

# Gaps in Legal Services for Immigrants in the Central Valley

Carl Plant, Alizée Natsoulis, and Jasmijn Sloopjes

A joint publication from the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative

## Immigrants' Access to Legal Aid in the Central Valley

Over 540,000 residents in the Central Valley are noncitizens and 740,000 have limited English proficiency. Language and citizenship barriers make finding and accessing services such as legal assistance and citizenship training difficult. This not only hurts immigrants' social and civic inclusion but has ripple effects for the tens of thousands of children living in immigrant families. The complex legal procedures involved with immigration—from removal hearings to applying for and renewing visas and green cards—make legal assistance a vital service. Those who have the highest need for legal services are low-income immigrants who cannot afford private attorneys and must rely on free or low-cost legal services. Lack of proximity to services creates an additional barrier for immigrants in the Central Valley who live in small towns and rural areas.

The Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative (BIMI) examines gaps in legal services by merging Census data on the region's immigrant population with a unique database of immigrant legal services. This database is available to the public and researchers through an innovative service-locator app, helping hundreds of thousands of people connect to the services they need. BIMI also aims to make the service landscape more equitable by combining location and service information with targeted demographic data, such as language needs, to shine a light on service gaps for funders, policymakers, and service providers.

Through its research, the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative (BIMI) has identified 32 immigrant-focused legal aid offices that offer free or low-cost services in the Central Valley. A majority of these organizations are located in urban areas along Highway 99. However, a significant number of immigrants—especially low-income immigrants—live outside of these cities, in small towns and rural communities. This spatial mismatch means many immigrants are unable to access the legal aid they need, either because of geographical distance from service providers or because the closest service provider is overwhelmed by demand. The two maps presented here investigate these two barriers, utilizing the BIMI legal service provider database and Census data.

## No Options Within Reach - Geographic Isolation from Legal Aid

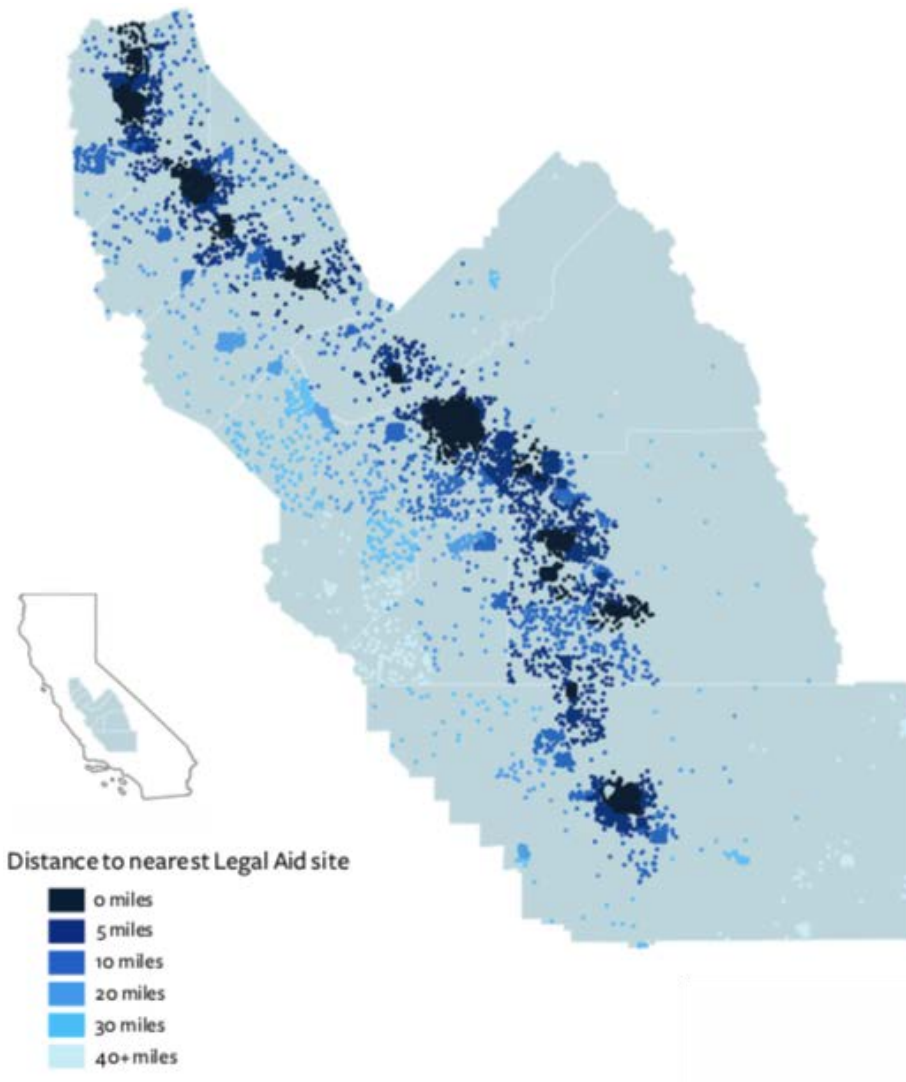
The map in Figure 1 shows how far foreign-born residents earning less than 150% of the federal poverty level have to travel to reach the nearest low-cost legal services.<sup>1</sup> Each dot represents 25 low-income immigrants; cities and suburbs with larger low-income immigrant populations are visible as a denser cluster of dots. The color represents distance, as the crow flies, to the nearest legal aid site: the darkest dots mark people who live quite close to legal aid, while the lightest blue dots mark people living further away from legal aid providers.

