Indigenous Migrants in Los Angeles County

USC Dornsife
Equity Research Institute

CIELO
COMUNIDADES INDÍGENAS EN LIDERAZGO

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Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful to staf at Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo (CIELO) and University of Southern California Equity Research Institute (ERI) for their support of this project. At CIELO we extend our appreciation to Pablo Ek, Alba Gonzalez, Angel Novelo, Aurora Pedro, and Antonia Velázquez for helping to inform this report through interviews. Thank you also to Jon Endow and Genesis Ek for audio visual production and assistance for the interviews. At ERI we want to thank Rhonda Ortiz and Manuel Pastor for their guidance and advice throughout the report process. We also want to thank Sabrina Kim for mapping, brief design, and overall design coordination and Cristina Rutter for design and layout.

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Joanna Lee, Lupe Renteria Salome, and Janet Martinez
Lead Authors

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

We understand and acknowledge that our own lived experience, social location, backgrounds, and intersectional identities afects our work as researchers. As a practice self refexivity and to acknowledge the social positions we are writing from, we provide a brief background of the authors.

Joanna Lee is a Senior Project Manager at ERI born in Southern California and raised by immigrant parents from Hong Kong in a middle class Los Angeles suburb.

Lupe Renteria Salome is a Data Analyst at ERI born in Acapulco, Guerrero, Mexico, and raised in the border city of San Diego. She descends from the Me'phaa (Tlapaneco) community in Mexico.

Janet Martinez is the Vice Executive Director of CIELO born in Los Angeles, California and raised by her Zapotec family and community.

All photos in this report were provided by CIELO.

Land Acknowledgment

We acknowledge that the University of Southern California and in particular, the Equity Research Institute, as well as CIELO, are on the traditional homelands of the Tongva people. The land we call Los Angeles County is located within the ancestral and unceded homelands of the Chumash, Tataviam, Serrano, Cahuilla, Juaneño, Luiseño, and Tongva Peoples. We pay our respects to the traditional caretakers of the land, the Tongva Nation, their ancestors, elders, and relations past, present, and forthcoming who have been indigenous to this region for at least 7,000 years.[1] While L.A. County and California state are home to many Indigenous groups, including people from Tribal Nations who were the original inhabitants of these lands, there are also many Native Americans from other regions of the land now known as the U.S. (representing hundreds of non Californian Tribes and Native Nations, many of whom were forced into California and Californian urban areas via U.S. policies and actions, such as the Indian Relocation Act), and Indigenous immigrants (including Canadian First Nations and Inuit, Mexican,Central, and South American Indigenous Peoples, and Pacifc Islander Nations and People), many of whom were also forced to migrate to California due to U.S. foreign policies and actions.

We encourage readers to acknowledge that the land we reside on was taken by a settler colonial state; one that violently exploited Native, immigrant, migrant, and enslaved people stealing labor, knowledge, and skills to build what we now call Los Angeles County. Indigenous stewardship and rightful claims to these lands have never been voluntarily relinquished nor legally extinguished. Tongva/Gabrielino people continue to reside in and around what we now call Los Angeles County the county that is currently home to the largest population of native people in the United States. Immigrant communities and U.S. born citizens alike must grapple with what it means to live on stolen land, understand our roles and responsibilities as guests on Native American homelands, and be committed to racial justice and social change by supporting the struggle for Native Nations' sovereignty and self determination. We recognize this land acknowledgment is limited and requires us to engage in an ongoing process of learning and accountability.

Introduction

Los Angeles County is home to many immigrant communities from across the globe including "Indigenous migrants" who are Indigenous people from what is now known as Mexico and Central America. Indigenous communities in Mexico and Central America have long been subject to violence and oppression, often experiencing displacement and discrimination, before feeing their homelands to places such as the United States. According to the International Organization for Migration, displacement of Indigenous peoples can be caused by natural phenomena such as natural disasters and environmental degradation and human activities such as development projects, industrial environmental destruction, armed conflict, and governmental policies.[2] For Central America, the drivers of migration include poverty, organized crime, climate disasters, and unstable political systems.[3]

Los Angeles has become a destination for migrants displaced from their homelands because, in the words of one organizer, there is already a community here to welcome them.[4] For decades, migrants have settled in Los Angeles, setting up businesses and contributing to the diverse cultures of the region. From the Oaxacan corridor in the Pico-Union neighborhood, to the Guatemalan night market in the Westlake neighborhood near MacArthur Park and

> ***"We're not migrating here because we thought LA is very sunny. You know, like, I want to see a palm tree. Believe it or not, there's so many palm trees in Guatemala. and it's actually a whole industry, a palm oil industry that's forcefully displacing [Guatemalan Indigenous] communities... people aren't migrating here because of the American dream. They're migrating here because they're forced to seek opportunities that are not accessible to them in their homeland."***
>
> Aurora Pedro, Akateko and Q'anjob'al Interpreter,CIELO

the South Central Los Angeles mural created by Zapotec and Mayan artists, Indigenous Mexican and Central American communities are a visible presence throughout the city of Los Angeles. Indigenous migrant communities have long organized themselves – both in their homelands as well as here in the U.S. – to provide mutual aid, create a support system, and maintain their cultural practices.

Though Indigenous migrants are often longtime residents of Los Angeles County, the connection to their homeland remains strong. Organizers share that many continue to celebrate their Indigenous traditions and participate in binational organizations in order to stay connected to governing structures and engage in advocacy for Indigenous communities in their homelands.[5] Regular cultural events across the city celebrate Indigenous Mexican and Central American culture, bringing together communities to honor traditions from their country of origin. Since the 1980s, communities have organized yearly cultural celebrations for their hometowns "because even though maybe they're not able to go back home and celebrate, they can celebrate with their community here in Los Angeles."[6] For example, the traditional Oaxacan festivity, Guelagetza, has been organized by community leaders and Zapotec communities involved with the Regional Organization of Oaxaca (ORO) since 1988.[7] This celebration, which includes traditional meals, dance, and music, honors and afrms their Oaxacan heritage.

INDIGENOUS MIGRANTS:

While the term refers to experiences of many groups internationally, we use "Indigenous migrants" in this report to refer to those descendants of frst peoples native to the countries in Mexico and Central America who now live in the United States. Similar to American Indian communities, Indigenous migrants are native to lands that have been colonized. Indigenous migrants move from their homelands due to a host of reasons including discrimination, persecution, and violence in their home countries, environmental degradation in part due to climate change and industrialization, and exclusion from economic opportunities.

In the same way these communities have long organized to celebrate and preserve their cultures, they have used their community structures to support each other in times of emergency, such as during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the Maya K'iche' emergency committee, a community led group,[8] organized a mutual aid fund to take care of expenses for Indigenous families who needed to send a loved one's remains to their country of origin. In other instances, documented Indigenous people receiving government aid organized and distributed grocery bags to undocumented families who were not eligible to receive state aid.[9] Organizations in Los Angeles responded with urgency and created funds to distribute cash assistance, grocery gift cards and food boxes to undocumented families struggling to pay for food. CIELO like other Indigenous migrant-serving organizations across the state, developed linguistically appropriate educational outreach for families to receive information about COVID-19

in their Indigenous languages, including an informational workplace safety video for frontline workers.[10] Similarly, in 2022 when Los Angeles Politicians and civic leaders were overheard disparaging Indigenous migrant communities in leaked audio tapes of closed-door meetings,[11] they were able to galvanize community members to turn out and demand accountability.

