ABOUT CALIFORNIA 100

The California 100 Initiative envisions a future that is innovative, sustainable, and equitable for all. Our mission is to strengthen California's ability to collectively solve problems and shape our long-term future over the next 100 years.

California 100 is organized around 5 policy themes and 5 core values, and driven by interrelated stages of work: research, policy innovation, and engagement with Californians. California 100's work is guided by an expert and intergenerational Commission.

Through various projects and activities, California 100 seeks to move California towards an aspirational vision—changing policies and practices, attitudes and mindsets, to inspire a more vibrant future. This Regional Analysis was produced as part of California 100's research stream of work.

The California 100 initiative is incubated through the University of California and Stanford.

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The largest cities within each of the counties in the Central Coast Region include:

- Oxnard (Ventura County, 202,063)
- Salinas (Monterey County, 162,791)
- Santa Maria (Santa Barbara County, 109,707)
- Santa Cruz (Santa Cruz County, 61,950)
- San Luis Obispo (San Luis Obispo County, 47,063)
- Hollister (San Benito County, 34,928)
The Central Coast of California, also known as “the American Riviera,” boasts some of California’s most well-known beaches and towns, from Santa Barbara to Big Sur and Monterey Bay. Spanning 15,000 square miles, the region makes up roughly 9 percent of California’s total area and about 6 percent of its population, or about 2.3 million people. The following six counties comprise this region: Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and Ventura. Although the region does not have any large cities relative to other regions in California, its population is spread out along the coast in small-to-medium-sized municipalities, with Oxnard as the largest city with a population of about 202,000 people.

Historically, the region has been known for sustaining agriculture and viticulture, and serving as a tourist destination. Its coastal climate, protected by the Santa Lucia Mountain Range, traps moisture to the west, whereas further east in the Salinas Valley, the climate is drier, serving as a hub for produce and crop production, like strawberries, lettuce, and wine grapes, among others. In response to climate change, the Central Coast may witness more extreme maximum and minimum annual temperatures and a mild increase in precipitation, particularly along the coastline.
The Central Coast Region Has A Large Population of Younger Hispanic/Latino Residents, and Its Older Population Skews Whiter

**Figure 1**

**Source:** U.S. Census Data, 2020
### Figure 2

**The Central Coast has More Latino/Hispanic Residents Than the Rest of the State**

**SOURCE:** U.S. Census Data, 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Hispanic or Latino</th>
<th>Black or African American</th>
<th>Asian or Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander</th>
<th>American Indian and Alaska Native</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Two or More Races</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>STATEWIDE</strong></td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td></td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**NOTE:** Many parts of the Central Coast, particularly in Monterey County, fall under the category of very hard-to-count on the U.S. Census, leaving open the possibility of undercounting the population.
The Central Coast Generally Matches the Overall Political Makeup of California

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Third-Party</th>
<th>No Party Reference</th>
<th>Eligible Non-Registered</th>
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<td>5%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Benito County</td>
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<td>5%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Luis Obispo County</td>
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<td>28%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Barbara County</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Cruz County</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ventura County</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STATEWIDE</strong></td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** California Secretary of State, September 9, 2022 Report of Registration.
For more than 10,000 years, the Central Coast has been home to native populations. With its temperate climate and variety of topographical and biological environments, the Central Coast offers ample opportunities for sustaining agriculture and livestock within its redwood and evergreen forests, grasslands, and coastal scrub habitats.

Prior to the settlement of the Europeans in the 18th century, the native peoples inhabiting this region included the Tataviam from what is now Ventura County, the Salinan from northern San Luis Obispo County, branches of the Chumash in Ventura County, Santa Barbara County, San Luis Obispo County and the Northern Channel Islands, the Costanoan-Ohlone and Esselen in Monterey County, and the Yokuts further east of Monterey County.

These native populations primarily existed as hunter-gatherer economies, and over time, altered their environments via sustainable land-use practices to better meet their
needs. Intentional, controlled fires were among the strategies used by the native peoples to sustain the growth of plants and maintain habitats for animals. For example, there is evidence that the Chumash selectively burned areas along the coastal region in order to increase the availability of seeds, like chia and tarweed, which were a significant part of their diet. Over time, these fires likely had the effect of increasing the range of grassland and shrubland in the region, which, in turn, provided greater accessibility of edible plants and animals to the native peoples while limiting the habitats of predators, like grizzly bears that lived along the coastal ranges. Moreover, these indigenous groups selectively harvested plants throughout the region, improving habitats for oak trees and hunted animals, including rabbits, deer, and elk. As populations of shrubbery and wildlife adapted to the widespread scale of these practices, so too did the landscape of the Central Coast.

