# Housing Affordability in the Wake of COVID-19

## Regional Solutions for Southern California

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**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC** has exacerbated the deep nature of social inequality in the United States. Perhaps most urgently, the pandemic has demonstrated just how many Americans live paycheck to paycheck, one unanticipated bill away from losing their homes. The most recent Census Pulse survey estimates that 7.04 million families in the United States are behind on paying rent.[5] As of July 3, 2021, even with an unprecedented national evictions moratorium, 422,432 evictions occurred in the five states and thirty cities tracked by The Eviction Lab during the pandemic (Eviction Lab, 2021).

Pandemic effects are racialized, with Black and Latino workers overrepresented in low-wage jobs that did not transition to remote work (Brown, 2020; Green & McCargo, 2020). Community spread was higher in these populations, as well, due to higher proportions of housing overcrowding and essential workers (Cimini & Botts, 2020; Mejia & Cha, 2020). As a result, Black and Latino renters were more likely to miss paying rent (Greene & McCargo, 2020). These pandemic-related impacts build from a foundation of structural racism[6] that leaves Black and Latino residents more vulnerable during times of crisis—including the current COVID-19 pandemic and its widespread but unequal shockwaves (Jacobs, 2019).

Southern California dynamics reflect these national trends.[7] The average unpaid rent in San Bernardino and Riverside County exceeds $3,300 per household, with over 36,000 renter households estimated to be behind on rent, facing $124 million in collective rent owed (Policy Link, 2021). In Los Angeles

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5 U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, Week 30. May 12-24, 2021.

6 See powell, 2007 for further discussion of structural racism.

7 We use the term Southern California region as shorthand for Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties for the remainder of this article.

County, nearly half of renters are behind on rent, owing a median of $2,800, for an estimated $3 billion cumulatively (Manville et al., 2021). Evictions data remain notoriously difficult to access in California, yet research suggests that hundreds of thousands of families live at risk of eviction within the region (Blasi, 2020). As stimulus payments, unemployment benefits, and eviction moratoria begin to expire, we must focus on housing and affordability interventions, to keep thousands more households from being forced out of their homes.

However, solving the current crisis requires addressing long-standing housing and social policy issues: the pandemic only added to an ongoing affordability crisis. Across Southern California, most renters are rent-burdened—paying over 30 percent of household income on rent—a threshold after which households cut back on necessities. Despite different income levels and rent prices, and in contrast to popular conceptions of the Inland Empire as Los Angeles's more affordable neighbor, rent burden rates are consistent across renter households in the Southern California region: 56.5 percent in Los Angeles County, 56.3 percent in Riverside County, and 55.4 percent in San Bernardino (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2019 1-year estimates). These statistics reflect the interconnected nature of housing markets and underscore the need for a regional approach to affordability.

This paper begins by describing current housing affordability dynamics across Los Angeles and the Inland Empire. Although rent burden metrics help identify households vulnerable to instability, it is the underlying housing and work conditions that shape residents' lives and produce this indicator—particularly as people cope by working more and living in more crowded households.[8] By comparing conditions driving the affordability crisis, we show that housing pressures found in the Inland Empire are a continuation or extension of Los Angeles dynamics. In response, we emphasize the need to simultaneously examine interrelated housing, labor, and social conditions and their underlying drivers across Southern California.

With the State of California experiencing an unprecedented $40 billion budget surplus, we are at a moment of acute need but also exceptional opportunity to enact long-term structural change. Therefore, the final section of this piece describes a policy agenda to address the underlying causes and widespread effects of the housing affordability crisis across the region. We emphasize that an effective policy agenda must include three elements. First, we must create immediate relief for residents as well as long-term investments, to stabilize conditions and generate impactful support in the near-term, while carving a new path toward a more equitable housing system in the long-term. Second, accomplishing this vision of immediate relief and systems change will require participation and coordination across the public, nonprofit, and private sectors. Finally, we call for a regional approach that encompasses Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties collectively, reflecting their interconnected circumstances. Such a multi-sectoral and multi-scalar policy agenda is necessary to address the multiple drivers and entrenched structures that perpetuate the region's affordability crisis.

