



ESSENTIAL & ON THE BRINK

CALIFORNIA'S COMMUNITY MEDIA SECTOR

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INTRODUCTION

In the midst of a global pandemic and a historic economic downturn, California's community media outlets, often referred to as ethnic media, have never been more vital to the diverse and often vulnerable communities they serve. Hardest hit by the pandemic and often sidelined by mainstream media and government outreach, working people, Latinos, immigrants, and communities of color across the state are turning to community media outlets now more than ever for life-saving COVID-19 related information and guidance. Despite unprecedented demand for reliable local news, systemic underinvestment and financial hardship resulting from the current economic downturn pose a major threat to this critical community infrastructure. Without immediate action and prioritization, California could lose an essential resource in its fight for a full recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the state allocates funds for vaccine distribution, economic relief and other critical COVID-19 recovery efforts in its 2021-2022 budget, sustained and coordinated investment in community media will be essential to ensure an equitable pandemic response and the survival of this vital community-serving resource for years to come.

“For the nearly one in five Latino households with limited English language proficiency, these outlets may be the only accessible option for in-language news and information.”

AN OVERVIEW OF CALIFORNIA'S COMMUNITY MEDIA SECTOR

California's community media sector is expansive and well-established, made up of hundreds of outlets that function as essential information sources and community institutions for the diverse communities they serve.

California's community media sector is a diverse and essential network of over 300 outlets serving Black, Native, and Latino people, immigrants, rural communities, and poor and low-income people throughout the state. A 2020 study produced by the Center for Social Innovation (UC Riverside) and the Latino Media Collaborative entitled “State of Community & Ethnic Media in California” surveyed 106 ethnic media outlets across California and found diversity throughout the sector that mirrored that of the state itself. Outlets report in 37 different languages and serve at least 38 different ethnic, racial, and cultural communities across the state.¹

Census estimates suggest that the sector could reach as many as 17.3 million people throughout the state who speak a language other than English at home, about 44% California's total population. **For the nearly one in five Latino households with limited English language proficiency, these outlets may be the only accessible option for in-language news and information.**²

California's community news outlets tend to be very integrated and well established within the communities they serve, with roots often going back decades. Our 2020 State of Community & Ethnic Media in California study found that nearly 60% of surveyed outlets were more than 25 years old and 22% had been serving their community for more than 40 years. This longevity speaks to how embedded and committed these outlets are to the communities they serve, as much cultural institutions as they are sources of news and media content.

While many outlets reach major geographies in their reach and distribution, most are small, local outlets that are established by and for the members of a particular community, allowing for hyper-local and community-specific news coverage. Our 2020 study found that 73% of outlets were owned locally and independently and were often run by just a handful of dedicated staff, with 65% of outlets reporting fewer than five full-time staff. Dedicated editors' deep ties in the communities they serve allow them to regularly engage with their audience to produce community-specific local news coverage. In fact, coverage of local issues accounted for 68% of the outlets' coverage, in the aggregate.

Plugged into their community's day-to-day experiences and struggles, outlets provide essential local and community-specific news coverage for populations whose issues and perspectives are underrepresented in mainstream news media and underserved by all levels of government. For decades, communities whose voices and issues are not often covered in the mainstream media have turned to these outlets for trust-worthy and relevant coverage of issues ranging from local and national politics to practical information about how to access social services and where to vote. For California's large immigrant population in particular, community media has long been the go-to source for recent immigrants learning to navigate a new country. Now faced with the devastating impacts of the pandemic, these populations are relying on community media for reliable and accessible news more than ever.

“30% of surveyed outlets started covering the pandemic in January, before it became an issue of widespread concern in the United States and 62% provided fact checking or debunked misinformation during the pandemic.”

COMMUNITY MEDIA'S CRITICAL IMPACT DURING THE PANDEMIC

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, community media outlets have been an indispensable source of reliable and accessible information for the hard-hit communities they serve.

The disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on immigrants and communities of color are staggering. Across the country, Pacific Islander, Latino, Indigenous and Black Americans have a COVID-19 death rate of double or more that of white Americans.³ In California, Latino communities have been devastated by the pandemic, suffering the highest rate of infections and deaths in the state.⁴ While Latinos were disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in cases and deaths, representing 46.2% of all deaths in California, they have not been receiving testing and COVID-19 vaccine doses anywhere near their levels of impact, only receiving 24.3% of COVID-19 vaccine doses, a 22% difference below what is expected from deaths.⁵ These disparities extend to relief efforts, which have often left these highly impacted communities behind. Recent studies have found that Latino households are less likely to receive financial relief and lack access to the vaccine.^{6,7} Devastated by the pandemic and often left behind by government relief efforts, California's most vulnerable populations are relying on community media more than ever for life-saving information and connections to critical resources.

