Merced is a community that believes children, youth, and families should grow up in safe neighborhoods, schools, and community environments. We support the development of communities where youth are healthy, safe and ready to learn.
As part of the Building Healthy Communities movement, Merced and surrounding communities are working to create opportunity-rich communities where children are safe, healthy, and ready to learn. By opportunity, we mean a situation or condition that places families and individuals in a position to be more likely to succeed. When we talk about opportunity, we’re talking about the balance of the assets and challenges that people experience within a community.

Opportunity has a geographic footprint, and this document contains several opportunity maps. Maps are a great tool for understanding differences in access to opportunity. Opportunity maps reveal where opportunity is located geographically; demonstrate how different groups of people are concentrated in areas of low or high opportunity; and provide a platform for conversations about strategies to change the geography of opportunity and connect all residents to opportunity.

The study area includes Merced, Le Grand, Planada, and the Beachwood Franklin area. The maps presented here focus especially on Education opportunity; Health and Environment opportunity; and Comprehensive opportunity. We also looked at Housing and Neighborhood opportunity and Economic and Mobility opportunity (please see the Supplemental Materials document).

In our analysis, we found that children in the most distressed communities of Merced face multiple barriers to opportunity, including healthy outlets for recreation, high quality education, viable transportation, healthy food, and empowerment to make changes.

In the Merced study area:
- 35% of children lived in poverty in 2011, compared to 21% in the state and the US
- 44% of youth live in low and very low opportunity communities; 48% of non-white youth live in these communities
- 60% of non-white youth live in areas of low to moderate educational opportunity
- 53% of non-white youth live in areas of low and very low health and environmental opportunity

Through several meetings with community members and other stakeholders, we heard many times that families do not feel empowered to make the changes they want to see. The need for improved engagement between policy makers, organizational representatives, and the community became clear. This report also includes recommendations for building civic capacity and increasing engagement and ultimately, empowerment.

Although the challenges are many, so, too, are the opportunities. The Merced community is rich in engaged stakeholders and residents are ready to do the hard work of making change happen. Small, strategic interventions can lead to transformative change; many programs are already in place. To capitalize on the good work these programs are achieving, stakeholders should:
- nurture youth leadership development and empowerment
- build civic capacity so residents are an integral part in decision-making
- collaborate across agencies and issue areas to develop targeted yet holistic interventions
Youth Poverty in Merced

Youth poverty has substantially risen over the last two decades: 35% of all youth lived in poverty in Merced County in 2011. By comparison, 21% of youth in California and the US lived in poverty in 2011.

Poverty is just one metric for understanding children’s welfare. In Merced, we looked at opportunity holistically, considering health, environment, education, neighborhood, and safety factors. We found that 44% of Merced youth were living in communities that do not offer the best chance for them to reach their full potential; in other words, they live in low or very low opportunity communities. In these areas, educational, health, and recreational opportunities are especially limited.

Youth Opportunity and Low Opportunity in Merced

However, community residents do not feel empowered to make change. They do not know who to take their issues to, or how to get on policymakers’ agenda and get real traction on issues. But they are ready to be the change in their communities they want to see. As one resident stated, “Help us help ourselves.”

Youth Poverty by Race

But not all children in Merced experience poverty in the same way. In 2011, twice as many Latino children were living in poverty as White children (42% vs. 21%). About 28% of Black children and 21% of Asian children were in poverty. Poverty is just one metric for understanding children’s welfare.
The good news is there are numerous individuals in the community ready and willing to work for change so that all youth in Merced are able to reach their full potential. There are efforts underway to connect youth to opportunity, but more is needed. To realize the greatest benefit, individuals and groups need to connect with each other and with policymakers, collaborate around common issues and initiatives, and engage youth and their families as leaders in the change effort.
Southwest Merced/East Merced County is one of fourteen communities in California selected to participate in a cutting-edge effort called Building Healthy Communities (BHC). Southwest Merced/ East Merced County BHC, or BHC Merced, includes four contiguous geographical locations: South Merced, Beachwood and Franklin area, Planada, and Le Grand. These communities are participating in the 10-year BHC program spearheaded by The California Endowment (TCE) to achieve healthier communities. The premise is simple but based on years of research that highlight one simple fact: place matters.

With this investment, communities are tasked with improving healthy youth development, neighborhood safety, employment opportunities, education, housing, access to healthy foods, unhealthy environmental conditions, and access to affordable healthcare to ensure children are safe, healthy, and ready to learn.

The Partnership

The Kirwan Institute was commissioned by TCE to embark on a community engagement and opportunity mapping process as part of the Endowment’s BHC initiative in Southwest Merced/East Merced County (from here on, we will simply refer to this geography as Merced). As part of this process, Kirwan partnered with the BHC Hub Office and the Opportunity Mapping Advisory Committee (OMAC), comprising community residents, agency representatives, community leaders, and the TCE Program Manager. The task of OMAC was to advise on the data collection process and the relevancy of the data to the community’s priorities. We came together to identify existing assets in the community, seek opportunities for asset development, and build capacity around the use of Kirwan’s Opportunity Mapping approach, described below, in system and policy change. From the outset, we all understood that the opportunity maps produced as part of this project were a means to an end. The most important outcome will be the increased capacity of the community to communicate their needs and make positive changes; the stories behind the maps are the driving force of this process.