> ***Many of the things that we do to make our cultures heard is to speak [to] the city councils, to call in favor of laws that are passing or [against] laws that don't agree with us. Something common to our culture is that we unite to make ourselves known, in parties, demonstrations, and through everything we celebrate. We make ourselves visible and I believe that the city also recognizes us."***
>
> Angel Novelo, Maya Yucateco organizer, CIELO

Though some of the fastest growing immigrant communities, Indigenous migrant populations from Mexico and Central America are often grouped into the broader "Latinidad"[12] racial category, invisibilizing their indigeneity.[13] As a result, Indigenous migrant communities have long fought to advocate for visibility in data, separate from the broad Latino umbrella. In addition, many administrative datasets in the U.S., such as the census, often report on Indigenous identity as a specifc racial group and/or may only report on data for specifc U.S.-recognized Indian tribal identities.[14] This ongoing invisibility and misrepresentation has consequences for the community, as Indigenous migrants navigate racialized systems that often lack culturally competent services. For example, many Indigenous migrants do not speak Spanish or English, afecting their ability to access services and navigate community resources. Organizations serving Indigenous migrant communities like CIELO often fll in the gaps, providing vital services including interpretation and translation when government agencies, educational institutions, and others fail to do so.

This report seeks to provide insights and data for those seeking to better understand and serve Indigenous migrant communities in Los Angeles County. Due to the virtual lack of detailed U.S. Census Bureau data on Indigenous migrant communities, we instead rely on community survey responses as our primary data source. These data were collected by CIELO between 2021 and 2023 during their outreach events. See our data methods section in Appendix A for more on how data were processed and analyzed. This report begins with a brief overview of the county's Indigenous migrant communities and a discussion about our use of community data, followed by a summary of data fndings, and considerations moving forward for institutions interested in better serving Indigenous migrant communities and partnering with community-based Indigenous migrant-led and serving organizations. We hope this report serves as a resource to immigrant-serving organizations, including foundations, government agencies, community-based organizations, and others seeking to improve the lives of all residents across the county.

About the Data

There has been little data on Indigenous migrant communities in administrative datasets such as the U.S. Census, often due to the broad racial categorizations which renders Indigenous migrant groups invisible under the "Latino" racial group.[15] While there are some disaggregated data in the Census' decennial fle for those reporting as being from "Latin American Indian tribes", these numbers are limited to general population counts and some household data in the full decennial 2020 Census count.[16] In the Census' annual American Community Survey (ACS) summary fle data there are some estimates on social and economic characteristics for Indigenous Migrant communities but data are grouped together under broader categories (e.g. "Latin American Indian", "Mexican Indian (all tribes)"), and there is limited data by specifc Indigenous groups, particularly for sub-state geographies.[17] Similar to the summary fle data, ACS microdata provides estimates aggregated into the overly broad "Mexican American Indian" category. Due to the limitations of the ACS, we included only full 100 percent count data by disaggregated group from the 2020 Census in Appendix B as a reference point.

As a result of the relative lack of inclusion in administrative datasets, community data eforts such as survey data from CIELO's outreach events ofer a unique opportunity to better understand the diversity of Indigenous Migrant communities throughout Los Angeles County. By designing in-person surveys administered by trusted community messengers in Indigenous languages, CIELO's staf were able to gather data on their communities in ways that larger governmental survey and polling eforts have not. These data, gathered during a variety of community outreach events, including food distribution and vaccination outreach eforts, provide important insights into the lives

of Los Angeles County's Indigenous migrant communities not seen in reports on immigrant communities that rely on data produced only for broad racial groups. For more on the survey methodology, please see Appendix A.

> ***"Numbers are important. Data is important. If we don't have data, we don't exist, and if we don't exist, there are no services, no language supports, and it becomes a human rights violation against Indigenous people."***
>
> Odilia Romero, Co-founder and Executive Director, CIELO

Though this report is a frst-of-its kind, this is a continuation of CIELO's work to collect and distribute data on their communities. In 2021, CIELO published a frst-of-its kind interactive website that featured data on Indigenous migrant communities living in Los Angeles County. The interactive maps and charts included survey data on recipients of CIELO's "Undocu-Indigenous Fund", a solidarity fund created in 2020 to provide small grants to residents that did not qualify for the broad federal assistance dollars distributed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.[18] CIELO staf continued to gather data at additional events in the years following this frst data project, hoping to build on these fndings. The new data in this report follow the previous work of the interactive map with data collected by CIELO through surveys between 2021 and 2023.

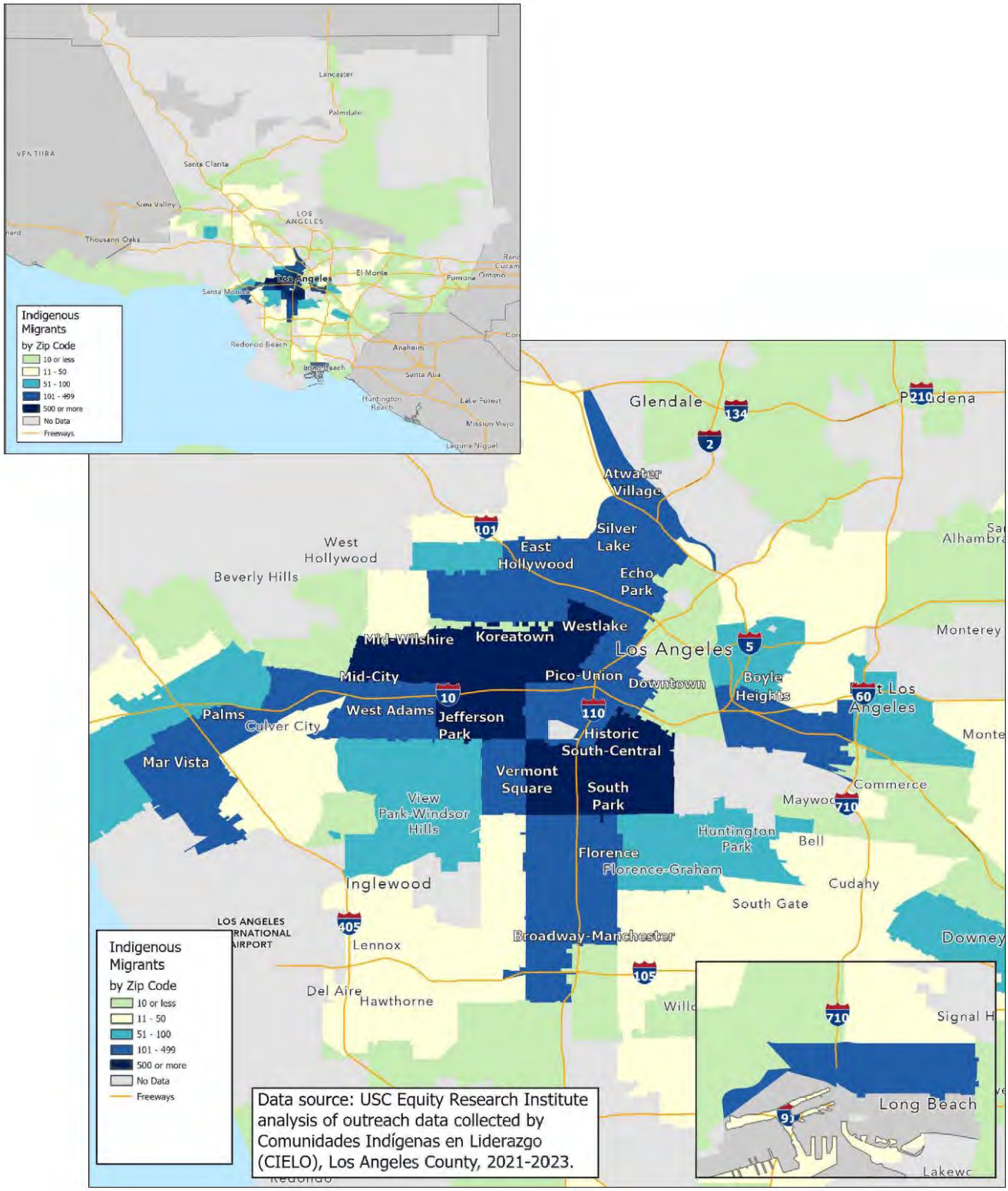
Data Findings

1 Indigenous migrant communities live across the county, with core communities located across the core of the City of Los Angeles.

