Key Findings

This report, the third volume in Measure of America’s Portrait of California series, takes a human development approach to understanding the country’s most populous and diverse state. It presents a detailed picture of how Californians are doing on three key dimensions of well-being—a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown more clearly than ever that economic measures alone cannot capture the array of factors that go into making up a good life. Measure of America’s American Human Development Index (HDI) is a supplement to money metrics that tells us how people are doing. Based on the Human Development Index developed by the United Nations, the gold standard for measuring the well-being of people in every nation, this report combines official government data on health, education, and earnings into a composite score on a 10-point scale. The index provides us with a way to pinpoint inequalities in well-being between different groups and geographies and supplies a simple means of tracking change over time. It shows us, for example, that overall well-being levels in the state have increased steadily over the past two decades, from 5.09 in 2000 to 5.85 in 2019, the most recent year of data available. It also shows us, however, that these gains have not been distributed equally, and that while some groups of Californians are doing better than ever before, others are falling further and further behind.

From statewide lockdowns to transitions to remote work and schooling, changes brought on by the pandemic have affected people and communities across the state. But it is the Californians who were already struggling—to keep up with schoolwork, to make ends meet, to cope with chronic health issues—who have suffered the most severely. The pandemic and its attendant impact on education, economic security, and health hit Black and brown communities the hardest, exacerbating existing inequalities in ways that will have a reverberating impact on well-being for years to come. Understanding which places and groups were vulnerable before the pandemic will be vital to directing resources and setting the state on the road to recovery.

In addition to an in-depth survey of well-being levels across the state, this volume in the Portrait of California series focuses on a central prerequisite to a good life, one that far too many Californians struggle to attain: access to safe and secure housing. The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically underscored the importance of stable, affordable housing.
components of the index and outlines policies that can help the state address homelessness and housing insecurity to ensure that all Californians have a safe place to call home.

This report presents HDI scores for the state overall as well as by gender, by race and ethnicity, by nativity, by metro area, and by neighborhood cluster. In addition to providing HDI scores for various groups and geographies, it also delves deeper into the underlying causes of the gaps in well-being between them—structural racism, discrimination, sky-high housing costs, among others—and offers recommendations for addressing these challenges and building afairer future for the Golden State, one in which every Californian can lead a freely chosen life of value.

Human Development Index by Neighborhood Cluster
Human Development in California

KEY FINDINGS: AMERICAN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX

- California scores 5.85 out of 10 on the American Human Development Index, with gains in all three components of the HDI since 2009. California’s HDI score is higher than the country’s as a whole and has improved at a faster rate.

- Looking at scores by race and ethnicity, however, reveals that of the state’s six major racial and ethnic groups, only two—Latino and Asian Californians—have seen improvement in overall well-being. Latino Californians experienced the greatest increase on the HDI of any racial or ethnic group, from 3.99 in Portrait of California 2011 to 4.81 now. The scores for white, Black, and Native American Californians declined between 2009 and 2019. Since 2000, the HDI score for Native American Californians has declined by an alarming 22.5 percent, the sharpest drop experienced by any group. This is the first year for which we have an HDI score for Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI) Californians, 4.20.

- Overall, women in California score slightly higher than men, 5.81 compared to 5.73, faring better on the health and education components of the index. Black, Latina, Native American, and NHOPi women all score higher than their male counterparts, while white and Asian women score lower due to the especially large gender earnings gaps within these groups.

- Greater San Jose scores the highest on the HDI of California’s metro areas, 8.09, while Madera scores the lowest. Greater Los Angeles contains the widest well-being range in the state.
KEY FINDINGS: THE FIVE CALIFORNIAS

While comparing the highest- and lowest-scoring areas is useful for understanding California’s human development extremes, most places fall somewhere along the vast well-being continuum present in the state. In order to make sense of California’s 265 neighborhood clusters and to highlight commonalities shared by different places, this report sorts areas with similar HDI scores into five groups:

**One Percent California** comprises six neighborhood clusters with scores of 9.00 or higher on the HDI, five of which are located in the Bay Area. The 900,000 people, 2.3 percent of the state population, living in these communities enjoy higher levels of well-being and greater access to opportunity than almost anyone in the country.

**Elite Enclave California** is home to roughly eight million people, or one-fifth of the state’s population. Its fifty-six neighborhood clusters, scoring between 7.00 and 8.99 on the index, are found almost entirely in the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

**Main Street California** neighborhood clusters score between 5.00 and 6.99 on the HDI. More than eighteen million people, 46 percent of the population, live in one of these 121 areas. Main Street Californians have higher levels of well-being than the average US resident. Nonetheless, California’s high cost of living means that some Main Streeters face levels of economic insecurity similar to that of Struggling California.

