

Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan 2018–2024 Foundational Review

Report Writing Contributors

- Sarah Emmert, Impact Launch
- Robyn McKeen, Impact Launch
- Sven Stafford, County Executive Office
- Viridiana Ramirez, CSUMB/ Impact Launch

Table of Contents

Board of Supervisors	3
Strategic Plan 2026–2032.....	4
Executive Summary:	5
2018–24 Strategic Plan Foundational Review	12
Foundational Review Methodology	19
Focus Area: Comprehensive Health	23
Focus Area: Comprehensive Safety	30
Focus Area: Attainable Housing	38
Focus Area: Reliable Transportation.....	46
Focus Area: Sustainable Environment.....	54
Focus Area: Dynamic Economy	62
Focus Area: Operational Excellence	70
Recommendations for Next Strategic Plan.....	80
Appendix	83

Artificial Intelligence Acknowledgement:

ChatGPT, an Artificial Intelligent (AI) large language model tool, significantly contributed to the development of this document, in compliance with the County of Santa Cruz AI Appropriate Use Policy.

Board of Supervisors



Manu Koenig
1st District



Kimberly De Serpa
2nd District



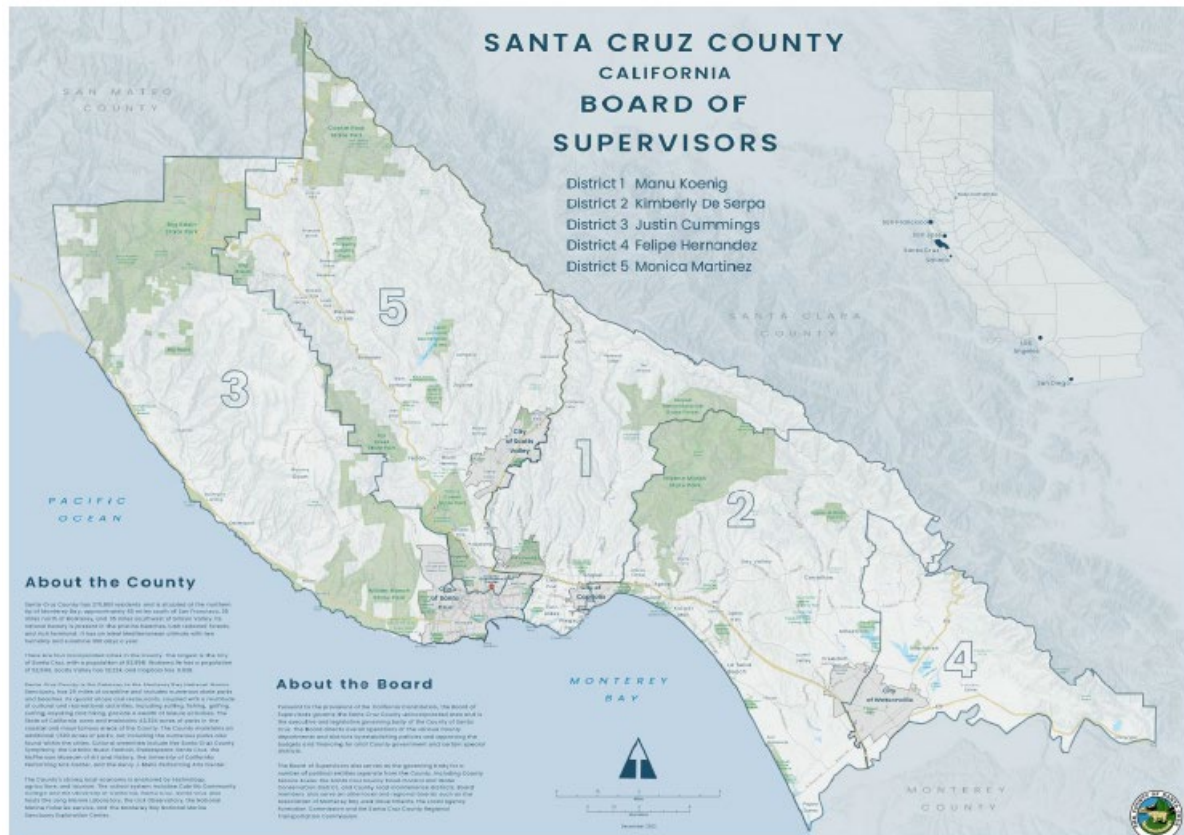
Justin Cummings
3rd District



Felipe Hernandez
4th District



Monica Martinez
5th District



Contact Us

701 Ocean Street, Room 500, Santa Cruz, CA 95060

Phone: (831) 454-2200

Fax: (831) 454-3262

Strategic Plan 2026–2032

The County of Santa Cruz’s next Strategic Plan will guide priorities from 2026 to 2032. Building on the progress and lessons from the 2018–2024 plan, this process will integrate new voices, data, and partnerships to move us closer to a county where all people can thrive and belong.

Our vision remains clear: a healthy, safe, and more affordable community that is culturally diverse, economically inclusive, and environmentally vibrant. The new plan will be further rooted in our County Equity Statement and informed by frameworks including Health in All Policies and Results Count, which help us stay focused on what matters most—measurable results for people.

