

# California's Essential Workers and Their Housing Needs

## Introduction

Californians working in frontline essential jobs are risking their lives and their families' lives to keep California fed, housed, and healthy during the coronavirus pandemic. Frontline essential workers have no choice but to show up to work while others shelter in place and work from home. Compounding the health risks, low wage frontline essential workers—many of whom are Black and Latinx\*—also face housing insecurity and overcrowding. This fact sheet highlights who California's frontline essential workers are, where they live, and what housing challenges they face.

The University of California Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education defines frontline essential workers as those who work in a frontline (non-managerial, non-technical) occupation in an industry described as Essential Critical Infrastructure by the state.<sup>1</sup>

## Who are California's frontline essential workers?

Frontline essential jobs in California are often held by Latinx, Black, and immigrant workers earning less than \$15/hour. Latinx workers make up the largest share of California's frontline essential workforce and are overrepresented in occupations—like farmworkers and janitors—with the highest percentages of low-wage work.

\* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as "Latinx" to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

**Table 1: California Workers Employed in Frontline Essential Jobs**

Worker Profile	Percent in Frontline Essential Jobs	Approximate Number of Workers in Frontline Essential Jobs
Low wage workers	52%	2.5 million
Race/Ethnicity		
Latinx	55%	3.7 million
Asian	37%	1 million
Black	48%	460,000
Other	38%	1.3 million
White	35%	2.5 million
Immigrant	48%	4.3 million

Source: UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education; U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2013-2018 5-Year Estimates

### Where do California’s low-wage frontline essential workers live?

Low-wage front line essential workers live in every metro and rural area in the state (See Appendix Low Wage Frontline Essential Workers by Metro and Non-Metro Area). The Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim MSA, as the largest metro area in the state, has the highest number of low wage frontline essential workers. However, metro areas with large agricultural economies, like Salinas and Fresno, have some of the highest concentrations of low-wage frontline essential workers in the state. These workers and their families are also more likely to live in certain neighborhoods because of persistent racial and economic residential segregation within cities and towns across the state.

### What are the housing needs of California’s low wage frontline essential workers?

- **Essential workers lack access to affordable housing.** According to UnidosUS estimates, there are more than 1.1 million low wage frontline essential workers in California that do not have access to affordable rental housing. The majority of these workers are Latinx.

Latinos make up almost 52% of all California’s essential workers, and 52% of renters without access to affordable rental housing.

**Table 2: Low-Wage Frontline Essential Workers without Access to Affordable Rental Housing**

	Low-Wage Workers	Renters without Access to Affordable Housing
All Low-Wage Essential Workers	2,714,531	1,164,534
Latinx	1,413,159	606,245
Black	155,773	66,827
Asian	348,651	149,571

Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 5-Year Estimates - Public Use Microdata Sample 2018; UC Berkeley Labor Center

- **Essential workers are more likely to live in overcrowded housing:** Living in overcrowded housing increases the risk of contracting COVID-19—and essential workers in California are more likely to live in overcrowded homes than nonessential workers due to the prevalence of low-wage work. Certain essential workers are much more likely to live in an overcrowded home than other workers, including those employed in farm work and food preparation/service.

A household is defined as overcrowded if there is more than one occupant per room. Overcrowded housing is a direct consequence of high housing costs—because of the high cost of housing in California, the rate of overcrowding in the state is more than double the national average.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 3. Overcrowded Housing and Essential Workers**

Workers in California	Percent in Overcrowded Housing Units
Nonessential workers	12%
Essential workers	16%
Workers in farming jobs	31%
Workers in food preparation and serving jobs	29%

Source: Public Policy Institute of California

## Conclusion

California's frontline essential workers face heightened risks of contracting COVID-19 due to the nature of their employment and the housing challenges they face. As confirmed by recent reports, low-income Latino neighborhoods are susceptible to COVID-19 spread because of dense housing, crowded living conditions, and the fact that many essential workers who live there are unable to work from home.<sup>3</sup> That Latinx and Black workers are overrepresented in frontline essential occupations has contributed to the deadly impact the pandemic has had in these communities.

### Appendix Low-Wage Frontline Essential Workers\* by Metro and Non-Metro Area, May 2019

Geography	Low-Wage Frontline Essential Jobs		
	Number of Jobs	% of All Jobs in Area	% of All State Low-Wage Essential Jobs
California	3,579,600	21%	100%
<b>Metropolitan Statistical Area</b>			
Bakersfield	95,200	30%	3%
Chico	17,890	23%	0%
El Centro	17,520	30%	0%
Fresno	106,990	28%	3%
Hanford-Corcoran	9,980	23%	0%
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim	1,252,090	20%	35%
Madera	14,340	31%	0%
Merced	20,600	27%	1%
Modesto	44,340	24%	1%
Napa	15,560	20%	0%
Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura	63,300	20%	2%
Redding	15,470	23%	0%
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario	382,020	25%	11%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics, May 2019

\* Definition of low wage frontline essential jobs based on UC Berkeley Labor Center research—see section II of this report. The specific BLS occupation codes included in the definition are located in endnote vi.

## Appendix Low-Wage Frontline Essential Workers\* by Metro and Non-Metro Area, May 2019

Geography	Low-Wage Frontline Essential Jobs		
	Number of Jobs	% of All Jobs in Area	% of All State Low-Wage Essential Jobs
Sacramento-Roseville-Arden-Arcade	211,620	21%	6%
Salinas	62,270	34%	2%
San Diego-Carlsbad	264,160	18%	7%
San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward	421,430	17%	12%
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara	168,150	15%	5%
San Luis Obispo-Paso Robles-Arroyo Grande	24,510	21%	1%
Santa Cruz-Watsonville	19,460	20%	1%
Santa Maria-Santa Barbara	40,740	21%	1%
Santa Rosa	43,360	21%	1%
Stockton-Lodi	60,330	24%	2%
Vallejo-Fairfield	30,110	21%	1%
Visalia-Porterville	52,830	34%	1%
Yuba City	10,980	24%	0%
<b>Non-Metropolitan Statistical Area</b>			
North Coast Region	23,190	22%	1%
Eastern Sierra-Mother Lode Region	11,460	19%	0%
North Valley-Northern Mountains Region	21,670	22%	1%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics, May 2019

\* Definition of low wage frontline essential jobs based on UC Berkeley Labor Center research—see section II of this report. The specific BLS occupation codes included in the definition are located in endnote vi.

## About UnidosUS

UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels.

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our country stronger. For more information on UnidosUS, visit [www.unidosus.org](http://www.unidosus.org), or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

## Endnotes

- 1 Sarah Thomason and Annette Bernhardt, "Front-line Essential Jobs in California: A Profile of Job and Worker Characteristics," *UC Berkeley Labor Center Blog*, May 14, 2020, <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/front-line-essential-jobs-in-california-a-profile-of-job-and-worker-characteristics/> (accessed October 27, 2020).
- 2 Marisol Cuellar Mejia and Paulette Cha, "Overcrowded Housing and COVID-19 Risk among Essential Workers," *Public Policy Institute of California Blog*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.ppic.org/blog/overcrowded-housing-and-covid-19-risk-among-essential-workers/> (accessed October 27, 2020).
- 3 Rong-Gong Lin II and Luke Money, "Deaths among Latinos in L.A. County from COVID-19 rising at astonishing levels," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-01-14/latino-black-and-poor-residents-suffer-dramatically-worsening-covid-death-rates> (accessed January 18, 2021).