

Perspectives of Imperial Valley College Students on Local Investments

Veronica Terriquez, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

Manuel Pastor, USC Equity Research Center

Chris Benner, UC Santa Cruz Institute for Social Transformation

Imperial County plays a critical role in California’s agricultural industry and contains one of the largest lithium deposits in the country. At the same time, residents experience some of the highest levels of poverty in the state and face severe health challenges due to environmental pollution, poor air quality, and extreme summer temperatures. New economic investment tied to lithium extraction and related industries has the potential to generate tax revenues that could potentially improve the quality of life for all residents, but the resulting changes may also exacerbate the region’s environmental degradation (Benner and Pastor 2024).

Imperial Valley College (IVC) students, a young and crucial segment of the local population, have a vested interest in the region’s future. Drawing on a representative sample survey of 1,274 IVC students aged eighteen and above conducted in spring 2024, this report presents their perspectives on crucial steps to improve the region. To contextualize these findings, the report first examines student demographics, health status, and environmental challenges before delving into their views on potential local projects focused on increasing job opportunities, affordable housing, and residents’ well-being. This research brief highlights IVC students’ strong support for investments that promote the long-term sustainability and health of their communities.

Student Demographics, Health, and Aspirations

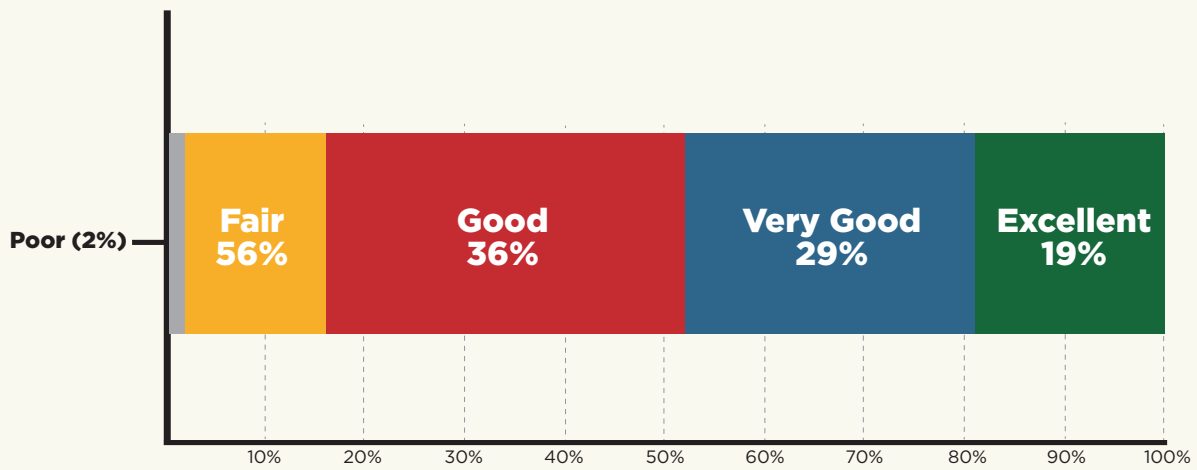


IVC primarily serves a young student population, as the median age of our sample is twenty-one. While the college enrolls high school students and retirees, the majority are young adults pursuing higher education. The student body largely reflects the racial demographics of Imperial County, with 93 percent identifying as Hispanic/Latino. Despite the region’s significant immigrant population, 91 percent of IVC students were US citizens at the time of the survey and hence likely eligible to vote.

Residents of the Imperial Valley face numerous environmental health challenges, including exposure to pesticide spraying, poor air quality, limited access to clean drinking water, and a

strained healthcare system. These issues are aggravated by toxic dust storms from the Salton Sea, which likely contribute to poor health outcomes (Johnston et al. 2024). Reflecting these challenges, only 48 percent of survey respondents reported being in excellent or very good health, despite their relatively young age (fig. 1).