This document is a comprehensive *Foundational Review* of the 2018–2024 Strategic Plan — assessing progress, identifying lessons, and setting the stage for the next chapter.

Timeline & Milestones



Executive Summary:

2018–24 Strategic Plan Foundational Review

Purpose of the Review

To know where you are going you have to know where you have been. This Foundational Review of the 2018–2024 Strategic Plan examines:

- Quantitative trends using local and regional data
- Community partner feedback from surveys and focus groups
- Perspectives from County leadership and staff
- Implementation progress across 469 County objectives

The goal: to surface what worked, what challenges remain, and how we can move forward with deeper alignment, equity, and accountability.

Overall Findings

Across Board of Supervisors interviews, focus groups, and County staff and community partner surveys, there was strong alignment around where the County of Santa Cruz has made the most meaningful progress, and where critical gaps remain. Stakeholders consistently pointed to moments of cross-sector collaboration, including the County's COVID-19 response and overall reduction in homelessness as successes. Where the County had clear policy and authority, aligned partnerships, and accountability to a plan of action — particularly in serving the County's most vulnerable populations — success was far more likely.

Key Insights

Where the County government is aligned with its partners and resourced to take action, it is getting real results for the community. For many residents who rely most on County systems — those navigating housing instability,

serious behavioral health needs, or the criminal legal system — life today is measurably better than it was seven years ago.

At the same time, County staff, community partners, and Board members noted that residents who primarily experience government through roads, housing markets, and public safety often hold different views of County performance. Some of these residents may perceive crime as rising (despite historically low crime rates), feel disconnected from local decision-making, and experience frustration over rising housing costs, local wages, and infrastructure limitations. While these challenges are distinct from the acute needs of the most vulnerable, they influence public trust and highlight the importance of clear communication, visible improvements, and broader community engagement.

Recommendations

To increase impact and alignment, the County should deepen community engagement, embed equity and resilience across systems, and align around measurable policy goals. The next strategic plan can build trust in County government by being clear and audacious, empowering County staff and community to align and take action. This review recommends six actions to carry through the next strategic planning process:

1. Integrate Frameworks that Lead to Action and Alignment
2. Engage Community to Identify Priority Focus Areas and Validate with the Board
3. Deepen Community Participation and Co-Design within Focus Areas
4. Develop Equity Metrics and Targets for Focus Areas
5. Co-Create Values with County Staff that Accelerate Action and Accountability
6. Present 2026–2032 Strategic Plan that Reflects the Collaboration of Staff and Community

Focused Learning

Focus Area	What We Learned	
Comprehensive Health	Progress was made in cross-sector collaboration, expanding substance use disorder services, and creating a 24/7 mental health mobile crisis team. Challenges remain in workforce shortages, geographic disparities, and access barriers for low-income and undocumented residents.	
	Bright Spot: COVID-19 vaccination rate highest in state for vulnerable populations	Gap: Behavioral Health services and funding inadequate to meet local demand
Comprehensive Safety	Progress was made in diversion and restorative justice efforts, as well as overall historic low crime rates. Challenges remain with perception of increasing crime, and overrepresented system involvement for people with behavioral health issues and communities of color.	
	Bright Spot: Established Public Defender's Office and Neighborhood Justice Program	Gap: Locked and step-down facilities that can better serve people with behavioral health needs
Attainable Housing	Progress was made in reducing homelessness and updating the General Plan and Housing Element to accommodate denser urban development. Challenges remain in the cost of housing at all levels of affordability.	

	Bright Spot: 17.7% decrease in homelessness since 2017	Gap: Insufficient housing stock growth of 2.5% over last ten years
Reliable Transportation	Progress was made through unprecedented County investments to repair storm-damaged roads, and safety for bicyclists and pedestrians. Challenges remain in cross-county commuting and pavement condition.	
	Bright Spot: Invested over \$180 million in storm damage repair	Gap: Declining pavement condition and limited local funding sources
Sustainable Environment	Progress was made in establishing disaster response and recovery functions, and expanding park access in South County. Challenges remain in increasing resilience in the face of climate-related threats.	
	Bright Spot: Secured \$600 million federal project to reinforce Pajaro River Levee	Gap: Disproportionate climate impact on rural and low-income communities
Dynamic Economy	Progress was made in opening six new or renovated library branches, as well as a library annex, standing up a cannabis office, and expansion of job training programs. Challenges remain in attracting and housing current and needed future workers.	
	Bright Spot: Opened six new or renovated library branches, as well as a	Gap: 57.7% of jobs are low-wage, widening income disparities

	library annex, funded by Measure S and County Library Funds	
Operational Excellence	Progress was made in community- and results-based practice, including through the COVID-19 response and addressing homelessness. Challenges remain with inconsistent internal alignment and siloed services.	
	Bright Spot: Over 45,000 people served to date at new South County Government Center	Gap: Inconsistent and fragmented systems are frustrating to users and service providers

2018–24 Strategic Plan

Purpose

The 2018–2024 Strategic Plan was the first Santa Cruz County comprehensive, countywide roadmap to align operations, budgets, and partnerships with community priorities. Over 3,000 community members and County staff contributed to the plan’s development in Fiscal Year 2017–18. The Board approved the first County Strategic Plan in June 2018.

