

BUILDING COMMON GROUND THROUGH DATA

Insights on Vital Conditions in the IE



Center for Community
Solutions



A NOTE ON THIS REPORT FROM THE UCR CENTER FOR COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

With over 4.6 million residents, Riverside and San Bernardino counties make the Inland Empire (IE) one of the fastest-growing and most diverse regions in the U.S. Understanding such a dynamic region requires place-based data and a shared framework to guide collective progress toward a thriving IE.

Commissioned by the Inland Empire Community Foundation, this report uses the *Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being* framework to analyze the core elements that enable communities to thrive. At the center of these vital conditions is *Belonging and Civic Muscle*, which captures whether people feel seen, valued, connected, and empowered to shape the decisions that affect their lives.

To contextualize well-being and provide a common foundation for understanding how life in the IE is experienced, we begin with the Cantril Ladder, a widely used measure of life satisfaction. From there, we present findings from an original survey of 2,381 IE residents that considers various dimensions of Belonging and Civic Muscle and offers insight into patterns in residents' feelings of belonging and civic engagement, as well as analyses of how these concepts are correlated with well-being. Finally, we analyze select data tied to the remaining six vital conditions, accompanied by expert insight from UCR School of Public Policy faculty, that connects key measures to regional trends and needs.

Data provides common ground to better understand our region and work together for the common good. We hope this report and its online companion spark conversations about how we can learn from our neighbors, coordinate investment, shape policy, and advocate for our region with a unified voice. As a research center at the University of California, Riverside, we're committed to providing policy-relevant research that empowers local action by those on the ground. It is our pleasure to support data-driven dialogue and contribute to shaping a thriving Inland Empire

In partnership,

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Throughout this report, you'll find reference to an online companion that provides detailed methodology, additional measures, extended analyses, and references. To explore further, please scan the QR code to the right.



The 7 Vital Conditions for Well-Being



Belonging & Civic Muscle



Thriving Natural World



Basic Needs for Health & Safety



Humane Housing



Meaningful Work & Health



Lifelong Learning



Reliable Transportation

For more on the vital conditions, visit
IEvitalconditionsnetwork.org

Thriving, Struggling, and Suffering in the IE

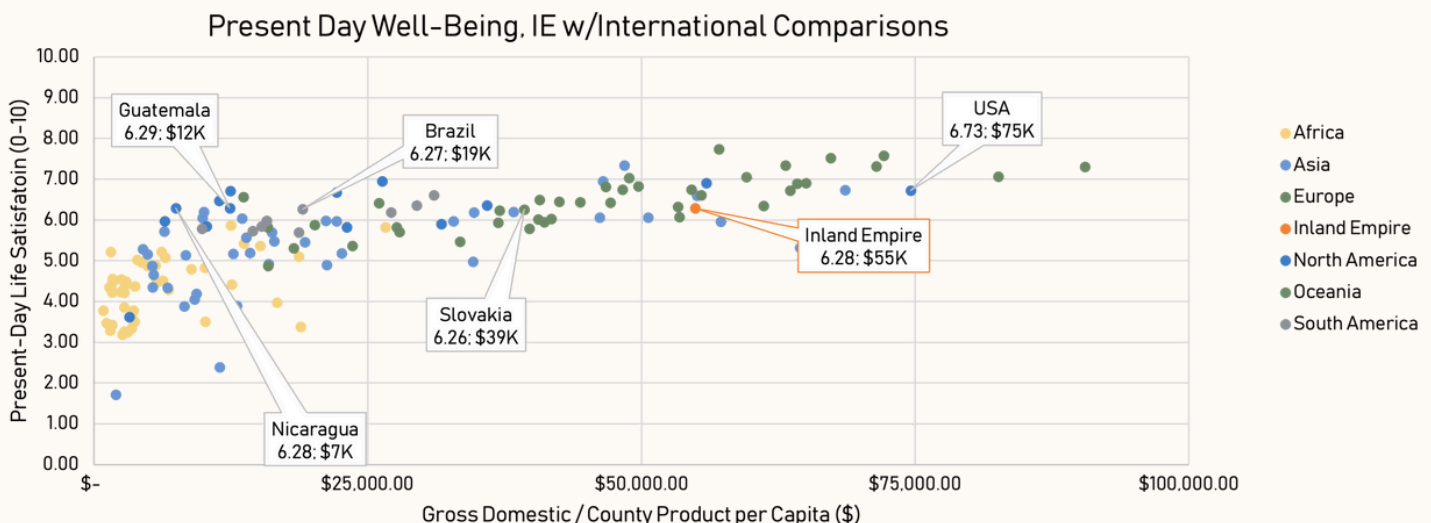
The Cantril Ladder is a well-established and widely used measure of life satisfaction and well-being that asks people to rate their lives today and in the future on a scale from 0 (worst possible) to 10 (best possible), allowing researchers to categorize respondents' well-being as **thriving** (high and stable), **struggling** (precarious), or **suffering** (low). We surveyed 2,381 IE residents and find **41% are thriving**, (compared to 53% nationally and 29% globally), **53% are struggling** (43% nationally; 60% globally) and **6% are suffering** (4% nationally, 12% globally) — placing the region in a relative middle ground.