By the 16th century, the region underwent a significant change as European explorers reached the west coast of the United States. First landing in San Diego in 1542, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo of Spain led explorations up the coast to Monterey Bay, which would later be the location of the capital, the eponymous city of Monterey, of Spain’s Alta California. Along the way, Cabrillo introduced new vegetation and human diseases along this initial journey.

Though Spanish trading ships regularly frequented the coast of California in the centuries after Cabrillo’s navigation, formal settlement of Alta California did not occur until 1769 with an expedition led by the military captain, Gaspar de Portolá, and Junípero
Serra, a Franciscan priest. As they surveyed the region, Franciscan priests led by Serra, known as the Padres, identified areas along the coasts with large populations of the native peoples, recognizing that the success of their missions would depend on the existence of established settlements, familiarity with the land for the extraction of building materials, and labor to exploit. Of the 21 missions built in California, 11 are built along the Central Coast.

Upon the arrival of the Spanish, the native peoples extended a generous welcome to the explorers, offering food and entertainment. In return, the Padres recruited the native peoples to initiate the construction of the missions and presidios, or forts, along the coastal region. In 1786, the year the mission in Santa Barbara was constructed, the mission recorded three indigenous converts, or “neophytes,” and by 1789, that figure had reached 425. Often, Native American people were lured to the mission by its promise of a better life, with Western food, clothing, and shelter, and upon their conversion to Christianity, bound to life at the mission – the missions often had soldiers or guards whose responsibility was to track and recapture runaways. In 1786, a French naval officer arrived at Monterey Bay and in his descriptions of the relationship between missionaries and neophytes, likened the treatment of the Native Americans at the missions to that of slaves. Conversion to Christianity, in essence, entailed a loss of freedom and the rapid dismantling of native culture.
Along with a new culture and religion, the Spanish also introduced European vegetation and animals for cultivation in the region. These effects remain today: the $2 billion agricultural industry in Ventura County has its roots in the introduction of livestock and crops at the Mission San Buenaventura in 1782. The Padres introduced cattle, sheep, and horses into the Central Coast, which were left to graze the land and would later become the basis for the extensive cattle ranching in the region. As the Spanish viewed the practice of controlled burns for land restoration primitive and an unnecessary threat to grazing animals, they also limited this practice. Fewer restorative land-use practices, compounded with the effects of increased deforestation and overgrazing of the land, led to the depletion of plant and animal populations. Beyond the introduction of new species into the Central Coast, the Spanish also carried smallpox, measles, and syphilis, among other diseases previously foreign to the native peoples; consequently, by 1848, the population of native people in California had declined by more than two-thirds.
EFFECTS OF U.S. ANNEXATION OF CALIFORNIA FROM MEXICO ON THE CENTRAL COAST

The effects of Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821 were felt along the coast of California, where the missions were stripped of much of their land and power via secularization, the process of replacing missionaries with secular clergy, and selling mission land and property. As the Californios grew wealthy off their cattle, more settlers from across the U.S. and abroad moved into Mexico’s Alta California expecting wealth from the fur-trading business. In the Central Coast region, many of these settlers initially came to the area for fur trading, hunting mink, fur seals, and sea otters for their valuable hides. Increasingly, U.S. settlers occupied the land in search of opportunities for ranching, sea commerce, or agriculture.

This free people, who had previously been under the control of the missions, were freed. In 1834, under Governor Jose Figueroa of Alta California, much of the land held by the missions was decreed to be distributed among the neophytes. Actually, the native peoples only received unproductive livestock and small fractions of the land, whereas the remainder of the mission land was sold as ranchos, which continued to depend on the labor of the native people. These native people, who had previously been under the control of the missions, were freed.

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As U.S. settlements in the territory grew, so too did foreign interest: news of impending occupation by Britain and France reached the U.S. commander of the Pacific Squadron in 1842, Commodore Thomas Ap Catesby Jones, who briefly seized the capital of Alta California—Monterey—for the U.S. Under the false impression that the U.S. had declared war against Mexico, Jones subsequently surrendered Monterey back to Mexico in the same year. Four years later, in 1846, the U.S. officially declared war on Mexico, ultimately annexing California in 1850 following the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.