Indigenous migrant communities live in neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles County. Over 36,500 residents countywide reported being from an Indigenous community in Mexico or Central America in the 2020 Census.[19] Los Angeles County was home to about 40 percent of Californians who reported being from an Indigenous migrant community in 2020 – the largest concentration of those reporting Indigeneity from Mexico and Central America among all counties statewide.

While census data is often considered the most robust source of population data, this is likely an undercount[20] as accurately counting and reporting data on smaller communities continues to be a challenge, particularly for those who do not speak, read, or write in English and may live in neighborhoods identifed by the census as "hard-to-count", among other factors.[21]

Figure 1. Map of Indigenous Migrants Reached by CIELO's Outreach Programs and Services, by zip code, Los Angeles County, 2021-2023



Basemap Credit: County of Los Angeles, California State Parks, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, SafeGraph, METI/NASA, USGS, Bureau of Land Management, EPA, NPS, USDA, USFWS, Port of Long Beach, City of Long Beach, GeoTechnologies, Inc.

Indigenous communities from Mexico and Central America are also long-time social, cultural, and economic contributors to Los Angeles. In October 2023, after years of community advocacy, the City of Los Angeles ofcially designated a 1.6 mile area on Pico Boulevard in the Pico-Union neighborhood as the "Oaxacan Corridor".[22] This area has been home to many businesses providing food, products, and services that originate from Indigenous communities in Mexico. On July 2024, the Regional Organization of Oaxaca (ORO) and Indigenous community leaders celebrated the inauguration of the Oaxacan Corridor on Pico Blvd between Arlington and Normandie during their annual Convite celebration. This is an annual celebration where Indigenous Oaxacan delegations from diferent Indigenous groups participate in an afternoon desfle (parade) through the streets of Los Angeles with their traditional music, dances and vestimentas (traditional clothing). The community-led celebration centered on the tremendous eforts from the Oaxacan Indigenous businesses and ORO who dedicated over 10 years organizing for recognition of their economic and cultural contributions. In the future, Indigenous oaxaqueños envision more art in the area that refects the vibrant colors alive in Oaxaca, Mexico.[23]

> ***"In Westlake where there are street vendors from Guatemala…who sell what is most commonly found in Guatemala but now it's in L.A., bringing these home recipes to L.A. And if you walk down sixth Street and Bonnie Brae, you will hear Q'anjob'al being spoken. You will hear Kiche being spoken…"***
>
> Aurora Pedro, Akateko and Q'anjob'al Interpreter, CIELO

Near MacArthur Park in the Westlake neighborhood is "Little Guatemala" which includes a Guatemalan night market established and maintained by the community as an important cultural place.[24] In South Los Angeles the "South Central Dreams" mural by Zapotec migrant artists connects communities here with their Oaxacan roots. Most notably, Indigenous migrant communities are often vital members of the food industry countywide. We see Indigenous Mexican and Central Americans working in many restaurant kitchens across Los Angeles, driving and unloading produce and sharing their cultural dishes.[25]

2 Los Angeles County is home to people from many different Mexican and Central American Indigenous communities, speaking many different languages.

There are many Indigenous communities throughout Mexico and Central America, each with their own distinct cultural traditions, practices, and languages. A 2024 report on Indigenous communities worldwide reported that there are hundreds of Indigenous languages in the Americas, with over 364 in Mexico alone.[26] Los Angeles County is home to at least 24 distinct Indigenous migrant communities that hail from Mexico and Central American countries, according to survey data collected by CIELO (fgure 2). Over two-thirds of those accessing services from CIELO reported being Zapotec. The next most common groups served by CIELO were K'iche', Chinanteco, Mixteco, and Mixe (fgure 3).

> ***"Most people talk about everything Mexican, Guatemalan, Salvadoran. They talk as if we are in a bottle and that we are Latinos...We have many languages here in Los Angeles. Many of them think that they recognize us as being Latino and that's it, and they don't see us as Indigenous. They see us as Latinos and that we all speak Spanish and that we all come from Guatemala. But it's a very diverse culture. We have many cultures here."***
>
> Angel Novelo, Maya Yucateco Organizer, CIELO

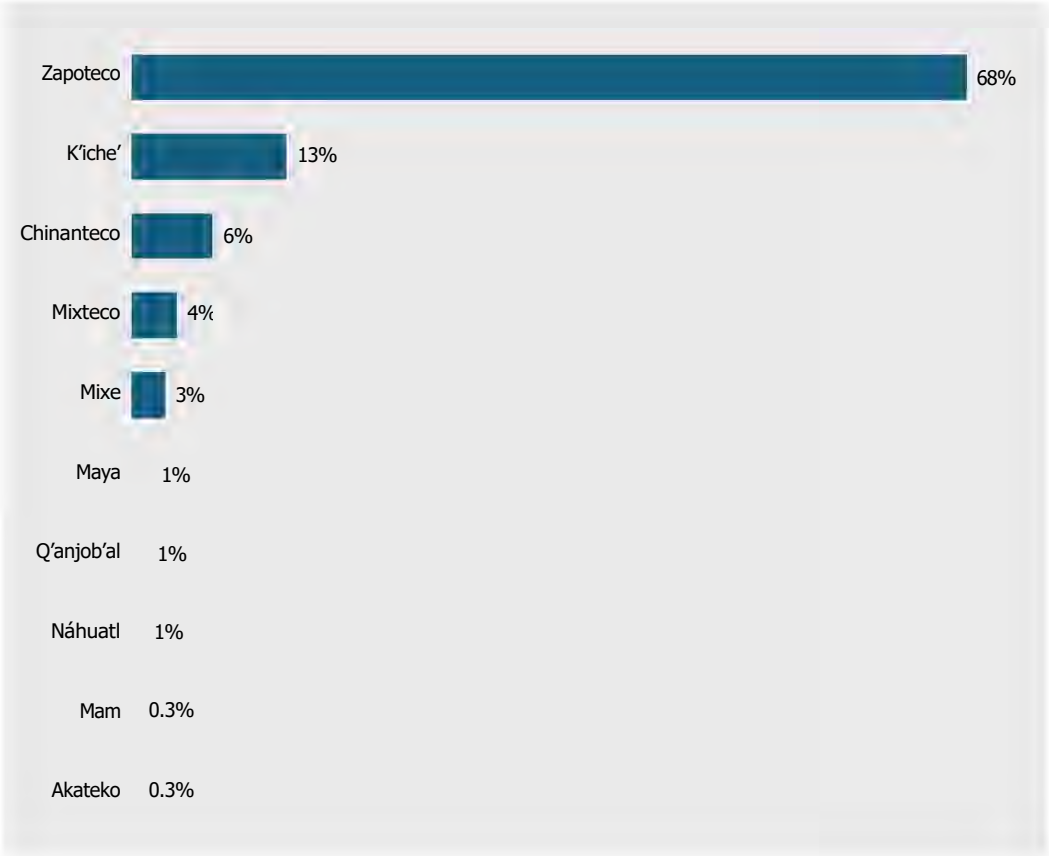
Many of those surveyed also reported speaking an Indigenous language. About 36 Indigenous migrant languages were reported in CIELO's survey data (fgure 4). Common languages spoken included Zapoteco, K'iche', Chinanteco, Mixe, Q'anjob'al, Mam, Mixteco, Náhuatl, Maya, and Akateko (fgure 5). CIELO organizers shared that many Indigenous migrant Angelenos do not speak English or Spanish but are often provided with assistance in only one of these languages. One organizer shared that the lack of interpretation and translation services in Indigenous languages means that the communities do not know what services they can access. Another organizer shared: "If my mom were here; she doesn't speak Spanish well, she can't read or write, how could she fll out a form where there is only the option of Latino without any other option, not even "other"? That is simply the challenge that our community has faced here and that has limited the access to the assistance that the county provides." One of CIELO's main areas of work includes providing interpretation and translation services to those needing assistance for a variety of services including those receiving medical treatment and appearing in court.

