

UNDOCUMENTED AND ESSENTIAL

A Profile of Undocumented Women in California

Immigrant women who are undocumented are integral members of California's dynamic economy, diverse communities, and vibrant cultures. But they are overlooked in America's immigration debate.

Executive Summary

Nearly one million immigrant women who are undocumented live, work, and raise their families in California. They harvest, prepare, pack, and serve the food that sustains the United States. They are college students and businesswomen. They care for the young, the elderly, and the sick. They clean the offices, hotels, and homes of California businesses and families. They are mothers to upwards of 1.8 million California children.¹

Yet just as these women are compelled by their immigration status to live in the shadows, their lives, labors, and aspirations are rendered invisible in public debate about America’s immigration system. Forty-five percent of undocumented people in the United States are women. But when the media or politicians discuss America’s immigration challenges, the immigrants they talk about tend to be men. With men as the norm, women’s distinctive experiences and concerns are ignored.

The Gender Equity Policy Institute’s “Undocumented and Essential” presents a data-based profile of California’s undocumented women, their families, their work, and their current economic challenges. To estimate the number of undocumented immigrants in California, researchers at the Institute analyzed data compiled from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS) for the years prior to the covid-19 pandemic. The Institute proceeded to interact the data by gender to uncover key facts about undocumented women’s work, income, health, housing, and family. While other institutes and researchers have published estimates on the number of undocumented people in the U.S. and how many are women and men, no others have disaggregated demographic and labor force data by gender to investigate the living conditions of undocumented women specifically.

As the following report shows, undocumented women make vital contributions to California’s economy. They have high rates of labor force participation. The industries in which they work are critical to the success and growth of the state’s \$3.4 trillion economy.² But undocumented women face significant barriers in their efforts to access economic opportunity—barriers that

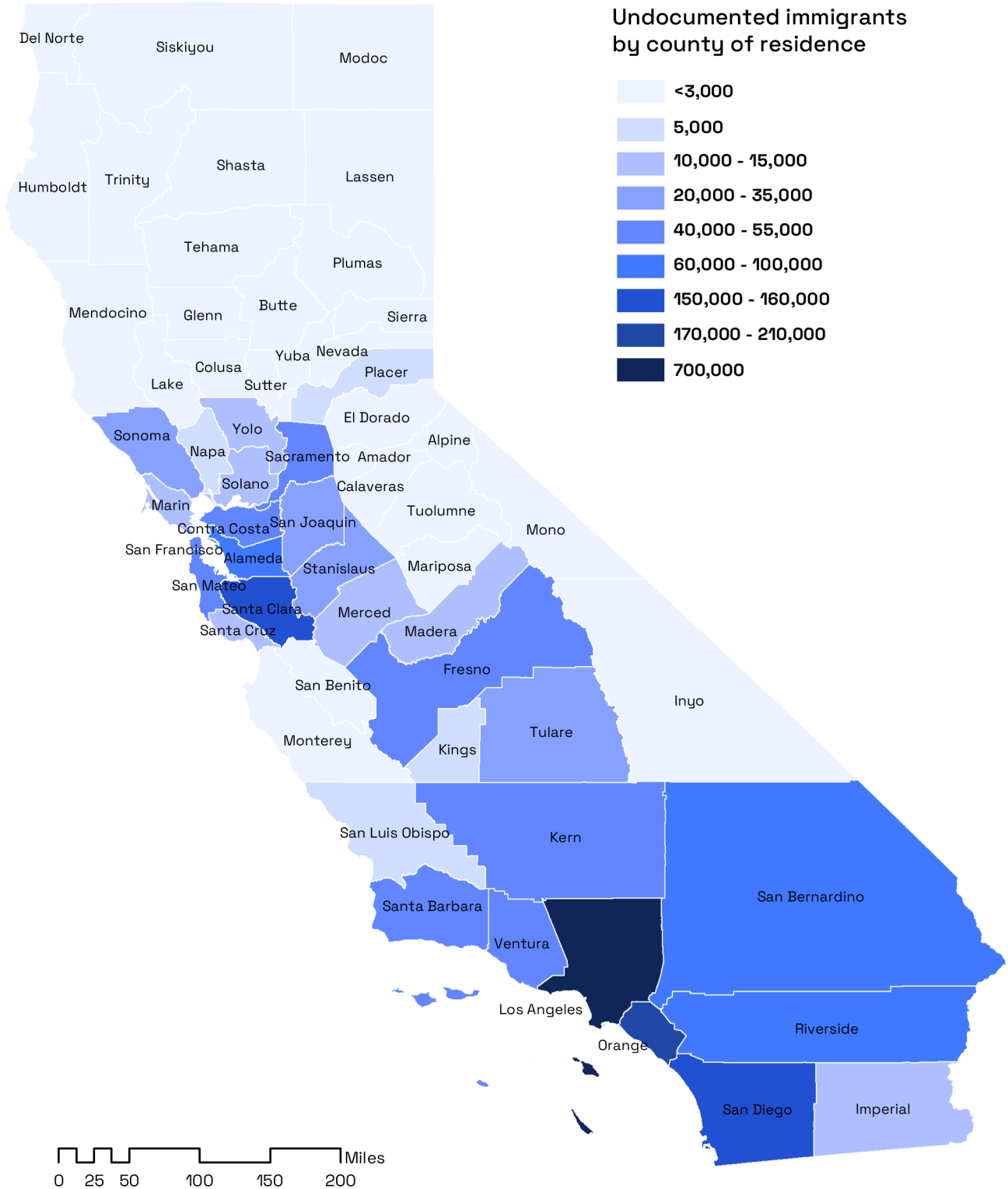
Key Findings About Undocumented Women in California:

- Undocumented women earn 49 cents to every \$1 earned by white men³
- 62% are in the labor force
- The median income of women working in the ten most common occupations is \$22,337, roughly \$3,500 below the poverty threshold for a family of four⁴
- Only 55% have health insurance
- Undocumented women are half as likely to live in a home owned by themselves or a family member, compared to California women overall
- 21% live below the poverty line
- 70% are Latina, 21% are Asian Pacific Islander
- At least 800,000 of the 1.8 million children living with undocumented mothers are U.S. citizens

are higher than those encountered by undocumented men. Undocumented women are paid less for similar work than all other Californian workers. They have high rates of poverty and low rates of homeownership and health insurance.

Undocumented women are integral members of California’s dynamic economy, diverse communities, and vibrant cultures. Recognizing the contributions that immigrants make to the state and its economy, as well as the hardships imposed by a federal immigration system widely acknowledged to be dysfunctional, California’s leaders have over the years enacted policies to advance immigrant economic participation, safety, and social integration. Labor laws and safety regulations aimed at industries with high rates of immigrant labor, for example, provide needed protections to all essential workers, many of whom are undocumented. As policymakers look ahead, the 2022 budget surplus provides an opportunity to uplift the families of 2.2 million undocumented Californians who make up a critical mass of the state’s workforce and help propel economic growth in the nation’s largest economy.

UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS IN CALIFORNIA ARE CONCENTRATED IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY AND THE CENTRAL VALLEY



Undocumented Women in California: By the Numbers

Between 10.8 million and 11.2 million immigrants who are undocumented live in the United States, according to estimates by the Institute.⁵ More live in California—approximately 2.2 million—than in any other state.

Nearly one million undocumented immigrant women call California home. A large majority (57%) are originally from Mexico and 12% hail from Central America. Women from China and India each account for about 5% of all undocumented women living in California. (See Appendix, Table 1.)

Throughout the many waves of immigration the U.S. has experienced in its history, men have made up the majority of immigrants. That remains true for recent immigrants. Overall, 56% of California’s undocumented immigrants are men and 44% are women. Still, there are notable gender differences among immigrants from the top ten countries of origin. Immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, India, Guatemala, Honduras, and Vietnam are disproportionately men, while immigrants from China and Taiwan are roughly half women and half men. The Philippines and South Korea are the only major countries of origin from which women make up a clear majority (53%) of immigrants.