Table 1: COVID-19 Disproportionately Affects Latinos in California

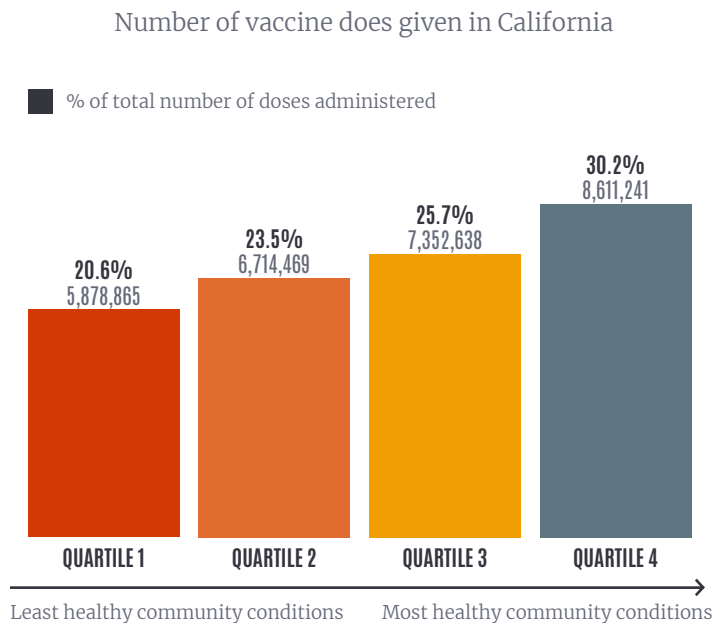
RACE/ETHNICITY	% OF POPULATION	% OF COVID-19 CASES	% OF COVID-19 DEATHS	% OF COVID-19 TESTING	% OF COVID-19 DOSES	DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DEATHS % AND DOSES %
LATINO	38.9%	41.4%	46.2%	35.5%	24.3%	-21.9%
WHITE	36.6%	35.6%	33.5%	39.7%	37.7%	4.2%
ASIAN AMERICAN	15.4%	9.8%	10.9%	15.8%	16.8%	5.9%
BLACK	6%	9%	6.9%	7.3%	3.7%	-3.2%
MULTI-RACE	2.2%	2.9%	2.2%	0.4%	1.1%	-1.1%
AI/AN**	0.5%	0.5%	0%	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%
NHPI***	0.3%	0.8%	0%	0.9%	0.5%	0.5%

* “Other” and “Unknown” not shown here; ** American Indian or Alaska Native; *** Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander

This racial and ethnic disparity also has a geographic dimension, and the least healthiest communities are still receiving less than what is expected from the pandemic’s impact on these communities. California utilized the Healthy Places Index (HPI) to separate counties into quartiles and doubled the allotment of COVID-19 vaccines to the least healthy communities,⁸ but this did not address the inequity because a lower HPI score still means those highly impacted communities are receiving less doses. Less than 21% of vaccines were administered to the least healthy communities, while 30.2% of vaccines were administered to the healthiest communities.⁹

Part of the issue is the need for more integrated and inclusive communications and outreach efforts integrating community and ethnic media focused on communities of color. This is resulting in a lack of willingness to get the COVID-19 vaccine, which remains stubbornly high among Latinos and African Americans. While African Americans were much more likely to respond that they would definitely not or probably not get the vaccine, Latinos are much more likely to be on the fence. Only 38% of Latinos and 26% of African Americans stated they would definitely get the COVID-19 vaccine, compared to 51% of Whites that stated they would definitely get the vaccine in a recent survey.¹⁰

