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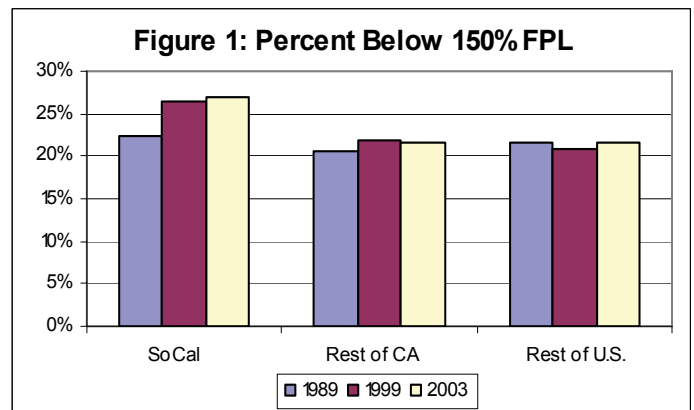
Residents Say Local Government Is Not Doing Enough For the Poor

INTRODUCTION

Public opinion surveys can play an important role in decision making because public policy should be informed by both objective data and the values held by people. While opinions may be subjective and biased, they nonetheless shed light on people's concerns and priorities and their views on what government should do. This Fact Sheet presents findings from a recently completed survey of Southern California residents (those living in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura). Details of the survey can be found in the appendix to this Fact Sheet. The available "objective" data reveal that this region has a disproportionately large number of low-income residents, with their share of the total population growing over time. One key result of the survey is that a large majority states that local government is not doing enough for the poor, a view held by most demographic and socioeconomic groups. Among those who hold this opinion, a large majority also believes that local government is doing an inadequate job of improving education and providing affordable housing in this region.

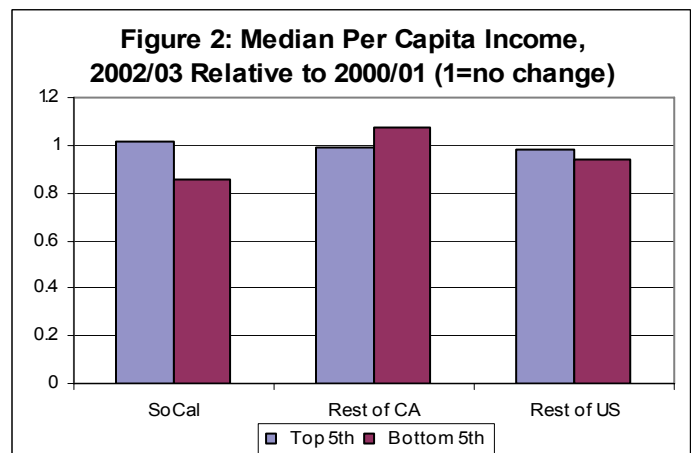
BACKGROUND

The absolute and relative number of persons in low-income families in this region has increased over the last quarter century. This can be seen in Figure 1, which defines the low-income population as the segment containing people in families with an income below one and a half times the Federal Poverty Level, which was \$28,735.50 in 2004 for a family of four (with two children). Additional information on the FPL and its use can be found in the Appendix. The statistics in Figure 1 come from the 1990 and 2000 decennial census and the 2004 Current Population Survey, and are based on annual income for the prior year. For the rest of California outside of Southern California and the rest of the nation outside the state, roughly a fifth of the population fell below this threshold, a proportion that essentially remained unchanged for the three reporting years. Unfortunately, the proportion for Southern California in-



creased, from slightly over a fifth to slightly over a quarter. The increase is due in part to both an immigration-driven demographic shift to a less skilled labor force and an economic restructuring that has limited upward mobility into the middle class.

The poor in Southern California also have not fared well over the short run. The regional economy has experienced a recession and slow recovery over the last few years, and the impact was particularly hard on those at the bottom of the income ladder. The average (median) per capita income for the bottom fifth in this region took a significant hit from 2000/01 to 2002/03, a period when the unemployment rate increased and incomes stagnated (see Volume 1, Number 1 of this Fact Sheet series). What is troubling is that other groups did not experience the same hardships (see Figure 2).

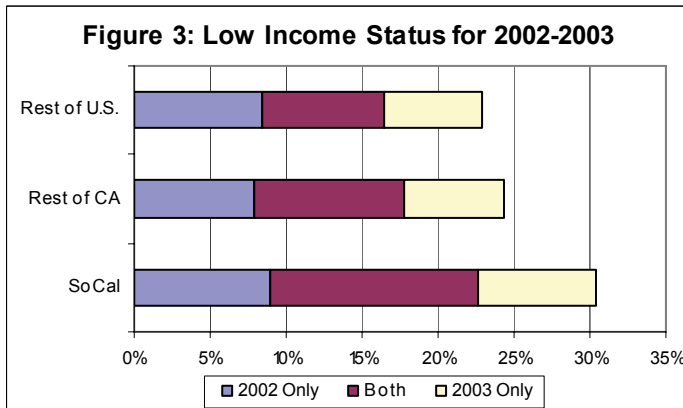


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The median for the top fifth in this region, both the top and bottom fifth for the rest of California and the rest of the nation, did not change substantially.

