

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Rural San Joaquin Valley Households and Workers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief presents results from Harvesting Safety study, a random sample survey of 301 households conducted in rural communities among three San Joaquin Valley counties.

The San Joaquin Valley accounts for the majority of California's cash farm receipts, and this study examines social and economic issues associated with the onset of the pandemic. The study surveyed persons with phones living in eight communities in Merced, Fresno and Tulare counties, from August 15 to August 26, 2020, and had a margin of error of +/-5.6 percent.

The survey asked questions related to income, and health and safety concerning households and workers. Findings suggest high levels of income loss, food insecurity and failure to pay rent. Findings also suggest strong support for greater workplace health and safety, and slowing down business reopenings. Most respondents were concerned with their own health and safety, nearly half could not affirm that their workplaces had COVID-19 safe practices, and most felt that the government was too quick to reopen businesses.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Nearly half (44%) of rural San Joaquin Valley households sampled experienced income reduction since March 1.
2. Three in ten (30%) households went without food, or relied on food stamps or a food bank. Fifteen percent (15%) of renters failed to pay rent in April or May.
3. Most respondents (59%) claimed they would be "very concerned" if they were to experience COVID-19 symptoms.
4. Most workers (57%) claimed they had not been able to work from home—for any amount of time—since the Governor's stay-at-home order on March 19.
5. Nearly half (46%) were unable to affirm that their workplaces had safe practices for preventing COVID-19 spread.
6. Only 28% of workers said they qualified for ten days of paid sick leave.
7. More than half (53%) of workers felt the government was opening businesses "too quickly" or "much too quickly."

BACKGROUND

The San Joaquin Valley has been acutely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, from higher-than-average surges (Flores and Padilla 2020), to a lack of healthcare for those suffering from COVID-19 (Ho 2020a), to its higher rate of undercounted deaths (Reese 2020). However, as the state heads into a new and deadlier surge in COVID-19 cases, local corporate and public policy discourse continues to place business, rather than worker health and safety, at the fore (Ho 2020b; Hall 2020; Marcum et al. 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the San Joaquin Valley's long-standing racial, economic and geographic inequalities, from job loss and reductions in hours (Almeida 2020; Flores et al. 2020), to race and class disparities in infection rates (Fernandez and Weiler 2020), to the effects of institutional racism on access to care, underlying health disparities and death (e.g. Pirtle 2020). The valley provides a microcosm of California's pandemic racial inequalities, which are concentrated in its rural regions. Valley counties' undercounts of COVID-19 related deaths are among the state's highest, and such deaths are highest among communities of color—in particular Latinos (Reese 2020).

Pandemic deaths are especially pronounced among *immigrant* Latinos, who largely toil in low-wage jobs. Whereas Latino immigrants typically have lower mortality rates than whites, during the pandemic immigrant Latinos' death rates have surpassed whites' (Saenz and Garcia 2020). In California, immigrant Latinos' death increase has been *twice* that of native-born Latinos, and far higher in the valley; in Kings County, immigrant Latino deaths increased by 450% between 2019 and 2020 (Padilla 2020).

The valley's high increases in immigrant Latino deaths may be partly explained by the fact that nearly half of the state's meatpacking (47%) and agricultural (47%) workers live there (author's analysis of ACS 2018 data). For example, it is in these two industries—agriculture and meatpacking—with longstanding issues in worker health and safety, in which some of the largest workplace COVID-19 outbreaks have taken place. Investigative journalistic accounts of workplace outbreaks have found low-wage, immigrant, non-English speaking, and non-citizen workers face acute risk in agriculture and meatpacking work (Ho 2020c).

To learn about their experiences, we interviewed persons who live and work in those rural, San Joaquin Valley communities with the highest concentration of agriculture and meatpacking workers in the state.

DATA AND METHODS

The UC Merced Community and Labor Center designed this survey to examine how residents and workers were faring during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between August 15-26, 2020, Communities for a New California (CNC) utilized random-digit dialing to survey 301 persons with phones. The survey targeted small cities in Fresno, Merced and Tulare counties, rural areas with the largest concentration of food chain (agricultural and food processing) workers in the state.

The sample has a margin of error of +/-5.6 percent in the three combined geographies. The survey asked questions about income and economic issues, workplace health and safety practices, and political and community engagement.

