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Building Stronger Communities: Insights from Local Economic Development Efforts in Oakland's Fruitvale Neighborhood



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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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Executive Summary

Times of crisis often expose and deepen longstanding vulnerabilities in under-capitalized communities, leaving many without access to critical resources. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, community-based organizations (CBOs) across the U.S. mobilized quickly to meet the critical needs of vulnerable community members.

This case study examines the economic and public health impacts of the pandemic on residents and small businesses in Oakland's Fruitvale neighborhood. It also explores how Fruitvale's CBOs responded together to immediate crises while advancing a long-term vision rooted in equity, culture, and community agency.

Fruitvale is a vibrant, immigrant-rich neighborhood shaped by generations of Black and Latino residents, including Mexican and Central American families and a prominent Guatemalan Mam community. Fruitvale has also endured decades of disinvestment, criminal injustice, and structural exclusion. These challenges intensified during the pandemic, as residents faced elevated exposure to and negative outcomes from COVID-19, limited access to health and relief information, and loss of income from informal or self-employment. Yet, these communities have built strong networks of entrepreneurship, mutual aid, and cultural celebration.

To study Fruitvale, we used quantitative and spatial data analysis, paired with historical research and two in-depth interviews with staff from The Unity Council and Prospera, two Latino-serving CBOs active in the neighborhood. Although limited in number, the interviews provide valuable practitioner insight to contextualize the data.

Using quantitative data, we find:

- » **Income and housing disparities:** Fruitvale households earn a median income of \$65,400, almost half the Alameda County median (\$126,200). About 76% of residents are renters, far higher than the city (42%) or county (54%) averages, reflecting limited homeownership access.
- » **Severe COVID-19 impacts:** By fall 2020, infection rates in Fruitvale reached 11.9% for Latino and 26.8% for Mam individuals, far exceeding the neighborhood average (9.8%). Fruitvale accounted for over 19% of county cases despite being only 10% of the population. Testing data also show high levels of food insecurity (40%), income loss (25%), and job loss (15%).
- » **High business churn and uneven relief:** From 2019 to 2023, Fruitvale saw both higher business growth (43%) and closures (36%) than the county, a churn rate of 79% compared to 55% countywide. Although federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) aid per resident and per job was higher than the county average, CBOs reported that small and informal businesses struggled to access this relief.



Our historical research and in-depth interviews revealed that:

- » **Local coalitions and advocacy successfully challenged top-down economic development.** In an incredible feat of community power, Fruitvale leaders envisioned the Fruitvale Transit Village to disrupt gentrification, meet local needs, and increase homeownership, small business activity, and educational attainment, while preserving the neighborhood's demographic diversity.
- » **During the pandemic, Fruitvale CBOs leveraged historic coalitions to activate crisis responses.** Fruitvale CBOs reinvigorated the Resilient Fruitvale Collaborative to coordinate linguistically and culturally competent outreach, testing, and aid distribution for residents, who are primarily Latino and Mam. These partnerships strengthened safety net infrastructure and continue to inform preparedness for future crises.
- » **Fruitvale CBOs focus on providing culturally rooted service delivery.** Fruitvale CBOs have long filled gaps in community needs, hiring from service populations and designing programs with local residents. Organizations prioritize designing programs responsive to residents' cultural, linguistic, and economic realities.

For Fruitvale's Latino leaders, recovery is not about returning to the status quo, but building systems rooted in cultural strength, community control, and collective care. Their work provides a model for how equitable investment and revitalization can succeed when driven by those closest to the challenges. Funders, policymakers, and institutions must not only support but also follow the lead of this community-based leadership.



Introduction

Times of crisis often expose and deepen longstanding vulnerabilities in under-capitalized communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, historically disinvested communities experienced disproportionate levels of business closures,¹ unemployment,² and housing instability.³ Fruitvale, a longstanding majority-Latino neighborhood in Oakland, California, exemplified these patterns, having long fought poverty and disinvestment.

In response to the pandemic, Latino-led organizations in Fruitvale and across the U.S. quickly mobilized to fill governance and service delivery gaps and meet the critical needs of vulnerable members, particularly those excluded from or unable to access government relief programs such as PPP.⁴ From launching mutual aid networks to provide food and medicine, to creating emergency relief funds for small businesses and culture bearers, these efforts demonstrate ingenuity and a deep commitment to community well-being. However, few studies have sought to tell the stories of the community-based efforts that sustain communities through crises. This brief combines quantitative data and cultural narratives to highlight Latino-led, community-driven responses that address both crisis and long-term empowerment.

About this Case Study

This case study is part of a series documenting Latino-led Economic Development (LLED) efforts. **We define LLED as community-rooted strategies that foster economic resilience and justice through advocacy, education, access to capital, and cultural preservation initiatives.** Latino leaders and organizations lead LLED efforts to ensure equitable participation and influence in the economy. These efforts are often rooted in the belief that communities can shape their economic futures through grassroots solutions centered on their cultural values and needs while fostering economic self-sufficiency.

In Fruitvale, LLED strategies emerged as a vital response to the compounding challenges of disinvestment, displacement, and the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study explores how community-led efforts in Fruitvale delivered immediate relief through resident and small business support, as well as by leaning on previously established collaboratives to push for cultural competency and community autonomy in service provision and development.

To study Fruitvale, we used quantitative and spatial data analysis, supplemented by historical research and two in-depth interviews with staff members from local community-based organizations, The Unity Council and Prospera.⁵ While limited in number, these interviews provide valuable practitioner perspectives that help contextualize our findings, especially when interpreted alongside longitudinal demographic and environmental data (see Appendix for additional details on methodology).

Traditional economic development often relies on top-down solutions and overlooks cultural and local knowledge, leading to displacement and gentrification under the guise of revitalization. In contrast, community-led strategies in Fruitvale emphasize empowering the local community to be an active leader in these efforts, strengthening established cooperative networks and advocating for tailored resources that will pave the way for sustainable growth for generational residents.





Fruitvale: A History of Community Activism

“Fruit Vale” was established in the mid-19th century east of Lake Merritt by Quaker horticulturist and abolitionist Henderson Luelling, where he cultivated fruit trees after migrating west in 1854. Following the 1909 San Francisco earthquake, Oakland annexed Fruitvale, and the community quickly urbanized as a working-class neighborhood. Fruitvale prospered and became one of Oakland’s busiest commercial and residential centers, primarily inhabited by German, Portuguese, and Irish families.⁶

Following the end of the Second World War, however, Fruitvale suffered the effects of middle-class white flight and economic decline as factories, businesses, and many of the neighborhood’s wealthiest white residents moved out to the suburbs.⁷ At the same time, the construction of a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station and the Nimitz freeway displaced countless African Americans and Latinos out of West Oakland (a predominantly Mexican and Puerto Rican community) and into East Oakland communities like Fruitvale.



During the 1960s, Fruitvale Chicanos (U.S.-born Latinos of Mexican descent) fought for civil rights, social justice, and against police brutality through local organizations and chapters of national civil rights groups. Labor leader César Chávez frequented Fruitvale and advocates established Spanish-speaking clinics and civil rights organizations such as El Centro Legal de la Raza, La Clínica de la Raza, El Centro Infantil de la Raza, La Escuelita, and the Emiliano Zapata Street Academy.⁸

In 1964, Fruitvale Chicano activists formed the Mexican American Unity Council to support leadership, housing, services, and development for Latino communities in East Oakland. Later renamed the Spanish-Speaking Unity Council, The Unity Council continues to play a vital role in the community, providing direct services, affordable housing, and advocacy for the area's Latino community based on a comprehensive community development model, integrating housing, economic development, early childhood education, workforce training, and cultural programming, among other services.⁹

In the 1990s, the drug epidemic and subsequent police crackdown affected Fruitvale's Black and Latino residents, leading to increased crime, poverty, and violence. By the early 1990s, the BART Fruitvale station had the second-highest crime rate of all the stations in the rail system. In 2009, the murder of Oscar Grant by police inside Fruitvale station, in what many saw as another example of police brutality against unarmed Black men, reinforced the public perception of Fruitvale as a site of police violence.¹⁰

Much like in the 1950s and 1960s, the Fruitvale Latino community joined the African American community to demand justice and change for both groups. Community-based organizations addressed crime through youth development, cross-cultural solidarity, and neighborhood coalitions, dramatically decreasing property and violent crime in recent years. In 2019, a mural with Oscar Grant's portrait was unveiled at Fruitvale BART, and a nearby street was renamed "Oscar Grant III Way" in his honor after activism from Black and Brown communities.¹¹