In California, undocumented immigrants are concentrated in Los Angeles County and the Central Valley. Additionally, large numbers reside throughout southern California and the counties of Santa Clara and Alameda. (See Appendix, Table 2.)

Immigrants tend to be younger than the population overall. Half of undocumented immigrants are younger than 36, and about half of undocumented women have children under 18 at home. Most undocumented adults are longtime residents in the United States; on average, undocumented women have lived in the U.S. for fourteen years. The Institute estimates that there are 1.8 million children of undocumented women living in California.⁶

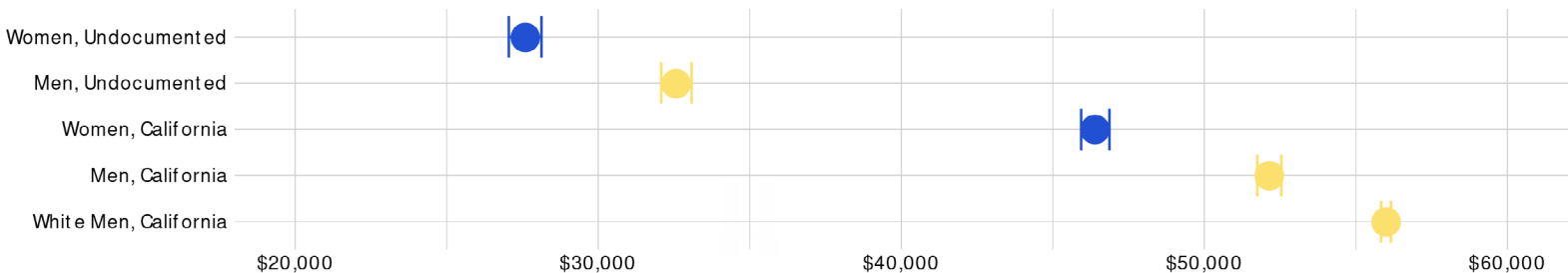
High Labor Force Participation Rate, Low Incomes

Undocumented women—seven in ten of whom are between the ages of 25 and 49—are in their prime work, wealth building, and family formation years. Almost two in three are in the labor force. Among mothers with children under 18 in the household, 53% are in the labor force.

The industries in which they are concentrated, such as agriculture and tourism, are critical to the \$3.4 trillion California economy.⁷ Fifteen percent of all undocumented working women hold jobs in hotels and restaurants.⁸ Thirteen percent of all U.S. agricultural output is produced in California, and undocumented women make up substantial numbers of the essential workers in California agriculture.⁹

The pay disparities experienced by undocumented women in the state’s labor market are stark—particularly in comparison to white men, the highest paid group in California. Undocumented women earn only 49 cents for every \$1 earned by white men.

UNDOCUMENTED WOMEN EXPERIENCE THE LARGEST GENDER WAGE GAP AMONG ALL WORKERS IN CALIFORNIA



Note: Estimates represent annual median income by group, 2019 dollars. Source: Gender Equity Policy Institute estimates compiled from ACS (2015-2019).
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For undocumented women, immigration status, race, and ethnicity intersect with gender to exacerbate the difficulties they encounter in securing economic stability. The gender wage gap and occupational disparities they experience, however, are common for California women.

Working women in California face a sex-segregated labor market and, on average, are paid less than men. Many of the low-wage occupations commonly held by undocumented women, such as cashiers and personal care aides, are also among the five most common occupations held by California women overall. Even so, in these occupations, undocumented women earn less than their female counterparts in the state. Adding to this pay disparity for the same work, two of these five top occupations for California women overall—nursing and elementary and middle school teaching—pay well above the median state income.¹⁰ Median incomes for the most common occupations held by California women range widely, from \$21,300 for maids and housekeeping cleaners to \$93,900 for nurses. While California women overall make more than undocumented women, they still earn just 83 cents for every \$1 earned by white men—and women of color typically earn even less.

Undocumented Women are Shut out of Good Jobs—Because They are Women

The Institute’s analysis of occupations and incomes of undocumented women indicates that gender creates barriers beyond immigration status.