## The Scope and Scale of Rent Burden in Los Angeles

In Los Angeles, renters lived in deep economic distress before the pandemic began, with most residents cutting back on basic necessities to afford rent. To understand the extent and impacts of renter precarity, we conducted a multi-year study, beginning with 36 focus groups that included 358 participants in Los Angeles, San Diego, and the Coachella Valley (Eastern Riverside County). The focus group findings informed a randomly sampled, door-to-door

8 Typically, housing affordability is computed by comparing incomes and rents. The forces driving these statistics are 1) residents' ability to earn income, and 2) their ability to locate housing that meets their needs. The most common metrics for affordability are rent burden and residual income (income left over after rent).

survey of 794 Spanish- and English-speaking households in South and Central Los Angeles during 2019. We asked renters about their housing and economic situations, and how rental affordability impacted their lives. Study results reveal how rental affordability creates deep and pervasive impacts on residents' lives (Rosen, Angst, De Gregorio & Painter, 2020).[9]

First, we found that renters were cutting back on basic needs to maintain housing—and for some, these actions had extended for years. More than 60 percent of renters had cut back on food, 45 percent on clothing, and 33 percent on transportation. Almost half of respondents had taken on additional debt during the previous two years to make life more affordable. In addition, cutbacks were more severe in places where rent was increasing the most (Central versus South Los Angeles), suggesting the urgent need to address rental affordability in a more geographically-targeted manner. Finally, one in five tenants reported not being able to cover an unexpected $400 expense, an economic vulnerability that has likely increased during the pandemic.

Pairing the survey and focus group findings reveals that rent burden not only forces working-class renters to forego basic needs, but creates enormous stress from the combined pressure of housing insecurity and unaffordability (Rosen, Ciudad-Real, Angst & Painter, 2021). Many residents felt that they were essentially stuck in place because of their limited ability to find another affordable home nearby as well as the social and economic costs of moving. Residents stated that these conditions left them dependent on their current housing, which gave landlords additional leverage to withhold maintenance, increase rent suddenly, and harass tenants.[10]

Altogether, this project illustrates how many Los Angeles renters face deep and impactful economic vulnerabilities, with implications for tenants across the broader region. Housing affordability pressures create far-reaching ripple effects not just on housing outcomes, but economic, educational, health, and intergenerational mobility outcomes, as well.

## Affordability and the Inland Empire

The strains produced by the housing affordability crisis reflect a broader, regional pattern. Rent burden rates in the Inland Empire parallel other counties across Southern California. An Inland Empire survey of over 1,500 San Bernardino and Riverside County residents found that 60 percent of renters "worried that they won't be able to make the next month's rent," and 39 percent were "extremely" or "moderately" concerned that they will have to move out of their homes for reasons outside their control (Othering & Belonging Institute, 2020). Similar to our Los Angeles survey findings, insufficient affordable housing in the Inland Empire corresponds with families making harmful cutbacks; 20 percent of renters reported making food spending cuts and going hungry in the past year (Othering & Belonging Institute, 2020).

Beyond housing pressures, Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties have similar demographic compositions, which underscores their shared circumstances. In 2019, the three counties had similarities in the population share living below the poverty level, labor force participation rates, unemployment rates, average household size, and average family size (see Table 1). Median rents were slightly higher in Los Angeles, while median incomes were slightly higher in Riverside. Nevertheless, income and rents have been rising in all three counties, with income increasing fairly evenly with rents. Los Angeles had a significantly larger share of immigrants (34 percent compared to 21 percent and 22 percent in Riverside and San Bernardino respectively) and non-U.S. citizens than Riverside and San Bernardino (16 percent compared to 9 and 10 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau).