Today, the Unity Council continues to lead efforts to unite community leaders and law enforcement to find non-carceral solutions to support the community and reduce crime. Noting the ongoing public safety challenges, The Unity Council CEO Chris Iglesias underscored that they have **"had a big impact on Fruitvale and other parts of East Oakland. [But] We don't think [more police are the answer], the Transit Village is doing what it's supposed to do. There's a lot of fear, but we're hearing a lot of [holistic] ideas [to address public safety]."**¹²

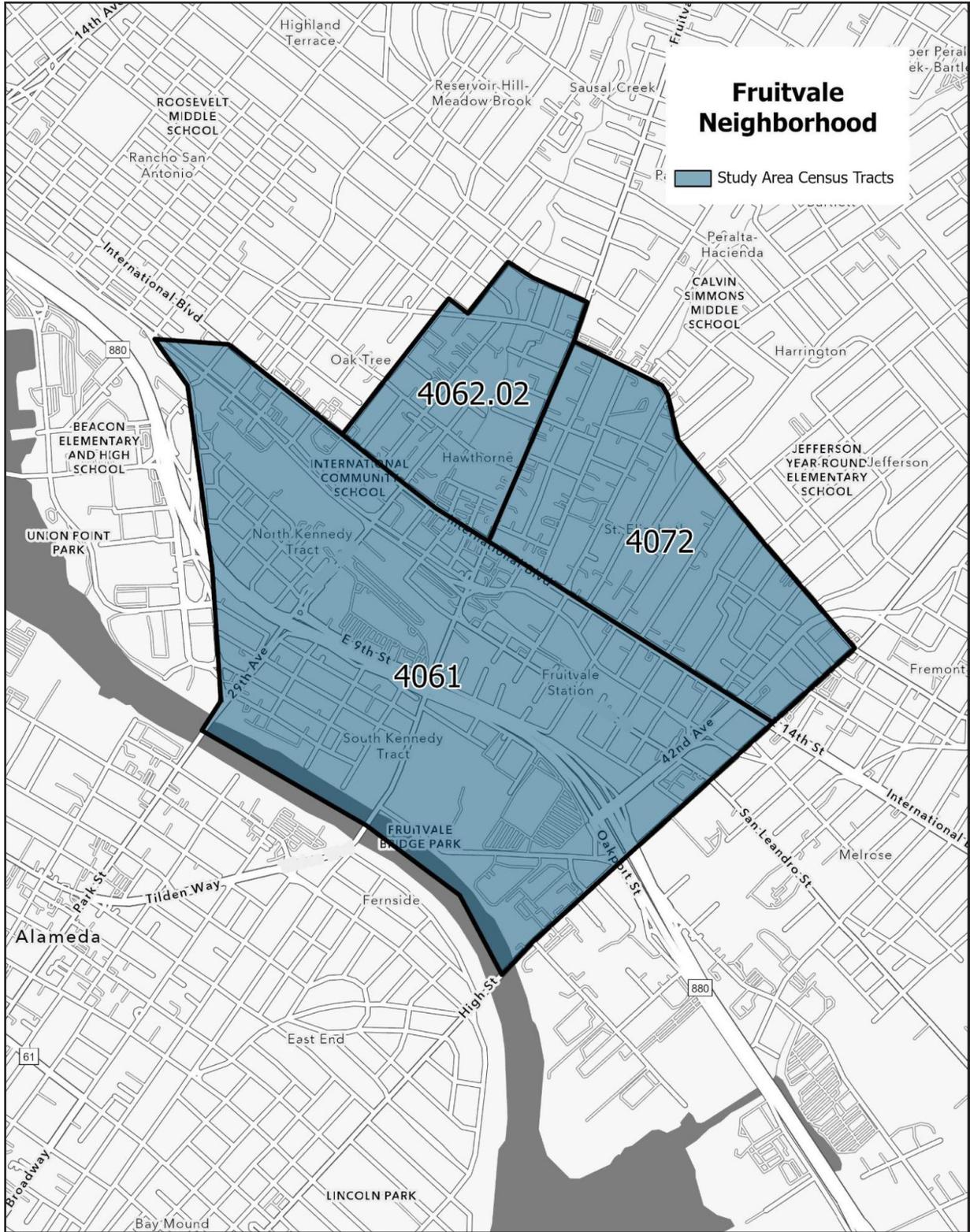
Neighborhood Conditions in Fruitvale Today

A. A Demographically and Culturally Diverse Community

Fruitvale is one of Oakland's most culturally and racially diverse districts and is home to the city's largest concentration of Latino residents and businesses. Located about two-and-a-half miles southeast of Downtown Oakland, Fruitvale is crosscut by the 880 freeway and home to the Fruitvale BART station, as shown in Map 1. The blue shaded polygons indicate the Census tracts used to provide demographic and socioeconomic data for Fruitvale.

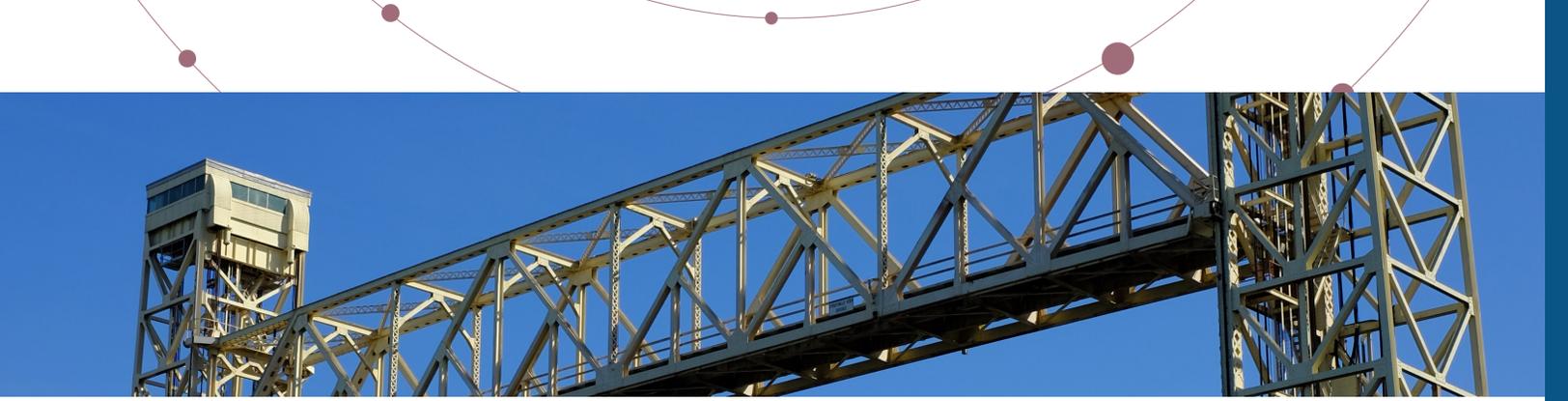


Map 1. Fruitvale Neighborhood Boundaries and Census Tracts Used in Analysis



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Cartographic Boundary Shapefile; OpenStreepMap, and Alameda County Information Technology Department - Geographic Information Systems.





Fruitvale is predominantly Latino, with two thirds (67%) of the population identifying as such (Table 1). This is more than double the share in Oakland at large (29%) and nearly triple that of Alameda County (23%). The community also has a significant Asian immigrant community, highlighting the value of language diversity in local service provision.

Table 1. Fruitvale Neighborhood Racial and Ethnic Composition, 2023

	Fruitvale <i>Oakland, California</i>	Oakland City <i>California</i>	Alameda County <i>California</i>
Total Population	16,820	438,072	1,651,949
Latino Share	67%	29%	23%
Black Share	5%	21%	10%
Asian Share	16%	15%	32%
White Share	10%	28%	28%

Note: Latinos can be of any race. All other groups reflect the non-Latino/non-Hispanic population.

Source: LPPI analysis of 2023 5-Year American Community Survey Table B03001, [available online](#).

