogs by empowering citizens to monitor air and water quality in communities that are often overlooked by regulators. Organizations participating in the Central California Environmental Justice Network train residents to monitor the environment, report suspected environmental hazards and advocate for environmental justice. Through Central California Environmental Justice Network's crowd sourcing-based reporting system in Kern County called Identifying Violations Affecting Neighborhoods (IVAN) Kern (formerly Kern Environmental Enforcement Network, or KEEN), they have mobilized local, regional, state and federal regulatory agencies to enact stricter controls and enforce them.[41] In addition, the capacity building and empowerment experienced by these citizen scientists often leads to their engagement in other policy and systems change efforts. (See the following section for more information about IVAN Kern.)

> *"The air board will put out monitors in a few places, but then there's a strong community sentiment that it's not actually capturing the full extent of how bad the air pollution is."*
> – Marisa Lundin, Co-Director, Community Equity Initiative, California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.

Representation of Disadvantaged Communities

As noted throughout this and later sections of the report, an important role for advocates is to ensure that communities that experience inequitable access to resources and opportunities have adequate representation in decisions impacting them, and that new laws and regulations benefit these communities. For example, as the state implements cap and trade regulations, it will be important to watch for any unintended consequences from facilities that have a Greenhouse Gas net reduction but negative impacts for local communities. Community groups such as Community Water Center, Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability and Self-Help Enterprises have been involved in ensuring that disadvantaged communities are included in and have the capacity to inform plans developed by Integrated Regional Water Management groups and other jurisdictions with the power to make decisions that affect access to clean water, especially during times of drought.[42] (See the Land Use section for examples of how local groups have been effective at increasing self-governance in other arenas.)

Statewide Environmental Legislation

At the state level, several initiatives are under development that would strengthen environmental protections for vulnerable communities. These include legislation to expand school buffers for pesticide spraying, and to protect access to clean water in vulnerable communities. Of special significance to the San Joaquin Valley is a proposed law (SB 1318) that would prohibit municipalities from extending drinking water or wastewater infrastructure or services until they have provided those services to all disadvantaged communities within or adjacent to its sphere of influence. Additional legislation (SB 1317) would prohibit the drilling of new wells in water basins where aquifers are in critical overdraft, leaving some homeowners without any water. Both of these bills died in the Assembly, but are expected to return in future legislative sessions.

Other Policy and Systems Change Opportunities

Economic Policy

Though mentioned by interviewees less frequently than other issues, data indicate that community economic development strategies that promote job opportunities and entrepreneurship opportunities are sorely needed in Kern County. Such strategies might include workforce development to address the shortage of highly skilled workers, the development of locally driven value-added agriculture enterprises, expanding job opportunities in the clean energy sector, living wage ordinances, local hire requirements and Community Benefit Agreement mechanisms to ensure that Kern County residents benefit from the development of high-speed rail and other publicly

financed infrastructure projects. It will be vitally important to ensure that the job training pipeline is strengthened so that when high-quality jobs become available in Kern County, those jobs go to local residents from communities that experience systemic discrimination.

Lack of access to capital hampers development in some communities, particularly smaller communities that do not have local banks. Jill Egland, Vice President of Community Impact with United Way of Kern County and a founding member of the Kern Food Policy Council, remarked, "*They don't have a banking relationship with anyone, so where's the capital supposed to come for local innovation? They can have all the innovative ideas that they want, the city infrastructural support, and the willingness to shift the policies, but there's no capital. There's no economic partnership right now between mainstream financial institutions and the micro-entrepreneurs who need access to non-predatory financing options.*"