In the days leading up to the signing of the Treaty, James Marshall discovered gold near Sacramento, thus sparking the Gold Rush and a rapid influx of migrants from the East and
abroad. Over the following year, nearly 100,000 people poured into California in search of gold, driving up the population and accelerating the need for government in California through statehood.\(^30\) In the years following the annexation of California, Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act into law in 1862, opening the West to settlement by men and women of all backgrounds and races in 160-acre increments.\(^31\) These “homesteaders” soon occupied the land throughout California, and disturbed land ownership to remove Mexican owners in favor of white settlers. For example, before annexation in 1834, the land spanning Big Sur had been sold to the governor of Alta California, Juan Bautista Alvarado, as a nearly 9,000-acre rancho land grant. However, following the annexation of California and passage of the Homestead Act, settlers occupied these lands, and many of the region’s features now bear their names (e.g., Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park).\(^32\)

George Hearst, the father of newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst, also capitalized on the availability of land following California’s annexation. After accruing wealth as a gold-mine owner, George Hearst purchased 40,000 acres of land around San Simeon Bay in 1865. Years later, in 1919, his son, William Randolph Hearst inherited this land, gradually acquiring more land around the property until he amassed 250,000 acres of land for the development of the project he called “La Cuesta Encantada,” or Enchanted Hill.\(^33\) For more than 20 years, Hearst commissioned a series of buildings around its focal point, a nearly 70,000 square foot mansion referred to as Casa Grande, or Hearst Castle.
REGIONAL INDUSTRIES DURING THE 19TH CENTURY

With the population booms in San Francisco as a result of the Gold Rush, the economies of the Central Coast region responded accordingly, becoming hubs for natural resources, like lumber, either for use on its own, or hard oak species for charcoal in the growing cities nearby.34 During the 19th century, thousands of acres of oak trees were cut down for such industries; by the 1940s, the U.S. government also introduced incentives for landowners to continue cutting down oak trees, in order to accommodate larger livestock populations.35 As a result of new industry, infrastructure development, and the impact of farming and ranching, the Central Coast ecosystem experienced widespread deforestation over a series of decades. Today, much of the stretch of coastal, forested land extending between Ventura and Monterey Counties, known as Los Padres National Forest, is among the state’s land protected from logging and other industrial activities.36

By the mid-1860s, coinciding with the U.S. Civil War, Santa Cruz became a dominant gunpowder producer with the advent of the California Powder Works company, which served as a major employer in the County for 50 years.37 Elsewhere in the region, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties supported a growing oil industry as drilling companies sprang up around the turn of the 20th century.38

Around this time, agricultural cultivation continued to develop throughout the region. Further north in the Salinas Valley, land previously used for ranching cattle slowly transitioned to the production of agriculture, with the Valley supporting a growing flour and wheat industry. By the late 1800s, Chinese immigrants comprised much of the agricultural labor force around Monterey. In the decades prior, Chinese immigrants had moved into California, many seeking to participate in the Gold Rush and others settling along the Central Coast to set up fishing villages.39 In 1882, however, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 forced many of these settlers into low-wage work, either with the railroads or others finding work nearby in the Salinas Valley cultivating sugar beets and strawberries.40

Infrastructure, in the form of both railroads and highways in the late 19th century, helped support these industries by expanding their markets. With help from New Deal funds and convict labor from San Quentin in Marin County, the portion of Highway 1 connecting San Simeon to Big Sur opened in 1937. Three years later, in 1940, the Southern Pacific Railroad finished construction on the Salinas Depot.

The highway and railroad networks allowed for more effortless movement throughout the state; consequently, agricultural hubs like Salinas expanded the breadth of their reach in the market, ultimately becoming known as the “Salad Bowl of the World.” Years later, this moniker would be borrowed by a farmworker strike in the 1970s, as laborers with the “Salad Bowl Strikes” sought better pay and working conditions. The strikes, which led to the California Agricultural Labors Relations Act of 1975, produced some improvements for unionized farmworkers. Its effects, however, gradually lessened with the region’s growing dependence on non-unionized, immigrant labor.41
Industries that developed alongside the settlement of the Central Coast continue to dominate much of the economy, whether related to agriculture or energy production. Today, however, these industries continue to expand upon their expertise, integrating technological innovation and progress with support from local universities and organizations. The Central Coast is home to three top-ranked public universities: University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), UC Santa Cruz (UCSC), and California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly SLO), as well as Cal State University, Monterey Bay (CSU Monterey Bay). Of these universities, UCSB opened first – initially, the school was formed as a teacher training school in the late 19th century, joining the University of California system in 1944. Cal Poly SLO also opened as a vocational school in the early 20th century, expanding its curriculum and later becoming a California State Polytechnic College in 1947.

