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Transportation, Economy, and Education Top So Cal Problems

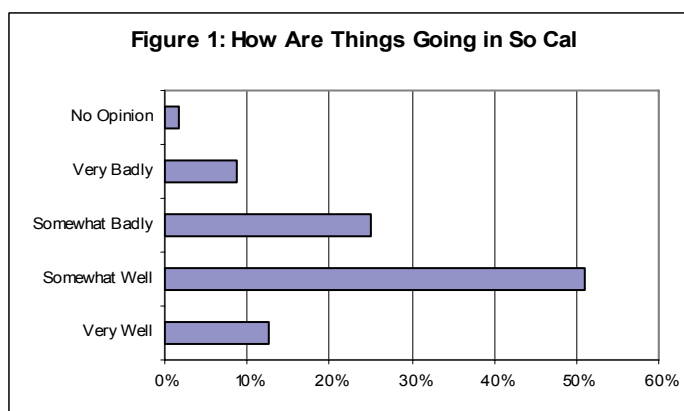
INTRODUCTION

Public opinion surveys can play an important role in decision making as they gather information that complements data from standard sources such as the Decennial Census and Current Population Survey. 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. Information from the survey can help better inform elected officials about the public's concerns and priorities. In 2005 Southern Californians indicated that transportation, the economy, education, crime, and housing were the most important problems in the region. Transportation was, by far, the most cited concern, both overall and across demographic groups.

OVERVIEW OF MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS

Southern California is in many ways an attractive place to live. Almost three-quarters of the survey respondents believe that the weather is the best thing about the region, but others also mentioned amenities, both natural and cultural, and services (10%), opportunities, including educational and economic opportunities, among others (9%), and lifestyle (6%). Almost two-thirds of the survey respondents also believe that things are going well in the region as far as the quality of life is concerned (see Figure 1). Despite these positives, however, residents do have some serious concerns.

Figure 2 displays the top five problems in Southern California, as well as the top five problems in the Bay Area, for comparison. Transportation, economic concerns, education, crime, and housing are the top five problems cited by Southern California Survey respondents. These problems are all related to life in a large metropolitan area, so it is not surprising that the Bay Area generally shares the same concerns. Transportation is the top problem in both regions, followed by Economic concerns. The economy does appear to be more troublesome in the Bay Area, which is still suffering



from the effects of the dot com bust. Housing, education, and crime round out the list of the top five problems in both regions, though housing is more of a problem in the Bay Area.

The Southern California Survey asked respondents to name the three most important problems facing the region. Figure 3 displays Southern California's top five problems according to all three responses. The survey also asked which problem "most affects your own household." Figure 4 displays the problems classified as being individual concerns, regional problems, or both. The ranking is almost the same. The most important problems in order of which problem most affects individual households puts housing above crime. Crime is actually the problem least likely to affect individual households. The high level of concern with crime despite declining crime rates and little actual experience with it may be a result of media hype. The constant coverage of violent crime on TV news may be affecting residents' perceptions of the pervasiveness of crime.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kim Haselhoff is a post-doctoral fellow at the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies. **Paul Ong** is a professor in urban planning, social welfare, and Asian American studies at UCLA and Director of the Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies. **Lucy Tran** is an undergraduate student in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and a document assistant at the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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Figure 2: Top 5 Problems In So Cal and Bay Area

