

TOGETHER A HEALTHY SAFE THRIVING MONTEREY COUNTY



2020 Report To The Community

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Introduction

“I know I have a voice and this allows me to use it.”

- Community conversation participant

This report attempts to represent the diverse perspectives of more than 3,500 Monterey County residents who shared their opinions and aspirations through the 2019 Impact Monterey County Community Assessment. Through adult and youth surveys, key informant interviews, and community conversations, we heard the voices of residents speaking on the issues that shape their everyday lives and their goals and aspirations for four domains - health, safety, education, and economic self-sufficiency. The result is a deeper understanding of the future that residents hope to see for themselves, their families, and their communities, and where we have opportunities to improve.

While we are excited to share the assessment results with the broader Monterey County community and proud of the work we have done, we also feel obligated to recognize the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has radically changed our reality. The impacts of Covid-19 first hit Monterey County during the process of planning this report and we made a collaborative decision to adapt the report in order to better address evolving community needs. We hope that this report provides a snapshot of community values and priorities prior to the pandemic and that it serves as a strategic tool to guide future recovery efforts in order to build a stronger community for all residents. The Covid-19 pandemic has created a historical moment and an opportunity for important changes to promote equity in our community. It is our belief that a recovery focused on prioritizing public health, focusing on racial equity, and revitalizing our economy will guide us towards a safer, healthier and thriving Monterey County.

The 2019 Assessment and the 2020 Report would not have been possible without the support and participation of many institutions, organizations, and community members in Monterey County, the following had a significant impact on this process.

Institutions and Organizations

Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, Big Sur Land Trust, Blue Ribbon Task Force for the Reduction of Youth Violence, Blue Zones Project- Monterey County, Bright Futures Education Partnership, Castro Plaza Family Resource Center, Central Coast Center for Independent Living, City of Gonzales City Council, City of Marina City Council, City of Monterey City Council, City of Salinas City Council, City of Seaside City Council, Community Action Partnership for San Luis Obispo, Community Alliance for Safety and Peace, Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association Inc., First 5 Monterey County, Food Bank for Monterey County, League of United Latin American Citizens, Middlebury College, Middlebury Institute of International Studies, MILPA, Monterey County Child Care Planning Council, Monterey County Office of Education, Greenfield Union School District, Monterey County Free Libraries, Monterey County Health Department, Monterey Peninsula Unified

School District, Monterey Police Department Community Action Team, Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast, Partners for Peace, Rancho Cielo, Salinas Public Library, Sun Street Centers

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Who We Are

Impact Monterey County (IMC) began in 2014 and grew out of an idea of the staff at United Way Monterey County (UWMC). Seizing the opportunity for a one-time grant from Capital One, UWMC enrolled local leaders in a county-wide assessment project aimed at capturing the needs and aspirations of residents throughout Monterey County. That partnership, representing the public, nonprofit and private sectors, gradually evolved into IMC.

Today, IMC is a collaborative effort of nonprofits, public agencies and the community working together to identify and align the most effective ways to improve life in our County.

IMC employs multiple outreach and engagement strategies to shine a light on community aspirations related to economic self-sufficiency, education, health, and safety. Grounded in the values of inclusiveness, courage, and respect, IMC promotes evidence-based strategies for social change while encouraging alignment and shared measurement among key community actors. One concrete way that IMC does this is through its Leadership for Community Transformation program (LCT), which focuses on training participants to become courageous, systems-oriented leaders in their communities.

In the face of new challenges and uncertainty, IMC is committed to being responsive to community interests and will continue to examine the ways it is best positioned to make a difference.

UWMC continues to serve as the backbone organization for IMC, planning and coordinating quarterly convenings that highlight and explore effective action across key domains. For more information, please visit www.ImpactMontereyCounty.org or contact UWMC Community Impact Director Kalyssa King at Kalyssa.King@UnitedWayMCCA.org.