Consider the factors of skill and educational levels in pay. To be sure, the gender gap between California men and undocumented women is due in part to undocumented women’s relatively low rates of college education. Yet undocumented women are also excluded from good jobs that commonly employ non-college educated men, including ones who are undocumented. Likewise, women-dominated occupations, which in certain cases demand high levels of skill in interpersonal relations, as well as hard physical labor, pay substantially less than male-dominated ones that require less skill. The median income in California for a female personal care aide is \$25,000; for a male truck driver, it is \$41,700.¹¹ While undocumented workers earn less than other Californians in these occupations, the gender wage gap

between the male-dominated and female-dominated occupations is much larger. (See Appendix, Figure 1.) Moreover, gender pay disparities by occupation are compounded by the tendency among employers to pay women, people of color, and undocumented immigrants less than white men for the very same work.

Despite the fact that undocumented women show a strong attachment to work that is often difficult and demanding, they are largely excluded from good paying jobs and are dramatically over-represented in sex-segregated, low-paying occupations. The most common occupation held by undocumented immigrant women is as a maid or housekeeping cleaner, an occupation in which women are 90% of the workforce. The annual median income in it for undocumented women is only \$18,200, below the poverty threshold for a family of three. The second most common occupation for undocumented women is agricultural work, with a median annual income for undocumented women of \$20,400. Among employed undocumented women, 12% are engaged in low-wage caregiving work, as childcare workers, personal care aides, or the like.¹²

Because of their lack of legal status, immigrants who are undocumented, regardless of gender, typically encounter lower wages, precarious working conditions, and exploitation in the U.S. labor market. Undocumented working men and women both have low annual incomes, as compared to Californians overall.

Undocumented men earn only 58 cents for every \$1 earned by their white male counterparts—and just 70 cents for every \$1 earned by California women overall.

Disaggregating data on income by gender and immigration status reveals that undocumented men earn less than any other group of workers—men or women—with one exception: undocumented women.

The median income earned by undocumented working men (\$32,600) is 19% higher than the median income earned by undocumented women (\$27,500). The gender wage gap among undocumented people is driven largely by men’s access to comparatively higher paying jobs as truck drivers and in the construction industry. For example, undocumented carpenters have a median income of \$33,500. Roughly one in five undocumented

men work in the construction industry, compared to only one in 100 undocumented women. Undocumented truck drivers have a median income of \$36,400. Approximately 28 times more men than women hold this job.

Among the ten most common occupations for undocumented people of any gender, only agricultural work is not overwhelmingly segregated by sex. (See Appendix, Tables 3 and 4.) Women comprise roughly a third of undocumented agricultural workers, yet earn less than men. The median annual income for undocumented men in agricultural work is \$26,000, or 26% more than that for undocumented women. As in agriculture, in other occupations that employ both men and women who are undocumented, women often earn less. (See Appendix, Figure 2.)

Comparing the occupations and incomes of undocumented women to men, as well as to undocumented men, the conclusion that emerges appears inescapable: Undocumented women are largely shut out of good jobs because they are women, not because of their immigration status.

Low wages create housing and health insecurity for undocumented women

Undocumented women suffer from comparatively high rates of poverty. Among undocumented women, the poverty rate is 20.9%. (The poverty threshold for a family of three in 2019 was \$20,578.¹³) More than a third (34%) have incomes that fall below 150% of the federal poverty line.

It is important to underscore that the available data on poverty among undocumented immigrants predates the coronavirus pandemic, and the data does not yet exist to accurately gauge more recent poverty rates for undocumented people. Not only did the pandemic exacerbate longstanding and deeply rooted inequalities experienced by immigrant families, but in addition, immigrants—with legal status and without—faced disproportionate harms from the pandemic and its economic fallout. Immigrants and undocumented immigrants made up large proportions of essential workers. They faced heightened health risks from their exposure at work and suffered higher rates of disease and

mortality from Covid. At the same time, undocumented women worked in highly disrupted industries, like tourism, food service, and retail, where unemployment soared. Lacking legal status, undocumented workers who lost their jobs were not eligible for unemployment benefits and other income replacement programs created by the federal government.¹⁴

