

DOWN BUT NOT OUT

LABOR STRUGGLES FOR PROFESSIONAL BOXERS IN CALIFORNIA'S RING

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About LPPI

The UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute addresses the most critical domestic policy challenges facing Latinos and other communities of color through research, advocacy, mobilization, and leadership development to expand genuine opportunity for all Americans.

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The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the University of California, Los Angeles as a whole. The authors alone are responsible for the content of this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 2024, professional boxer Saúl “Canelo” Álvarez took on Jaime Munguía and earned a purse estimated at a whopping \$35 million.¹ While most Americans are familiar with these multi-million dollar fights, for most of the roughly 3,600 licensed professional boxers actively working in the United States, boxing is a profession with high risks and very low pay.² This policy brief examines the precarious labor position that professional boxers occupy in California, the state that hosts the most boxing events in the country.

Drawing on data from 32 in-depth qualitative interviews we conducted with independently contracted Latino boxers and various boxing stakeholders, as well as quantitative data provided by the California State Athletic Commission (CSAC), we provide valuable insights on professional boxing events, the approximate number of Latino boxers, a typical workday for boxers, median compensation figures, the health and physical risks associated with the job, and current regulations. In doing so, we offer an intricate look at the labor landscape of the boxing industry in California.

Our main findings are:

1. **California is the top state for boxing in the country by number of events.** In 2022, California hosted almost 6 times as many official events as Nevada, a state popularly known for its boxing fights. Within California, most matches are concentrated in Los Angeles County and the Inland Empire.
2. **Latinos were overrepresented among professional boxers in California.** While Latinos made up 40% of California’s population in 2022, 49% of boxers fighting in California between 2013 and 2021 were of Latino descent.
3. **Almost 84% of all fights in California between 2013 and 2021 were four-, six-, or eight-round fights.** Despite this statistic, championship-level matches—usually 12-round fights—attract the most money and attention from the media and the public.
4. **Boxers in California who fight four-, six-, or eight-round fights typically train between 24 and 30 hours per week.** Boxing work requires not only physical training, but also rehabilitation, meal preparation, social media engagement, and business meetings.
5. **Many boxers in California receive less than minimum wage earnings from boxing.** The median compensation for fighters in California ranges from \$1,500 per four-round fight to \$7,000 per eight-round fight, and fighters at four-, six-, and eight-round levels typically have two to four matches per year. Thus, in a best-case scenario, boxers at this level would make \$28,000 per year, approximately \$5,000 less than the annual earnings of a full-time worker earning California’s minimum wage.
6. **Since boxers are independent contractors, they have no access to comprehensive work benefits and protections and are not covered by federal labor standards.**



Photos by: Rudy Mondragón

Unlike other professional sports leagues such as Major League Baseball, the National Football Association, and the National Basketball Association, professional boxing in the United States is not centrally organized, meaning that there is no national regulatory commission overseeing the sport. Instead, individual U.S. states, territories, and tribes regulate boxing. These individual commissions are not structurally connected and lack regulatory uniformity. In California, CSAC has made strides in implementing some measures to assure, to the best of its abilities, the health and safety of boxers, such as requiring the presence of ringside physicians at each match.

However, our findings show that boxers still face precarious conditions. To improve the safety and labor protection of boxers in California, we make the following policy recommendations:

- Raise the minimum payment of contestants from the current \$100 per round to \$375 per round and make annual adjustments to account for inflation.
- Strengthen the California Professional Boxer's Pension Fund by increasing fees and making annual adjustments to fees and caps to account for inflation.
- Create a financial literacy tool that helps boxers learn financial skills.
- Create an easily accessible database for collecting, storing, and retrieving disaggregated data.

INTRODUCTION

Prizefighting, which began in the 17th century in England, is the pursuit of professional boxing for financial gain.³ Although prizefighting has existed in the United States since the late 18th century, the sport remains underregulated and overwhelmingly underpaid.⁴ This is true at all levels of professional boxing, including four-, six-, eight-, 10-, and 12-round matches. The United States has no national boxing commission and the sport is regulated instead by individual states, territories, and tribes. The boxing industry is different from other major interstate professional sports industries in the United States. It operates independently, without any private sector association, league, or centralized organization to regulate and uphold consistent business practices and ethical standards.⁵ This is a major reason why professional boxers have described the industry as the “Wild West.”