Figure 2. Indigenous Migrant Communities Reached by CIELO's Outreach Programs and Services, Los Angeles County, 2021-2023

Achi	K iche	Náhuatl
Akateko	Kaqchikel	Popoloca
Amuzgo	Mam	Purépecha
Ch ol	Maya	Q anjob al
Ch orti	Mazahua	Tarahumara
Chatino	Mazateco	Tlapaneco
Chinanteco	Mixe	Tzotzil
Huichol	Mixteco	Zapoteco

Source: USC Equity Research Institute analysis of outreach data collected by Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo (CIELO), Los Angeles County, 2021-2023.

Figure 3. Top 10 Indigenous Migrant Communities Reached by CIELO's Outreach Programs and Services, Los Angeles County, 2021-2023



Source: USC Equity Research Institute analysis of outreach data collected by Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo (CIELO), Los Angeles County, 2021-2023. Note: Percentages are based on those reporting a specifc Indigenous Migrant community.

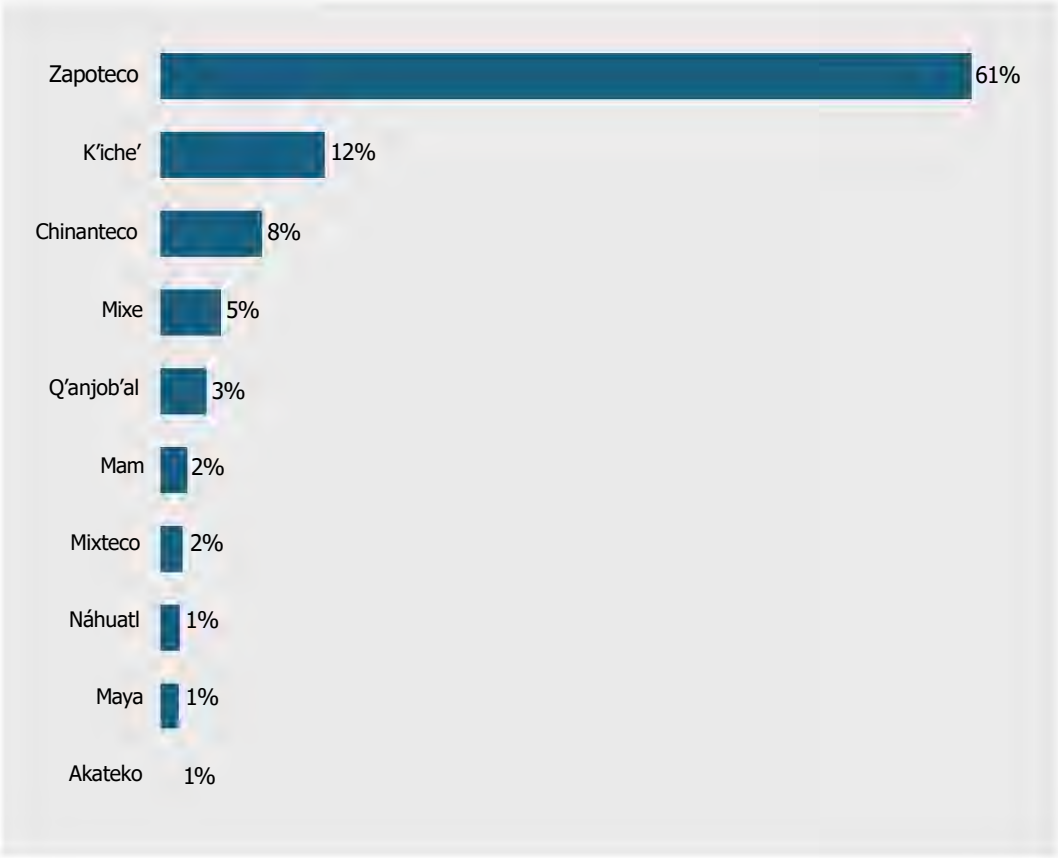
> ***For us, unfortunately, they tried to erase us from their culture, they took everything from us, but we still kept [our] language, which is a nice way to say we are still here... Thanks to our resilience that characterizes Indigenous people, we can overcome many things."***
>
> Angel Novelo, Maya Yucateco organizer, CIELO

Figure 4. Indigenous Languages Spoken by Those Reached by CIELO's Outreach Programs and Services, Los Angeles County, 2021-2023

Achi	Ixil	Otomi	Sakapultek
Akateko	K iche	Poconchi	Tlapaneco
Amuzgo	Kaqchikel	Popoloca	Totocapa
Ch orti	Mam	Popti	Totonaco
Chatino	Maya	Poqomam	Tz utujil
Chinanteco	Mazateco	Purépecha	Tzeltal
Chol	Mixe	Q anjob al	Tzotzil
Chuj	Mixteco	Q eqchi	Uspanteko
Cuicateco	Náhuatl	Quechua	Zapoteco

Source: USC Equity Research Institute analysis of outreach data collected by Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo (CIELO), Los Angeles County, 2021-2023.

Figure 5. Top 10 Indigenous Languages Spoken by Those Reached by CIELO's Outreach Programs and Services, Los Angeles County, 2021-2023

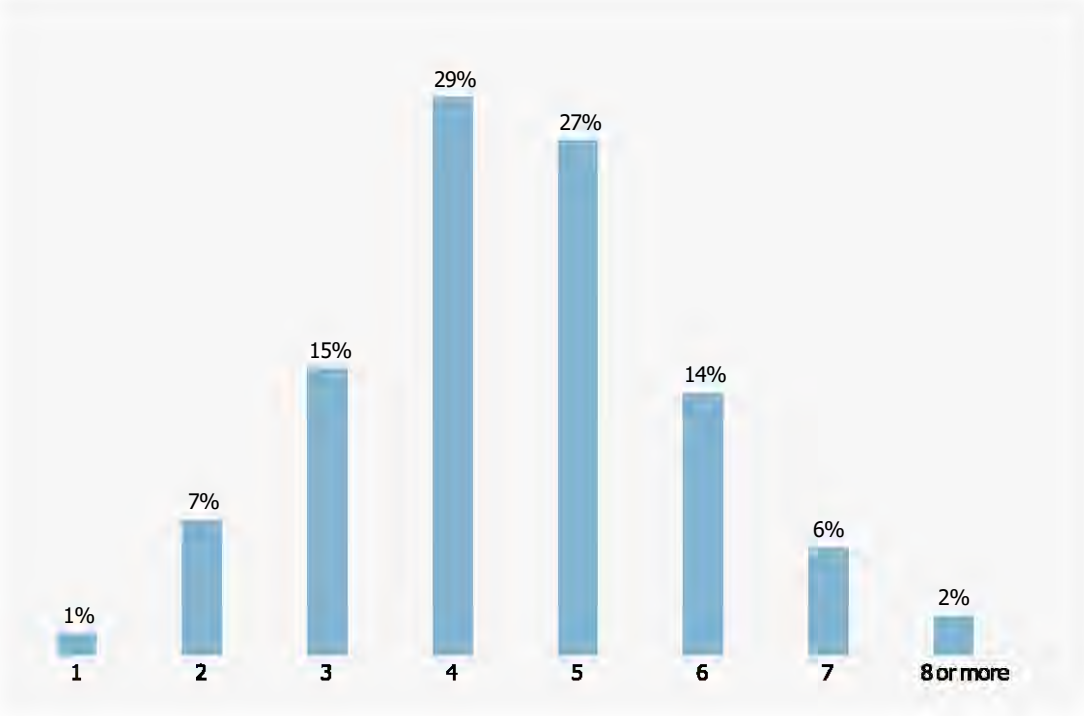


Source: USC Equity Research Institute analysis of outreach data collected by Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo (CIELO), Los Angeles County, 2021-2023. Note: percentages are based on those who reported speaking a language other than English or Spanish.

