

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

Summary Report

January 2025

Introduction

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

With immigrants underrepresented in official surveys like the U.S. Census, essential data on this community's characteristics and needs remain limited, making it difficult to address their specific challenges effectively. This study consolidates data from various sources to support policymakers, nonprofits, and other local organizations in understanding the composition, challenges, and needs of the immigrant community in San Luis Obispo County. Key issues covered include housing, healthcare, legal support, education, economic stability, and family services.

Demographic Overview

We are a county of immigrants who live on the lands of the Indigenous Peoples of San Luis Obispo County, which includes the Salinan Tribe and the Yak tit'yu tit'yu Yak tithini Northern Chumash tribe.

San Luis Obispo County, with a total population of 281,712 residents, has a diverse and growing immigrant population that comprises approximately 10% of the county's residents, or about 26,721 individuals. The majority of these immigrants are long-term residents, with 82% having lived in the United States for over 15 years. Immigrant communities in the county include citizens, lawful permanent residents, and undocumented individuals, each contributing significantly to the local economy and cultural landscape. The following graphic outlines key aspects of the county's immigrant and Latine demographics:

SLO POPULATION DATA

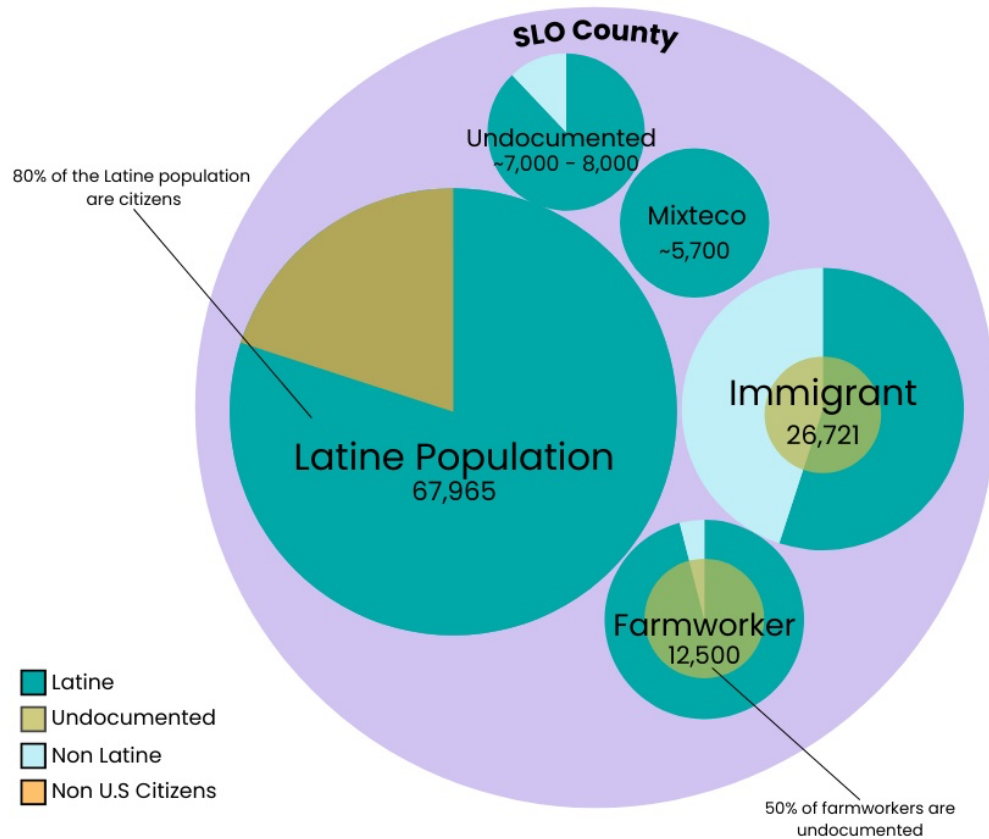


Figure 1: Relative Sizes of Immigrant and Latine populations

- **Naturalization and Legal Status:** Among the immigrant population, around 52% (13,915 individuals) are naturalized U.S. citizens, while 48% (12,805 individuals) are non-citizens. Non-citizen immigrants include both documented residents, such as lawful permanent residents, and undocumented individuals who lack legal status.
- **Undocumented Population:** Estimates place the number of undocumented immigrants in San Luis Obispo County at between 7,000 and 8,000, approximately half of the county's non-citizen population. Additionally, an estimated 9,700 U.S. citizens and lawful residents live in households with undocumented family members, meaning that about 16,600 county residents are either undocumented or share households with undocumented individuals.
- **Ethnic and Regional Origins:**
 - o Latine¹ Population: A significant portion of the immigrant population is Latine, with about 69% identifying as such. However, it is important to note that the

¹ We have adopted the non-gender specific term Latine to describe the Latin American population in this report.

majority (80%) of the overall Latine population in San Luis Obispo County were born in the U.S., making it clear that being Latine is not synonymous with being an immigrant.

