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The State's Future: Kern County's Young, Growing, Diverse Population and Dynamic Economy

grew by 41%, and its workforce grew by 51%, both **third-highest** in the state.

SUMMARY

Kern county occupies a unique position—at the center of the state, at the forefront of its population growth, and in one of the nation's largest agricultural and energy producing regions. In recent years, reports have noted that Kern County has fostered an “open-for-business” climate. But what exactly does “open-for-business” mean for Kern County workers?

In this report, we examine several features of Kern's distinctive population and economy. In per capita terms, Kern County's economy grew faster between 2000 and 2009 than any other county in the state—but then shrank more than all but two California counties. We also find that workers have experienced extreme inequality in Kern, and that Kern worker disadvantage has only grown over time.

The findings have implications for California's new approach to economic development—the high road model. How local stakeholders engage with these findings for regional economic development will have consequences for shared prosperity between business and workers.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Kern County is the tenth most populous California county, with 873,334 residents. Between 2000 and 2019, **Kern's population**

2. Kern is one of the **youngest counties** in California. It has the state's third-youngest median age (31), and fourth-highest rate of residents under the age of five (7.8%).

3. Kern's population is **diverse**. Kern has the fifth most Latino population in the state (55%), and immigrants are one in five (20%) residents.

4. Kern's workforce will **quickly change**, from many migrants to many native-born workers. Nearly one in three (31%) of workers aged 55-64 are migrants, yet of those aged 15-24 and entering the workforce only 8% are migrants.

5. Kern's **per capita GDP growth is highly volatile**; it grew more than any other California county between 2000 and 2009, at 34.9%. Yet, since 2009, Kern's per capita GDP shrank by 4.4%—third-worst in the state.

6. Since 2009, **22 of 30 industries in Kern experienced job growth**. Among the highest were: warehousing (552%); animal production (220%); non-oil and gas mining (215%); forestry, fishing and hunting (193%); building services (90%), and utilities (72%).

7. Kern **workers' earnings decline** have been singularly worst among all California counties. In 1979, Kern workers earned a median wage of \$34,451 (in 2019 dollars), identical to US

workers outside of California. Yet since 1979 Kern workers' median wages have declined 13%.

8. Kern workers are among the state's most **disadvantaged**, even after adjusting for local cost of living. Four out of ten (40%) Kern workers lived below a living wage in 2019, third-worst in the state. Nearly one in two (48%) workers in Southeast Bakersfield lived below a living wage.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2017, the California Workforce Development Board founded the High Road Training Partnership (H RTP), an innovative initiative to advance economic and workforce development in the state. The H RTP is premised on a "high road" approach, characterized by "industry-led" and "worker-centered partnerships" (UCLA Labor Center, undated). Its first investment, \$10 million over eighteen months, provided public funding for partnerships in eight industry sectors, including healthcare, hospitality, transit, freight, water and wastewater, building operations, public sector, and transportation, distribution and logistics (Gonzalez-Vasquez and Lopez 2021, 1). The three goals of the H RTP were job quality, equity, and the climate (California Workforce Development Board 2018).

The State of California has since made the high road approach foundational in its approach to economic and workforce development. A June 2020 report commissioned by the California Workforce Development Board, "Putting California on the High Road," articulated the high road framework as a key strategy for the state's efforts to advance on ambitious climate goals—reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2035 and becoming carbon-neutral by 2045 (e.g. Zabin et al. 2020). Later, as a response to the COVID-19 economic and public health crisis, California Governor Gavin Newsom introduced the \$750 million Community Economic Resilience Fund (CERF); the CERF was designed

as a "high road" strategy, funding high road transition collaboratives and implementation grants (Governor's Office of Planning and Research 2021).

The Kern High Road Coalition, founded in October 2020 and consisting of three co-convenors (Bakersfield College; UC Merced Community and Labor Center; and Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment), is currently leading the development of a Strategic Workforce Development Plan in Kern County under California's H RTP initiative.

The Kern High Road coalition will convene several labor, community and environmental justice partners, around issue areas of interest to high road employers, worker organizations, disadvantaged communities, and climate groups. It will also foster collaborations that advance the state's interest in high road economic development. The release of this report is the first step.

Research on economic development in Kern County has highlighted several distinctive features of Kern: reliance on energy production (e.g. Kern Economic Development Foundation 2021), the number of good jobs and high pay in energy sectors, tremendous job growth (e.g. Hamilton et al. 2015), and the contributions of oil and gas to local property tax revenue streams (e.g. Natelson Dale Group 2020). Yet key questions remained about worker prosperity.