Boxing is one of the most popular sports among Latinos.⁶ Some of the most famous world champions are of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Panamanian, and Nicaraguan descent. The two most marketable and highly sought-after dates for boxing are Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day weekend.⁷ This in part has to do with the significance of the Latino fandom. According to a Nielsen report, 94% of Latinos are sports fans and 56% of those consider themselves dedicated fans, which means that the Latino audience represents a large market for U.S. sports industries.⁸

Our study takes a close look at Latino boxers who have fought in California, the state that hosts the largest number of registered boxing events in the country. In California, a large proportion of the boxing labor force is Latino. We worked closely with the California State Athletic Commission (CSAC), which is part of the state’s Department of Consumer Affairs. Established in 1924, the CSAC is responsible for protecting the health and safety of licensed boxers, kickboxers, and other martial arts athletes. The commission is in charge of implementing and enforcing the federal Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act and the California Boxing Act. The commission, which has seven members (five appointed by the governor), has four main functions: licensing, enforcement of applicable laws, approving and regulating events, and administering the Professional Boxer’s Pension Fund.

This policy brief highlights the precarious labor position Latino boxers occupy in California. Drawing from quantitative and qualitative data on professional boxers who have worked as independent contractors in California, this study reports findings related to total boxing events, the approximate number of Latino boxers, a typical workday for boxers, and median compensation figures.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the precarious labor position occupied by Latina/o boxers in California, we conducted 32 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with boxers and other stakeholders. We conducted 15 interviews with Latino boxers and three with Latina boxers. This sample consisted of active and retired boxers whose level of experience ranged from early-career four-round fights to 12-round world championship fights. All had fought at least once in California. The other 14 interviews were with CSAC executives, boxing promoters, boxing media professionals, and the president of a sanctioning organization. We coded these data to facilitate analyses of working conditions, a boxer’s typical work week, boxing as labor, health and safety, compensation, and reasons for fighting.

We worked closely with Andy Foster, Executive Officer of CSAC, who was appointed by the commission and has served in this role since 2012. We attended more than 10 professional boxing matches in California with Foster. He provided us access to professional boxers and administrative records, including datasets with compensation amounts and total rounds for all boxers who fought in California between 2013 and 2021 and the total number of boxing events by state and region between 2011 and 2022. We paid particular attention to the compensation amounts—the total earnings from an individual fight—found in the administrative records dataset and considered factors such as the number of rounds fought in each. This allowed us to examine fighters’ median earnings for four-, six-, eight-, 10-, and 12-round fights. Consequently, in this policy brief we provide what might be the only available earnings analysis of the boxing industry.

The data are not disaggregated based on race and ethnicity, but they do include first and last names. To estimate the total number of Latino boxers who fought in California between 2013 and 2021, we identified boxers with Spanish surnames as an indication of Latino heritage, using a published list of Spanish surnames from the Florida Cancer Data System as a reference.⁹



Photos by: Rudy Mondragón

FINDINGS

Boxing in California

California is the top state for boxing in the country by number of events. As Table 1 shows, from 2017 to 2022, approximately 14% of all boxing events in the country took place in California (453 out of 3,178 events).¹⁰ After California, Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, New York, and Nevada round out the top six states to host events, cumulatively accounting for 43% of the total (1,382 events).