- **Country of Origin:** Roughly 56% of immigrants in the county are from Latin America, 20% from Asia, 16% from Europe, and smaller percentages from Africa and Oceania.
- **Indigenous Mexican Communities:** Within the Latine immigrant population, a notable group comprises indigenous Mexicans from southern Mexico, particularly the Mixteco community. The San Luis Obispo Mexican Indigenous Community Study (SLOMICS) estimated that 3,430 to 8,000 indigenous Mexican immigrants reside in the county, with most adults working as farmworkers. These communities face unique linguistic and cultural challenges, as many speak indigenous languages rather than Spanish or English.
- **Household Composition and Family Structure:** Immigrant households tend to be larger and more likely to include extended family members compared to non-immigrant households. The average household size among immigrants is 3.3 individuals, compared to 2.5 for the general population. Mixed-status families, where some members are U.S. citizens or lawful residents and others are undocumented, are common.
- **Age Distribution:** The immigrant population in the county skews older, with a median age of 47.9 compared to 40 for the general population. The majority (75%) are working-age adults (18-64), a higher percentage than the overall population. Immigrant families generally have a smaller percentage of children under 18 (5%) compared to the general population (17%).
- **Language and English Proficiency:** Approximately 69% of immigrants speak a language other than English at home, with Spanish as the predominant language. However, among the indigenous Mexican population, Mixteco is commonly spoken. Many immigrants report limited English proficiency, with 48% stating that they speak English "less than very well," though this figure is lower among naturalized citizens (28%) compared to non-citizens (61%).

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

These demographics reflect a county immigrant population that is both diverse in origin and well-established in the community. Addressing the needs of both documented and undocumented populations through inclusive services and supportive policies will be essential for San Luis Obispo County to foster a more equitable and cohesive community for all residents.

Key Findings

- **Labor and Industry:** Immigrants are essential to the county's agriculture, construction, hospitality, and food services sectors. Despite their contributions, many immigrant

workers face wage disparities and lack access to benefits like unemployment insurance. The median hourly wage for immigrants in San Luis Obispo County is \$18, compared to \$28 for the general population, and undocumented workers often earn even less.

- **Housing:** High rent burdens and overcrowded living conditions severely impact the immigrant population. Approximately 53% of non-citizens spend over 30% of their income on rent. Undocumented immigrants face unique barriers to accessing affordable housing, often resulting in overcrowded conditions. Additionally, undocumented immigrants are generally ineligible for federal housing assistance.
- **Healthcare Access:** Immigrant communities face numerous healthcare challenges, including language barriers, distrust of the healthcare system, and financial constraints. Over half of Spanish-speaking residents delay medical care due to cost, and language barriers disproportionately impact non-English-speaking immigrants. The recent expansion of Medi-Cal in California will benefit undocumented residents; however, significant gaps remain, especially for those who earn above the income threshold for Medi-Cal but lack employer-based insurance.
- **Food Insecurity:** Immigrants in San Luis Obispo County face higher rates of food insecurity due to economic hardship and limited access to food assistance programs. Approximately 64% of Mexican indigenous respondents reported experiencing hunger within the past year. Programs like CalFresh exclude undocumented individuals, though mixed-status families can receive prorated benefits.
- **Education:** Language acquisition is a major barrier for immigrant students. English learners make up 12.6% of the student population in San Luis Obispo County, with Spanish as the predominant language among these students. Limited educational attainment among immigrant adults highlights the need for accessible vocational and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs.
- **Policy Barriers:** Immigration status significantly impacts access to social services and public benefits. Although California has expanded certain services to undocumented residents, eligibility remains limited, especially for income assistance and unemployment insurance. Moreover, fear of deportation and distrust of institutions hinder many immigrants from accessing available resources.
- **Income Assistance:** Immigrant families, particularly those with undocumented members, face significant challenges in accessing income support. Undocumented immigrants are generally ineligible for federal income assistance programs, though some state-level programs provide limited aid. California offers the Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI) for elderly and disabled immigrants and allows undocumented taxpayers to claim state credits like the California Earned Income Tax Credit (CalEITC) and the Young Child Tax Credit (YCTC). However, many undocumented individuals remain excluded from key benefits, leading to increased financial insecurity.
- **Disaster Assistance:** Undocumented immigrants are disproportionately affected by natural disasters but face barriers in accessing relief services. Federal programs, like those administered by FEMA, provide only limited emergency assistance to undocumented individuals, often excluding them from direct financial aid. Some organizations, including local non-profits and the American Red Cross, offer relief regardless of immigration status. California has provided interim relief in certain cases,

but immigrant communities still experience significant gaps in disaster support due to legal and policy restrictions.

- **Climate Change:** Immigrant communities, particularly those working in agriculture and construction, face heightened vulnerability to climate-related hazards such as extreme heat, wildfire smoke, and drought. Many immigrant workers are at risk due to language barriers, lack of access to health and safety information, and financial pressures to continue working in dangerous conditions. Recent state policies have been implemented to address these risks, including mandating paid sick leave for agricultural workers during extreme weather conditions, but additional protections and resources are needed.
- **Digital Literacy:** Access to digital tools and internet connectivity is essential for accessing public services, education, and employment opportunities. Immigrant communities in San Luis Obispo County, especially non-English-speaking households and lower-income families, often face barriers in digital access and literacy. Many immigrant households lack internet access or rely solely on smartphones, limiting their ability to participate in online services and educational opportunities. Efforts to enhance digital literacy and access are needed to bridge this gap, particularly as more public services require online engagement.

Conclusion

The immigrant population of San Luis Obispo County is integral to the county's economy, social fabric, and cultural diversity. Addressing their unique challenges—particularly in housing, healthcare, education, and economic security—is essential to fostering an inclusive and resilient community. Through targeted policies, enhanced community support, and inclusive service delivery, San Luis Obispo County can better support its immigrant residents and strengthen the region for all.

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