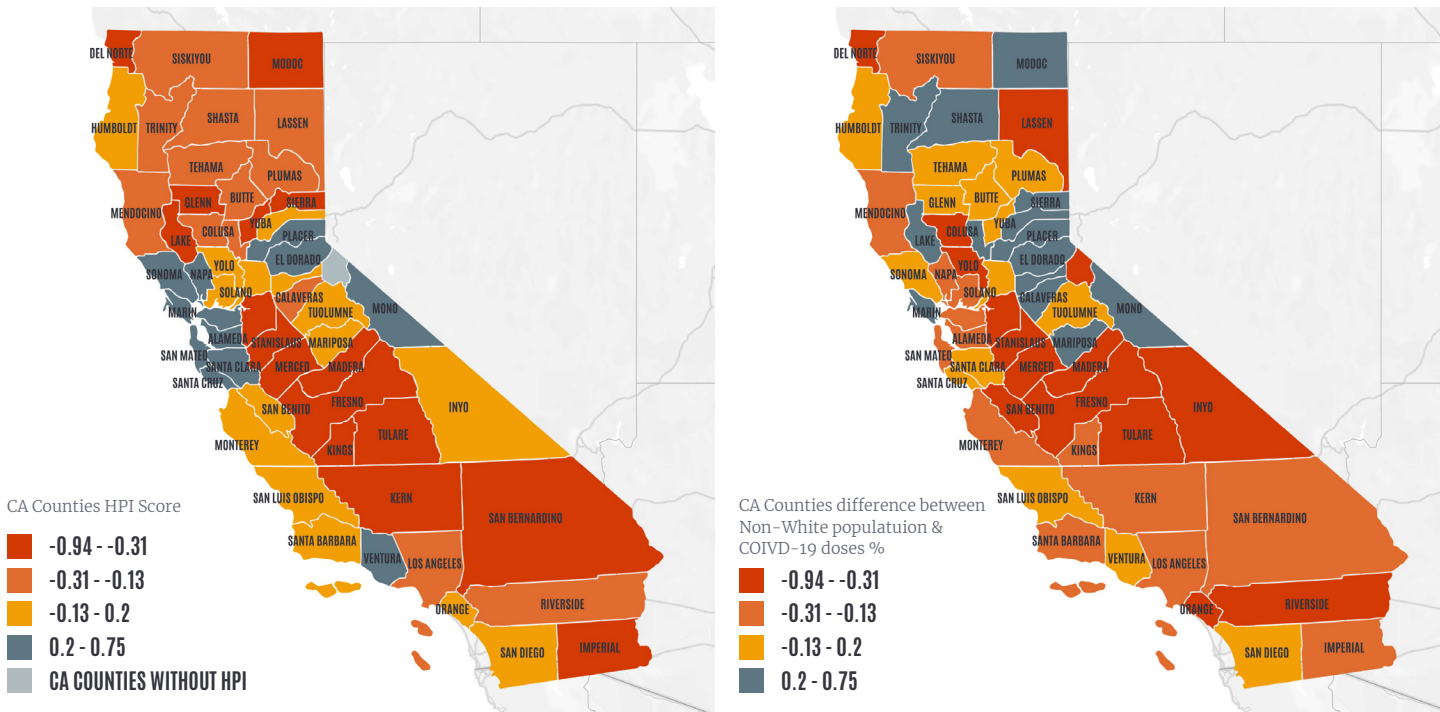
Figure 1: Vaccinations by doses administered



Updated April 28, 2021 with data from April 27, 2021

In California, the least healthiest counties with the lowest HPI scores are seeing non-whites receive doses well below their population size, especially in Central and Northern California, as can be seen in the following maps.¹¹ Red signifies lower HPI scores on the left, and on the right, red signifies a larger gap between population size for non-whites and percent of vaccines administered to non-whites.

Figure 2: California Counties Maps of vaccination progress.



Source: 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), California Department of Public Health, the California HPI, and KQED. Special tabulation by Daniel Paredes. Data downloaded on April 24, 2021.

Amidst the chaotic information environment of the pandemic, community media outlets have provided verified and community-specific coverage of public health guidelines, COVID testing and vaccines, hospital capacity and critical economic relief. Our study found that as many as 30% of surveyed outlets started covering the pandemic in January, before it became an issue of widespread concern in the United States. Of the outlets surveyed, 61.8% provided fact checking or debunked pandemic misinformation. In the midst of what the World Health Organization has dubbed a “massive infodemic” surrounding COVID-19, community media has been critical in preventing the spread of misinformation and providing trustworthy, up-to-date guidance and information to some of the populations most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic California’s most vulnerable populations.¹²

AN ESSENTIAL SECTOR THREATENED BY A LACK OF INTEGRATION AND GOVERNMENT DISINVESTMENT

Facing challenges even before the pandemic as a result of a changing media landscape and systemic underinvestment by large advertisers and government agencies, the pandemic has exacerbated many outlets’ already difficult financial outlook.

