

Perseverance and Visibility Against the Odds

Oxnard's Immigrant-origin Indigenous Young Adult Population

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Introduction

As an immigrant destination, Oxnard is home to a large Indigenous population with roots in Oaxaca and other parts of Mexico and Central America. For at least several decades, Indigenous migrants have settled in Oxnard in large numbers after initially being drawn to agricultural jobs in the city and the surrounding region. This report briefly describes Oxnard's population of immigrant-origin Indigenous young adults, addressing their demographic characteristics, socioeconomic circumstances, and

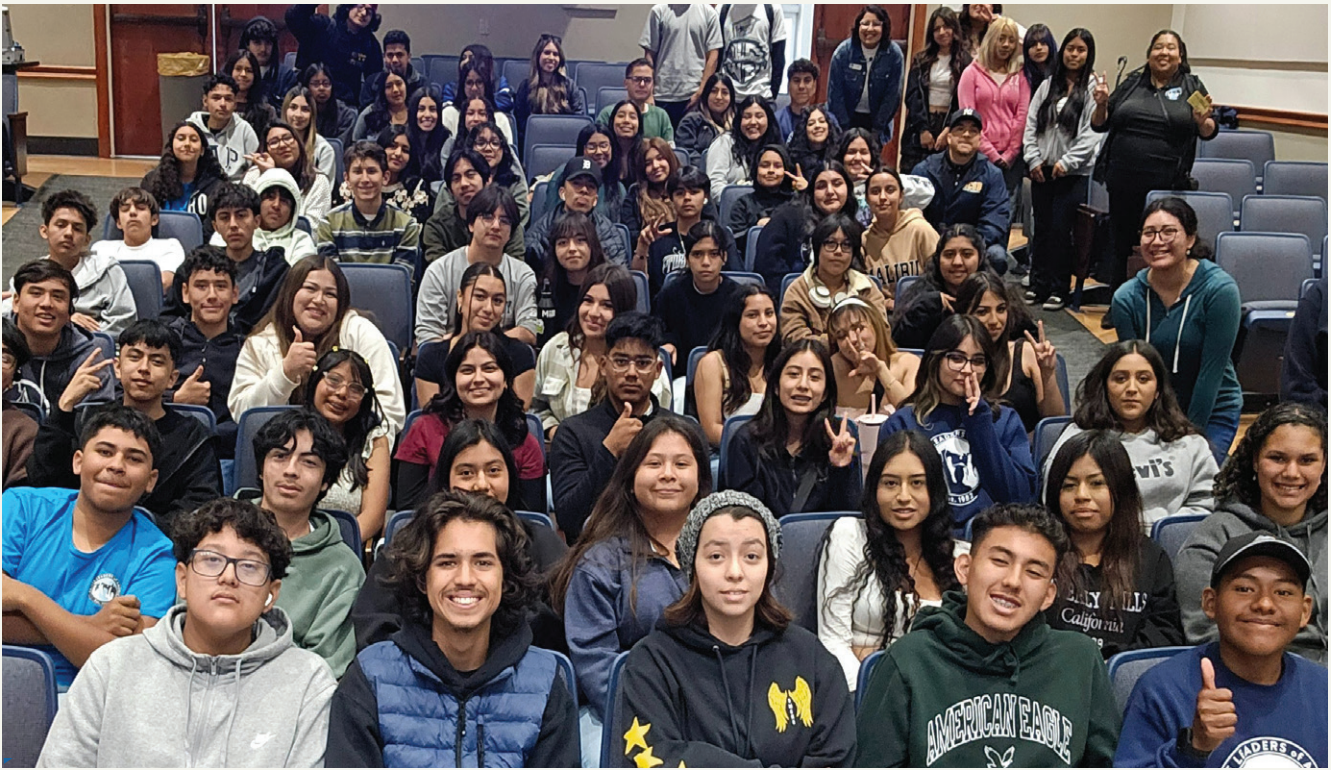
community experiences. Beyond highlighting the diversity of these residents, the findings describe some of the economic challenges they encounter and offer evidence of the unjust and racist treatment they experience. At the same time, it illustrates the importance of recognizing that these young adults embody a history of perseverance and survival. With proper resources, they have the potential to thrive in Oxnard. This report aims to inform how Oxnard’s educational and civic institutions engage with and support its Indigenous young adult residents.