9 For more information on survey methods and findings: https://socialinnovation.usc.edu/rent-burden

10 For quotes from L.A. renters describing these conditions, please visit: www.affordablesouthla.com/voices

**TABLE 1**

## 2019 Census Indicators for Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties

| Indicators | L.A. County | Riverside County | San Bernardino County |
|---|---|---|---|
| Population | 10,039,107 | 2,470,546 | 2,180,085 |
| Population below the poverty level (%) | 13 | 11 | 13 |
| Labor force participation rate (%) | 65 | 60 | 61 |
| Unemployment rate (%) | 5 | 6 | 6 |
| Rent burden (30%+) (%) | 56.5 | 56.3 | 55.4 |
| Median rent (dollars) | 1,577 | 1,487 | 1,342 |
| Median income (dollars) | 72,797 | 73,260 | 67,903 |
| Change in income 2009-2019 (%) | 19 | 16 | 11 |
| Change in rents 2009-2019 (%) | 18 | 14 | 12 |
| Foreign-born (%) | 34 | 21 | 22 |
| Not a U.S. citizen (%) | 16 | 9 | 10 |
| Household with no vehicle available (%) | 8.7 | 4.2 | 4.4 |
| Only English spoken at home (%) | 43.2 | 58.6 | 56.7 |
| Industries employing the largest share of workers | | | |
| Industry 1 | Health care and social assistance | Health care and social assistance | Health care and social assistance |
| Industry 2 | Retail trade | Retail trade | Retail trade |
| Industry 3 | Manufacturing | Construction | Transportation and warehousing |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates; https://data.census.gov/cedsci/.

The similarities across Los Angeles and the Inland Empire extend to industry composition, with low-wage and precarious jobs overrepresented. The two industries employing the largest share of workers in all three counties are health care services and social assistance, followed by retail trade. There is variation after, with manufacturing in Los Angeles, construction in Riverside, and transportation and warehousing in San Bernardino ranking third. All these industries employ large shares of service workers, sales and office workers, and production and transportation workers, which are some of the lowest paying occupations in the region. More than half of all employees in the three counties fall into those occupational categories (53.3 percent in Los Angeles, 57.2 percent in Riverside, and 58.9 percent in San Bernardino). Warehousing, retail, and service jobs are often considered precarious work, associated with unpredictable schedules, limited benefits and worker protections, and low wages (De Lara, 2018). Precarious work produces underemployment: workers can find jobs, but these unstable and risky positions make it difficult to find enough hours to meet basic needs—including necessary time off (Hacker, 2019; De Lara, 2018).

Although the Inland Empire has been framed in recent decades as an affordable area relative to neighboring Los Angeles, this is clearly no longer the case (Pfeiffer, 2012; Kotkin & Frey, 2007). The idea of inland California fostering new industries that would become a vehicle of upward mobility has instead given way to greater inequality and extraction. Since 2010, the Inland Empire has experienced rapid growth in population and economic activity alongside Los Angeles. This growth was accomplished in exploitative and predatory ways, however (Kaoosji & Alvarado, 2020; Mordechay, 2020). In response, working class residents are actively challenging the narrative of the Inland Empire as a destination of affordable opportunity and organizing against harmful conditions (Clark & Araiza, 2021; De Lara, 2018).

Altogether, the housing, demographic, and labor similarities across Los Angeles and the Inland Empire demonstrate that the affordability crisis is a regional problem that deeply affects residents' lives and future opportunities. However, this regional challenge has solutions. The state budget surplus is—in large part—a result of inequitable prosperity (Yamamura, 2021). While working class tenants struggled to make ends meet during the pandemic, the stock market and corporate profits reached all-time highs bringing in larger than expected tax revenues. This inequality has produced deleterious outcomes, but can be leveraged to redistribute resources towards greater social, economic, and racial justice.

Long plagued by assertions of austerity, the Southern California region faces a unique moment where the necessary funds and political will can be catalyzed to address structural issues that have allowed affordability to worsen for decades. We now have the potential to shift relationships between local residents and the private sector from extraction to mutual benefit, to collectively build a region that supports workers and families. To do so, policymakers must recognize the interrelated nature of issues faced by Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties, focusing on comprehensive interventions that reflect and leverage these inherent connections.

## Policy Recommendations

The ongoing housing crisis is driven by housing market failures, eroded wages and labor protections, an inadequate social safety net, and the impactful legacy of state-sanctioned racism (Darity & Mullen, 2020; powell, 2012). These intersections produce considerable harm for households, families, and broader communities—warranting immediate, decisive, and comprehensive action. To address housing affordability in the Inland Empire, we call for: short-term policy solutions to provide immediate stability, enabling residents to stay in their homes and meet their basic needs; and longer-term policies that restructure public institutions and markets to create a system that supports housing affordability for all. This vision requires bold action at the federal, state, and local levels, to address the different scales at which economic and housing vulnerability are produced. Between the California state budget surplus and resources flowing into local governments from the American Rescue Plan Act, policymakers have a tremendous opportunity to enact lasting reform.