For decades, community media outlets have suffered the same financial pressures burdening all news organizations since the devastation of the sector by the 2008 financial crisis and the rise of digital media. Like mainstream media organizations, most community outlets rely on advertising as their primary revenue source. But mainstream businesses, institutions and government agencies have long undervalued and underinvested in community media, particularly

small outlets and those serving communities of color, making them even more vulnerable to the economic disruption of the pandemic. While community media outlets have proven resilient to economic shifts and are already adapting under pandemic conditions, the sector would greatly benefit from meaningful investment and key strategic partnerships with the state and community-based organizations.

As the shutdown forced many small businesses to suspend operations, cut back on costs or close shops entirely, community media outlets that relied on small businesses for advertising revenue have suffered devastating losses. Ironically, outlets are incurring these losses despite increased demand for their coverage and significant audience growth.^{13,14} Still, our study found that **the pandemic had wiped out half of the sector's revenue and forced some outlets to lay off staff, decrease circulation, and in some cases, cease operations completely, just when they're needed the most.** Without immediate investment in the sector, many more outlets may follow suit, creating news deserts throughout the state.

“Not including 2020 Census advertising, fewer than half of community media outlets we surveyed have ever received advertising buys from government agencies.”

GOVERNMENT'S UNDERINVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY MEDIA

A lack of advertising contracts with government agencies represents a major loss for the sector and for the state's public outreach efforts.

Inequitable distribution of government advertising funds accounts for a major revenue gap for the sector. Not including 2020 Census advertising, fewer than half of community media outlets we surveyed have ever received advertising buys from government agencies. This consistent underinvestment has hurt the sector economically, but also represents a huge missed opportunity for the state to get critical information to some of its most marginalized and hard-to-reach constituents.

Government agencies' inequitable advertising spending can be attributed in part to the marginalized and decentralized distribution of outlets across the state. In some cases, government agencies are simply not aware of the small, hyper-local outlets that make up this vast communication network. While directories and databases of outlets exist, they are often incomplete or out of date. Without a comprehensive community media program to identify and coordinate with the state's many outlets, advertising dollars are not equitably distributed.

On a more fundamental level, our study found that underinvestment in the sector stems from the practices of state government departments who consistently rely on marketing firms' with a transactional approach to outlets and a failure to commit to building meaningful and sustained partnerships. Outlets reported feeling systematically locked out of advertising opportunities with government agencies, citing a lack of interest from media buying and marketing firms that represent state agencies, leaving outlets constantly trying to get their attention without much success. Editors of community media outlets describe regularly receiving press releases from government agencies, suggesting that state agencies have an understanding of community media's ability to get the word out but that they are not willing to pay for that reach through advertising contracts.

Underinvestment in community media represents a missed opportunity for government agencies to expand their reach not just through targeted advertising placement, but through dialogue and meaningful engagement with their most hard-to-reach constituents. Agencies should take advantage of local outlets' deep ties in communities whose relationships to government have long been defined by fear and mistrust in order to engage with these constituents and break down barriers to effective communication. This type of meaningful and informed engagement will be especially critical to the state's efforts to address vaccine hesitancy.

In March 2020, Congress enacted the CARES Act (CARES), which provided \$150 Billion to create the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) for the U.S. Treasury to make payments to state, local, and tribal governments for certain expenditures related to their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵ California allocated \$1.3 Billion to address public health and safety needs due to COVID-19 under the CARES Act, but this spending did not appear to meet the needs of California's largest population group as the gap between percentage of deaths and doses for Latinos remains significantly high.¹⁶ California must focus efforts on an integrated and extensive outreach and education campaign for communities of color through partnerships with ethnic and community media, which service these highly impacted communities.