<sup>1</sup> 150% of the federal poverty line is an annual income of \$30,000 for a family of 3. We use this as a cut off but many immigrants earning considerably more than this are likely relying on these legal service providers as well. All data is from 2013–2017 Five-Year Estimates.



**Key Findings**

- **280,000 low-income immigrants** in the Central Valley (**79% of the 360,000 low-income immigrants in the region**) **live more than 10 miles from the nearest legal aid office.** Given many low-income immigrants’ demanding work schedules and reliance on public transportation, living even a few miles or more from services severely limits accessibility.
- **17,000 low-income immigrants** in the Central Valley (**5% of all low-income immigrants in the region**) **have to travel more than 30 miles to reach legal services,** a trip can take hours or may even be impossible without a car due to the lack of public transportation in the Central Valley, particularly over long distances. This level of geographic isolation can put vital legal services out of reach.
- Ridgecrest, Rosamond, Avenal, and Coalinga are the largest low-income immigrant communities without any legal services within a 30-mile radius.



**Figure 1. Distance to nearest immigrant legal aid site for low-income foreign-born residents**

This map shows the density of foreign-born residents earning below 150% of the poverty line, colored from light to dark blue according to the distance to the nearest legal aid site (where dark blue is closest and light blue is farthest).

Data Sources: American Community Survey 2013–2017 5-Year Estimates, the Immigration Advocates Network Nonprofit Resource Center, the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, and The United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review.

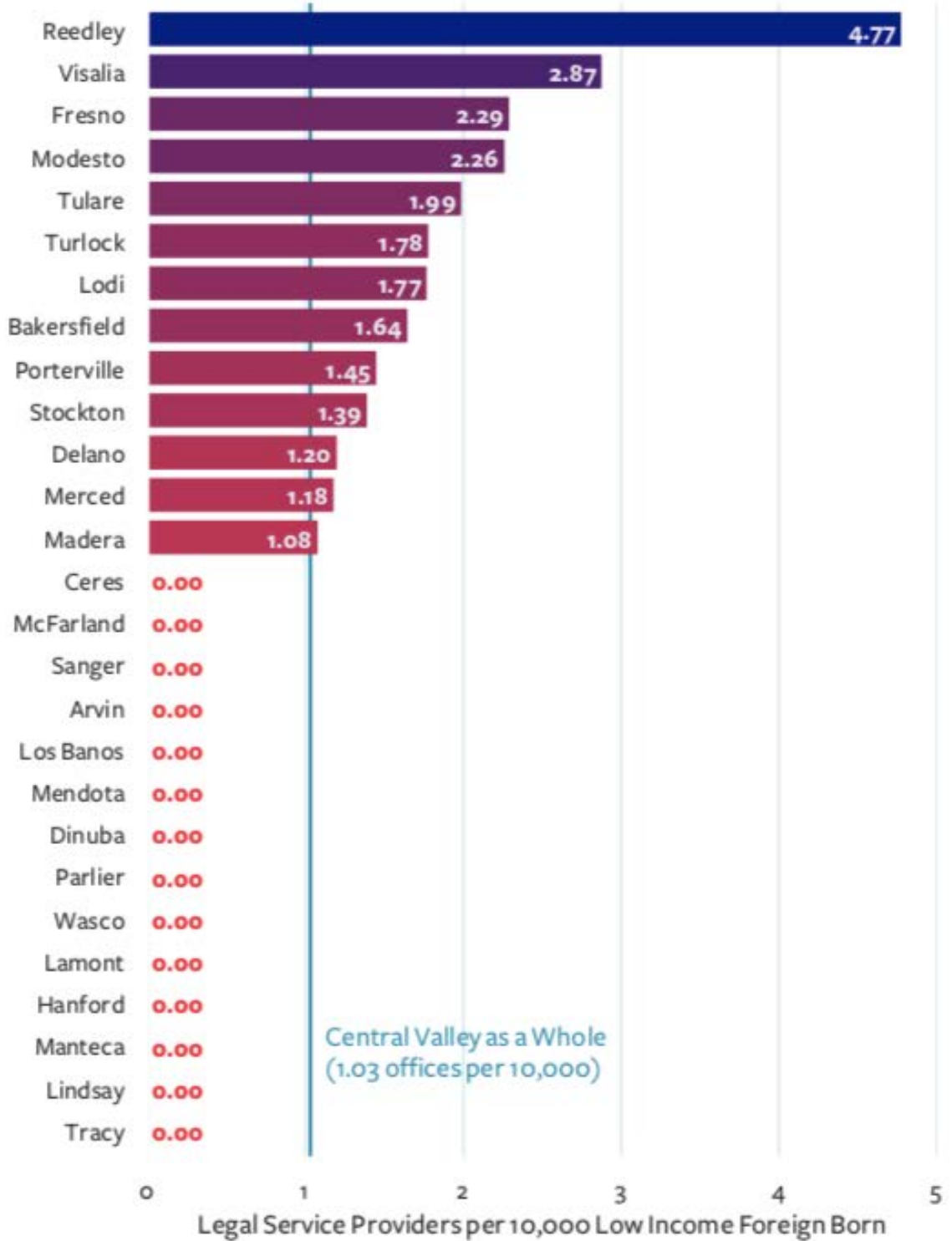
### Legal Aid Services Don't Match Demand in Smaller towns and Rural areas