Table 1.1 Sample Distribution by County

	Harvesting Safety		ACS 2019
	Number	Percent	
Merced	106	35.2%	20.4%
Fresno	74	24.6%	51.0%
Tulare	121	40.2%	28.6%
N=	301	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Harvesting Safety Study

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The Harvesting Safety study sampled 301 adults from small cities in rural areas located in Merced, Fresno and Tulare counties. The sample cities consisted of Livingston and Los Banos (Merced); Sanger and Selma (Fresno); and Cutler, Orosi, Farmersville and Lindsay (Tulare). The largest number of cases were drawn from Tulare (n=121), followed by Merced (n=106) and Fresno counties (n=74) (see table 1.1).

While the sample proportions were slightly different than the distribution of population in the counties (see table 1.1), demographic and household characteristics were very similar compared to American Community Survey (ACS) 2019 data for the region. The few exceptions were for sex, immigrant status, and home ownership status.

More than three-fifths (62.8%) of our respondents were female, so we weighted the data to approximate the ACS estimate of sex distribution in each of the same geographies. Our final, weighted sample was 49.4% female, compared with the ACS average of 50.7% for the combined geographies. Our sample characteristics were otherwise very similar to ACS estimates, both weighted and unweighted. In

the following, we report weighted estimates (unless otherwise noted).

The study areas were younger than the rest of the state. The median age of our adult respondents was 39, compared to the ACS estimate of 43 for adults in the same area or 45 for the rest of the state. In addition, 84.9% of our respondents participated in the English-language version of our survey, compared with the ACS estimate of 87.3% of adults that speak English well or better. However, while only 19.6% of our sample reported being foreign-born, ACS estimates suggest the figure is twice as high—38.7%—for the region.

In terms of race, our sample was 66.7% Latina/o, compared with the ACS estimate of 67.6%. There were smaller numbers of whites (18.8%), Blacks (4.0%), Asians (3.4%), Native Americans (2.5%), and persons of two or more races/ other (4.6%). These figures were close to ACS estimates of whites (24.9%), Blacks (1.9%), Asians (4.0%), Native Americans (0.8%), and persons of two or more races/ other (0.8%).

Lastly, in terms of household characteristics, our study areas had a larger household size than the rest of the state. Study households had, on average, 3.5 persons per household, similar to the ACS estimate of 3.3 and much larger than the rest of the state (2.7) (see table 2.2). Households had an annual median income of \$45,000, lower than the ACS estimate of \$54,000 and far lower than the state average of \$80,000. Only 37.9% of households were homeowners, compared with 57.4% in the ACS estimate or 55.0% for the state.

Table 2.1 Demographic Characteristics

	Harvesting Safety		ACS 2019	
	Unweighted	Weighted	Study Area	California
Age	38	39	43	45
Female	62.8%	49.4%	50.7%	51.1%
Immigrant	18.3%	19.6%	38.7%	33.6%
Language				
English	86.4%	84.9%	87.3%	89.2%
Spanish	13.6%	15.1%		
Race				
Latino/a	67.4%	66.7%	67.6%	35.9%
White	19.3%	18.8%	24.9%	39.5%
Black	4.0%	4.0%	1.9%	5.5%
Two or more races, or other	4.3%	4.6%	0.8%	2.7%
Asian	3.0%	3.4%	4.0%	16.1%
Native American	2.0%	2.5%	0.8%	0.4%
N=	301	301	301	301

Source: Harvesting Safety Study

Table 2.2 Household Characteristics

	Harvesting Safety		ACS 2019	
		N=	Study Area	California
Avg. Household Size	3.5	294	3.3	2.7
Median HH income (2019)	\$45,000	182	\$54,000	\$80,000
Homeowner	37.9%	275	57.4%	55.0%

Source: Harvesting Safety Study

In sum, as a whole, our sample and the study area were younger and more Latina/o than the rest of the state, as well as lived in a larger household size with a lower household income. At the same time, our sample had a lower percentage of immigrants and a lower percentage of homeowners than ACS estimates for the same area and the state.