For undocumented women particularly, daycare and school closures placed additional burdens on those in the labor force. A report by the UCLA Latino Politics and Policy Institute found that, during the pandemic, Latinas spent significantly more time caring for family members and performing domestic labor and significantly less time in paid work. Pressed by responsibilities at home and the collapse of already insufficient support for working parents, California Latinas involuntarily exited the workforce.¹⁵

The low wages earned by many undocumented women leave them with limited resources to spend on necessities—a problem exacerbated by California’s high cost of living.

Undocumented women in California face difficulties in the state’s notoriously expensive housing market. Only 28% live in homes they or a family member owns, while 71% are renters. Not only do few have access to one of the most important means for wealth-building in the U.S.—homeownership—but many renters are also struggling. One study found that 68% of undocumented immigrants in Los Angeles County, home to roughly a third of California’s undocumented population, spend more than 30% of their income on housing and utilities.¹⁶

Only 55% of undocumented women have health insurance, a rate 41% lower than that for California women overall. Following implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) by the state of California, more than 90% of the state’s residents overall have health insurance coverage. Federal regulations, however, bar immigrants from participating fully in the ACA’s benefits and subsidies. To mitigate the impact of this exclusion, California policymakers have extended insurance coverage and medical care to some groups of undocumented immigrants. Those younger than 26 were made eligible for Medi-Cal in 2016, while

a 2021 law extending Medi-Cal to undocumented people aged 50 and over will go into effect in May 2022. That will open access to health insurance to more than 170,000 undocumented women, according to the Institute’s estimates. Nevertheless, about 1.5 million undocumented people will remain ineligible for Medi-Cal and likely remain uninsured unless eligibility is expanded to all undocumented immigrants.¹⁷

Methodology

Social scientists have employed a variety of methods to estimate the number of immigrants who are undocumented residing in the United States. The Gender Equity Policy Institute’s primary objective in this report was provide an in-depth profile of undocumented women to assess their well-being. First, we employed a frequently used demographic estimation technique, the residual method, to arrive at an estimate of the number of undocumented immigrants. After conducting this process and identifying undocumented individuals in the U.S. Census American Community Survey, the Institute then interacted gender with a number of variables across various economic and social dimensions to analyze the lives of undocumented women. The residual method technique, summarized below, is described in detail in the full methodology available [online](#).

In sum, the residual method estimates the number of undocumented immigrants by taking the difference between the total foreign-born population and the sum of legal permanent residents, refugees, and foreign-born individuals with legal authorization to work or reside the U.S.

To estimate these populations, the method relies upon two public datasets. The first is the American Community Survey (ACS), conducted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau. With this dataset, researchers can estimate the total foreign-born population by country of origin currently residing in the U.S. The second is Department of Homeland Security data on the number of immigrants entering the country per year, by country of origin, since 1986. By accounting for mortality rates, emigration rates, undercount rates, and the number of current temporary workers in the U.S., the Institute

estimated the number of legal permanent residents, refugees, and foreign-born individuals with legal authorization to reside or work in the U.S. as of 2019. The difference between the total foreign-born population and the sum of the legal permanent resident, refugee, and individuals with authorization produces the residual estimates of the number of undocumented immigrants per country of origin.

The method independently takes ACS and applies a series of “logical edits” to arrive at an individual-level dataset of those who are most likely to be undocumented. A series of techniques are used to ensure that the ACS totals of possibly undocumented immigrants complement the residual estimates. In other words, demographic information and profiles of the undocumented immigrant population are compiled by identifying non-citizens in ACS most likely to be undocumented, and ensuring the data is in accordance with the estimates produced from the residual method.

Appendix

TABLE 1:
TOP PLACES OF ORIGIN
UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS, CALIFORNIA

COUNTRY	PERCENT
Mexico	58.4%
Central America	12.2%
India	5.5%
China	4.6%
South Korea	3.0%
Philippines	2.8%
South America	1.9%
Taiwan	0.8%
Iran	0.6%
Vietnam	0.6%
Total other countries	9.1%

Source: Gender Equity Policy Institute estimates compiled from ACS and DHS data.

