

# Gaps in Legal Services for Immigrants in the Bay Area

Carl Plant, Alizée Natsoulis, and Jasmijn Sloopjes

A joint publication from the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative

*The Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative (BIMI) is investigating 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 services. 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.*

Over one million residents of the 9-county Bay area are noncitizens, and over one million individuals have limited ability to speak English. 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 as immigrants increasingly live in smaller suburban and bedroom communities in the region. What do we know about the accessibility of immigration legal services in the Bay area?



**1 MILLION**

BAY AREA RESIDENTS ARE  
NONCITIZENS



**1 + MILLION**

INDIVIDUALS HAVE LIMITED  
ENGLISH SKILLS



ACCESS TO LEGAL SERVICES IS  
UNEVEN IN THE AREA



Through its research, the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative (BIMI) has identified 93 immigrant-focused legal aid offices that offer free or low-cost services in the nine-county Bay Area. A majority of these organizations are clustered in the urban centers of San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose. However, a growing number of immigrants—especially low-income immigrants—live in smaller cities and suburbs ringing the Bay. 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 service provider in their area is overwhelmed by demand. The two maps presented here investigate these two barriers, utilizing the BIMI legal service provider database and Census data.

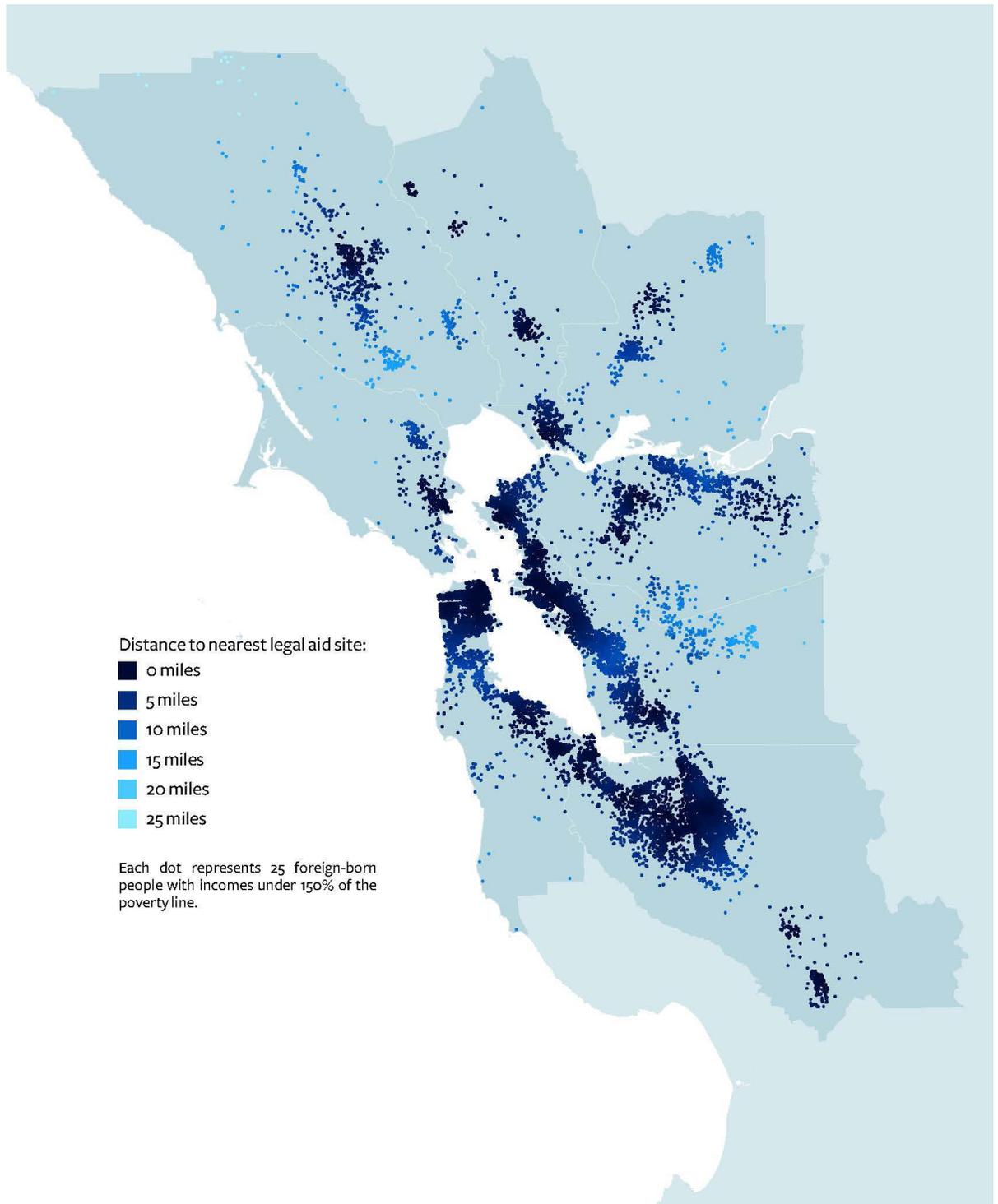
### No Options Within Reach - Geographic Isolation from Legal Aid

