Our Values, Our Voices: Housing and Community Health in San Mateo County
About the People’s Alliance of San Mateo County:
This report is a project of the People’s Alliance of San Mateo County. PASMC is an alliance of organizations in San Mateo County committed to working for social justice and equity in housing, health care, education, immigration, the environment, and criminal justice.

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Glossary

Public health is a field concerned with the health of the population as a whole. Subfields include biostatistics, epidemiology, environmental health, global health, health policy and management, social behavioral health, and community health. This report focuses on community health.

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social wellbeing. It does not just refer to the absence of disease or infirmity.

Social determinants of health / social conditions that affect health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age. Social factors include economic status (employment and income), education, neighborhood and physical health, access to health care, and social support, to name a few. We support moving away from the word determinant because, despite the fact that certain communities face oppressive conditions, those factors don’t determine health because health status is not static.

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how different aspects of one's identity contribute to distinct forms of discrimination. These include, but are not limited to, racial/ethnic identity, gender, sexuality, and immigration status. Intersectionality is used to identify combinations of injustices, understand their cumulative impact, and inform our approach to solutions.

Housing is a human right means that all people have the right to live in security, peace, and dignity. This means that everyone should be guaranteed safe, permanently affordable, accessible, and stable housing.

Housing instability is variably defined as having difficulty paying rent, being “housing burdened” (spending more than 30% of household income on housing), experiencing frequent moves, facing eviction or displacement, or living in overcrowded conditions.

Gentrification is a process of neighborhood change in which new, more affluent residents and businesses move into historically disinvested neighborhoods, often immigrant enclaves or communities of color. Increased investment often fails to include input from long-term residents or native people of the land and leads to the increased displacement of long-term residents.

Displacement results from eviction, property acquisition or the demolition of property, or the expiration of covenants on rent or income-restricted housing. Displacement can occur when residents and businesses can no longer afford escalating rents or property taxes, or are forced out so that landlords can remove units from the rental market, renovate buildings, or raise rents.

Narrative representation in this project means shifting narrative power to people who usually don’t have an opportunity to share their own stories. Narrative representation aims to share the experiences of those left out of dominant narratives in the hopes of slowing down or reducing damage and harm, and ultimately influencing the policies and interventions that affect their communities.

Latinx is a gender-neutral term used instead of Latino or Latina to refer to people of Latin American cultural or ethnic identity in the United States. Not everyone is on board with the word Latinx. We use it because of its gender neutrality, but understand that it is a blanket statement for a diverse group of people that includes Black, Indigenous, and white people.
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Executive Summary

This report examines how the lack of affordable housing in San Mateo County (SMC) affects the health and wellbeing of some of its most impacted residents. The project used a participatory research model that centers narrative representation, and highlights the voices of low-income immigrant families and Latinx youth in SMC.

Using an intersectional public health lens, we analyzed both participants’ stories and secondary data on existing social conditions in their cities to demonstrate the deep connection between housing and income, rent, education, food access, neighborhood change, displacement, and community assets.

The research has three key findings: 1) Immigrants are particularly vulnerable to unjust and discriminatory conditions, 2) communities of color are disillusioned by the systems that structure their lives, and 3) gentrification and displacement are deteriorating community assets and strengths built over generations.

Participants’ community strengths illuminate the just path forward: investing in cultures of interconnectedness and mutual care. These values strengthen and protect the entire county, and we urge that they be nurtured on individual, neighborhood, organizational, and political levels. This means increasing our dedication to our neighbors, working toward holistic and intersectional policy and advocacy interventions, and fighting for community stability through tenant protections in order to promote people-centered and people-driven growth in participants’ neighborhoods.
Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare and exacerbated preexisting injustices in our world. The importance of housing quickly became evident as San Mateo County and surrounding counties were mandated to “shelter in place.” Over time, residents were called to understand that shelter means safety for everyone, and lack of shelter for some puts all at greater risk. This situation spotlighted what impacted communities and many experts have been saying for a long time: housing is a public health issue.

This report uses an intersectional public health lens to illustrate how existing social conditions and institutions affect the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities in San Mateo County (SMC). While the impacts of unaffordable housing are widespread, this project illustrates the intricate ways that existing systems create and perpetuate unjust social conditions for marginalized populations. In doing so, the report reveals the connections between housing, employment and income, education, and neighborhood change in the lives of SMC residents.

We approach the “housing crisis” from the belief that housing is a human right and is necessary for the life, health, and wellbeing of individuals, families, and the community as a whole. Every person living in SMC deserves guaranteed safe, permanently affordable, accessible, and stable housing. We believe that the lack of affordable housing for all stems from a long history of racism in housing and urban policy and a market that turns homes into commodities. The current crisis did not arise from skyrocketing housing costs; rather, it has exacerbated and laid bare existing, ongoing inequities.