Fruitvale’s Latino population is primarily of Mexican descent, but a notable portion is of Central American descent (Table 2). About two thirds of Fruitvale Latinos are of Mexican descent, closely reflecting the city and county shares (66% and 70%, respectively). Additionally, over one quarter of Fruitvale Latinos are of Central American descent, including a substantially higher Guatemalan share (17%) than the city (12%) and county (5%). Fruitvale is also home to prominent indigenous groups, including a Guatemalan Mayan community fighting to establish radio, social services, and health care access in the Mam language.¹³

As reflected in its demographics, Latino culture is embedded in Fruitvale’s community and economy. Fruitvale is home to vibrant Mexican and Central American businesses, art, and gastronomy and in 2023, The Unity Council—in collaboration with community partners and with the leadership and support of Oakland City Council—designated Fruitvale as a “Latinx Cultural Arts District” to celebrate, highlight, and support the area’s Latino business owners, artists, and community organizations.¹⁴



Table 2. Fruitvale Latino Population by Descent Group, 2023

	Fruitvale <i>Oakland, California</i>	Oakland City <i>California</i>	Alameda County <i>California</i>
Total Latino Population	11,239	126,517	385,245
Mexican Share 🇲🇪	67%	66%	70%
Puerto Rican Share 🇵🇷	0%	3%	3%
Cuban Share 🇨🇺	0%	1%	1%
Dominican Share 🇩🇲	0%	0%	0%
Central American Share	27%	23%	15%
Guatemalan Share 🇬🇹	17%	12%	5%
Salvadoran Share 🇸🇻	6%	7%	6%
Honduran Share 🇭🇳	2%	3%	1%
Nicaraguan share 🇳🇮	1%	1%	2%
South American Share 🇲🇻 🇪🇨 🇵🇪	2%	3%	5%

Note: Latinos can be of any race.

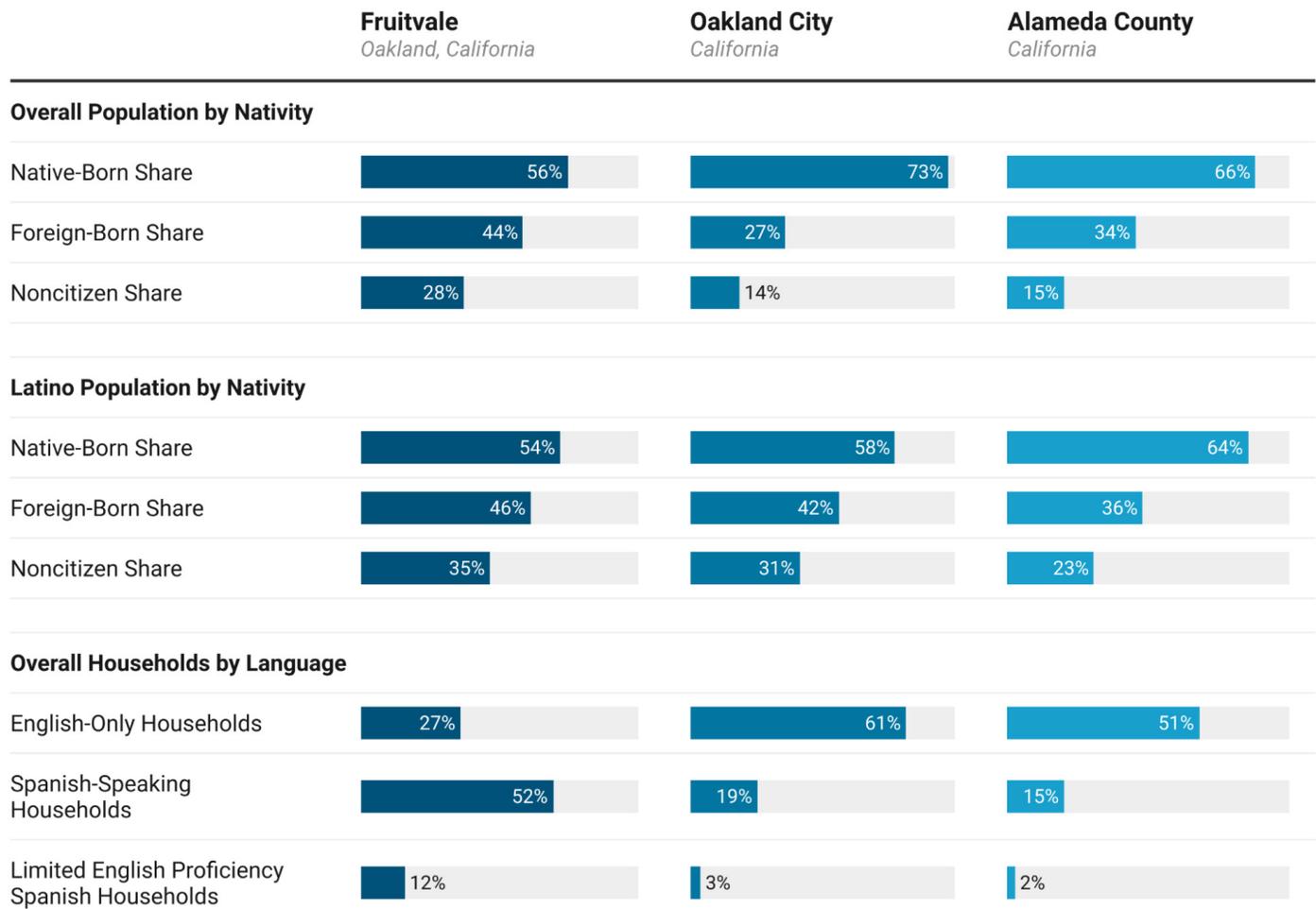
Source: LPPI analysis of 2023 5-Year American Community Survey Table B03002, [available online](#).

Fruitvale has a disproportionately higher share of noncitizen residents than the city and county (Table 3). In 2023, over one quarter of Fruitvale residents were not U.S. citizens (28%), almost double the rate for both Oakland City (14%) and Alameda County (15%). Among the Latino population, a higher proportion of Latinos lacked citizenship in Fruitvale (35%) than in Oakland City (31%) and Alameda County (23%).

Spanish-speaking and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) households are also more prevalent in Fruitvale than in the city or county. In Fruitvale, over half of households are Spanish-speaking (52%), compared to 19% in Oakland and 15% in Alameda County. Similarly, 12% of households in Fruitvale are both Spanish-speaking and have LEP (meaning no household member speaks English “very well”).¹⁵ These rates are significantly higher than those of the city (3%) and county (2%).



Table 3. Fruitvale Population by Nativity and Households by Language



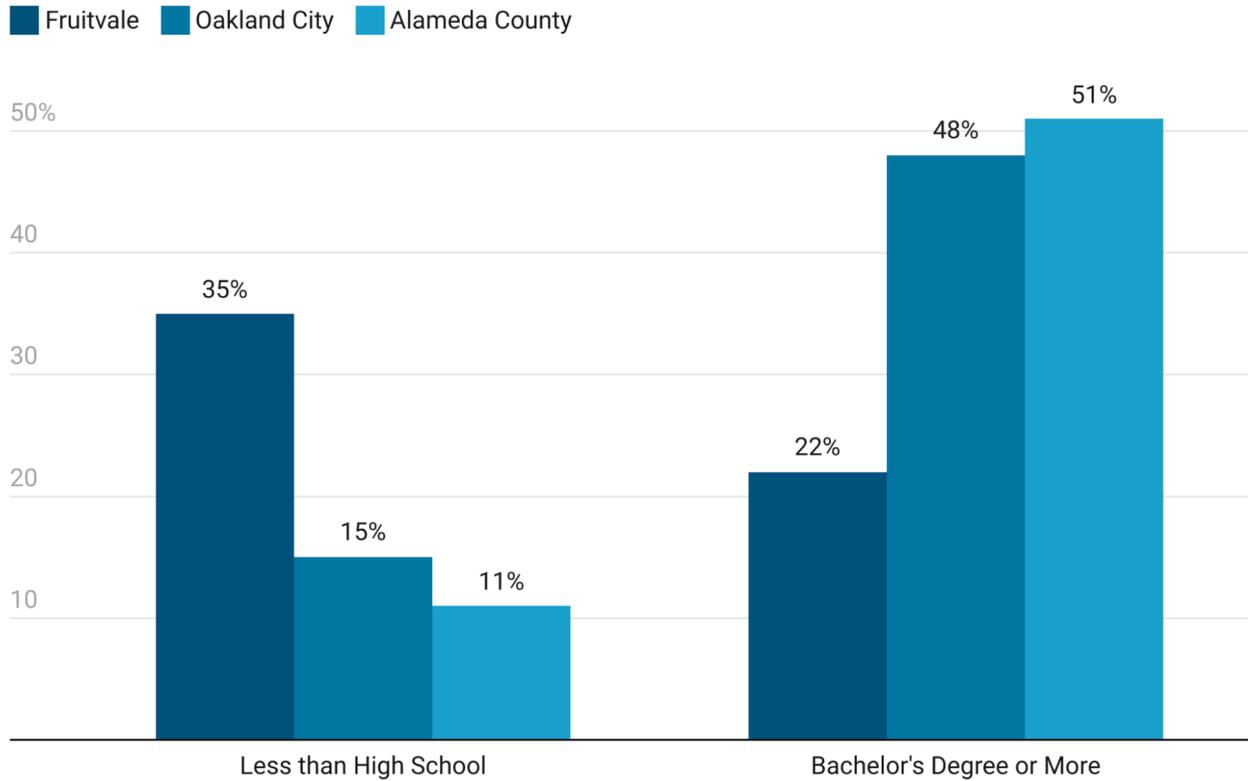
Note: Limited English proficient households are defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as those in which no member 14 years or older 1) speaks only English or 2) speaks a non-English language and speaks English “very well.”
Source: LPPI analysis of 2023 5-Year American Community Survey Table B05001, [available online](#); Table B05003I, [available online](#); and Table C16002, [available online](#).