This report draws on the 2023 Thriving Youth Study (TYS) of 3,031 Oxnard residents aged eighteen to thirty-four. Twenty-three percent of surveyed residents reported either that their ethnic origin was an Indigenous group in Mexico or another Central American country or that they spoke a Mesoamerican Indigenous language at home (fig. 1). We use the term *Indigenous* as shorthand for this population, which should not be confused with the Native Americans who are the original inhabitants of lands contained within the borders of the United States. The findings presented in this report generally reflect Oxnard’s young adult population, but they cannot be considered representative. This research brief is one in a series of reports focused on Oxnard’s young adult residents (Terriquez 2024). A separate technical appendix available on the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center website contains more information about the data used in this report and the study’s research methods.

The efforts of students from the community, which include the second and third authors of this report were critical in securing a high rate of participation among Indigenous young adults, who often remain significantly underrepresented in government surveys.

Figure 1.
Young Adults Indigenous
Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023 (N = 3,031)



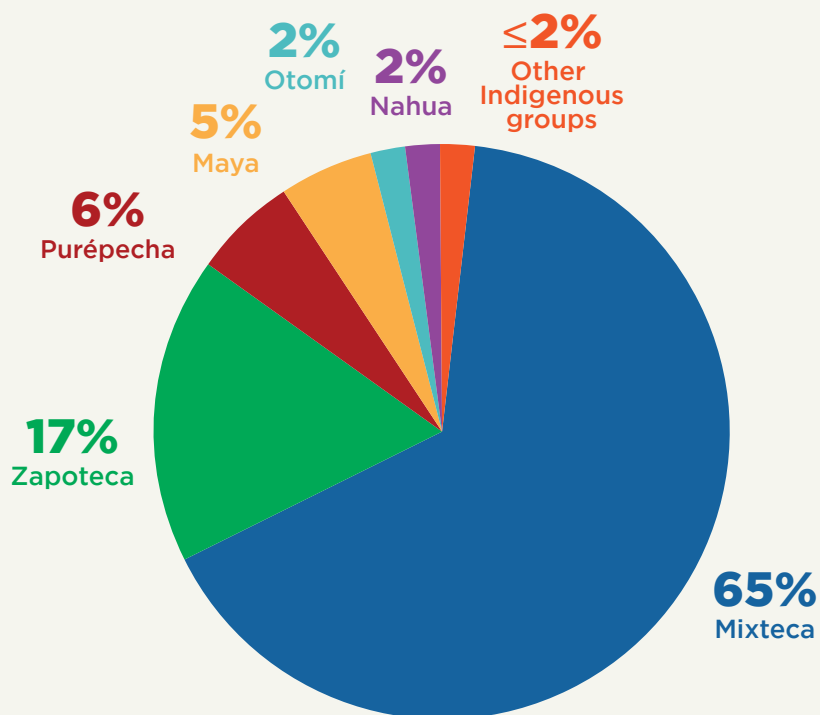


Demographic Characteristics and Linguistic Diversity

The average age of Indigenous young adults who participated in the TYS survey was 27.2 years. The majority (54 percent) identified as men, 44 percent identified as women, and 2 percent identified as nonbinary. We note here that the agricultural industry in and around Oxnard recruits a male-dominated workforce, which likely contributed to the population's gender distribution in the survey participation rate.

Most Indigenous respondents were immigrants (75 percent). Approximately 25 percent were born in the United States, and the majority were born in Mexico (72 percent). A small number were born in Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador. All these countries have a history of endorsing state-sanctioned violence against their Indigenous peoples at various points in time (Bartilow 2020; Felenon and Trafzer 2014; Martinez, Dominguez, and Salazar 2023). In recent decades, poverty, violence, and/or climate change, alongside the promise of opportunity, have motivated migration of Indigenous people to Oxnard (Arias Cubas 2022; Garrapa 2020).