This report examines Kern County's population, economy, and workers. We utilize several public data sources: 1980-2000 US Census Decennial data; 2009-2019 American Community Survey microdata; and 2001-2020 US Bureau of Economic Analysis data.

The data in this report suggest that several key assumptions must be reconsidered for high road economic development to be advanced in Kern. First, Kern's tremendous economic and job growth has been driven in large part by population growth. Second, Kern's massive population and job growth has been accompanied by the worst decline in worker earnings in the state. Third, projections of Kern

property tax revenue decline resulting from changing state policies have been overstated.

Our report ends with the implications of Kern’s young, growing, and dynamic population and workforce, and the need for high road approaches to economic development.

area in Kern, the “mean center of population” in California (Census 2022); Smith Corner lies at the mid-point of the state’s distribution of its residents. In addition, Kern is has experienced demographic growth and change—two characteristics long associated with the state.

Table 1.1 Kern County Profile, 2019

		<i>County area rank</i>	
<i>Household</i>	Avg Household Size	2.9	12th-highest
<i>Characteristics</i>	Number of subfamilies in household	0.09	19th-highest
<i>Individual</i>	Median Age	31	3rd-youngest
<i>Characteristics</i>	Age 0-4	8%	3rd-highest
	Age 0-17	30%	4th-highest
	Immigrant	20%	16th-lowest
	Median year of arrival	1996	20th-most recent
	Non-English speaker	17%	11th-highest
<i>Workforce</i>	Labor Force Participation	68%	6th-lowest
<i>Characteristics</i>	Unemployed	8%	6th-highest
	Growth in workers (6, 6, 3, 12)	51%	3rd-highest
	Change in median wages	-9%	2nd-lowest

Note: For small counties (population <150,000), PUMAs are used as county areas.

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS- USA American Community Survey 2019 Public Use Microdata Series (PUMS) data

POPULATION

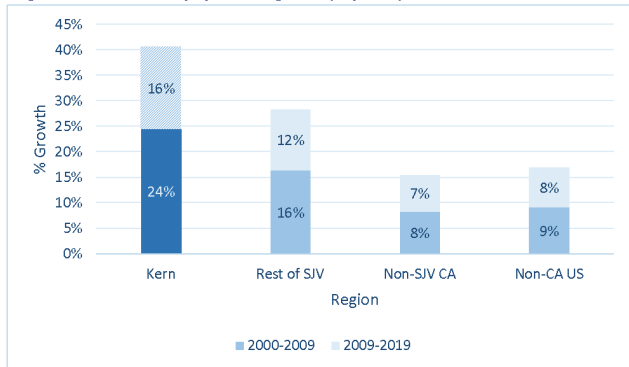
Household Characteristics. Kern is one of the largest counties in California. With 272,889 households and 873,334 persons it is the tenth most populous county in the state. Kern’s household characteristics are slightly above average in size; its average household size is 2.9 persons per household, and for every one hundred households there are nine families living in households that are not their own (see table 1.1).

Center of Population. Kern County is also symbolic of California. In 2022, the US Census Bureau declared Smith Corner, a Census Designated Place (CDP) and unincorporated

Youth and Growth. In 2019, Kern’s youthfulness and population growth stood out among California counties. Kern County residents had a median age of 31 years (see figure 1.2), third-youngest among California counties. The county also had a high rate of children; one in thirteen (7.8%) Kern residents were under the age of five, fourth-highest in the state—only behind its neighboring counties of Kings (8.6%) and Tulare (8.0%), and Imperial (8.6%). In addition, nearly three in ten (29.6%) Kern residents were under the age of 18. This was fifth-highest in the state, only behind other rural counties (Tulare 30.8%; Imperial 30.2%; Kings 29.8%; and Merced 29.7%).

Diversity. Kern County's diversity was unique among California Counties. Latinos comprised 477,787 residents, more than half (55%) of the county's residents and the fifth-highest percentage in the state (see figure

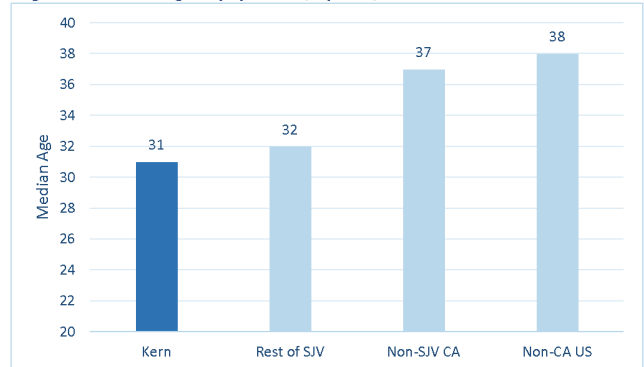
Figure 1.1 Household population growth, by area, between 2000-2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA US Census Decennial 2000 5% file; IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

