Fresno Speaks 2020: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Registered Voters and their Positions on Major Issues

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief presents results from the largest random sample survey conducted in the City of Fresno since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: the Fresno Speaks 2020 Survey.

Fresno is the fifth largest city in the state, and this study examines issues of health, well-being and safety. The study surveyed 2,397 registered voters with phones living in Fresno, from August to September 2020, on a range of community, health and safety issues concerning themselves and their households. We find high levels of job loss and reduced work hours among Fresno households—especially for low-income registered voters and non-whites.

The survey also found strong support for major policy reform. Most respondents (i.e. registered voters) supported public health behaviors mitigating COVID-19 spread; police reform; and investing in social programs, violence prevention and job opportunities.

Lastly, the survey examined Fresno registered voters' attitudes towards voting and participating in civic engagement, and found that most support addressing racism, public school education, and police reform.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Between 85.6 to 92.0 percent of voters engage in public health behaviors mitigating spread of COVID-19.

2. Half (50%) of Fresno voter households experienced job loss or work hours reduced following the onset of the pandemic.

3. More Latina/o/xs (57.0%), African-American (54.6%) and Asian American (54.5%) households experienced income reduction than white households (42.0%).

4. Fresno registered voters expressed strong support for police reform. Most (77.9%) stated they would support elected officials who advocated for police reform. The most popular solutions to gangs were proactive, from providing jobs to people with records (30.4%) or youth (28.9%), to public social programs (18.4%).

5. Fresno registered voters also expressed strong support for policy reform through voting and grassroots civic participation. Support was strongest for addressing issues of racism (54.8%), quality of public education (52.0%), and police reform (50.4%).

BACKGROUND

Fresno is the fifth largest city in the state. In 2019, it had an estimated population of 531,576, with more than one in four (28.8%) residents under the age of eighteen.[1] Nearly half (49.4%) of residents were Latino; Asian (13.7%) or Black (7.6%). One in five (20.6%) residents are immigrants, and 43.6% of households speak a non-English language.

At the same time, Fresno also ranks high on indices of inequity. Between 2014 and 2018, Fresno's median household income was merely $47,189, far below the state average of $71,228. More than one in four households (26.9%) lived below the poverty line, higher than double the state average (11.8%). More than one in ten (10.4%) persons under the age of 65 lack health insurance.

In March 8, 2020, Fresno officials confirmed the first COVID-19 case. In the following months, as it spread throughout the city and region as one of the nation's top hotspots, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed some of Fresno's most pressing inequities. Fresno's dynamics accelerated an already-global public health and economic crisis through a large, low-wage, immigrant workforce that lacked any safety net; a lack of health and safety regulatory enforcement in essential agricultural and meatpacking industries prone to COVID-19 outbreaks; and local government that lacked transparency in the spending of COVID-19 related funding.[2]

This study examines Fresno registered voters' responses to multiple national crises afflicting the city and region, from the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession to long-standing issues with local policing.

In recent years, internal audits and public records have revealed issues with management and misconduct in Fresno's Police Department, high rates of officer-involved shootings, and lawsuits costing the City millions of dollars.[3] This year, as Black Lives Matter protests spread nationally, Fresno residents voiced discontent with policing and called for a civilian Police Commission.[4]

This study offers a snapshot of the impact of COVID-19 on Fresno registered voters' income; attitudes towards public health, public safety, and police reform; and voting and civic participation.

DATA AND METHODS

This study was designed to capture voter public opinion on major issues, at the level of the City of Fresno and in each of its seven districts. Between August 18 and September 15, 2020, the Fresno County Civic Engagement Table conducted a random phone survey of 2,397 Fresno registered voters with phones. Communities for a New California accounted for 77% of surveys conducted, while other table partners accounted for the remaining 23%.