The map in Figure 2 shows the 27 Central Valley cities with the largest low-income immigrant populations (more than 3,000), and how available legal services compare to the demand. The number of legal aid offices per 10,000 low-income immigrants in each

city are indicated by colors: red indicates a city with little or no legal aid available (0-1 per 10,000 low-income foreign-born) and blue indicates cities with the highest number of legal service providers (4 or more per 10,000 low-income foreign-born). The size of each circle is proportional to the number of low-income immigrant residents.

#### Key Findings

- There are very few legal aid clinics (32) in the Central Valley as a whole, with an average of only 1.03 legal clinics per 10,000 low-income immigrants.
- The limited **legal services are concentrated in mid- to large-sized cities**, creating a spatial mismatch between rural, low-income immigrant populations and vital legal services.
- The urban centers of **Visalia, Fresno and Modesto** all have 2-3 legal aid offices per 10,000 low-income immigrants, offering greater access to legal services for low-income immigrant residents when compared to other cities.
- There are many cities **with greater than 3,000 low-income immigrant residents and no legal services at all**, including Ceres, McFarland, Sanger, Arvin, Los Banos, Mendota, Dinuba, Parlier, Wasco, Lamont, Hanford, Manteca, Lindsay, and Tracy.
- In **Kings County**, there are **9,000 low-income immigrants and not a single legal service provider in the whole county**.
- **Madera and Merced counties** are home to **35,000 low-income immigrants**, but they only have **1 legal aid office each**. This constitutes a ratio of .28 legal aid offices per 10,000.
- One small town, **Reedley**, performs much better in providing low-cost legal aid to immigrants, with almost 5 times better service than the Central Valley average and 1.7 times better than the next best city, Visalia.