The Kirwan Institute is an applied research center based at The Ohio State University in Columbus,
Opportunity is a window of possibility; a moment that offers a chance to make change happen.

Ohio. Kirwan’s mission is to create a just and inclusive society, where all people and communities have the chance to succeed. Core to this mission is the belief that place matters, and some communities have greater access to opportunity than others. We seek to help communities examine their own opportunity landscape and expand this opportunity to everyone.

What is opportunity?

We describe opportunity as a situation or a condition that places families and individuals in a position to be more likely to succeed. We measure opportunity as the balance between the assets and challenges that people experience within a community.

- Assets are those community characteristics that tend to make life better for the people who live there. They include good schools where children can learn, safe places for them to play, and access to affordable, healthy food.
- Challenges are characteristics that make life more difficult for community members. High crime rates, unsafe neighborhoods, and high incidences of vacancies and foreclosures all can act as barriers to success for the people who live in those communities. While some exceptional people can find a way to succeed in even the most challenging environments, most of us rely on safe, productive, positive, and healthy communities for our economic, social, physical and psychological well being.

Children, place, and opportunity

Understanding the geography of opportunity is especially important to ensure that our children have every chance to succeed. For children, the connections between place and opportunity are especially critical. Racially isolated and economically poor neighborhoods restrict employment options for young people, contribute to poor health, expose children to higher rates of crime and violence, and house some of the least-performing schools. Children who do not see neighbors leaving for work, who are unchallenged in school, who cannot go to their local park, and who cannot find healthy food in their community are
exposed to cumulative disadvantages that can be hard to overcome. In fact, new studies show that living in a severely disadvantaged neighborhood is equivalent to missing an entire year of school.¹

Neighborhood conditions have implications for the level of stressors facing children during critical phases of development. High levels of chronic stress and trauma can have significant impact on a child’s development, in essence producing physiological impacts on children’s well-being which can inhibit learning, social development, and health. While some children are able to navigate these challenging environments toward success, these tremendously resilient individuals too often represent the exception and not the norm in high poverty and low opportunity neighborhoods. In short, neighborhood context and access to opportunity—from preventative health care to high-performing schools -- can deeply affect children’s health and safety and their opportunities to learn and grow.

**Why do structures matter?**

We know that individual choice matters for achieving success, but we also know there are institutional and structural factors that have a strong influence on our outcomes. Institutional factors include the policies and practices within institutions, and how these result in differential access to opportunity or differences in resource distribution. Structural factors refer to the interactions among institutions and the unequal outcomes these interactions produce. For example, when it comes to health, our lifestyle choices (individual) and access to quality medical care (institutional) are key factors of our overall well-being, but as illustrated below, our home, work and community conditions have a greater impact and our access to a variety of economic and social opportunities (i.e. structural) a greater impact still.

These differences in how opportunity is distributed often fall along racial and class lines. This unequal distribution of opportunity limits the choices available to individuals in low opportunity communities. An understanding of structures and opportunity allows us to think through how institutional policies, interactions among institutions, and differences in resource distribution or investment can produce racially unequal outcomes.
OPPORTUNITY MAPPING: WHY & HOW?

Maps are a great tool for understanding differences in access to opportunity. Opportunity maps reveal where opportunity is located geographically; demonstrate how different groups of people are concentrated in areas of low or high opportunity; and provide a platform for conversations about strategies to change the geography of opportunity and connect all residents to opportunity.
Mapping in Merced Communities

As part of our process in Merced, we formed an advisory committee with stakeholders and residents representing a broad cross section of expertise, from health, to probation, to education, and more. The advisory board helped us think through what indicators would best tell the stories of Merced. We broke down indicators into four categories: Housing & Neighborhood; Economic & Mobility; Health & Environment; and Education.

We then combined these category maps into a single, comprehensive opportunity map, which gives a holistic view of opportunity. This comprehensive view reflects the understanding that a multitude of interconnected variables, and not just one or a few, are required to account for differences in opportunity.

All of the maps made for this project and a detailed explanation of how the opportunity maps are created can also be found in the Appendix.
How to read these maps

The data pulled for these maps is at the block group level. The shading from light to dark (representing low to high opportunity) shows how a certain block group is faring relative to the geography we are studying, Southwest Merced/East Merced County and North Merced. In the top right corner of the maps is a list of the indicators—the data pulled—used to create the opportunity index.
Map 5.0 shows high opportunity concentrated in the North and North east, with areas of low opportunity found in South Merced, Planada, Le Grand, and Beachwood Franklin. These findings match the stories we heard from community members in Merced.