Respondents were asked about changes in income; attitudes towards COVID-19 public health practices, policing and police reform; city budget preferences; and potential solutions for social issues. The sample has a margin of error of 2.5 percent at city level and 6 percent at the voting district level.
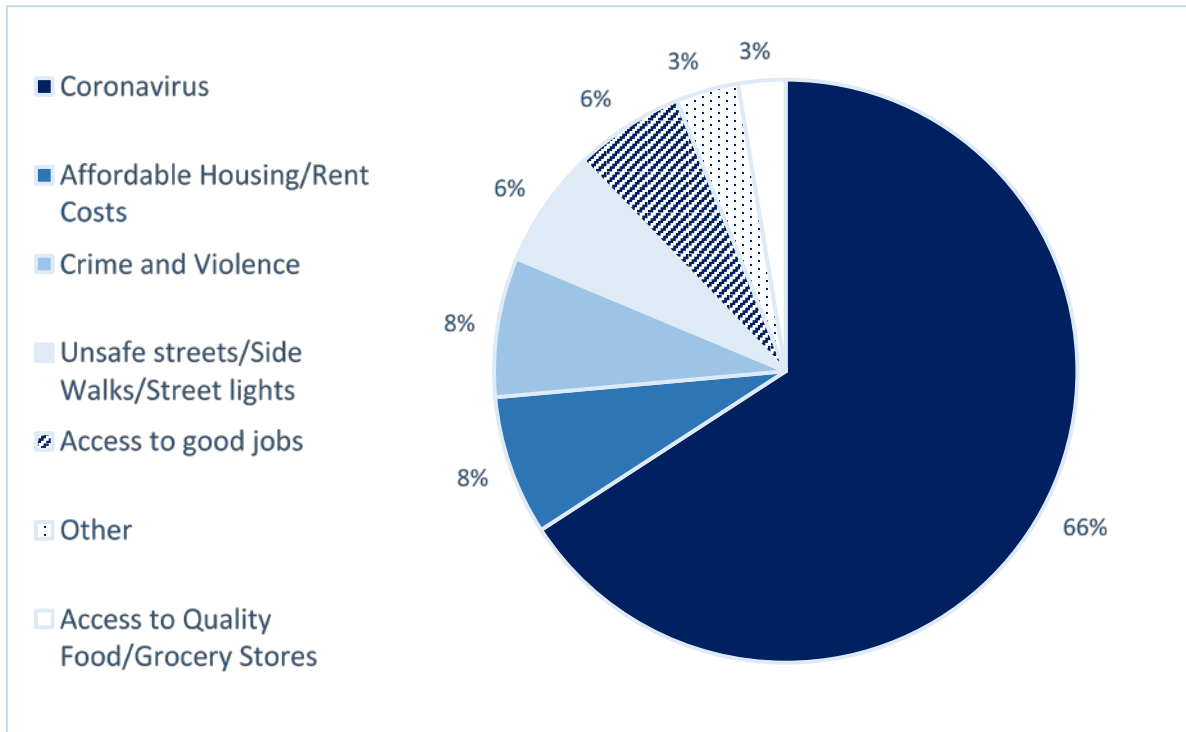
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[1] See United States Census Bureau (2020).
[2] See Ho (2020a, 2020b) and Amaro (2020a, 2020b).

[3] See Fresno Office of Independent Review (2018) and Coleman et al. (2017).
[4] See Tsutsui (2020).

Figure 1.1 Issues with the largest negative impact on household

- Coronavirus
- Affordable Housing/Rent Costs
- Crime and Violence
- Unsafe streets/Side Walks/Street lights
- Access to good jobs
- Other
- Access to Quality Food/Grocery Stores

Source: UC Merced CLC analysis of Fresno County Civic Engagement Table- Fresno Speaks 2020 data