### SHORT-TERM POLICY SOLUTIONS

In the immediate, we must act decisively to avoid a looming eviction crisis that threatens substantial increases in homelessness. The short-term interventions that have already been implemented—widespread stimulus aid and extended eviction moratoria—were essential to avoiding catastrophe during the pandemic. However, housing cost pressures and income instability persist even as the country reopens. These issues necessitate policy extensions to help vulnerable and affected people cope in the pandemic's aftermath. We should also continue to prepare for expanded emergency housing needs and rapid rehousing services. Overall, interventions must include mechanisms to help people stay in their homes, including:

- guaranteed legal counsel in eviction proceedings;
- no-fault eviction protections including extensions for non-payment of rent;
- anti-harassment ordinances;
- rent control;
- informational campaigns around AB-832 and SB-91 protections and rental assistance; and
- pivoting to rent forgiveness paired with landlord assistance.

State legislators have done important work in extending the eviction moratorium for non-payment of rent through September 2021, and developing a rental relief program that will help vulnerable tenants cover unpaid rent accumulated over the past 18 months. Regrettably, the rollout of these policies has been exceptionally confusing and slow.[11] Renters are struggling to figure out how to navigate the various programs, determine eligibility requirements, understand the different protections provided by the state versus local government, and enforce protections when landlords do not comply (Choi et al., 2021). Moreover, it remains to be seen whether rental assistance will reach vulnerable tenants in time, or run out before the need is fully met. As written, AB-832 allows evictions to start up even if funds have not been fully distributed, and does not prevent landlords from immediately increasing rent after the subsidy is received.[12] The most recent three-month extension of protections also coincides directly with the end of federal unemployment subsidies. Consequently, the threat of eviction will continue past September for many households as economic ramifications from the pandemic linger and uncertainty remains around their financial recovery.

The protections and rent relief found in SB-91 and AB-832 are crucial to stemming a wave of evictions over the next year, but the rollout of these interventions must be improved to support renters and avoid producing more confusion and stress. During the first three months of rental assistance provided through SB-91, only 8 percent of the $619 million designated was distributed. Additionally, applicants were disproportionately white, non-Latino households, and 60 percent reported difficulties in accessing the program (Reina & Goldstein, 2021).

In San Bernardino County, there are roughly 37,000 households at-risk of eviction and eligible for the program, yet less than 2,000 applications have been received. An alternative rent forgiveness program could instead place the onus on landlords—who already interact with the government through the tax code and stand to profit from reimbursements—and take the burden off

11 These challenges began with the passage of SB-91 on January 29th—just days before eviction protections were set to expire—which set-up a large-scale rental assistance program, yet left many tenants vulnerable to eviction long-term by allowing landlords to choose unit by unit which tenants they wanted to apply for rental assistance. If landlords failed to apply for funds on behalf of their tenant, renters were able to apply directly to the program, but only 25% of unpaid rent was covered whereas 80% was paid when landlords submitted. While this gap in coverage was rectified through AB-832—which extended the eviction moratorium through September and expanded rental assistance to cover 100% of rent owed regardless of who applies—it once again left tenants in the dark until the last minute and was signed into law just 2 days before protections expired again.

12 Evictions can start up October 1st, but tenants cannot be evicted for 6 months past this date if they have an active rental assistance application. This still leaves many eligible renters at risk of eviction, though, as take-up of the program has been slow and the majority of evictions are lost due to default decisions so this option may never be presented to those who are not already aware of their rights.

renters to navigate application processes without sufficient resources. A pivot to this type of program would ensure that vulnerable residents do not slip through the cracks, while continuing to provide assistance to small landlords with tenants that have missed rent due to the pandemic (Mays, 2021; Raman, 2020). Under this structure, larger landlords owning 25 or more units could be given transferable tax credits, which would compensate them for lost rent while delaying the public sector's immediate financial commitments. This approach prioritizes local residents over large, corporate landlords that continued to earn record profits throughout the pandemic, and allows for a greater allocation of funds to be directed toward community needs (Fang, 2021; Gandel, 2021).

These short-term anti-displacement policies require additional accountability measures, funding for enforcement, and a massive information campaign to ensure that tenants know their rights. Furthermore, while housing policy has rightly focused on rental assistance, we must remember that this alone will not solve the long-standing affordability crisis. Rather, rental assistance only addresses the short-term concern of unpaid rent that has resulted from unprecedented economic hardship over the past year. In the next section, we turn to the long-term policy solutions that can help build a more equitable and effective housing system.