AGTECH

From its history as an agricultural and cattle-ranching economy, the Central Coast remains a significant crop supplier, with its total agricultural production valued at more than $10 billion in 2020. Its fertile soil and cool climate allow for the consistent growing of berries, vegetables, and flowers year-round, despite fluctuations in temperature and rainfall. Monterey County is a significant producer of strawberries and lettuce, Ventura of strawberries, lemons, and avocados, and Santa Barbara of strawberries, broccoli, and wine grapes.
Nonetheless, climate change in the region brings the risks of rising sea levels along the coastlines and limited rainfall further inland. Along with its university partners, the agriculture industry is building upon its expertise, investing heavily in Agriculture Technology, or AgTech, to develop technologies for more sustainable farming practices in an ever-
changing climate. In 2020, investments in AgTech businesses in California surpassed $5 billion, with $722 million of these investments—nearly 15 percent—awarded to companies based in the Central Coast.46,47 For many years, Salinas also hosted Forbes’ annual AgTech Summit, drawing experts from agricultural, technological, and entrepreneurial backgrounds.48

Local industry and university partners support innovation in the region: Cal Poly SLO, for example, is completing construction on the $125 million J.G. Boswell Agricultural Technology Center, which will offer students hands-on opportunities to learn about the intersection between technology, agriculture, and the food industry.49 The Center will build upon SLO’s existing expertise within its College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences, which manages 6,000 acres of farmland in the region, supporting student and faculty research into new technologies for farming and ranching. Since 1989, Cal Poly SLO has also operated the Irrigation Training & Research Center, which directly provides irrigation modernization support to districts across the state and country, while also investigating water conservation programs for use globally.50

Likewise, the Institute for Energy Efficiency at UCSB, which was founded in 2008 to support research into sustainable energy use, is researching technologies that use AI and machine learning for use in farming practices.51 UCSC is similarly exploring other opportunities to contribute to the AgTech industry, thereby supporting its local farmworker partners.52
The Central Coast is also home to the state’s last remaining nuclear power plant, Diablo Canyon. Currently, the Diablo Canyon Power Plant in Avila Beach produces about 2,240 megawatts of electricity, which equates to roughly 9 percent of the state’s electricity. As of 2016, the plant, which opened in 1985 and is operated by PG&E, has been planning to close its two reactors in 2024 and 2025, respectively, citing rising costs to keep the plant open. The likelihood of its closure is now low, however, as the Newsom administration has approved the lending of up to $1.4 billion to PG&E for maintenance of the facility. Although nuclear power serves as an alternative to fossil fuels, the generation process also produces dangerous nuclear waste stored in temporary containers, which can leak radiation that risks the environment and human health.
Opponents of keeping Diablo Canyon running past 2025 cite such risks, arguing that investment in nuclear energy may prevent needed investment in alternative renewable energy generation. Proponents argue, however, that the power plant provides a necessary and dependable service to Californians, particularly during hot weather that threatens the state’s electrical grid.

The planned closure of Diablo Canyon coincides with plans to establish offshore wind energy farms near the coast of San Luis Obispo, which may offset the effects on electricity generation from its closure. The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), the agency which manages this offshore land, has identified nearly 400 square miles off the coast, which it plans to auction off as three leases to developers in late 2022. The proposed wind farm is expected to generate nearly 3,000 megawatts, which could power more than Diablo Canyon’s current electricity generation, providing more than 1 million homes with electricity.