PANDEMIC ECONOMIC CRISIS

Respondents were asked questions related to how the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession impacted their daily lives, and in the adjustments they were making. One such question asked respondents which one issue had the most negative impact on the household. Two-thirds (66%) responded that the coronavirus was the most important issue negatively affecting them (see Figure 1.1). Another 8% stated that affordable housing and rent costs were the issue most negatively affecting them. Other issues negatively aff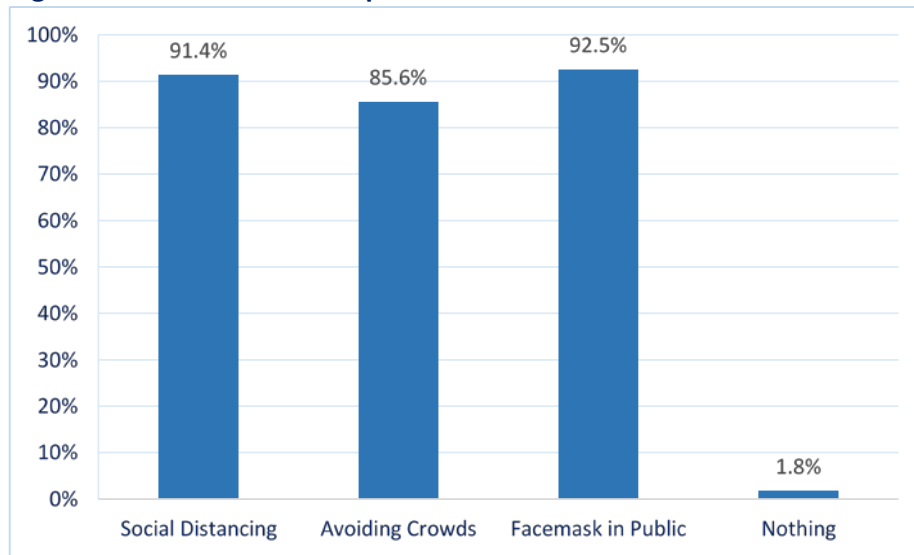ecting respondents included crime and violence (8%), unsafe streets/side walks/street lights (6%), access to good jobs (6%), and access to quality food/grocery stores (3%).

Respondents also expressed support for personal protection; they reported high rates of engaging in social distancing, avoiding crowds, and wearing a face mask in public (see Figure 2.1). In contrast, the national average for mask wearing in public is lower, at 85%.[5] Such support for precautionary behaviors is reflective of populations in some of the nations with the lowest rates of COVID-19 infection, and bodes well for efforts to mitigate COVID-19 spread that rely on resident participation.

[5] See Stephanie Kramer, "More Americans say they are regularly wearing masks in stores and other businesses," PEW Research Center, August 27, 2020. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact- tank/2020/08/27/more-americans-say-they-are-regularly-wearing-masks-in-stores-and-other-businesses/

Figure 2.1 Activities used to protect self from coronavirus

Source: UC Merced CLC analysis of Fresno County Civic Engagement Table- Fresno Speaks 2020 data

Table 1.1 Household job loss or work hours reduced during pandemic, by income

Household Income	Yes	No
Less than $25,000	60.5%	34.5%
$25,000-49,999	54.3%	45.7%
$50,000-74,999	43.2%	56.8%
$75,000 or more	33.4%	66.6%
Total	50.0%	50.0%

Source: UC Merced CLC analysis of Fresno County Civic Engagement Table- Fresno Speaks 2020 data

Table 1.2 Household job loss or work hours reduced during pandemic, by race/ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Yes	No
Latino	57.0%	43.0%
African-American	54.6%	45.4%
Asian American/Pacific Islander	54.5%	45.5%
White	42.0%	58.0%
Total	50.0%	50.0%

Source: UC Merced CLC analysis of Fresno County Civic Engagement Table- Fresno Speaks 2020 data

Table 2.1 Support for Elected Officials that Advocate for Police Reform

	Yes	No
District 1	82.2%	17.8%
District 2	74.9%	25.1%
District 3	76.9%	23.1%
District 4	81.4%	18.6%
District 5	80.9%	19.1%
District 6	71.6%	28.4%
District 7	77.9%	22.1%
Entire City	77.9%	22.2%

Source: UC Merced CLC analysis of Fresno County Civic Engagement Table- Fresno Speaks 2020 data

The COVID-19 pandemic's massive economic disruptions negatively affected a significant number of Fresno registered voters. Half of all households sampled (50.0%) reported a job loss or reduction of hours during the pandemic (See Table 1.1).

COVID-19 related income losses were especially acute among low income households. Three in five (60.5%) households earning less than $25,000 per year experienced an income decline during the pandemic, and a majority (54.3%) of households with annual incomes of $25,000-$49,999 suffered an income decline.

Middle-income households also suffered pandemic income decline at a significant rate. A large minority (43.2%) of households earning $50,000-$74,999 suffered income decline, as did one in three (33.4%) of households with incomes at or above $75,000 per year.