## LONG-TERM POLICY SOLUTIONS

Long-term policy solutions must enact systems-level changes across the housing and social sector through place-sensitive and community-oriented interventions. Foremost, we must support structural housing market changes by creating long-term affordable housing options that can weaken unequal market relations and reduce speculation.

### Multi-sectoral Partnerships

Collective action is required to meaningfully deliver new affordable housing supply. In this context, supply can be increased by directly providing social housing, encouraging new housing through zoning reforms, and changing how we finance and approve new housing (Schuetz, 2020a; Schuetz, 2020b). Multi-sectoral partnerships can provide the resources and accountability needed for a multi-pronged approach to affordability. One such Inland Empire collaboration has brought together a broad array of Coachella Valley partners to deliver 9,881 housing units over 10 years. Similar collaborations exist in the San Francisco Bay Area and King County, Washington (which includes Seattle).[13] Each of these initiatives includes local and state government, private market actors, and non-profit organizations working collectively to accomplish strategic goals. Their goals focus broadly around renter protections, preservation of the existing affordable housing stock, and production of new affordable units. Multi-sectoral coordination expands both the funding and policy interventions available to address the crisis. Partners have committed to pooling existing resources, developing new local funding mechanisms, and coordinating future housing development to accomplish these goals. Given the entrenched nature of segregation and unequal housing opportunities, cross-sectoral commitments are necessary to support broad systems change.

However, collaboration requires resources, expertise, and the motivation of relevant stakeholders to pursue new ways of policymaking and hold members accountable to results. Government agencies play an important leadership role in multi-sectoral,

13 For additional details on these collective impact initiatives, please see: Coachella Valley - https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5fdd8a053193d513c0b568fc/t/5fde8feef23a830a59ae97a8/1608421373601/Lift-to-Rise_ActionPlan_Report-v8.pdf; King County - https://kingcounty.gov/~/media/initiatives/affordablehousing/documents/report/RAH_Report_Print_File_Updated_10,-d-,28,-d-,19.ashx?la=en; Bay Area - https://mtc.ca.gov/sites/default/files/CASA_Compact.pdf

place-based collaboration because of their access to a wide array of funding streams, authority for enforcement, regulatory capacities, and technical expertise (Rosen et al., 2018). The public sector cannot solve affordability on its own, though, and must form strong partnerships with community groups to understand their needs and work with the private sector to determine the best ways to motivate local actors toward collective goals. Furthermore, philanthropic resources can be used to pilot new programs and policy interventions co-produced across these groups. The magnitude and urgency of the affordable housing crisis demands a collective response in which all sectors are working together.

## Regional Coordination

State and regional government remain the best equipped to work across various levels of governmental agencies, coordinate between sectors, and encourage the production of new supply. New financing and approval policies can hold cities across the region accountable to taking on their fair share of multi-family and affordable housing in accordance with regional housing need assessments (RHNA) required by state law. Municipalities have long evaded their allotted zoning and construction requirements to exclude working class residents. There is a continued need in California for regional housing authorities with the ability to set fines and allocate funding based on cities' fulfillment of RHNA.[14] These entities could also provide important technical support so that local governments understand the suite of policies and funding mechanisms available to them.

Successful regional, cross-sectoral coordination can promote durable and equitable policy interventions. The recent creation of the Bay Area Housing Finance Authority (BAHFA) provides an example of a new type of governmental entity that can lead regional efforts to produce affordable housing. BAHFA was created through AB 1487 and allows the nine counties and 101 cities to raise funds from regional ballot measures, state and federal appropriations, and private and philanthropic contributions.[15] This organization will facilitate knowledge sharing and gives members the ability to plan, fund, and develop projects collectively with the entire region in mind. In Southern California, a regional affordable housing authority like BAHFA would provide a vital organizing body to initiate the structural changes required to address affordability at its root.