Fruitvale residents have lower formal educational attainment levels than the city and county overall. Fruitvale residents are half as likely to hold a bachelor’s degree (22%; Figure 1) as Oakland city residents (48%) and Alameda County residents (51%). Additionally, 35% of Fruitvale residents have less than a high school diploma, more than double the share for Oakland (15%) and triple that of the county (11%).

Together, these demographic patterns highlight the importance of community strategies prioritizing linguistic access, cultural representation, and equity in service delivery. Cultural fluency is a matter of identity and a strategic foundation for economic and social sustainability in Fruitvale.



Figure 1. Educational Attainment for the Population Ages 25 and Older in Fruitvale, 2023



Source: LPPI analysis of 2023 5-Year American Community Survey Table B15003, [available online](#).

B. Income and Housing Disparities in Fruitvale

Fruitvale is a majority-Latino, working-class community marked by lower incomes, high rental rates, and elevated poverty levels. Fruitvale households earn a substantially lower median income (\$65,400; Table 4) than the city (\$97,400) and county (\$126,200). Further, the median household income in Fruitvale is approximately half of the county median, highlighting a significant income gap relative to the broader region.

Ongoing housing affordability challenges compound lower incomes in Fruitvale. Over three quarters of Fruitvale households are renters (76%) compared to 42% in Oakland and 54% in Alameda County, highlighting limited homeownership access. Although median gross rents in Fruitvale are lower (\$1,600) than in the city (\$1,900) and county (\$2,300), that amount still represents a considerable share of household income. This suggests a heightened rent burden for many residents. The ongoing housing crisis in the Bay Area has implications for many Fruitvale residents, both those struggling to afford housing and those concerned about growing encampment rates and related safety concerns.¹⁶



As with other Oakland neighborhoods, Fruitvale exists in its current racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic demographics as a product of redlining in the earlier century. In 1937, a Home Owners' Loan Corporation's map of the area indicated so-called unsuitable factors for sale: "Odors from industries. Predominance of foreign inhabitants. Infiltration of Negroes and Orientals."¹⁷

These policy decisions contributed to disinvestment and a lack of local development, leaving many residents without infrastructure and social service access, even today. Because the federal government did not want to guarantee mortgages or loans made in these neighborhoods, entire communities were denied access to credit. As a result, redlining catalyzed disinvestment and poverty in Fruitvale, and many white families moved to the suburbs. The remaining families could not access home mortgages or business loans.¹⁸

Table 4. Homeownership and Income Indicators for Fruitvale, 2023

	Fruitvale <i>Oakland, California</i>	Oakland City <i>California</i>	Alameda County <i>California</i>
Total Households	5,221	173,179	593,117
Homeownership Rate	24%	42%	54%
Renter Households	76%	58%	46%
Median Household Income (2023)	\$65,303	\$97,369	\$126,240
Median Gross Rent (2023)	\$1,584	\$1,917	\$2,318
Median Household Income as Percent of City/County	-	67%	52%
Poverty Rate	16%	14%	9%

Source: LPPI analysis of 2023 5-Year American Community Survey data, [available online](#).



C. Environmental Challenges and Public Health Risks in Fruitvale

Fruitvale residents experience elevated pollution exposure. Compared to the Alameda County average, Fruitvale residents are exposed to double the Diesel Particulate Matter (PM) concentrations.¹⁹ A UC Berkeley study identified several sources of diesel pollution in the neighborhood, including high vehicular traffic on the 880 freeway and major thoroughfares and trains that cut through the neighborhood.²⁰

As a result, Fruitvale has been designated a disadvantaged area under SB 535, which identifies communities facing heightened environmental and socioeconomic stressors. All tracts in the study area are designated as disadvantaged under SB 535, while only 12% of the county tracts are designated as disadvantaged under the bill.

Table 5. Environmental Indicators for Fruitvale

	Fruitvale <i>Alameda, California</i>	Alameda County <i>California</i>
Population-Weighted Averages of Air Pollution Indicators		
PM2.5 Concentrations (µg/m3)	9.0	9.0
Diesel PM (Tons per Year)	0.6	0.3
Climate and Environmental Justice Screening Tool		
Disadvantaged Classification Under SB 535 (Percent of Tracts)	100%	12%

Note: California's Senate Bill 535 requires that a portion of proceeds from the state's Cap-and-Trade Program be directed toward disadvantaged communities (DACs) to address environmental, public health, and socioeconomic burdens.

Source: LPPI analysis of data from CalEnviroScreen 4.0, [available online](#).

The pollution data reflect a historical and ongoing fight for environmental justice in Fruitvale. According to a 2016 Reuters report, the Fruitvale neighborhood is one of 3,000 U.S. communities with lead contamination worse than Flint, Michigan. For example, blood samples of over 500 children under age six who live in Fruitvale showed dangerously elevated levels of lead.²¹ In 2022, a group of Fruitvale middle school students discovered elevated lead levels in the soil on their campus, at Peralta Hacienda Historical Park, and at their homes.²² However, lead pollution in Fruitvale remains mostly undiscussed outside of the advocacy work done by local residents.





D. Fruitvale's Vibrant, Service-Based Economy

Fruitvale boasts a vibrant, neighborhood-serving economy. In 2023, 1,500 registered businesses operated in Fruitvale, and most neighborhood businesses (79%) were microbusinesses employing between one and nine workers (78%).²³

Health care and social assistance businesses, including service organizations and community clinics, anchor Fruitvale's economy and account for 42% of all establishments. Together, they are the largest sector in the neighborhood. The next largest sectors are retail trade (9%) and accommodation and food services (9%).