In October 2023, the Board of Supervisors amended the Strategic Plan by adopting an equity statement. Over 1,000 community members and County staff contributed to declaring the County an anti-racist institution that aligns and transforms local systems toward equitable results.

Structure

Vision	Mission	Values
Santa Cruz County is a healthy, safe and more affordable community that is culturally diverse, economically inclusive and environmentally vibrant.	An open and responsive government, the County of Santa Cruz delivers quality, data-driven services that strengthen our community and enhance opportunity.	Accountability, Effectiveness, Support, Collaboration, Innovation, Transparency, Compassion, Respect, and Trust
County Equity Statement* <i>Equity in action in Santa Cruz County is a transformative process that embraces individuals of every status, providing unwavering support, dignity, and compassion.</i> <i>Through this commitment, the County ensures intentional opportunities and access, fostering an environment where everyone can thrive and belong.</i>		

Focus Areas**		
Comprehensive Health and Safety	Attainable Housing	Reliable Transportation
Sustainable Environment	Dynamic Economy	Operational Excellence
<p>*The County Equity Statement was adopted in October 2023.</p> <p>**Each focus area contains four goals, which are detailed in this report and at www.sccvision.us.</p>		

Implementation & Accountability

The Strategic Plan was implemented through three distinct **two-year Operational Plans**, which translated goals into measurable objectives across departments and tracked progress over time.

2018–24 Strategic Plan Foundational Review

Purpose of the Review

To know where you are going you have to know where you have been. This Foundational Review of the 2018–2024 Strategic Plan examines:

- Quantitative trends using local and regional data
- Community partner feedback from surveys and focus groups
- Perspectives from County leadership and staff
- Implementation progress across 469 County objectives

The goal: to surface what worked, what challenges remain, and how we can move forward with deeper alignment, equity, and accountability.

What's Next in This Report

The Foundational Review is organized by Strategic Plan Focus Area. Each section includes:

- Focus Area Goals: What we wanted to achieve
- County Service Mandates: What we are required to do
- Community Well-being and Resilience: Population data and results
- Alignment in Action : Major work we completed through our Operational Plans
 - Bright spots and system-level gaps
- Leadership and Community Perspectives: How results were experienced

These sections provide a comprehensive picture of where we've advanced—and where alignment, resources, and accountability are still required.

Focus Area Goals

Each focus area in the 2018–2024 Strategic Plan included four broad goals that outlined the County's areas of influence and aspiration. However, these goals were not initially tied to measurable outcomes. As a result, most

departments developed their major work plans independently and linked them to focus area goals after the fact, rather than being guided by them from the start.

Each goal also included one to three strategies intended to further define the scope of work. However, because these strategies were inconsistently measurable and applied, they are not summarized in this review.

This Foundational Review includes the original Strategic Plan goals for each focus area. Notably, Comprehensive Health and Safety has been divided into two sections due to the volume of County work in that area. Moving forward, the next strategic plan should consider measurable goals and stronger alignment between focus areas and the actual structure and responsibilities of County departments.

County Service Mandates

Many of the services provided by the County are governed by state and federal mandates. These mandates define core responsibilities—such as public health, public safety, behavioral health care, and social safety net programs—that the County is legally required to deliver.

While mandates provide structure and funding, they often leave little flexibility in how services are designed or implemented. At the same time, the County often chooses to go beyond the minimum—investing in coordination, cultural responsiveness, and community partnerships to improve outcomes.

This review highlights how mandated services intersect with the Strategic Plan goals and where there is opportunity to shift from compliance to equity-driven, community-informed service delivery.

Community Well-Being & Resilience

Community well-being is shaped by more than individual choices—it is driven by policies, systems, and conditions that affect daily life. Housing, income,

education, transportation, safety, and environmental quality are among the social drivers of health that determine how long and how well people live. These factors are deeply interconnected and influenced by the work of County government across all departments.

Reflecting this understanding, the County is investigating a Health in All Policies (HiAP) lens and the Results Count® framework to align decisions with measurable population outcomes. This review integrates both quantitative trends and community insights to examine how conditions have changed over the past six years—where outcomes have improved, where disparities persist, and what it will take to build resilience for the long term.

To guide this work, the Board of Supervisors formally approved a set of proposed Community Indicators on May 20, 2025. These indicators—developed with community and departmental input—are included throughout this document and provide a foundation for evaluating progress. Moving forward, there should be a clear link between community indicators and goals in the next strategic plan.

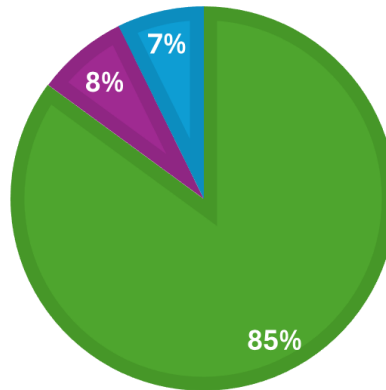
Alignment in Action

The County Operational Plan is the primary tool for implementing the Strategic Plan, translating broad goals into measurable, department-level objectives over two-year cycles. Developed collaboratively by County departments and their implementing partners, the Operational Plan ensures that services, budgets, and County staff efforts align with community priorities. Through clear performance measures and progress tracking, the Operational Plan fosters accountability, supports continuous improvement, and provides a practical roadmap for delivering results across all focus areas.