This project focuses on the experience of low-income Latinx youth and immigrant mothers in SMC. We highlight the experiences of these groups for three main reasons: 1) They are seldom part of decision-making processes, 2) members of the People’s Alliance of San Mateo County work with and have built relationships with many of these communities through their organizing, and 3) approximately one-third of SMC residents are immigrants. Participants also represent communities of highest risk as identified by SMC’s Community Vulnerability Index. This report aims to broadcast their stories, because we believe that those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, but furthest from resources and power.

This report finds that immigrant populations are disproportionately impacted by and feel a deep sense of disillusionment with the systems and policies that structure their lives, and that their communities’ assets and strengths are under severe strain.

We contend that our current systems reflect values – individualism, competition, racism, and xenophobia – that have been used for centuries to maintain inequality. In contrast, the participants in this project uphold vastly different values: interdependence, community wellbeing, and collective care. We are faced with an opportunity to listen to the lived experiences of some of the county’s most impacted people in order to build upon these values and work toward a more just reality in SMC.

Our approach: Narrative Representation and Methodology

Too often, impacted groups are asked to share their struggles, challenges, and trauma in an effort to touch people. This approach often exploits people’s experiences and can run the risk of exacerbating trauma rather than supporting self-determination and agency. Therefore, this report passed the microphone to participants so that they could share their own stories and present their own narratives.

In order to support narrative representation, we used a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) model for data collection and analysis. CBPR is a research methodology that centers those impacted by a given field of inquiry: in this case, tenant protections and housing instability.

For this project, we worked with Latinx youth from East Palo Alto who are part of Youth United for Community Action (YUCA) and Latina immigrant mothers from Redwood City, North Fair Oaks, and San Mateo who are community leaders at Faith in Action Bay Area (FIABA). Members of these groups participated in a process called PhotoVoice, a CBPR method that uses photojournalism as a way to help impacted people collect information about and analyze their homes, communities, and cities.

In addition to PhotoVoice, we conducted one focus group with immigrant moms from FIABA in Daly City and individual interviews with an elderly resident, a teacher, a faith leader, and a non-profit leader from across the county. The specific networks with which we were able to collaborate limited the demographics of the report, yet this approach can both amplify the Latinx immigrant experience in SMC and also serve as a potential model for working with other

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How Did We Get Here? Historical Context

In order to understand current housing failures, we must root our analysis in the long history of systemic discrimination in housing and urban policy. This approach suggests a collective understanding that racism is progressive rather than inert, present rather than only historical, and actively shaping reality rather than simply underlying it.

San Mateo County draws its borders on stolen Ramaytush Ohlone land.

- The Aramai people of the Ramaytush Ohlone lived in two small villages in present-day Pacifica prior to the arrival of the Spanish in 1769.
- By 1842, only 15 Aramai people remained.  

The acquisition of property in the Bay Area was enabled by this genocide, which means that we are all benefiting from the dispossession of Indigenous people, however unknowingly. To learn more about the Ramaytush Ohlone people, visit their website, and consider paying a land tax to Indigenous trusts where you live.

Other forms of codified racism shaped how the Bay Area and the U.S. at large grew into what they are today:

- San Francisco passed an ordinance in 1890 to exclude Chinese residents from specific neighborhoods, making it one of the first cities to propose legislation to segregate explicitly by race.
- In the 1930s, the federal government used redlining to advise mortgage brokers where it was “safe” to offer loans. They mapped cities by “risk” using explicitly racist criteria. These maps influenced decades of neighborhood investment, systematically denying those communities of color avenues of financial growth, like homeownership. These outlines are still relevant today.
- Though less historically emphasized, Latinx communities in urban areas, especially Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans, experienced segregation, disenfranchisement, and economic and social discrimination throughout the 20th century.
- Redlining and other real estate practices like blockbusting encouraged “white flight” from major U.S. cities. East Palo Alto itself became a majority-Black neighborhood as a result of massive white flight from the area following unsuccessful protests in the 1950s to stop Black families from moving in.

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After the Civil Rights Act of 1968 outlawed housing discrimination, myriad urban planning techniques were used to create de facto racialized spaces.