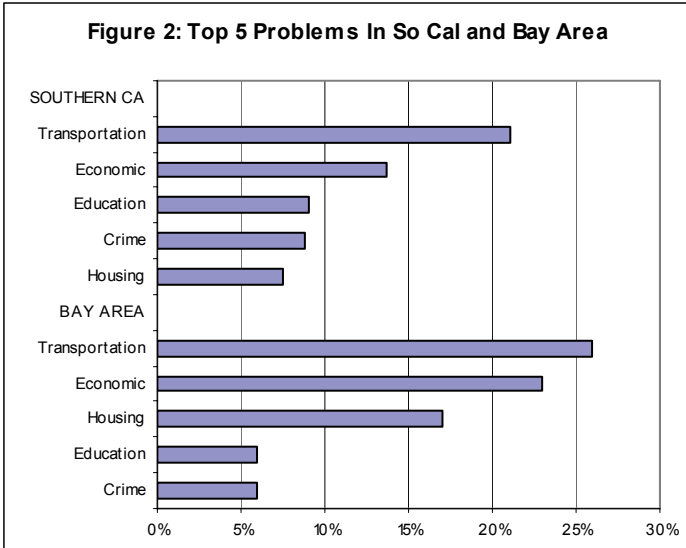


Figure 3: Top Problems by First, Second, and Third Response

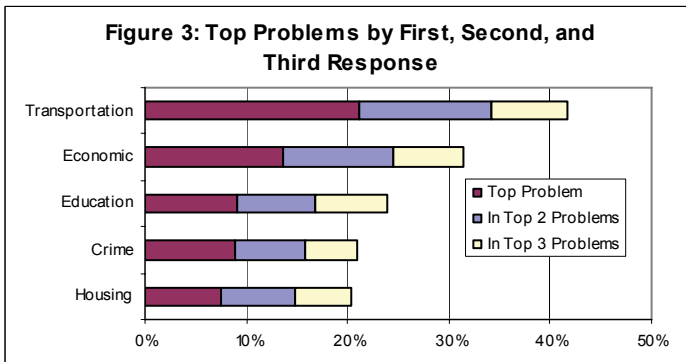
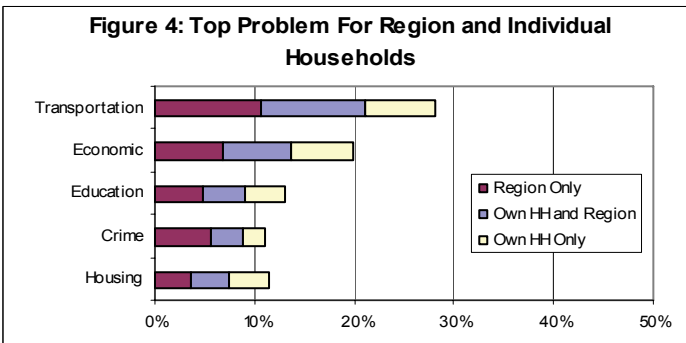


Figure 4: Top Problem For Region and Individual Households



BACKGROUND ON SO CAL'S TOP FIVE PROBLEMS

The most overwhelming concern in the region is transportation. Although various responses related to transportation were offered, by far the most common response to the question about the region's most important problem was traffic. Although Southern California does not have the highest average commute times in the U.S., it does stand out for its level of congestion. In terms of the average hours wasted annually per traveler, Los Angeles and Orange counties have the worst congestion of all U.S. metropolitan areas. Riverside and San Bernardino tied for first out of 27 large metro areas, and Ventura tied for seventh out of 30 medium metro areas. These delays are a major source of frustration in the region (Ong & Haselhoff, 2005b).

The economy is the second most important problem in the region. Within this category employment was the most cited problem. Over the past few years, the regional economy has been in a doldrums. The unemployment rate increased in the early 2000s, from 4.7% in 2000 to 6.1% in 2003, but the increase was not as dramatic as the increase during the early 1990s. In recent months, the Southern California unemployment rate has declined moderately. The mild recovery rate can also be seen in the data for the moderate 2% growth of the employed population from 2003 to 2004. During this period, real per capita income has been relatively flat. This is particularly true in the early 2000s. While the economic slowdown was moderate, the impact was particularly hard on those at the bottom of the income ladder. The average (median) per capita income for the bottom fifth took a much larger hit than that for those in the top fifth (Ong & Haselhoff, 2005a).

Education is a statewide problem as well as a regional one. A recent study on the state of education in California found that 82 percent of Californians believe that the quality of education in the state is at least somewhat of a problem, and 52 percent consider it a big problem, which is up from 46 percent in 1998 (Public Policy Institute of California, 2005). On a more local level, education was one of the top three issues most important to voters in the recent Los Angeles mayoral election – a city in which the mayor has little control over education (Perry, 2005).

Crime and housing round out the list of the top five problems. According to the California Department of Justice, violent crime has actually been declining since the mid-1990s. Statewide, the number of violent crimes decreased 11 percent between 1998 and 2003. The violent crime rate also decreased considerably in each of the five Southern California counties between 1994 and 2003. This has been offset somewhat by a slight increase in property crime, (which is partly due to an increase in the motor vehicle theft rate), but overall the concern with crime seems to belie the statistics.

The lack of affordable housing has also been cited as a statewide, and increasingly, national problem, but it has reached a crisis level in Southern California. Increasing demand for housing has not been met by a corresponding increase in housing production. While many factors have contributed to the affordability problem, continued population growth and an undersupply of new housing has been key. Particularly over the last fifteen years, as the regional population has continued to increase, the new housing market in Southern California has been dominated by the suburbanization of construction, with mostly expensive single family homes being built and much fewer multi-family units or smaller, more afford-

able single unit homes (Ong, et al., 2004). The *Los Angeles Times* recently reported that in Southern California, the median price of a home was \$477,660. The median household income was \$52,050, which is \$59,320 short of the \$111,370 qualifying income needed to buy a median-priced home.