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TABLE 2:
UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS BY COUNTY

County	Number	Percent
Los Angeles	700,000	31.5%
Orange	210,000	9.6%
Santa Clara	160,000	7.5%
San Diego	150,000	7.0%
Riverside	100,000	4.6%
San Bernardino	100,000	4.6%
Alameda	100,000	4.6%
Contra Costa	55,000	2.5%
Ventura	50,000	2.4%
San Mateo	50,000	2.3%
Fresno	45,000	2.1%
Sacramento	45,000	2.1%
Kern	45,000	2.0%
San Francisco	45,000	2.0%
Santa Barbara	40,000	1.8%
San Joaquin	35,000	1.6%
Sonoma	25,000	1.1%
Tulare	20,000	1.0%
Stanislaus	20,000	0.9%
Merced	15,000	0.8%
Solano	15,000	0.7%
Yolo	15,000	0.6%
Santa Cruz	10,000	0.5%
Marin	10,000	0.4%
Madera	10,000	0.4%
Imperial	10,000	0.4%
San Luis Obispo	5,000	0.3%
Napa	5,000	0.3%
Kings	5,000	0.3%
Placer	5,000	0.3%
Butte	NA	
El Dorado	NA	
Humboldt	NA	
Shasta	NA	
No County Report	75,000	3.5%

Note: NA values reported where sample sizes are too small to estimate totals.

Source: Gender Equity Policy Institute estimates compiled from ACS and DHS data.

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TABLE 3:
TOP 10 OCCUPATIONS
UNDOCUMENTED WOMEN, CALIFORNIA

Occupation	Percent	Median Income
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	10.3%	\$ 18,218
Other agricultural workers	5.8%	\$ 20,362
Cooks	4.4%	\$ 22,527
Cashiers	4.2%	\$ 20,859
Janitors and building cleaners	3.8%	\$ 23,740
Packers and packagers, hand	3.0%	\$ 22,000
Personal care aides	2.8%	\$ 23,740
Childcare workers	2.5%	NA
Waiters and waitresses	2.4%	\$ 23,740
Retail salespersons	2.3%	\$ 24,000

Note: Percents relative to total number of undocumented working women California.
For more information about potential undercount with agricultural workers, see endnote. NA values reported where sample sizes are too small to estimate totals.
Source: Gender Equity Policy Institute estimates compiled from ACS and DHS data.

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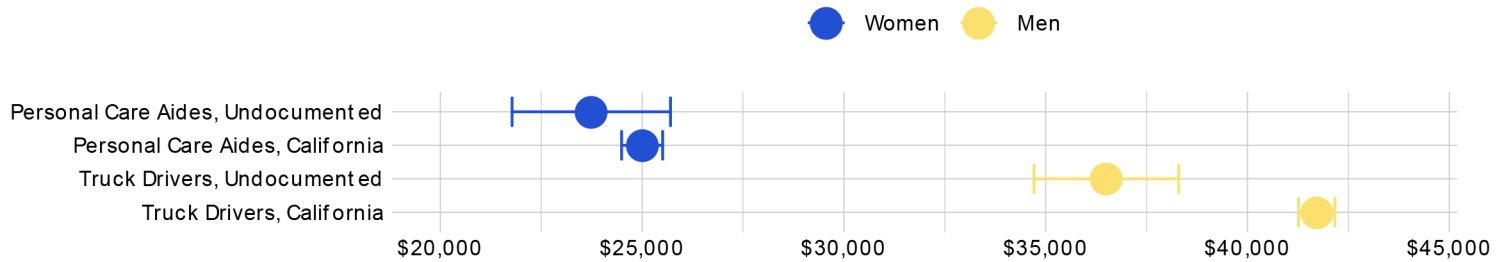
TABLE 4:
TOP 10 OCCUPATIONS
UNDOCUMENTED MEN, CALIFORNIA