The 2018–24 Strategic Plan generated three operational plan cycles and 469 objectives. County departments completed 85% of those objectives, documented at www.sccvision.us.

2018-2024 STRATEGIC PLAN OBJECTIVES OVERALL PROGRESS 469 OBJECTIVES

■ Completed ■ In Progress ■ Consolidated



469 Unduplicated Objectives*

Completed: 399 | In Progress : 36 (26 Amended) | Consolidated: 34*****

* Overall objective numbers are unduplicated and will not add up to the total of the Focus Area objectives numbers due to individual objectives applying to multiple Focus Areas and Goals

** Throughout this report, "In Progress" includes both "In Progress" and "Amended" objectives

*** "Consolidated" refers to objectives that have been closed due to funding, County staffing, or other feasibility restrictions

Leadership Perspective: Insights from the Board, County Staff & Community Partners

Throughout this review, leadership perspectives were gathered through interviews with the Board of Supervisors, focus groups with County staff and community partners, and responses to a bilingual countywide survey. These voices provide vital context for understanding not only what progress was made, but how it was experienced—and by whom.

Leaders across sectors consistently emphasized that meaningful results emerged when community voices were centered, systems aligned, and action was supported by clear authority and resources. At the same time, they pointed to persistent challenges, especially in housing affordability, workforce capacity, and equitable access to care and opportunity. Many described a disconnect between the County’s vision and the lived experience of residents navigating fragmented or under-resourced systems.

Our ability to collaborate with the County is significantly helped by shared goals & a mutual commitment to improving family well-being.
~Survey Respondent

To close that gap, community insights and lived experience must remain central to decision-making and accountability. Doing so will improve County services to achieve better outcomes for all residents, with particular attention to those who have been historically underserved.

What follows is a summary of some of the most impactful things we heard.

Meaningful Progress:

- **Cross-sector collaboration improved:** COVID-19 response efforts fostered stronger coordination between County departments, community-based organizations, and healthcare systems—establishing a foundation for better alignment in areas like housing, public health, and emergency response.
- **Behavioral health service expansion:** New mental health and substance use programs—including co-located clinics and mobile crisis response—demonstrated early signs of success, particularly in South County and underserved communities.
- **Investment in supportive housing and homelessness response:** Stakeholders noted significant momentum in supportive housing

Since the pandemic, there’s been more openness to working together—it’s the most connected I’ve felt.
~Focus Group Participant

development, eviction prevention efforts, and improved coordination through initiatives like Housing for Health and Smart Path funded primarily by one time federal and state revenues.

- **Youth and workforce development programs:** Positive examples were shared of youth employment, job training, and frontline worker support across several sectors, though often pilot-funded or limited in scale.
- **South County investments:** Bilingual outreach, mobile services, and a new Government Center were seen as early steps toward correcting regional disparities and improving government accessibility.
- **Equity commitments integrated in planning:** Adoption of the County's Equity Statement, inclusive language in strategic plans, and growing use of equity frameworks were cited as steps toward long-term systems change.

Setting up offices in South County has been a great symbol of the effort toward more equity.

~Focus Group Participant

Persistent Challenges: Pressing Issues Raised Across Sectors

- **Severe housing unaffordability and displacement:** Stakeholders across every sector—including safety, health, and economy—identified the housing crisis as a root cause of community instability, workforce attrition, and worsening disparities.
- **Workforce shortages and affordability barriers:** Difficulty recruiting and retaining County staff, healthcare providers, and essential workers—especially due to housing and childcare costs—was a widespread concern.
- **Behavioral health system strain:** Despite new investments, capacity still lags behind community needs. Long wait times, limited inpatient options, and County staff burnout affect care quality and emergency response.
- **Service fragmentation and system complexity:** Residents and community partners described County services as siloed, hard to

navigate, or inconsistently implemented—particularly in housing, permitting, and behavioral health.

- **Data gaps and lack of accountability tools:** The absence of accessible, disaggregated data and public metrics was seen as a major barrier to progress on equity, strategic alignment, and transparent decision-making.
- **Persistent equity disparities:** Communities of color, low-income residents, undocumented individuals, youth, and South County communities continue to face disproportionate barriers in access, voice, and opportunity—underscoring the need for systems-level equity implementation.

Foundational Review Methodology

To create the Foundational Review of the 2018–2024 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan and prepare for the next 2026–2032 Strategic Plan, the County engaged in a multi-pronged data collection process in Spring 2025. This process prioritized data and the integration of social drivers of health, and the elevation of voices closest to County systems. Through interviews, surveys, focus groups, and a review of key data sources, the County gathered insights from County staff, community partners, and commissioners to assess what has worked, where challenges persist, and what conditions are needed to advance meaningful, measurable change in the next Strategic Plan.