Our Goals and Methods

In order to understand the context for this report, we must look back to 2015, when IMC conducted its first county-wide assessment. Nearly 8,000 county residents participated in that assessment and the perspectives that they shared have guided IMC's work ever since. Following the assessment, IMC published a community report similar to this one to share the results with county residents. The rich assessment data, which was made publicly available, has been utilized by leaders throughout the county to further their work. Below are just a few examples of how that data has been used:

- The Community Alliance for Safety and Peace (CASP), together with the City of Salinas, cited IMC data on community safety as part of their successful application for 2018 California Violence Intervention and Prevention (CAL VIP) grant funding.
- The Monterey County Office of Education and the Bright Futures Education Partnership cited IMC data on educational aspirations to demonstrate that parents have high hopes for their children and overwhelmingly want to see them continue their education after high school.
- At the Community Foundation of Monterey County, seeing the gap between students' A-G completion and career aspirations inspired a bigger focus on local scholarships and supports for first generation students.
- At the Monterey County Health Department, IMC data has been used in numerous presentations, was incorporated into their Strategic Plan update, has been used as part of the Community Health Improvement Plan, and served as the basis for the county's design of the Cannabis Tax Fund community meetings.
- At UWMC, the 2015 assessment results inspired a shift in its business model. The organization now focuses its resources on addressing community priorities through a collective impact approach. UWMC works in collaboration with change makers to leverage complementary resources and address common community challenges.

Through the 2019 Assessment, IMC sought to build off of these successes and develop an updated sense of community needs and aspirations. Key goals for the 2019 Assessment included:

1. Identify how community priorities and critical needs have changed since 2015
2. Understand whether we are still on track with our common agenda
3. Refocus community impact efforts to ensure we are delivering on our promise to advance the common good through strategic investments and staff work
4. Identify resources currently available to address the needs identified
5. Identify gaps in resources and services to address the needs identified

For the 2019 Assessment, IMC used a range of data collection methods designed to gather rich information while also offering opportunities for diverse groups to participate. The three sources of primary data were:

- Surveys: one for adults and one for youth
 - Survey respondents: 2,515 adult and 574 youth (validated responses)
- Community Conversations
 - 23 round-table conversations with a total of 154 participants
- Key Informant Interviews
 - 15 interviews

Data collection and outreach were conducted primarily by a team including graduate students from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey and undergraduate students from Middlebury College, as well as students from California State University, Monterey Bay in the Summer and Fall of 2019. After data collection concluded in Fall 2019, IMC relied on the support of the META Lab at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey to conduct a detailed analysis of the survey, interview, and community conversation data. A more detailed description of the assessment methodology, as well as related challenges and limitations, can be found towards the end of the report.

With the changing needs and reality of our community as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, this report shifted from solely highlighting the original goals to meet those factors and include a vision for recovery while incorporating the data collected through the 2019 Assessment and secondary data from before and during the pandemic.

Key Findings

We believe that any conversation about building a better future should start by first recognizing the things that community members appreciate about the place they call home. When asked what they like most about their community, survey participants spoke of friends and family, access to nature, and cultural diversity as some of its greatest assets. Others pointed to great weather, hard-working families and a small-town atmosphere as reasons they call Monterey County home. In fact, 63% of adult survey respondents claimed to have lived in Monterey County for 20 years or more. We see this as a testament to what makes our home special, and to the commitment of its residents to make their voices heard.

We asked “What do you like most about your community?” To this, residents responded:

“I like that I can say that I am a lifelong member of the community. I am proud of my heritage as a Native American from this immediate area.”

“In the rural area where we live, “neighbors” includes people who live miles away. In general, people care about each other and help each other. It really is a community.”

reasons to appreciate life in Monterey County, we also heard about the problems and challenges that make life harder for individuals, families, and communities. Unfortunately, despite numerous examples of progress since our 2015 Assessment, many of the same shortcomings and inequities continue to exist. Top concerns among assessment participants included the lack of affordable housing and rising cost of living, as well as violence and unmet mental health needs in their communities. To discuss key assessment findings and residents' aspirations for the future, we will focus on four domains:

- Economic Self-Sufficiency
- Education
- Health
- Safety

Under each domain, you will see a snapshot of the data we collected through the Assessment, as well as secondary information illustrating the broader context. We will also turn our attention to the impacts of Covid-19, laying out our concerns and our hopes for recovery.



Economic Self-Sufficiency

IMC envisions a future in which all county residents are economically self-sufficient, with opportunities for more prosperity. However, data from both the assessment and secondary sources point to a crisis of affordability that stands in the way of stability and progress for many. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, economic self-sufficiency remained out of reach for a significant portion of the county population.

