



Fresno
**Economic
Opportunities
Commission**

COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT 2024-2025



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Executive Summary

Fresno County, located in the heart of California's Central Valley, is a community marked by an impressive array of strengths that contribute to its unique character and resilience. Among these strengths, the rich agricultural heritage stands out, positioning Fresno as a vital contributor to both the national and global food supply. This agricultural prowess fosters a sense of pride and tradition among residents, who benefit from and contribute to a thriving local economy.

Another significant strength of Fresno County is its diverse population, which brings together a vibrant tapestry of cultures, languages, and traditions. This diversity is celebrated through various community events, festivals, and educational programs, enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation among its residents. Furthermore, the community's commitment to education and innovation is evident in its support for local schools, libraries, and universities, which prepare future generations for a dynamic world.

Fresno County also exhibits a strong spirit of volunteerism and community service, with numerous organizations and individuals dedicated to supporting those in need. Whether it's providing shelter and services to the homeless, assisting low-income families, or preserving the natural beauty of the region, the people of Fresno are actively engaged in making their community a better place. This collective commitment to civic engagement and mutual aid not only addresses immediate needs but also strengthens the social fabric of the county, making it a heartwarming example of community solidarity and resilience.

Conditions of Poverty

Fresno County, despite its many strengths, also faces significant challenges related to inequity among its population. One of the most pronounced issues is the economic disparity that exists within the county. The overall poverty rate among individuals is 19%, however it is much more pronounced in specific communities, cultural enclaves, and among specific populations. Geographically, there is concentrated poverty in the City of Fresno and widespread poverty in the more rural areas of the county and in some communities such as Huron, Mendota, and Orange Cove.

Family status is tied to poverty rates. Among families, 15% have an income below poverty, of these families, 40% are married-couples with children and 49% are female – headed households with children. The rate of seniors living in poverty in Fresno County is higher than for California. The poverty rate for seniors is 14% compared to a rate of 11% for all of California. Poverty reflects broader socio-economic challenges, and the conditions of poverty are multifaceted impacting thousands of residents and various aspects of life.

Inadequate Housing: Housing was noted throughout the community data, community forums and interviews conducted for the community assessment as a condition of poverty. Fresno County has a high number of homes with substandard conditions which contribute to health

challenges, a lower quality of life and safety concerns for people who reside in those homes. According to the data, 42% of homes had at least one substandard condition. Housing Instability and insecurity is also a concern. Furthermore, housing instability and homelessness are significant problems, with many residents struggling to find affordable housing due to rising costs and limited availability. This issue is compounded by a lack of supportive services and infrastructure to assist those in need. Of the community survey respondents, 64% noted the county has a major need for temporary housing, utility assistance, home repair programs, safe multi-family housing and programs to support energy efficiency.

Food Insecurity: Some individuals and families that live in poverty experience food insecurity, meaning they lack consistent access to enough nutritious food to lead a healthy life. Food insecurity rates in Fresno County did not stand out in the public data as one of the top needs. However, when viewed from an equity perspective several conditions are revealed that should be addressed. First, there are many food deserts throughout the county and the communities with the highest poverty rates also have the least access to food. Since these communities are home to more diverse populations, there is a racial disparity in food access. This trend is also supported with data for Fresno County from Feeding America which notes that Black/African American and Hispanic residents experience a higher degree of food insecurity than Whites. Data shows that more than 50,000 people in Fresno County with a low-income live in an area where they also have low access to food. Food insecurity was also noted repeatedly in the community forums as a top community problem.

Unemployment and Low-Wage Jobs: Limited job opportunities or the prevalence of low-wage jobs make it challenging for individuals to secure stable employment and earn a sufficient income to meet their basic needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to changes in the job market that are fueling unemployment rates. For example, there are lingering layoffs and job losses, reskilling and upskilling needs to help the unemployed transition into new careers, and job market shifts where e-commerce, health care, and fields that involve remote work have become more desirable, yet they lack a workforce and often people do not possess the soft skills for success in these jobs. The unemployment rate in Fresno County far exceeds that of California and the nation at 9.5%.

There is also the problem of underemployment. Based on national percentages, as of March 2024, 7.3% of all workers were underemployed. If this percentage were applied to Fresno County this would mean that over 34,000 workers are underemployed. Adequate employment and good jobs were noted as a community concern in the community assessment survey responses and also in the community forums. Among community survey respondents, 64% noted the community needs better job opportunities.

There are income and employment disparities due to race/ethnicity as the result of factors such as historical injustices and discriminatory practices, low rates of educational attainment that limit earning potential, occupational segregation in which minorities are concentrated in lower – paying positions and lack business ownership, the wealth gap where individuals of color are less likely to own assets that can generate additional income, and racial discrimination practices in hiring.

Educational Inequities: In Fresno County, schools in lower-income neighborhoods often have fewer resources, larger class sizes, and less access to advanced placement courses or extracurricular activities compared to schools in more affluent areas. This disparity impacts the educational outcomes and future opportunities for many children and young adults. Foundational issues contributing to this problem include a school funding formula that is dependent on property taxes where low-income neighborhoods receive less tax revenue for schools versus neighborhoods that have homes with a higher value have schools that benefit from higher contributions of tax dollars to support educational programs.