FINANCIAL DISTRESS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Our study suggests that a large number of households in the rural San Joaquin Valley experienced an economic downturn following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 1, forty-four percent (44%) of households experienced a decline in income (see table 3.1). Three in ten (30%)

Table 3.1 Financial Distress During the COVID-19 Pandemic

	Percent	N=
Income reduction since March 1	44%	299
Could not afford food or rent	32%	301
Could not afford food	30%	301
Failed to pay rent	15%	171
Failed to pay mortgage	5%	105

Source: Harvesting Safety Study

Table 3.2 Respondent access to safety net

	Harvesting Safety		ACS 2019	
	Percent	N=	Study Area	California
Federal Stimulus Check	94%	191		
10 days of paid sick leave	28%	191		
Household members with health insurance	92%	984	89%	92%

Source: Harvesting Safety Study

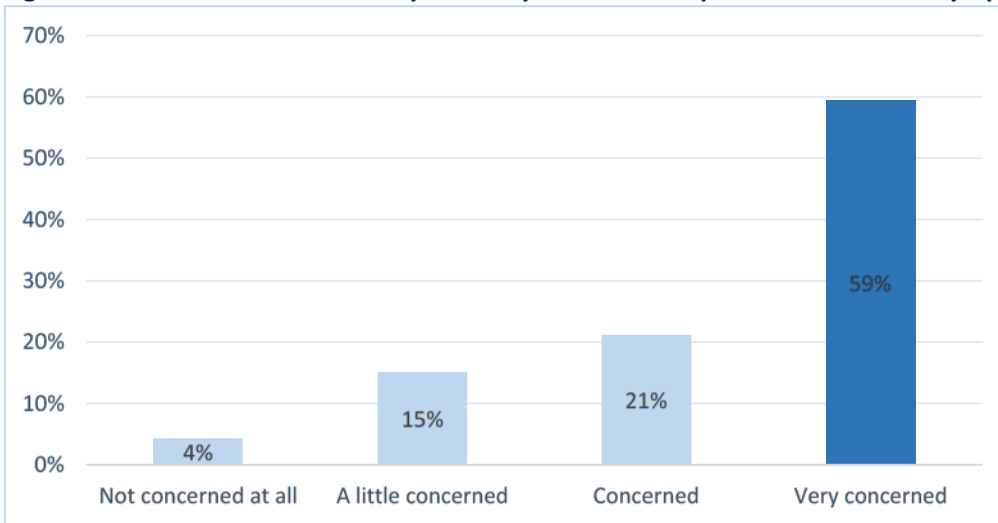
households either went one day without food, or had to rely on food stamps or a food bank in order to have sufficient food. Fifteen percent (15%) of renters were unable to pay rent, and five percent (5%) of homeowners failed to pay their mortgage. Nearly one in three households (32%) were unable to afford food or failed to pay their rent or mortgage.

Despite the widespread financial distress experienced by rural valley households, few workers qualified for extended paid sick leave either through workplace policy or through the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA). Only twenty-eight percent (28%) of respondents said they qualified for ten days of paid sick leave (see table 3.2). This is consistent with

our prior research utilizing the Current Population Survey that indicated the majority of American workers are employed by firms with less than fifty or more than five hundred employees, which are exempt from the FFCRA (Flores and Padilla 2020).

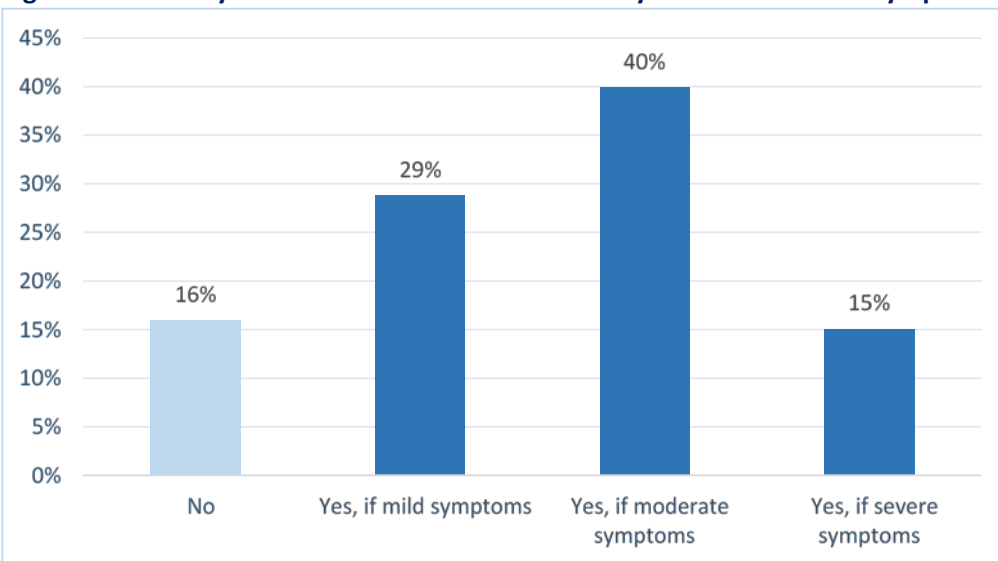
Most respondents (94%) claimed that their households qualified for a federal stimulus check, though more than one in twenty (6%) indicated their household did not qualify for a stimulus check—likely a result of having undocumented immigrants in their household (see table 3.2). Study respondents reported that, on average, 92% of their household members were covered by any form of health insurance, consistent with the rate indicated by the ACS (89%) for the same area.