Not all groups experience the same level of opportunity. For example, people of color tend to be more concentrated in areas of low opportunity than in areas of high opportunity, especially Asian and Hispanic populations (see Maps 6.0-6.4 in the Appendix).
5.0 Comprehensive Opportunity


Legend

Comprehensive Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High
- Rural/Low Density

Kirwan Institute
Many Differences One Destiny

California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) 2011-2012.
Map 8.6: Where do children fit in with opportunity? In Merced and surrounding communities, 44% of Merced youth live in areas of low and very low opportunity. These communities of low opportunity are performing poorly in all of these categories—Housing & Neighborhood; Economic & Mobility; Health & Environment; and Education. If we break opportunity down by race, we find that non-white children in Merced are slightly more concentrated; almost half (48%) of these children are living in areas of low and very low opportunity. Interventions will need to be made in all of these areas to give children their best shot at success.
8.6 Comprehensive Opportunity and Youth Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Youth Population.

In several meetings with residents and other stakeholders over the course of this year-long project, four priority areas emerged: Education, Health, Safety and Recreation, and Civic Empowerment. In the following sections, we will take a closer look at these issues and how they relate to youth, and the potential impact the opportunity in each of these areas can have on youth development.
One of the most alarming realities in Merced and surrounding communities is student poverty. Research shows that concentrated poverty in schools depresses educational outcomes for all students, regardless of individual promise. A high student poverty rate, based on free and reduced lunch rates, indicates that children are experiencing hardship beyond the school walls, and can indicate challenges for teachers seeking to meet the significant needs of students.

School poverty has serious implications not just for students, but for districts, communities, and the region. The poverty of a school, far more than the poverty of an individual, determines students’ educational outcomes and impoverished students do better if they live in middle-class neighborhoods and/or attend more affluent schools. This research is well-established; the 1966 Coleman Report (a study of inequality of opportunity in education) concluded that concentrated poverty inevitably depresses achievement on a school-wide and a district-wide basis—the effects are not contained within school walls.

Researchers commonly refer to a tipping point, that point at which a school crosses a threshold and the problem spirals beyond the control of the school. Most experts place that point at 50%. Beyond this point, all students’ prospects are depressed. As one study has found, high poverty schools have to devote far more time and resources to family and health crises, security, language barriers, children with few educational materials in their homes, and many children with very weak educational preparation. Another report finds that once the concentration of poverty in a district reaches 60% or above, the district can no longer rely on its own internal efforts to improve outcomes.

For Merced, many schools have poverty rates well above 50%, and several schools that are at or near almost 100% FRPM. Only 2 out of 33 elementary schools had a Free and Reduced Price Meals eligibility rate below 50%.
## Free and Reduced Lunch in Merced County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Percent on FRL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Le Grand Elementary</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Grand High</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Granada High</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Stefani</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ada Givens Elementary</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Wright Elementary</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donn B. Chenoweth Elementary</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin Elementary</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbert Hoover Middle</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence High (alternative)</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Valley High</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merced High</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merced Scholars Charter</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequoia High</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yosemite High (continuation)</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plainsburg Union Elementary</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John C. Fremont Charter</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Muir Elementary</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luther Burbank Elementary</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Sheehy Elementary</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudolph Rivera Middle</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenaya Middle</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan Peterson Elementary</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leontine Gracey Elementary</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia Reyes Elementary</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbert H. Cruickshank Middle</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Stowell Elementary</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merced City School District Community Day</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planada Elementary</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cesar E. Chavez Middle</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmland Elementary</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaver Middle</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneer Elementary</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### School District

- **Le Grand**
- **Merced**
- **Planada**
- **Weaver**
Map 1.0 shows Educational Opportunity for Merced and surrounding communities. High educational opportunity is concentrated in North/Northeast Merced. Le Grand and parts of South Merced rank very low in terms of educational opportunity. Given the research about educational attainment and poverty, making inroads on educational success requires that interventions are holistic and community-centered, and not solely focused on what goes on in the classroom.
1.0 Education Opportunity


Legend
Education Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High
- Rural/Low Density

Adult Educational Attainment Rate
Dropout Rate
Eligible Students for College Rate
ESL Students Rate
Graduation Rate
Reading & Math Proficiency
SAT Scores
Student Poverty

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Merced City Inset Map

Mariposa County
During our engagements, residents and advocates also raised the issue of cuts to school bus routes. Not only are children struggling in under-resourced communities, but even getting to school is proving problematic for some families. For example, the Beachwood Franklin community is approximately 4.5 miles from the neighborhood school, and the only two or three routes to school are either narrow roads lacking sidewalks and lighting, or expressways with a speed limit of 55 mph when school zones are 25 mph. One of the routes requires students to cross an overpass and an extremely busy intersection with no crosswalk.
Our health impacts every aspect of our lives, and whether we are healthy is largely influenced by where we live. For example, one study shows that property values, more than income or education levels, are the best predictor of obesity rates, perhaps due to the neighborhood presence or absence of grocery stores in safe walking distance with affordable, healthy food.\(^8\) The very characteristics that signal a low opportunity neighborhood—such as low income, few job opportunities, toxic contamination, crime, and so on—show up in our health, both mental and physical; such neighborhoods act as chronic stressors on families living there. Such conditions—both independently and cumulatively—have implications for asthma. One study found that increased exposure to violence predicted a greater number of asthma symptom days, even after controlling for socioeconomic and housing conditions.\(^9\) For children, growing up in low opportunity neighborhoods can have long term, negative effects on adult health.\(^10\)