Limited access to Healthcare and Racial and Socioeconomic Disparities Contributing Social Determinants of Health: Access to affordable healthcare services is a barrier for people in poverty. Lack of health insurance coverage and the limited availability of healthcare can result in inadequate medical care which impacts the life span and the quality of life for those in poverty. The Fresno County health care provider to low-income resident ratio for dentists, physical health, and mental health care professionals indicates that people have more limited access to health care. Data reflecting community wellbeing factors indicates that the number of providers is an issue, however transportation barriers also limit access to services. In addition, the large percentage of the population that receives Medicaid also impacts access to health care services because some providers will not accept public insurance as payment.

Data shows that residents in the economically disadvantaged areas of Fresno County often have less access to healthcare services, including preventive care. Even when people do go to the doctor, they are often told they can only address one issue if they are utilizing Medicaid and they must wait an extended period of time to see a doctor. This is exacerbated by environmental issues, such as poor air quality and pesticide exposure, which disproportionately affect low-income, rural farming communities. The result is a higher incidence of health problems like asthma, diabetes, and other chronic conditions in these populations. Other public and individual health concerns include a high rate of substance abuse and overdose deaths. In the community assessment survey, 55% of respondents noted that lack of access to health services was a major concern and 55% also reported they had inadequate insurance coverage. When data from the U.S. Census is analyzed, it was found that specific cohorts of the population are impacted more greatly by lack of access to health services such as pregnant mothers who do not receive adequate prenatal care, people using Medicaid, primarily children, and the unemployed which have an uninsurance rate of 14%. In Fresno County, more than 61,544 people are uninsured.

There are also deep disparities in maternal child health. Over 28% of births are to mothers in poverty and the teen birth rate is 4% of all babies. The rate of prenatal depression in Fresno County is 17% compared to a rate of 14% for California. Additionally, Fresno fares worse than the state in the number of babies that are born with low birthweight, a major contributor to infant death. The Fresno County infant mortality rate exceeds that of California and when disaggregated by race, the rate of infant mortality for Black infants is 9.71/per 1,000 births compared to 6.33/1,000 for Hispanic/Latino babies and 5.06/1,000 for White infants.

Addressing these inequities is vital for the overall health and cohesion of Fresno County. Efforts to reduce disparities and promote inclusivity are essential to ensuring that all residents can contribute to and benefit from the community's strengths and resources.

Adverse Early Childhood Experiences and Family Challenges: The rate of child abuse in the service area is rising and the rate for Fresno County is 61.3/1,000 children, compared to a rate of 43.5/1,000 for California. There are many factors that contribute to a tendency of children to be impacted by an adverse experience. In Fresno County, community risk factors include that more than 14,000 children under five years live in single-parent families. It is also estimated that more than 5,000 children under six reside in doubled-up housing or they are unhoused. There were also 8,748 domestic violence reports in the county for the time period analyzed in this report, which is a major contributor to homelessness and child and family trauma. Within the Head Start program in the past year, 445 families received assistance to resolve a crisis highlighting the vulnerability of young children and families.

Causes of Poverty

There are various causes of poverty in Fresno County. Some of these issues reflect evidence on the primary causes of poverty such as structural inequities, labor market issues, differences in educational attainment and the changing economy. However, the causes of poverty can also be attributed to and are exacerbated by political factors, individual decisions, and the restriction of safety net programs such as Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), food assistance, health insurance, subsidized housing, and childcare subsidies. These challenges have led to an overburdened system and families and individuals lack access to the assistance they need to climb out of poverty. The lack of programs and services in the counties disproportionately impacts the poor and near-poor population.

A shifting economic landscape also drives significant changes. Data collected for this community assessment demonstrates that employment opportunities increasingly lie in jobs requiring higher level skills, including a college degree and analytical and technical skill sets. At the same time, jobs requiring physical or manual skills have faded or remain low paying. These changes have played out over decades resulting in inequities in earnings, as workers with in-demand skills experience rising wages while wages for workers without a college education have remained stagnant. Even small increases in wages have been outpaced by inflation and an increased cost of living. Barriers to upward mobility such as low-income, limited language proficiency, lack of social and/or family support, and limited self-sufficiency have been identified as contributors to poverty and are also experienced by subpopulations in the service area at disparate rates.

Causes of Poverty

Education

Limited access to quality education or low educational attainment levels leads to limited employment opportunities and lower wages, which contributes to poverty.

Unemployment/Underemployment

High unemployment rates or a lack of job opportunities for specific segments of the population are persistent in the area, particularly for individuals with limited skills or education, which makes it difficult for people to escape poverty. Underemployment, where individuals work part-time or in jobs that don't match their skills, also keeps people in poverty.

Low Wages

Fresno County data shows wages vary among specific cohorts of the population and contribute to poverty rates and inequities.

Demographic Factors

Certain demographic factors contribute to poverty rates. For example, a high percentage of single-parent households and households where the adult has limited English proficiency face increased vulnerability to poverty.

Affordable Housing

The availability and affordability of housing in the area plays a significant role in poverty. High housing costs or limited affordable housing options consume a significant portion of a household's income, leaving less for other essential needs.

Racial and Ethnic Disparities

Systemic inequalities and racial or ethnic disparities contribute to higher poverty rates among certain groups, as they face discrimination, limited access to resources, and fewer opportunities for economic mobility.

Economic Shocks and Lingering Pandemic Transitions

Economic downturns, job losses, or changes in local industries are having a significant impact on poverty rates. Inflation of the cost of goods and services is occurring at the same time as pandemic assistance is falling away returning and leaving many in poverty.