Photo courtesy of Dolores Huerta Foundation

Immigration Policy

Informants did not identify immigration policy as a top policy opportunity when interviewed prior to the election. However, the anti-immigrant stance adopted by the Trump administration and echoed in many communities across the region is generating a great deal of fear and uncertainty in Kern County's large immigrant population, the industries that employ them and agencies that serve them. Hate crimes are on the rise,[43] and law enforcement agencies cite fear of deportation as driving down crime reporting in immigrant communities and reducing safety.[44] A potential restriction on travel from Muslim countries and a reduction in H-1B visas could worsen the doctor shortage in places like Kern County, which is already medically underserved.[45] Kern County is home to a private immigrant detention center, feeding suspicions that it "*serves as a pipeline to having folks detained and actually deported from Kern County,*" according to Jonathan Bibriesca, Administration and Development Coordinator for the California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance. He continued, "*What we do know, is that people that were getting picked up were the main providers of the household, so people became homeless. Undocumented families and also citizen families of mixed statuses were becoming homeless.*" Several community-based groups advocate for the removal of the detention center.

Even if the political climate in Washington is not conducive to advancing comprehensive immigration reform, there are opportunities to pursue policies at the state and local level to protect immigrants. For example, the passage of bills such as the California Values Act (SB 54), which prohibits the use of state or local resources for immigration enforcement purposes, help to encourage immigrants to utilize law enforcement, health, education and other services without fear. Community groups perform vital functions such as educating immigrants about their rights and ensuring that existing laws are upheld. Moreover, advocates and concerned citizens can participate in public forums to be held by cities or counties that turn immigrants over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). These forums are mandated by the TRUTH Act, which went into effect on January 1, 2017. The TRUTH Act further requires that immigrants detained in local jails be informed that they have a right to say no or to request to have an attorney present for interviews with ICE agents. Community groups can monitor local law enforcement to ensure they are complying with the law.

Kern Food Policy Council

A multi-sector collaboration of food banks, nonprofits, agricultural interests, public health and health systems, the Kern Food Policy Council is conducting a Food System Assessment to articulate community priorities and goals for a sustainable, healthy food system. This assessment has the potential to galvanize change in the way food is grown, processed and distributed in Kern County, with the goal of ending food insecurity. Community meetings organized by the Food Policy Council provide an opportunity for residents to advocate for inclusion in the identification of goals that meet the needs of their communities and lead to more equitable outcomes. Jill Egland, founding member of the Food Policy Council, explained that the purpose of the community meetings is "*to see where the interest is, where innovation is happening, where the potential leadership is, and then begin to understand where the policy shifts need to happen, where do we need to push for changes, and how to leverage the information that we've gathered to make those changes happen.*" Residents will need to participate in these and other forums to advocate for change in the institutions that make up complex food systems to promote equitable outcomes.

Leading the Way Toward a Healthy and Equitable Kern County

Numerous efforts are under way in Kern County to build the capacity of disadvantaged and underrepresented communities to engage in policy and advocacy work that supports healthy, sustainable and equitable communities. Nonprofit community-based organizations, faith-based groups, government agencies, coalitions, foundations and individuals committed to empowering communities that have traditionally lacked a voice in their own governance are helping residents advocate for social, environmental and economic justice.

> *"...in some cases, it's the first time a lot of these partners have been brought together... those are the groups that are equipped to really go and engage with the school district, the school board members, the superintendents."*
> – Kendra Rogers, Children Now

In this section, we present examples of community organizing efforts that were identified through our key informant interviews as particularly effective at engaging residents in actions that have a transformative impact on community well-being. We highlight the issues that local groups are working on, the strategies they employ to engage community members, and the impact of community involvement in these efforts. We also highlight some of the challenges and opportunities these organizations face as they strive to build community capacity as a means to increase racial, health and social equity in Kern County and beyond. Although not an exhaustive list, these efforts illustrate a range of strategies that are being employed and the diverse issue areas that can be addressed with community input and action.

Using LCFF to Promote Equity in Education – Dolores Huerta Foundation

Issue: Students of color and disabled students are disproportionately likely to be suspended or expelled, putting them at increased risk for grade retention, dropout and contact with the juvenile justice system.[46]

Strategy: Build the capacity of parents to participate in LCAP in order to make schools more inclusive, safe spaces where all students are given the resources and afforded the opportunity to meet academic goals.