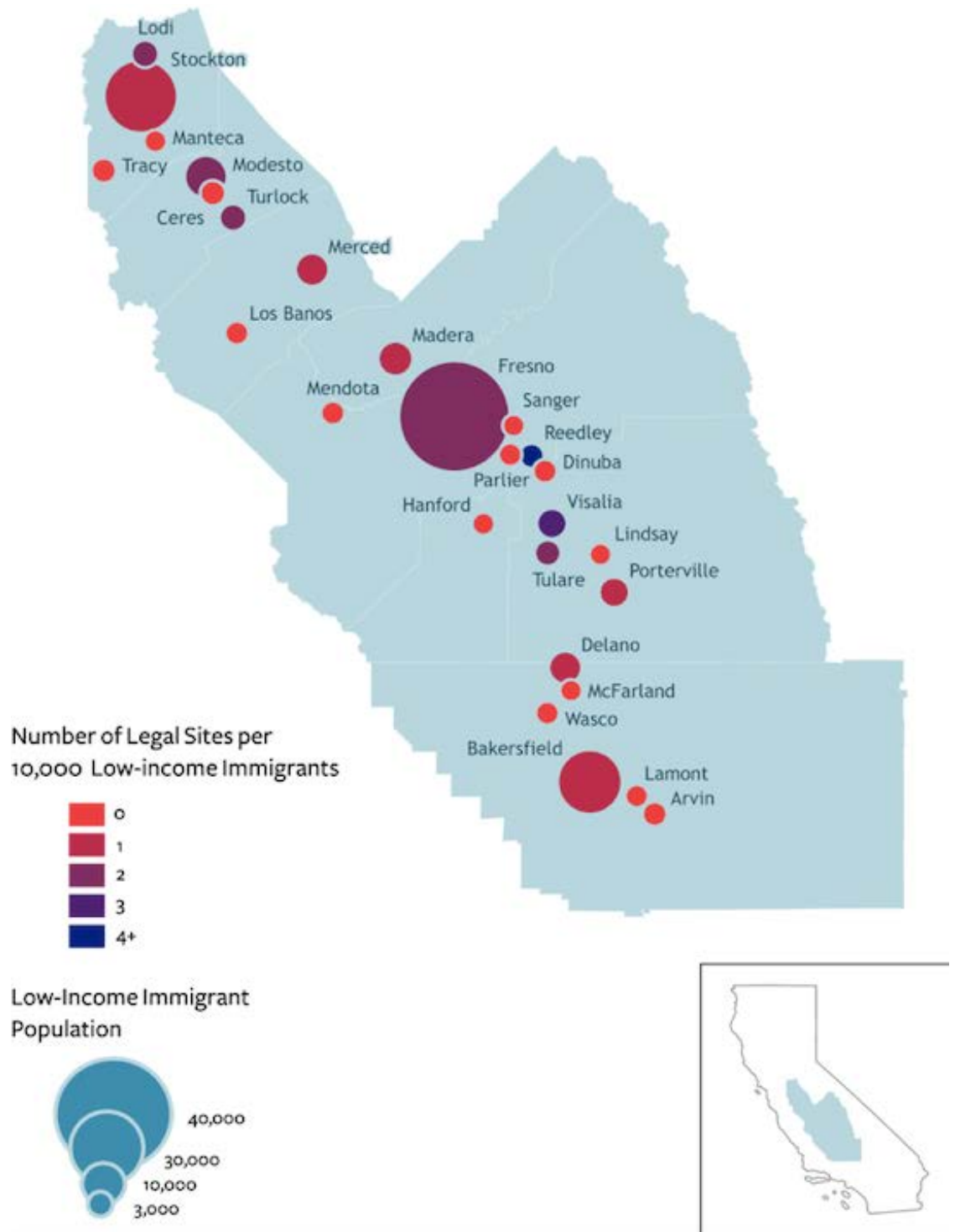


**Figure 2. Ranking of Cities by Number of Legal Clinics per 10,000 Low-Income Immigrant Residents**

This chart highlights the 27 Central Valley cities with the largest low-income immigrant populations (greater than 3,000)—the people most likely to rely on immigrant-focused health clinics as their primary source of healthcare. For each city, the number of legal clinics per 10,000 foreign born uninsured residents is shown.

Data Sources: American Community Survey 2013–2017 5-Year Estimates, the Immigration Advocates Network Nonprofit Resource Center, the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, and The United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review.





**Aid Services Accessibility**

This map shows 27 cities in the Central Valley with at least 3,000 foreign-born residents living below 150% of the poverty line. The circle sizes are proportional to the total low-income immigrant population, and the colors correspond to the number of health clinics per 10,000 low-income immigrant residents.

Data Sources: American Community Survey 2013–2017 5-Year Estimates, the Immigration Advocates Network Nonprofit Resource Center, the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, and The United States Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review.



# This brief is a publication from the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative

## Citation

---

Plant, Carl., Natsoulis, Alizée, & Slootjes, Jasmijn. 2020.  
“Gaps in Legal Services for Immigrants in the Central Valley”.  
Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative.

## Design & Layout

---

Al Nelson, Carlin Praytor

## Contact

---

Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative  
bimi@berkeley.edu  
<https://bimi.berkeley.edu>  
124 Moses Hall  
Berkeley CA, 94720

## About the Author

---

**Carl Plant** holds a B.A. in Mathematics from UC Berkeley and recently completed a policy research fellowship with the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative, concentrating on spatial inequality and data visualization. He has studied public policy analysis and structural inequity through the Blum Center’s Global Poverty & Practice Minor and further coursework. Carl has previously worked for the California Senate Office of Research in the areas of human services and welfare policy, and is now a policy analyst for Wisconsin’s Legislative Fiscal Bureau.

**Alizée Natsoulis** is an undergraduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles where she studies Human Biology and Society (B.S.). She is an undergraduate research fellow with the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative, working on the Mapping Spatial Inequality Project. Through her work with BIMi, she hopes to make research findings more accessible to the general public, and bring to light public health problems faced by immigrant communities.

**Jasmijn Slootjes** is the Executive Director of the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative (BIMI) at the University of California, Berkeley. Jasmijn completed her Ph.D. about health and labor market integration of different immigrant groups in the Netherlands (VU University Amsterdam, 2017) and a Master of Science in Migration, Ethnic Relations and Multiculturalism (Utrecht University 2012). Before joining BIMi she worked at Google and was a Pat Cox Fellow at the Migration Policy Group in Brussels.