Lived experience differs significantly by well-being category. Compared to those who are thriving, **IE residents who are struggling or suffering are much less likely to agree with statements that reflect core aspects of their well-being.** For example, those who are struggling or suffering are more likely to delay medical care due to cost, feel less safe in their homes and feel less confident about job stability or income growth, among other correlations. **These (and other) statistically significant patterns highlight the strong link between well-being and unmet vital conditions.** For more on the variation in lived experience across the vital conditions and well-being categories, please view the online companion report.

Does Money Buy Happiness?

It helps, but doesn't tell the whole story.

The figure below visualizes the average present-day Cantril Ladder score and GDP per capita for 151 countries and the IE. **Well-being increases with GDP, but there are diminishing returns** as prosperity increases. **If the IE was a country, its average present well-being score of 6.28 would position it just below the U.S.** and alongside countries like Brazil, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Slovakia, which have substantially lower GDP per capita – thus underscoring the relationship between well-being and prosperity is not linear or universal.



Similarly, we observe a **non-linear relationship between household income and well-being at the individual-level** in our survey data, with a slight decrease in well-being when moving from households making less than \$20K/year to households with \$20K-\$50K/year, followed by a steady increase thereafter with rising income. These analyses can be found in the online companion report.

Who is the most likely to be thriving in the IE?

Residents who:

- have higher income;
- have higher levels of education;
- are religiously affiliated (especially Catholic, non-denominational Christian, or Orthodox);
- are married;
- do not identify as white (non-Hispanic);
- do not identify as non-binary

are significantly more likely to be thriving, controlling for other demographic factors.

Belonging & Civic Muscle in the Inland Empire

Foundations for a Thriving Region

In the IE, community well-being is built from a foundation of vital conditions that support people's ability to thrive. Among the most central of these conditions is Belonging and Civic Muscle. Belonging & Civic Muscle acknowledges the connective tissue that holds communities together, builds trust, and powers collaborative problem-solving.

To explore how the IE experiences belonging, civic engagement, well-being and how these dynamics vary, we surveyed 2,381 residents of Riverside and San Bernardino counties between June 17 and July 2, 2025. Survey respondents were sampled through Dynata, a national survey research firm. While not a random sample, Dynata recruits participants through diverse channels, and the resulting sample broadly reflects the Inland Empire's population across key demographics. For more on the survey methodology and sample, please scan the QR code to view the online companion report.

The data reveal both challenges and opportunities. While many residents feel a strong sense of belonging and community responsibility, others—particularly lower-income residents, some communities of color, and those who are more ideologically moderate—report feeling disconnected or unseen. These divides signal areas where the IE's civic fabric may be frayed, but they also highlight where investment, partnership, and even simple shifts in practice may make a difference. By learning from groups where belonging is strong and lifting up their practices there is an opportunity to advance more inclusive systems..

This section draws on three validated tools, among other measures: the Belonging Barometer, which measures how emotionally connected, valued, and included people feel; the Civic Engagement Scale, which captures residents' sense of responsibility and real-world civic behaviors; and the Cantril Ladder. All together, they reveal that when people feel a sense of connection and shared purpose, they're more likely to thrive — reminding us that building common ground through belonging and civic engagement is essential to advancing the common good of a more thriving Inland Empire.

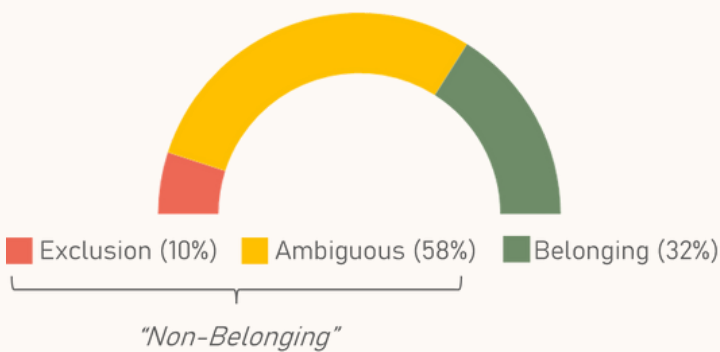
Scan the QR code to view the online companion for our methodology, as well as additional measures and analyses



