



The 2024 CHCF Central Valley Health Policy Survey: Executive Summary

APRIL 2024

Authors: Jen Joynt, independent health care consultant, Rebecca Catterson, Emily Alvarez, Larry Bye, Vicki Pineau, and Lin Liu, NORC at the University of Chicago

Executive Summary

The Central Valley counties of Mariposa, Madera, Fresno, Kings, and Tulare are home to 1.8 million people and one of the nation’s most productive agricultural areas. The Central Valley is geographically, ethnically, and economically diverse. Fifty-seven percent of residents are Latino/x. And 45% have family incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL) compared to 30% statewide.*

The Central Valley faces challenges with access to care, especially for behavioral health services and primary care, and struggles to recruit physicians and other health care professionals.

Annually since 2019, the California Health Care Foundation has funded a representative, statewide survey of residents’ opinions and experiences on a variety of health care topics. The California Health Care Foundation (CHCF) and NORC at the University of Chicago, a nonpartisan research organization, conducted the survey again in late 2023.

For the first time, the 2023 survey includes an oversample of respondents from the Central Valley, composed of Mariposa, Madera, Fresno, Kings, and Tulare Counties, with 1,525 Central Valley respondents age 18 and older. This allows CHCF to report statistically representative results for the region, as well as comparisons among key sociodemographic groups residing there and differences between the region and the rest of California.

Key themes and findings from this analysis of Central Valley survey responses include:

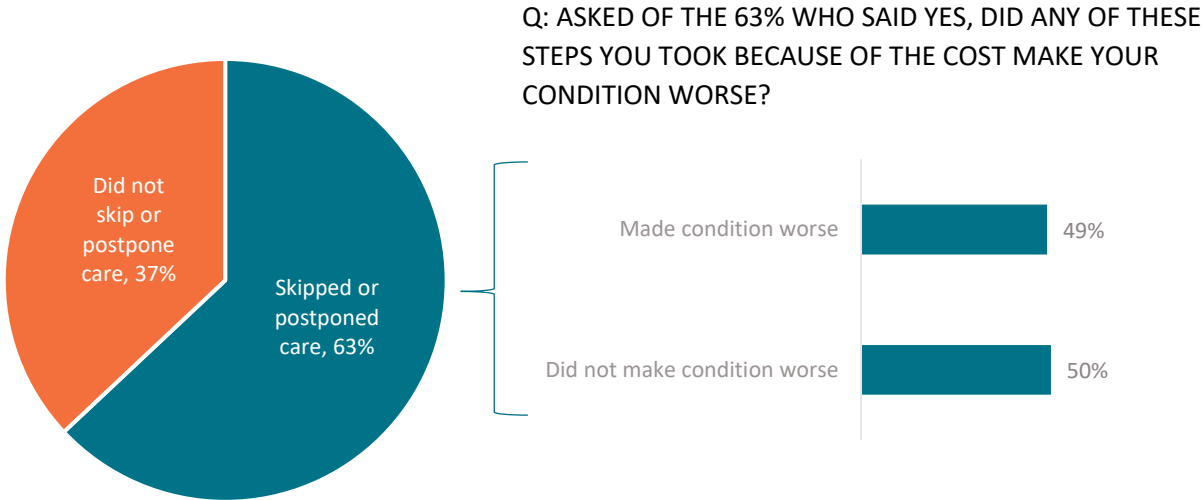
High health care costs and medical debt are particularly acute issues in the Central Valley, especially among those with low incomes and Latino/x residents. Reducing the amount of money that people pay for care is one of the top health care priorities of Central Valley residents.

- More than 6 in 10 Central Valley residents (63%) report skipping or delaying care due to cost. This is significantly higher than Californians in the rest of the state (52%) (Figure 1).
- More than three in four Central Valley residents are “very” or “somewhat” worried about being able to afford out-of-pocket health care costs (78%) and unexpected medical bills (77%). In contrast, 63% of Californians in the rest of the state are “very” or “somewhat” worried about out-of-pocket health care costs, and 65% about unexpected medical bills.
- More than 8 in 10 Central Valley residents with low incomes and Latino/x residents are “very” or “somewhat” worried about being able to afford out-of-pocket health care costs and unexpected medical bills.

* Len Finocchio and James Paci, [*San Joaquin Valley: Despite Poverty and Capacity Constraints, Health Care Access Improves*](#), California Health Care Foundation, December 2020.

- Nearly half of Californians in the Central Valley (48%) have medical debt compared to 36% of Californians in the rest of the state. Fifty-six percent of Central Valley residents with low incomes and Latino/x residents report medical debt.
- Eighty-six percent of Central Valley residents say reducing the amount of money that people pay for care is “extremely” or “very” important for the legislature and governor to focus on in the coming year.