OIL INDUSTRY

In contrast with the current efforts for renewable energy, the Central Coast has long supported an oil business along its shores. In 1896, drilling began off the coast of Santa Barbara in the Summerland oil field. Based on observations of the region, researchers estimate that the oil and gas seeps in the region have been ongoing for at least 500,000 years. Today, more than 6,000 jobs in the Central Coast depend on the oil and gas industry in the Central Coast, or about 1 percent of the total jobs in the region.
Since the industry’s inception, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo have each experienced oil spills affecting the local environments. In 1969, poor casing within a Union Oil well resulted in a spillage of roughly 3 million gallons of oil in the Santa Barbara Channel, spreading across 800 square miles of ocean.63 Years later, in 1992, a pipeline rupture near Avila Beach in San Luis Obispo County resulted in more than 24,000 gallons of oil pouring into the Pacific Ocean. Currently, there is a moratorium on the initiation of new oil drilling operations in the Central Coast after lawsuits filed in 2020 called for further investigations into the environmental impacts of proposed oil and fracking developments.64

AEROSPACE

The Central Coast is also home to the Vandenberg Space Force Base (VSB) in Santa Barbara County, formerly the Vandenberg Air Force Base. As a major employer in the region, VSB employs more than 8,000 personnel and is situated on nearly 100,000 acres in the County, drawing talent from Cal Poly SLO and UCSB.65 Initially, it was established during World War II as the military post, Camp Cooke. After the Korean War in 1957, the U.S. Air Force assumed the land and developed the missile and space facility, VSFB, which launched its first missile a year later in December 1958, and now oversees missile testing for the Department of Defense.66 Today, the Central Coast region seeks to further develop its workforce within the aerospace industry through partnerships between the State of California, UCSB, Cal Poly SLO, and other stakeholders to attract space-related companies to the area.67

In order to attract commercial aerospace operations into the area, the State of California has awarded Relativity Space, Inc., an aerospace research and development firm, a $30 million tax credit to employ an additional 1,000 employees in the region; similarly, Astra Space Operations, Inc., also in aerospace research and development, was awarded a $25 million tax credit to create more than 650 jobs in the region.68
As a region with five of its six counties along the Pacific Ocean, the Central Coast of California is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Since 1990, the rate at which the global sea levels have been rising has increased – double its estimates for the 20th century – now at a rate of 1.3 inches per decade. The effects of sea level rises are concerning in areas across Santa Barbara County, a region which some research predicts parts of may be completely flooded in the next century. In Carpinteria, for example, the properties of more than 4,500 residents are at risk of flooding, whereas in the city of Santa Barbara, more than $2.4 billion in property is at risk.
Added to the concern of lost property is the disproportionate effects sea level rises and flooding would have on low-income and renting residents along the coast. By 2050, projections indicate that disadvantaged communities are five times more likely to live near flood-risk zones in 2050 when compared with the general population. If, for example, California experienced a 100-year flood, or an extreme flooding event with a 1 percent likelihood of occurring, 56,000 of those affected (or 27%) are lower income. Of this population, most are renters, and nearly 10 percent are linguistically isolated, or have limited proficiency in English.

Although the likelihood of such an event stands at 1 percent, El Niño events may exacerbate the effects of sea level rises, as these events bring higher water levels and rainfall, thereby adding to shoreline erosion along the coast. In 2015, California experienced the strongest event in the last 145 years, which eroded sandy beaches in Central California on average by 45.7 meters. Efforts to address the impending impacts of sea level rises have been ongoing yet remain costly and time-intensive: Caltrans recently completed a 15-year, $57 million project, moving a 2.8-mile section of Highway 1 near San Simeon 400 feet inland. Public infrastructure, like wastewater treatment plants, power plants, and highways, remain at risk along the coast.

Moreover, because much of the Central Coast gets its water from groundwater reserves, sea level rises are particularly concerning for the agricultural industry, which relies upon this water for its crop production and drinking water. Contaminated, highly-salinated water due to rising sea levels could result in dampened agricultural yields – the agricultural economy
between Santa Barbara and Ventura counties is estimated to be more than $6 billion, supporting roughly 45,000 workers. Seawater intrusion is already occurring in the Salinas Valley, where existing issues of pesticide contamination have led to dangerous levels of nitrates in the drinking water wells. As more groundwater is pulled from these aquifers, saltwater can flow more easily and contaminate the supply.

By contrast, the region has already experienced the effects of drought on agricultural output. Between 2014 and 2015, California experienced a severe drought, costing the state more than 17,000 jobs and $2.2 billion in lost crops. That year, California also experienced an exceptional wildfire season – nearly 900,000 acres burned and more than 3,000 structures damaged or destroyed – driven primarily by the Rough Fire in Fresno County and the Cuesta and Park Hill Fires in San Luis Obispo. By 2021, those figures had grown to more than 2.5 million acres burned, with more than 3,600 structures damaged or destroyed. The 2021 Alisal Fire burned nearly 17,000 acres in Santa Barbara County, prompting a Proclamation of a State of Emergency to help cover the cost of repairs following the fire.