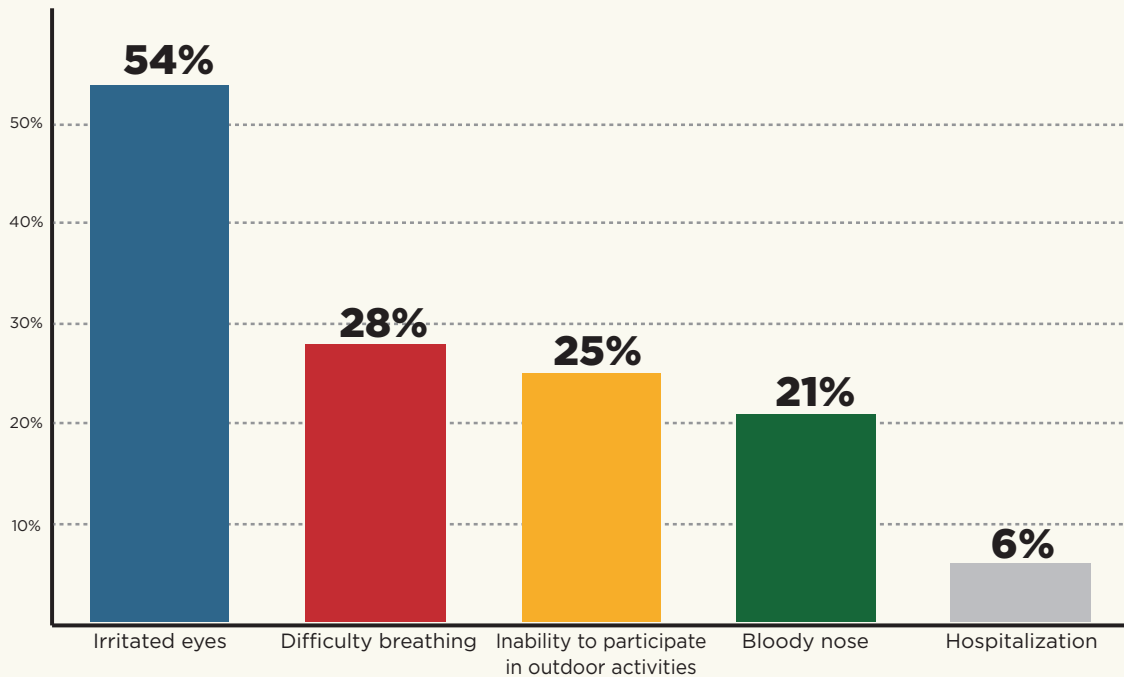
Figure 1. IVC Students' Self-Reported Health, 2024



Source: Thriving Youth Study (N=1,274)

Poor air quality in Imperial County presents significant health challenges for residents. The survey asked students how air pollution and dust exposure had affected them over the past year. As shown in figure 2, more than half (54 percent) reported experiencing eye irritation, while 28 percent struggled with breathing difficulties. Additionally, 25 percent said that poor air quality prevented them from participating in outdoor activities. Just over one in five students (21 percent) experienced nosebleeds, and 6 percent required hospitalization because of health issues related to air quality. These findings suggest that exposure to air pollution and dust storms may have long-term negative effects on the health and well-being of young residents in the region.

Figure 2. IVC Students' Self-Reported Health Symptoms Attributed to Poor Air Quality, 2024



Source: Thriving Youth Study (N=1,274)