When we heard from community members last year in 2019, the lack of affordable housing across income levels emerged as a central theme across all assessment tools, a finding echoed by key secondary data. Roughly half of county residents rent their homes and 56% of the renting population spends more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities.¹ Examples of overcrowded, substandard housing have become commonplace throughout the County as renters navigate a housing market with very few options for those making below the median income.

“Our homelessness is not like Monterey or Salinas or Santa Cruz. Our homelessness is we have three or four families living in an apartment.”

- Key informant from Gonzales

We asked survey respondents to rate their satisfaction with their current financial situation and saw what we expected: as income rises, so does financial satisfaction. For those making less

¹ “Selected Housing Characteristics.”

than \$25,000 a year, only a quarter said they were satisfied or very satisfied, compared to nearly 90% reporting satisfaction among those with salaries above \$150,000.

“I have three jobs in order to support my household. For domestic workers like me, they’re paying us almost the minimum. That makes it really hard.”

-Community conversation participant

Across surveys, community conversations, and key informant interviews, many participants described the challenge of keeping up with the cost of living while wages remain relatively stagnant. Although some traditional economic indicators like unemployment and median household income seem to suggest broad economic improvement over recent years, a closer look reveals deep inequities and vulnerabilities that existed even prior to Covid-19.

“I worry about wages. Everything goes up except wages.”

-Community conversation participant

Between the 2015 IMC assessment and early 2020, the percentage of Monterey County residents living below the federal poverty line dropped from 17% to roughly 13% and median incomes rose modestly.² Over the same period, unemployment rates also continued to decline, marking a slow recovery from the Great Recession. However, other measures of financial well being tell a very different story.

One example is the County’s rate of liquid asset poverty, which refers to a household’s inability to rely on available assets to survive for at least three months without income. Prior to Covid-19, Monterey County’s liquid asset poverty rate was 42%, serving as a stark indicator of financial vulnerability for much of the county population. This challenge is particularly worrisome for households of color as 59%, the rate for households of color, was more than double the rate of white households (24%).³ Another is the percent of Monterey County residents who do not earn enough to pay their basic expenses. The United Ways of California Real Cost Measure report indicates that 41% of residents are below self-sufficiency levels.⁴

“I would like for my kids to grow up here and make families here but rent is unaffordable so they moved to a place that has more affordable housing.”

- Community conversation participant

In Monterey County and California’s Central Coast, widespread financial instability is closely tied to the nature of the regional economy, which relies heavily on industries with an abundance of low-paying positions that offer minimal job security. As Covid-19 has demonstrated here and across the country, many of the jobs that are now recognized as essential pose a significant health

² “Census Profile: Monterey County, CA.”

³ “Data by Location.”

⁴ “The Real Cost Measure in California Monterey, 2017.”

risk to workers, on top of being poorly compensated.⁵ Reporting on June 19, 2020 showed that agricultural workers accounted for 37% of the 1,156 confirmed Covid-19 cases in Monterey County;⁶ Although September 15, 2020 data showed a decrease in that percentage with agricultural workers accounting for 23% of the total 9,197 confirmed cases, this industry sector at that date had the largest percentage with 2,125 confirmed cases.⁷ Other important local industries have been devastated by the economic downturn and laid off much of their workforce. In Monterey County leisure and hospitality, employment has dropped to 14,100, a reduction of 12,200 jobs from May of 2019.⁸

As we examine the economic damage inflicted by the Covid-19 shutdown, we are deeply concerned about historic levels of unemployment, the impact on thousands of small businesses and permanent job losses in major industries that employ the bulk of our county workforce. State labor data for the month of May estimates Monterey County's unemployment rate at 16.6%, among the hardest hit of California's 58 counties.⁹ With this economic blow layered on top of the region's existing housing burden, it is all but certain that tens of thousands of Monterey County residents will struggle to pay back months of owed rent after the eviction moratorium is lifted. This could be especially true for thousands of undocumented residents who, along with their families, have been excluded from all forms of government stimulus despite contributing substantially to state and local taxes.^{10,11}

These realities are sobering, especially when considering the expected shortfalls in tax revenue at all levels of government and the potential for successive waves of the virus. We have our sights set on an economic recovery that fosters success for both large and small employers and workers across a range of incomes. We know this will require innovative thinking, community collaboration, and a willingness to invest in preparing our workforce for a transformed job market.