Infrastructure along the coastline remains at risk after wildfires, as the dry soil and vegetation in a post-burn region become particularly susceptible to landslides with rainfall. In August 2020, the Dolan Fire burned through 128,000 acres of the Big Sur region; by February 2021, winter rains carried a 150-foot stretch of Highway 1 down into the ocean. Recovery of the stretch was estimated to cost $11.5 million.

Likewise, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties experienced a nearly 300,000-acre burn with the 2017 Thomas Fire. That year, the Thomas Fire became the largest fire on record since the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection began its record-keeping in 1932. In Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, the fire burned roughly $200 million in crops and structures within the agriculture industry. Moreover, the farmworkers in these areas were exposed to high levels of particulate matter, PM 2.5, which research has shown can have long-term effects on health and cognition. Such workers are also exposed to increasingly dangerous temperatures throughout the year: per the Institute of Labor Economics, agricultural workers experience up to a 35-times greater risk of a heat-related death relative to other occupations. These risks will likely worsen in the coming years, as research indicates that California’s wildfire season will continue to grow longer while the rainy seasons shorten, forcing the state to take action to accommodate a changing climate and ecosystem. As of August 2022, nearly 100 percent of Monterey, San Benito, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz and Ventura counties were experiencing severe droughts, which impacts grazing land, raises the risk of a more intense fire season and hurts the agriculture and livestock in the region.

Roughly one month after the start of the 2017 Thomas Fire, mud and debris ripped through the community of Montecito, destroying more than 100 homes and killing 23 people. Based on insurance claims, the costs associated with the Thomas Fire hit roughly $1.8 billion, while those from the subsequent mudslides...
reached $421 million.\textsuperscript{90, 91} The 2018 mudslides also closed stretches of Highway 101 between Ventura and Santa Barbara County, affecting the more than 11,000 daily commuters between the two regions.\textsuperscript{92}

In the Central Coast, efforts to address the effects of climate change are ongoing. In order to preserve potable, clean water, the region is planning to develop or reactivate multiple desalination plants. Specifically, the Charles E. Meyer Desalination Plant has received a $10 million grant from the Department of Water Resources to reopen after having only been in use for two years during the 1990s.\textsuperscript{93} Further north, in Monterey County, there is a greater focus on maximizing water usage through improved irrigation systems and adjusting planting and harvesting schedules to address drought and salinity sensitivity issues.\textsuperscript{94}

Ultimately, the effects of climate change are likely to be felt unevenly between high-income coastal communities and low-income, agricultural communities. Rising temperatures and exposure to airborne pollutants represent one such disparity; housing represents another. As coastal flooding increases, residents in low-lying housing will be most affected. These residents are often older and low-income, as this housing is more affordable relative to other coastal markets.\textsuperscript{95} Such residents often have limited resources to move elsewhere. As sea level rises adversely affect the supply of available housing, costs may rise, creating more obstacles to accessing affordable housing.\textsuperscript{96}
A DEPENDENCE ON LOW-WAGE EMPLOYMENT AND SUBSEQUENT WAGE IMBALANCE

Due partly to an abundance of outdoor recreational activities, including beaches, trails, and wineries, and its proximity to Los Angeles and the Bay Area, the Central Coast has long been a popular tourist destination. In 2021, visitors to the Central Coast spent approximately $7.6 billion, providing the region state and local tax revenues of $778 million, down from its peak in 2019 of $9.4 billion.97

**Figure 5** In 2021, Nearly 75,000 Jobs in the Central Coast Depended on Travel-related Spending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Jobs (in 1,000s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodations &amp; Food Services</td>
<td>45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, Entertainment &amp; Recreation</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground Transportation</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Travel</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitor Air Transportation</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Visit California, The Economic Impact of Travel in California: Central Coast.
Representing nearly 8 percent of California’s total travel economy in 2021, tourism in the Central Coast encompasses attractions like Big Sur, Carmel-by-the-Sea, Hearst Castle, the Channel Islands, and Ojai Valley. In Santa Barbara and Monterey Counties, hospitality, retail, and tourism represent some of the largest employers. Consequently, relative to the rest of California, the Central Coast has a larger proportion of low-pay, low-skill workers – more than 50 percent, compared to the statewide average of about 45 percent.