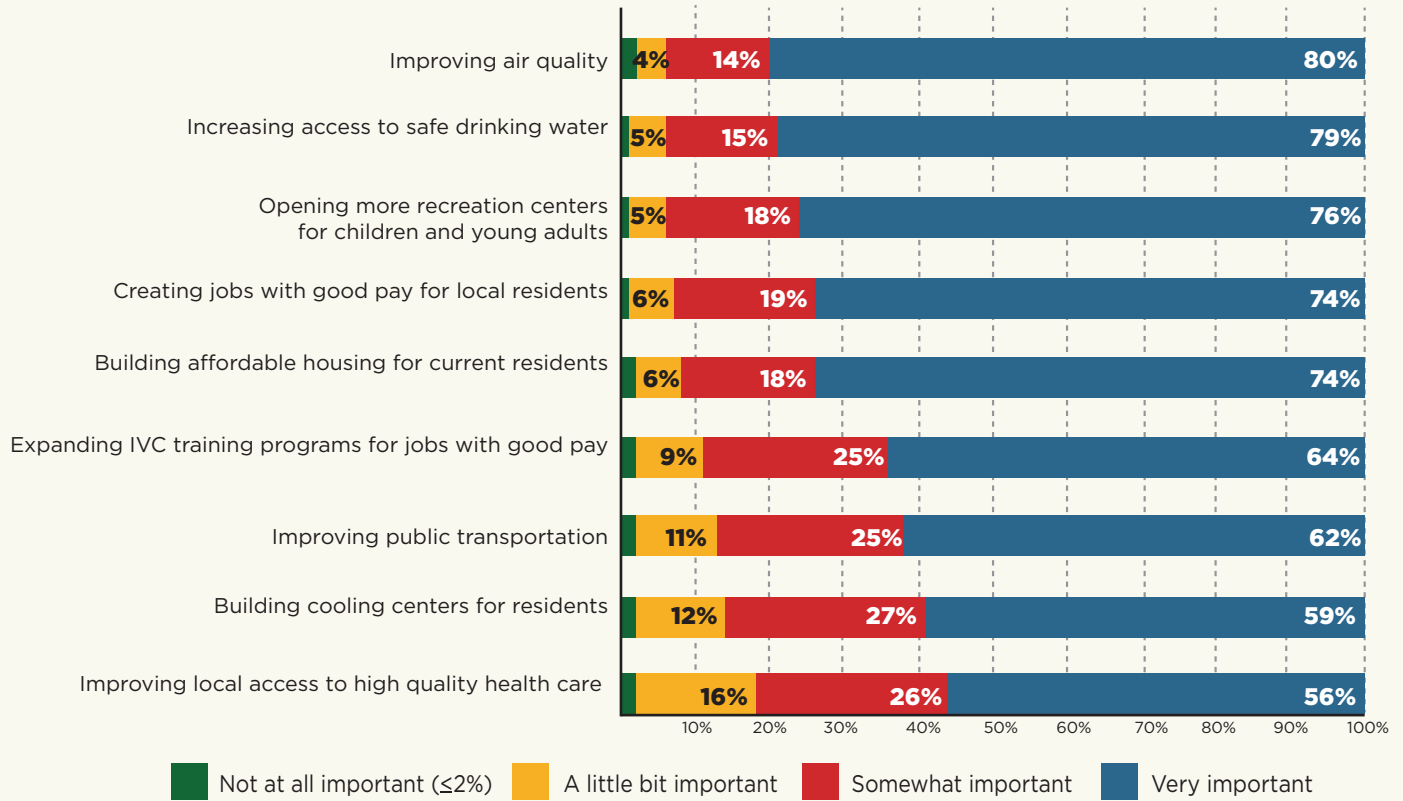
Despite these challenges, IVC students demonstrated strong academic motivation and resilience. Many earned fairly good grades in high school and aspired to complete a four-year college degree. Only 19 percent were raised by a parent with a bachelor's degree, with the rest being first-generation college students striving to secure better opportunities for themselves and their families. Because they are deeply invested in the community and intimately familiar with the region's environmental hardships, IVC students are also well-positioned to contribute to the county's economic prosperity and civic leadership.

Students' Priorities for Local Improvements



Given the anticipated economic and infrastructural changes in the Imperial Valley, the survey asked IVC students to evaluate potential local improvements. Students were asked to rate the importance of each improvement on a scale ranging from "not at all important" to "very important." The survey items were informed by research and discussions with community leaders and students. As shown in figure 3, students overwhelmingly supported investments in environmental quality, infrastructure, and economic development.