A final point worth noting is the underlying dynamics of the movement into and out of the low-income segment. Changes in financial conditions are fairly pronounced at the individual level, and may have become more volatile in recent years (see for example, Formby et al., 2002; Gosselin, 2004; and Naifeh, 1998). The movement between income classes can be seen in Figure 3, where a significant proportion of the population move into and out off the low-income segment. Not surprisingly, the percentages for all categories (only in 2002, only in 2003, and in both years) are larger for Southern California than for other areas. The findings indicate that over a third of those in the low-income segment were able to move up, but unfortunately they were replaced by nearly the same number of individuals falling into this segment. Another interpretation of the statistics is that the number of long-term poor is smaller than indicated by the annual statistics but the number of people who experience some financial hardship over a longer time period is larger than indicated by the annual data.



PUBLIC OPINION OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THE POOR

Given the size of the low-income population in this region, a critical question for the public opinion survey is whether residents believe adequate attention is being paid to the poor. Specifically, the survey asked respondents, “Has your local government done enough to help the poor?” Figure 4 reports the results. For the whole sample, a majority stated that government has not done enough. The majority is even larger after excluding those who did not give a response. Over two-thirds of this sub-sample expressed this opinion.

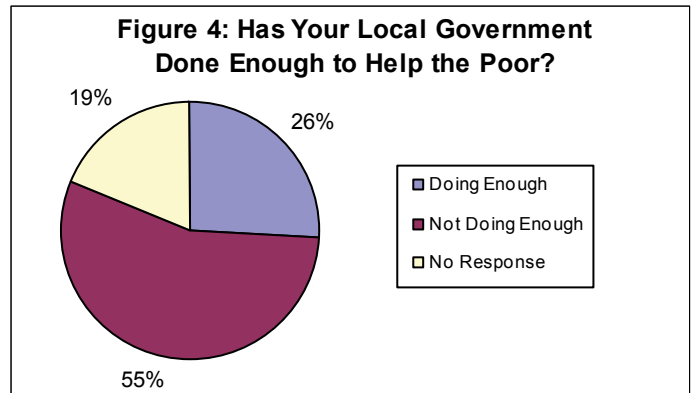
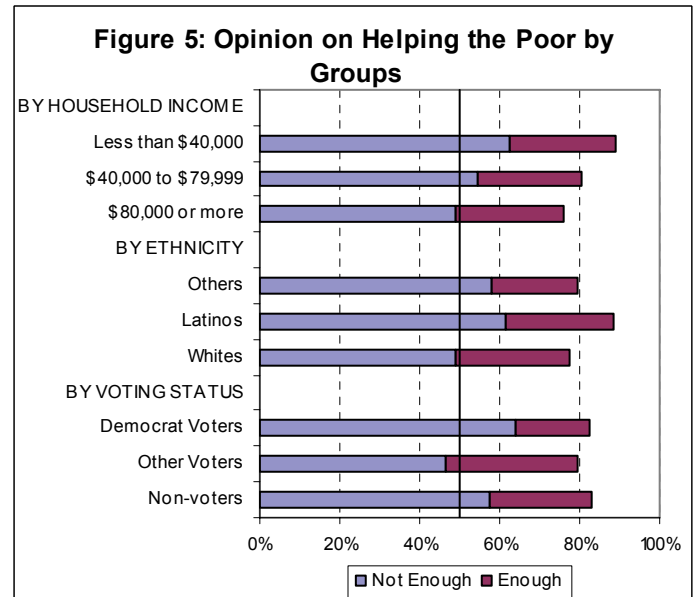


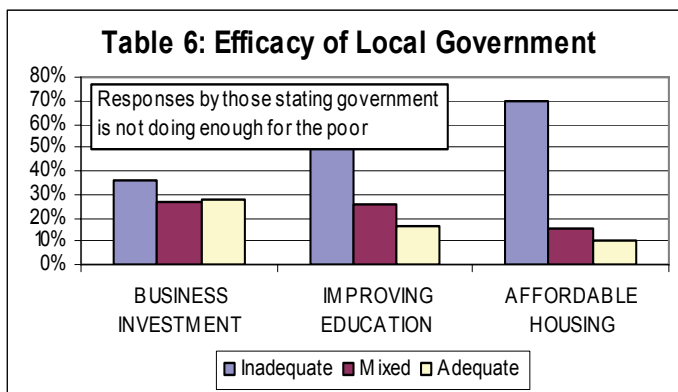
Figure 5 reports the response by economic, ethnic and political grouping. Not surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of those in the “Less than \$40,000” category stated that government has not done enough. The percentage is only slightly higher for those in households with less than \$20,000 in annual income, while only a quarter held the opposite opinion. What is telling is the pattern for those in the “\$80,000 and more” category. Nearly half believes that government has failed to do enough to help the poor. Moreover, if excluding those who did not respond, those saying “no” outnumber those saying “yes” by 3 to 2. This general pattern holds even among households with incomes of \$125,000 or more.