Education

The closure of schools across the county in March due to Covid-19 was an unprecedented disruption to our education system. Seemingly overnight, teachers, students, and parents were thrust into a new reality of remote teaching and learning. According to the Monterey County Office of Education, at the time of school closures there were over 6,000 K-12 students without access

⁵ "Occupational Employment Statistics (OES)."

⁶ "Monterey County Daily Situation Report," 2,7.

⁷ "2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-NCoV) - Local Data | Monterey County, CA."

⁸ "Employment by Industry Data."

⁹ "400C May 2020- Revised 19BM."

¹⁰ Narea, "For Immigrants without Legal Status, Federal Coronavirus Relief Is out of Reach."

¹¹ Ondersma, "A Bailout That Excludes Immigrants Hurts Everyone."

to a laptop, computer, or tablet and over 11,000 that lacked home internet connectivity.¹² Thanks to generous private and non-profit contributions, there appears to have been significant progress in closing this “digital divide.” However, ensuring equal access to learning resources under shelter-in-place is just a small piece of equity imbalance that occurs with remote learning, with factors such as guardian supervision and participation critical to the success of the remote learning structure and not possible for many families. Although we are seeing these challenges in remote learning, they are reflective of the bigger theme of the need for improved and equitable education in our County.

“The only difference between two very busy, affluent parents and two very busy poor parents, is the affluent parents are paying for summer camps, tutoring, after school programs, private school...only difference. And these parents over here often get told, ‘Oh well, they just don’t care enough about education.’”

- Key informant

Much as in the 2015 IMC Assessment, the vast majority of youth participants in the 2019 Assessment expressed a desire to continue their education beyond high school. 84% of 16-18 year olds that we surveyed said they plan to continue their education beyond high school and 87% of parents that responded to the question, representing all geographic, socioeconomic, and racial groups, said they aspire for their children to obtain at least a bachelor's degree, if not higher. We see these aspirations as reflecting a broad awareness of what it takes to achieve financial and professional success in today's economy. Yet despite these ambitions, only 71% of county residents 25 and older have a high school diploma or higher¹³ and only 37% of high school graduates countywide complete a career certificate or college degree.¹⁴

We recognize that many careers are accessed through continued education, so to gain a deeper understanding we asked youth “What are your career goals?” To this, youth responded:

“I wish to teach for a while, become a school administrator, and ultimately run for local office.”

“I want to be an engineer in the marines.”

“Have my own indigenous non-profit and have it be [a] safe, free space for [the] community to learn about our indigenous roots.”

“I would like to work as a translator on an international level, helping to facilitate solutions to transnational problems such as climate change and mass migration.”

¹² “Digital Equity Team Makes Progress in Closing the Digital Divide.”

¹³ “Selected Social Characteristics in the United States.”

¹⁴ “7 Community Goals & Indicators.”

“I want to become a Spanish teacher in Monterey County and give back to the community by raising our future leaders one class at a time.”

“To be successful and take care of my family and those I love.”

Another common thread throughout the Assessment was an interest in expanded opportunities for vocational training and other educational alternatives that create career pathways for higher-paying jobs. This interest appears to be corroborated by countywide data on one to two-year post-secondary certification programs, which saw 40% more graduations in 2017-18 than in 2015-16.¹⁵

“More emphasis should be given to vocational skills and trades. College is not for everyone and schools should do more to encourage other options.”

- Survey respondent

At the other end of the cradle to career continuum, we heard that a lack of quality and affordable child care remains a serious issue for parents across the socioeconomic spectrum. Through the work of organizations like First 5 Monterey County, countywide initiatives such as the Bright Beginnings Early Childhood Development Initiative, and other early childhood champions, we have seen an expansion of resources that support a variety of child care and early education options. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to temporary closures for an estimated 60% of child care centers nationwide, many of which may be unable to survive without significant government aid.¹⁶ As of September 11, 2020 in Monterey County 76% of total registered child care centers are open and 89% of total registered child care homes are operating.¹⁷ With a significant number of options remaining closed and many of those open restricting the quantity of children served, it represents a threat not only to the healthy development of thousands of Monterey County children, but also to the parents and caregivers who will be forced to make difficult decisions about child care.