Latina/o/x, African-American and Asian American respondents all reported much higher rates of pandemic-related income loss than whites (See Table 1.2). More than half of Latina/o/x (57.0%), African-American (54.6%), and Asian American and Pacific Islander (54.5%) respondents reported household income decline following the pandemic.

Respondents were additionally asked what they thought was the percentage chance of their family running out of money in the next three months. Among all respondents living in households with an income, the average response was a 23% chance of running out of money in the next three months. Among registered voters with the lowest annual income—less than $25,000—the number rises to a 36% average chance of running out of money in the next three months.
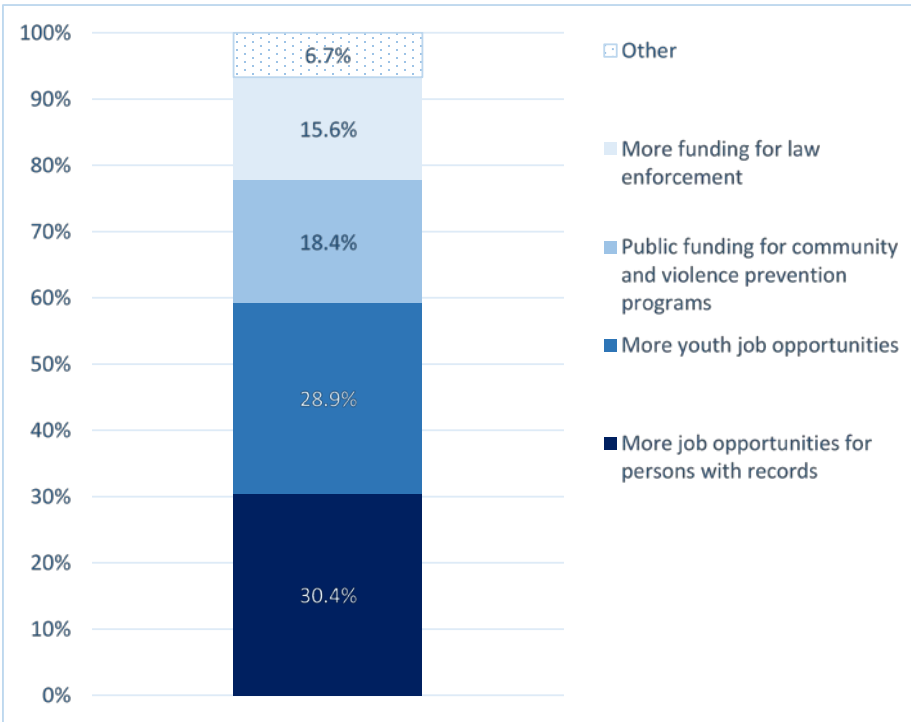
POLICING AND SAFETY

As issues of public safety and law enforcement practices reached center stage in the national spotlight in 2020, Fresno registered voters expressed concerns with local policing.

In our study, respondents expressed strong support for elected officials advocating for police reform. When asked if they would support elected officials that advocated for police reform, more than three in four (77.9%) of respondents responded affirmatively (see Table 2.1).
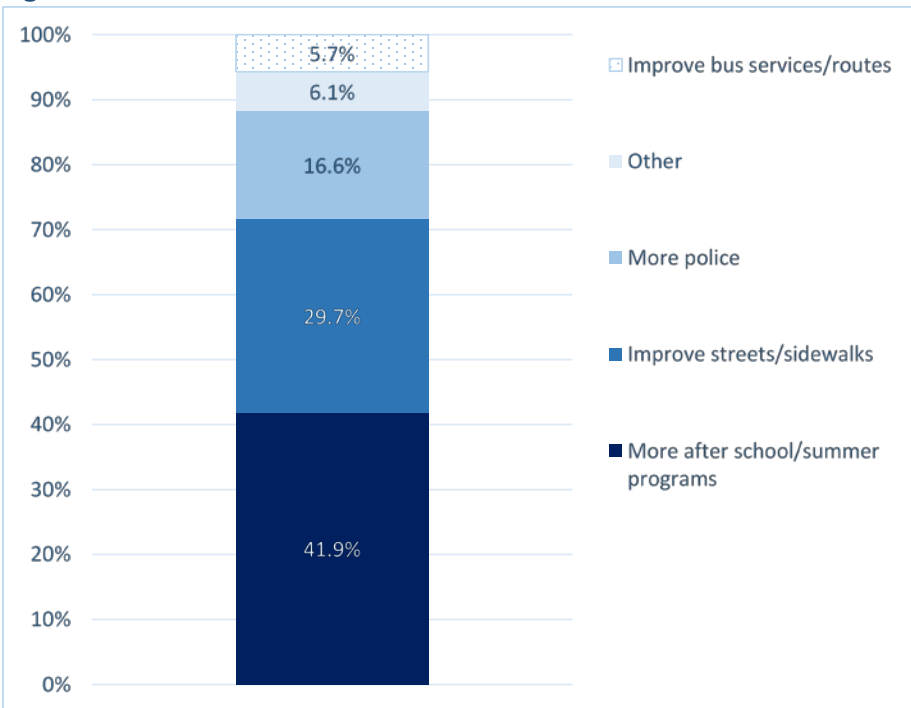
Strikingly, support for elected officials championing police reform held up across the city. Respondents in all seven city council voting districts expressed a firm preference for police reform (See Table 2.1).