Figure 1. More Than 6 in 10 Central Valley Residents Report Skipping Care Due to Cost; Nearly Half Say Skipping Care Made Their Condition Worse



Notes: Sample includes 3,431 California residents overall and 1,525 Central Valley residents age 18 and older. See topline for full question wording and response options. Figures may not sum due to rounding.

Source: CHCF/NORC California Health Policy Survey (September 18–October 25, 2023).

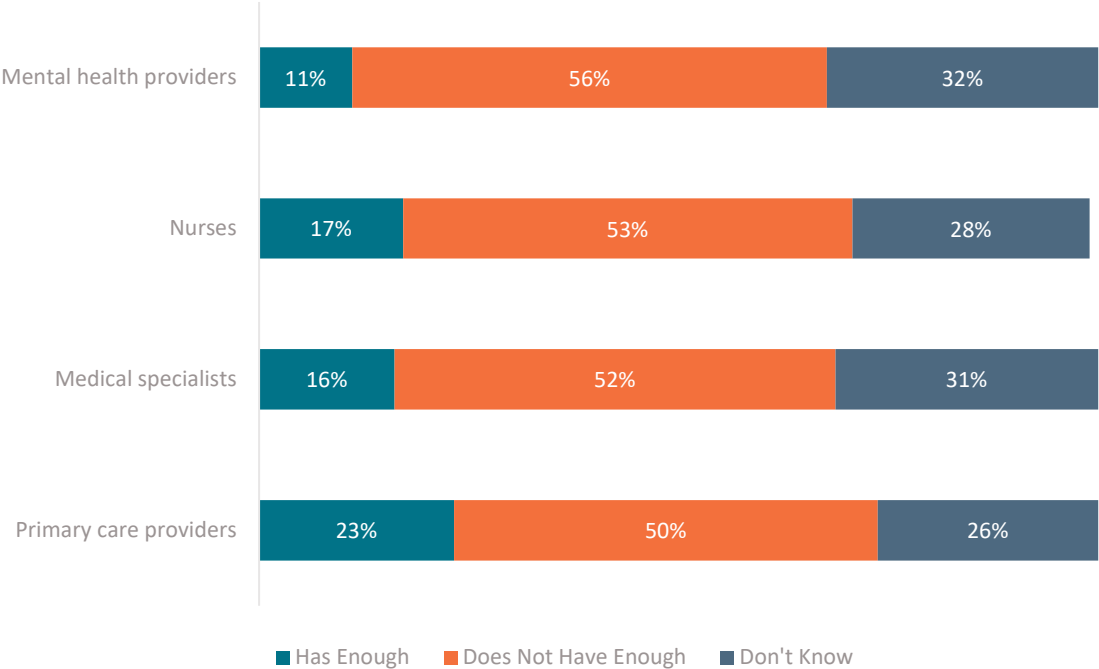
A significant proportion of Central Valley residents report challenges accessing health care, especially for mental health concerns. Most Central Valley residents think their community does not have enough health care providers.

- Thirty-five percent of Central Valley residents overall, 44% of those with low incomes, and 37% of Latino/x residents say it is “somewhat” or “very” difficult to access high-quality, affordable health care for them and their families.
- Among the 20% of Central Valley residents who tried to make a mental health appointment, 62% report waiting longer than they thought was reasonable to get an appointment. Among the 51% of Central Valley residents who tried to make an appointment for physical health care, half (50%) say they had to wait longer than reasonable.

- Central Valley residents (78%) are less likely to have a regular doctor or health care provider than residents in the rest of the state (85%). Latino/x Central Valley residents (73%) are less likely to have a regular doctor or provider than White residents (87%).
- Half or more of Central Valley residents think their community does not have enough providers, especially mental health providers (56%) (Figure 2).
- Nearly one in four Central Valley residents (23%) report a hospital closure in their community in the last 12 months, more than four times higher than residents in the rest of California (5%).

Figure 2. Half of Central Valley Residents Think Their Community Does Not Have Enough Providers, Especially Mental Health Providers

Q: DO YOU THINK YOUR COMMUNITY HAS ENOUGH PROVIDERS TO SERVE THE NEEDS OF LOCAL RESIDENTS OR NOT?



Notes: Sample includes 3,431 California residents overall and 1,525 Central Valley residents age 18 and older. Did not answer not shown. See topline for full question wording and response options.