We know that health is more than just access to health care; in fact, access to health care only accounts for 15-20% of the variations seen in mortality and morbidity rates.\(^11\) That said, accessing health care is still a major barrier for many in Merced, either because of low income, being uninsured, or language barriers.\(^12\) In Merced city especially, where more than 70% of non-English speakers are living in low opportunity neighborhoods, improving access for these populations is important (see Map 7.0 in the Appendix). More generally, our analysis found that health care centers were substantially more concentrated in North Merced (see Map 3.1 in the Appendix).
Health and environmental opportunity are especially challenging for many Merced residents. A study of the San Joaquin Valley by the UC-Davis Center for Regional Change found that environmental hazards tended to cluster where people with high levels of social vulnerability were living. Exposure to pollutants can lead to lower life expectancies, increased low birth weight, and higher rates of asthma, for example. There is also evidence that suggests children living in agricultural settings may be at high risk of exposures to toxins that can disrupt normal development and health. Residents in Planada and Le Grand raised concerns about pesticides and the health of their children, and that of migrant workers.

"[There is] pollution from within, but we have no say, no power.”

Map 3.0 shows Health and Environment opportunity in Southwest Merced/East Merced County. Fifty-one percent of youth are living in areas of lowest health opportunity. The isolation of youth in neighborhoods with low health opportunity is especially worrisome for children in Planada and Le Grand, which are spatially isolated and surrounded by agricultural fields.
3.0 Health and Environment Opportunity

Source(s): American Community Survey 2006-2010, Merced County Department of Public Health 2008, Environmental Protection Agency 2010.

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**Legend**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health/Environment Opportunity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural/Low Density</td>
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</table>
Recreational opportunities are vital for healthy communities. Community activities, street festivals, neighborhood clean-ups, and similar activities promote community involvement and community safety. A study on youth crime and recreation from the American Institutes of Research linked an 87% decrease in truancy, a 62% reduction in the number of school discipline notices, and a 33% reduction in juvenile crime and vandalism to participation in recreational activities. Good, clean, safe parks and recreational facilities are necessary for these community activities to flourish.

The availability of parks, community centers, and similar facilities has been shown to have a marked impact on community health, particularly among young people. At-risk children who are exposed to after school recreation programs have been reported to show improved grades, social skills, and community involvement. Access to good parks is also shown to have a positive effect on the physical health of children, and children who do not get enough physical activity are at risk for obesity and other complications from chronic conditions, such as type 2 diabetes.

Unfortunately in Merced, not everyone has access to clean, safe parks and good recreation facilities. Within the Merced city limits, people living north of Route 99 have access to over twenty times more park space than those living south of 99, with parks that are over four times as large on average. Anecdotally, many residents shared that parks in the north part of Merced were safer and more accessible than parks in the south end.

“My neighborhood is that cutthroat and dangerous that I don’t feel motivated to get to know my neighbors...college is pretty much the only way out of here for some, if you don’t get up to that standard of college you find something else, some people join gangs or sit there and do drugs...”
This corresponds to the disparity of opportunity within the city that shows that those in the northeast section of Merced have far greater access to opportunity than those in other areas. For example, in the Beachwood Franklin neighborhood, there is no community center. There are parks nearby, but the lack of sidewalks and other pedestrian infrastructure makes getting to those parks a potentially dangerous challenge for children. In the rural communities of Planada and Le Grand, the outlook is much bleaker. The only park that exists in either of these communities is Houlihan Park in Planada. Even more troubling, the parks that residents do have access to have been reported as unsafe; the presence of gangs is cited as a primary reason why families and children do not go to the parks. For the children who live in these communities, there are very few recreational opportunities that could help improve health and school performance nearby. These communities are predominantly made up of Latino and Asian youth.

High crime rates in Merced communities can lead to less neighborhood activity and more difficulty in sustaining programs that could help children learn and grow. Residents living in low and very low opportunity areas experience over 20 more crimes per 1,000 residents than those in high opportunity areas. Residents in low and very low opportunity areas also experience more violent crimes than those in high opportunity areas, having an adverse effect on the perception of safety in these neighborhoods, especially with children.
We heard countless stories about the lack of activities and programs for children in Merced communities. Those programs that do exist tend to be located too far from children who need them most. Parents try to help their children access these activities, but a combination of work schedule conflicts, distance, and lack of transportation can make that difficult for some families. That leaves children to try to make it to these activities alone, either on foot or by bike on unsafe roads, often without sidewalks and lighting. Many of the programs for children in the community are also too expensive, particularly for families that are experiencing higher rates of poverty and unemployment in the south of Merced and outside of the city.

These challenges have spurred residents in these communities to take matters into their own hands and start programs of their own. From resident-led Zumba classes, to free drumming and music lessons for children, there are many community members who see the difficulties for young people and want to help. Unfortunately, residents shared that the facilities that they have access to do not allow many opportunities for use.