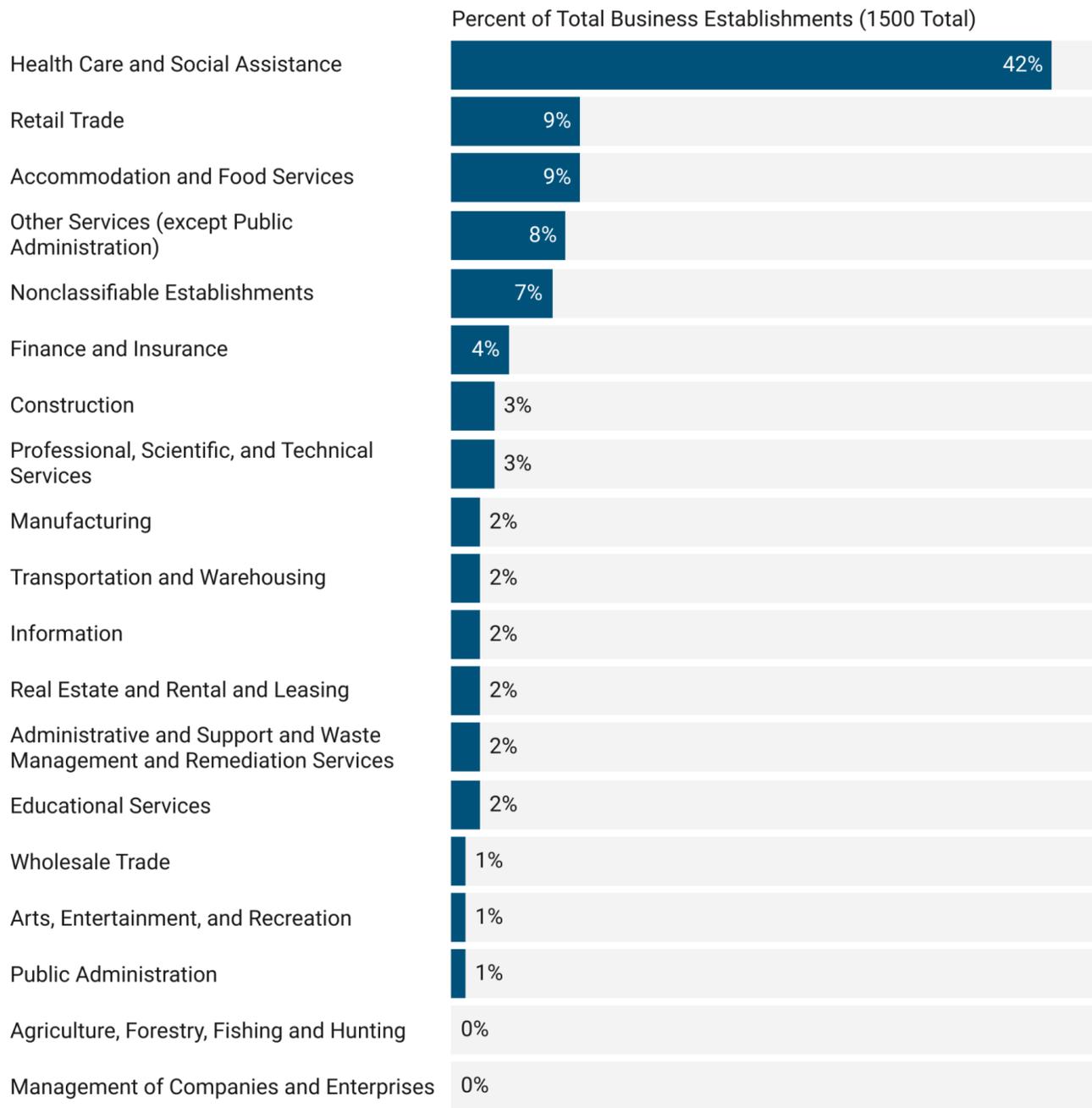
This distribution reflects a strong presence of service-based industries, particularly in health care, food, and personal services. Local service providers highlight an extensive network of traditional cultural makers, some linked to formal business structures and others as part of the informal economy. For example, the Fruitvale Community Healing Center is a space that provides access for both community members and healers to holistic healing services, focusing on Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities and their unique needs.

Fruitvale's history of white flight, redlining, and the subsequent lack of capital access and investment have strained the local economy, as many business owners have struggled with the loss of higher-income consumers and have lacked capital to fill vacant businesses. Many of these small businesses are immigrant-owned, making accessing government grants and resources that might support expansion challenging.

However, the community has attempted again to address these issues by leveraging the federal Community Reinvestment Act (CRA), which mandates that banks offer loans and financial services to all communities, especially low-income ones. As part of this effort, banks can partner with CBOs to provide community members with financing, credit, loans, and other services. For Fruitvale, The Unity Council is the key partner in leveraging the CRA for equitable economic development and access.²⁴



Figure 2. Industry Mix of Businesses in Fruitvale, 2023



Note: Industries reflect two-digit NAICS sectors. In 2023, there were 1,500 total businesses in Fruitvale.
Source: LPPI analysis of 2023 Data Axle data.



COVID-19 Impacts on Fruitvale

The pandemic exposed deep-rooted inequities in health, access, and opportunity in Fruitvale. High infection and death rates were driven by limited health care access, environmental risks, and systemic disinvestment.

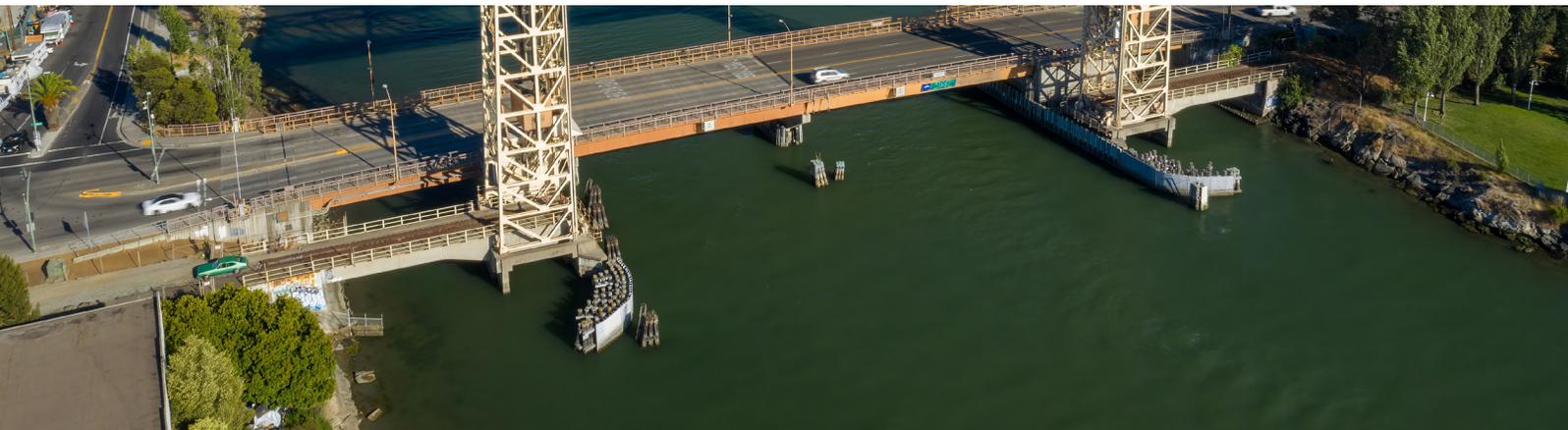
A. Unequal Health Impacts on Fruitvale's Latino and Indigenous Families

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, research documented worse exposure and health outcomes for Latino communities in Alameda County, and Fruitvale was no exception. Through research collaborations with the University of California, San Francisco, The Unity Council highlighted that as of August 2020, over half of all COVID-19 cases in Alameda County were Latino individuals.²⁵

Fruitvale was among the hardest-hit neighborhoods, with one of the largest concentrations of Latinos in the county. In September 2020, active COVID-19 case rates in Fruitvale reached 11.9% among Latino residents and 26.8% among Indigenous Mam individuals, both well above the neighborhood average of 9.8%.²⁶ As of December 2020, Fruitvale accounted for more than 19% of total COVID-19 cases in Alameda County, despite accounting for just 10% of the county's population.²⁷ In Oakland more broadly, Latinos held the second-highest mortality rate in the first eight months of the pandemic among major racial and ethnic groups.²⁸

Providers linked these unequal outcomes to deeply entrenched structural inequities: language barriers, lack of affordable and culturally competent health care, and inadequate public health outreach to indigenous communities.²⁹ Local CBOs such as La Clínica de la Raza banded together in their original mission to increase access, yet were not equipped for a crisis of this magnitude without additional public support. Nevertheless, they were able to vaccinate thousands and likely saved countless lives.³⁰

Through their outreach efforts, local CBOs also highlighted the ways in which the community was further experiencing poverty and food insecurity due to job losses and a lack of access to traditional support systems. Through research with JAMA,



The Unity Council estimated that 40% of those tested through their Sanando Juntos (Healing Together) initiative were also experiencing food insecurity, more than 25% experienced reduced income, and 15% had lost their jobs.³¹ Food insecurity was an especially prescient issue for essential workers, many of whom called Fruitvale and East Oakland home. Chris Iglesias, CEO at The Unity Council, highlighted the connection between Fruitvale and the region’s essential workforce, and urged reinvestment in the community:

“The Fruitvale BART station was the busiest station during COVID, because that’s where all the essential workers got on. Now is the time to reinvest in that community [of workers]. There are still major issues around food insecurity, housing, and getting folks back to work. Fruitvale and East Oakland were hit very, very hard by COVID.”³²

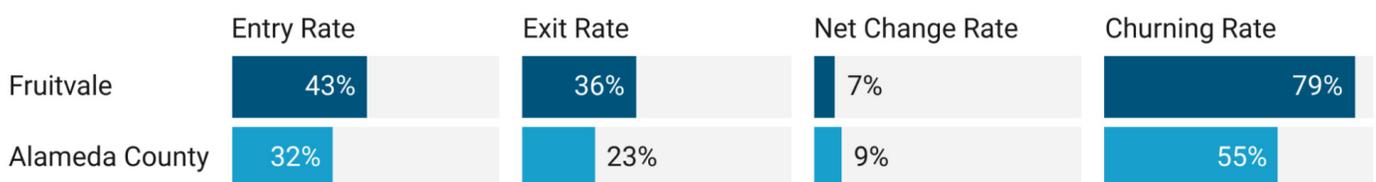
B. Local Business Disruptions and Uneven Access to Assistance

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic extended to all aspects of community life, including the local business landscape. While the pandemic’s effects on health were severe, the economic impacts in Fruitvale tell a more complex story.