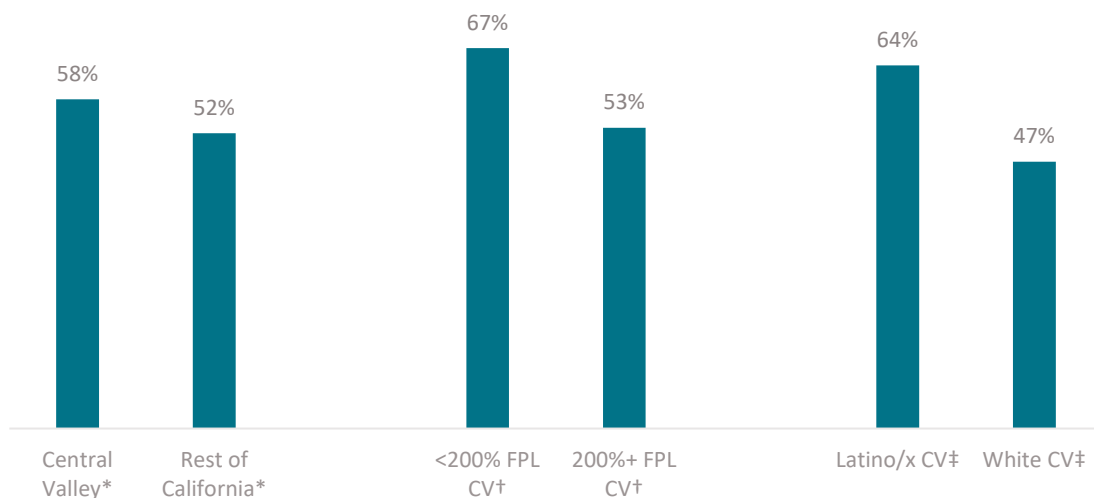
Source: CHCF/NORC California Health Policy Survey (September 18–October 25, 2023).

Most Central Valley residents are concerned about the health effects of weather and environmental factors.

- Nearly 6 in 10 Central Valley residents (58%) and about two in three Central Valley residents with low incomes (67%) and Latino/x Central Valley residents (64%) are “very” or “somewhat” worried about the effect of weather and environmental factors — such as extreme heat, floods, wildfires, and air quality — on their or a family member’s physical or mental health (Figure 3).
- Three in 10 Central Valley residents (29%) say the weather or environment has impacted their or their family’s physical health, and 2 in 10 (20%) say that it has impacted their or their family’s mental health.

Figure 3. Nearly Six in 10 Californians in the Central Valley Are “Very” or “Somewhat” Worried About the Effect of Weather and Environmental Factors

PERCENTAGE WHO SAY THEY ARE “VERY” OR “SOMEWHAT” WORRIED ABOUT THE EFFECT OF WEATHER AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS ON THEIR OR A FAMILY MEMBER’S PHYSICAL OR MENTAL HEALTH



* $p < .05$ for differences between the Central Valley and Rest of California.

† $p < .05$ for differences between income groups.

‡ $p < .05$ for differences between Latino/x and White respondents.

Notes: Sample includes 3,431 California residents overall and 1,525 Central Valley residents age 18 and older. See topline for full question wording and response options. *FPL* is federal poverty level.

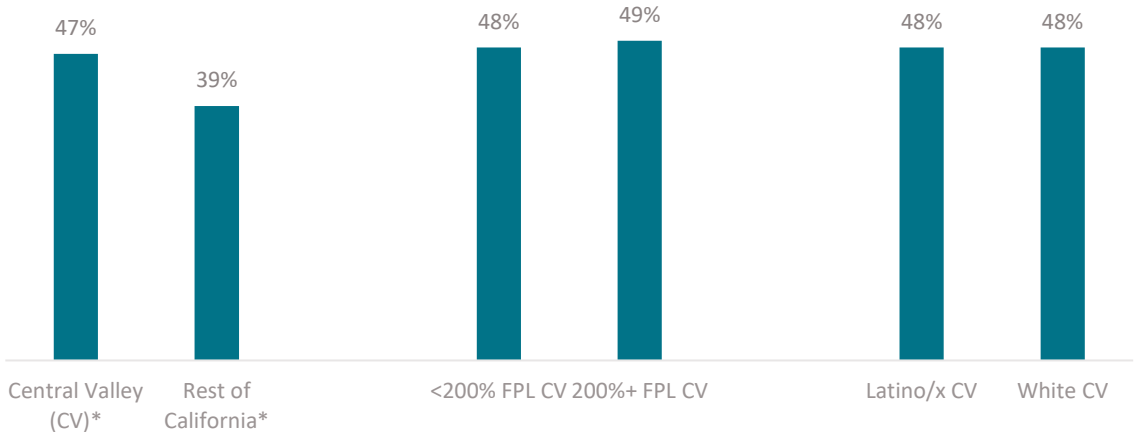
Source: CHCF/NORC California Health Policy Survey (September 18–October 25, 2023).

Nearly half of Californians in the Central Valley report waiting for authorization from their health insurers before receiving doctor-approved care.

- Central Valley residents (47%) are more likely to report waiting for insurance authorization of a treatment, procedure, or medicine prescribed by their doctor than residents in the rest of the state (39%) (Figure 4).
- Nearly 6 in 10 Central Valley residents (58%) who had to wait for authorization report waiting a week or longer.
- Among Central Valley residents who waited for insurance authorization, 46% report waiting for authorization of the same type of care more than once in the last year.