Figure 3. IVC Student’s Priorities for Local Improvements, 2024



Source: Thriving Youth Study (N=1,274)

Given the region’s environmental challenges and toxic dust storms, it is unsurprising that air quality emerged as a top priority, with 80 percent of students identifying it as “very important” and an additional 14 percent considering it “somewhat important.” Only 1 percent regarded it as unimportant.

Pesticide spraying and other pollutants can make the water in some of the poorest Imperial County communities unsafe for human consumption. As such, water quality and access also ranked high on students’ list of concerns. Seventy-nine percent of respondents said increasing access to safe drinking water was “very important,” while 15 percent deemed it “somewhat important.”

Beyond environmental concerns, students also emphasized the need for increased community resources and infrastructure projects. Seventy-six percent of respondents

supported opening more recreation centers for children and young adults. Recognizing the risk of displacement by incoming workers drawn to new economic opportunities, 74 percent of students highlighted the importance of building affordable housing.

Creating jobs with good pay for local residents and expanding training for these positions were also popular, with 74 percent deeming the former “very important” and 64 percent ranking the latter as a top priority. It is notable that straightforward employment concerns did not outweigh environmental ones, reflecting community debates in which the benefits of jobs in lithium-related industries have not always eased residents’ worries about environmental threats to their health (Benner and Pastor 2024). In other words, young residents seek to cultivate economic growth without turning a blind eye to environmental degradation.

Transportation infrastructure remains a challenge in this largely rural region, which likely explains why 62 percent of students considered improving public transportation “very important,” with another 25 percent finding it “somewhat important.”

Extreme heat is another serious concern because summer temperatures in the region can reach 120 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, posing life-threatening risks. A majority of students, 58 percent, strongly supported the construction of cooling centers, while 27 percent saw these projects as “somewhat important.”

Finally, limited access to healthcare forces many residents to seek medical services across the border in Mexico, and in doing so, they must sometimes endure a long wait at crossing points. Consequently, students also emphasized the need to improve access to high-quality healthcare in the region.

These results highlight a broad consensus among students that investments in environmental safeguards, public infrastructure, and economic opportunity are essential to improving the quality of life in Imperial Valley. Findings also indicate that students view these concerns as interconnected priorities rather than competing interests that require trade-offs.

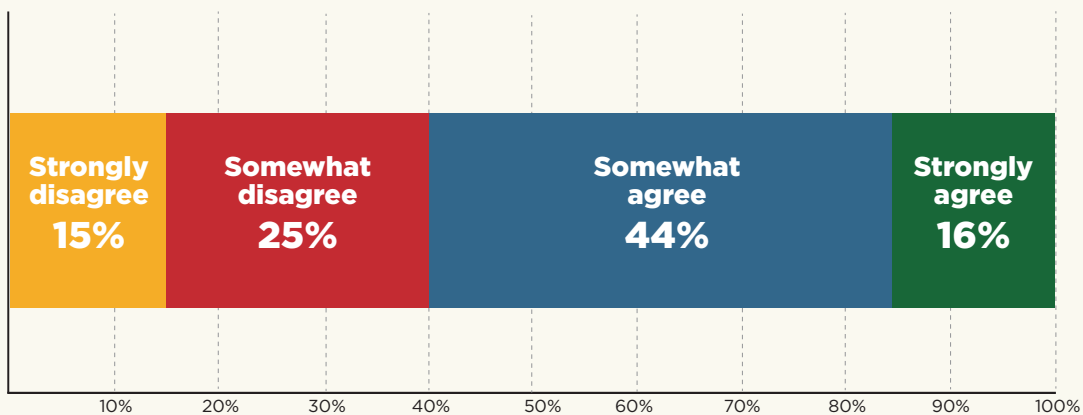
Government Accountability



As the future of the Imperial Valley unfolds, it will be essential for local officials and other decision-makers to prioritize the well-being and interests of the region’s young residents. IVC students represent a key constituency that must be taken seriously. They are not only local residents but also young adults who are deeply connected to families and communities that stand to gain—or lose—the most from lithium extraction and other economic development.