Fruitvale’s businesses experienced significant pandemic-era disruptions (Figure 3).³³ Between 2019 and 2023, Fruitvale experienced higher business growth (43%) than countywide (32%). Fruitvale businesses were also more likely to close than they were countywide (36% vs. 23%), resulting in a substantially higher churn rate (the combined business starts and closures) than the county average (79% vs. 55%).

Fruitvale’s elevated churn rate suggests that the neighborhood’s business landscape experienced more disruption and movement than Alameda County as a whole. While some Fruitvale businesses struggled to keep their doors open, others emerged to take their place, reflecting both economic stress and resilience during this period.

Figure 3. Business Dynamics in Fruitvale and Alameda County, 2019 to 2023



Source: LPPI analysis of 2019 and 2023 Data Axle data.



In contrast to other similar-situated communities, Fruitvale received more Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) support than the county average (Figure 4). Fruitvale received \$3,600 per resident and \$9,800 per job in PPP support, substantially higher than the county averages (\$2,800 and \$5,900 respectively). The data suggest stronger access for some businesses or the presence of larger or higher-wage employers.

Figure 4. Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) Relief Received in Fruitvale, Alameda County, and California



Source: LPPI analysis of PPP data from U.S. Small Business Administration data (2024), available online. Population data are from the 2017-2021 5-Year American Community Survey. Job data are from the 2019 Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) dataset.

However, local community organizations detailed that PPP dollars did not reach smaller businesses and many of Fruitvale’s most vulnerable. In Fruitvale, many immigrant entrepreneurs and informal business owners could not access aid. Claudia Arroyo, executive director of Prospera, noted the specific challenges faced by Spanish-speaking and immigrant entrepreneurs:

“The first thing that we saw is something that we knew: we are not seen, we are not heard, and the system is not designed for us. Some [information for programs] like emergency funds weren’t translated [into Spanish]. So when many entrepreneurs learned about it, it was too late because they were gone. Access to technology was also a big challenge during COVID. If you were already having a hard time navigating the system when you were able to go out, it was like ‘how do I do it now?’”

Local CBOs collaborated to translate resources, provide technology access and technical support to small businesses applying for grants, and support workers whose incomes relied on in-person services, such as food vendors and cleaning services.



Challenging Top-Down Economic Development

"To come [from San Francisco] into East Oakland, the farther east you are, the resources just drop and the needs of the community go through the roof. It's brutal how quickly it happens and how much it's been ignored. It's been generations of disinvestment. There are huge economic disparities between these cities that aren't fair." - Chris Iglesias, The Unity Council³⁴

Fruitvale has a long and storied history of targeted activism to ensure that top-down economic development meets community needs. In 1991, BART announced proposals to redevelop an area north of the Fruitvale BART station as a multi-level parking lot. Led by The Unity Council, the Fruitvale community initially resisted the proposal. Residents were concerned that the proposed parking lot would disconnect the BART station from Fruitvale's main commercial center, worsening physical connectivity for residents and harming businesses. While the planning perspective was that riders were better off not interacting with what they saw as a dangerous neighborhood, the Fruitvale community argued this should instead be an opportunity for change for both community residents and other riders.³⁵

In response to the opposition, BART agreed to incorporate residents' opinions into alternative redevelopment plans. The Unity Council was awarded government funds, including federal Community Development Block Grants and funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation, to consult community members and conduct feasibility assessments on a new plan for the area.³⁶

Following these meetings, The Unity Council assembled a team of architects, urban designers, and developers to reimagine the parking lot site as a mixed-use project named Fruitvale Village. The design envisioned a gathering space that was reflective of Fruitvale's culture and needs, incorporating the values and needs of the Latino community into its design. A parallel revitalization program began on Fruitvale's main commercial strip, International Boulevard, and The Unity Council was selected to pilot a community economic development approach called the Neighborhood Main Street Initiative.³⁷

The 257,000-square-foot Fruitvale Transit Village opened in 2003, and included 47 housing units (10 of which are affordable housing units with rents set between \$486 and \$1,029), a community clinic, services for seniors and youth, a Head Start center, a public library branch, small businesses, and a charter high school. Many developers and philanthropists have applauded the Fruitvale Transit Village model as a model for community investment without displacement of local marginalized populations.



In 2018, a 10-year longitudinal study by UCLA LPPI found that homeownership rates, small business ownership, and educational attainment rates in Fruitvale had increased, while the neighborhood's racial, ethnic, and age diversity remained the same. For The Unity Council and other local CBOs, the village is part of larger efforts to ensure that development supports local residents, rather than coming at their expense.³⁸ The Unity Council has continued to push for resident-centered development, and recently completed construction on Casa Sueños, a mixed-use, transit-oriented development providing 181 units of affordable housing—including 46 units of permanent supportive housing—and expanded its small business support programs.³⁹

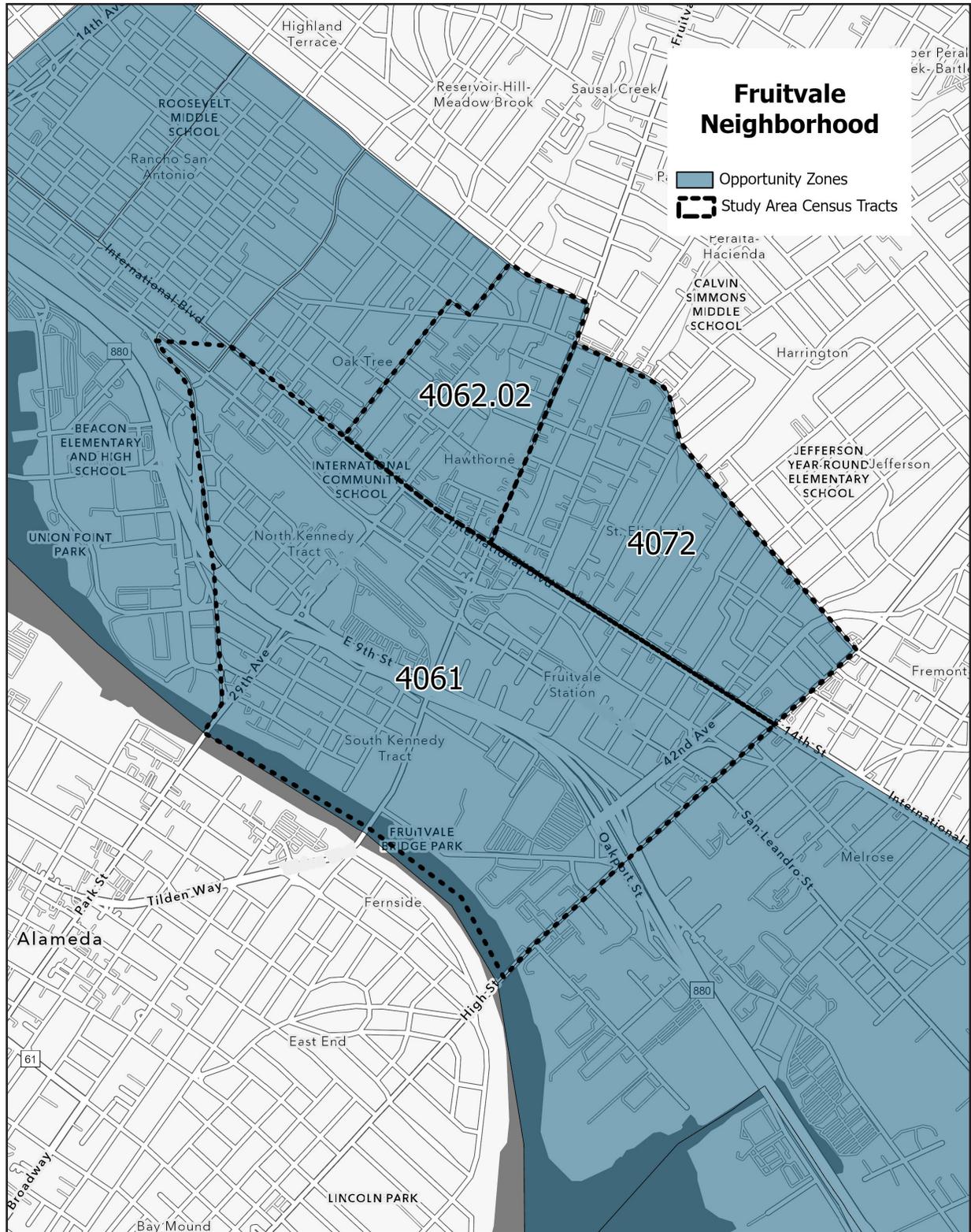
These developments are part of the Unity Council's efforts to help residents stay in the communities they call home. Karla Guerra explained,

"How do we support families and provide them with the tools to escape poverty and thrive in the community they have called home all their lives? We want to make sure that people have access to place-based economic opportunities in order to stay in the place they call home."

