

# Study uncovers significant concerns about economic distress in L.A.

April 7 2016, by George Foulsham

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The UCLA survey of 1,401 county residents found significant differences in ratings of financial, cost of living and economic fairness issues. Credit: UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs

The depth of financial insecurity in Los Angeles County is revealed in a [new survey](#) that shows 29 percent of residents have worried about going

hungry in the last few years because they could not afford the cost of food, and 31 percent have worried about losing their homes and becoming homeless as a result.

But the survey also revealed a profound difference among [ethnic groups](#) when it comes to economic distress: Latinos were three to four times more likely to fear hunger and homelessness than were whites.

Those are just a few of many significant results from the first Los Angeles County Quality of Life Index, a project of the Los Angeles Initiative of the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs. The survey was prepared in partnership with the public opinion research firm Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz and Associates.

Interviews were conducted with 1,401 residents throughout the county, who rated their satisfaction with up to 40 aspects of quality of life divided into nine categories. The study found significant differences among ethnic groups and by class on financial, cost of living and economic fairness issues.

"Our survey represents a compelling class- and ethnic-based economic story," said Zev Yaroslavsky, director of the Los Angeles Initiative.

"Latinos in particular are standing out as having fundamental economic concerns. Almost 1 out of 3 people in L.A. County has worried about going hungry in the last few years, but among Latinos that number jumps to 44 percent—and 52 percent among Latino men.

"This represents a very high percentage of county residents experiencing intense economic stress," he added.

The overall satisfaction score from the survey is 59, slightly above the midpoint (55), on a scale of 10 to 100. The rating will provide the baseline for succeeding years of the index, which will be an annual

countywide survey.

"Half of residents with annual incomes under \$30,000 and one-third of people earning between \$30,000 and \$60,000 feared having to skip meals due to their economic circumstances," Yaroslavsky said. "Nearly half of Latinos surveyed, 44 percent, worried about becoming homeless. There's obviously a have/have-not divide. There's something happening below the surface here that's invisible to a lot of people's eyes."

Major aspects of life in Los Angeles County can be separated into positive, neutral and negative groupings.

On the positive side, neighborhood quality (71), health care (70) and, somewhat surprisingly, ethnic/race relations (69) are among the factors receiving top scores. Education (54), jobs and the economy (52) and cost of living (50) are at the bottom of the scale. Among the categories in the middle of the pack are public safety (64), the environment (61) and transportation (58).

"Interestingly, our survey shows that people are not as concerned about getting along as they are about getting ahead," Yaroslavsky said.

## **The negatives**

The cost of housing is the biggest factor dragging down the overall satisfaction score of county residents. Cost of living was the most salient category and also the lowest ranked, and housing [costs](#) are the most important of the specific components in the cost of living category. Forty-one percent of all respondents cited "cost of housing" as the most important factor in their cost of living rating.

The lowest satisfaction scores on the cost of housing come from Latinos (47) and those with a household income of less than \$30,000 (47).

Latinos, in fact, proved to be the most negative ethnic group on all cost of living measures—utilities, transportation, food and taxes, as well as housing. Asian-Americans, meanwhile, were the most positive group in this category.

On jobs and the economy, most respondents are satisfied with their current jobs and job security. But when the question turned to retirement security, the ability to get ahead or whether the local L.A. economy is fair to all, some clear fault lines emerged. African-Americans assign the lowest scores of any ethnic group for the ability to get ahead (57) and the fairness of the local economy (54). Those under 50 years of age are the least satisfied with their retirement security (53). And those who are currently unemployed give a very low score (44) to their prospects of landing a job.

Finally, in a category that bridges the class spectrum, there is widespread concern about the [public education](#) system in Los Angeles County. Whites, African-Americans, college graduates, post-college graduates and those with household incomes more than \$150,000 gave a rating of between 50 and 54 to the quality of public education.

Likewise, lower scores were given to the level of funding for K-12 public education and the training students are receiving for jobs of the future. The only good marks were given to access to higher education, led by Asian-American respondents and those who graduated from high school.

## **The positives**

The highest score went to neighborhood quality (71). Homeowners gave the most favorable rating in this category, which also addresses the availability of fresh, nutritious groceries and of parks.

The score for racial and ethnic relations (69) is an unexpected result considering the amount of recent media coverage devoted to racial strife throughout the country. The county's whites (78), Latinos (75), African-Americans (77) and Asian-Americans (74) are in almost total agreement about their own relations with different ethnic and racial groups.

While the category of interactions with local law enforcement revealed a more varied result—whites (79), Latinos (66), African-Americans (65) and Asian-Americans (70)—they all registered significantly higher than the overall quality of life rating, 59.

The quality of health care also received relatively positive scores, ranging from 76 by college graduates to 82 among those with a household income of more than \$120,000.

## **The neutrals**

The daily commute to work is the driving force in the transportation category. If your commute is 15 minutes or less, the satisfaction level is high (80). It goes downhill from there based on the length of the drive: 30 to 44 minutes (56) and 45 minutes or longer (47).

The availability of public transportation also received slightly above average scores, topping out with Latinos (68) and African-Americans (68), groups that indicated they are more likely to use mass transit.

Other neutral rankings went to public safety—which includes safety from terrorism/mass shootings, violent crime, property crime, and earthquakes/fires—and the environment, which includes the quality of tap water and steps being taken to deal with the drought, among other issues.

The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.6 percent.

Participants' responses were weighted according to the salience they assigned to each quality of life factor.

**More information:** View the survey questions and top-line results: [issuu.com/uclapubaffairs/docs/ ... wt-ucla-index-survey](https://issuu.com/uclapubaffairs/docs/...wt-ucla-index-survey)

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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