- Exclusionary zoning rules only allowed for low-density development in certain neighborhoods, effectively banning renters looking for apartments. \(^{10}\)
- Today, after decades of disinvestment in neighborhoods of color, forces of gentrification and displacement are re-segregating regions like the Bay Area. \(^{11}\)

## Health and Housing Stability

This report employs a guiding framework that *social conditions affect health*. \(^{12}\) Where people live, work, play, learn, and pray affects their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. \(^{13}\) Moreover, these conditions are responsible for health inequities, that is, the unfair differences in health outcomes. \(^{14}\)

### Table 1: Social conditions in the neighborhoods where participants live: \(^{15}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic area</th>
<th>Racial Demographics (%)</th>
<th>Median Household Income</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Rent Burden</th>
<th>Life Expectancy(^{16})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>San Mateo County</td>
<td>Latinx: 24.6%</td>
<td>White: $112.4k</td>
<td>Latinx: HS diploma: 69.7%</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
<td>84.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White: 40.4%</td>
<td>Asian: $112.1k</td>
<td>White: HS diploma: 93.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black: 2.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian and PI: 27.0%*</td>
<td>Latinx: $64.7k</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daly City</td>
<td>23.7% Latinx</td>
<td>Latinx: $63.8k</td>
<td>Latinx: HS diploma: 72.4%</td>
<td>55.50%</td>
<td>79.3(^{17})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.7% White</td>
<td>Asian: $89.5k</td>
<td>White: HS diploma: 92.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.6% Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^{12}\) The terms social determinants of health is the commonly known phrase in public health, but concepts are living ideas and many public health professionals have pushed back on the word determinant because health and wellness can also be culturally and personally defined. Further, negative social conditions don't automatically put people in a poor health state because as illustrated in this report, hope, resilience, community support are also factors that affect health.

\(^{13}\) “About Social Determinants of Health,” World Health Organization, [https://www.who.int/social_determinants/sdh_definition/en/](https://www.who.int/social_determinants/sdh_definition/en/).

\(^{14}\) “About Social Determinants of Health,” World Health Organization.

\(^{15}\) Data in the table, unless otherwise noted, is from the 2017 American Community Survey 5-year estimate.

\(^{16}\) Life expectancy data is from SMC All Together Better: [http://www.smcalltogetherbetter.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=8195&periodId=1159&localeId=initial](http://www.smcalltogetherbetter.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=8195&periodId=1159&localeId=initial).

\(^{17}\) Census Tract 06081601300
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>57.4% Asian &amp; PI</th>
<th>Asian: HS diploma: 88.2%</th>
<th>76.2&lt;sup&gt;18&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Redwood City</strong></td>
<td>37% Latinx</td>
<td>Latinx: $60.3k</td>
<td>51.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43.1% White</td>
<td>Latinx: HS diploma: 63.9%</td>
<td>64.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.0% Black</td>
<td>White: $137.4k</td>
<td>64.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13.8% Asian</td>
<td>White: HS diploma: 96.5%</td>
<td>64.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North Fair Oaks</strong></td>
<td>70.3% Latinx</td>
<td>Latinx: $50.4K</td>
<td>63.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19.2% White</td>
<td>Latinx: HS diploma: 48.6%</td>
<td>63.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.8% Black</td>
<td>White: $106K</td>
<td>63.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.6% Asian</td>
<td>White: HS diploma: 96.6%</td>
<td>63.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>East Palo Alto</strong></td>
<td>63.2% Latinx</td>
<td>Latinx: $53.7k</td>
<td>63.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.9% White</td>
<td>Latinx: HS diploma: 48.7%</td>
<td>63.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.6% Black</td>
<td>Asian: $151.8k</td>
<td>63.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.3% Asian and PI</td>
<td>White: HS diploma: 95.5%</td>
<td>63.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Though this data collapses Asian and Pacific Islander people into one category, Pacific Islander populations in SMC often face social conditions more similar to Latinx and Black populations.*

This table paints an all-too-vivid picture: Latinx people in San Mateo County are far less likely than their white and Asian counterparts to earn high wages, which increases their likelihood of experiencing rent burden. They are also less likely to finish high school, decreasing future job prospects. It also makes geographic inequities in health outcomes plain: Just across Highway 101 in Menlo/Atherton, life expectancy is 85.8 years<sup>21</sup> – nearly **seven years higher** than in East Palo Alto and almost **eight and a half years higher** than in North Fair Oaks.

GetHealthy San Mateo County uses its Community Vulnerability Index as a way to aggregate data in different census tracts related to health insurance coverage, education, supplemental security income, rent burden, poverty, unemployment, and disability status.<sup>22</sup> According to this metric, and as the above table reflects, tracts in North Fair Oaks, Redwood City, and East Palo

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<sup>18</sup> Census Tract 06081610203
<sup>19</sup> Census tract 06081610601
<sup>20</sup> Census Tract 06081611900
<sup>21</sup> Census Tract 06081611500
Alto – the three communities in which most of the participants in this project live – have the highest levels of vulnerability in SMC.\textsuperscript{23}

This data echoes what participants shared. Though the focus group and PhotoVoice sessions centered on the issue of housing, conversations often veered away from housing specifically and onto its ripple effects. Housing is intimately linked to employment and income, school and neighborhood conditions, and quality of healthcare – all of which are key determinants that affect the health of their families and communities. The following sections delve into these and other social aspects that highlight this linkage.