The Dolores Huerta Foundation is one of several organizations working to address racial disparities in education by increasing community capacity to participate in school governance processes.

Dolores Huerta Foundation partners with districts to provide LCFF/LCAP training for parents, as well as information about parents' rights, school resources and programs, and the reclassification process for English language learners. The superintendent of a school district where Dolores Huerta Foundation is deeply engaged stated that LCAP has formalized and deepened the collaboration between school districts and community members, likening the new relationship to "collaboration on steroids."

Dolores Huerta Foundation organizers hold house meetings to educate parents, many of whom are immigrants, about how the school system works, how schools are governed and funded, and about the importance of LCFF/LCAP. During their weekly meetings, they go through LCAP documents line by line to ensure parents understand them, translating the documents if necessary. In these meetings, parents raised concerns about school climate and high rates of suspensions and expulsion among students of color. Dolores Huerta Foundation encourages them to bring these concerns to LCAP meetings and push for changes that promote greater equity and better serve the needs of disadvantaged students.

Impact: School districts across Kern County are starting to implement restorative justice and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and have committed funding for those programs through their LCAPs. Following a 2014 lawsuit by Dolores Huerta Foundation and other members of the Kern Education Justice Collaborative alleging discriminatory discipline and transfer policies, Kern High School District appropriated $2.59 million for PBIS in its 2015-16 LCAP and used no supplemental or concentration grant funds for its police department, as it had in previous years. In addition, Dolores Huerta Foundation has helped parents use the LCAP process to successfully advocate for family and parent resource centers on school grounds, and increased opportunities for parental education, volunteerism and school leadership. Building community capacity to

participate in the LCAP process has paid off with changes that promote a safer, more inclusive school climate for Kern's disadvantaged children and increased opportunities for parental involvement.

Establishing Resident Committees to Leverage Community Power – Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment

Issue: Low-income communities and communities of color lack representation in decision-making structures in environmental and health issues.

Strategy: Build political power in low-income communities and communities of color through community organizing with the goal of engaging residents who have been systematically excluded from decision-making processes.

The Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment has used door-to-door canvassing, house meetings, community meetings and other face-to-face outreach efforts that aim to build a grassroots movement and challenge existing power structures. In many cases, this organizing results in an action committee of local residents. Examples of these groups include Committee for a Better Arvin, Committee for a Better Shafter, Greenfield Walking Group and the Delano Guardians. Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment provides guidance on how to run effective meetings, establish group priorities, and create bylaws and decision-making structures, allowing these communities to function more effectively and leverage their collective power. In the words of Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment Executive Director Caroline Farrell, *"It's really about building relationships, building leaders, [and] building trust within the community."*

Impact: Many of these committees have gone on to become powerful agents of change, with their members participating in a number of collaboratives, attending school board and city council meetings, joining in lawsuits on behalf of residents, and participating in the creation of school district LCAPs. Several informants noted that these grassroots organizations have become highly effective at influencing policies in their cities and providing much-needed monitoring and oversight.

For example, Committee for a Better Arvin pressured the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to improve the cleanup of a polluted Superfund site in the community. After several years of concerted efforts, they secured $1 million from the EPA to build a new drinking water well in Arvin free from the groundwater pollution plume. The group also has become a trusted community resource and city council members regularly attend their meetings to learn about community issues and priorities. Committee for a Better Shafter has taken on the administration of a community garden and focuses on engaging residents in creating other positive changes in their community. As a result, the city has become more responsive to their efforts and views the committee as a valuable resource. The Greenfield Walking Group has established a community garden in Bakersfield and maintains a close working relationship with the city. The Delano Guardians serve as a "watchdog" and their current efforts are focused on helping residents better understand what's happening with the city council so residents can remain informed about local decision making.