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. Considering the Bay Area's high cost of living, 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:

- **14,000 low-income immigrants in the Bay Area (3% of the 435,000 low-income immigrants in the region) live more than 10 miles from the nearest legal aid office**, a trip that can take hours by public transportation. Given many low-income workers' demanding work schedules and reliance on public transportation, this geographic isolation can put vital legal guidance out of reach.
- **Petaluma and the Tri-Valley Area** (encompassing San Ramon, Pleasanton, and Livermore) are the largest low-income immigrant communities without any legal services within a ten-mile radius.
- **83,000 low-income immigrants in the Bay Area (20% of all low-income immigrants in the region) have to travel more than 5 miles to reach legal services**, a trip that can take 30–60 minutes by public transportation.



**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 the Suburbs

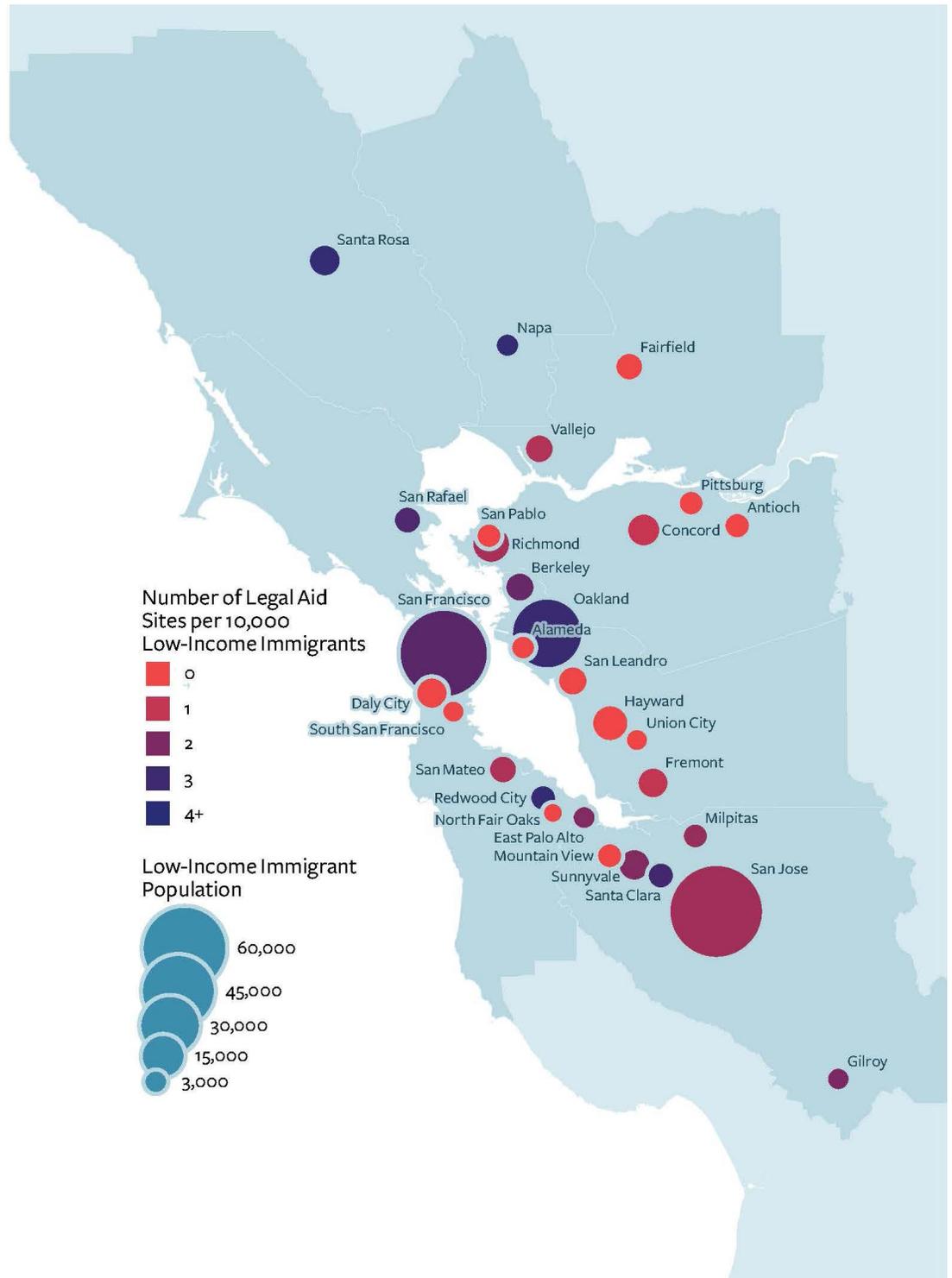
The map in Figure 2 shows the 30 Bay Area cities with the largest low-income immigrant populations (more than 3,000), and how available legal services compare to the demand. The number of legal aid offices per 10,000 low-income immigrants in each city

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

### Key findings:

- The urban centers of **San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose** all have **10 or more legal aid offices**. With 2–4 offices per 10,000 low-income immigrants, these cities offer greater access to legal services for low-income immigrant populations.
- There are many cities **with no legal services at all**, including **Hayward, Fairfield, Bay Point, Pittsburg, Antioch, Sonoma, Novato, Rohnert Park, South San Francisco, San Bruno, and Millbrae**.