Measuring Belonging in the Inland Empire

Belonging occurs across a range of life settings—from personal connections at home or work, to broader feelings of togetherness with a nation—but it is within local communities that individuals build social networks, engage civically, and foster shared responsibility – all of which are crucial components of a thriving society. **Since the 1960s, local belonging has declined across the U.S.**, and media channel proliferation has fueled narrowcasting, creating echo chambers that reinforce our views and reduce understanding of others. Thus, measuring and nurturing **local belonging is key to rebuilding civic engagement, strengthening social fabric, and building thriving communities.**

IE Local Community Belonging Barometer

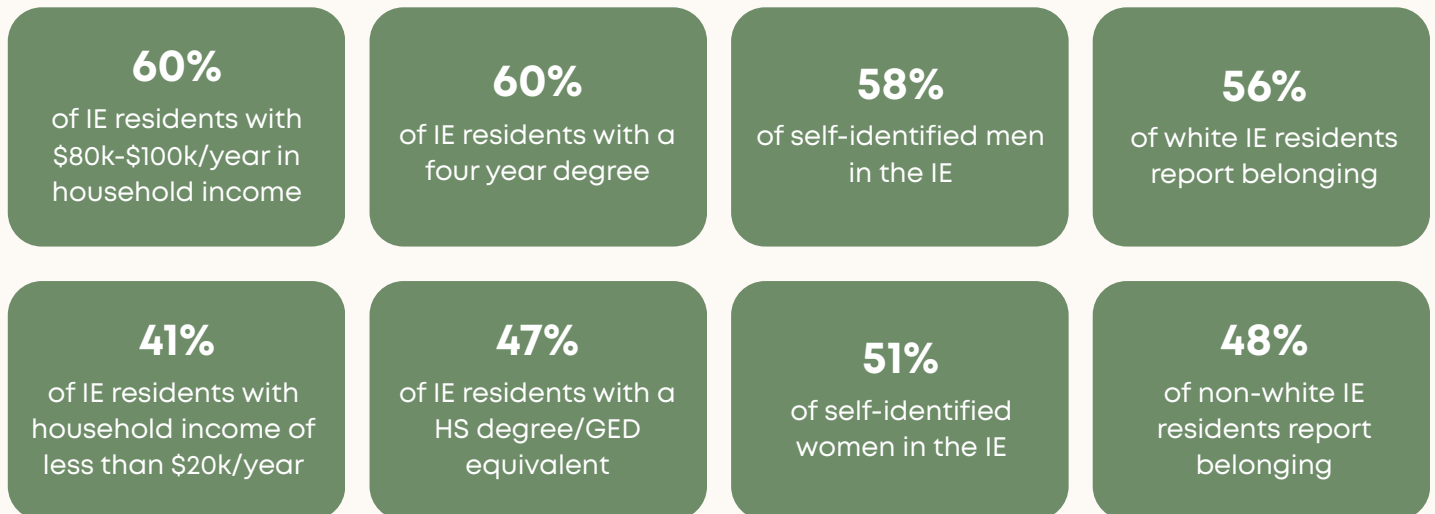


Source: 2025, UCR Center for Community Solutions, Regional Survey

The **Belonging Barometer** is an established measure of how connected, valued, and included people feel based on their agreement with 10 statements regarding their relationship to their local community. Respondents are categorized based on their average score as **"exclusion"** (left out, rejected, ignored), **"ambiguous"** (uncertainty about where they belong), and **"belonging"** (high social connection, safety, and agency). Those who fall into ambiguous and exclusion are further categorized as experiencing "non-belonging".

In the IE, **68% of residents report non-belonging** and **32% report belonging**. Although the level of non-belonging is high, **IE levels of local community belonging are higher than those of Americans overall** (86% of Americans experience non-belonging in their local community; see: 2023 National Belonging Survey by Over Zero and the American Immigration Council.).

Who Feels they Belong in their Local Community?