Table 2: California CARES Act Spending Plan: State Auditor on January 19, 2021

CARES PROGRAM DESCRIPTION	CARES \$	CARES %
For learning mitigation resulting from COVID-19 closures	\$4,493,819,000	47.09%
To reimburse COVID-19 related expenditures	\$2,700,000,000	28.29%
To address public health and safety needs due to COVID-19	\$1,300,000,000	13.62%
For emergency housing for homeless individuals and families	\$550,000,000	5.76%
To address increased homelessness due to COVID-19 economic impacts and for additional public safety services	\$500,000,000	5.24%
TOTAL	\$9,543,819,000	100%

An analysis of California budget expenditures, which has some limits,¹⁷ found that California made large investments in advertising in the last year during the pandemic, possibly its largest ever, but this investment did not seem to prove fruitful for Latinos. In the last year, California spent \$57.54 million on advertising, about 90.5% of all advertising expenditures from available data spanning from July 1, 2016 to January 31, 2021.¹⁸

Table 3: State Advertising Spending During the Pandemic

FY-END	TOTAL \$	% OF TOTAL \$
2021	\$57,536,164.12	90.47%
2020	\$3,241,319.80	5.1%
2019	\$1,273,636.75	2%
2018	\$1,057,825.06	1.66%
2017	\$488,627.62	0.77%
TOTAL	\$63,597,573.35	100%

The Office of Emergency Services spent 87.9% (\$55.92 million) of all advertising expenditures from July 1, 2016 to December 31, 2020, nearly all of it in the last year. The top 5 departments' advertising expenditures accounted for 95.1% of all advertising spending for the state.

Table 4: Top State Departments Spending on Advertising

SPENDING RANK	STATE DEPARTMENT	TOTAL \$	% OF TOTAL \$	SPENDING RANK	STATE DEPARTMENT	TOTAL \$	% OF TOTAL \$
1	Office of Emergency Services	\$55,922,196.42	97.93%	9	Victim Compensation Board, CA	\$246,026.74	0.39%
2	CA Highway Patrol	\$2,121,225.55	3.34%	10	Judicial Branch	\$229,656.26	0.36%
3	Business & Economic Development	\$1,118,368.92	1.76%	11	Food & Agriculture	\$174,786.12	0.27%
4	Department of Fish & Wildlife	\$836,471.31	1.32%	12	CA Student Aid Commission	\$137,959.48	0.22%
5	Forestry & Fire Protection	\$477,572.28	0.75%	13	State Controller	\$137,708.03	0.22%
6	Parks & Recreation	\$360,329.10	0.57%	14	General Services	\$122,366.84	0.19%
7	Public Health	\$257,834.17	0.41%	15	CAL FIRE	\$119,524.32	0.19%
8	Industrial Relations	\$246,414.16	0.39%	16	State Water Resources Control	\$105,726.21	0.17%

SUCCESSFUL MODELS OF GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT

Successful models of government investment in community media can serve as an example to California as the state prepares to allocate federal relief funds and finalize its budget.

California’s 2020 census campaign is a promising example of how the state can meaningfully invest in and engage with community media. Among outlets surveyed, 82% have run ads for the census. For many outlets, census ads by the state of California were the first and only time the government advertised with them. The impact of this state government investment, though short term in many cases, was profound. Multiple outlets surveyed described the census ads as critical to their continued operations throughout the economic strain of the pandemic. Most importantly, the state leveraged trusted state and local partners to procure census investments for community media across the state, which helped break through traditional firewalls that stand in the way of resources getting to community media. The success of the state’s census outreach program should serve as the foundation for long-term, coordinated investment in the sector by all state agencies with outreach needs.

New York City’s 2019 executive order mandating that city agencies spend at least 50% of their advertising budgets on ad buys with community media serves as a promising model for California.¹⁹ In addition to committing a sizable portion of the city’s advertising dollars to community media, the executive order required agencies to engage in a centralized and coordinated effort to prioritize community media investment. The mandate’s impacts have been profound. In its first fiscal year, city agencies spent nearly \$10 million across over 220 community media outlets, totaling nearly 84% of their total print and digital ad buys.²⁰

Seattle’s Ethnic Media Program provides another example of the importance of relationship-building and coordination in community media investment. The Program, housed under the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, acts as a central liaison between city departments and community media, coordinating ad buys and partnerships and advocating for outlets within the city government.²¹

The success of Seattle and New York City’s programs demonstrate that achieving equity in the state’s distribution of advertising dollars will require proactive outreach and coordination by the state, which would be strengthened by legislation which requires that a certain percentage of agencies’ advertising budgets be earmarked for use on ethnic and community media.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE INVESTMENT

To ensure equitable COVID-related outreach and the survival of the community media sector, the state should: immediately allocate funds to community media for COVID-related outreach and recovery purposes; require that state agencies spend 50% of their annual advertising budgets on community media serving those most impacted by COVID; and fund and develop the infrastructure to facilitate effective coordination between agencies and outlets in the long-term.