- In southern Alameda County (south of Oakland) there are **41,000 low-income immigrants and only one legal service provider in the region** (the Fremont office of the International Institute of the Bay Area).
- **Contra Costa and Solano counties are home to 76,000 low-income immigrants, but they only have seven legal aid offices combined**. This constitutes a ratio of 0.9 legal aid offices per 10,000.
- This spatial mismatch is worsened by staffing shortages and relatively lower capacity at many suburban offices. For example, **all of the immigrant legal services in Eastern Contra Costa County have just 13% of the staff of legal service offices in Oakland** but are serving a population two-thirds the size of Oakland's.<sup>1</sup>
- Some mid-sized cities and suburban areas in the region perform much better in providing low-cost legal aid to immigrants; **Napa County averages 13.3 offices per 10,000 low-income immigrants and Sonoma County averages 2.6, both better than the Bay Area as a whole, with an average of 2.1.**

<sup>1</sup> Carrillo, D. (2016). Unity out of Adversity: Non-Profit Organizations' Collaborative Strategies to Serve Immigrants in Bay Area Suburbs (Working paper). Institute for the Study of Societal Issues. University of California, Berkeley.



**Figure 2. Legal Aid Services Accessibility**

This map shows 30 cities in the Bay Area 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

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## Design & Layout

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Al Nelson, Carlin Praytor

## Contact

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

## About the Author

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**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.