Early research suggests that learning from home has already caused many students to fall significantly behind, widening existing racial and socioeconomic gaps.¹⁸ Those inequities, which were present long before Covid-19, have been a major focus of collaborative partnerships like Bright Futures, which strives to improve educational outcomes in Monterey County from cradle to career. Among the roughly 78,000 K-12 students in the county, 36% are dual language learners and more than 70% qualify for free or reduced-price meals.¹⁹ Meeting the needs of these students, both academically and in terms of basic sustenance, is even more difficult under current circumstances.

¹⁵ “2017-2018 Monterey Bay Regional College Completions.”

¹⁶ Ward, “The Pandemic Is Set to Shutter 40% of US Childcare Centers - and It Could Prove Catastrophic for the Careers of American Women.”

¹⁷ “Child Response & Recovery Weekly Digest.”

¹⁸ Goldstein, “Research Shows Students Falling Months Behind During Virus Disruptions.”

¹⁹ “EdData - County Summary - Monterey.”

As schools grapple with the best ways to serve their students while also following safety guidance, they will undoubtedly need *more* funding than they did before Covid-19. In addition to modifying the use of common spaces to reduce health risks, including smaller class sizes and increased access to personal protective equipment, schools will likely face an heightened need for mental health and counseling services for students.²⁰ Investment in schools at this time of unprecedented adaptation will guarantee a safer return to schools and improved learning outcomes for years to come.

Health

We are fortunate in Monterey County to live in an area that naturally supports healthy living in many ways. Moderate weather throughout the year, 99 miles of coastline, an abundance of locally produced food, and a range of recreational opportunities are all part of why many county residents live long and healthy lives. It has been proven that the environment around an individual is more important than their actions in relation to health outcomes, yet Monterey County ranks 22nd out of 58 California counties in health outcomes and 36th in health factors, according to the 2020 County Health Rankings.²¹

When we asked adult survey respondents in 2019 to weigh in on their biggest health concerns, 57% told us that unmet mental health needs were a significant problem in their communities. Other top concerns included street/gang violence (42%), a lack of exercise (35%), bullying (35%), “street” drug abuse (35%), unaffordable prescription drug prices (32%), and alcohol abuse (31%). This is different from the 2015 survey where gang violence was indicated as the biggest health concern, followed by obesity, a lack of exercise, and alcohol abuse. Among youth participants in 2019, top concerns consisted of diet, obesity and diabetes, unmet mental health needs, and drugs, smoking and alcohol abuse. In the 2015 survey when asked about the most serious health concerns facing their generation, youth responded with obesity as their top concern.

Widespread concern for unmet mental health needs was echoed in community conversations and key informant interviews, where participants described the challenge of accessing high quality, affordable mental health resources for things like depression and anxiety. Some of this public concern might be due to a growing cultural awareness and openness to discussing mental health issues, but it remains clear that much more needs to be done to address this community need. This need to focus on mental health was echoed through the data collected for the Community Health Needs Assessments by the Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula in 2019 and Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital in 2020.^{22 23}

²⁰ “Response to Governor’s 2020-21 May Revision.”

²¹ “California: Monterey.”

²² “2019 Community Health Needs Assessment Report,” 19.

²³ “2020 Community Health Needs Assessment,” 6.

“My community is predominantly Latinx and there are many stigmas and beliefs against mental health care. Public outreach is incredibly important.”

- Youth survey respondent

There is a growing recognition in the public health field that health risks and outcomes are largely shaped by our environment. Known as social determinants of health, these factors can influence our health for better or worse and are typically beyond the scope of individual choices.²⁴ In Monterey County, key examples include high rates of poverty, a large uninsured population (10.5%)²⁵ and a large percentage living with severe housing problems (30%).²⁶ These complex, systemic challenges stand in the way of improved health outcomes and leave many at high risk in the case of outbreaks like Covid-19.

“When you have poor living conditions, it starts impacting the health of families.”