3 Many Indigenous migrants receiving services from CIELO had larger—and younger—families than the county average.

Survey data on family size collected during food aid and other giveaway events shows that those receiving services from CIELO were supporting large families. The average family size was 4.5 among those Indigenous migrants served by CIELO's outreach programs and services. About 29 percent of households surveyed had 4 people while about 27 percent had 5 family members (fgure 6). In comparison, the average household size among all residents in Los Angeles County was about 2.89 people per household, according to 2022 American Community Survey estimates.[27] In addition, limited 2020 Census data published for a few Indigenous migrant groups shows that family households were more common than nonfamily households among Indigenous migrant communities in Los Angeles County. About 86 percent of Zapotec, 82 percent of Purépecha, and 80 percent of Maya households were family households, rates higher than the overall county average (67 percent).[28] When asked about the presence of children in their households, about 86 percent of those surveyed by CIELO said they lived with children younger than 18, a rate higher than the county average (32%).[29] Data from these surveys showed that even as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to wane, Indigenous migrants with large families and young children in Los Angeles County continued to access food aid and other assistance.

Figure 6. Household size of Indigenous Migrants Reached by CIELO's Outreach Programs and Services, Los Angeles County, 2021-2023



Source: USC Equity Research Institute analysis of outreach data collected by Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo (CIELO), 2021-2023. Note: Percentages are based on those who reported their household size.

LANGUAGE ACCESS IS A CRITICAL ISSUE FOR INDIGENOUS MIGRANT FAMILIES:

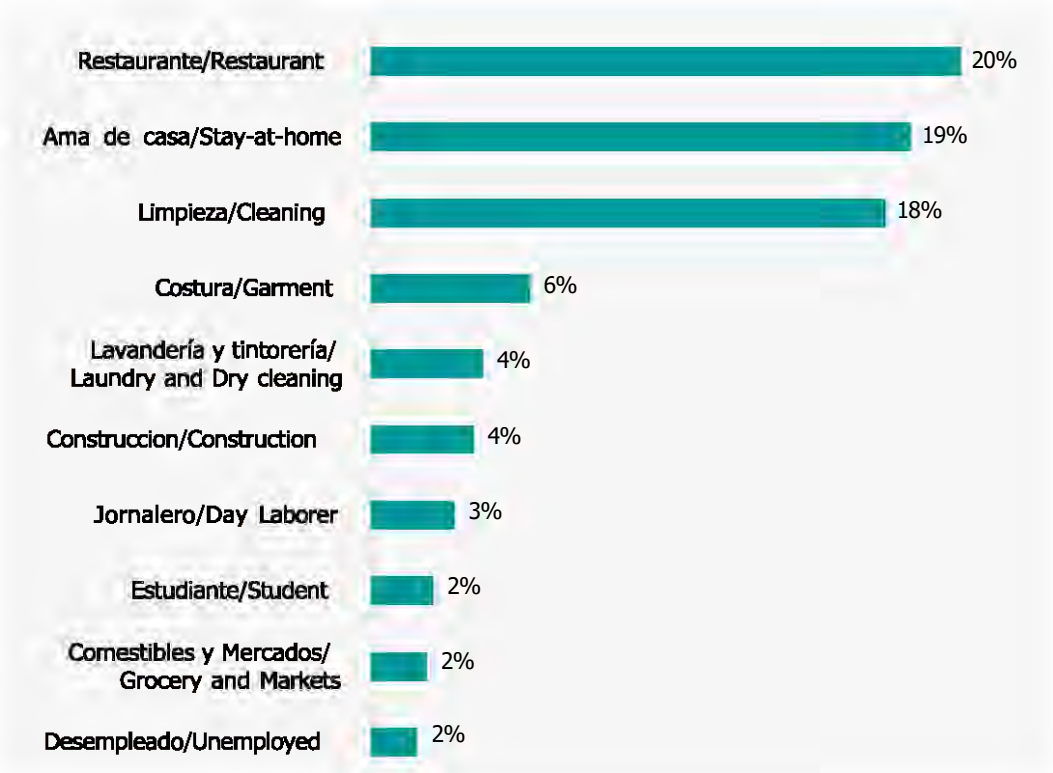
One of CIELO's interpreters shared that she had interpreted for an Indigenous migrant family who had immigrated about 5 to 10 years ago with children born here and had one child diagnosed with a very severe illness. Initially, the mother was only provided with an interpreter who spoke Spanish, not in her own language, despite being a regular patient at the hospital. The mother hadn't been informed in her own language what the medication treatment would look like and how serious it was when the medication ran out for her child's illness.

Once the situation became serious, CIELO's interpreter, who spoke the same language as the mother, was brought in to explain what had happened. The child was admitted overnight because the situation was very serious and tragically passed away. Failure to provide appropriate interpretation from the beginning can have dire implications for families as they navigate the healthcare system as well as other institutions.

4 Many Indigenous migrant workers were employed in jobs considered "essential work" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data collected by CIELO between 2021 and 2023 provides insights into how Indigenous migrant communities fared during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as in the years after health and safety measures were lifted and businesses began to operate more regularly. About 35 percent of Indigenous migrants surveyed between 2021 and 2023 reported that they were "essential workers"[30] during the pandemic shutdowns. Most notably, Indigenous migrant communities were and still are vital members of the food industry countywide. About one in fve (20%) of Indigenous migrant workers surveyed between 2021 and 2023 worked in restaurants. In comparison, about 8 percent of Latinx immigrants in Los Angeles County worked in food preparation and serving jobs.[31] Others were employed as house cleaners, garment workers, laundry and dry cleaning workers, construction workers, and day laborers (fgure 7). Many also stayed at home caring for their families. Most of the top occupations reported by CIELO's survey data are low-wage jobs requiring physical labor but typically do not provide benefts and are often vulnerable to exploitative labor practices such as wage theft. Organizers and interpreters interviewed shared that many were self-employed as street vendors as well, facing additional risks of violence and theft. While many street vendors struggled during the height of the pandemic, some also stepped up to support each other as well as provide food aid to communities.[32]

Figure 7. Top 10 Occupations of Indigenous Migrant Workers Reached by CIELO's Services and Outreach Programs, Los Angeles County, 2021 to 2023



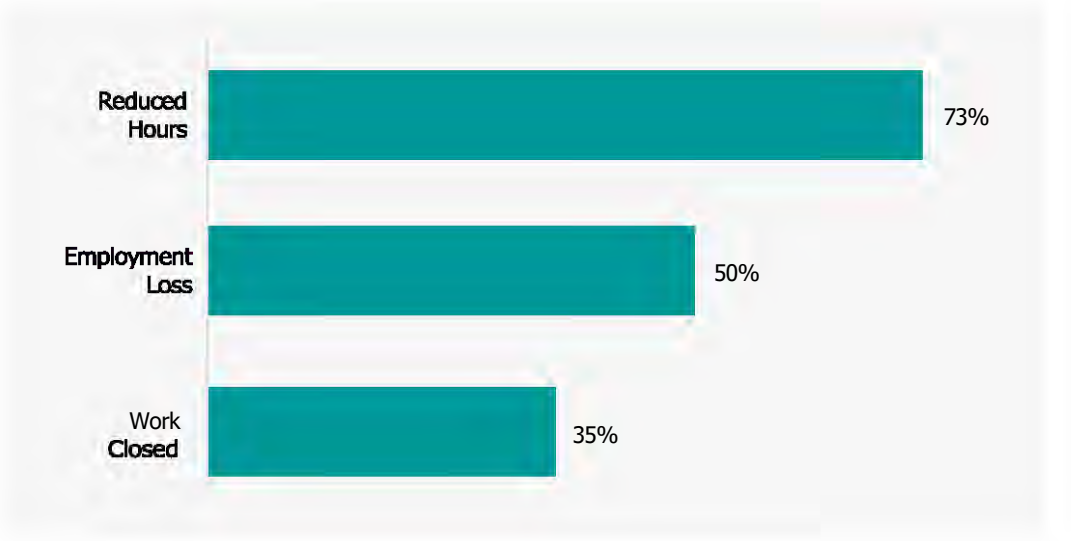
Source: USC Equity Research Institute analysis of outreach data collected by Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo (CIELO), 2021-2023. Note: Proportions are based on those who reported their occupation.