1. Rent and Housing Conditions

Participants confirmed what rising prices imply: paying rent feels impossible. \textit{Latinx families are three times more likely than white families to be severely housing burdened}, meaning they spend half of their income or more on housing; Black families are nearly five times more likely.\textsuperscript{24} Youth noted that the income requirement to qualify for housing presents a pressing barrier when trying to move. When asked how high rents and low wages affect them, mothers spoke of increases in stress, anxiety, and depression.

The high demand for housing in the Bay Area also forces renters to overpay for substandard conditions. Such situations can pose both physical and mental health risks – safety hazards like mold, vermin, water leaks, and lack of heating or cooling expose tenants to communicable diseases and harm.\textsuperscript{25} The mothers from FIABA shared that reporting such conditions isn’t easy because their assumed immigrant status gives landlords power to threaten, retaliate against, and ignore their requests for housing maintenance.

Substandard conditions and landlord neglect are common experiences in SMC, but tenants have vastly differing access to supportive resources. Lois Plymale of Pacifica, for example, is a white, elderly U.S. citizen on a fixed income who has exercised her knowledge of tenants’ rights to file complaints with the health department about the dangerous conditions in her apartment. She was also able to utilize legal services to earn back damages for the harm to which she was exposed and her lost wages. Despite these resources, her story is deeply upsetting:

\begin{quote}
The second time I had to call the health department was because I had mold growing and it was affecting my asthma. Another time, I told the property manager that I was calling PG&E to come check on my heater and they told me not to. I still called. PG&E told us to get out of the apartment quickly because the allowable amount of carbon monoxide is 27, and in my apartment it was 327.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{23} Healthy Economy Data,” Get Healthy San Mateo County, San Mateo County Department of Health. \url{http://www.gethealthysmc.org/healthy-economy-data}.


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I had to go to the hospital. In the end, they had to replace 26 of 30 heaters in the building. I sued them for the hospitalization and my three weeks off work.

In contrast, immigrant participants did not express a similar ability to call upon state agencies or legal services for fear of exposing their immigration status or losing what sources of stability they had, like their apartments.

**Immigrants face particular barriers to safe and healthy housing**

The reality of being an immigrant presents particular vulnerabilities and injustices, such as feelings of disposability and otherness, which are amplified by unstable housing, work, and school environments.

The Latina immigrant mothers who participated in this project spoke of their feelings of disposability, sharing that as immigrants, they don’t feel valued, especially at work. Employers routinely threaten to fire them if they get sick, fail to give them breaks during shifts, or withhold wages. Employers and landlords alike take advantage of participants’ immigration status, and of undocumented individuals in particular. Participants say they feel harassed when landlords ask for personal information like Social Security numbers and credit reports, and are ignored when they ask for building maintenance. They shared that the immigrant experience is filled with dehumanization and discrimination in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools.

2. Income and Food

Youth participants cited a lack of time and money, both heightened by skyrocketing rents, as affecting their community’s access to healthy food. They shared that *time poverty*, the concept that people become time-poor when they don’t have a choice but to work more to make ends meet, is a huge barrier. Because parents are constantly working, convenience is paramount when making choices about food.

Julie, 16, spoke of families being forced to make trade-offs: "You have people that spend a large amount of their money on rent rather than different foods that would be healthy for their child."

Food scarcity is endemic in low-income communities of color and affects both physical and emotional health. Poor neighborhoods are often food insecure because they lack adequate grocery stores, and residents often have to pay more for lower-quality food and produce. The

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youth participants said that both in their neighborhood markets and at school, food is either already expired or “goes bad instantly.”

The literature around housing instability doesn’t always highlight food access as a central issue of housing justice. Participants drew a clear connection between rent burden, low wages, time poverty, and neighborhood and school resources to demonstrate that choosing between food and rent is a trade-off too many families of color must make on a regular basis. These choices strip people of their dignity and unfairly impact their health.

Photo by Kimberly, 15:

“I took this picture because it represents places that are owned by community members... It’s a family type of thing. Developers come in and make prices go up, and white people get praise for stuff [like food trucks] that people of color started and have been doing for years.”

3. Educational Inequities
We included educational inequities in this analysis because ample research shows that people with higher educational attainment tend to have better job prospects and far higher incomes.29 In our discussions of housing and neighborhood safety, the YUCA youth shared extensively about hostile school environments and a lack of support from teachers and administrators.