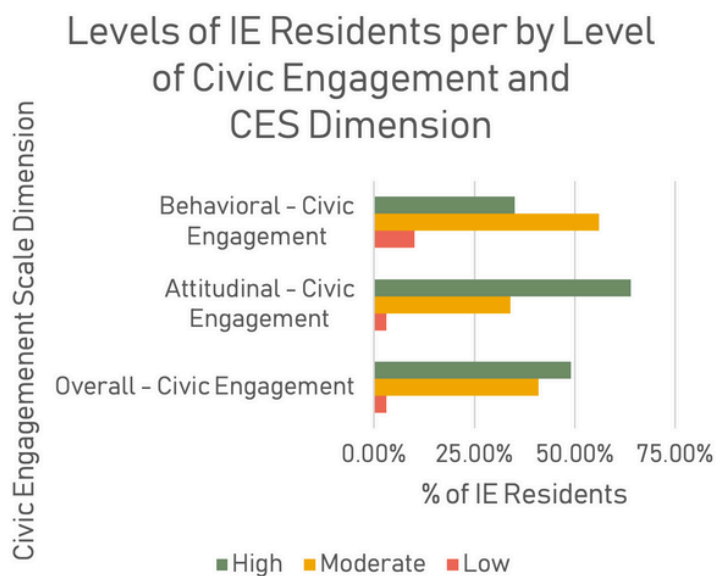


Similar to national trends, **socioeconomic status, age, and religious affiliation are significantly linked to belonging in the IE**, with Catholics, non-denominational Christians, Protestants, and Muslims, as well as those with higher education and income, reporting greater community connection. However, unlike the 2023 national belonging survey, which found non-white individuals had higher belonging, **IE residents identifying as white report stronger community ties** (for more on this, see: Racial & Ethnic Gaps in Belonging on the next page). This reversal suggests local dynamics may differ from national, but we caution against drawing definitive conclusions without additional investigation due to a two-year lag in comparison – especially as the sociopolitical climate (or other factors) may have reshaped racial patterns of belonging.

Measuring Civic Muscle in the Inland Empire

While belonging reflects an individual's internal sense of connection, inclusion, and value, civic muscle captures the outward expression of that connection; it is how people participate in shaping their communities – from voting and serving on juries to joining local sports clubs and being a PTA member. These concepts reinforce one another: belonging can inspire engagement, and civic participation can deepen connection by contributing to the community alongside others. To assess civic muscle, we administer the **Civic Engagement Scale (CES)** and replicate select questions from the **American National Election Studies, American Social Capital Survey, and General Social Science Survey** in our survey. This section highlights findings from the Civic Engagement Scale; additional analyses, including of the other measures, appear in the online companion.

The CES measures two dimensions of engagement: attitudinal (belief in one's ability to influence community change) and behavioral (active participation). Understanding attitudinal and behavioral civic engagement both separately and together reveals not just whether people are participating, but also whether they believe they can make a difference—insight that helps tailor efforts to build both



Source: 2025, UCR Center for Community Solutions, Regional Survey

capacity and motivation for civic action. Respondents rate 13 statements on a 1–7 scale, and we then categorize them as having low (0–2.33), moderate (2.34–4.67), or high (4.68–7) levels of civic engagement based on their average overall score.

While **64% of IE residents exhibit high levels of belief that civic participation is important, only 35% exhibit high levels of acting on that belief – leaving less than half with high overall civic engagement.** This gap points to a key opportunity: many IE residents see the value in civic participation, and motivating action around existing beliefs is often more effective than convincing people their participation matters.

Who has Higher Levels of Civic Engagement in the IE?

56%

of IE residents with household income between \$80k-\$100k/year

57%

of IE residents with a four-year degree

36%

of IE residents with household income of less than \$20k/year

39%

of IE residents with a HS degree/GED equivalent

Civic engagement in the Inland Empire, as in much of the country, varies significantly across residents and reflects deeper patterns of social access and institutional connection. **Individuals with more formal education and higher incomes are significantly more active in civic life** – a dynamic rooted not only in personal resources but in opportunities to participate and be heard. As with belonging, **religious identity also matters, with those identifying as Catholic, non-denominational Christian, or Muslim being more likely to report greater belief and involvement in civic activities** than those with no religious affiliation, pointing to the role of faith communities as potential civic incubators. While racial and ethnic disparities often emerge in national data, this analysis finds that once education, income, and other demographic factors are accounted for, **race and ethnicity alone do not predict civic engagement levels in the IE.**

A Closer Look at Belonging & Civic Muscle

With a clearer picture of who does and does not experience belonging and civic engagement, this section dives deeper into examining which forms of connection and participation are most closely linked to well-being, and where key gaps and opportunities exist. Using ordinal logistic regression and principal component analysis (PCA), we identify the attitudes and behaviors most strongly associated with well-being. All findings are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) unless otherwise noted; additional description of our methodology and findings are available in the online companion report.

Mapping the Core Dimensions of Belonging

Belonging encompasses both **bonding social capital**—closer-knit connections that offer emotional support and a sense of solidarity—and **bridging social capital**, which reflects connections across different social groups that foster inclusion and opportunity. This analysis finds that a one unit increase in **agreement with bonding-oriented belonging statements is associated with a 32% increase in the odds of reporting higher well-being**, while **bridging-oriented statements are linked to a 74% increase**. These findings suggest that while deep ties that promote feelings of emotional connection within one's community matter, those which promote relationships that span lines of difference—efforts that call for agency, openness and trust—may play an even greater role in advancing individual and collective thriving.