Figure 3.1 Best solutions to reduce gang violence

Chart legend (top to bottom):
- Other — 6.7%
- More funding for law enforcement — 15.6%
- Public funding for community and violence prevention programs — 18.4%
- More youth job opportunities — 28.9%
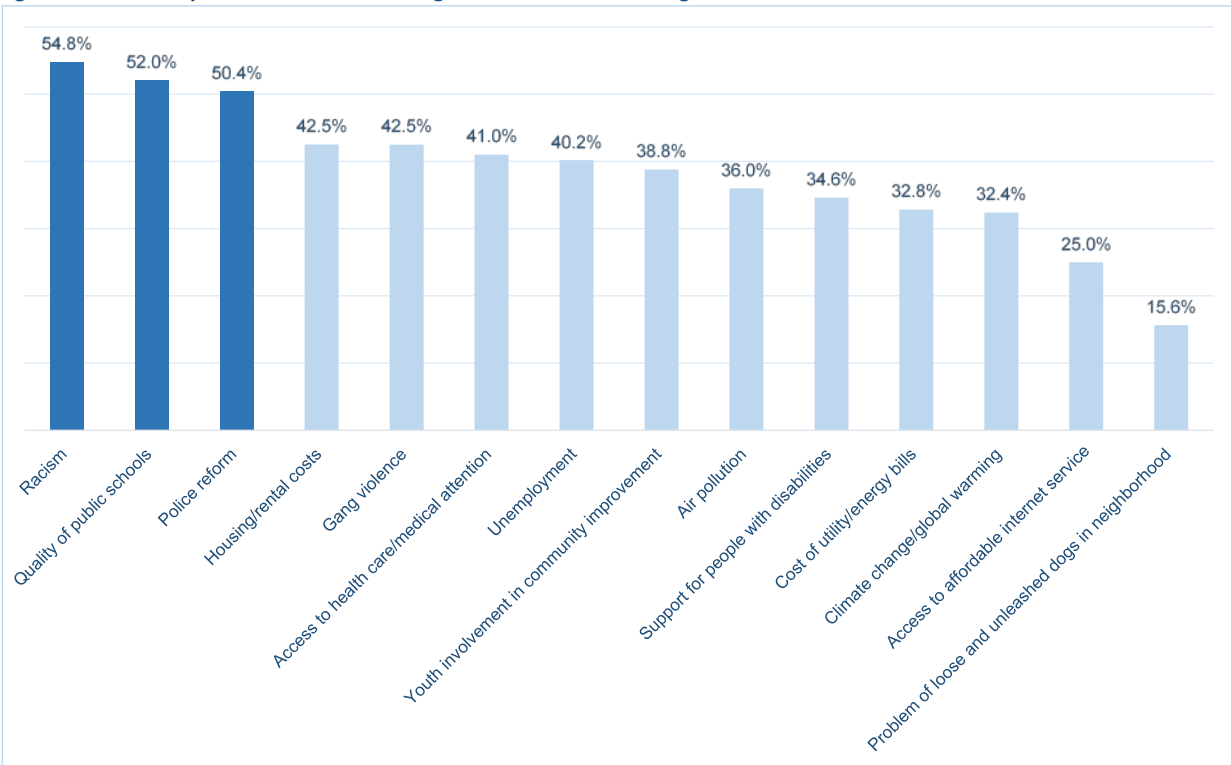- More job opportunities for persons with records — 30.4%