> ***I've also provided interpretation [for] migrant workers in a factory…And unfortunately, this company was basically committing wage theft. But migrant workers [were not told] what their rights are, what possible resources, legal resources were available to them. When they see any fgure of authorities coming to them… speaking to them in a language that they don't understand and they're coming from a community like Guatemala where they've experienced a lot of just cyclical violence and they migrated because they were forced and forcefully displaced, any fgure of authority is going to be a fgure of fear. So what ends up happening is the community will leave [their job] before they even understand what resources are available to them. [These are the] consequences of when institutions disregard their indigeneity."***
>
> Aurora Pedro, Akateco and Q'anjob'al interpreter, CIELO

5 Indigenous migrants workers reached by CIELO struggled with job insecurity in the years following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Between 2021 and 2023, CIELO surveyed Indigenous migrant communities during their food and giveaway events to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic was afecting their ability to earn a living. Nearly three-quarters reported that they had experienced reduced work hours. Half reported losing their job while over one-third reported that their work had closed due to the pandemic. One organizer shared that many people lost their businesses and their savings but because of their immigration status and a language barrier, they were unable to apply for government assistance and unemployment. On top of job insecurity, many workers were facing health and safety risks at their in-person jobs. CIELO was one of many community organizations across Los Angeles County that hosted personal protective equipment (PPE) giveaways and vaccination outreach events to ensure that communities were educated and could access the vaccines when available. About 56 percent of those surveyed had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Figure 8. Employment Instability for Indigenous Migrant Workers Reached by CIELO's Services and Outreach Programs, Los Angeles County, 2021 to 2023



Source: USC Equity Research Institute analysis of outreach data collected by Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo (CIELO), 2021-2023. Note: percentages are based on those who responded to questions on COVID-19 pandemic afects.

> ***I think the pandemic really showed the instability that was already there…The most hard hit industries were those where Indigenous migrants are working for, like the garment industry, the restaurant industry… there still isn't a lot of safety net for these communities, especially undocumented communities."***
>
> Aurora Pedro, Akateco and Q'anjob'al interpreter, CIELO

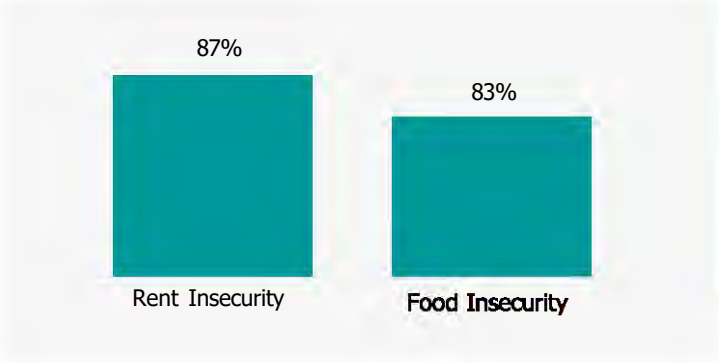
6 Indigenous migrant communities reached by CIELO struggled to pay for food and rent following the height of the pandemic.

In the years following the temporary shutdowns implemented to reduce the spread of COVID-19 many were able to get back on their feet as businesses reopened. However, Indigenous migrant families continued to face economic uncertainty as many were already living at the margins. During the height of the pandemic in 2020, CIELO provided financial assistance to 2,500 Indigenous migrant residents who did not qualify for aid as a part of their "Undocu-Indigenous fund".[33] However in following years, families continued to struggle to make ends meet. Survey data from CIELO's aid events between 2021 and 2023 show that most were struggling to pay for rent and food (fgure 9).

Despite citywide[34] and countywide[35] moratoriums on rent increases and evictions for non-payment between March 2020 and February 2023, many reported challenges with paying for housing during these years. Anecdotally, organizers shared that their community continues to struggle as rents have increased in recent years and many have been evicted from their apartments because they don't have information on how to advocate for their rights as tenants. According to Odilia Romero, co-founder and executive director of CIELO, "Although there was a rent moratorium, a lot of people did not know about it because everything was given in Spanish. But not only that, the landlord's did not respect this moratorium and continued sending messages saying you need to pay your rent. We're going to charge you late fees."[36]

> ***A lot of Indigenous migrants are still facing housing instability, having to share an apartment with two other families because they can't access the resources to housing, either because they're undocumented or they don't know how to read or write... they don't speak Spanish or English... so they're not given interpretation. This creates a place where even though we're not told this, by all of these barriers, we're basically told, 'You don't belong here'."***
>
> Aurora Pedro, Akateco and Q'anjob'al interpreter, CIELO

Figure 9. Food and Rent Insecurity for Indigenous Migrant Individuals Reached by CIELO's Services and Outreach Programs, Los Angeles County, 2021 to 2023



Source: USC Equity Research Institute analysis of outreach data collected by Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo (CIELO), 2021-2023.

Note: Percentages are based on those who responded to questions on COVID-19 pandemic afects.

Considerations

Los Angeles County can strengthen its commitment to providing a welcoming atmosphere for Indigenous migrant communities by implementing inclusive and equitable immigrant policies.

Both the City and County of Los Angeles have institutionalized their support of immigrants in many ways including establishing Ofces of Immigrant Afairs and recognizing the contributions of individual immigrant groups through acknowledgments such as Los Angeles County's recent proclamation establishing December as "Indigenous Migrants Month". The city and county continue to make strides in immigrant-friendly policymaking as well, recognizing the 3.5 million immigrants and their families countywide. In November 2024, the Los Angeles City Council unanimously passed a sanctuary city ordinance[37] which codifed a 2017 executive directive that prevented city resources, property, or personnel from being used for immigration enforcement.[38] The city's immigrant-friendly approach has made it a target nationally, with Texas Governor Abbott sending migrants to Los Angeles in 2023 with the goal of creating chaos. However, Los Angeles' deep infrastructure of immigrant-serving organizations responded quickly to welcome and provide support and services.[39]

Additionally, it is important to continue enacting policies that ensure immigrants are able to safely live and work in Los Angeles. For example, organizers continue to advocate for increased protection to prevent immigration authorities from accessing city jails to interrogate detainees and prohibiting city agencies from sharing personal immigration

data to immigration authorities.[40] While local government agencies do provide translation and interpretation support in many other non-English languages, broadening these services out to include Indigenous migrant languages are often overlooked, in part due to relying on datasets that do not capture Indigenous migrant communities to determine languages services needed. In addition, for years, street vendors and immigrant rights organizers advocated for access to economic opportunity through the decriminalization of street vending[41] including in unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County.[42] Street vendors have faced discriminatory and unlawful vending restrictions for years even during the pandemic when brick and mortar restaurants were given more fexibility. Advocates continue to push to remove barriers to accessing permits, equipment, and space for street vendors.[43] Immigrant entrepreneurs and small businesses provide afordable and culturally diverse food for communities throughout Los Angeles County and developing laws and policies to protect them is crucial.

A more equitable Los Angeles County means strengthening language access plans across all sectors to ensure all communities, including Indigenous migrants, can contribute and thrive.

More can be done to ensure immigrants, and in particular, Indigenous migrant communities, are able to access vital services and continue to participate and contribute to our region's civic life. In interviews for this report, interpretation and translation were noted as being some of the most essential services for residents. Broadening language access policies to include more languages spoken by Indigenous migrant communities and others is one of the critical pieces toward full immigrant inclusion. Local government departments and agencies, including school districts, can establish and strengthen their partnerships with community-based and Indigenous-led groups to develop and implement language access programs. In early 2024, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a countywide language access plan[44] to ensure it includes Indigenous languages as commonly spoken languages, however, more work needs to be done to fund and move the plan toward actionable steps that expand access to more residents across the region.