Figure 2.
Ethnic Diversity of Oxnard's Indigenous Young Adults (Aged 18–34)
Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023



Oxnard's Indigenous young adult residents are ethnically diverse, even though the majority immigrated from Mexico (fig. 2). Mexico is a multilingual, multiethnic country, and among survey respondents, 65 percent identified as Mixteca, 17 percent as Zapoteca, 6 percent as Purépecha, 5 percent as Maya (mostly from Guatemala), 2 percent as Otomí, and 2 percent as Nahua. The remainder identified as Triqui, Mazahua, Yaqui, Amuzgo, or Cora, all Indigenous groups in Mexico.

These respondents also exhibited linguistic diversity. Conducted in English, Spanish, Mixteco, and Zapoteco, the TYS survey asked them about the languages they grew up speaking at home. Fifteen percent said that they spoke English, 58 percent Spanish, 56 percent Mixteco, and 14 percent Zapoteco, while 5 percent listed another language. The TYS survey did not identify respondents' first language or whether Spanish was a learned second language. As such, the survey results only begin to showcase the rich language history of this population.

Despite Oxnard being an immigrant destination city for a multilingual Indigenous population, translation services in government and educational institutions, when available, tend to target Spanish speakers (Camacho and Rivera-Salgado 2020). However, it is important to note that 42 percent of Indigenous survey respondents spoke neither English nor Spanish at home while growing up. Meanwhile, 49 percent of Indigenous respondents reported that they did not speak English at all, and another 10 percent said they spoke a little English. These results point to the importance of making translation services available in Indigenous languages.

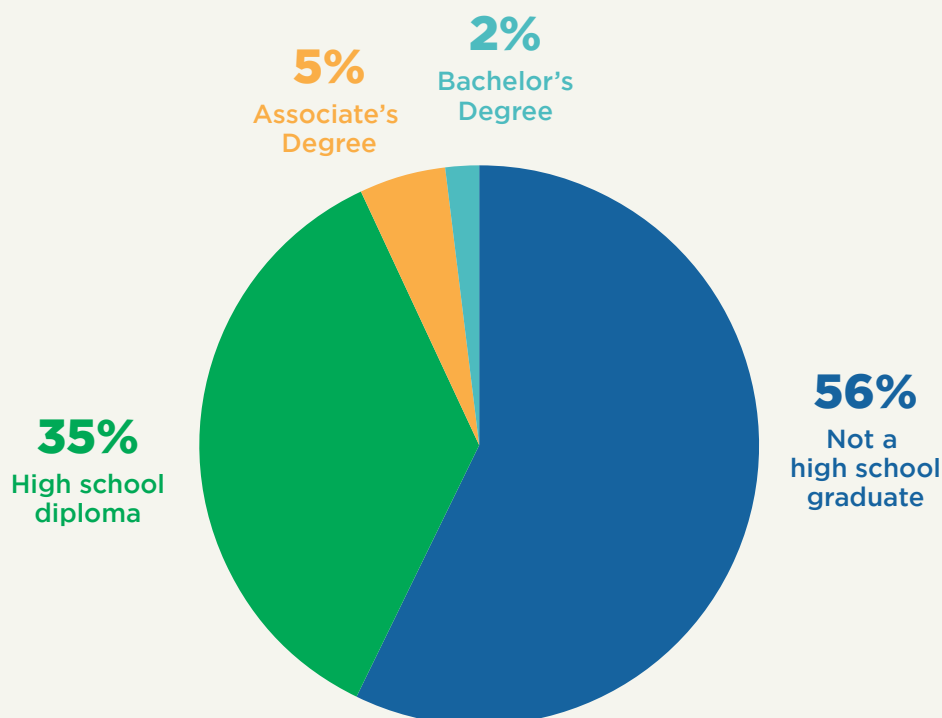
Educational Barriers

Indigenous respondents experience disproportionate poverty, poor access to high-quality and culturally responsive education, and racial discrimination in their home countries and the United States (fig. 3). These challenges contributed to the low levels of education among Indigenous survey respondents, the majority of whom (56 percent) reported lacking a high school diploma. In fact, 30 percent reported having less than a sixth-grade education. Those without a high school diploma were asked why they were unable to complete their schooling. Seventy-eight percent reported financial reasons, which suggests that these residents had an immediate need to provide for themselves and their families, whether in their home countries or in the United States.