Without immediate and substantial investment in community media, the state is at risk of losing an essential resource in its fight for a full recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. **We recommend that the state allocate at least \$56 million to community media outlets in its 2021-2022 budget to ensure that critical information about vaccines, economic relief and public health guidelines reaches the communities hardest hit by the pandemic.** The state invested this amount (approximately \$55 million) for its sustained 2020 census campaign as well as for 2020 Office of Emergency Services pandemic advertising efforts and both are concrete examples of a strong baseline for an effective campaign given the right partnerships.

In addition to an immediate injection of funds to community media outlets for COVID-related outreach, there is also an urgent need for the state to develop a comprehensive and long-term approach to investing in community media that builds off the success of the state's census outreach and is modeled on the success of Seattle and New York's community media programs. **Therefore, we recommend that the state address inequity in agencies' distribution of advertising funds by mandating that agencies spend 50% of their advertising budgets on community media serving those communities most impacted by the COVID pandemic.**

To support these new investments, **the state should develop and fund the infrastructure to facilitate effective coordination between agencies and outlets.** Key aspects of the Seattle and New York City programs inform the following recommendations for coordination efforts:

- Develop and maintain a list of community and ethnic media outlets that serve hard-to-reach communities.
 - Define community media as follows: any print or digital publication that is created for communities of people based on native language, race, color, gender, national origin, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability or immigration status; targets a discrete neighborhood, or a geographic region, or a population that may or may not typically receive information from mainstream publications because of their exclusive use of foreign language.
- Require State agency representatives that are responsible for ad buying to participate in regular trainings to learn about community/ethnic media outlets
- Require agencies to submit a year-end data report to the state detailing the total amount each agency spent on advertising with both community media outlets and overall.
- Data regarding each agency's ad buying should be made available to the public.
- Work with local Cities, Counties and Tribal Governments to identify local community media outlets for State's advertising purposes.

- Develop partnerships with community based organizations to facilitate outreach and relationship-building with community media outlets.
- Work with local Cities, Counties and Tribal Governments to support local efforts to develop community media programs.

ADDITIONAL EMERGENCY FUNDING RECOMMENDATIONS

Emergency economic relief to struggling outlets.

Fund a relief grant program that provides critical emergency financial relief for small community media outlets disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. The final state budget may specify community media outlets as a priority underserved small business group, or it may allocate a certain amount of funds specifically for grants to struggling outlets.

Incentivize businesses' use of stimulus funds on advertising with community media to facilitate recovery while supporting struggling outlets in the short and long term.

A recent study of Latino media outlets found that small, hyperlocal outlets have lost revenue during the pandemic as community-owned businesses that have long supported them no longer have the resources to sell ads. Community-owned businesses applying for relief grants should be encouraged to spend that money back in their community, re-building and creating relationships with local community media outlets while getting the word out about their local business as the economy reopens. The state should facilitate those partnerships as part of their wrap-around services already included in the COVID-19 Relief Grant Program.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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ENDNOTES

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¹¹ Maps created by Daniel Paredes using data from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), California Department of Public Health (<https://covid19.ca.gov/vaccination-progress-data/#progress-by-group>), the California HPI (<https://healthyplacesindex.org/data-reports/>) and KQED (<https://www.kqed.org/news/11861381/see-californias-vaccination-rates-by-race-and-ethnicity>).

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¹⁴ Zhang, “The State of Community & Ethnic Media in California: Impact, Resource Gaps, and Opportunities”

¹⁵ Source: <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/cares/state-and-local-governments>

¹⁶ Source: <https://www.auditor.ca.gov/reports/2020-610/index.html#figure1>; <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/Interim-Report-of-Costs-by-Category-Incurred-by-State-and-Local-Recipients-through-June-30.pdf>; Letter published by the California State Auditor on January 19, 2021; Data download and analysis by Daniel Paredes on May 2, 2021.

¹⁷ Open FISCAL currently contains data from 150 departments, representing approximately 65% of California's budgetary expenditures (<https://open.fiscal.ca.gov/learning-center/included-departments.html>). The percentage of the state's expenditures available has increased with each fiscal year, as more state departments transition to using FISCAL for their accounting. Vendor name is not available for all expenditure transactions and is masked in some situations for which vendor identity must remain confidential (<https://open.fiscal.ca.gov/learning-center/confidential-and-excluded-vendors.html>).

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