Figure 4.1 How concerned would you be if you were to experience COVID-19 symptoms?



Source: Harvesting Safety Study

Figure 4.2 Would you seek medical treatment for any COVID-19 related symptoms?



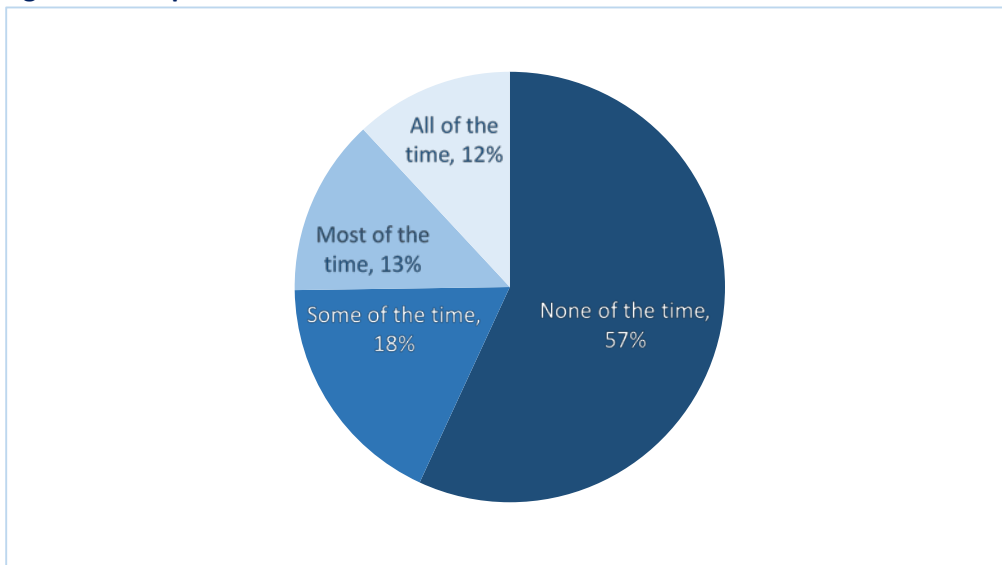
Source: Harvesting Safety Study

CONCERNS WITH COVID-19

Most respondents expressed concern with health and safety in the context of the pandemic. A majority (59%) claimed that they would be “very concerned” if they were to experience COVID-19 symptoms (see

Figure 4.1). Only 4.3% claimed they would be “not concerned at all.” The majority claimed they would seek medical treatment for COVID-19 related symptoms, either for mild (29%) or moderate (40%) symptoms. Only sixteen percent (16%) claimed they would not seek medical treatment for COVID-19 related symptoms (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 5.1 Respondent has been able to work from home