While the engagement for this review was intentionally focused on those working within or closely alongside County systems, broader community engagement is planned for Fall 2025. The next phase will prioritize deeper outreach to residents and community members to co-create the 2026–2032 Strategic Plan.

Board of Supervisors Interviews

In May 2025, one-hour individual interviews were conducted with all five members of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors. These conversations explored Supervisors' reflections on the strengths, challenges, and outcomes of the current Strategic Plan, while surfacing early priorities and success conditions for the upcoming strategic planning process.

For interview questions and thematic findings, see Appendix.

Strategic Plan Stakeholder Survey

A survey was distributed to gather input from individuals actively engaged in County work—either as County staff, commissioners, or community partners. It was shared via email and through Countywide collaboratives, commissions,

and organizational networks. The survey was open from April 29 to May 23, 2025 .

- **Total Responses:** 988 (some respondents skipped individual questions)
- **County Staff:** 79% of responses
- **Community Partners** (defined as representatives of nonprofit organizations, service providers, or partner agencies who collaborate with the County): 12% of responses
- **County Commissioners** (members of formal County commissions and advisory bodies): 4% of responses

For survey questions and response analysis, see Appendix.

Focus Groups

In June 2025, nine focus groups were conducted with County staff, department heads, and community partners across key focus areas. These sessions explored the perceived impact of the Strategic Plan, persistent barriers to progress, and emerging needs. Each group followed a standardized discussion guide and was developed in coordination with the Foundational Review Committee.

- **Focus Areas:**
 - Business and Economy
 - Health
 - Housing
 - Safety and Justice
 - Social Services and Nonprofit Organizations
 - Transportation
 - Youth
 - County Staff (general)
 - County Department Heads

For focus group questions and synthesized themes, see Appendix.

Secondary Data Review

To complement qualitative insights, the Review also incorporated analysis of key County data sources:

- **County-Community Indicators:** Population-level and system-wide indicators approved by the Board of Supervisors were used to assess long-term trends and contextualize stakeholder perspectives.
- **Department Operational Plans:** Objectives from department-level Operational Plans were reviewed to identify progress, alignment with Strategic Plan goals, and opportunities for continued investment.
- **Previously Collected Input:** Feedback gathered through recent County-led planning efforts was reviewed to ensure continuity with previous engagement and to uplift community and County staff voices already captured in related initiatives.

Strategic Recommendations and Engagement Planning

In addition to identifying themes and assessing past performance, the Foundational Review surfaced strategic recommendations to guide the 2026–2032 planning process. These include cross-departmental actions to strengthen coordination, equity, and accountability across departments. The Review also highlights priority groups to engage in Fall 2025 to ensure the next Strategic Plan is co-created with those most impacted by County services and most integral to successful implementation.

Foundational Review Committee Members

The Strategic Plan Foundational Review Committee—composed of County staff and community leaders—served as the advisory body for this process. The Committee helped refine data collection tools, interpret emerging themes, and ensure that the review remained grounded in equity, accountability, and cross-sector collaboration. Members also provided iterative feedback on report drafts and helped identify areas for greater specificity and alignment with future priorities.

- Elissa Benson, Santa Cruz County Executive Office
- Bella Bonner, Black Surf Santa Cruz, Inc
- Chris Clark, Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office
- Nicole Coburn, Santa Cruz County Executive Office
- Monica Morales, Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency
- Randy Morris, Santa Cruz County Human Services Department
- Erica Padilla Chavez, Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County

Focus Area: Comprehensive Health

Goals

In California, a county government's primary task is Comprehensive Health and Safety. To account for this significant body of work, this section has been broken into two parts.

Focusing on health, the Strategic Plan put forward three goals: to advance health equity, expand community support systems, and strengthen behavioral health services. Objectives within this focus area emphasize integrated care, social support, and inclusive practices that improve health outcomes and quality of life for all residents—especially those facing systemic barriers.

County Service Mandates

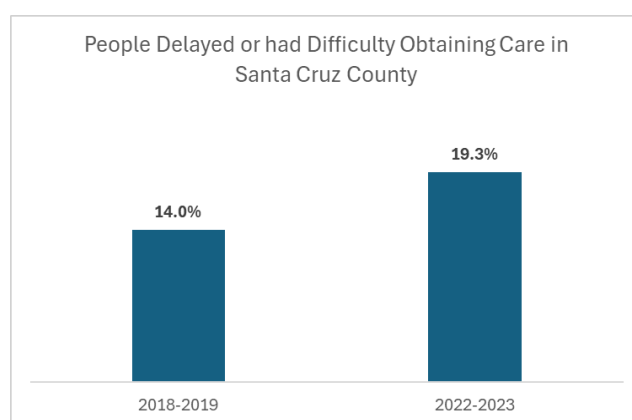
Santa Cruz County delivers a broad range of mandated health and human services essential to the well-being of residents. Through the Health Services Agency (HSA), the County is responsible for core public health functions—including communicable disease control and environmental health regulation—as well as mandated behavioral health services, including treatment for severe mental illness and substance use disorders. HSA also operates Federally Qualified Health Centers that provide primary care to Medi-Cal beneficiaries and uninsured residents.