Table 1. Number of Boxing Events by State and Year, 2017–2022

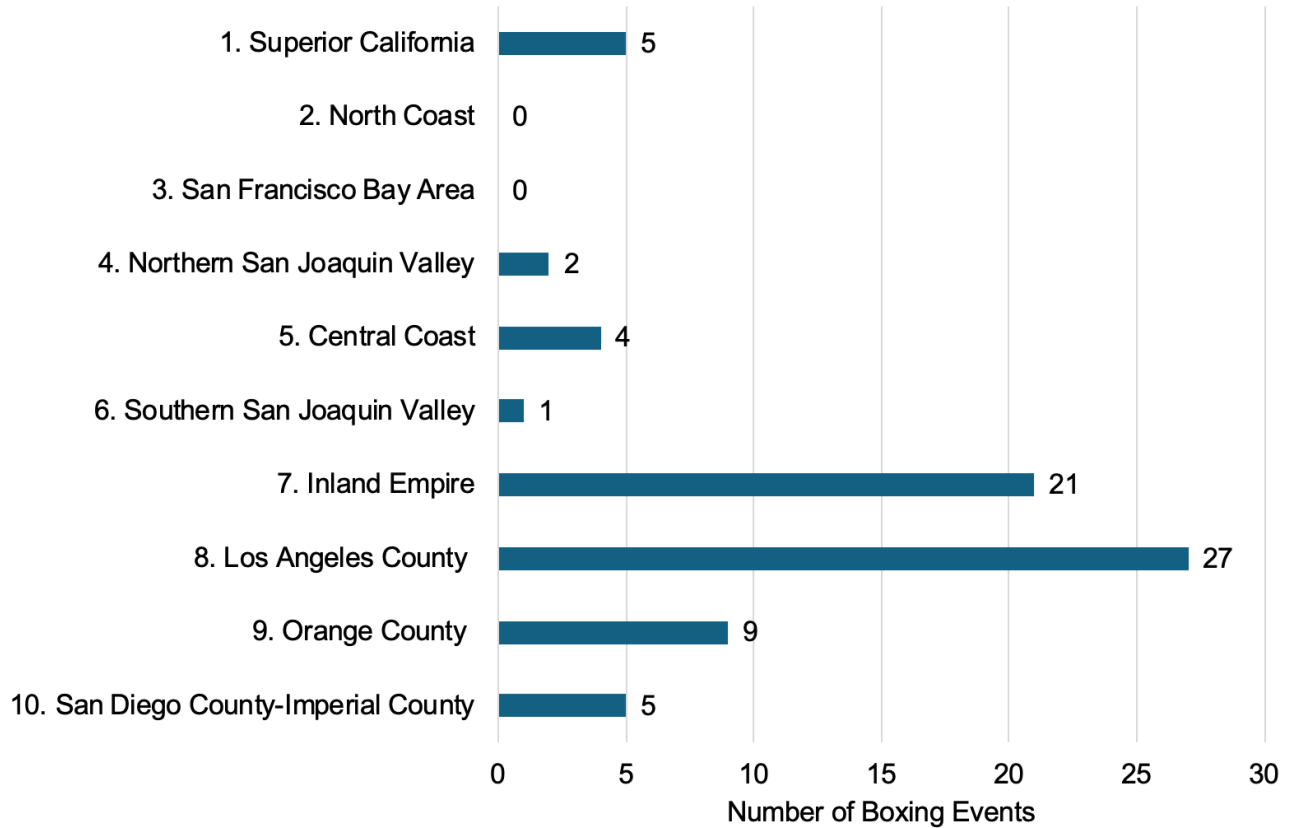
Year	California N	Texas N	Florida N	Pennsylvania N	New York N	Nevada N	Rest of the USA N	Total
2017	87	48	30	40	26	22	366	619
2018	114	54	33	37	32	21	332	623
2019	101	50	29	35	29	24	365	633
2020	35	14	38	9	4	27	112	239
2021	42	35	55	32	12	15	292	483
2022	74	56	44	39	26	13	329	581
	453	257	229	192	129	122	1,796	3,178

Source: California State Athletic Commission and BoxRec

Because many of the popular multimillion-dollar megafights are in Las Vegas, Nevada is commonly perceived to be the state that hosts the most boxing events. The number of fights in Nevada, however, was only 122, or 4% of the total from 2017 to 2022. In 2018, the CSAC supervised 114 boxing events, surpassing the combined total hosted by the state athletic commissions of Nevada, New York, and Texas. This underscores California’s prominence in the boxing industry, despite the popular perception that Nevada, New York, and Texas are the primary hosts of such events. The number of boxing events experienced a decline across the country during the COVID-19 pandemic, but by 2022, there was a gradual recovery, with California leading the way with a total of 74 fights.