Source: Harvesting Safety Study

WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY

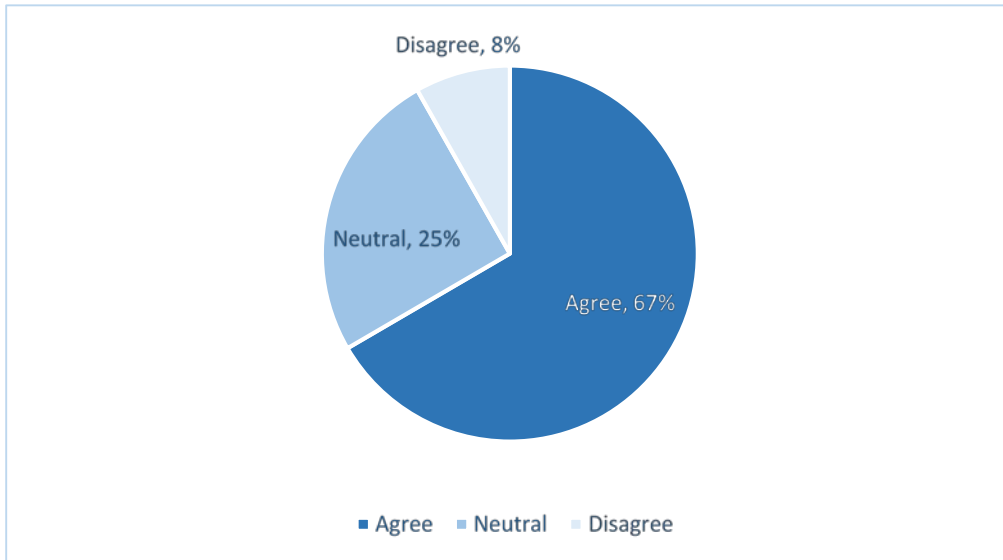
Apart from widespread financial distress and concern with COVID-19 health and safety, our study indicates that rural San Joaquin Valley workers face challenges in keeping themselves healthy and safe on the job. Most workers (57%, N=235) claimed they had been able to work from home “none of the time” since the Governor’s first stay-at-home order had gone into effect on March 19, 2020; only one in four workers (25%) were able to work “most of the time” or “all of the time” from home.

The financial insecurity that rural valley workers faced, combined with their inability to work from home, left workers exposed to the risk of contracting COVID-19 on the job. Yet, many workers expressed having little choice but to work during the pandemic. Two in three workers (67%) agreed with the statement that it was “necessary to work

under any conditions” (see figure 5.2)—despite nearly half (46%) being unable to affirm their workplaces had safe COVID-19 health and safety practices (see figure 5.3).

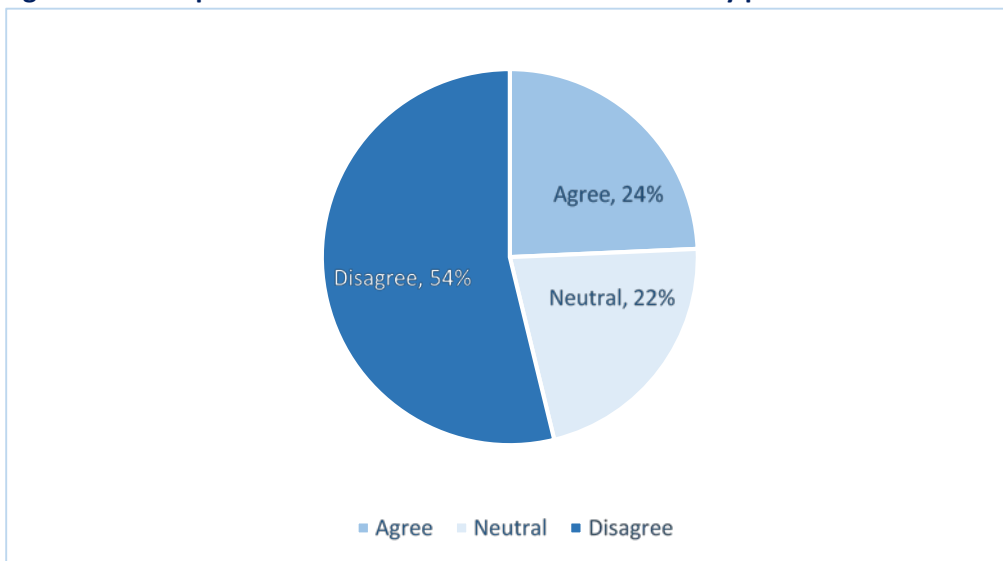
We asked respondents whether their workplaces provided a range of COVID-19 health and safety practices: from hand-washing and personal protective equipment, to cleaning of tools, to social distancing between co-workers and customers. Most workers (between 72% to 82%) agreed that their workplaces exercised any one of the six items we asked about, though non-compliance with any of these measures creates hazardous work conditions during a deadly pandemic (see figure 5.4). Nearly one in four workers agreed that their workplace had unsafe practices (24%), while another twenty-two percent (22%) provided a “neutral” response to the question (see figure 5.3).