Figure 4. IVC Students’ Trust in Local Government, 2024

“I trust that local government officials will prioritize my community’s needs as lithium developments bring changes to the region.”



Source: Thriving Youth Study (N=1,274)

Survey results indicate, however, that local leadership may need to do more to listen, communicate, and remain accountable to residents as the community deals with future opportunities and challenges. When asked whether they trusted local government officials to prioritize community needs as lithium-related development begins, only 16 percent of respondents strongly agreed, while another 44 percent somewhat agreed (fig. 4). The remaining 40 percent either somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed. These findings likely reflect historical tensions between residents and officials, who should seek to strengthen trust with young residents to ensure more inclusive decision-making processes.

Conclusion



The survey results provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders. They reveal that IVC students, who compose an important constituency and the future leadership of the Imperial Valley, strongly support investments in clean air, safe drinking water, housing, healthcare, and job creation. Their responses reflect not only personal experiences with environmental and economic hardships but also their vision for a more sustainable and equitable future.

As the region undergoes the economic transformation promised by lithium-related industries, it is imperative that local leaders prioritize the needs of current young residents. Ensuring that new economic growth translates into tangible improvements in infrastructure, environmental health, and economic mobility will be essential for fostering thriving, resilient communities. Given their deep ties to the region and their commitment to higher education, IVC students are poised to play a vital role in shaping the future of the Imperial Valley. Their perspectives can inform decisions made by local leaders to help ensure that residents prosper for generations to come.



References:

Benner, C., & Pastor, M. (2024). *Charging Forward: Lithium Valley, Electric Vehicles, and a Just Future*. The New Press.

Johnston, J. E., Razafy, M., Lugo, H., Olmedo, L., & Farzan, S. F. (2019). "The Disappearing Salton Sea: A critical reflection on the emerging environmental threat of disappearing saline lakes and potential impacts on children's health." *Science of The Total Environment*, 663, 804- 817.

Author information:

Veronica Terriquez is the Director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and a Professor in the Departments of Chicana/o and Central American Studies and Urban Planning at UCLA.

Manuel Pastor is the Director of the Equity Research Institute and a Professor in the Departments of Sociology and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California.

Chris Benner is the Director of the Institute for Social Transformation and a Professor in the Departments of Sociology and Environmental Studies at UC Santa Cruz.

Acknowledgements:

This research is supported by The California Endowment. We appreciate the research assistance of Imperial Valley College student researchers Giselle Gonzalez, Joseph Gonzales, Veronica Martinez Hernandez, Dominique Miramontes, Alejandra Moreno, Brittanya Ortega, Ivette Paez, Maria Plascencia, Elizabeth Ramirez, Annaka Smith, Natalie Torres, and Michelle Trejo. Their contributions were invaluable in carrying out this work. Additionally, this research benefited from the dedication of our team members and partners, including Victoria Ciudad-Real (UCI), Monique Ureña (UCSD), Jamilet Coronel (UCSC), Desiree Rodriguez (UCLA), Dr. Chantiri Abarca (UCLA), and Dr. Amada Armenta (UCLA).



This report was made possible with the support of Imperial Valley College's Workforce Development Division, particularly Efrain Silva, Dean of the Economic and Workforce Development Division; Jose Carrillo, Associate Dean of Institutional Effectiveness; Angie Ruiz, Professor of Business; and Genaro Ayala, Job Placement Case Manager. We are also grateful for the support and input of the Imperial Valley Equity and Justice Coalition, whose guidance helped shape the survey and student training process.