## Social Housing

As in 2008, we stand at a precipice, with thousands of properties at risk of default across the country. This time, however, we can foster a more equitable housing model and avoid past mistakes. Alternative housing production strategies such as social housing, renter cooperatives, and community land trusts position housing as a social good and reduce housing commodification by removing properties from the market altogether (Baiocchi & Carlson, 2020). These mechanisms hold greater potential to add supply without accelerating speculation, because they create permanent solutions that do not rely on the participation of private actors, nor are they vulnerable to funding shifts or expiration over time. They also result in the direct provision of housing for residents whose needs are not typically met by the private sector. Policymakers can develop new funding mechanisms by working with non-profits, philanthropy, and government to stitch together the resources needed to convert distressed homes into long-term affordable options. The development of social housing is supported by a majority of voters across party affiliation and represents a politically viable alternative to further commodification (Harrison & Kraemer, 2020). This path avoids ceding, again, to the private sector, which is poised to accomplish one of the larg-

14 There is precedent in the California Coast Commission for regional authorities to take on enforcement responsibilities and set fines when regulations are not followed.

15 For more information on Bay Area Housing Finance Authority (BAHFA) see, https://abag.ca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2021-02/Launching%20BAHFA-Regional%20Housing%20Portfolio_2-24-21_v6.pdf

est land grabs in modern history—just as they did a decade ago (Bloomberg, 2021; Mordechay, 2020).[16]

## Value Capture & Benefits-Sharing Agreements

While zoning changes and expedited approval processes are needed to increase supply in Southern California overall, these decisions have the potential to create large financial windfalls for developers and landlords while generating insufficient material benefits for local renters (Anenberg & Kung, 2020; Damiano, 2020; Zuk & Chapple, 2016). To avoid this extractive pattern, new housing supply must coincide with community-oriented policies that distribute financial gains more evenly and protect against neighborhood change and displacement. Value capture tools—such as land taxes and benefits-sharing agreements—offer one strategy to ensure that new development fosters equity. Previous literature has shown, however, that these processes are often implemented in limited ways, appropriated by development interests, and steered toward lopsided, short-term outcomes (Chapple & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2021; Karner, 2019; Rosen & Schweitzer, 2018; Purcell, 2009). Further, although these interventions may redirect the private market toward more social ends, they do not address the structural, housing production, and community investment issues that have entrenched unaffordability over generations. Therefore, new supply—even with value capture—is not enough.

## Expansion of Housing Vouchers

Demand-side policies can complement these supply-side interventions, playing a critical role in supporting vulnerable families. We must expand the federal Housing Choice Voucher program (Section 8), which fixes a household's rental costs to no more than 30 percent of their income. Currently, HUD estimates that only 1 in 4 eligible families receive the voucher, which creates waiting lists, sometimes decades-long.[17] California must fill in the gaps. There are currently 1.36 million households in California paying over 50 percent of their income in rent. Subsidizing these households in the short term is essential so that their rental payments no longer exceed the 50 percent threshold. This would provide at least some degree of stability for the most affected tenants at an annual cost of roughly $6,410 per household.[18] Since most of these households qualify for Section 8, this would provide support while they wait for a full voucher. In the long term, we must fully fund the Housing Choice Voucher program to meet the needs of 15 million households in the U.S. that currently qualify but do not receive benefits. This program would scale back gradually over time as more social housing is made available and renters no longer depend exclusively on the private market (Harrison & Kraemer, 2020).

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16 Hedge funds and corporate landlords have an estimated $300 billion in cash ready to buy up distressed properties. In recent years, policymakers have shown little movement in regulating these groups after allowing massive buy-outs after the Great Recession. Policies like AB-1199, which would impose a tax on owners of 25 properties or more, are finally beginning to gain traction and would result in some revenue sharing but do little to address the unequal power relations that allow this type of large-scale take-over. With the magnitude of capital currently waiting to be invested, community organizations and local governments require concerted effort at the State and Federal levels to achieve a new, sustainable alternative.

17 The American Rescue Plan creates 70,000 emergency housing vouchers for U.S. These emergency vouchers are only temporary, though, and do not come close to covering those on wait lists across the country.

