

Apprenticeships give workers of color a leg up on clean-energy careers, says study

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A new [study](#) from UC Berkeley's Green Economy Program shows that joint union-employer apprenticeship programs have helped people of color get training and career-track jobs building California's clean energy infrastructure.

The impact of California's climate policies on jobs and equity has been an important concern for state decision makers, including the state Legislature's current debates on SB 100, which sets a goal of 100 percent [clean energy](#) by 2045. The report, "Diversity in California's Clean Energy Workforce," is the first research to address with quantitative data the question of who is getting into jobs and apprentice training programs in the construction of renewables.

The report examines data for the ethnic, racial, and gender composition of enrollment in state-certified apprenticeship programs for the electrician, ironworker, and operating engineer unions, which have worked on the majority of renewable energy plants built in California from 2002-2017. The report authors also looked at wage and residence data on the electrical workers employed on 27 solar power plants in Kern County from 2012-2017 to determine how many were living in disadvantaged communities as designated by the California Environmental Protection Agency – those most burdened by pollution and most vulnerable to its effects, based on socio-economic factors and health indicators.

According to Carol Zabin, co-author of the report and director of the

Green Economy Program, "The data we have examined shows that joint union-employer apprenticeship programs have helped people of color get training and career-track jobs building California's clean energy infrastructure. Construction jobs in utility-scale renewables are good jobs, so these programs provide workers a path to the middle class."

Key findings include:

- More than half (60 percent) of those entering these apprenticeship programs are people of color.
- New apprentices' racial and ethnic diversity varied significantly among unions for electricians, ironworkers, and operating engineers:
 - - While Latinos make up a little over one-third of California's labor force, they represent more than half of all new apprentice ironworkers (53 percent), just over one-third (34 percent) of electrical workers, and one-fifth (23 percent) of operating engineers.
 - While African-Americans are 6 percent of the statewide labor force, they make up 4 percent of new apprentice electricians, 6 percent of ironworkers, and 9 percent of operating engineers.
- Inclusion of veterans in these apprenticeship programs is higher in all three trades than in the state's workforce as a whole.
- Despite the progress for other groups, women's participation in apprenticeship programs remains minimal, mirroring the rest of California's construction industry.
- Data from the 27 [solar power plants](#) built in Kern County in 2012-2017 showed that 43 percent of entry-level workers lived in disadvantaged communities, and 47 percent lived in communities with unemployment rates of at least 13 percent.

- On the 27 solar projects in Kern County, starting pay for entry-level panel installers in 2016 was \$16.12 per hour plus \$50 per day for travel. First-year apprentices started at \$16.49 per hour plus full benefits, and receive wage increases as they move through their five-year training program. They graduate as journey electricians earning more than \$40 per hour.

California has made this progress toward inclusion in good, career-track clean energy jobs because most large-scale [renewable energy plants](#) have been built under project labor agreements. These agreements require union wage and benefit standards and provide free training through apprenticeship programs, creating a pathway upwards for workers. The significant diversity in renewable construction [jobs](#) is a result of recruitment efforts by unions and the location of many renewable power plants in Kern County and other areas in southern and central California where there are high concentrations of [disadvantaged communities](#). Further inclusion can be supported by specific programs such as publicly funded pre-apprenticeship programs and local or targeted hire agreements.

"The Renewables Portfolio Standard in California has played a crucial role in driving this growth, and future progress is likely if the Legislature approves SB 100," said Zabin.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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