As many challenges as there may be when it comes to accessing parks and recreational opportunities, the good news is that they do exist. While residents generally remarked upon the undesirable state of recreation facilities in the community that can make some of them unusable, they also reported that efforts to address some of these challenges have begun.

By working together, we can find solutions for overcoming transportation challenges for working parents, find more resources to expand programs’ reach, and pair resident-led activities with recreational spaces that will allow them to thrive and grow, giving more youth an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of recreational opportunities.
Studies have shown that encouraging civic participation among youth is a crucial aspect of sustaining healthy communities. A study on civic engagement among youth from the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that young people who were actively engaged in community programs developed better leadership and communication skills, and also found it easier to work with adults in the community on further programs. Getting young people involved in volunteer activities or community programs designed to deal with important issues can play a key role in building the leadership skills necessary to support positive change in the community as time goes on.

Increased civic engagement can also have an important effect on the emotional health of young people. Young people that participate in community events on a regular basis tend to enjoy better physical and emotional health and are more likely to form healthy social bonds with their peers and others in the community. One-on-one interaction with other community members is another benefit of youth engagement; young people who are personally invited to be a part of community programs tend to stay involved more than those who are not.

Although Merced’s young people bear the brunt of many of the challenges in education, health, safety, and recreation, there are very few entry points for youth to contribute to community solutions. This not only discourages young people from helping to find solutions to these challenges, but it also separates them from opportunities to form healthy community relationships. This can push many young people towards gang membership for a sense of belonging and a feeling of social acceptance, and safety. The effects of youth disengagement are clear; from 2007 to 2008, Merced experienced a fourfold increase in gang related crimes. Merced County ranks 5th in youth criminal activity among counties in California.

Disengagement also impacts youth participation in one of the most fundamental rights of citizenship in the United State: voting. Voting...
among registered voters in Merced County aged 18-24 declined dramatically from 2002-2010, hitting its lowest point in 2008, when the voter turnout among youth across the country was at record highs. This lack of civic knowledge and a feeling of helplessness among young people have roots in the lack of civic engagement opportunities at an early age. The cumulative effect of this systematic disengagement is that young Merced residents, particularly Latino and Asian voters, have had less of a voice in local decision-making, making them less likely to have access to social and economic assets that would help them succeed later in life.

"the one asset that is underutilized the most, that can harness these things, are leaders. We need to identify community leaders. These individuals that have a gift for organizing are typically in the communities that are doing ok, but not in the ones that have a need...."
Growing Youth Engagement

Encouraging youth leadership in the community is key to ensuring young people stay involved. Volunteer opportunities and personal mentoring provide wonderful opportunities to reach out to young people. Developing opportunities for young people to help design and implement community programs can be instrumental in building civic leadership capacity for the future while also placing young people back into a center of the community. Engagement provides opportunities to identify young community leaders and provide the kind of support that will help them carry on community programs and policies that will help the community thrive for years to come. Programs such as Serving Our Youth and Community in San Francisco show that making youth involvement in community programs now can create strong civic leadership abilities later.²³

Finding and developing leadership is particularly important in traditionally disadvantaged communities that have not generally been included in planning and policy decisions. These communities tend to be the most separated from civic decision-making, making them more vulnerable to the negative effects of those policies in the future. Strong leadership can harness the social capital that exists in personal relationships, community projects, local business, and services in these communities. Strong leadership can demand that their voices be heard and that more opportunities are available to help people in these communities find success.
There is no shortage of committed individuals and organizations in Merced working to make positive changes in their communities. There are several efforts on the ground seeking to address the issues of greatest concern to residents. The mapping, analysis, and stories presented here complement these efforts. The greatest benefit from all of this work will be realized through collaboration and increased engagement at all levels, but especially with youth.
Through all of our engagements with community residents especially, the overarching concern was children and their health and safety. Our findings confirmed that many of the youth in Merced face a multitude of barriers to opportunity—in fact, 44% of youth experience such challenges. Unsafe streets and a lack of recreational activities, educational resources and economic opportunities work together to marginalize youth and their families in Merced. Children and youth are community assets, and as such, deserve to be included in planning processes, projects, and programs developed to address these challenges. Involving youth is more than a strategy recommendation; we are calling for youth engagement to be a principle of positive change.

A great list of recommendations is already started, and reflected in the Building Healthy Communities work. These include:

- **Youth in leadership positions**
  Empowering young people by creating opportunities to play an impactful role in community initiatives, particularly involving youth recreation, education, and civic engagement.

- **Mentoring Opportunities**
  Coordinate community opportunities such as volunteering, community and church events, and school events to create meaningful partnerships between youths and community leaders and mentors in order to foster leadership and development.