- Key informant

It is still too early to predict the long-term health impacts of Covid-19, but existing county data shows a pattern of racial inequity in Covid-19 infections that mirrors other health outcomes prior to the pandemic. As of June 19, 2020, of the 1,156 county residents that have been infected, the vast majority are Hispanic/Latinx (80%). Nearly 60% live in Salinas and 27% in South County, compared to just 6% on the Peninsula/Big Sur and 7% in North County.²⁷ These percentages by September 15, 2020 had changed but echoed the same inequities with the majority of those with confirmed cases being Hispanic/Latinx (76%), and with Salinas and South County having 55% and 28% respectively of the confirmed cases in Monterey County.²⁸

So far, it appears that the countywide approach to social distancing, free testing, and contact tracing has helped to limit the spread of the virus and reduce the loss of human life. However, months of social isolation on top of devastating job losses and fear of the virus have introduced additional risks, particularly around mental health. As depression and anxiety related to the pandemic spread throughout our communities, quality, affordable mental health services for both youth and adults will likely become more vital than ever. Adding to these challenges is the fact that many who previously relied on healthcare coverage through their employers have now joined the ranks of the uninsured. A recently published Kaiser Family Foundation study estimates that nearly 27 million Americans lost employer-sponsored health insurance during the initial wave of job losses in March and April of this year.²⁹

²⁴ “Social Determinants of Health: Know What Affects Health.”

²⁵ “California: Monterey.”

²⁶ “California: Monterey.”

²⁷ “Monterey County Daily Situation Report,” 2.

²⁸ “2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-NCoV) - Local Data | Monterey County, CA.”

²⁹ Garfield et al., “Eligibility for ACA Health Coverage Following Job Loss.”

As of this writing, the number of local Covid-19 infections continues to rise daily, stubbornly reminding us of a simple yet profound reality: we are only as safe as the most vulnerable in our communities. Embracing a sense of solidarity with our fellow county residents, regardless of how different their communities might look from our own, will be critical in the struggle to save lives and protect public health moving forward.



Safety

When considering the full range of human needs, we know that safety is always at the top of the list. When we feel unsafe or threatened in our daily lives, we are unable to reach our full potential. But while safety is undoubtedly important to everyone, it is also true that feeling safe means something slightly different for each person, family, and community.

In 2015, Assessment participants identified gang violence as a major safety concern in their communities. In the 2019 Assessment, survey respondents and community conversation participants echoed that same concern. Although this safety concern still exists, key informants pointed out the progress that has been made since 2015 in reducing violent crime, particularly in heavily impacted areas such as East Salinas. 11 of 15 interviewees described an important shift taking place in the way that local authorities understand and respond to violence. By stepping back from reactionary, intervention-based policing and focusing more on violence prevention, it seems that more cities and communities are addressing the root causes of violence instead of simply reacting to it.

“Police are reactionary, for the most part, an intervention....But what are we doing to prevent it in the future so that we don't have to continuously invest in such an expensive remedy? That's where I think we're finally shifting as a community.”

-Key informant

Despite this encouraging shift, which is largely the result of sustained community activism, it was clear that assessment participants still perceived a range of threats to personal safety. One important example is homelessness, a problem that many highlighted as a key safety concern. Participant perspectives varied widely on the causes of homelessness and the most effective solutions, but what stands out is a broadly held concern for what many perceive to be a growing problem in their communities. Although this perspective contradicts that “...homeless people are disproportionately the victims of violent crime,” it is important to consider how many community members perceive the homeless population in relation to their safety.³⁰ One Key informant asked why don't we allocate:

³⁰ Shortt, “Op-Ed: We Don't Need Protection from the Homeless. They Need Protection from Us.”

“...what we’re already spending[,] into [sic.] (homeless) services that the providers now know actually work to get people access to and into better health and housing? Wouldn’t that be a smarter way to do things? Sounds simplistic. But that’s where it’s at. That’s what people need to understand.”

- Key informant

An estimated 30% of Monterey County residents were born outside of the United States and among that population a significant number lack legal status. We heard that for the thousands of undocumented county residents, feelings of fear and anxiety are constant. Participants explained that particularly under the Trump Administration, people who are undocumented feel wary and distrustful of government, fearing that they could be deported without warning. This sense of insecurity and fear ripples through mixed-status families who have different citizenship statuses within one family, and is pervasive in many Monterey County communities, participants explained.

“I know a lot of attention and work is going towards... developing better relationships with the community and the police. But there continues to be profiling and distrust and fear. And then, because we have a large number of undocumented people in our county, even worse. I think that that’s a real concern. I don’t think people feel safe.”

- Key informant

“Kids don’t feel safe. They ask “Mom, if you go to Mexico, what will I do? Who will we stay with?”

- Community conversation participant

As we look to the future and consider funding priorities in the face of unprecedented budget shortfalls, we believe in continued investment in programs and services that keep people safe by developing community assets. We see this as particularly important in light of the current national conversation around racial equity, police violence, and law enforcement funding.