The Human Services Department (HSD) administers vital safety net programs that are primarily funded and governed by state and federal mandates. These include Medi-Cal, CalFresh, and CalWORKs, which provide health coverage, food assistance, and income support to tens of thousands of residents. With nearly 90,000 residents enrolled in Medi-Cal and over 4,000 households receiving housing support through the Housing for Health division, HSD plays a central role in promoting individual and community stability.

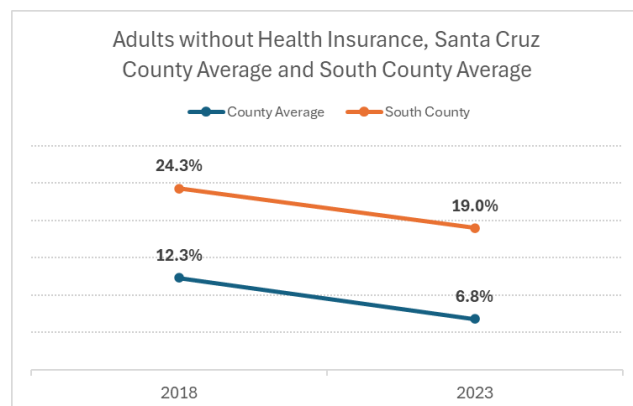
Santa Cruz County continues to embed equity and integration into service delivery—ensuring that mandated programs are not only accessible, but delivered in ways that affirm dignity, foster trust, and close long-standing gaps in health outcomes. These systems are designed not only to meet legal obligations, but to support healing, connection, and long-term resilience across communities.

Community Well-Being & Resilience

Access to care is a key indicator of population health. The percentage of people in Santa Cruz County who delayed or struggled to get care rose by 5.3% between 2018 and 2023¹. During that same time period, the average number of adults without health insurance decreased nearly 45% countywide indicating other factors are impacting access to care locally.



While overall access to health insurance improved, in South County the uninsured rate remains nearly three times higher, falling from 24.3% to 19.0% during the same period². This gap highlights ongoing inequities in access to health coverage and suggests that residents in South

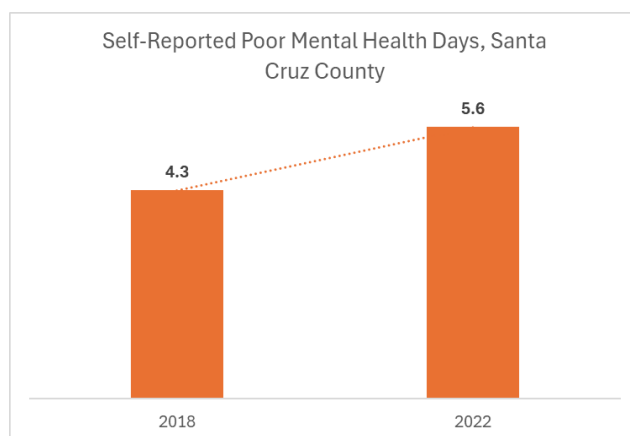


¹ DataShare Santa Cruz County. (2025). *People delayed or had difficulty obtaining care in Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=344&localeId=281&localeChartIdxs=1>

² DataShare Santa Cruz County. (2025). *Adults without health insurance, Santa Cruz County average and South County average*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=90&localeTypeId=28&periodId=246>

County continue to face greater barriers to care than those in the rest of the county.

In addition to rising barriers to care and persistent insurance disparities, community resiliency—as reflected by mental health—has also declined in Santa Cruz County. Between 2018 and 2022, the average number of self-reported poor mental health days per month increased from 4.3 to 5.6³. This 30% rise suggests growing mental health challenges and declining emotional well-being across the community.



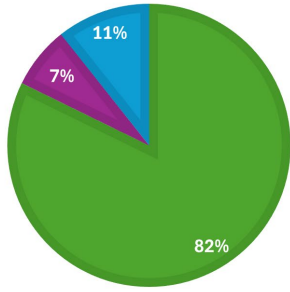
These trends point to the need for targeted efforts to reduce disparities, expand access to care in underserved areas, and strengthen mental health supports to build a more resilient and equitable health system.

Survey Perspectives & Data Trends

Access to Care: Survey responses were mixed regarding access to health care: one-third of respondents said their access had worsened since 2018, another third reported improvement, and 41% saw no change. This comes alongside quantitative data showing a 5.3% increase in reported delays or difficulty accessing care, despite overall gains in health insurance coverage.

³DataShare Santa Cruz County. (2025). *Self-reported poor mental health days, Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=368&localeId=281>

Alignment in Action

HEALTH Goals									
<p>FOCUS AREA: HEALTH 169 OBJECTIVES</p> <p>■ Completed ■ In Progress ■ Consolidated</p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Health Objectives Status Summary</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Status</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Completed</td> <td>82%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>In Progress</td> <td>7%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Consolidated</td> <td>11%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Status	Percentage	Completed	82%	In Progress	7%	Consolidated	11%
Status	Percentage								
Completed	82%								
In Progress	7%								
Consolidated	11%								
<p>A: Health Equity: Promote a safe and healthy community that nurtures body and mind across all ages and social conditions.</p> <p>85 Objectives 80% Completed 6% In Progress 14% Consolidated</p>	<p>B: Community Support: Provide access to food and basic support through integrated health care and social services.</p> <p>64 Objectives 91% Completed 2% In Progress 8% Consolidated</p>								
<p>C: Behavioral Health: Support residents and improve community impacts through increased access to integrated mental health, substance use disorder and health care services.</p> <p>14 Objectives 79% Completed 7% In Progress 14% Consolidated</p>									