PERCEPTIONS OF PROBLEMS BY GROUPS

A breakdown of the top three problems according to ethnicity, education, age, and income indicates a high degree of consistency in the perception of problems among demographic groups. There are noticeable differences, though. We developed a scoring system to determine the order of importance of problems among groups. We assigned a score to each response depending on whether it was the first, second, or third answer. First answers received a 4, second answers a 2, and third answers a 1. Again, transportation was ranked as a top problem, with economic concerns the second most important problem. We did see differences in the ranking among Latinos, those with a high school education or less, and those making less than \$40,000 per year. These groups ranked economic issues as the most important problem, and transportation second or third. Given that many of the responses related to economics had to do with employment, it is not surprising that the groups at the lower end of the income scale ranked the economy first. (As mentioned above, these groups were also the hardest hit by the mild recession of recent years). These groups were also the only ones to list crime as one of the top three problems.

Education was ranked the third most important problem by several groups, including those with some college education or higher, those in the middle income category (those in the highest income category ranked education second) and among Whites and “Other¹” ethnic groups (non-Latinos). Finally, immigration came up as a concern for those 55 and over, and housing was a concern for those in the 36 – 54 age group. The list of the top three concerns by demographic groups is displayed in Figure 5.

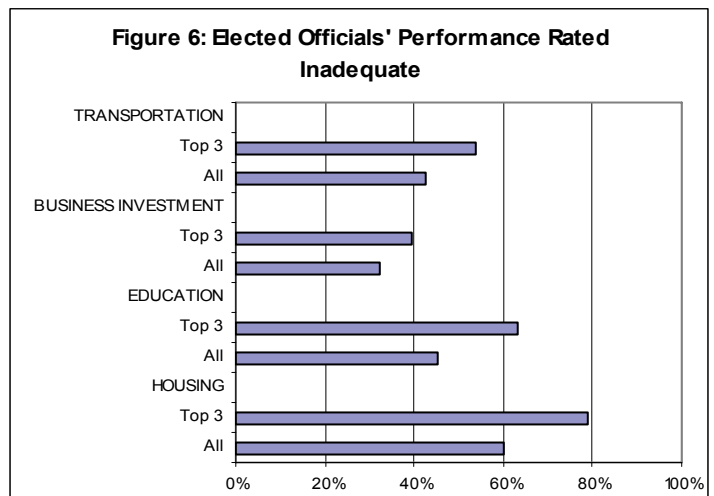
GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE ON THE TOP PROBLEMS

When it comes to rating government performance on these issues, those who cited any of the top three problems were also more critical of local officials’ performance on that particular problem (see Figure 6). While overall just over 40 percent of respondents indicated that local officials’ performance in improving transpor-

tation was “generally inadequate,” that percentage jumped to 54 percent among those who had cited transportation as a major problem. For those who rated economic issues as a top problem the percentage who rated officials’ performance in keeping and attracting business investment in the region as inadequate was 39 percent, versus 33 percent for all respondents. For education, the percentage who indicated officials’ performance in improving education was “inadequate” jumped significantly among those most concerned, from 45 percent overall, to 63 percent. Respondents were most disappointed with local officials’ performance in improving affordable housing in the region. While 60 percent responded with “generally inadequate” overall, that number jumped to almost 80 percent among those who cited housing as a major problem. We did not ask respondents to rate local officials’ performance on crime.

Figure 5: Most Important Problem by Demographic Groups

	Most Important Problem	Second Most Important	Third Most Important Prob
By Ethnicity			
White	Transportation	Economic	Education
Latino	Economic	Transportation	Crime
Other	Transportation	Economic	Education
By Education			
High School or Less	Economic	Crime	Transportation
Some College	Transportation	Economic	Education
BA or Higher	Transportation	Economic	Education
By Age			
18 - 35	Transportation	Economic	Crime
36 - 54	Transportation	Economic	Housing
55+	Transportation	Economic	Immigration
By HH Income			
Less than \$40,000	Economic	Transportation	Crime
\$40,000 - \$80,000	Transportation	Economic	Education
\$80,000+	Transportation	Education	Economic



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DISCLAIMER

Neither the University of California, the School of Public Affairs nor the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies either support or disavow the findings in any project, report, paper, or research listed herein. University affiliations are for identification only; the University is not involved in or responsible for the project.

APPENDIX: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY, 2005

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 the campus and community organizations. UCLA units include the Center for Communications and Community, the Institute for Transportation Studies, the UCLA Center for Civil Society, and the UCLA Anderson School. Three public agencies participated in the process, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), the Metropolitan Transportation Agency (MTA) and the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC). 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.

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 for the full sample. (Sampling error may be larger for subpopulations).

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

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