As demonstrated by these local resident committees, many organizing efforts begin with mobilization on a specific action, but the larger goal is to empower disenfranchised communities to speak for themselves and make their voices heard by policymakers. These organizing efforts ideally evolve into continued activism, advocacy and community engagement. According to Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment's Caroline Farrell, these groups *"house and institutionalize some of this power building and leadership development within the community."* This method empowers residents, identifies likely leaders and begins to build momentum as these individuals engage in addressing important issues.

> *"There is definitely a huge need in Kern County to create spaces that organize the planted seeds of consciousness, and that are led by people being directly affected by the issue, that are sustainable in a way that allows for, particularly youth, to grow as leaders."* – Jonathan Bibriesca, California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance

Civic Scientists Protecting Vulnerable Communities – Identifying Violations Affecting Neighborhoods (IVAN) Kern

Issue: Disadvantaged communities are disproportionately impacted by environmental burdens and are often overlooked by enforcement agencies.

Strategy: Empower residents to collect and report their own data on suspected environmental hazards in their communities, and to partner with local agencies to improve enforcement and spur regulations that protect vulnerable communities and residents.

IVAN Kern is one of several IVAN reporting networks throughout the state.[47] IVAN Kern consists of an online reporting web site (https://kernreport.org/) and a task force charged with resolving environmental problems reported through the web site. The task force is comprised of environmental justice and other community-based organizations, along with staff from federal and state environmental agencies, and community members appointed by community organizations. As explained by Gustavo Aguirre, Jr., Project Coordinator for Central California Environmental Justice Network, "*the task force is responsible for receiving reports from community members on…illegal dumping of trash, graffiti on neighborhoods, big industry violations, oil and gas, violation of permits, illegal water discharging, and illegal pesticide drift. And so, we deal with what affects community members at the very micro level, and address issues there.*"

The success of IVAN Kern depends on the capability of residents to monitor the environment and report potential hazards. Community-based organizations participating in the network perform the vital role of training "civic scientists" so they have the knowledge and skills to monitor the environment in communities that often are overlooked by environmental protection agencies.[48] Rosana Esparza, an independent researcher with the Kern Environmental Health Project in Lost Hills explained, "*The role of the organizer is to identify issues affecting residents on multiple levels. It's important that residents are the primary investigators and researchers. They have a history living in the community and are the holders of information. Together with their children they have experienced changes in the area over time. Their children are the ones most affected by environmental conditions, pollution, oil and gas production, and traffic.*"

Organizers from IVAN Kern and related organizations also help residents understand environmental laws, regulations, public agencies and their policy priorities. This helps community members recognize what information public agencies need to begin addressing environmental wrongs, and facilitates their participation in the resolution of environmental problems.

Impact: Residents of Arvin who had been evacuated from their homes due to a leak in a gas pipeline were told by the operator of the pipeline that it was safe to return. These residents and concerned community members had been trained to sample the air. Community groups toured the site shortly afterward, using their own monitoring equipment to detect gas emissions from nearby storage tanks, and filed a report on the IVAN Kern web site. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District quickly responded, issuing a notice of violation to the company operating the facility, and promising that it would be fined. This collaborative interaction stands in contrast with other more conflictual relationships between the Air District and regional environmental justice organizations, and it prompted legislation granting state regulators the capacity to protect individuals living near oil and gas pipelines.

More than simply reporting environmental conditions, residents trained as "civic scientists" gain experience that empowers them to proactively and constructively participate in problem-solving. Lost Hills noted that along with an increase in environmental literacy, IVAN Kern-trained residents gained a sense of pride and ownership in their community, and became accustomed to giving media interviews and hosting visitors from other cities wanting to learn more about their air monitoring project. When youth from Lost Hills attending a regional leadership training workshop were asked to describe what made their community unique, they named the air monitoring stations, and spoke with pride about their parents who agreed to place the stations in their yards and participate in the data collection effort. What began with a simple question – *"Is the air we breathe making us sick?"* – has led to the mobilization of engaged, empowered residents around this and other issues impacting the community.