- **Institutionalization of youth empowerment**
  Codifying goals and strategies aimed at increasing youth leadership in local institutions, particularly those involved in education, safety, health and public policy by creating specific rules and policies that target youth involvement and provide incentives for institutions, businesses, and non-profit organizations to involve youth in leadership roles.
Change happens when people connect to each other, at whatever scale. Whether it’s neighbors coming together for a community clean up or starting a block watch, or the City connecting with residents to make upgrades to a park, or organizations coming together to coordinate services for a common population, none of this great work can happen if people do not talk to each other first. Communities are made up of residents, businesses, elected officials and service providers, all of whom have influence over community resources and different ideas about how those should be used.

For residents, we heard time and again how difficult they found it to seek out these connections. Either they did not know where or with whom to connect, or they did not see any positive outcomes from the connections they were able to make.

One way to get answers to the questions of where and who is through power mapping. While opportunity mapping charts the physical world of assets and challenges, power mapping identifies the relationships between people and institutions. Power mapping not only can help residents identify who has influence over what levers of opportunity, but can begin to organize residents around the specific issues and build a campaign for change; in other words, it can build civic capacity. The first important part of building civic capacity is knowing the ‘civic terrain’ of the community: Who can influence the
issues that we care about the most? How do they feel about the issue, and what is important to them? How do they fit into the community? Who do they partner with and why? Where and how can they be reached? What do we have in common and where do we disagree?

But it is not enough to know who to ask, or where to go; it’s also important to know what outcomes you want, and how you can play a role in the change. In other words, accountability has to be part of the conversation, on both ends—by the community and the decision-makers.

To gain a better understanding of how different entities within the community are related, a closer look at the connections among various community entities can be useful. For example, while police and safety officials are often the first point of contact when residents have safety concerns, other entities such as schools, non-profits, and local businesses may also have an interest in working to find solutions to these problems. Safety officials may also be working with community groups or neighbors to tackle a different issue, creating an opportunity to work together on this issue as well. Communities are built on relationships such as these, and being aware of those relationships is a powerful tool in building empowerment among residents who have often felt powerless to make a difference in their communities. A positive first step in finding and utilizing these connections would be to use social networking analyses such as Net-Mapping that can reveal the connections among different groups and what assets, challenges, and issues are at the heart of those connections.

**Conclusion: Creating Systems Change**

We spent this past year talking about systems and how they matter for opportunity. The many faces of low opportunity—poverty, dilapidated schools, sporadic health care, stress, exclusion and increased exposure to crime—force us to recognize that interventions that aim to expand opportunity for all children and families in Merced cannot be limited to one domain. This is essentially the story the comprehensive maps tell. Working on a single issue in one domain may result in positive change in the short term, but eventually, because of the nature of systems, that change can be swamped because other parts of the system remain unchanged. Given this, coordinating services or programs among agencies with “common constituencies” simply makes sense. At an organizational level, this can help organizations make the most informed investment, both in terms of efficiency and outcomes. More than just combining resources to have a greater reach, it has the potential to create a new system that distributes opportunity in a more equal way. The opportunity maps created as part of this project can help point organizations and residents in the right direction. They provide a more nuanced view of the communities in Merced, and which neighborhoods may be struggling more in what areas, so resources can be targeted effectively.
Despite the depth of the challenges of addressing low opportunity, strategic interventions to affirmatively connect marginalized children to opportunity can produce transformative change in the lives and future of Merced children. With an eye towards creating opportunity for all, Merced residents can begin with smaller, strategic interventions. These initial interventions can bring various groups to the table to define a shared vision of success, mobilize energy around important issues, build trust among diverse people and organizations, and show that change can indeed happen.

The strategies discussed in this report are a starting point; these solutions require an organized and engaged community to implement them. Political and public will, collaboration, strategically used resources, and extensive civic engagement form a critical foundation for implementing strategies to expand opportunity for Merced’s marginalized communities and children. Laying this foundation is the key starting point in responding to these systemic challenges. Taking action on these challenges is not just a response to help Merced’s most marginalized children, but an essential investment in the future of the region. Only by providing the necessary support services and resources for children living in poverty and low opportunity neighborhoods can the Merced community achieve neighborhoods that provide opportunities for all children to flourish.


3  Schellenberg, Stephen J. *Concentration of Poverty and the Ongoing Need for Title I Reform* in Hard Work for Good Schools; Facts Not Fads in Title I Reform (The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University 1998).

4  Poverty and Race Research Action Council *Annotated Bibliography: The Impact of School-Based Poverty Concentration on Academic Achievement and Student Outcomes*.

5  Poverty and Race Research Action Council *Annotated Bibliography: The Impact of School-Based Poverty Concentration on Academic Achievement and Student Outcomes*.


7  Poverty and Race Research Action Council *Annotated Bibliography: The Impact of School-Based Poverty Concentration on Academic Achievement and Student Outcomes*.


11  Life and Death from Unnatural Causes, The Alameda County Health Department, April 2008.


End Notes

19 Camino, Linda et, al. “Strengthening Communities Through Youth Participation: Lessons Learned from the ACT for Youth Initiative” Center for Nonprofits, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 4. March 2009


APPENDIX MAPS
1.0 Education Opportunity


Legend

Education Opportunity

- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High
- Rural/Low Density

Legend

- Adult Educational Attainment Rate
- Dropout Rate
- Eligible Students for College Rate
- ESL Students Rate
- Graduation Rate
- Reading & Math Proficiency
- SAT Scores
- Student Poverty
1.1 Education Opportunity and Non-White Youth Population

This map represents access to education opportunity with an overlay of Non-White Youth population.