The youth from YUCA emphasized their disillusionment with how policing, surveillance, and punishment are present in their daily lives at school; according to GetHealthy SMC, EPA's Ravenswood City School District has a 4.8% suspension rate, whereas neighboring, more affluent Menlo Park has a suspension rate of only 0.4%. Youth echoed the well-documented school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately affects Black and Brown youth across the country, discussing the barbed-wire fences and security guards, who they feel are constantly surveilling and criminalizing them at school.

The youth from YUCA also spoke of the ways their schools alienate them. Valeria, 14, explained the discomfort that comes from having few teachers of color, lamenting that “when teachers aren't from your specific background, they don't understand where you're coming from. These teachers don’t make an effort to build relationships with us.” This lack of shared background extends to school administrators lacking necessary cultural competency, an experience that mirrors the type of discrimination that immigrant parents say they face in the workplace.

Source: Get Healthy SMC


Participants are disillusioned with existing structures and elected officials
There is widespread lack of hope for or belief in the systems that structure participants’ lives, from the housing and job markets to the police and government.

Feelings of disillusionment came up across topics in group discussions and across sectors of participants’ lives. Some participants expressed that their hope of finding an affordable place to live or of seeing that life would be better for their children was dwindling.

A focus group participant remarked, “We want safety, we need space for our children, we want our children to live well. To have dignified housing is to have a room for my children, but it’s only a dream. I don’t know that it’ll ever happen.” Comments like this were common, but they also came from the same participants who shared how they continue to fight for their families and the future despite these diminishing expectations.

Participants also expressed a sense of disillusionment with the systems and authorities that structure their lives. One major site of distrust was the police. Focus group participants explained that their trust in the police is broken because they’ve seen them turn in friends and
family to immigration enforcement. The youth likewise expressed deep skepticism of the police.

Participants also shared that they felt unseen and unheard by elected officials. Even worse, as Kimberly, 15, said, the officials “know, they just don’t do” – they know what the issues are in the participants’ communities, but they still don’t do anything about them.

4. Gentrification

Participants’ communities are changing demographically, and have been for many years, as tech-fueled investment has overheated SMC’s housing market. Silicon Valley continues to attract more high-wage workers, increasing demand on the housing stock and forcing prices up. This has led to increasing gentrification in historically disinvested communities of color across the Bay Area and in SMC cities like East Palo Alto – the same areas that were systematically shut out of private and public investment and forcibly segregated through processes like redlining and white flight. We now see disproportionate displacement of Black, Latinx, and other people of color from the Bay Area’s cities to increasingly disparate parts of the region.32

Each of the youth participants from East Palo Alto had a lot to say about their peer’s picture of the new Amazon corporate office on Donohoe Street.

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32 UC Berkeley’s Urban Displacement Project and the California Housing Partnership, “Rising Housing Costs and Re-Segregation in the San Francisco Bay Area,” April, 2019.
Photo by Raquel, 15:

“I took this picture because I've been living here my whole life. When I think of East Palo Alto, I think of a community primarily of color. I think we all do. But, ever since this building got here, I noticed just white people. This building has caused rent increases and has caused a lot of traffic as well.”

The new Amazon building alienates and angers the youth. Others shared their reactions:

“It kind of makes us feel like, not outsiders, but in some form feel like the Amazon workers are higher than us.” – Kimberly, 15

“We all agree that it does nothing for us. This building actually takes away opportunities that East Palo Alto could have. For example, there could've been homes there, it was close to pretty much everything. Or, if we did have another space we would be able to have our own little downtown EPA, somewhere where people can go and hang out. But instead the building takes away opportunities we could have had.” – Fili, 17

Fili’s comment makes clear not only that tech-fueled gentrification doesn’t benefit long-term EPA residents, but they feel that it actively and negatively impacts their lives.

The youth expressed that the Amazon building also reflects a lack of control over their city, as changes are imposed by perceived outsiders. Fili explained that they were highly aware of how
EPA’s outward reputation has shifted, from being known as the “murder capital” of the U.S. to being considered desirable by virtue of its proximity to tech companies. To the youth, such shifts in outside perception reflect a kind of revisionist history. They’re proud of their city’s legacy as a majority-POC, activist community, and they see these new perceptions of EPA as an erasure of the city’s actual history.

Youth also identified that while the tech industry boosted the economy, the economic benefits have only benefited those with higher paying jobs, usually people who are not long-term residents.