18 Read more here: **https://socialinnovation.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Right-to-Housing-Subsidy-2.pdf**

### Flexible Social Safety Net

Reinvesting in the social safety net will reduce economic uncertainty and give residents a more secure foundation moving forward. The public sector is uniquely positioned to diffuse resources, protections, and information that can help families find stability across multiple dimensions of everyday life. Our research suggests the need for a flexible, multi-faceted approach that can meet residents' most acute needs as they emerge—from food assistance and utility bill subsidies to free childcare and legal aid—depending on the population, timing, and regional location. This entails increasing the funding and capacity of social services, which will allow for a greater number of residents to be served and a larger breadth of resources to be offered. Flexibility will allow this service mix to change and adapt to the needs of local residents as conditions shift and new challenges emerge. To accomplish this expansion, the public sector will require partnering with community groups to reach populations that have traditionally been underserved and contracting out to local organizations for services the government is unable to provide. A more inclusive approach is particularly important for immigrant and working-class families that may have higher needs for services, yet less access to knowledge of resource availability due to time and language barriers. While California's social safety net largely covers immigrants, mixed-status families still face obstacles accessing resources, federal programs, and information on application processes.

### Income Supports and Worker Rights

Evidence from the pandemic stimulus packages underscores the effectiveness of income supports. The Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit expansions will reduce the child poverty rate by nearly half and finally extend support to adults without children (Center on Poverty and Social Policy, 2021; Marr et al., 2021). Moreover, households that received direct payments through stimulus checks experienced greater financial stability and improved mental health outcomes than those who did not (Cooney & Shaefer, 2021). Policymakers can learn from these interventions by making the tax credits permanent and considering a universal basic income, replicating pandemic-related policies (West et al., 2020). Income support is especially pertinent in Los Angeles and the Inland Empire, where widespread regional underemployment exists.

Income supports do not address the structural inequality found in the labor market, however. Additional employment and industrial standards as well as unionization efforts are pivotal in the long run to help people access safe, healthy homes (Kaoosji & Alvarado, 2020; De Lara, 2018; Rolf, 2018). Policies such as limitations on executive pay, providing employee seats on corporate boards of directors, profit-sharing, work protections, and expanded employee benefits can help ensure labor arrangements compensate enough to afford a basic living standard (Mishel & Wolfe, 2019; Data for Progress, 2019; Saez & Zucman, 2019; Rolf, 2018). Reducing the barriers for employees to organize and collectively bargain will be key to achieving better work conditions (Farber et al., 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021). These types of policies are not only supported by a majority of Americans, but will also improve the responsiveness of policymakers to constituent needs over time by creating more equitable power relations between residents, the private sector, and politicians (Hertel-Fernandez, 2020; Data for Progress, 2019; Stegmueller et al., 2018).

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced enormous economic harm across the nation—especially for renters. Its impacts have been severe because renters were already struggling to survive amidst a housing affordability crisis. These challenges are rooted in the intersection of multiple structural problems, including an inadequate system of housing supports, a restructured economy dependent on low wages and minimal worker protections, the persistence of structural racism, and a shrinking social safety net. Given this complexity, policymakers need to launch a significant response to this crisis, while learning from residents in order to understand where pressures are most acute and develop effective solutions. The public sector can work with community organizations to understand these conditions, reach vulnerable populations, and provide resources to help residents withstand unexpected events. Additionally, local residents, organizations, and social movements can create the political pressure needed to allocate funding, monitor the implementation of interventions, and hold elected officials accountable.

In the end, housing affordability is a regional problem that requires coordination and cooperation at different scales across Southern California. Historically, the Inland Empire has been considered a separate entity from Los Angeles—especially on matters of housing—producing distinct and independent policy interventions. However, the housing markets, economies, and well-being of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties are deeply interrelated. Local economic shocks shape where people and jobs move across the region—reflected in how rising affordability issues in Los Angeles have extended into the Inland Empire, while the shift to remote work has increased Inland Empire demand and rents. Therefore, policies seeking to address the issue of affordability must span across these counties and treat the region holistically. For this reason, the policy framework we propose advocates for an integrated, multi-scalar approach. Regional planning and policymaking—undertaken through the recognition that housing, transportation, and social systems are interconnected and mutually reinforcing—will be crucial to addressing housing affordability in the Inland Empire.

We propose a bold, multi-faceted policy approach to address the converging issues driving housing affordability challenges. Long-term interventions to restructure housing and social policy must always be community-oriented to ensure that they remain attuned to residents' needs. A comprehensive solution requires coordinated action at all levels of government, from national to local. To solve the worsening problem of housing affordability, we must address the interconnected nature of social, economic, and racial inequality that underlie contemporary housing systems.

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