Today, all three of Fruitvale's census tracts are designated Opportunity Zones (See Map 2), offering tax incentives for investments in eligible, historically underserved neighborhoods.⁴⁰ In Fruitvale, this designation aligns with ongoing efforts to revitalize the neighborhood through mixed-use transit-oriented projects such as Fruitvale Transit Village and emerging digital infrastructure initiatives. These efforts reinforce the area's growth while aiming to preserve affordable housing and support Latino and Indigenous communities.⁴¹ Research on Opportunity Zones in other neighborhoods cautions that this economic development tool has had minimal impact on residents' employment, earnings, or poverty rates,⁴² as investments tend to favor wealthier, more educated counties.⁴³



Map 2. Federally Designated Opportunity Zones in Fruitvale



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, [available online](#).



Interventions: Coalition Forming, Culturally Competent Resources, and Community Leadership and Autonomy

In the face of compounding crises including a deadly COVID-19 pandemic and rising displacement, Fruitvale community leaders drew on decades of cultural organizing, mutual aid, and grassroots advocacy to respond swiftly and collectively. As interviews with the local CBO staff confirmed, these interventions were not simply reactions to the crisis but extensive, long-standing networks of care and a shared commitment to cultural attunement and community self-determination.

A. Leveraging Historic Coalitions for Health Access

Through advocacy for the development of Fruitvale Transit Village, local CBOs had already built many informal coalitions of organizations and activists focused on service provision and power-building for Latino and immigrant communities in the area. Other periods of community crisis further formalized some of these relationships. In 2016, a fire in the Ghost Ship warehouse, which had been converted into an artist collective without a city permit, took the lives of 36 artists and community members. In response, a collective of organizations formed Resilient Fruitvale to improve coordination between providers in the area and protect Fruitvale’s most vulnerable residents.

The COVID-19 pandemic reactivated these coalitions to ensure the community could access vital health and support services. Resilient Fruitvale provided access to testing and vaccination to many in the Latino and Mayan communities who likely would have otherwise gone without support. Karla Guerra, a policy and advocacy senior manager at The Unity Council, highlighted their efforts to provide language-accessible services:

“Local government asked for help, and we recognized that many community members needed information in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner. In our community, people speak English, Mam, and Spanish, so it was essential that our outreach reflected this diversity.”

Through county and university partnerships, Resilient Fruitvale launched the Test and Respond Campaign called Sanando Juntos (Healing Together)—the first neighborhood COVID-19 free testing and case study event in Oakland in 2020—testing



over 1,172 individuals for COVID-19 in a two-day period and ensuring testing and vaccination access for thousands more throughout the pandemic. **These organizations, working both individually and in coalition, were essential to ensuring access to resources and information for many of Fruitvale’s marginalized communities, including the undocumented community and the indigenous Mayan community.**

Furthermore, member organizations are considering lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to prepare for current and future crises. Based on their experience with the pandemic, local CBOs are discussing how to ensure the most vulnerable in their communities have support during the difficult road ahead, especially the undocumented, low-income, and indigenous populations. Through their experiences, they have learned how to support these groups even when federal and state governments have been unable or unwilling to offer aid, and have leveraged other partnerships with local and philanthropic partners to find innovative solutions.

B. Culturally Responsive Resources for Latino Communities

While Fruitvale’s community has often struggled due to disinvestment and a lack of access to formal support, they have also found ways to thrive in large part due to the efforts of local CBOs to provide resources that meet the cultural needs of the local community. During historical periods where many lacked basic access to health care, education, housing, and business support, local CBOs were some of the first and only places where people could access these resources and find providers who understood their unique needs.

Many successful CBO initiatives in Fruitvale incorporate Latino resident voices into their services. Additionally, they ensure that programs are built in partnership with local vendors and leaders and meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Local CBOs do so by hiring from within the Latino community, with some CBOs such as The Unity Council going as far as recruiting Central American and Mam workers to ensure representation for all of Fruitvale’s populations. Organizations including The Unity Council and Prospera, an Oakland-based nonprofit offering small business resources to Latina entrepreneurs, have frequently hired staff and board members from within their participant bases. In doing so, they make an effort to ensure their work goes beyond serving clients. These decisions ensure that future clients see themselves in those serving and offer yet another pathway to success for current clients.

Claudia Arroyo, the executive director of Prospera, noted how Latina entrepreneurs design, direct, and shape their work:

“We are not empowering [Latina entrepreneurs]. They have the real power. So they’re part of the designing of the programs. We are talking with them about the vision of Prospera, what they really need. They are part of the board of directors. They are part of the staff. So, our approach and our strategy is about how we bring them to the table and how they are in the driving seats for the change.”



Providers, including The Unity Council, further incorporate perspectives such as the social determinants of health, demonstrating the importance of providing a wide array of services for a family's needs. They understand that programming such as early childhood education and culturally competent health care go beyond touching the lives of the individuals they serve to improve outcomes for the entire family and community. For example, The Unity Council's early childhood education programs shape participants' economic mobility for the years to come. Karla Guerra explained further:

"We want to ensure that everyone in our community has the opportunity to thrive throughout their lives. Our model addresses the social determinants of health from before a child is born all the way to aging in place, and we also honor our ancestors through our Día de los Muertos celebration."

For this reason, it was vital for providers to find safe ways to keep their resources open during the early days of the COVID-19 crisis. For many in the community, these CBOs were already a vital lifeline and their continued presence significantly reduced the COVID-19 pandemic's heavy impacts on health and businesses. Even now, as many local CBOs face budget cuts and uncertainty, they continue striving to keep the resources the community feels are most vital available for those who rely upon them.

Having a wide array of services also helps meet potential clients where they are in their journey. Providers such as Prospera often have big dreams for their clients' lives and are excited to implement them. At the same time, they know that it can take time for individuals, especially those who have experienced broken promises and false hope in the past, as many marginalized communities have, to feel ready to take the steps to put those dreams into action. Claudia Arroyo highlighted Prospera's perspective:

"We want to plant the seed so that it doesn't matter where you are in the challenges or in your status. If you embrace your story, you can embrace your skills, and that's why all the programs are about meeting people where they are. You know when you go to el mercado, maybe you feel that you know what you want to eat, but when you start smelling things in the mercado you're like, 'Oh, I don't want to eat only the elote anymore. I want tacos and I want more.' That will happen when people are exposed."



Meeting individuals where they are is vital to building community power and putting clients on a path to success. By focusing on relationship building and information gathering, providers can help clients feel more comfortable and realize the changes they would like to see in their lives.

C. Relying on Community Leadership and Autonomy

One of the commonalities between service and advocacy work in Fruitvale is that community residents drive the work. Service providers frequently stressed the value of bringing the community to the table so that projects such as the Transit Village could happen with real success. While many CBOs and philanthropic organizations often work from a top-down approach—only engaging the community after major plans have already been completed or never at all—those working in Fruitvale have come to understand that little can be implemented successfully without the full participation of the community.

Like many communities of color across the country, Fruitvale's history is one of disenfranchisement and neglect by major public and private players. This has been a catalyst in recent conversations about how much change real investment could bring. At the same time, development partners like The Unity Council have led residents and business owners in vocalizing their concerns that these investment projects have often focused on the needs of tourists and outside consumers, and come at the expense of families who have called the area home for generations. As a vital neighborhood for low- and middle-income homeownership and entrepreneurship, Fruitvale remains a pillar of the Latino community in Oakland, and many fear that investment without conscious choices to benefit the community would drive out many. However, asset-based development that centers the needs of low-income Latino communities in the area is disrupting that model.