Belonging & Civic Engagement at the Ideological Extremes

IE residents with strong political identities—either very liberal or very conservative—are up to 200% more likely to engage civically and report a stronger sense of belonging than ideological moderates. By contrast, moderates and third-party voters report lower levels of both. These patterns suggest that people in the ideological middle may feel less represented or anchored in today's polarized environment, underscoring the need to design inclusive civic spaces that engage across the spectrum and offer meaningful entry points for belonging and participation.

Belonging & Civic Engagement at the Ideological Extremes

In contrast to national trends, white (non-Hispanic/Latino) residents of the IE are significantly more likely to report a stronger sense of belonging than Hispanic/Latino and other non-white peers. **Being white (non-Hispanic/Latino) increases the odds of reporting higher belonging by ~150%**, relative to those who are white (Hispanic/Latino) and controlling for demographic characteristics. Civic engagement and well-being levels are comparable across groups, controlling for other demographics, suggesting that Hispanic/Latino residents are participating civically and doing relatively well, despite feeling less rooted in their communities. These findings raise timely questions about visibility, inclusion, and representation and suggest a need for public spaces and programs that actively affirm belonging, especially for Hispanic/Latino communities who make up a large and growing share of the region.

The Belonging & Civic Muscle – Thriving Connection

IE residents with strong belonging and civic engagement are significantly more likely to thrive. Moving up one level on the Belonging Barometer triples the odds of higher well-being (per the Cantril Ladder), while a step up in civic engagement increases the odds by 1.6 times, controlling for demographics. These relationships are not causal, but they are striking and suggest that building civic muscle and deepening belonging may be mutually reinforcing pathways to a more resilient, inclusive, and hopeful Inland Empire.

Belonging and Civic Muscle serves as both a foundation for thriving and a potential lever for change. By starting here, we can better understand who fares well, where gaps remain, and how to invest — through policy, programs, or even simple, no-cost strategies inspired by groups already leading the way. The following pages highlight key insights related to other vital conditions, with an eye toward policy, program, and community strategies that build on this foundation.

Vital Conditions in Focus

Spotlighting core metrics across time & place

Given the Vital Conditions Framework's comprehensiveness and depth of available data that speak to each vital condition, we worked with **UCR School of Public Policy** faculty to **spotlight select indicators** from publicly available datasets to assess how Riverside and San Bernardino counties compare to their neighbors. This section draws on data from across these conditions and offers expert insight on how the Inland Empire compares to itself over time and to neighboring Los Angeles and Orange counties.

This section draws on data from the American Community Survey (5-year and 1-year), the California Department of Education, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. We have incorporated recommendations and analysis from SPP faculty to surface key regional trends. Additional data visuals and contributor biographies are available in the online report.



Humane Housing

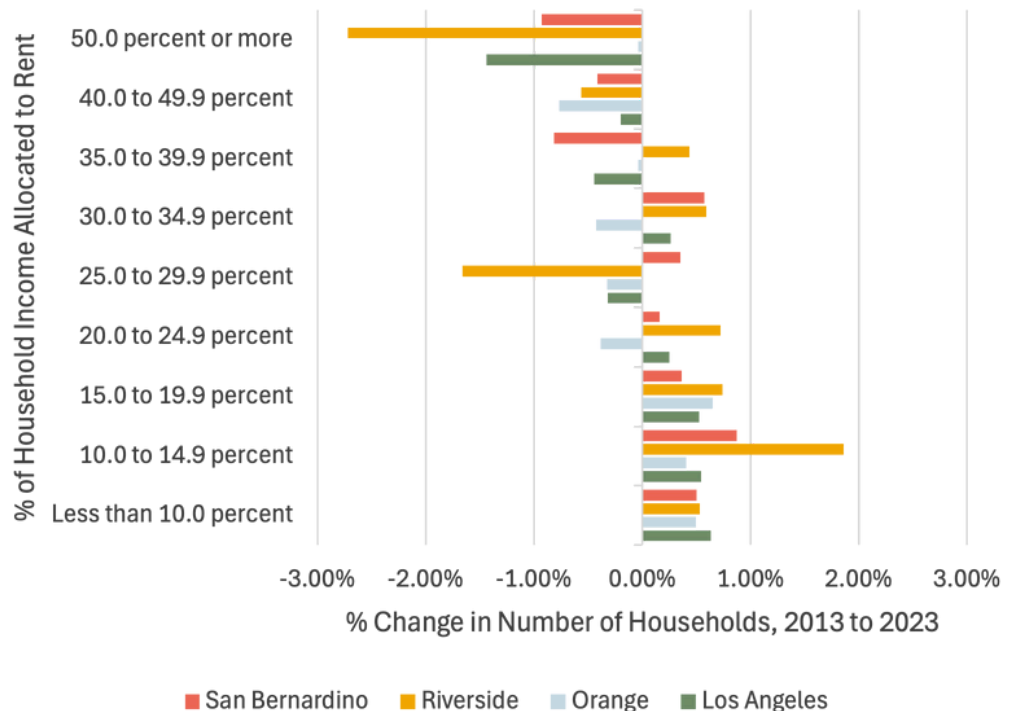
with insight from Richard Carpiano, Ph.D., Professor, UCR School of Public Policy