Occupation	Percent	Median Income
Other agricultural workers	8.4%	\$ 25,569
Construction laborers	7.8%	\$ 28,488
Landscaping and groundskeeping workers	5.3%	\$ 21,582
Cooks	4.6%	\$ 25,569
Truck drivers	3.8%	\$ 36,652
Carpenters	2.9%	\$ 33,452
Janitors and building cleaners	2.8%	\$ 26,978
Painters and paperhangers	2.4%	\$ 25,030
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand	2.4%	\$ 27,116
Miscellaneous production workers, including equipment operators and tenders	1.4%	\$ 30,245

Note: Percents relative to total number of undocumented working men California. For more information about potential undercount with agricultural workers, see endnote.
Source: Gender Equity Policy Institute estimates compiled from ACS DHS data.

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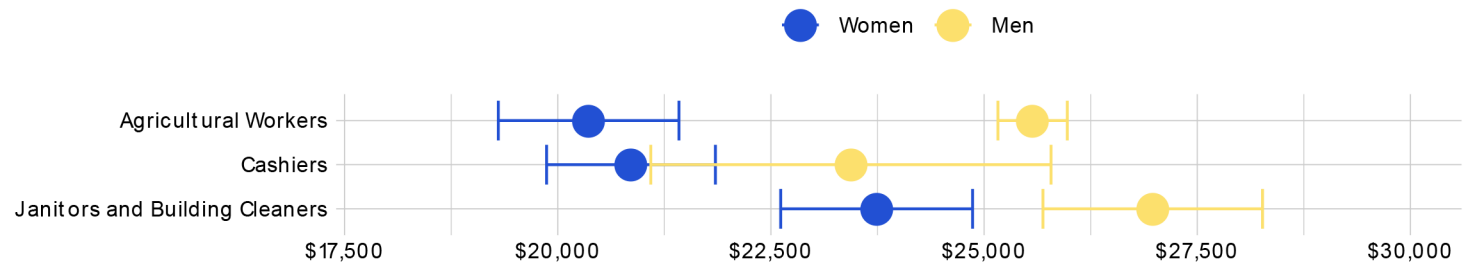
FIGURE 1:
COMPARISON OF MEDIAN INCOMES WITHIN OCCUPATIONS, UNDOCUMENTED WOMEN AND MEN



Note: Estimates represent annual median income for full-time year-round worker, 2019 dollar. Source: Gender Equity Policy Institute estimates compiled from ACS (2015-2019).

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FIGURE 2:
COMPARISON OF MEDIAN INCOMES WITHIN OCCUPATIONS, UNDOCUMENTED WOMEN AND MEN



Note: Estimates represent annual median income for full-time year-round worker, 2019 dollar. Source: Gender Equity Policy Institute estimates compiled from ACS (2015-2019).

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Sources

¹ The Institute employed a frequently used demographic calculation technique, the residual method, to estimate the gender breakdown of the undocumented population in California. See a detailed explanation of the methodology online. ACS 2015-2019 data was accessed through *IPUMS USA*, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. DHS data was compiled from "Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2019" (Department of Homeland Security, 2019). <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2019>. All estimates and calculations contained in the report were done by the Institute, unless otherwise noted. Subsequent references to this analysis will be cited as GEPI Estimates.

² Estimate reflects the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of CA as of Q3 2021. "Gross Domestic Product by State, 3rd Quarter 2021" (Bureau of Economic Analysis). <https://www.bea.gov/data/gdp/gdp-state> (Hereafter BEA (2021)).

³ Throughout this report, white includes all non-Latino/Hispanic white people. All Californians is an inclusive category of all people in California, regardless of race, ethnicity, or immigration status.

⁴ Forty-two percent of all undocumented working women work in the top ten occupations. See Appendix, Table 3. The poverty threshold (2019) for a family with two adults and two children was \$25,926. (Jessica Semega et al., "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2019" (U.S. Census Bureau, September 2020), <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-270.pdf>).