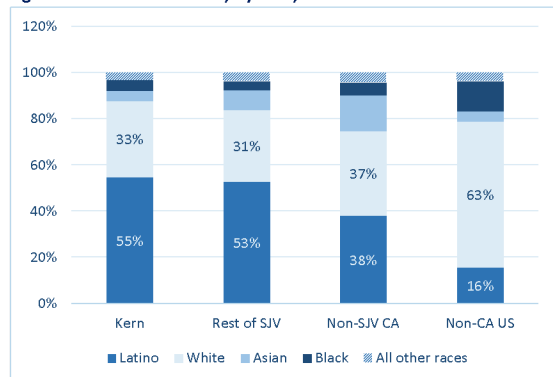
1.3). One in three residents (33%) were white, while Asians (5%), Blacks (5%) and persons from other

Figure 1.2 Median age of population, by area, 2019



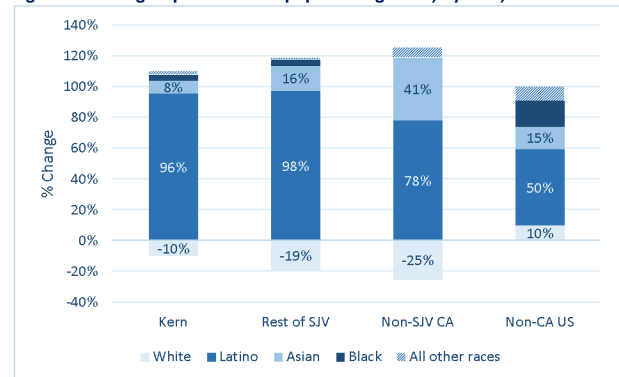
Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

Figure 1.3 Race distribution, by area, 2019



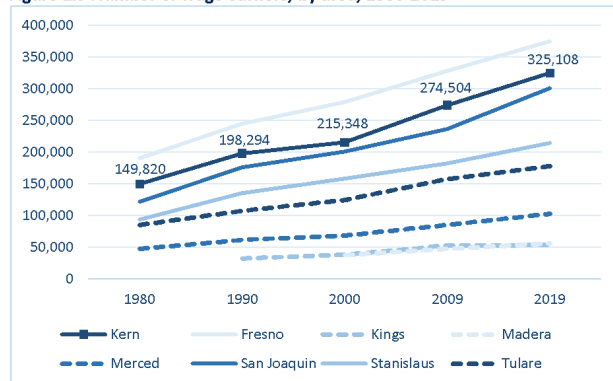
Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

Figure 1.4 Race groups as share of population growth, by area, 2009-2019



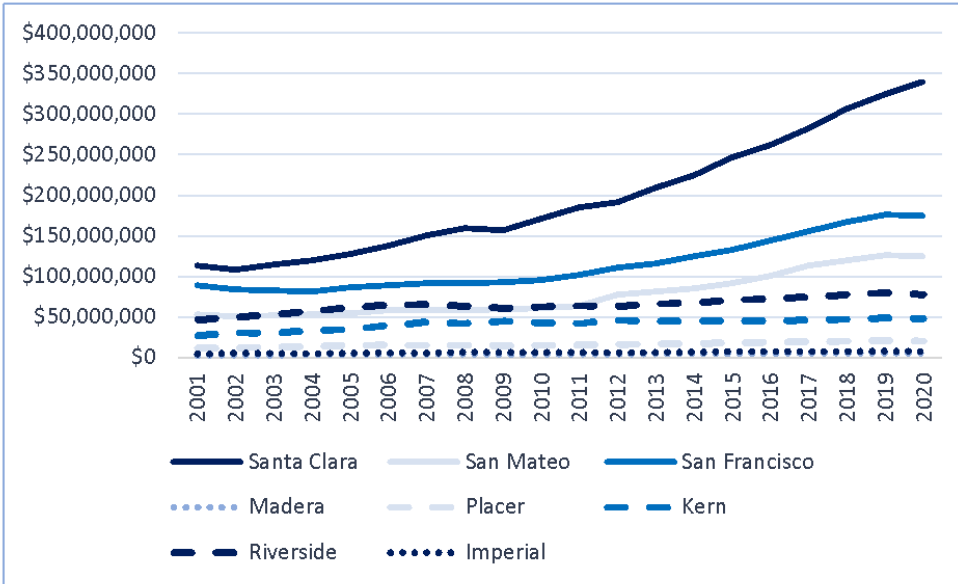
Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

Figure 1.5 Number of wage earners, by area, 1980-2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA US Census Decennial 1980-2000 5% files; IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

Figure 2.1 Counties with GDP growth above state average, California 2001-2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2001-2020 data

Note: All GDP figures in thousands of chained 2012 dollars

racers (3%) formed a minority of residents. These figures were similar to the rest of the San Joaquin Valley, though distinct from the rest of the state; non-San Joaquin Valley California had a relatively lower percentage of Latinos (38%) and higher percentage of Asians (15%) than Kern.