While institutions seeking to serve more of their communities should include Indigenous migrant languages in their list of services, it shouldn't stop there. It is also important to engage with Indigenous migrant community-led organizations who can ofer educational and training services to institutions interested in deepening their understanding of Indigenous communities and how to engage with Indigenous migrants. Interviewees shared multiple stories about miscommunication with government agencies, medical facilities, law enforcement, and others that led to serious consequences for families. For example, organizers have shared that some who speak an Indigenous language may not be able to read nor write in their Indigenous language or in Spanish so written translated materials needed to be delivered in both written and oral methods in order to efectively distribute information. One organizer was concerned that parents who had more recently arrived often did not understand public school protocols and would not be able to access important school information to support their child's education because of the lack of interpretation services in Indigenous languages. In addition to partnering with organizations, institutions must also develop creative ways to reach Indigenous communities, like creating more audio and visual translation to share information about their services.

Community-based organizations and networks are the primary systems of support for Indigenous migrant communities who are often locked out of traditional governmental support systems – but more institutional investment from philanthropy, government, advocates, and others is still needed.

Los Angeles is a destination for Indigenous migrants who move to in the region because of the deep community networks and resources. Families who migrate speaking only their Indigenous language can fnd it difcult to integrate into their new home and access social and economic resources.[45] As a result, many Indigenous migrants rely on trusted social networks and community organizations in Los Angeles to provide support when needed. With strong social connections, Indigenous migrants also bring with them traditional practices of care for responding to community emergencies. During the pandemic when Indigenous families in the United States had a death, community members coordinated mutual aid through collections and donations for the family. CIELO's Undoc-Indigenous Fund program, which issued emergency cash assistance to about 2,500 families throughout the county, was another example of how a community organization stepped in to support the community when many Indigenous families could not access state and federal assistance due to their immigration status.

The county is also home to many immigrant-serving community-based organizations like CIELO that provide vital services for many immigrants, including Indigenous migrant communities. Often these services are used when immigrant communities are denied other resources due to citizenship requirements and language barriers. Additionally, many communities have been hesitant to access governmental resources due to fear of being deemed a "public charge", though many public benefts do not count toward becoming a public charge.[46] Community-based organizations and social networks

based on cultural ties are critical to connecting Indigenous migrant communities to resources and flling in the information gaps to ensure that residents know their rights and can access the help they need. Like many other immigrant communities, networks and resources that are specifcally tailored to their communities have been vital for Indigenous migrant communities in establishing roots here throughout the county. For example, the strong presence of Oaxacan businesses is connected to the formation of La Asociación Oaxaqueña de Negocios (The Oaxacan Business Association) by community members that helped inform each other on how to establish their business and learn how to apply for business loans. Being able to access these networks and organizations has enabled Indigenous families to create economic opportunities for themselves and their community.

Organizations and networks serving Indigenous migrant communities have been around for decades and remain trusted partners and messengers for the community, however these groups are often under-resourced and overlooked by those seeking to serve immigrant communities. More resources are needed to ensure services can reach those most afected across the county. Often those seeking to serve immigrant communities can inadvertently overlook communities that don't show up in traditional datasets and reports. Indigenous migrant community advocates spend much of their time attending public meetings, conferences, and convenings to bring awareness about their communities, spending time away from providing the essential services that their communities need. Deeper and long-term investments in and partnerships with Indigenous migrant serving organizations and community networks are needed to adequately serve the variety of needs across these diverse communities.

Improving data collection and reporting on Indigenous migrant communities are critical pieces toward ensuring these communities are considered in policy making and program planning.

Being visible in data translates into tangible benefts for communities when those providing services use data to determine which populations need their help the most. However, when data are not collected on specifc communities, they are left without tools to make the case to government agencies, foundations, and others that their communities require particular support and interventions. For example, U.S. Census data on race and ethnicity are often used to determine how funding from federal, state, and local government agencies are allocated and which communities should be prioritized

> ***"Unfortunately, the way that this world works is if there is no data, then there is no funds and it's ourselves raising these funds to provide these much needed services to communities."***
>
> Aurora Pedro, Akateco and Q'anjob'al Interpreter, CIELO

to receive these funds. Unfortunately, census data on Indigenous migrant groups are very limited and are released much later than the decennial population numbers for many other groups. As a result, these communities often do not show up in key reports about the general demographic patterns and are often overlooked by policymakers, funders, and others seeking to invest in immigrant communities. Advocates from Indigenous migrant organizations recently celebrated a new state bill which would require California's health departments to expand their data collection eforts.[47] SB 1016, the "Latino and Indigenous Health Disparities Act", signed into law in September 2024, requires state health departments to collect more detailed race, ethnicity, and language data on Latino and Indigenous populations and seven specifc indigenous languages, including Zapotec and Maya, that will accurately identify their health needs and allocate resources.[48] Though a big win, more federal, state, and local jurisdictions should follow suit and expand their data collection and reporting protocols.

Additionally, utilizing more inclusive data gathering and reporting protocols across Los Angeles County's government agencies and other organizations who work with immigrant communities countywide is the frst step toward visibility and access to resources for Indigenous migrants. Partnering with Indigenous migrant organizations who can help shape and advise on how best to collect data on their communities is another way to ensure efective data gathering eforts. For example, relying only on census data to inform access often cannot capture the nuances of a specifc culture as they may only report on communities included under broader umbrella categories. Without an inclusive and collaborative approach to data gathering practices, Indigenous migrant communities will continue to be invisible and erased from resources and opportunities which can threaten their livelihood and safety.

Community-collected data is powerful and necessary, and those seeking to partner with community-based organizations need to approach these relationships with care, respect, and integrity.

When data are not available or are inadequate in capturing lived experiences, community advocates and leaders often take it upon themselves to gather their own data to bolster narratives and infuence policy change. CIELO spent years gathering data through their services and programs, capturing individual and house level characteristics, including place of residence, country of origin, and pandemic impact. Designing and administering the surveys themselves in Indigenous languages at community events, CIELO staf understood the need to collect information on their communities in ways that built community trust and were culturally appropriate, instead of using researchers and evaluators which can often be an extractive process. Though not as aligned with traditional data gathering practices, the surveys yield rich data on Indigenous migrant communities not captured in any other administrative datasets, and unlikely to have come from more formalized survey methods. USC Equity Research Institute and CIELO spent months working closely together to better understand the data and shape the research fndings together as partners. Though this process took time, it was critical to developing an ethical, respectful, and reciprocal research partnership.

> ***"Numbers are important. Data is important. If we don't have data, we don't exist, and if we don't exist, there are no services, no language supports, and it becomes a human rights violation against Indigenous people. That's why here in Los Angeles where we do our work, we've created a map of Indigenous communities to educate people."***
>
> Odilia Romero, Co-Founder and Executive Director, CIELO

Community-engaged research should be rooted in equity practices. Academic institutions seeking to form meaningful collaborations must approach community partnerships with curiosity, close attention, and humility. One of the main ways to build and sustain trust includes respecting community processes, which can include supporting organizations to build up their own data collection protocols. This includes supporting Indigenous data sovereignty – the ability for native communities to collect, keep, and share their own data, which is particularly important for communities who have often been marginalized, exploited, and harmed by extractive institutions and systems.

Conclusion

In recent years, as Indigenous Migrant communities gained more visibility—mostly through the hard work of community organizers and advocates—there has been more awareness and acknowledgment of the rich contributions of Indigenous migrants here in Los Angeles County. For decades, Indigenous communities from Mexico and Central America have contributed to the diverse culture of this region—from Oaxacan youth brass bands sharing their traditional music, night markets, street vendors, and restaurants sprinkled throughout the city, Alebrijes and other art displayed in local museums and galleries—despite often being marginalized or assumed to be part of Latinx culture. Over the years, continued invisibility and marginalization has led to harmful assumptions and false stereotypes, pushing communities farther into the shadows, similar to dynamics they faced in their homelands. However, CIELO and others continue to push back, sharing their narratives and fghting for visibility, recognition, and equity for Indigenous migrant communities – and building relationships and partnerships to support a more inclusive conversation around what it means to be an immigrant in Los Angeles.