HEALTH Brights Spots

- **Child Crisis Services**– Mobile youth behavioral health crisis services were provided to **275 youth** annually, successfully reducing youth visits to the Crisis Stabilization Program.
- **COVID Response**
 - Partnered with the County Office of Education and districts to **re-open local schools** for in-person instruction through COVID-19 outbreak prevention and management.
 - Led the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, with the most at-risk residents achieving the highest **rate of vaccination at 86.2%** (compared to the average of 82.7%).



Drive-thru vaccination clinic at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds. Credit: Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz

- **Immigrant Food Security**– Over two years, worked with community partners to increase the number of children living in mixed immigrant households **receiving CalFresh by 28%**, from 2900 to 3710.
- **Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Services**– Over 7 years, SUD treatment availability grew substantially to support the needs of Medi-Cal beneficiaries. Availability of local withdrawal management beds **increased by 350%**, residential treatment beds total 102 locally, and the number of beneficiaries engaging in SUD treatment on an annual basis has doubled. Additionally, on-demand treatment for Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) and outpatient/intensive outpatient services are now available when needed.

→ **Thrive by Three-** Doubled the number of families receiving Thrive by Three home visitation support over two years.

Leadership Perspective: Insights from the Board, County Staff & Community Partners

Throughline: Across Board interviews, community and County staff surveys, and focus groups, there was strong alignment around both the progress made in cross-sector collaboration and behavioral health investment, as well as persistent challenges related to workforce shortages, geographic disparities, and access barriers for low-income and undocumented residents—particularly in South County.

What We Did Well: As identified by Supervisors, County Staff, & Community Partners

- **Cross-sector collaboration:** COVID-19 response catalyzed stronger relationships between County departments, clinics, and community-based organizations, enhancing alignment around shared health goals.
- **Behavioral health investments:** Expanded access to mental health and substance use services, including new clinics and co-located behavioral health facilities, particularly in South County.
- **Increased community engagement:** Public health efforts were informed by inclusive partnerships with trusted local organizations, improving transparency and responsiveness.
- **Health access improvements:** Health insurance coverage increased in South County, and mobile health services helped bridge access gaps for isolated communities.

Partnerships improved because people really showed up during emergencies—and some of those relationships stuck.

~Focus Group Participant

- **Intentional equity partnerships:** The County strengthened relationships with community-based organizations that serve marginalized populations—particularly in South County—and supported bilingual outreach, culturally responsive care, and increased transparency in service delivery.

Gaps & Areas for Continued Attention: As raised across interviews, focus groups, & survey responses

- **Shortage of healthcare providers:** Many stakeholders described a continued shortage of clinicians—especially bilingual and bicultural County staff—citing high cost of living and limited recruitment pipelines as key barriers.
- **Strained behavioral health system:** Mental health and substance use services are under-resourced and overburdened, with limited inpatient capacity and long wait times for care.
- **Geographic disparities in access:** South County residents have significantly fewer OB/GYNs despite higher birth rates, and overall access to care remains uneven across the region.
- **Healthcare access for undocumented residents:** Fear of immigration enforcement and data-sharing deters undocumented residents from seeking care, worsening health disparities.
- **Funding instability:** Heavy reliance on Medi-Cal and grant-based funding creates vulnerability; potential policy shifts threaten continuity of care and strain emergency services.
- **Structural barriers to equitable care:** Disparities in access remain pronounced for undocumented residents, non-English speakers, and low-income communities, who continue to face systemic barriers to preventive care, treatment, and service navigation.

Focus Area: Comprehensive Safety

Goals

In California, a county government's primary task is Comprehensive Health and Safety. To account for this significant body of work, this section has been broken into two parts.

Focusing on safety, the Strategic Plan established a goal to enhance public safety by fostering respectful, restorative practices that reduce recidivism and support both victims and communities. Objectives within this focus area emphasize prevention, partnership, and transformative opportunities that promote long-term community well-being.

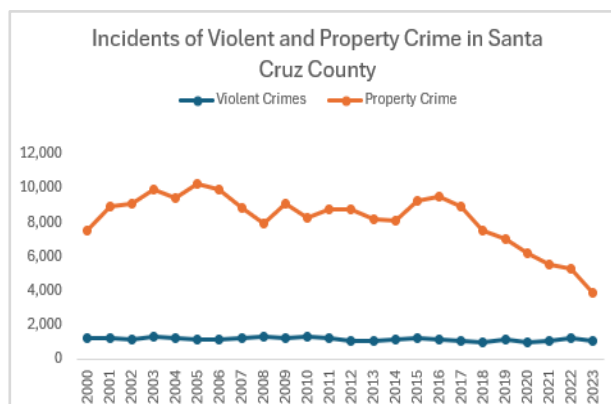
County Service Mandates

Santa Cruz County provides mandated public safety services through departments that support every branch of the local justice system. The Sheriff-Coroner is responsible for maintaining patrol and investigations in unincorporated areas, operating the jail system, providing court security, and conducting forensic services and coroner investigations. The District Attorney prosecutes criminal cases on behalf of the People of California and provides victim advocacy services. The Public Defender provides the constitutional right to legal representation for individuals who cannot afford to hire an attorney to defend them through a holistic defense model. The Probation Department supervises youth and adults involved in the justice system and operates the Juvenile Hall and programs focused on accountability, rehabilitation, and community reintegration.