Because of a reliance on the tourism and hospitality industries, the Central Coast was particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Until early 2020, the region had witnessed sustained job growth adding nearly 12,000 jobs in recent years; however, between February and May 2020, the region lost approximately 23,000 jobs, primarily within the tourism and retail industries. As the pandemic wore on, nearly 68 percent of workers in the tourism and hospitality industries lost their jobs in the region; by contrast, employment for workers in the highest-income bracket experienced a dip, followed by a full recovery.

Although the region has been steadily recovering in terms of job availability following the end of statewide shelter-in-place orders, the Central Coast continues to face high unemployment, disproportionately affecting those earning the lowest wages. Since early 2020, the unemployment rate has decreased, yet the labor force participation rate has also been reduced by two percentage points, indicating that about 10,000 workers have left the region since the start of the pandemic.

In addition to fewer jobs, a lack of affordable housing has been an added challenge for low-wage workers in the region. In Monterey County, for example, the California Housing Partnership estimates workers need to earn $36.50 per hour to afford rent, as median rent rates in Monterey hit nearly $2,500 per month. In Monterey, the two largest industries are Agriculture and Hospitality, employing 76,000 and 24,000 workers, respectively. The average hourly wages in these sectors typically fall below $20 per hour – much less than the needed $36.50. Elsewhere in the Central Coast region, a worker would need to earn $48.08 per hour to afford rent in Santa Cruz, $46.81 in Ventura, $35.81 in Santa Barbara, and $27.77 in San Benito.

Consequently, like many other regions in California, the Central Coast region requires more affordable housing for many of its residents. Between 2010 and 2020, 3.2 people moved into the state for every unit of housing added. For those whose income places them at extremely low-income levels, 76% of households in the Central Coast pay more than half of their income on housing.

In 2017, Governor Jerry Brown signed 15 new housing bills into law under the Legislative Housing Package designed to increase the availability of affordable housing for more Californians by boosting the construction of affordable homes. One of the bills, SB 3 or...
the “Veterans and Affordable Housing Bond Act,” required a ballot measure to approve the $4 billion bond to fund both state and veteran housing programs and was approved by voters in the 2018 general election.

In 2019, nonprofit housing developer Community Housing Improvement Systems & Planning Association, Inc. (CHISPA) initiated construction on a development with 124 apartments and 90 homes in Castroville, Monterey County. Focusing on affordable housing in Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz counties, CHISPA is working to build multi-family complexes, designating housing for farmworker families and other low-income families in the region. In Monterey County and Santa Barbara County, which fall above the state’s average for household overcrowding (defined as more than one person per room), there was a spike in housing construction in the years following the legislation, followed again by a dip in production.

Again in 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom signed an additional 30 housing bills into law, expanding existing housing development programs to add 3.5 million new housing units by 2025. One of these bills, SB 9 or the “California Housing Opportunity and More Efficiency Act,” changed zoning laws to legalize the construction of duplexes in previously single-family-only zones. Although the bill was met with fierce opposition by cities across California, the UC Berkeley Terner Center reports that only 5.4 percent of currently zoned single-family parcels would be eligible for developing additional units. However, this study also finds that many coastal counties, including Santa Cruz, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara, can feasibly support a greater share of new homes because these counties can accommodate more individual housing units on an average parcel of land.

Consequently, a lack of housing availability persists, particularly in the Central Coast region. In July 2022, Representative Jimmy Panetta of Monterey County proposed the Housing Access Improvement Act, which would increase the number of housing developments that accept Project Based Vouchers (PBVs) for affordable housing across the state. These PBVs allow low-income tenants to pay 30 percent of their income for rent and utilities, while the voucher from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development pays the difference between this amount and the cost to rent the unit. As of 2017, only 170,000 units were available nationally under the PBV program.