Immigration. Kern was also characterized by diversity in national origin and language. One in five (20%) Kern residents were immigrant. In addition, the immigrant population was long-settled; the median year of arrival to the US for immigrants living in Kern was 1996 (see table 1.1). The county's percentage of immigrants has remained at 20% since 2009. Nonetheless, despite having a largely long-settled immigrant population, nearly one in five (17%) Kern residents did not speak English "very well" (see table 1.1).

Racial Change. Kern County's population grew by 41% between 2000 and 2019, the third-highest rate in the state (see figure 1.1). For every 100 residents that the county had increased in population, 96 were new Latino residents, 8 were Asian, 6 were of other races, and 10 whites had moved out (see figure 1.4).

Labor Market Growth. Kern's dramatic population growth fueled tremendous economic and labor market growth. Between 2000 and 2019, the number of workers in Kern County grew by 51% (see figure 1.5), this was third-highest in the state.

Labor Market Demographic Change. Kern's population growth and demographic changes will soon substantially reshape the labor market with declining numbers of white or immigrant workers, and increasing numbers of native-born Latino workers. Whereas thirty-one

percent of workers entering retirement age (55-64) in the next decade are immigrants, only eight percent of persons aged 15-24 and two percent of persons aged 5-14 are immigrants (analysis not shown). In addition, while forty percent of workers aged 55-64 are Latino, sixty-five percent of persons aged 5-14 or 15-24 are Latino.

ECONOMY

GDP Growth. Kern County's economy experienced tremendous overall growth in gross domestic product (GDP) between 2001 and 2019—in fact, among the state's highest. This obscures, however, the fact that population growth fueled such tremendous growth. Adjusted for inflation and population, Kern experienced extreme economic volatility; Kern's

Mateo, and San Francisco) experienced the greatest GDP growth, while five inland counties also experienced GDP growth above the state's average: Madera, Placer, Kern, Riverside, and Imperial counties. Kern's GDP increase, from \$28 billion in 2001 to \$46 billion in 2009, was fifth highest in the state.

GDP Growth, 2001-2009. Adjusted for population, Kern County's 2001-2009 GDP growth was actually the highest in California. Between 2001 and 2009, Kern County's per capita GDP grew by 34.9% (see table 2.1). Such growth was higher than that in Santa Clara County (30.3%), Ventura (28.5%), Santa Barbara (24.1%), and Solano (16.8%). Kern's per capita GDP growth (34.9%) was nearly four times greater than that of the state (9.5%).

GDP Contraction, 2009-2019. Kern County's economic growth between 2009 and

Table 2.1 Top 5 California counties with highest per capita economic growth, 2001-2009

Rank	County	2001		2009		2001-2009 Growth
		GDP	Pop.	GDP	Pop.	
1	Kern	\$27,651,931	633,062	\$45,552,481	773,070	34.9%
2	Santa Clara	\$114,240,305	1,660,641	\$156,929,380	1,750,586	30.3%
3	Ventura	\$37,003,295	749,315	\$50,423,666	794,761	28.5%
4	Santa Barbara	\$17,976,028	387,372	\$22,573,538	391,857	24.1%
5	Solano	\$15,161,616	387,622	\$18,152,088	397,164	16.8%
	California	\$1,692,324,096	33,534,644	\$1,995,439,659	36,115,231	9.5%

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2001-2009 data

Note: All GDP figures in thousands of chained 2012 dollars

economy was characterized by the state's highest GDP growth between 2001 and 2009—but among the state's worst after 2009.