Figure 4. Nearly Half of Central Valley Residents Report Waiting for Insurance Authorization of a Treatment, Procedure, or Medicine Prescribed by Their Doctor

PERCENTAGE WHO SAY THAT THEY OR A FAMILY MEMBER NEEDED TO WAIT FOR THEIR HEALTH INSURANCE COMPANY TO APPROVE OR AUTHORIZE A TREATMENT, PROCEDURE, OR MEDICINE THAT THEIR DOCTOR PRESCRIBED OVER THE PAST YEAR



* $p < .05$ for differences between the Central Valley and Rest of California.

Notes: Sample includes 3,431 California residents and 1,525 Central Valley residents age 18 and older. See topline for full question wording and response options. FPL is federal poverty level.

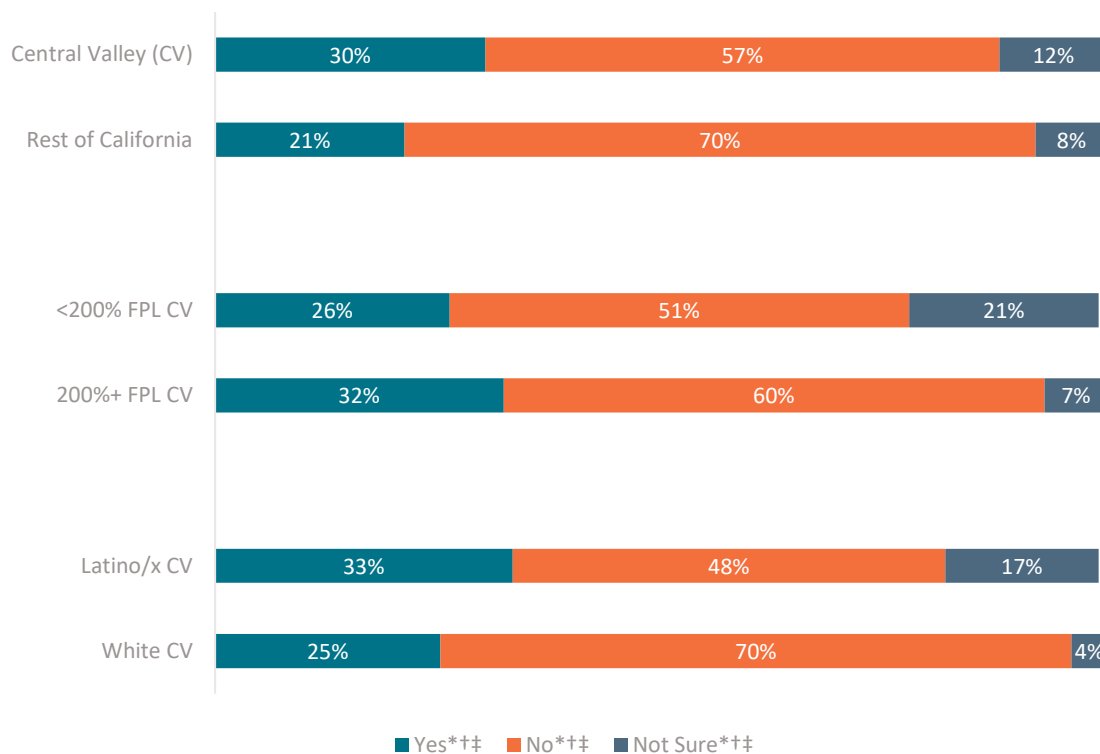
Source: CHCF/NORC California Health Policy Survey (September 18–October 25, 2023).

Californians in the Central Valley are more likely to have experienced a change in health insurance coverage in the past year than Californians in the rest of the state, often resulting in increased costs of coverage or care.

- Three in 10 Californians in the Central Valley (30%) and one in three Latino/x Central Valley residents (33%) report experiencing a change in health insurance coverage in the past year (Figure 5).
- Among Central Valley residents who changed insurance coverage, 33% say their costs for coverage increased and 32% that their costs for care they needed increased.

Figure 5. Three in 10 Central Valley Residents Experienced a Change in Health Insurance Coverage in the Last Year

Q: HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED A CHANGE IN HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE, SUCH AS GAINING, LOSING, OR SWITCHING, IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS?



* $p < .05$ for differences between the Central Valley and Rest of California.

† $p < .05$ for differences between income groups.

‡ $p < .05$ for differences between Latino/x and White respondents.

Notes: Sample includes 3,431 California residents overall and 1,525 Central Valley residents age 18 and older. “Don’t know” or did not answer not shown. See topline for full question wording and response options. FPL is federal poverty level.

Source: CHCF/NORC California Health Policy Survey (September 18–October 25, 2023).