Figure 1 presents a geographic mapping of the boxing events in California in 2022, showing that the largest concentration of fights took place in Los Angeles County and the Inland Empire.¹¹

Figure 1. Number of Boxing Events by California Census Region, 2022



Source: California State Athletic Commission

Notes: Counties in each region include: (1) Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Sacramento, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Sutter, Tehama, Yolo, and Yuba; (2) Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, Mendocino, Napa, Sonoma, and Trinity; (3) Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Solano; (4) Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Mono, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Tuolumne; (5) Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, San Cruz, and Ventura; (6) Fresno, Inyo, Kern, Kings, and Tulare; (7) Riverside and San Bernardino; (8) Los Angeles; (9) Orange; and (10) Imperial and San Diego

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Latinos are overrepresented among professional boxers in California. Between 2013 and 2021, 49% of all boxers in California were of Latino descent, based on an analysis of boxers’ surnames (see Table 2). However, Latinos only made up 40% of the population in California.¹²

Table 2. Number of Boxers with a Latino Surname in California, 2013–2021

Year	Boxers <i>N</i>	Boxers with Latina/o Surname <i>N</i>	Boxers with Latina/o Surname %
2013	575	319	55%
2014	685	325	47%
2015	733	378	52%
2017	640	344	54%
2018	824	380	46%
2019	518	258	50%
2020	333	144	43%
2021	453	206	45%
	4,761	2,354	49%

Source: California State Athletic Commission

CSAC does not currently collect disaggregated demographic data from its boxing workforce. The license application, for example, asks only for the applicant’s sex. California requires boxers to register for a license every year, so CSAC has the opportunity to use the application process to systematically collect demographic data like race and ethnicity as well as sex. This would establish a precedent for athletic commissions in other states, potentially leading to the creation of a nationwide demographic profile of the boxing workforce.

Work Requirements for Professional Boxers

In general, professional boxers are categorized by the number of rounds they fight. Table 3 shows the number of bouts fought in California at each level between 2013 and 2021. During that time, about 84% of all boxing matches in California were four-, six-, or eight-round fights.

Table 3. Number of Fights by Rounds in California, 2013–2021

Year	4 rounds N	6 rounds N	8 rounds N	10 rounds N	12 rounds N	Total
2013	427	223	103	78	24	855
2014	470	247	170	119	35	1,041
2015	428	280	201	122	39	1,070
2016	445	262	189	129	37	1,062
2017	527	278	186	90	37	1,118
2018	595	329	215	143	43	1,325
2019	513	337	223	197	83	1,353
2020	104	79	80	74	23	360
2021	213	77	100	82	54	526
	3,722	2,112	1,467	1,034	375	8,710

Source: California State Athletic Commission

On average, four-, six-, and eight-round professional boxers in California spend between 24 and 30 hours a week in both active training and rehabilitation. Our interviews gave us insights into the rigorous training regimens of professional boxers. We learned that four-, six-, and eight-round boxers typically train up to six days a week for a six-week camp (training program). In general, they will dedicate four to five hours daily to training and boxing-related activities while balancing a second job. For a typical fighter, this requires traveling to different gyms for various activities, such as sparring, strength training and conditioning, and using the sauna. Additional time is dedicated to rehabilitation work, meal preparation, social media engagement, and business meetings. Together, these activities demand between 24 and 30 hours a week.

Fighters at four-, six-, and eight-round levels might have two to four matches each year. At 10- and 12-round levels, a fighter might have one to three matches. The number of fights boxers have in a year depends partly on the damage they sustain in training camps and during fights. However, boxing work requires not only physical training but also rehabilitation. Acupuncture, physical therapy, yoga, and observing a proper diet are all part of a boxer’s labor. Given the uncertain nature of scheduled matches at this level, boxers continue training, regardless of whether they have a fight scheduled.