Only eight California counties experienced GDP growth (in chained 2012 dollars) above the state's average between 2001 and 2020 (see figure 2.1). Three counties in or adjacent to Silicon Valley (Santa Clara, San

2019, however, ranked among the state's worst. Between 2009 and 2019, Kern's GDP per capita grew from \$45.6 billion to \$49.2 billion (see table 2.2). But while this was an increase in absolute terms, it was a decline relative to its population growth. Adjusted per capita, Kern's GDP actually shrank by 4.4% between 2009 and 2019. Only Contra Costa (-11.0%) and Ventura

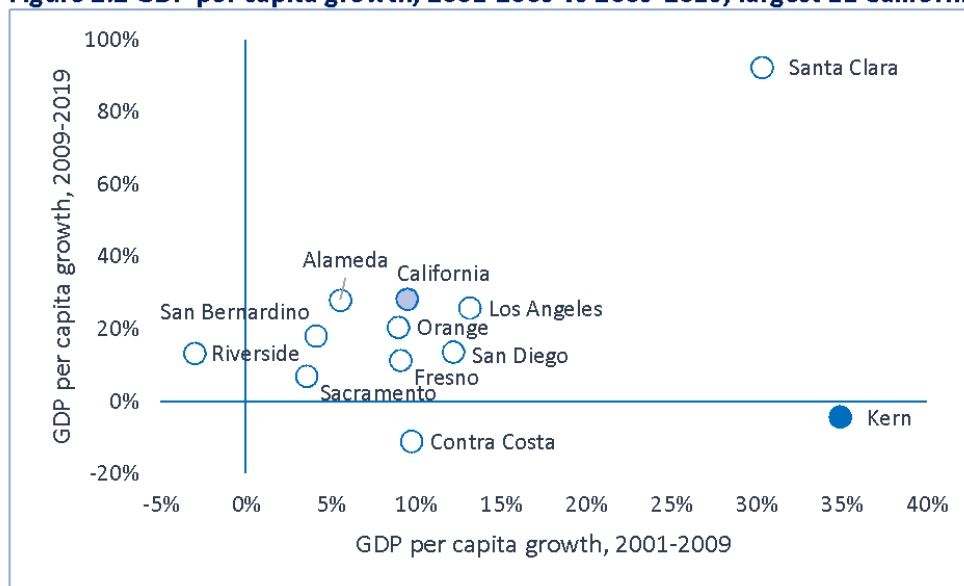
Table 2.2 Top 5 California counties with lowest per capita economic growth, 2009-2019

Rank	County	2009		2019		2009-2019 Growth
		GDP	Pop.	GDP	Pop.	
1	Contra Costa	\$80,291,378	1,031,159	\$79,295,699	1,143,695	-11.0%
2	Ventura	\$50,423,666	794,761	\$47,846,529	832,609	-9.4%
3	Kern	\$45,552,481	773,070	\$49,221,208	873,334	-4.4%
4	Humboldt	\$4,678,757	125,980	\$5,185,967	131,586	6.1%
5	San Joaquin	\$23,369,038	645,592	\$28,686,598	741,237	6.9%
	California	\$1,995,439,659	36,115,231	\$2,739,343,439	38,668,104	28.2%

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2009-2019 data

Note: All GDP figures in thousands of chained 2012 dollars

Figure 2.2 GDP per capita growth, 2001-2009 vs 2009-2019, largest 11 California counties



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2001-2019 data

Note: All GDP figures in chained 2012 dollars

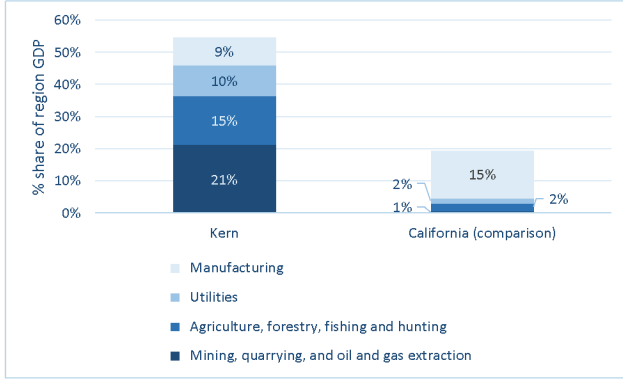
(-9.4%) fared worse. All other counties in California experienced positive per capita GDP growth between 2009 and 2019. The state average for the period was 28.2%.

No other California county besides Kern County experienced greater GDP growth in the first decade of the century yet worse growth during the second decade (see figure 2.2).