Building Healthy Communities – South Kern

Issue: Communities are burdened by health and racial inequities due to institutional policies and disinvestment that have created longstanding barriers in their physical and social environments.

Strategy: Use the power of collaborative partnerships to create healthy environments for vulnerable populations. Building Healthy Communities is a multi-year, multi-site initiative of The California Endowment. Partners at each Building Healthy Communities site pursue a policy and systems change agenda to address the needs of the local community. Building Healthy Communities – South Kern has leveraged input from residents, community-based organizations, businesses, school districts and public agencies in Arvin, Lamont, Weedpatch and Greenfield to develop a shared vision, goals and action plan for improving community health. Action Teams pursue improvements in education, the environment, health access and recreation. These efforts are supported by the Building Healthy Communities HUB, which provides staffing and resources to the Action Teams and the Central Table, both of which are key structures for communication and organization. Using the "Collective Impact" framework, the multi-sector partners of Building Healthy Communities – South Kern employ multiple strategies (e.g., outreach, advocacy, direct action) to work toward their common vision and goals, while meeting regularly to identify priorities, strategize and report on progress.

Impact: The local organizations identified in the previous sections are some of the many partners involved in the Building Healthy Communities – South Kern initiative. These efforts demonstrate the collaborative potential in South Kern, and many successes have been produced as a result. For example, through the coordinated efforts of Building Healthy Communities – South Kern, the Dolores Huerta Foundation has been able to partner with other organizations and school districts to increase parent engagement and support LCFF activities to improve school climate. Building Healthy Communities – South Kern partners also were responsible for launching IVAN Kern to help improve reporting, monitoring and enforcement of air quality in South Kern. Furthermore, Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment and the local resident committees that they support (e.g., Committee for a Better Arvin, Greenfield Walking Group) are active partners in the Building Healthy Communities initiative. The concerted efforts of Building Healthy Communities – South Kern have aided their success as they've fought to clean up toxic waste sites and secure clean drinking water in the City of Arvin, among other actions.

Another opportunity that Building Healthy Communities – South Kern has pursued is investing in community groups to advocate for greater resident input on the Kern County General Plan update. Since many communities in Kern County face significant threats to their health and well-being due to inadequate land use policies, it is essential for county and city planners to seek their input when making decisions about housing, transportation, health and infrastructure. Through the collaborative efforts of Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment, and Central California Environmental Justice Network, Building Healthy Communities – South Kern has engaged community members in the planning process and given them a space to contribute recommendations for their neighborhoods. Building Healthy Communities – South Kern also advocated for the creation of a Bike Master Plan for the City of Arvin and supported Arvin's General Plan update. This marked the first time Arvin had included a health element in their planning policy and placed them among the few cities in California to do so.

These are some of the many successes achieved by Building Healthy Communities – South Kern while advocating for health and racial equity. As demonstrated by this initiative, community action is amplified when efforts are coordinated and supported with sustained resources. This ultimately strengthens the "civic infrastructure," creates greater connection among local efforts, and builds momentum within communities. In the words of The California Endowment's South Kern Program Manager Annalisa Robles, "*The evolution has to do more with community—those community groups and residents owning their power and using their power and voice.*"

Photo courtesy of Building Healthy Communities – South Kern

Community Engagement Challenges and Opportunities

Key informants identified community organizing and mobilization as an instrumental strategy in the effort to address many of the challenges facing residents in Kern County, while noting that it is time- and labor-intensive work. To be effective, this work requires building trust and establishing relationships in the community, creating sustained community engagement, ensuring that community voices are heard, holding decision makers accountable, and creating effective collaborative partnerships. Though difficult, this work is vital, because, as Susana DeAnda, Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director of the Community Water Center said, *"If we really want to ... create social change, it's important that impacted residents are at the forefront, are at the decision-making level, are at the table recommending solutions for their community."*