World champion fighters—boxing at the 12-round level for males and the 10-round level for females—undergo a more demanding schedule that prepares them for longer matches. World champions may train six days a week, with up to three sessions per day during an eight-week training camp. These sessions usually range from two to three hours. The day starts with an early morning run, followed by a midday gym session that involves mitt work and sparring. Strength training and conditioning (every other day) complete the daily schedule. Like other fighters, a champion fighter’s schedule might also include meal preparation, social media engagement, and business meetings, so a boxer at this level works approximately 35 to 40 hours a week.

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Earnings and Job Protection for Boxers in California

The boxers we interviewed repeatedly described the boxing industry as a “brutal sport” or a “brutal way to make a living.” This brutality extends to the compensation boxers receive for the risky work they do.

Boxers are paid by promoters from their various revenue streams. In boxing, it is the promoter’s responsibility to compensate fighters for their labor. For local boxing events that are not televised, for example, promoters generally pay fighters from the revenue of ticket sales. For boxing matches that are broadcast nationally or globally, promoters sell broadcasting rights to networks and streaming platforms. Golden Boy Promotions, for example, works with DAZN, a streaming platform, and the revenue from DAZN is then used to pay contracted fighters. Eric Gomez, president of Golden Boy Promotions, put it this way during our interview: “So, the Ryan Garcia fight, we negotiate a fee for [DAZN] to buy the show from us. That money that we get from [DAZN], which is the license fee, that’s what we use to pay the fighters. We pay everything associated with that show.” Garcia, who is one of the few top earners in boxing, received a \$2 million purse for defeating Javier Fortuna in this match on July 16, 2022.

Golden Boy Promotions’ total revenue and fighter expenses for 2014, 2015, and the first half of 2016 became public in 2017 during an antitrust lawsuit brought against the company. Golden Boy Promotions claimed it paid its boxers 62% of the company’s revenue.¹³ This share is higher than that for other combat sports, such as Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), but boxing is a winner-take-all market: Revenue is not equitably distributed among the boxers, and it tends to be disproportionately allocated to boxing’s most famous stars.

We analyzed the median amount of the purses that fighters earned in California by the number of rounds fought in 2021, as shown in Table 4. Four-, six-, and eight-round fights had the lowest fighter compensation and tended to not be televised. These types of fights are primarily preliminary matchups, which take place before the main bout. At this level fighters have not yet generated a financial “upside”—that is, being marketable and possessing a fan base that is willing to attend their matches. Ten-round fights come with higher payments because they are longer matches, the fighters have more experience, and the promoters have identified their boxing abilities, utility, and marketability.

Table 4. Median Compensation for Fighters in California by Rounds Fought, 2021

Fight Type	Median Compensation
Four-round fight	\$1,500
Six-round fight	\$4,000
Eight-round fight	\$7,000
10-round fight	\$20,000
12-round fight	\$147,180

Source: California State Athletic Commission

Note: Compensation data only include payments for fighting

Meanwhile, 12-round fights are championship-level matches, meaning that world or regional titles are at stake. These matches showcase the most famous boxers, who have large fan bases. Twelve-round matches pay the most because they tend to be the main attraction of a boxing event and they are usually televised. For the 54 12-round fights in 2021, the median purse was \$147,180. Pay increases as a boxer fights more rounds, and a fighter who holds a world title will earn top dollar. Nevertheless, fighters at the championship level may not be able to rely solely on their boxing wages and must work multiple jobs.¹⁴ The wage shortfall is even more drastic for females at this level, who are severely underpaid compared to their male counterparts.

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Boxers who stay at the four- and six-round levels often fight as opponents. Opponents have been described as fighters who are “durable” and “sent to the slaughterhouse,” meaning they are fighters who can box and are slightly competitive in a match. Their role, ultimately, is to lose, which builds up the win-loss record and the monetary value of fighters considered to be prospects and contenders. Opponents have leverage because the boxing industry needs a large pool of opponents to choose from when promoters are setting up matches for their prospects and contenders.