"Humane Housing" refers to safe, stable, affordable, and dignified living conditions that support physical and mental well-being, allowing people to put down roots and thrive in their communities.

Generally, rent as a percentage of household income is an indicator of a household's rent burden: the higher the percentage, the higher the financial burden that a household experiences to pay rent. 2023 and 2013 data show that, **of all households with rent payments of 35% or higher, the majority (~3 of every 10 households) are paying 50% or more of their income towards rent.**

Comparing across the decade shows increased prevalence of households paying less than 20% of their income towards rent. Here, Riverside County (and to a lesser extent, San Bernardino County) stands out, especially among households in the 10-14.9% burden range, the 25-29.9% range, and then 50% or more range. Altogether, given the extent of political attention paid to affordable housing and homelessness (especially during election cycles) in recent years, plus increases in housing prices and supply in our region over this period, it is difficult for one to argue that this observed decline in percent of households spending more than 50% of their income on rent is not due to out-migration of low-income households.

Percentage Change in Households' Housing-Rent Burden, 2013 & 2023



Source: ACS 5-year, S25070

Reliable Transportation

with insight from Andrew Crosby, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, UCR School of Public Policy

Reliable Transportation is important for many reasons – it helps us get to work and to school, to the grocery store, to daycare centers to pick up our kids, and to places of entertainment.

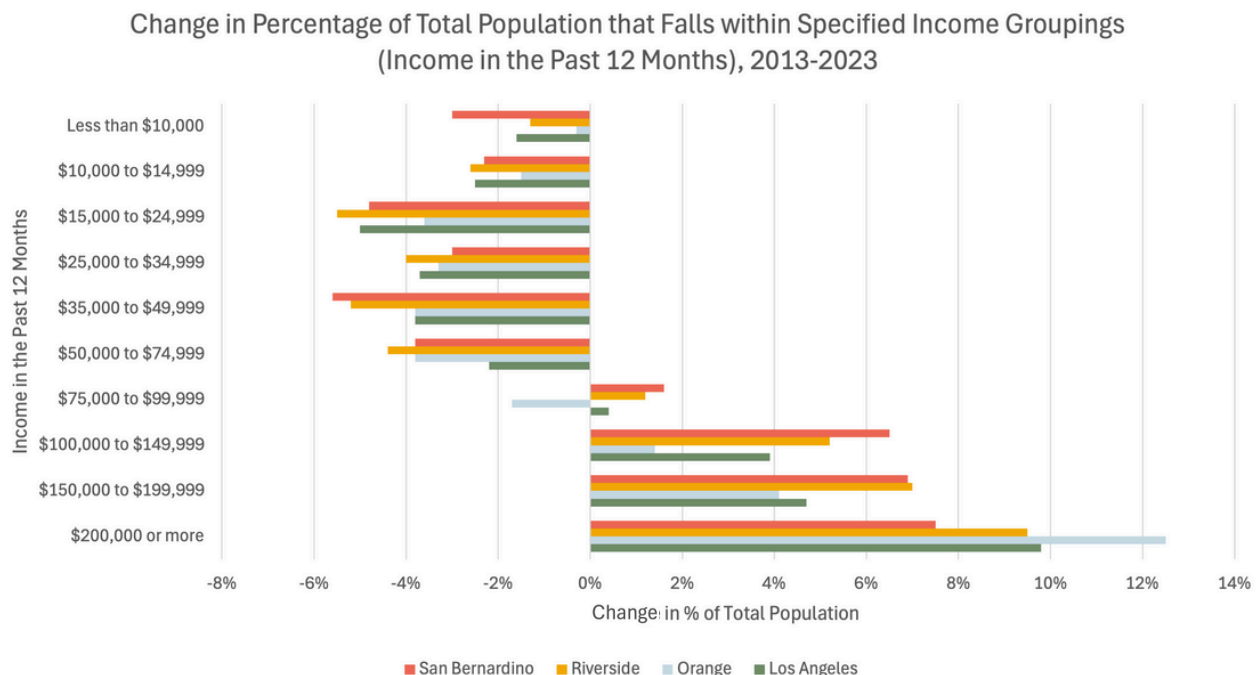
Southern California residents overwhelmingly commute by car, truck, or van. In 2013 San Bernardino accounted for the highest percentage of those that commuted by a car, truck or van, at 91 percent; while still the highest, by 2023 that percentage had dropped slightly to 86 percent. Notably, the share of residents working from home increased considerably across Southern California between 2013–2023, which coincided with a slight drop in commuting by car. While **public transportation use declined nationwide during the COVID-19 pandemic, ridership recovery in Riverside and San Bernardino counties has been aided by service expansions** - both on existing services lines and by adding new routes (e.g., Metrolink’s Arrow, and Riverside Transportation Authority’s Commuter Express Route 200).