“High company places don't give the jobs to minorities, but they'll give them the custodian, janitor, and maid positions.” – Julie, 16

5. Displacement and Evictions

Pressures exacerbated by gentrification lead to displacement, often in the form of evictions. From 2012-15, San Mateo County saw a 59% increase in evictions due to inability to pay rent and a 300% increase in “no-cause” evictions, in which a landlord is allowed to increase rent or move into a unit by forcing tenants out. These evictions disproportionately affected Latinx and African-American households in SMC. Prior to the 2020 implementation of California State Assembly Bill 1482, East Palo Alto was the only city in SMC with any anti-displacement protections in place.

Displacement strains families even more due to relocation costs, the deterioration of social capital through the loss of social connections and support, decreasing academic achievement due to moving schools or missing class, and compromising access to healthcare providers or essential medical care.

Many of the participants had experienced eviction themselves or were anxious about it. One mother commented: “You think, ‘Who’s next?’ Something has changed. It is not just who’s next, but what neighbor is going to go next? Every month I am waiting for some kind of notice in the mail.”

The period between eviction and relocation is a nebulous and especially unstable time for many, and it can force individuals and families to experience houselessness. In 2014, a survey of SMC

34 Justine Marcus and Miriam Zuk, “Displacement in San Mateo County, California.”
35 See appendix B for a list of local tenant protection policies.
36 Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative, “Improving the Health of Bay Area Families: Health Analysis and Recommendations for the CASA Compact,” (January, 2019).
renters who contested evictions in court found that 17.6% percent of these households were houseless at the time of the survey, which leads to increased exposure to violence, stress, and disease.\textsuperscript{37}

Displacement also increases chances of living in either overcrowded or substandard conditions and increases strains on mental health from stress and loss of community.\textsuperscript{38} Silvia, a FIABA leader and focus group participant, shared that her children were attending the elementary school she herself attended as a child in Daly City, but that the lack of affordable housing forced her to make the difficult choice to move to Bakersfield.

Displacement often means moving far away from employment centers or existing jobs, increasing commute times and emissions, and reducing much-needed time for rest and leisure.\textsuperscript{39} The mental health impacts can last for years after the physical eviction, and rising eviction rates have even been correlated with higher rates of suicide.\textsuperscript{40}

6. Community Culture and Assets

Neighborhood and city-level health and stability were highlighted through participants’ emphasis on community culture. Despite the injustice faced by people of color and pervasive feelings of disillusionment, participants spoke at length of the strength, resilience, and interconnectedness of their communities. Both the participants and public health experts know that “community power, voice, and cohesion are all essential for health...communities with more social and political power are better positioned to positively improve the local conditions that affect health.”\textsuperscript{41}

The participants demonstrated how they create and sustain networks of mutual care, support, and aid that work to improve communal wellbeing.


\textsuperscript{38} Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative, “Improving the Health of Bay Area Families.”

\textsuperscript{39} Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative, “Improving the Health of Bay Area Families.”


\textsuperscript{41} Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative, “Improving the Health of Bay Area Families.”
Throughout both PhotoVoice groups, participants said that the ultimate strength of their communities lies in their ability to support one another.

The youth in East Palo Alto communicated a similar pride in their relationships with neighbors and a culture of mutual care. Fili, 17, shared that despite an influx of newcomers breaking such traditions, some of them know everyone in their apartment complexes, and when accidents happen, neighbors are there to help. Others shared that neighbors help with childcare and other necessities. Stories like this, to the youth, represent the level of trust at the core of their community.

This pride in their city’s culture extends to how their community has fun and celebrates, and they spoke of neighbors sharing food and of weekly parties with loud music, which Kimberly, 15, said is “how I'd fall asleep to be honest” – emphasizing how comforting she finds their city’s sounds and norms.

**Neighborhood change erodes community strength**

Gentrification, displacement, and housing instability at large erode modes of inter-community survival and care. Rather than simply not positively impacting...
low-income communities of color, “new investment” actually means that these communities are forced to disinvest in their networks of care and survival.

Participants described the strength and endurance of their communities, and the culture of support and care at the center of their cities. In contrast, both groups of participants spoke about how gentrifiers and newcomers fail to contribute to this culture:

➔ “Respect means them acknowledging us. Incoming neighbors often pretend we’re not even there.” – Silvia, former Daly City resident
➔ "These people are coming in to claim that this is their land. And in reality, they moved in last week. They want to walk these streets acting like, ‘This is my place. I own this. You don't belong here.’ We are a community of cultural appreciation, so to have someone here looking at us ugly, it makes me angry." – Julie, 16
➔ “You see all the cultural appreciation slowly disappear, the barrier slowly trimming it down little by little. There used to be block parties, but you rarely see that nowadays because new residents will quickly call the cops to shut us down. You have neighbors that are all people of color, then, as soon as you know it, those houses start getting taken up by people you don't know at all.” – Fili, 17

In the participants’ experience, intruding gentrifier culture and the loss of connection because of eviction and displacement work together to actively wear down their communities’ strong bonds.