Regardless, the median payment for four-round fighters remains drastically low. For instance, one boxer told us that his total gross income for one year, for three four-round fights, amounted to merely \$4,950. Compared to other professional sports, boxing falls significantly short. In 2022, the minimum salaries in professional sports leagues were, for example, \$925,258 in the National Basketball Association; \$705,000 in the National Football Association (\$11,500 for its practice squad); \$65,500 in Major League Soccer; \$60,671 in the Women's National Basketball Association; and \$35,000 in the National Women's Soccer League.¹⁵

At the current median compensation levels, most four-, six-, and eight-round boxers have lower yearly earnings than a minimum-wage employee in California. The median compensation for fighters in California ranges from \$1,500 per four-round fight to \$7,000 per eight-round fight. Fighters at the four-, six-, and eight-round levels typically fight two to four matches a year. In a best-case-scenario, boxers at this level would make \$28,000 per year, which is approximately \$5,000 less than the annual earnings of a full-time worker earning California's minimum wage. As independent contractors, professional boxers have no access to comprehensive work benefits and protections and are not covered by federal labor standards.

Because of the low pay received from boxing, professional boxers need to work multiple jobs. One Latina fighter, who had fewer than 10 professional fights at the time of our interview and was balancing a full-time college schedule and a second job, told us, “We always train as if we're fighting because [we] can get an opportunity. And if I'm not ready, who knows when I'll get that same opportunity again?” In addition to pointing out the lack of consistency in her fight schedule, she mentioned taking fights outside of California for no compensation. “I think it's an embarrassment, kind of, to realize you're not getting paid, [that] you're fighting for free,” she said. “You're getting hit for free, basically.”

CSAC has enacted measures to increase pay for boxers, but the current minimum is still insufficient. In 2016, CSAC's Executive Officer, Andy Foster, began efforts to implement a minimum payment for professional boxers. The resulting state regulation, which sets a per-round minimum of \$100, became operative in 2018.¹⁶ Between 2013 and 2017, before the regulation took effect, some boxers at four-, six-, eight-, and 10-round levels were legally paid \$1 for their work. This regulation also presents the CSAC with the opportunity to regularly increase the minimum compensation, benefiting all boxers.

While CSAC has been instrumental in implementing some protections for boxers, there is still a need for more comprehensive long-term protections and benefits. CSAC is rigorous in executing strict protocols that assure, to the best of the commission's abilities, the health and safety of boxers during matches. These regulations include the presence of ringside physicians at each match, at least one paramedic on site at all times, prefight walk-throughs with ringside physicians and paramedics, and, to assure safety and fairness, the supervision of every fighter and their team by commission inspectors. However, regardless of how much money they earn, the boxing industry does not provide professional boxers with comprehensive work protections or health benefits for the long-term injuries they sustain in this dangerous form of work.

Joel Díaz, a former professional boxer and another of our interviewees, is a good example. Díaz was forced to retire at age 24 due to a detached retina. Although he's now a successful trainer, he never made life-changing money as a boxer and was not entitled to any work protections or compensation for the eye injury he sustained on the job.

CSAC also administers the Professional Boxer's Pension Fund for retired boxers who fought in California, which is the only one of its kind in the country. Created in 1982, the fund is maintained by a ticket fee of \$0.88 paid by promoters. The maximum contribution from each boxing event is \$4,600. In 2023, the average pension for boxers was a one-time payment of \$17,000.¹⁷



Photos by: Rudy Mondragón

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the *Bleacher Report*, the highest-grossing boxing event of all time was the fight between Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Manny Pacquiao during Cinco De Mayo weekend in 2015. It generated more than \$600 million in revenue.¹⁸ However, very few boxers can ever expect to reach this level.

Because of this disparity and the risks associated with this kind of work, our research provides data to inform changes that can improve the lives of boxers who may not be top earners, but nevertheless are the backbone of the boxing industry. The policy recommendations below are intended to be helpful for all boxing stakeholders in California: the CSAC, the California Legislature, promoters, executives of sanctioning bodies, and boxers.