Though the lack of data on Indigenous migrant communities persists, particularly for larger administrative datasets, community data gathering eforts, such as CIELO's survey eforts that began 2020, are key toward bridging the information gap – and bringing these communities into the mainstream conversation. CIELO's long-term strategy to change the narrative of data visibility by collecting and publishing information on their communities themselves - while still advocating for agencies and others to collect data – is a model for combining both the need for data advocacy and action.

This report is the second data-related piece featuring unique data collected by CIELO but more data and information is needed. In order to sustain local data collection eforts beyond one-time projects, more support and funding is needed to help develop these tools that deepen our understanding of Los Angeles' Indigenous migrant communities. Beyond understanding, government agencies, community organizations, educational institutions, and others can continue to work with trusted community organizations and advocates to integrate more culturally appropriate services focused on Indigenous migrant communities. As a county with the largest number of immigrants, and the largest population of Indigenous migrants statewide, Los Angeles has an opportunity to continue being a leader in ensuring a more equitable future for all its residents.

Appendices

Appendix A: Community survey data methods

Survey data in this report was collected by CIELO staf during outreach events between 2021 and 2023. Questionnaires were designed by CIELO staf members and administered in-person at a variety of events hosted and/or attended by organizational members of CIELO. Surveys were administered by multilingual staf in multiple languages including English, Spanish, Zapotec, Maya K'iche', Maya Peninsular, Akateco, and other Indigenous languages. Responses were entered electronically into google forms.

Data used in this analysis were taken from 37 sheets of data provided by CIELO to USC ERI, which captured responses from 5 diferent types of events: food distribution, giveaway events, vaccine outreach, outreach at consulates, and tabling at community events. Of the 4185 surveys used in this analysis, 1464 were collected in 2021, 1214 in 2022, and 1490 in 2023, with 17 surveys lacking date information but present in the 37 sheets (possibly due to data collection errors).

Because data were collected while respondents were attending a variety of community outreach events and receiving services, not a randomized countywide residential survey, we can assume these may not represent the experiences of the entire Indigenous migrant population countywide. Population counts in charts and maps are estimates based on individual survey responses and additional information some respondents provided on the number of people in their household. Social and economic data are based on individual answers provided by the survey respondent as these questions were directly primarily at individual experiences.

There was considerable variability in the questionnaires used to collect responses as the surveys. For example, there was variability across surveys when asking about Indigenous identity. In some cases, respondents were asked if they were Indigenous with a corresponding yes or no answer, in other cases were asked which Indigenous community they were from which yielded a variety of responses, and in some surveys the questions about Indigeneity was not asked at all. For this analysis, the ERI research team isolated responses to those that could be identifed as Indigenous migrant communities in consultation with CIELO. This included "yes" responses to questions about Indigeneity or naming a specifc Indigenous community from Mexico or Central America.

Questionnaires were often designed to obtain information specifcally for the type of event, creating an additional level of variability. For example, age of the survey respondent was asked only for some events such as for vaccine appointment assistance but not for events focused on giveaways, where family size was asked but not age of the respondent. Questions about rent and food afordability were asked only at food and giveaway events. Some events were focused on aid to families, thus resulting in more reporting of family households. Additionally, some answers were entered into the system in both Spanish and English languages which required translation and coding for consistency across the dataset. Open-ended questions (i.e. language spoken) similarly had to be coded to group similar responses together.

In addition, some respondents had attended more than one event hosted by CIELO and as a result, had flled out the survey more than one time. Unifying the data across the diferent types of events also included eliminating duplicate responses by using frst and last name, phone number, and zip code to identify possible duplicates.

Each "case" in our fnal dataset was either a household representative or an individual. In some cases, individuals were receiving services for themselves only (e.g., Vaccine appointment assistance) and in other cases, individuals were receiving assistance on behalf of their entire households (e.g., boxes of food and COVID-19 health and safety items). Most of the social and economic characteristic data collected in these surveys represented the individual flling out the survey. In some cases, household size and presence of children was asked which were used to estimate population size.

Indigenous migrant communities identifed and included in the analysis are as follows: Achi, Akateko, Amuzgo, Ch'ol, Ch'orti', Chatino, Chinanteco, Huichol, Indigena (not specifed), K'iche', Kaqchikel, Mam, Maya, Mazahua, Mazateco, Mixe, Mixteco, Náhuatl, Popoloca, Purépecha, Q'anjob'al, Tarahumara, Tlapaneco, Tzotzil, and Zapoteco.

Indigenous migrant languages identifed and included in the analysis are as follows: Achi, Akateko, Amuzgo, Ch'orti', Chatino, Chinanteco, Chol, Chuj, Cuicateco, Indigena, Ixil, K'iche', Kaqchikel, Mam, Maya, Mazateco, Mixe, Mixteco, Náhuatl, Otomi, Poconchi, Popoloca, Popti, Poqomam, Purépecha, Q'anjob'al, Q'eqchi', Quechua, Sakapultek, Tlapaneco, Totocapa, Totonaco, Tz'utujil, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Uspanteko, and Zapoteco.

Appendix B: Census data on Indigenous migrant communities in Los Angeles County

Though limited, the 2020 Decennial Census Summary File and "Census Detailed Demographic and Housing Characteristics File A" provides full 100 percent count data on those self-identifying as being from distinct tribal groups in Mexico and Central America. See the chart below for population counts from groups reported in the 2020 Census Data. While aggregated data are available in more updated American Community Survey data, these are broad estimates that include additional categories and lack detail on specifc groups. In consultation with CIELO, we identifed over 20 specifc "Latin American Indian Tribal groups" in Los Angeles County, as shown in the table. Census data on the following 20 additional Indigenous migrant communities are available at the statewide level: Amuzgo, Belizean Indian, Cakchiquel, Central American Indian, not elsewhere, classifed, Chatino, Chocho, Choco, Cochimi, Concho, Costa Rican Indian, Cuicatec, Guaymi, Huave, Huichol, Ixcatec, Kanjobal, Kekchi, Kuna Indian, Lacandon, Lagunero, Mazahua, Mazatec, Mexican Indian, not elsewhere classifed, Miskito, Nicaraguan Indian, Opata, Panamanian Indian, Popoluca, Tequistlatec, Tlapanec, Tojolabal, Triqui (Trique), Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Zoque.

The census "Maya" category aggregates all Mayan groups. However, this is an umbrella term that includes communities from Guatemala and Mexico that often have diferent and distinct languages, cultures, and traditions. In the CIELO survey analysis we separate out specifc Maya languages and cultures (e.g. K'iche among others). In this report, we exclude "Aztec" and "Mexican American Indian" categories from the census analysis and in the table in this appendix. The write-in category for Aztec is not included as a comparison in the data as the INEGI, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico, does not recognize Aztec as a category. The categorization comes from an ideology created in the United States, which can be attributed to the Chicano movement. For the purposes of this analysis we include Indigenous groups who primarily speak an Indigenous language to highlight the need for language justice.

Census 100 Percent Count Data on Indigenous Groups from Mexico and Central America, Los Angeles County, 2020

	INDIGENOUS GROUPS	COUNT
CENTRAL AMERICA	Central American Indian	233
	Guatemalan Indian	460
	Guatemalan Mayan	171
	Honduran Indian	63
	Lenca	108
	Maya Central American	1,936
	Nahua	194
	Pipil	815
	Quiche	301
	Salvadoran Indian	618
MEXICO	Chichimeca	204
	Chinantec	138
	Cora	183
	Huastec	25
	Huichol	396
	Mexican Indian	1,184
	Mixe	125
	Mixtec	378
	Nahuatl	173
	Olmec	36
	Otomi	139
	Tarahumara (Raramuri)	287
	Tarasco (Purepecha)	1,299
	Tepehua	42
	Toltec	63
	Zapotec	3,016
MESOAMERICA	Maya	23,936
	Other Mesoamerican Indian	28
	TOTAL	**36,551**

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