Despite challenges, some Indigenous young adult residents had obtained educational credentials, with 35 percent reporting attainment of a high school diploma or equivalent, 5 percent an associate’s degree, and 4 percent having a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Given that very few Indigenous respondents had the opportunity to access higher education, it is important that Oxnard’s educational institutions provide these residents with culturally responsive assistance in navigating state and federal educational systems and workforce development programs.

Figure 3.
Educational Attainment among Oxnard’s Indigenous Young Adults of Immigrant Origin (Aged 18–34)
Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023



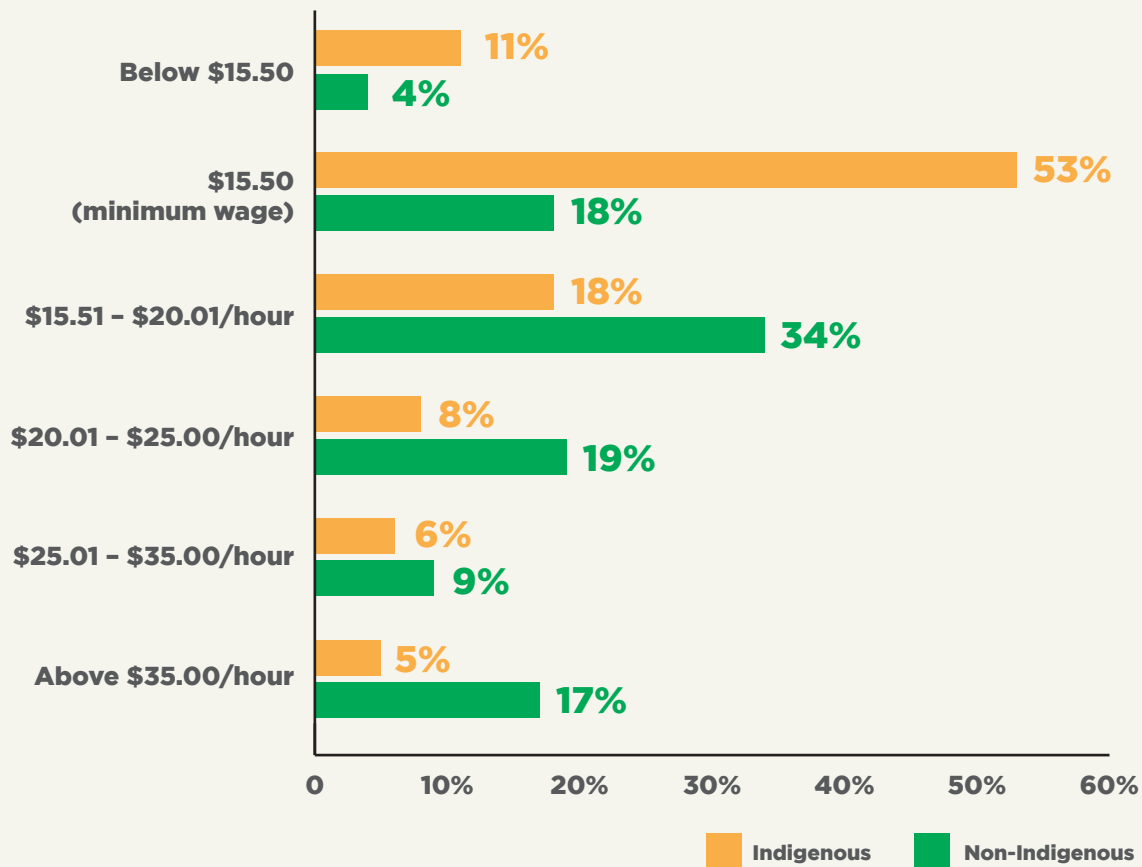


Employment and Low Wages

Approximately 70 percent of Indigenous residents surveyed reported working for pay at the time of the survey. However, it is important to note that paid employment was much higher among Oxnard men than women: 82 percent compared to 56 percent. Among those who were employed, a large percentage of men and women alike worked in the agricultural sector (58 percent of men and 49 percent of women). The seasonal nature of jobs in the agricultural industry results in fairly low annual wages for many of these workers (Camacho and Rivera-Salgado 2020).