Among Latinos, those in the “other” ethnic category¹, Democrats who voted, and those who did not vote, a large majority also stated that local government is not doing enough for the poor. For the other two groups (whites and 2004 voters who are not Democrats), those saying “no” outnumber those saying “yes.” This pattern holds even among Republicans.

¹ “Other” includes Asians, African-Americans, and mixed ethnicities, as well as respondents who did not indicate their ethnicity on the survey.

Responses to another set of questions provide some insights into where government is falling short in assisting the poor. The interviewees were asked to evaluate the performance of local government in several policy areas, including those related to the poor. (“For the following issue areas, please tell me whether the performance of Southern California’s elected officials has been generally inadequate, mixed, or generally adequate.”) Figure 6 presents the tabulations on three items for those who believe that government is not doing enough for the poor: keeping and attracting business investment in the region; providing affordable housing in the region; and improving education in the region. The public sector could foster economic development by enhancing the region’s competitiveness through supporting business investments, but this does not appear to be a particularly strong concern, as respondents are divided on this. Furthermore, while investments may increase job opportunities, it may do little to increase the income of the working poor. On the other hand, a majority believes that local government is doing an inadequate job of improving education. Tackling the problem of our public schools would ultimately help improve the economic chances of the children of the poor. Finally, a super majority states that local government is failing to provide affordable housing. Since the high cost of housing is particularly burdensome to those with low incomes, the provision of more affordable housing would provide immediate relief for the poor.



APPENDIX

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY: The 2005 Southern California Public Opinion Survey is supported by the UCLA Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies and is designed to gather the views and opinions of Southern California residents on critical public policy issues in this region. The survey was developed with input from campus and community organizations. UCLA units include the Center for Communications and Community, the Institute of Transportation Studies, the Center for

Civil Society, and the Anderson School of Management. Three public agencies participated in the process, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC), and the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Several UCLA faculty provided valuable input: Professors Vickie Mays, Michael Stoll, Brian Taylor, Amy Zegart, Frank Gilliam, Helmut Anheier, Chris Thornberg, and Ed Leamer.

The 2005 Survey gathered basic demographic data and covered seven topical areas: 1) major issues facing the region, 2) the efficacy of local government, 3) transportation, 4) the state of the regional economy, 5) housing, 6) civic engagement, and 7) major disasters. When possible, questions were worded to parallel existing questions from other surveys. All respondents were asked questions related to the efficacy of local government in addressing a number of major policy issues. The Survey was conducted in English and Spanish during the months of January and February 2005 using random digit dialing, and the data were collected by The Social Science Research Center at California State University, Fullerton. There are 1544 completed surveys for the five counties: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura. The sample is divided proportionally by county household population.

The characteristics of the sample by age, ethnicity, income, and home ownership categories are consistent with the 2004 March Current Population Survey. There is a sampling error of +/- 2.6 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. The sampling error maybe be larger for subpopulations.

LOW-INCOME DEFINITION: There is no widely accepted definition for the poor, but most definitions are related to the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), which is roughly three times the U.S. Department of Agriculture food budgets for a given family. The FPL varies with family size and composition, and for a family of four with two children, the threshold was \$19,157 in 2004. The Consumer Price Index for all urban consumers is used to adjust the FPL annually to account for inflation. Despite the wide variation in the regional cost of housing, the same FPL is used throughout the country.

ANALYSIS OF MOVEMENT ACROSS INCOME CLASS: The analysis of the movement into and out of the low-income class was conducted with data from the March Current Population Survey. Because of the way the samples are rotated into the survey, a household can appear in the survey in two consecutive years. This has enabled research to examine two-year changes in income and earnings.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Paul Ong is Director of the Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies.

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The **Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies** was established to promote the study, understanding and solution of regional policy issues, with special reference to Southern California, including problems of the environment, urban design, housing, community and neighborhood dynamics, transportation and economic development. It is a focus of interdisciplinary activities, involving numerous faculty members and graduate students from many schools and departments at UCLA. It also fosters links with researchers at other California universities and research institutes on issues of relevance to regional policy. Founded in 1988 with a \$5 million endowment from Ralph and Goldy Lewis, it was directed until December 1994 by Professor Allen J. Scott, directed by Roger Waldinger from 1994 through 1998 and is currently directed by Paul Ong. The Center is supported by its endowment, other private donors and foundations and research grants from a variety of agencies. The director works with an executive committee, with guidance from an advisory board that includes members drawn from both the University and the wider community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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