Industry GDP. Kern County is also distinct in its industry profile. Kern County's GDP is dominated by four major industries: mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction (21%); agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting (15%); utilities (10%); and manufacturing (9%) (see table 3.1). These four sectors comprised more than half (55%) of Kern County's GDP in 2019. By comparison, these four sectors only comprised 20% of the state's GDP. The disparity

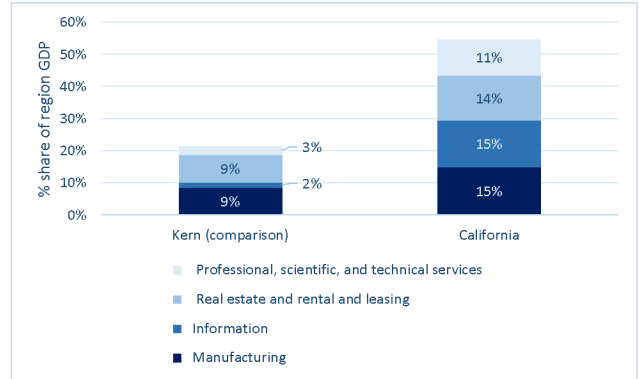
between the industry share of Kern's top three sectors and their share of California (46% versus 5%) was even more striking. In contrast, in 2019, manufacturing, information, real estate, and professional/scientific/technical services constituted the majority (55%) of California's GDP but only 22% of Kern County's GDP (see table 3.2).

Table 3.1 Industry share of region GDP (top-5 largest Kern industries), 2019



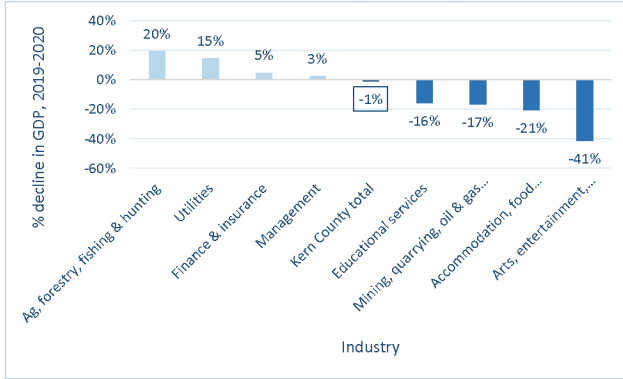
Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2019 data

Table 3.2 Industry share of region GDP (top-5 largest CA industries) 2019



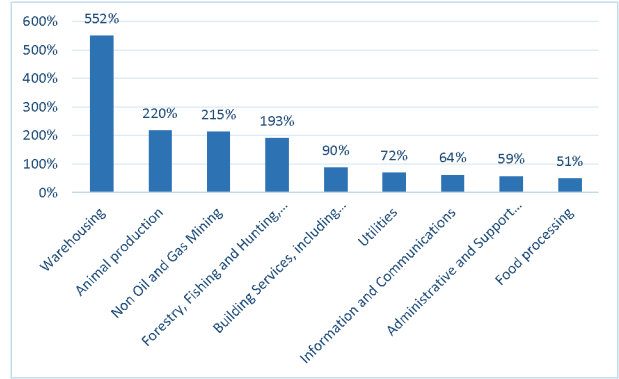
Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2019 data

Table 3.3 Most and least resilient Kern County industries, 2019-2020



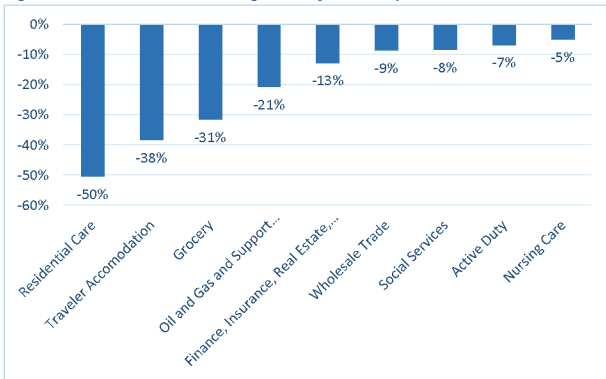
Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2019-2020 data

Figure 4.1 Kern Industries with greatest job gains, 2009-2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

Figure 4.2 Kern Industries with greatest job losses, 2009-2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2019 and 2020, four Kern industries declined in GDP: arts, entertainment and recreation (-41%); accommodation and food services (21%); mining, quarrying, oil & gas extraction (-17%); and educational services (-16%) (see table 3.3).

At the same time, four industry sectors appeared especially resilient despite the pandemic. GDP grew for agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting (20%); utilities (15%); finance & insurance (5%); and management (3%).

LABOR MARKET

Job Growth. Kern County's labor market profile has also been characterized by constant and tremendous job growth. Owing to regional population growth trends, the size of Kern's labor market grew by 51% between 2000 and 2019--third-highest in the state behind only Riverside (80%) and Placer (66%). In 1999, Kern County had 215,348 wage earners, and this figure increased to 325,108 by 2019.