Overall, Oxnard’s young adult workers tend to earn low wages, regardless of whether or not they come from Indigenous backgrounds. Still, survey results indicate that those of Indigenous origin are especially likely to find themselves in very low-wage jobs (fig. 4). For example, Indigenous residents were more likely to report earnings below California’s minimum wage than other young adult survey respondents (11 percent versus 4 percent). Moreover, the majority (53 percent of Indigenous respondents earned the exact minimum wage, \$15.50, at the time of the survey, whereas 18 percent of other respondents reported earnings at this wage floor. Only 5 percent of Indigenous respondents surveyed earned more than \$30.00 per hour, compared to 17 percent of their non-Indigenous counterparts. Further analyses not shown here also demonstrate that the wage distributions of Indigenous men and women are very similar. These generally low wages contribute to the economic hardships that many Indigenous residents face.

Figure 4.
Hourly Wages among Oxnard’s Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Young Adults (Aged 18-34)
 Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023

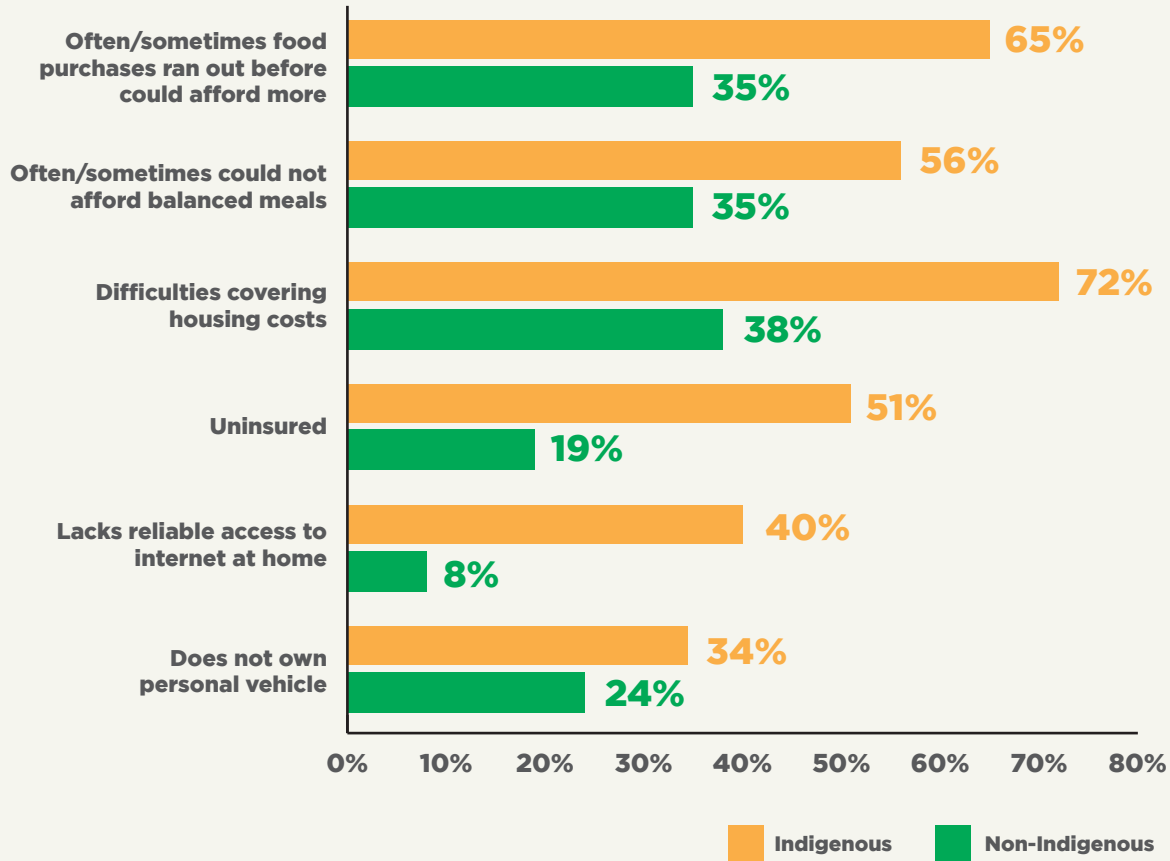




The Compounding Effects of Poverty

Oxnard is a working-class community, and many residents struggle with their finances, whether or not they come from Indigenous family backgrounds. However, the TYS offers further insights into the compounded economic challenges of Indigenous residents (fig. 5). For example, results suggest that a significant proportion of Indigenous young adult residents experience some level of food insecurity, with 65 percent reporting that it was often or sometimes true that their food purchases ran out before they had enough money to buy more. Meanwhile, only 35 percent of other respondents said this was the case. Furthermore, 56 percent of Indigenous respondents stated that it was often or sometimes true that they could not afford balanced meals, compared to 35 percent of other respondents. At the same time, 72 percent of Indigenous young adult residents said that they had encountered difficulties covering housing costs, compared to 38 percent of other residents. Results also indicate that Indigenous respondents are more likely to be uninsured, with about 51 percent reporting that they lacked health insurance, compared to 19 percent of other survey respondents.

Figure 5.
Financial and Resource Inequality among Oxnard’s Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Young Adults (Aged 18–34)
 Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023



The survey results also demonstrate disparities in internet access at home, with only 60 percent of Indigenous respondents reporting that they had access, compared to 92 percent of other respondents. Finally, 67 percent of Indigenous respondents reported owning a personal vehicle, compared to 76 percent of other respondents. Overall, these survey results demonstrate how poverty affects Indigenous residents on multiple fronts, including school access, retention, and completion, as well as career preparedness (Camacho, Graglia, and Davis, 2022). Inequitable access to technology (the digital divide) and limited mobility (transportation insecurity) are factors that are outside residents’ control and perpetuate their economic marginalization.