Figure 5.2 Respondent felt it necessary to work under any conditions



Source: Harvesting Safety Study

Figure 5.3 Workplace has unsafe COVID-19 health and safety practices

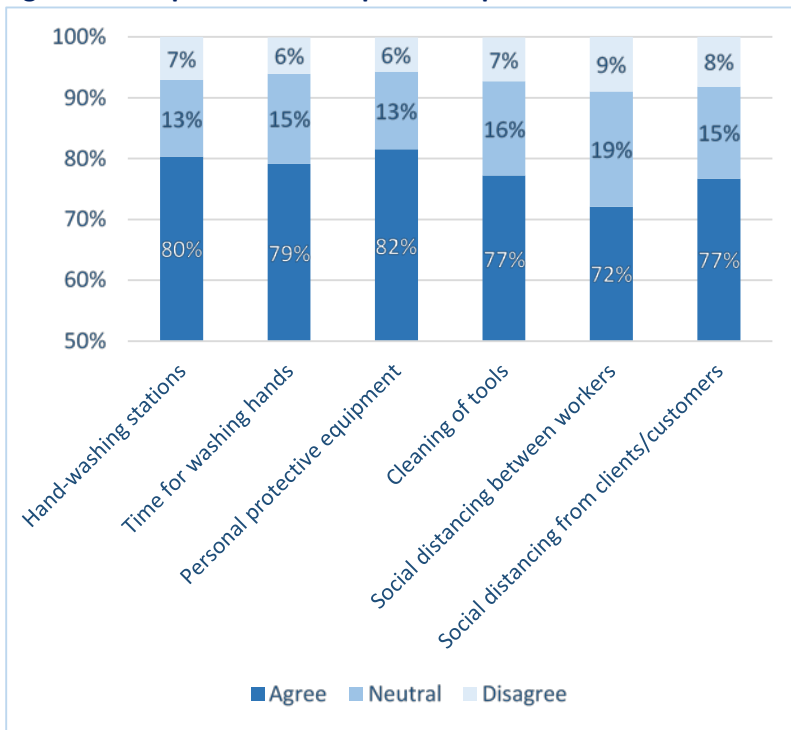


Source: Harvesting Safety Study

While the economy is typically the most popular issue of concern, public opinion surveys have documented that since the onset of the pandemic the American public has become less concerned with the economy than with the pandemic. Our survey reflects some of that shift. In mid-late

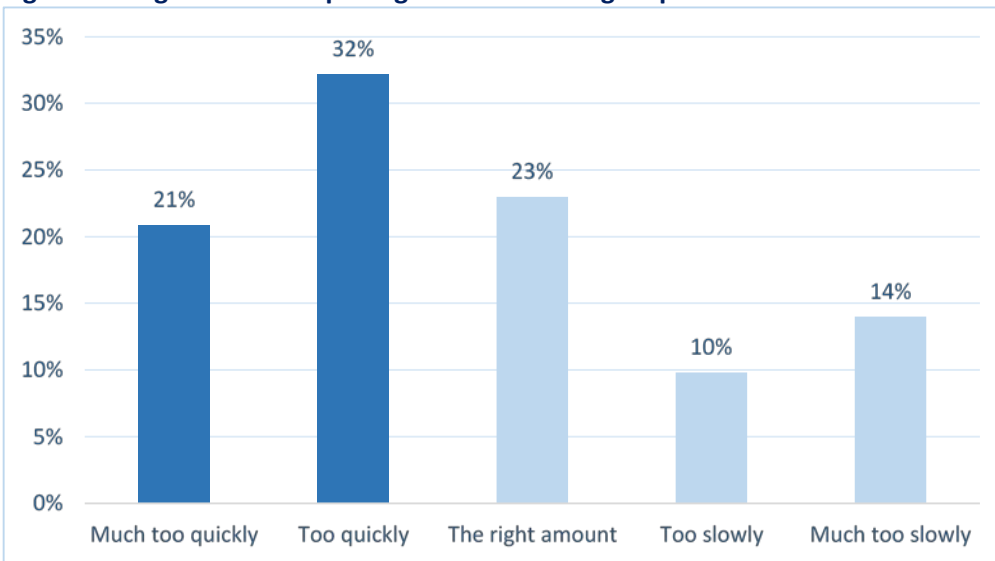
August, when we asked respondents, “how quickly do you feel our government is opening up businesses amid the pandemic crisis?” a majority of respondents expressed that the government was opening businesses either “much too quickly” (21%) or “too quickly” (32%).