Community organizations seeking to increase the power of those who are under- or unrepresented in local, state and national politics recognize the importance of increasing voter turnout. As noted in research from the California Civic Engagement Project,[49] Latino youth, almost all of whom are U.S. citizens and therefore eligible to vote once they reach voting age, make up an increasingly large segment of the population (52% in 2014). Yet voting rates are low among Latinos and other non-white populations. Although 1 in 3 Californians of voting age is Latino, only about 1 in 5 voters is Latino. Many groups we spoke with view voter registration and voter education as an important part of their capacity-building work, because voter turnout remains low among non-whites in Kern County. In the 2016 general election, only 35% of adult citizens of Latino heritage in Kern County cast a vote, 12 percentage points lower than the 47% turnout rate of eligible Latinos statewide. Turnout of Asian-Americans in Kern County (39%) is closer to the 41% of eligible Asian-Americans who voted statewide, but still trails the overall turnout rate in Kern County (45%) and the state (59%).[50]

Trust and Relationship Building

Informants expressed the importance of trust and relationship building in their work, and emphasized that this is a process that takes time, mindfulness and commitment. As explained by Juana Carbajal, Outreach Coordinator with the UFW Foundation, *"They will not talk to someone if they don't trust them... when they trust you, they'll open a little bit more on the other issues that they're having. So trust is something super, super important here in Kern County."* Community trust is seen as an essential component of this work, but interviewees noted that some funders may not provide sufficient resources to support the effort that goes into securing and maintaining trust. Marisa Lundin of California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. observed that *"Trust building [is] something that doesn't look super quantifiable on a grant report. But you need dedicated staff to maintain those relationships because otherwise, it's just going to continuously be these very cheap, surface-level relationships."*

Valuing Community Voice and Perspectives

Language barriers, cultural barriers and community isolation contribute to the perception by some policymakers and county leaders that residents of disadvantaged communities are uninterested or unqualified to participate in decision-making processes, despite their local expertise and knowledge of community issues. An organizer working with women to improve lives in farm worker communities countered this perception by stating, *"I mean, we like to think that even though we don't have formal education, extensive formal education, that we're still very talented women, skillful women that have great ideas."* Many informants explained that there is a lack of opportunities to participate in community development and residents often do not feel "invited to the table."

Additionally, when outside researchers, funders or other groups come into a community, there is a tendency to assume that they "know best." This can override the community voice and diminish efforts of local residents. As one environmental justice advocate explained about an organization that entered a community with a well-intentioned agenda that didn't align with community priorities, *"It was a challenge to get the organization to realize as a new organization coming into a community, it's not your position to be an expert in anything. Your job is to learn, to listen, and to work with the ideas that residents have."* This attests to the importance of creating viable opportunities for residents to be involved in decision making and valuing local expertise, perspectives and experiences.

Sustaining Community Engagement

Policy development and systems change are slow and deliberative processes, and it can be difficult to sustain resident engagement over time. Many community members are constrained in their ability to participate due to long work hours, seasonal work schedules, distance to events/meetings, lack of transportation and childcare needs. Rachel Vizcarra, Programs Assistant with the UFW Foundation, noted that *"It's not that people don't want to participate, right? And that's what we've seen. They want to. They absolutely want to come and share their stories. But can I get off of work to come and participate? And who's going to take care of my kids if I'm going to be at a two hour long meeting that goes beyond my work hours?"*

In order to sustain their commitment, people need to feel that their input and efforts matter. As explained by Camila Chavez, Executive Director of the Dolores Huerta Foundation, mobilizing residents can be difficult when they *"don't understand how their involvement or contributions would make a difference."* Without clear roles or tangible results, it can be challenging to ensure their long-term engagement. Community Water Center Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director Susana de Anda said *"I think it's really important that we have short-term and long-term strategies to bring about change. Because as organizers....people are going to lose hope if they're not seeing any traction change in a couple of years, they're going to lose hope. Policy work takes some time. And because our local leadership is not necessarily very conducive to our needs, that's even harder."*

Because these are long-term processes, sustainable funding and investment are needed to support community change efforts. Predictable funding streams strengthen organizations on the ground and enable them to focus on their work, rather than "chasing money."