Source: UC Merced CLC analysis of Fresno County Civic Engagement Table- Fresno Speaks 2020 data

Figure 3.2 Best use of Measure A "Cannabis Tax" to benefit own household

Chart legend (top to bottom):
- Improve bus services/routes — 5.7%
- Other — 6.1%
- More police — 16.6%
- Improve streets/sidewalks — 29.7%
- More after school/summer programs — 41.9%

Source: UC Merced CLC analysis of Fresno County Civic Engagement Table- Fresno Speaks 2020 data

Figure 4.1 Issues respondents would be willing to attend a local meeting to address

Source: UC Merced CLC analysis of Fresno County Civic Engagement Table- Fresno Speaks 2020 data

SOLUTIONS TO INCREASE PUBLIC SAFETY

When asked their top choice to invest city revenue to reduce gang violence, Figure 3.1 demonstrates respondents first preferred more job opportunities for persons on probation, parole, or formerly incarcerated (30.3%), followed closely by more youth job opportunities (28.9%).

Respondents also weighed in on the distribution of the new "Measure A" Cannabis tax. When asked for their top choice for use of Measure A funds (to best benefit the family members in their household), respondents selected "more after school and summer youth services" (41.9%) far above any other options (see Figure 3.2).

Spending cannabis tax revenues on "improving streets, sidewalks, and streetlights" was the second most popular preference (29.7%), with "additional funding for police" third (16.6%). These preferences held up across all seven city voting districts.

SOLUTIONS TO MAJOR SOCIAL ISSUES

Respondents reported actively engaging to address the major social issues negatively impacting communities in 2020. More than three-fourths (78.6%) of respondents reported voting in the primary elections in March of 2020, while nearly all (95%) stated they intended to vote in the November 2020 general elections (analysis not shown).

Besides electoral participation, respondents also expressed a desire to engage in grassroots civic participation. Respondents were asked about their willingness to attend a meeting to improve the situation of a list of 14 issues. The top issues in which respondents expressed willingness to collectively seek solutions included racism (55%), quality of education (52%), and police reform (50%) (See Figure 4.1).

CONCLUSION

Fresno has been at the epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis in the State of California—the world's fifth largest economy—and has laid bare how the pandemic has acutely impacted low-income and non-white communities. The Central Valley region not only accounts for the highest rates of COVID-19 in the state, but nearly half of the state's agricultural and meatpacking workers, the highest rate of worker households living below a living wage, and the majority (7 of 10) of the state's counties with a Latina/o/x majority—all factors particularly associated with the pandemic.

Our survey captures registered voters' stance on issues related to the multiple crises of health, public safety and the

economy affecting Fresno households in the COVID-19 era. In our study, respondents reported high rates of social distancing, avoiding crowds, and wearing face masks, to protect themselves and others from being infected with the coronavirus.

While the pandemic has negatively affected half of the households of registered voters in Fresno with job loss or work hours reduced, these trends were most severe for registered voters who were low-income and

people of color. Three in five households that earned less than $25,000 per year suffered pandemic income decline, as did more than half of Latina/o/x, African-American and Asian American households.

While the findings of this survey indicate that Fresno's low-income and non-white households have been at the center of major issues of inequity in the pandemic era, the survey's findings also point towards the potential for transformation in the region.

Amid national Black Lives Matter protests, and long-standing criticisms of policing, registered voters expressed strong support for police reform. Most respondents stated they would support elected officials who advocated for police reform, and most favored directing city funds to publicly-funded social programs, and job opportunity initiatives for youth and persons with records.

Lastly, while the City of Fresno has been at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis in the world's fifth largest economy, Fresno registered voters have not lost hope in democratic participation as a promising way to address the range of race, health and safety issues in the pandemic era. Respondents expressed support for voting and grassroots civic participation to address issues in the areas of racism, quality of public education, and police reform.

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About UC Merced Community and Labor Center

The UC Merced Community and Labor Center conducts research, education and policy development on issues of community, labor and employment.