Figure 5.4 Respondents' workplace has provided sufficient...



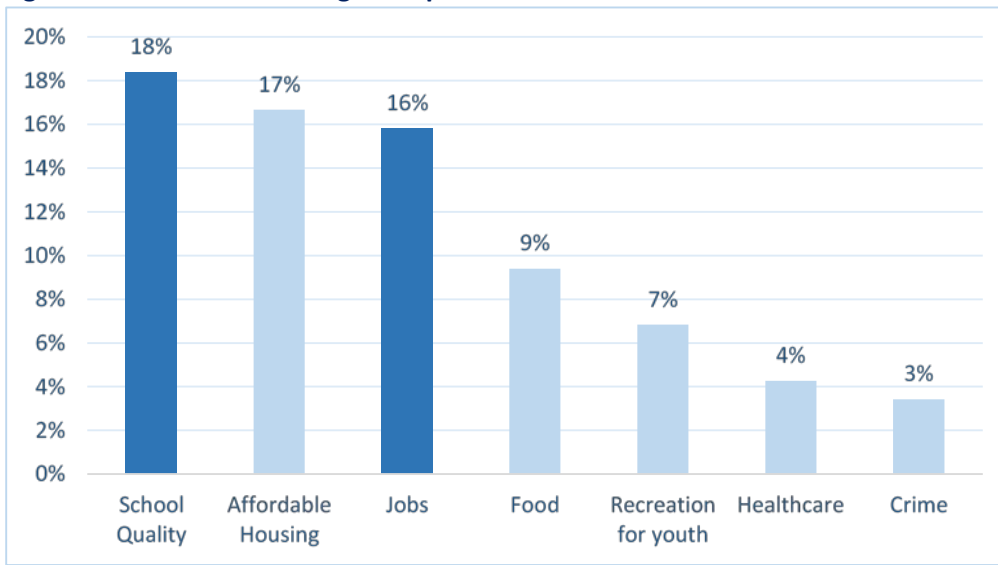
Source: Harvesting Safety Study

Figure 6.1 Is government opening businesses at right speed?



Source: Harvesting Safety Study

Figure 6.2 Issue with the largest impact on household since March 1



Source: Harvesting Safety Study

Nonetheless, our respondents did express persisting concern with economic issues. When asked to take a look at a list of thirteen issues and think about which issue “had the largest impact on your household?” the most popular responses were “school quality” (18%), followed by “affordable housing” (17%), and “jobs” (16%). There was no statistical difference in the frequency of responses to these three items.

CONCLUSION

The San Joaquin Valley has been at the center of California’s geographic inequalities, both before the COVID-19 pandemic but as well as after. These inequalities are rooted in work—particularly industrial food production, such as agricultural and meat processing.

Despite local concerns with maintaining businesses open, however, our study indicates that residents and workers are more concerned with their well-being. Our

survey captures the perspectives of residents and workers in communities with the highest food chain employment in the region and the state. Our findings indicate that residents have experienced widespread social and economic uncertainty, but are more concerned with protecting their safety and well-being.

A large minority of households experienced pandemic income reduction, and were unable to afford food or to pay the rent. Most respondents expressed concern with contracting COVID-19, were unable to work from home, and did not have access to extended paid sick leave. Nearly half could not affirm their workplaces had safe practices for mitigating COVID-19 spread, and slightly more than half felt government was opening businesses too quickly.

Our survey points to the need for comprehensive COVID-19 policy at the local, state and federal levels that enhances how residents and workers protect their health

and safety. While this includes regulating business openings, it also involves monitoring and enforcing sanitary working conditions, protecting disadvantaged workers who report health and safety non-compliance, and providing extended paid sick leave and unemployment insurance for all low-wage workers. Without such reforms, rural, low-wage workers face dangerous dilemmas: to quit work and risk starvation or eviction, or go to work and risk transmitting a deadly disease.

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