Meaningful Work & Wealth

with insight from Bruce Babcock, Ph.D., Professor, UCR School of Public Policy

Meaningful Work & Wealth are a key means to building and supporting healthy lives and communities and allowing everyone the opportunity to participate fully in all aspects of life. To understand how Meaningful Work & Wealth look in the region, we examine employment trends, income, and pay by occupation with the aim of understanding the percentage of the population that is working; how the distribution of income has changed over time; and what attainable upward mobility might be, depending on occupation.

From 2013 to 2023, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties have lower baseline employment rates than Los Angeles and Orange counties, both starting near 53% in 2013 and rising about 6 percentage points to 59% in 2023. All four counties experienced a visible decline in employment rates in 2020, consistent with pandemic-related economic disruptions. Notably, the percentage gap in employment between Orange County and Riverside & San Bernardino counties reduces by about half over the decade.



Source: ACS 5-year, S25070

We also consider the change in percentage of the total population that falls within 10 income groupings from 2013 to 2023. **From 2013 to 2023, both Riverside and San Bernardino counties experienced small but consistent declines in the share of their populations within lower income brackets (those earning \$75,000 or less).**

These declines were generally more pronounced than those observed in Orange and Los Angeles counties. While further analysis is needed to identify the trigger, **anecdotal evidence suggests lower-income households moving out of the Southern California region, or people from lower income groups moving into slightly higher ones may drive the decrease in the population earning lower incomes.** Both Riverside and San Bernardino experienced the most positive growth in the \$200k or more income group.

Examining the change in median earnings for Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties from 2015-2023, Riverside and San Bernardino show mixed trends, with some increases (e.g., Sales & Related Occupations) and some decreases (e.g., Protective service occupation). Although Riverside County sees broad-based and positive growth, there is some stagnation in white-collar roles, and declines in blue collar trades. San Bernardino County saw steep declines in some occupations (e.g., Construction and extraction) but outperformed in some typically lower paid occupations (e.g., Food prep/serving). Interestingly, despite being a primary driver of the inland economy, San Bernardino and Riverside counties saw only moderate gains in Material & Moving Occupations when compared to Los Angeles and Orange counties.

While there have been some indications of positive earnings growth in a few occupations, we compare earnings against occupational share. US Bureau of Labor Statistics data provides some notable contrasts in earnings vs share of employment by occupation. Considering that 2024 data for the Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) identifies Food Preparation and Serving related occupations as the third-largest employer in the region, San Bernardino's outperformance, as mentioned above, is potentially positive news, despite this occupation having among the lowest mean hourly wages. Similarly, while Transportation and Material Moving occupations accounted for 15% of the MSA's regional employment, median hourly wages within this occupational group were in the lowest 3rd overall.



Lifelong Learning

with insight from Mark Long, Ph.D., Dean & Professor, UCR School of Public Policy

The lifelong learning vital condition seeks to understand access to educational opportunities (formal and informal) at all phases of life. This can start as early as preschool, where an analysis of 2023 ACS data shows that Orange and Los Angeles Counties have a much higher percentage of 3- & 4-year-olds enrolled in school (54% and 48%, respectively) than either Riverside or San Bernardino Counties (31% and 30%, respectively). It also extends into adulthood, where according to 2023 ACS data, higher education rates are highest in Orange and Riverside Counties (87% and 83%, respectively), than they are in San Bernardino or Los Angeles Counties (82% and 81% respectively).

To understand the continuum between K-12 and higher education we analyzed the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and average scholastic performance. We find there is **no significant difference between the English Language Arts performance of students in the IE relative to students in Los Angeles or Orange counties when controlling for socioeconomic disadvantage.** We run a similar analysis for mathematics and find that **performance on mathematics exams in the IE is lower than in Los Angeles and Orange counties, even when controlling for socioeconomic disadvantage.** These results suggest there are other reasons – outside of the level of disadvantage among the student population – for lower performance on mathematics exams in the IE.