Many in the development and urban planning fields have seen the success of the Fruitvale community's advocacy to be included in the vision of the BART redevelopment project as a guiding model. Fruitvale Village has successfully improved outcomes for residents, business owners, service providers, and the larger economy in ways that benefit those who currently call the area home and future generations, while still being a wise investment for its supporters. To quote The Unity Council founder Arabella Martinez, **“In order to have wealth in this neighborhood, the community must own and control the assets.”**⁴⁴

This model of community-led investment continues to be implemented in other Fruitvale neighborhood projects. Even for local CBOs looking for ways to invest their funds and build out programming, getting community input early and throughout the planning and implementation processes has allowed them to address the most crucial needs of those they hope to serve, during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. Claudia Arroyo adds:

"[The choice is] do we just give away the money faster, or do we let it take longer if we call the community and they make the decision of where? So that's what we did. We love the long paths. We formed what is called the Latina Entrepreneur Resiliency Fund. It was about learning from the community what they need, and they made the decision. Some money became a non-extractive fund where women keep governing the money."

This input helps build more successful programming models that communities can get excited about, but it is also essential when resources are low and needs are high. During the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, many organizations have struggled to meet an ever-rising set of concerns for the Latino and immigrant communities, sometimes without a guarantee of more funding to match. Even today, organizations like the Unity Council are sustaining services despite shrinking budgets. When making these hard choices, working with clients allows for transparent decisions that all stakeholders can feel comfortable about. The community can ensure that the dollars are spent on the most pressing situations and develop innovative ways to use funding effectively that outside supporters would not have come up with.





Conclusion: Redefining Community Economic Development in Fruitvale and Beyond

"The pandemic changed a lot about how people view affordable housing and what essential workers are. We need to have essential workers, and we need to have them close. They need to be part of the economy of the Bay."

Chris Iglesias, The Unity Council⁴⁵

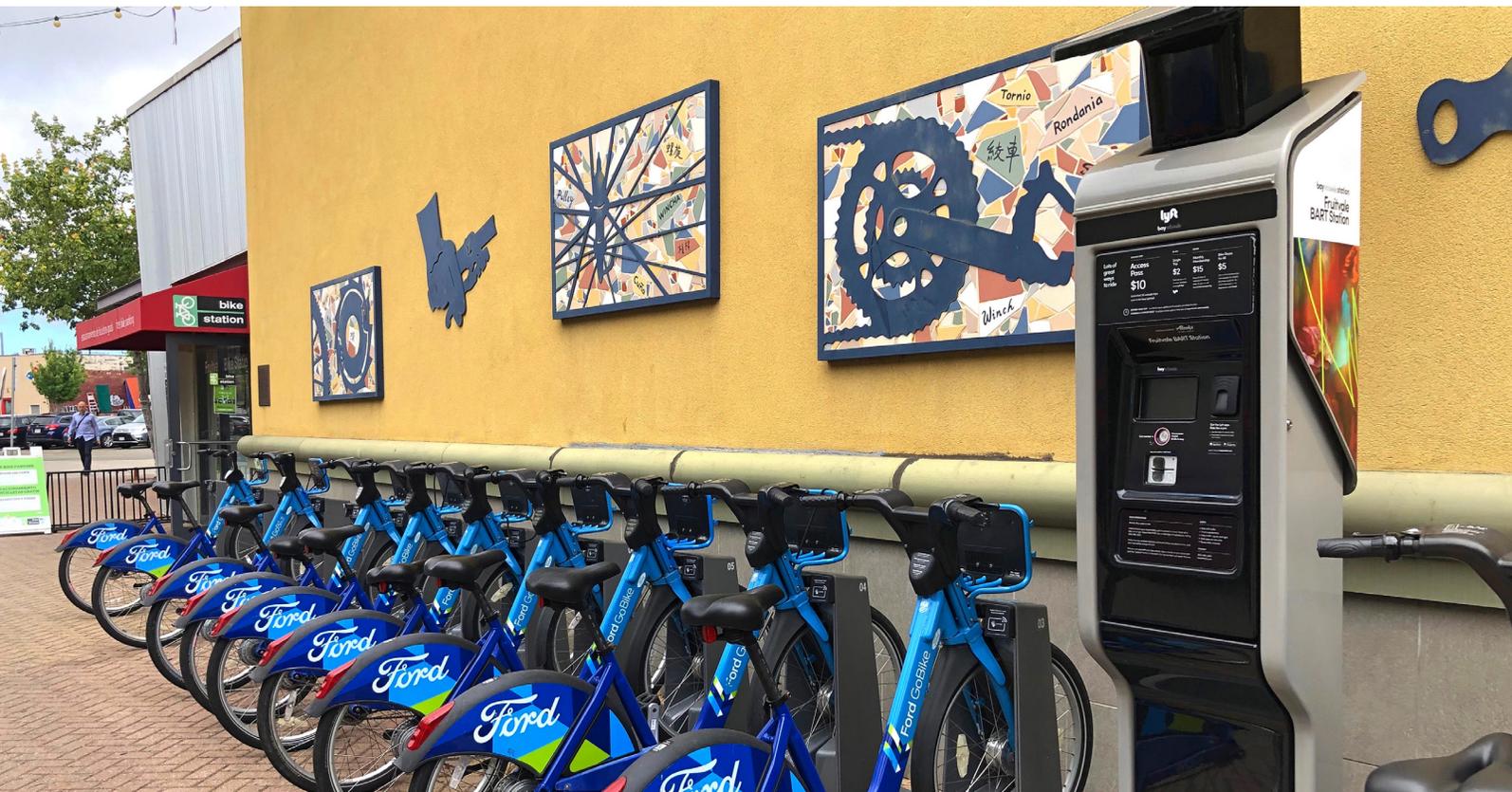
The work of the Fruitvale community to redefine community development and reinvestment as something by and for the people continues to provide necessary intervention and change since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the face of emerging crises. At a time when many are looking to reinvent their services and find new sources of funding, Fruitvale CBOs are using these lessons from the past to ensure they continue to take care of their own communities. Nonprofit supporters are not just carrying out the goals of federal and local government, but indeed are often the leaders providing for the community with or without external aid.



"We need to start treating Community Based Organizations as essential community institutions. Too often, government agencies fail to recognize that adequately funding the core operations of nonprofits and community-based organizations is critical to ensuring they can effectively deliver the services that the government itself cannot provide."

Karla Guerra, The Unity Council

Like many Latino neighborhoods, the Fruitvale community has repeatedly shown fierce resilience and power even when it was clear that no one was coming to bail them out. At the same time, their work has been strengthened by partnerships with research institutions, local government, and philanthropic organizations willing to honor their leadership and allow them to be agents for their own change. Future investment must continue to center and celebrate the dignity and autonomy of those closest to the issues so that community coalitions can replicate past successes. Latino residents and business owners are just as much a part of the solution as those coming in from the outside, and building with them instead of around them only strengthens reinvestment projects.



Appendix. Methodology and Limitations

We used a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and spatial data analysis, historical research, and qualitative interviews. The interviews—limited to two staff members from The Unity Council and Prospera—were not intended to be representative but instead to offer practitioner insight from individuals deeply embedded in Fruitvale’s cultural and economic life. These perspectives helped us interpret the broader data trends and identify locally relevant themes. We acknowledge that the small sample size limits the generalizability of the qualitative findings and invite further study to build upon this exploratory case. Future research should include a broader sample of community voices to deepen and validate the themes identified here.

Interviewers asked community leaders about their organization’s background and mission; strategies and stories of COVID-19 resilience; specific needs, values, or opportunities they see as necessary to building a strong local economy; systemic barriers encountered when trying to implement Latino-centered strategies; lessons on productive Latino leadership, and visions for the future. While not exhaustive, these interviews provided context to interpret the stories underlying the quantitative data and better understand on-the-ground experiences.

Quantitative sources included:

1. 2019-2023 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates data on population, race and ethnicity, household income, housing tenure, and rent to describe Fruitvale’s demographics and economic conditions.⁴⁶
2. CalEnviroScreen 4.0 indicators of pollution exposure and environmental risk.
3. 2019 and 2023 Data Axle establishment-level data to assess business dynamics pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. We calculated business entry and exit rates, net change rates, and churning rates of businesses from 2019 to 2023 to better understand neighborhood business dynamics.

We also gathered data from several historical sources. Historical resources include documents on the history of Fruitvale, community development plans, and records from local housing authorities and property management teams. Lastly, we gathered information on investment zones or designations over time using the archives of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Treasury Community Development Financial Institutions Funds to investigate the area’s funding and planning history.



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