Agriculture had the greatest number of workers in Kern, with 33,398 workers. This formed 11% of Kern's total labor market. Other large industry sectors included educational services (9%); health (8%); public administration (7%); retail trade (7%); restaurants and other food services (6%); and construction (6%). These seven industry sectors comprised 171,243 workers, more than half (54%) of Kern County's total workforce of 317,133.

When compared with the rest of the region, state, and nation, Kern County's top-ten industry workforce figures were very similar--with a few exceptions. Kern had a far larger agricultural workforce (11%) compared with the rest of the state (Non-SJV California 1%), and a smaller number of workers in manufacturing (4%) and professional/scientific/management jobs (4%) compared with the rest of the state (Non-SJV California 9%, 9%).

Industry Job Growth. Owing in large part to Kern's tremendous population growth, jobs in most Kern industry sectors (22 of 30) grew between the Great Recession of 2009 and 2019 (the most recent year of reliable American Community Survey data). Warehousing grew by far the most, with a 552% increase in jobs (see figure 4.1); this was higher than for the rest of the region, state and nation (analysis not shown). Other industries with substantial increases in workers included animal production (220%); non- oil & gas mining (215%); forestry, fishing and hunting (193%); building services (90%), and utilities (72%) (see figure 4.1).

Industry Job Contraction. Jobs decreased in eight Kern industry sectors between 2009 and 2019, however. In fact, five industries experienced double-digit negative percentage losses of workers: residential care (-50%), traveler accommodations (-38%), grocery (-31%), oil and gas (-21%), and finance (-13%) (see figure 4.2).

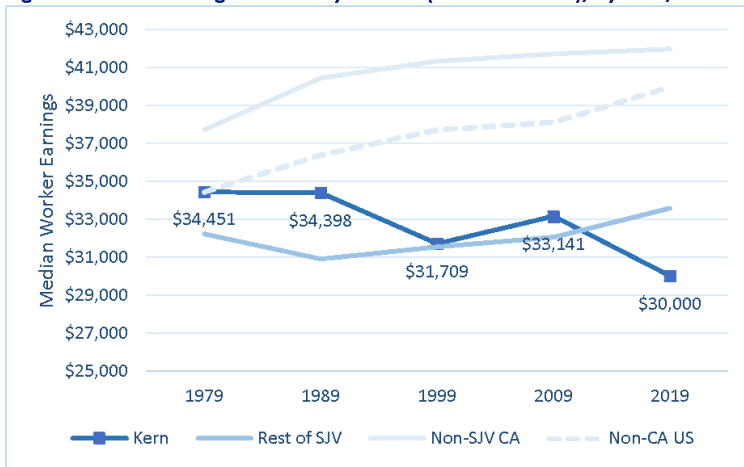
Work Inequalities. Kern County's labor market profile is also marked by severe disadvantage. Despite such overall labor market growth, the county had the state's third-lowest rate (60.3%) of persons aged 16-65 in the labor force. Among those in the labor force it also had one of the highest rates of unemployment. And adjusted for inflation, workers' median wages decreased by 9% between 2009 and 2019, the second-worst change in the state.

Earnings Inequalities, 2009-2019. Overall GDP growth has not translated into higher wages for the average Kern worker. The median wage for a Kern County worker declined 9% between 2009 and 2019, the second-worst rate in the state (see table 1.1).

California's greatest workers' earnings loss, 1979-2019. The decline in Kern County workers' median annual earnings is also striking in a regional, state and national context. In 1979, Kern workers earned an average of \$34,451--identical to that of US workers outside of California (see figure 4.3). By 2019, however, Kern workers' annual earnings had decreased to

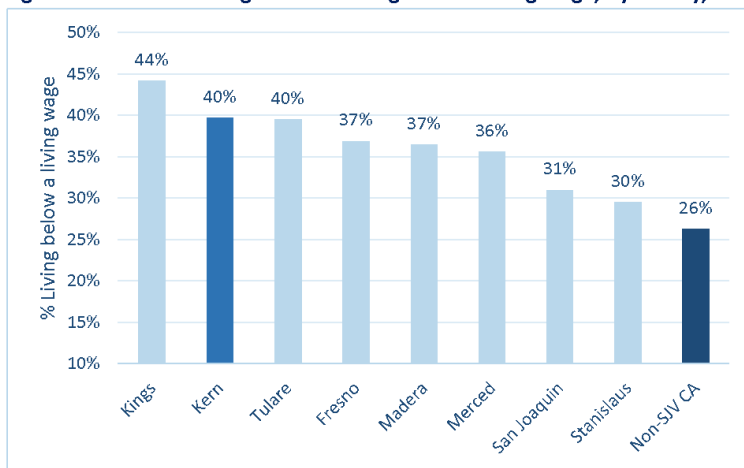
\$30,000. In contrast, earnings *increased* for workers in the rest of the San Joaquin Valley