In Sum

Though the Focus Group and PhotoVoice sessions centered on the issue of housing, this process emphasized how intimately entangled the accessibility, cost, and quality of housing is with all other aspects of participants’ lives. Their experiences echo public health analyses that social conditions severely impact health. From the participants, we learned of the pervasive inequities that structure their daily lives – including inequities in income, rent, food, education, and neighborhood – and how all these exacerbate health disparities.
Where Do We Go from Here?

Participants’ contributions emphasized three major themes:

- Immigrants face particular barriers to safe and healthy housing,
- Their experiences are full of disillusionment with existing systems, and
- The assets and strengths of their communities are deteriorating in the face of gentrification and displacement, despite their resilience.

In the face of these sobering findings, we highlight how we can all move forward and work toward a more just future for all of SMC’s communities.

1. Immigrant communities highlight interdependence

The immigrant communities who contributed to this project set an example: **We need to create a world where no one is left behind, where we watch out for each other, and where we understand that our safety and wellbeing is dependent on the safety and wellbeing of our neighbors.** As the COVID-19 crisis has underscored, the privilege to “shelter in place” is dependent on *essential workers*, such as grocery and delivery workers, farmworkers, and garbage collectors – the people whom we consider “low-skilled” outside of the pandemic context. Yet these workers still don’t receive the wages, benefits, protection, and respect they deserve. We need each other in order to survive, within this crisis and outside of it, which means we must make our values actionable.

Values aren’t just principles; we can and must practice them so that they have meaning. Here are some initial suggestions for advocates, leaders, and SMC residents alike:

- Look within: Reflect on the values that define your community and how you interact with it.
- Put a face to interdependence: Get to know your neighbors and community members.
- Show up for each other: Join mutual aid groups, neighborhood groups, and local organizations.
- Practice deep listening and empathy.

2. Resilience despite disillusionment
Virginia, Redwood City resident:
“This is a protest. When I took the photo I had in mind the American Dream, that if you work hard it will all work out. This is me disagreeing. I don't want to stress about high rents. I have a daughter that I need to support. She's going to college and that's more important to me. I belong here because of my daughter. While at first I felt shame about moving into an RV park, I stopped and reflected and wondered why. I am not ashamed and I shouldn’t be.”

Virginia’s sentiment is a powerful example that shows that despite widespread disillusionment with the systems and conditions that structure so many lives in SMC, residents show unbelievable strength and resilience.

Resilience in SMC takes the shape of people organizing constantly through and across differences; they are able to maintain hope because change and agency are possible when people unite. Actions in SMC before and especially in light of COVID-19 highlight this resilience and demonstrate that building bridges is intersectional by nature. The county has already made cross-issue progress as it has released hundreds of people from county jail;\(^{42}\) opened up hundreds of rooms for houseless people, first responders, and survivors of domestic violence;\(^{43}\) and


announced an eviction moratorium, along with the state of California. The state has also extended stimulus benefits to undocumented workers.

Suggestions for further solidarity:

- Call your elected officials and encourage them to support rent moratoriums, hazard pay, shelter for houseless people, and extensive protections for workers – these measures work to protect all of us.
- Support cancellation of rents and suspend mortgage payments before the emergency eviction moratorium expires. Only rent cancellation will prevent widespread eviction and homelessness in SMC when the COVID-19 emergency ends.
- Support activists in SMC who continue to encourage officials to stop ICE transfers and to rapidly decarcerate. Donate to worker relief funds, undocumented relief funds, organizations, and individuals if you are able. Share your stimulus check if your income and housing are stable.

3. Stabilizing communities enables people-centered evolution and growth

This project illuminated that community assets and strengths are directly threatened by gentrification and displacement. This finding encourages us to ask ourselves: How do we make the solidarity we see today, at the height of the pandemic, permanent? How do we remake and reimagine San Mateo County to truly serve everyone? Imagine if our values shaped all aspects of our communities – permanently affordable housing, living wages, universal healthcare, and equitable education.

To move forward, toward this imagined future, SMC must: 1) Stabilize communities through stronger tenant protection policies – including rent control and just cause eviction ordinances – to help prevent the degradation of community assets, and 2) open the door for people-centered growth, for the development of communities for and by their own residents. Housing stability is the first step; it allows growth toward a radically reimagined future.

Suggestions for solidarity:

- Support permanently affordable housing and community ownership of homes and land through Community Land Trusts. In SMC, support the Coastside Land Trust and the PAHALI Land Trust in EPA.
- Support the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA), which gives tenants the first opportunity to purchase their home when it goes up for sale.