**Struggling California** is made up of eighty-two neighborhood clusters with index scores between 3.00 and 4.99, found chiefly in greater Los Angeles, the Inland Empire, the Central Valley, greater San Diego, and northern California. Its residents, who make up roughly 30 percent of the state’s population, have lower levels of well-being than the typical American.

**Disenfranchised California** comprises areas that score below 3.00 on the HDI. Today, none of the state’s 265 neighborhood and town clusters meet this criteria, compared to nine in *A Portrait of California 2014–2015* and eleven in the 2011 volume.
Health

KEY FINDINGS: A LONG AND HEALTHY LIFE

- The health component of the index is measured by life expectancy at birth. A baby born in California today can expect to live 81.0 years on average, compared to 78.8 years in the US overall. Since 2012, life expectancy in California—and in the country as a whole—has dropped by 0.2 years.

- Of the state’s major racial and ethnic groups, Native American Californians have the shortest life expectancy, 71.2 years, and have experienced the greatest loss in life expectancy since 2012, a decrease of over 8 years. Asian Californians live the longest, on average, 87.0 years, although life expectancies vary significantly among Asian subgroups. Black Californians’ life expectancy (74.1 years) decreased by a concerning 1.5 years between 2012 and 2019, and has no doubt fallen further due to the pandemic.

- Over 12 years separate the life expectancies of the longest- and shortest-living neighborhood clusters, Milpitas & Northeast San Jose (87.3 years) and West San Bernardino (75.0 years). The neighborhood clusters with the longest average life expectancies have a relatively higher proportion of Asian residents, while neighborhoods at the bottom of the list tend to have a relatively higher proportion of Black or Latino residents, highlighting the negative impact of residential segregation on health outcomes.
Education

KEY FINDINGS: ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

- California is ahead of the United States overall on the education dimension of the index, measured by a combination of degree attainment and school enrollment indicators. Compared to the US as a whole, California has slightly higher bachelor’s and graduate degree attainment rates, but the share of adults age 25 and older without a high school degree in California, 15.9 percent, is higher than the national rate, 11.4 percent.

- While California fares better overall on the education component of the index than the country as a whole, gaps between racial and ethnic groups persist. Even where the Latino Education Index score is the highest—the rural Humboldt County area—Latinos score more than one point below the average Californian and well below the local white population.

- Education and income are closely linked in California. The highest-educated neighborhood clusters are concentrated in the affluent neighborhoods and suburbs of three major metropolitan areas, the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Conversely, the neighborhoods with the lowest Education Index scores—concentrated in urban city centers in Los Angeles as well as in both urban and rural communities in the Central Valley and the Inland Empire—are among the lowest-earning in the state.

- California’s youth disconnection rate—the share of teens and young adults who are neither working nor in school—is 10.3 percent and declined each year for the past decade. Unfortunately, we anticipate that data from 2020 and 2021 will show pandemic-induced spikes in the youth disconnection rate. Wide disparities between different geographies and groups persist: Asian and white young people have the lowest disconnection rates, 6.0 percent and 8.9 percent, respectively, while Black and Native American youth have the highest, 18.4 percent and 23.2 percent.
Earnings

The standard of living dimension of the index is measured by median personal earnings. In California, the typical worker takes home $39,500 annually, $3,000 more than the US median. White workers earn the most ($51,700), followed by Asian workers ($51,100), NHOPI workers ($38,200), Black workers ($36,400), Native American workers ($32,400), and Latino workers ($30,200).

Earnings gaps are even more striking when gender is taken into account: at the high end of the earnings scale, white men take home $61,600 each year, while Latina women, the lowest-paid group in the state, earn just $25,100. Although the size of the gaps varies, women earn less than men in each major racial and ethnic group, and the Covid-19 pandemic threatens to set women—especially women of color—even further back.

In each of California’s metro areas, white workers earn more than the state median, while Latino workers earn less. The Latino-white pay gap is widest in San Jose, where Latinos earn $0.46 for every dollar earned by white workers.

A difference of nearly $100,000 separates California’s highest- and lowest-earning neighborhood clusters: earnings range from $22,100 in Los Angeles’ East Vernon neighborhood to $120,400 in Cupertino, Saratoga & Los Gatos in Santa Clara County.