“Libraries, parks programs, better schools are our prevention measures and our safety measures.”

- Key informant

In response to survey questions about how to improve community safety, the most common answer was better lighting. This physical change, while it may seem simple, is one example of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), a method currently being used in a collaborative effort between Building Healthy Communities and the Monterey County Health Department. Their partnership, which aims to reduce violence in East Salinas through community-led improvements to the built environment, draws on a growing body of evidence linking our behavior to the environments we live in.³¹

³¹ Alisha Somji et al., “Supporting Thriving Youth in Salinas, CA through Community-Informed Environmental Design Strategies.”

While many assessment participants described a safer community as one with more investment in social programs, the second-most common suggestion for improving safety can be summed up as “more police.” These divergent opinions on how to promote public safety should be acknowledged while also leaving room for the best available data to guide discussions around violence prevention.

A Vision for Recovery

In just a few short months, the global Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting Shelter-in-Place orders have radically altered the lives of Monterey County residents. The relatively low infection rate and death toll here are probably the result of aggressive measures that were taken early on to prevent the spread of the virus. Yet those same measures have imposed a different set of challenges unlike any we have faced before.

While the pandemic is global in scale, its impact is felt most acutely at the level of individuals, families, and communities. As we look to the future and consider a strategy for a county-wide recovery, it is hard to know what to expect from the months and years to come. Although we are humbled by this deep uncertainty, we still hope to spur a conversation about the values and principles that should guide those recovery efforts.

Thankfully, Monterey County is already home to a number of bold leaders that are working to tackle complex problems through thoughtful and sustained collaboration. We hope that collaborative efforts like the Bright Futures Education Partnership, the Community Alliance for Safety and Peace, the Blue Ribbon Task Force for the Reduction of Youth Violence, Building Healthy Communities, and the Monterey Bay Economic Partnership continue to serve as examples of what can be accomplished through thoughtful and sustained collaboration across sectors, communities, and stakeholder groups.

Rather than setting a goal of returning to normal, we hope to be a part of building a more equitable Monterey County that is more resilient in the face of challenges. Realizing this vision will require targeted collaboration and innovative solutions that dare to imagine an alternative to even the most entrenched problems.



Prioritize Public Health

Above all else, the Covid-19 pandemic is a threat to public health. Despite significant efforts that have been made to limit infections throughout Monterey County, the number of cases continues to grow daily. Local and county authorities should continue to rely on the best available science and medical guidance to make informed decisions, even if this requires returning to earlier phases of reopening to reduce health risks. Residents should continue to follow updated guidance from local and county health departments regarding face coverings, social gatherings, and personal hygiene habits.

As restrictions loosen, we must be deliberate in protecting the safety of essential workers who are at greater risk of infection due to the nature of their work. Recognizing that quality housing is essential to one's health, we should commit to continued efforts to house the homeless while also ensuring that those who are currently struggling to pay rent are protected from eviction. This will be especially important as the county considers whether or not to extend the current eviction moratorium.



Focus on Racial Equity

Although virtually everyone has been touched by the Covid-19 pandemic in some way, emerging data shows that communities of color throughout the country have been disproportionately affected in terms of both their physical and economic health. The reasons for these disparities are complex and tied to generations of systemic racism. Those with little to no safety net prior to the pandemic will struggle the most to get back on their feet after restrictions begin to lift. In Monterey County this vulnerable population mainly includes Hispanic/Latinx communities and the undocumented (including mixed-status families). Failure to provide needed support for the most vulnerable could lead to setbacks that reverberate throughout the County for years to come, threatening to deepen existing inequities and undo progress that has been made in recent years.

Focusing on racial equity means creating space for difficult conversations within families, communities, organizations, public agencies and businesses large and small, both in the short and long term. It also requires disaggregating data by race in order to better understand racial inequities. Rather than phasing out different forms of public assistance based on population-level indicators, those decisions should be based on data separated by racial/ethnic groups in order to avoid an uneven recovery. As many activists have argued during recent nationwide protests, achieving racial equity requires that both individuals and institutions be actively “antiracist,” committing to ongoing efforts to understand, address, and erase inequities.