Unjust Treatment, Racism, and Discrimination

In the TYS survey, we asked young adult residents about their experiences living in the local community. The results indicate that Indigenous residents experience unjust treatment, including racial discrimination (fig. 6).

Specifically, we asked respondents if they *strongly disagree*, *somewhat disagree*, *somewhat agree*, or *strongly agree* with a series of statements. Certain findings are disconcerting. For example, Indigenous respondents were more than twice as likely than other respondents to strongly agree that they are treated with less respect than peers their age in the local

community (20 percent compared to 9 percent). They were also twice as likely to strongly agree that people who look like them are called racially insulting names in the local community (20 percent versus 10 percent). Racism and other types of discriminatory treatment by non-Indigenous residents, including those identifying as Latinx/Hispanic, likely contributes to financial, labor market, and the other challenges that face Indigenous residents. These findings serve as an invitation for local leaders to advance initiatives that elevate the visibility of Indigenous residents and promote antiracist practices.

Figure 6.
Discrimination and Racism Experienced among Oxnard’s Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Young Adults (Aged 18–34)

Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023





Advancing Indigenous Residents' Incorporation

Indigenous groups of Mexico and Central America have persevered despite state-backed efforts to destroy their cultures and communities (Bartilow 2020; Felenon and Trafzer 2014; Martinez, Dominguez, and Salazar 2023). Some of these people have made Oxnard their home and now make up a sizable segment of the city's population. These residents are ethnically and linguistically diverse, and they bring rich cultural traditions to their adopted US community. It is critical to center their cultural practices and knowledge, as well as wisdom gained from lived experience, when implementing support programs that promote opportunities for them to thrive.

This report provides an overview of some of the compounded challenges that Indigenous residents encounter and offers evidence of the discriminatory and racist treatment that residents experience in their local community. It demonstrates the need to address the linguistic, educational, and financial needs of Oxnard's Indigenous residents. It also highlights the imperative of local institutions and organizations to combat racism and anti-Indigeneity. Proper attention to the hopes, dreams, and needs of this diverse population will make Oxnard a better place to live for all its residents. Future reports will elaborate on the findings presented above and will offer recommendations for promoting a more equitable and inclusive Oxnard community.



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