In May 2022, CHISPA initiated another $45 million project to develop 66 multi-family units in the unincorporated community in Monterey County, East Garrison, with the majority of these units dedicated to housing farmworker families. Although these units, coupled with the PBV programs, will add to the availability of affordable housing, these developments will likely not meet the region’s total affordable housing needs.
Figure 6: Median Home Values Have Increased Dramatically Across the Central Coast

- San Luis Obispo
- Santa Barbara County
- San Benito County
- Ventura County
- Monterey County

Source: Zillow Home Value Index
ACCESS TO STRONG EDUCATION NETWORK AND EQUITY

Although the Central Coast has long been a hub for tourism, some of its counties are marked by their highly-educated workforces due to the integration between universities and industry in the region. In Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Ventura, and Santa Cruz, the percent of the population with a bachelor’s degree, respectively, is 34, 35, 34, and 41 percent. Each of these figures is at or above California’s average of 34 percent and well-above the U.S. national average of 32 percent.

However, elsewhere in the region, the averages fall below the California and U.S. averages. In Monterey, 24.7 percent of the population has achieved a bachelor’s degree, whereas in San Benito, only 19.7 percent of the population has a bachelor’s degree. The number of students graduating from high school follows a similar pattern across the region, with San Benito and Monterey Counties falling behind the other four counties.

In Monterey County, more than 9,000 youth are homeless, representing 9.3 percent of the students in the region. In 2020, 35 percent of the students served by the North Monterey County Unified School District (NMCUSD) faced homelessness or housing insecurity, which was the highest reported percentage in the state. The majority of students enrolled in Monterey County are of Latinx heritage. In the County, roughly 60 percent of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino, whereas the County as a whole is more than 20 percent non-citizens. These figures are similar across the five other counties of the Central Coast. Therefore, regardless of whether the students of Latino heritage make up the majority of the student population, these students are disproportionately represented among the homeless student population.

This issue is particularly acute in cities like Salinas and Santa Maria, which hire H-2A farmworkers, or temporary workers, to support the agricultural economies in the region. The H-2A program, introduced in 1986, authorizes U.S. employers to temporarily hire foreign workers for seasonal agricultural work. Housing for such workers has long been a challenge along the Central Coast, as the farmers who hire the H-2A workers are required to pay for or provide housing for their workers with varying degrees of regulation.

Efforts to provide regulated housing for these workers have met resistance, as residents of Santa Maria opposed formal housing for the farmworkers near their residences, which would ensure H-2A housing is not overcrowded. The result is that many farmworkers live in unsafe housing conditions, with multiple families packed into single-family dwellings, or undocumented immigrants in search of work unable to afford the high cost of housing along the Central Coast despite the need for their labor.
In 2020, Monterey, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and San Luis Obispo employed some of the highest numbers of H-2A workers in the state.

**Figure 7**

**Number of certified H-2A jobs**

- 6,394
- 2,000–3,000
- 1,000–2,000
- 500–1,000
- 1–500
- No data

**SOURCE:** FY20 OFLC disclosure data
The consequences of these housing conditions often affect the school-age children of parents in search of adequate housing. Although there are regulations in place, like the McKinney-Vento Act (1987), designed to support the education of students facing homelessness, such programs often do not reach students in need. As of 2020, only 1 in 3 children in California attended schools funded by the McKinney-Vento Act, leaving school districts like North Monterey County (NMCUSD) without critical funding to support its student population.\textsuperscript{134}

To support students facing housing insecurity, districts like NMCUSD offer their student population not only food and clothing resources, but also health services through community partners.\textsuperscript{135} For these students facing housing insecurity, NMCUSD has achieved a graduation rate of 91 percent, near its rate for those not experiencing homelessness. Throughout the region, too, higher education institutions have the designation of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI), indicating that at least 25 percent of the university's full-time undergraduate enrollment is Hispanic. As of 2017, 43 percent of CSU Monterey Bay’s student population identified as Hispanic\textsuperscript{136} and achieved HSI designation, which was also granted to UCSC in 2012\textsuperscript{137} and UCSB in 2015.\textsuperscript{138} Likewise, Cal Poly SLO opened a Latinx Center in 2022, intending to support Latinx-identifying students on campus and work towards HSI designation.\textsuperscript{139}
The Central Coast of California comprises six counties that run along the Pacific Ocean, and it is traditionally known for its beaches, agriculture and viticulture industries, and tourism. Because of this feature, however, the region is particularly vulnerable to impacts from climate change, including rising sea levels, drought and wildfires, and mudslides, which will not only affect the economy of the Central Coast, but also further limit housing availability. The region has a mix of well-educated and high-income residents working in education, aerospace, and tech, and many low-income less well-educated workers employed in agriculture, tourism, and retail. This mixture reflects a common feature of California’s economy that has led to significant economic inequality.
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