Lack of Local Representation in Positions of Power

Kern County was described by many of our informants as a politically "ultra-conservative" community. This creates significant challenges when trying to advance policies that address inequities. As articulated by Annalisa Robles, The California Endowment Program Manager for South Kern County, *"Oftentimes decision-making is not made through this lens of equity or equality or spread; in other words, it's still kind of the haves and have-nots. And whoever has the power is going to be able to kind of control, again, the most precious of all things, those resources and where decisions are being made and where they flow."* This observation highlights the need for accountability and added pressure to ensure that decision makers are responsive to community needs and priorities. In addition, it speaks to the need to develop formal political leadership in historically disenfranchised and vulnerable communities. As noted by Kendra Rogers, Managing Director of Early Childhood Policy at Children Now, *"There's a lot of power in the grassroots, but there's also a lot of power in investing in the right people in communities that are willing to stand up, and be strong, and have a voice, and, push things as well."* She reiterated the importance of electing leaders from these communities to positions of power by saying *"everything circles back to the political infrastructure, because you have to have people willing to make change."*

Collaboration

Although local leaders emphasized the importance of working with other organizations and partners to effectively address complex, interconnected issues, many interview informants also identified some of the challenges that come with collaborating. Most notably, collaboration can be very time-consuming and drain resources from an organization's primary work. Others stated that it is easy to fall into the trap of collaborating for the sake of collaboration. Without a clear purpose and goal, collaboration is likely to be ineffective. Joint decision making can be complex, consensus can be difficult to reach, and follow-through is challenging in the absence of accountability mechanisms. With multiple networks of organizations already in existence, and a relatively low level of local financial and organizational resources, pursuing collaboration must be intentional and thoughtful in order to be effective. This requires commitment for good collaborative practice from the local organizations as well as by their funders.

Photo courtesy of Building Healthy Communities – South Kern

Conclusion

Despite the challenges of community organizing and capacity-building work, supporting the self-empowerment of the populations experiencing racial and health inequities to participate in civic life is leading to more equitable, sustainable and healthy communities in Kern County. Our key informants noted the untapped potential of residents who may have limited knowledge of and experience in formal decision-making processes, but who are intimately aware of racial, social and health inequities in their communities. These residents experience first-hand the harmful effects of systemic injustice and should be involved in identifying problems, establishing priorities and proposing solutions. Without their participation in these processes, it is unlikely that systems will be transformed to meet the needs of historically underrepresented people and places. The challenge for community organizations and funders is that capacity building requires a slow, deliberate approach and sustained funding in order to achieve lasting change rather than fleeting success. A sustained commitment to supporting grassroots organizing will bear fruit as a new generation of leaders comes forward to tackle the underlying causes of racial and social inequities through policies and programs that promote equity.

Endnotes

[1] The San Joaquin Valley Health Fund strengthens the capacity of communities and organizations in the San Joaquin Valley to improve health and well-being by advancing programs and policy changes that promote community health and health equity for all. See http://www.shfcenter.org/sjvhealthfund for more information.

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[21] The FPL is set at three times the cost of a minimum food diet, adjusted for inflation, as well as age, family size and composition, but it is not adjusted for regional differences in the cost of living. Poverty level data in this paragraph are from the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), Table S1703, American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

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SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY HEALTH FUND

The San Joaquin Valley Health Fund strengthens the capacity of communities and organizations in the San Joaquin Valley to improve health and well-being by advancing programs and policy changes that promote community health and health equity for all.

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