- **Compensation.** Our research findings indicate that the CSAC should raise the minimum payment of contestants to \$375 per round, which would match the median compensation received by four-round fighters. The CSAC should also make annual adjustments to account for inflation.
- **Pension fund.** The CSAC and boxing promoters should work together to continue strengthening the California Professional Boxer’s Pension Fund by increasing the per-ticket fee, currently \$0.88, and the cap on the maximum contribution, currently \$4,600. They should also increase the gate tax limit to \$200,000, make annual adjustments to fees and caps to account for inflation, and create systematic outreach initiatives to ensure that retired eligible fighters receive their pension.
- **Financial literacy.** Because California hosts a sizeable portion of boxing events in the United States, the state licenses many professional boxers. To better support their well-being, the CSAC should create a financial literacy tool as part of the commission’s onboarding process for boxers seeking a professional license. A significant amount of boxers come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with limited education, making them vulnerable to exploitation. A financial literacy tool will empower boxers to protect themselves against potential exploitation during their careers.
- **Data collection.** The CSAC should create an easily accessible database for collecting, storing, and retrieving disaggregated data that include race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, compensation, and total rounds fought in California. To ensure the usefulness of the database, the CSAC should ask all professional boxers to report their demographic information on their license application. This would establish a precedent for athletic commissions in other states, potentially leading to the creation of a nationwide demographic profile of professional boxers that would provide greater insights into this workforce.

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Photos by: Rudy Mondragón

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dr. Rudy Mondragón is a UC Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment at the University of California, Los Angeles. As an interdisciplinary scholar, Mondragón bridges ethnic studies with the sociology of race and sport to examine the political economy of boxing and sporting sites of resistance. Mondragón has published in *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*, *Journal of Sports History*, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, and *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*. As an authoritative voice in boxing, he has been featured in ESPN, Fox Sports, Bleacher Report, CNN, New York Times, and the Washington Post. In 2021, actress, producer, and director Eva Longoria interviewed him for the Sundance-debuted DAZN documentary "La Guerra Civil," a film that delved into Mexican and Mexican American identities and the iconic clashes between Oscar De La Hoya and Julio César Chávez. Recently, he brought his expertise on boxing to Vice TV's "Dark Side of the 90s" docuseries, where he was interviewed for the episode on Mike Tyson. Mondragón earned his doctorate in Chicana/o and Central American Studies from UCLA.



Dr. Abel Valenzuela Jr. is the dean of the UCLA College Division of Social Sciences and a member of the faculty since 1994. Valenzuela is a professor of labor studies, urban planning and Chicana/o and Central American studies and the most recent past director of UCLA's Institute for Research on Labor and Employment. Valenzuela is a leading national expert on day labor and precarious labor markets, and he continues to publish and frame public and policy conversations on immigrant and low-wage workers. His research interests include precarious labor markets, worker centers, immigrant workers, environmental equity, just transitions, neighborhood change, and Los Angeles. At UCLA, he has held several administrative leadership positions, including chairing Chicana/o and Central American studies for two terms, directing the Center for the Study of Urban Poverty for more than a decade, and serving as special advisor to the chancellor on immigration policy for four years. During UCLA's Centennial Celebration, Valenzuela led the exhibit "UCLA: Our Stories, Our Impact," an effort to recognize and uplift alumni of color who have dedicated their work to social justice and change. Valenzuela earned his B.A. from UC Berkeley (social science field major) and doctorate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



Dr. José M. Hernández is a Senior Data and Applied Scientist at Microsoft and a Data Science Fellow at the University of Washington (UW) eScience Institute. He earned his doctorate at the UW, focusing on statistics and measurement, and holds a Master of Education in policy. His doctoral research focused on improving causal inference methodologies for complex data structures in scenarios lacking randomization. His current research now focuses on training and utilizing Large Language Models to aid qualitative researchers in the scientific discovery process..

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