Revitalize Our Local Economy

For many Monterey County residents, this is a time of wrenching uncertainty and economic desperation. Although we look forward to the return of many activities and jobs that have been put on hold since the pandemic began, we cannot expect a return to normal. Reviving our local and regional economies requires that we reshape them in order to better serve our population. This transformation might involve investing in workforce development to train workers for changing jobs, while expanding pathways to higher wages in tourism and agriculture. Maybe it involves a focus on asset development at the family level, building financial resilience so that hard-working families no longer have to live paycheck to paycheck. It might also include shifting private sector incentives by rewarding companies that treat their employees well and shield them from economic shocks.

Though we cannot say for certain what the future holds for the Monterey County economy, we believe the pandemic recovery should strive for something better than what we had before. A more just, equitable economy can only be achieved if we are bold enough to envision it.

“When it comes to wanting resources and to better our community, we all come together and say “No, we’re going to stand up for this.” It’s people like us that really make the change.”

- Community conversation participant

Challenges and Limitations

For this assessment, we strived to produce similar levels of participation to those from the 2015 Assessment while working with significantly fewer resources. While we are proud of what we were able to accomplish, we acknowledge there were barriers and constraints to the data collection process. With less time and human power to invest in engaging some of the county’s harder-to-reach populations, we fell short of achieving equitable participation from some key groups. This was particularly evident in the case of the adult survey, which saw overrepresentation from white residents, high income earners and those with above-average levels of education. We failed to achieve representative participation from non-English speakers and low-income earners. For these reasons, we cannot make claims about the assessment data being representative of the county as a whole.

In the interest of gathering more nuanced insights about community needs and aspirations, our surveys included many questions and asked for numerous write-in responses. Throughout the data collection and outreach, we received consistent feedback about the survey being too long. We are confident that the survey length contributed to high rates of partially completed surveys, and we know from face-to-face conversations that its length was enough to deter some people from starting it at all.

These experiences point to larger questions about the uses of community data and the costs associated with different methods of engagement and research. Key informant interviews with established leaders offer key insights and big-picture analysis, but involve no direct engagement with community members. Community conversations can be much more inclusive of residents who would be unlikely to take a survey, but they require significant resources to plan, coordinate, and facilitate effectively. And as survey response rates continue to decline across the County, it becomes more challenging (and expensive) to increase survey participation through incentives or other forms of persuasion³².

These barriers have forced us at IMC to reconsider the most effective assessment strategies and the role IMC is best suited to play in creating quality sources of local data. We will commit to ongoing conversations on this subject and look forward to hearing input from our partners as well as the broader community.

Notes on Data Collection

Methodology and Analyses

The main source of data was a pair of surveys, one for adults and one for youth, that were almost identical to those used in the 2015 Assessment. The surveys were available online and were also distributed in paper form at public libraries and community outreach events throughout the Summer and Fall of 2019. Roughly 2,900 people participated in the adult survey, while around 700 took part in the youth version. These responses were then validated resulting in 2,515 adult responses and 574 youth responses. Validated responses for the adult survey included respondents that had at least completed question nine and had spent at least five minutes on the survey, were Monterey County residents, older than 18 years old or identified as a parent, demonstrated a reasonable attempt at being honest in their responses, and completed the survey before December 22, 2019. Validated responses for the youth survey included respondents that had at least completed question seven and had spent at least three minutes on the survey, were

³² “Assessing the Representativeness of Public Opinion Surveys.”

Monterey County residents, were between the ages of 13 and 25, demonstrated a reasonable attempt at being honest in their responses, and had completed the survey before December 22, 2019.

In addition to the surveys, our team conducted 23 community conversations with a total of 154 participants. These facilitated conversations typically involved between five to ten participants and focused on the same themes that appeared in the surveys. We relied on our many partners to bring together groups of community members, who then shared personal experiences and perspectives on life in Monterey County.

Our third and final source of primary data was a series of 15 key informant interviews, conducted with established leaders throughout the county. With decades of experience in the public, private, and non-profit sectors, key informants drew on their expertise to paint a broad picture of recent improvements as well as the obstacles that stand in the way of a healthy, safe, and thriving Monterey County.

In order to promote the assessment, our student team led outreach efforts throughout Monterey County. From Big Sur to Salinas, to Castroville and San Ardo, we visited libraries, city council meetings, places of worship and community organizations with the goal of spreading the word about IMC and encouraging participation in the assessment.

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