Thriving Natural World

with insight from Kurt Schwabe, Professor, UCR School of Public Policy

While a thriving natural world encompasses all aspects of the environment around us, analyzing air quality (PM2.5) and extreme heat are particularly relevant for Southern California, and especially the inland region.

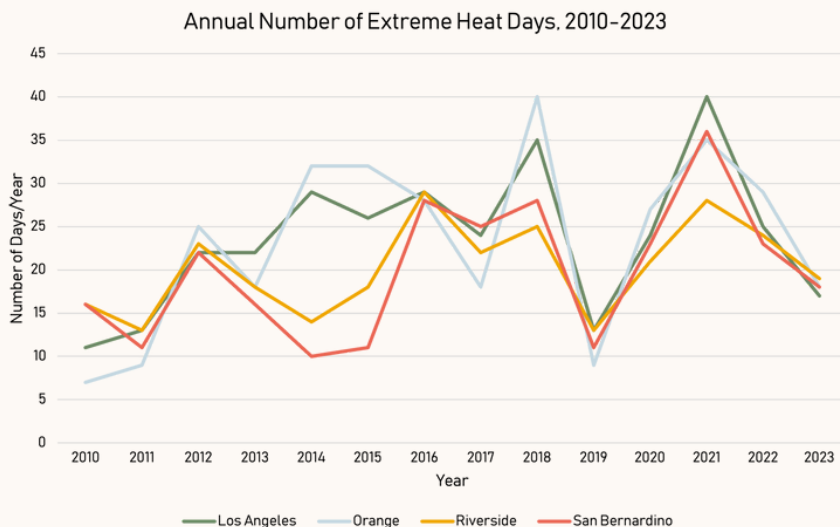
In general, PM2.5 levels have increased in the decade from 2010 to 2020. 2020 PM2.5 levels would likely have been much higher but were dampened due to lower economic activity and driving due to COVID-19.

Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties experienced the greatest increase in PM2.5 emissions. **Increases in warehouse industry activity in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties likely contributes to increased PM2.5 emissions, though the extent to which PM2.5 emissions will continue to rise over the next few decades will depend, in part, on the degree to which the transportation industry electrifies.**

The number of extreme temperature days within the Southern California region has increased over the past decade. Particularly concerning is the increase in frequency of extreme

temperature events as evidenced by the near 40 days of extreme heat in 2018 and 2021 relative to around 15 days in 2010 for Riverside and San Bernardino Counties.

Being aware of trends in temperature increases are important for economic, environmental, and social considerations. For example, extreme temperature has negative impacts on the availability of water, water quality, health, and agricultural production. Additionally, lower income households, and agricultural workers are some of the most vulnerable populations to rising temperatures given limited resources and disproportionate exposure.



Source: National Environmental Health Public Tracking Network, CDC

Basic Needs for Health & Safety

with insight from Richard Carpiano, Ph.D., Professor, UCR School of Public Policy

Basic Needs for Health & Safety refers to the essential conditions—nutritious food and accessible healthcare—that every person needs to survive and live with security and stability. As a benefit for low-income households, receipt of **Food Stamps/SNAP** (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), a federal program implemented in California as **“CalFresh,”** is a valuable indicator of socioeconomic disadvantage. There are rather stark racial-ethnic differences in the percentage of households receiving this benefit (and thus being low income). Considering that Whites and Latinos constitute a substantial proportion of the population for each the four counties analyzed, it is concerning that approximately **30-37% of White households and approximately 40-57% of Hispanic or Latino households qualify for this benefit. As concerning as these numbers are, they are substantially lower than the 2013 estimates for these groups.** The 2023 estimates for these two racial-ethnic groups represent substantial decreases for White households (i.e. an approximately 20% drop in each of the four counties). While such decreases may seem positive, they are **likely indicative of such economically vulnerable households moving out of the area.** Between 2013 and 2023, other racial-ethnic groups (Asian & Multiracial households) experienced increases in receipt of this assistance: Though Black/African American households showed no change in Food Stamp/SNAP receipt between these two time points, approximately 1 in 6 households in Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties, respectively, and 1 in 10 households in Riverside County received this assistance in 2023 and 2013.

We hope these findings serve as a valuable starting point for dialogue and action to strengthen a thriving, connected Inland Empire. Additional data and analyses are available in the online companion, accessible by scanning the QR code.



The **Center for Community Solutions** at UC Riverside's School of Public Policy conducts community-engaged research to inform data-driven solutions to pressing policy challenges in Inland Southern California and beyond.

To learn more or connect with us to learn how we can support your work through research, visit communitysolutions.ucr.edu or contact us at solutions@ucr.edu.

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