Legend

Non-White Youth (Under 18)
- 14 - 170
- 171 - 372
- 373 - 681
- 682 - 1,132
- 1,133 - 2,009

Education Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density

Legend

Reading & Math Proficiency
Student Poverty
Dropout Rate
Graduation Rate
ESL Students Rate
SAT Scores
Eligible Students for College Rate
Adult Educational Attainment Rate
2.0 Housing and Neighborhood Opportunity

Source(s): American Community Survey 2006-2010 and HUD 2008.

Legend

Housing & Neighborhood Opportunity

- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High
- Rural/Low Density

Homeownership Rate
Foreclosure Rate
Neighborhood Poverty Rate
Neighborhood Vacancy Rate
Cost-burdened Household Rate

Merced County
Mariposa County

Kirwan Institute
Many Differences One Destiny
3.0 Health and Environment Opportunity

Source(s): American Community Survey 2006-2010, Merced County Department of Public Health 2009, Environmental Protection Agency 2010.

Legend

Health/Environment Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High
- Rural/Low Density

Asthma Rate
Diabetes Rate
Food Access
Low-Birthweight Baby Rate
No (or little) Prenatal Cared Mother Rate
Premature Death
Proximity to Toxic Sites
Park Access
3.1 Health and Environment Opportunity and Health Care Facility

This map represents access to health/environment opportunity with an overlay of Health Care Facilities.

Source(s): American Community Survey 2006-2010, Merced County Department of Public Health 2009, Environmental Protection Agency 2010.

Legend
- Health Care Facility
- Health/Environment Opportunity
  - Very Low
  - Low
  - Moderate
  - High
  - Very High
  - Rural/Low Density

Asthma Rate
Diabetes Rate
Food Access
Low-Birthweight Baby Rate
No (or little) Prenatal Cared Mother Rate
Premature Death
Proximity to Toxic Sites
Park Access
3.2 Health and Environment Opportunity and Non-White Youth Population

This map represents access to health/environment opportunity with an overlay of Non-White Youth Population.

Source(s): American Community Survey 2006-2010, Merced County Department of Public Health 2009, Environmental Protection Agency 2010.

Legend

Non-White Youth Health/Environment Opportunity
- 14 - 170
- 171 - 372
- 373 - 681
- 682 - 1,132
- 1,133 - 2,009

Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High
- Rural/Low Density

Asthma Rate
Diabetes Rate
Food Access
Low-Birthweight Baby Rate
No (or little) Prenatal Cared Mother Rate
Premature Death
Proximity to Toxic Sites
Park Access
3.3 Health and Environment Opportunity and Youth Access to Parks

This map represents access to health/environment opportunity with an overlay of Parks.

Source(s): American Community Survey 2006-2010, Merced County Department of Public Health 2009, Environmental Protection Agency 2010.
4.0 Economic and Mobility Opportunity

Source(s): American Community Survey 2006-2010, Merced County Department of Public Health 2009, Environmental Protection Agency 2010.

Legend

Economic/Mobility Opportunity

- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High
- Rural, Low Density

Change in Number of Jobs within 5 Miles
- Mean Commute Time
- Number of Jobs within 5 Miles
- Population with Public Assistance
- Total Employees in Top 5 Industries
- Transit Access
- Unemployment Rate
- Youth Unemployment Rate

Source(s): American Community Survey 2006-2010, Merced County Department of Public Health 2009, Environmental Protection Agency 2010.
5.0 Comprehensive Opportunity


Legend

Comprehensive Opportunity

- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High
- Rural/Low Density
6.1 Comprehensive Opportunity and White Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of White Population.


Legend

White
- 8 - 125
- 126 - 500
- 501 - 800
- 801 - 1,300
- 1,301 - 2,093

Comprehensive Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of White Population.
6.2 Comprehensive Opportunity and African American Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of African American Population.

6.3 Comprehensive Opportunity and Asian Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Asian Population.


Legend
- Asian
  - 9 - 47
  - 48 - 133
  - 134 - 271
  - 272 - 764
  - 765 - 1,733
- Comprehensive Opportunity
  - Very Low
  - Low
  - Moderate
  - High
  - Very High
- Rural/Low Density

This map is a representation of access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Asian Population. The map includes data from various sources to provide a comprehensive view of the area.
6.4 Comprehensive Opportunity and Latino Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Latino Population.


Legend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Comprehensive Opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>95 - 407</td>
<td>Very Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>408 - 748</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>749 - 1,132</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,133 - 1,692</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,693 - 2,467</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural/Low Density</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.0 Comprehensive Opportunity and Non-English Speaking Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Non-English Speaking population.

8.1 Comprehensive Opportunity and White Youth Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of White Youth Population.

8.2 Comprehensive Opportunity and African American Youth Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of African American Youth Population.