⁵ Undocumented immigrants are undercounted in the Census and other government data sources. For more information, see Ron Jarmin, "Counting Everyone Once, Only Once and in the Right Place," (United States Census Bureau, Director's Blog, November 5 2018). https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/director/2018/11/counting_everyone_on.html. Research institutes and government agencies employ various estimation strategies to correct the undercount. The range of total undocumented immigrants above, 10.8 – 11.2 million, reflects the difference between two commonly used undercount adjustment methods. For more information, please see the methodology online.

⁶ GEPI Estimates.

⁷ BEA (2021).

⁸ GEPI Estimates of industries reported by working undocumented immigrants. The calculation for hotels and restaurants is based on analysis of the Accommodation and Food Services industry, ACS.

⁹ GEPI estimates that roughly one-third of undocumented farmworkers in California are women. For the state's output, see "California Agricultural Statistics Review 2019-2020" (California Department of Food & Agriculture), 2. https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/Statistics/PDFs/2020_Ag_Stats_Review.pdf. Agricultural workers, especially undocumented ones, are particularly subject to undercounts by the Census Bureau. One, the ACS undercounts undocumented immigrants. Two, depending on time of year and month of survey, seasonal agricultural workers are likely missed. Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, "Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic's Front Lines," (Center for American Progress, Dec 2 2020). <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/protecting-undocumented-workers-pandemics-front-lines-2/>.

¹⁰ Work visas, while difficult to obtain, are available for some categories of nurses, and many foreign-born nurses have legal authorization to work in the U.S. GEPI estimates there are under 10,000 registered nurses among undocumented women.

¹¹ Based on a number of factors, the Institute infers that truck drivers make up a majority of the individuals in the occupational category Drivers/sales workers and truck drivers. The occupation Personal Care Aide comprises workers who monitor the condition of people with disabilities or chronic illnesses and help them with daily living activities. They work in homes and institutional settings. (BLS, U.S. Department of Labor, "Occupational Outlook Handbook," <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/home-health-aides-and-personal-care-aides.htm>, accessed January 25, 2022.)

¹² Median incomes are calculated for full-time, year-round workers, defined as 35+ hours per week, 50+ weeks of work per year.

¹³ The amount is for two adults and one child. Semega et al., "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2019."

¹⁴ Raúl Hinojosa-Ojeda, Sherman Robinson, and Rodrigo Domínguez-Villegas, "Undocumented During COVID-19: Essential for the Economy but Excluded from Relief" (UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Initiative, August 2020), <https://latino.ucla.edu/research/undocumented-during-covid-19-essential-for-the-economy-but-excluded-from-relief/>.

¹⁵ The analysis includes all immigrant and native-born Latinas. Cassandra Hernández, et. al., "Latinas Exiting the Workforce: How the Pandemic Revealed Historic Disadvantages and Heightened Economic Hardship, UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute, June 14, 2021, 4, 12-13. <https://latino.ucla.edu/research/latina-workforce-2021-immersive/>.

¹⁶ Defined as spending more than 30% of income on housing and utilities. Equity Research Institute, "State of Immigrants in Los Angeles 2021," USC Dornsife, June 8, 2021, <https://dornsife.usc.edu/eri/state-of-immigrants-in-los-angeles-2021>.

¹⁷ GEPI estimates there are approximately 1,550,000 people between the ages of 26 and 49 who will remain ineligible for Medi-Cal after the new law goes into effect in May 2022.

ABOUT THE GENDER EQUITY POLICY INSTITUTE

The [Gender Equity Policy Institute](#) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing opportunity, fairness, and well-being for all people through research and education exposing the gender impacts of the policies, processes, and practices of government and business.

We conduct and publish research on the best practices for advancing gender equity. We analyze and rate public policies and business practices to identify the effects on people of all genders, with particular attention to the impacts on groups, such as women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people, who have been systematically disadvantaged by discrimination, bias, and structural inequality. By educating policymakers, business leaders, and advocates about the inequities and financial disparities embedded in seemingly neutral economic and political processes, we provide the tools and knowledge that leaders need to rebalance systems, guarantee equal benefits and opportunities, and secure a just and sustainable future for all Americans.

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