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● Support youth leadership in SMC, including YUCA, YLI, and Y-Plan.
● Land liberation: Pay a land tax to Indigenous trusts where you live.
● Encourage your city to adopt streamlined processes for building permanently affordable second units or Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs).

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, SMC residents are stepping up to help each other in an unprecedented way. Our network of mutuality is on full display, and we have the opportunity now to build, strengthen, and nurture that network to work for everyone.

Conclusion

Through narrative representation from Latinx, immigrant SMC residents, this report emphasizes that housing is necessary for the life, health, and wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities. It also highlights how values upheld by immigrant communities and communities of color stand in stark contrast to the values that underlie the unjust systems at work in SMC. Rather than individualism and competition, participants demonstrate the power of interdependence, resilience, and community care.

We can start reflecting on our relationships, values, and systems in our buildings, on our blocks, and in our homes. We can uplift participants’ contributions by getting to know the people who surround us and by understanding how our fates are intertwined. Reflection and mutual understanding allow for more thoughtful organizing and political action that can promote residential stability in all SMC communities. This will open the gate for people-directed evolution and, ultimately, growth. We are all in this fight together.

APPENDIX A: Research Methodology

This project used a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) model for data collection and data analysis. CBPR is a research methodology that centers those impacted by a given field of inquiry – in this case, tenant protections and housing instability – and allows them to guide the process.

For this project, we worked with Latinx youth from East Palo Alto who are part of Youth United for Community Action (YUCA) and Latina immigrant mothers from Redwood City, North Fair Oaks, and San Mateo who are community leaders at Faith in Action Bay Area (FIABA). These organizations are politically active and social justice-oriented, and as leaders of these groups, participants in this project likely have a higher-than-average understanding of systemic injustices in housing and public policy.
Members of these groups participated in a process called PhotoVoice. PhotoVoice is one example of a CBPR method that uses photojournalism as a way for impacted people to collect information about and analyze the realities of their homes, communities, and cities.

The YUCA group had five participants between the ages of 14 -17. The FIABA sessions started with ten participants, but ended with six participants, all six of whom participated in all three meetings. We held three two-hour sessions with each group.

Each session built upon the previous one. Here’s a summary of the materials covered in each session:

**Session 1 - Orientation and Scope of Work**
We introduced ourselves, the purpose of the project, and the frameworks participants would need to conduct research. Participants learned about worldviews, intersectionality theory, social determinants that affect health, and root causes of health, and we offered a quick history lesson on the roots of housing injustices, including settler colonialism and redlining. We also shared with them the nuts and bolts of the PhotoVoice process. At the end of the meeting, the group identified the questions they wanted to explore via photography:

- What are the assets and strengths of your community?
- What does it mean to belong? Belong in a neighborhood? In a society?
- What does it mean to be a young person/immigrant mother? How does your identity shape how you interact with different authority figures: parents, teachers, landlords.
- What happens when rents go up and people are displaced in your community?
- What changes have you noticed in your school, neighborhood, or home in the last few years?
- What does “housing is a human right” look like?

**Session 2 - Photo Selection and Data Analysis**
We began the second session by asking participants what the photography experience was like. We then shared some key findings from existing research on housing and health conditions in SMC (see Section 2 of the report). We also shared research in favor of tenant protection policies. This information was presented before participants shared their photos as a way to set the stage for their analysis. The discussion was recorded and later coded to identify common topics and themes among the groups.

**Session 3 - Data Analysis (Continued) and Report/Findings Dissemination**
We allocated some time for participants to share new photos. We also shared some common experiences from the other PhotoVoice group (YUCA to FIABA, and vice versa), since each group met separately. This sharing of information allowed each group to identify larger themes. Finally, we discussed the dissemination strategy and their roles at a planned launch event, which was eventually cancelled due to the COVID-19 shelter-in-place mandate.
In addition to PhotoVoice, we also conducted one-on-one interviews with housing justice experts, advocates, and impacted demographics, including people living on fixed incomes such as elderly people, teachers, and faith leaders, to name a few.

Project Limitations
This project did not include the voices of everyone in SMC, and it did not touch on or dive into many vital considerations surrounding housing. As a project of the People’s Alliance of San Mateo County, this report reflects the networks of the committee members and their relationships to those communities. Black, Asian, and Pacific Islander communities have also been hit hard by housing instability, though we were not able to include these populations in the PhotoVoice process. Disabled, formerly incarcerated, and houseless people are also disproportionately impacted, and this report does not include their voices. We hope this is simply the first volume of this kind of project, and that organizations and coalitions use this process as a template, perhaps doing their own PhotoVoice projects to listen to and learn from their communities’ knowledge.

APPENDIX B: Existing San Mateo County Tenant Protections

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