8.3 Comprehensive Opportunity and Asian Youth Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Asian Youth Population.


Legend

Asian Youth (Under 18)
- 1 - 32
- 33 - 75
- 76 - 206
- 207 - 374
- 375 - 616

Comprehensive Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density

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Merced City Inset Map

Merced County

Mariposa County

Atwater

Miles

0 0.75 1.5 2.25 3

Legend

Asian Youth (Under 18)
- 1 - 32
- 33 - 75
- 76 - 206
- 207 - 374
- 375 - 616

Comprehensive Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density
8.4 Comprehensive Opportunity and Latino Youth Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Latino Youth Population.


Legend

Latino Youth (Under 18)
- 61 - 154
- 155 - 275
- 276 - 426
- 427 - 579
- 580 - 1,240

Comprehensive Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density

Kirwan Institute
Many Differences One Destiny

Merced City Inset Map

Legend

Latino Youth (Under 18)
- 61 - 154
- 155 - 275
- 276 - 426
- 427 - 579
- 580 - 1,240

Comprehensive Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density

Merced City Inset Map
8.5 Comprehensive Opportunity and Non-White Youth Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Non-White Youth Population.


Legend
Non-White Youth (Under 18)
- 14 - 170
- 171 - 372
- 373 - 681
- 682 - 1,132
- 1,133 - 2,009

Comprehensive Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density

Merced County
Le Grand
Planada
Merced City Inset Map
Childs
Wardrobe
Grogan
North Bear Creek
23rd
13th
8th
Main
Glen
Santa Fe
16th
14th
140
99
0.25 0.5 0.75 1 Miles
0 0.75 1.5 2.25 3 Miles
Kirwan Institute
Many Differences One Destiny

8.5 Comprehensive Opportunity and Non-White Youth Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Non-White Youth Population.


Legend
Non-White Youth (Under 18)
- 14 - 170
- 171 - 372
- 373 - 681
- 682 - 1,132
- 1,133 - 2,009

Comprehensive Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density

Merced County
Le Grand
Planada
Merced City Inset Map
Childs
Wardrobe
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Glen
Santa Fe
16th
14th
140
99
0.25 0.5 0.75 1 Miles
0 0.75 1.5 2.25 3 Miles
Kirwan Institute
Many Differences One Destiny
8.6 Comprehensive Opportunity and Youth Population

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Youth Population.


Legend

Youth Population (Under 18)
- 78 - 203
- 204 - 421
- 422 - 673
- 674 - 1,187
- 1,188 - 2,664

Comprehensive Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Youth Population.

9.0 Comprehensive Opportunity and Early Childhood Education Centers

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Early Childhood Education Centers.


9.0 Comprehensive Opportunity and Early Childhood Education Centers

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Early Childhood Education Centers.
10.0 Comprehensive Opportunity and Health Care Facilities

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Health Care Facilities.

11.1 Comprehensive Opportunity and Crime Rate

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Crime Rate.


Legend

Crime Rate (per 1,000 people)
- 32.74 - 69.69
- 69.70 - 105.53
- 105.54 - 177.60
- 177.61 - 296.25
- 296.26 - 640.26

Comprehensive Opportunity
- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density
11.2 Comprehensive Opportunity and Type 1 Crime Rate

This map represents access to comprehensive opportunity with an overlay of Type 1 Crime Rate (incidents per 1,000 people).


Legend

Type 1 Crime Rate (per 1,000 people)

- 15.60 - 39.90
- 39.91 - 73.50
- 73.51 - 134.60
- 134.61 - 228.00
- 228.01 - 362.30

Comprehensive Opportunity

- Very Low
- Low
- Moderate
- High
- Very High

Rural/Low Density
Map 11.1 Park Accessibility to Youth

This map illustrates amount of park space within 1 mile of a neighborhood, overlaid with youth population, comparing Merced North of 99 to Merced South of 99.

Merced North of 99
Total Acres of Park: 22.755
Average size of Park: 0.495

Merced South of 99
Total Acres of Park: 1.113
Average size of Park: 0.101

Legend

Youth Population Acres of Park
- Under 0.1 acres
- 0.11 - 0.25
- 0.26 - 0.50
- 0.51 - 0.75
- above 0.75 acres
- Above 1000
- Parks
- Rural/Low Density
### California Opportunity Index

**Indicators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Merced</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Commute Time (Minutes per worker)</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Attainment Rate</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
<td>58.0%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeownership Rate</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
<td>73.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Assistance Rate</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Rate</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacancy Rate</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** American Community Survey 2006-2010

**Indicator Comparison Table**

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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Indicator Comparison Graph**

- **Education Attainment Rate**
- **Homeownership Rate**
- **Public Assistance Rate**
- **Poverty Rate**
- **Vacancy Rate**
- **Average Commute Time**

**California Opportunity Index**

- **Very High**
- **High**
- **Moderate**
- **Low**
- **Very Low**
- **Merced County**

**Source:** American Community Survey 2006-2010

**Kirwan Institute**

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MOVING MERCED COMMUNITIES FORWARD
CONNECTING YOUTH TO OPPORTUNITY

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