Figure 4.3 Median wage and salary income (in 2019 dollars), by area, 1979-2019



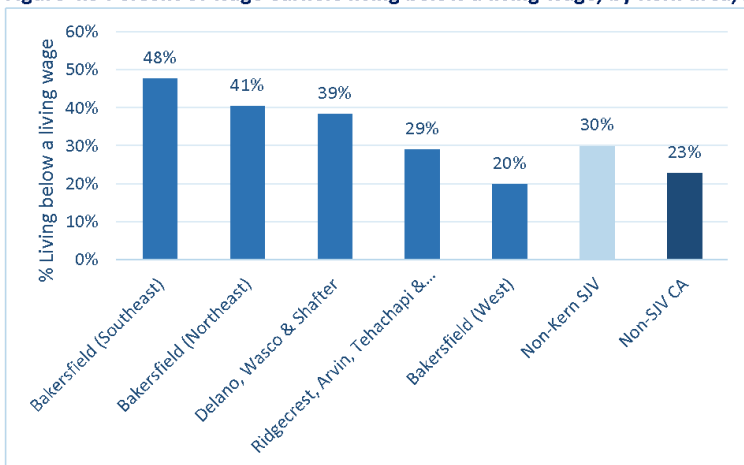
Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA US Census Decennial 1980-2000 5% files; IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2009 and 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

Figure 4.4 Percent of wage earners living under a living wage, by county, 2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2019, 1-year Public Use Microdata Series

Figure 4.5 Percent of wage earners living below a living wage, by Kern area, 2015-2019



Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of IPUMS-USA American Community Survey, 2015-2019, 5-year Public Use Microdata Series

region, the state of California, and the United States. **The 13% decline in Kern workers' median wages since 1979 was singularly worst among all California counties.**

Living below a living wage. Kern also experienced one of the highest percentages of wage earners living below a living wage—the amount necessary to avoid chronic and severe housing and food insecurity. Four out of ten (40%) Kern workers lived below a living wage in 2019 (see figure 4.4), the third-worst rate in the state (analysis not shown). In the five-year 2015-2019 period, nearly one in two (48%) Southeast Bakersfield workers lived below a living wage, while West Bakersfield (20%) had a much lower rate—even lower than the rest of the state outside the San Joaquin Valley region (23%) (see figure 4.5).

CONCLUSION

Kern county occupies a unique position—at the center of the state, at the forefront of its population growth, and in one of the nation's largest agricultural and energy producing regions. While previous research on economic development in Kern County had highlighted its reliance on energy production, the number of good jobs and high pay in energy sectors, and tremendous job growth, key questions remained about how a county that is “open-for-business” shares prosperity with workers.

This report finds that Kern County's dynamic population and economy exhibit several distinctive features necessary to understand for advancing innovative and inclusive forms of economic development. Kern is one of the most populous and fastest-growing counties in California. Its population is young and diverse, and will continue to change as older immigrants exit the labor market and younger native-born Latino residents enter.

While Kern County's economy has grown rapidly, this is mainly a function of the growth in the number of workers. Since 2009, Kern's per capita GDP growth has contracted. In addition, worker wages have declined in Kern more than any other California county since 1979. In this

context, any proclamations of favorable conditions for local business owners obscure enormous worker disadvantage that must be addressed for equitable economic development to occur.

The California Workforce Development Board's High Road Training Partnership (H RTP) initiative provides an opportunity to meaningfully engage with processes of equitable economic development. The H RTP is premised on a “high road” approach, characterized by “industry-led” and “worker-centered partnerships” (UCLA Labor Center, undated). The three goals of the H RTP are job quality, equity, and the climate (California Workforce Development Board 2018).

This report, developed as part of the Kern High Road Coalition and funded by the H RTP initiative, finds that Kern County is distinct in its young, growing, and dynamic population and economy—but that there is need for high road approaches to economic development that ensure prosperity for all. In coming months, the Kern High Road Coalition will share this report and several more research products—such as findings from needs assessment surveys with community members and workers, and employers and industry leaders—to discuss how to advance equitable economic development initiatives.

Kern is the center and the future of the state, but also reflective of many regions across the US. How Kern leaders engage with the findings in this report and related equitable economic development initiatives will have implications not just for Kern but set a precedent for any region rich in natural resources in the state and beyond.

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This report was prepared by Edward Flores.

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Mission Statement

The UC Merced Community and Labor Center conducts research and education on issues of community, labor and employment, in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.