In addition to justice system functions, the County also plays a key role in community safety through County Fire, which delivers emergency fire protection and response in unincorporated areas, and the Office of Response, Recovery, and Resilience (OR3), which coordinates countywide disaster

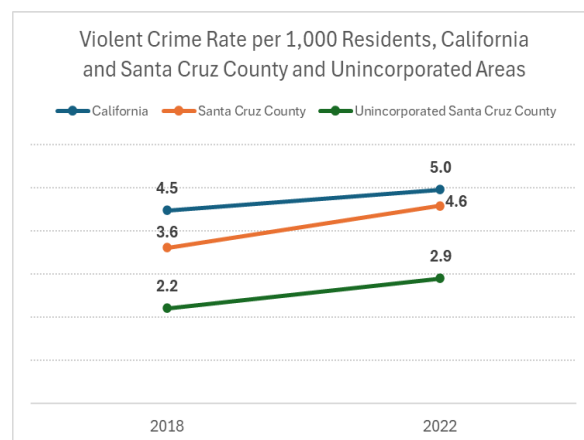
preparedness, emergency management, climate resilience, and recovery efforts.

While many of these services are mandated, Santa Cruz County continues to implement them in ways that reflect local values—emphasizing equity, prevention, and community engagement. By integrating restorative practices, building trusted partnerships, and investing in resilience, the County is working to create a safe and just environment for all residents.



Community Well-Being & Resilience

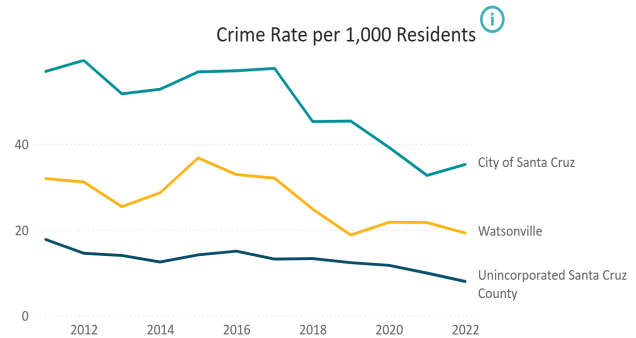
While violent crime incidents have remained relatively stable since 2000, with only a slight uptick in the 5-year period between 2018 and 2022, property crime incidents had dropped to their lowest level in over two decades by 2023⁴. This overall decline was largely driven by significant decreases in property crime rates in Watsonville and the City of Santa Cruz. Violent crime rates in Santa Cruz



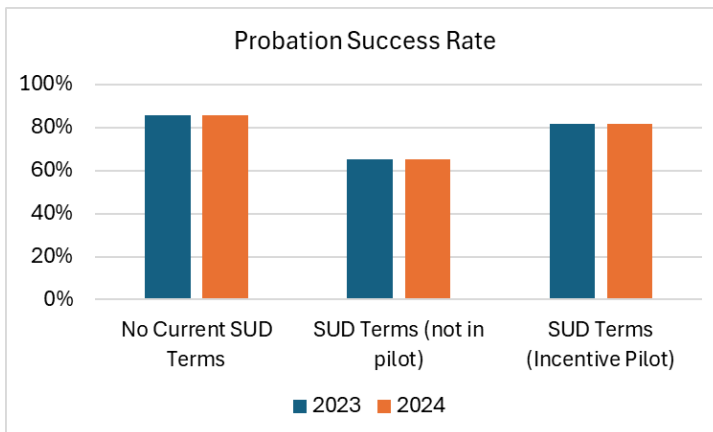
County increased from 3.6 to 4.6 per 1,000 residents between 2018 and 2022, nearly matching the statewide rate of 5.0. However, a notable disparity exists in unincorporated Santa Cruz County, where violent crime remains

⁴ California Department of Justice. (2025). *Incidents of violent and property crime in Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://openjustice.doj.ca.gov/exploration/crime-statistics/crimes-clearances>

significantly lower, rising only from 2.2 to 2.9⁵. Crime rates across the County remain remarkably low for both violent and property crimes.



With overall crime rates down, individuals that are engaged with the criminal legal system often have more acute issues. For the County Probation department, their goal is to help individuals reintegrate and contribute to the community. The department recognized that more and more individuals were failing to do this due to substance use disorder.



The Probation Success Rate (above) measures those who complete probation without a violation—an especially meaningful outcome for individuals with substance use disorders. An incentive-based supervision pilot helped support this vulnerable population by

reinforcing positive progress, leading to a 15% increase in success rate versus those who did not receive the incentive.

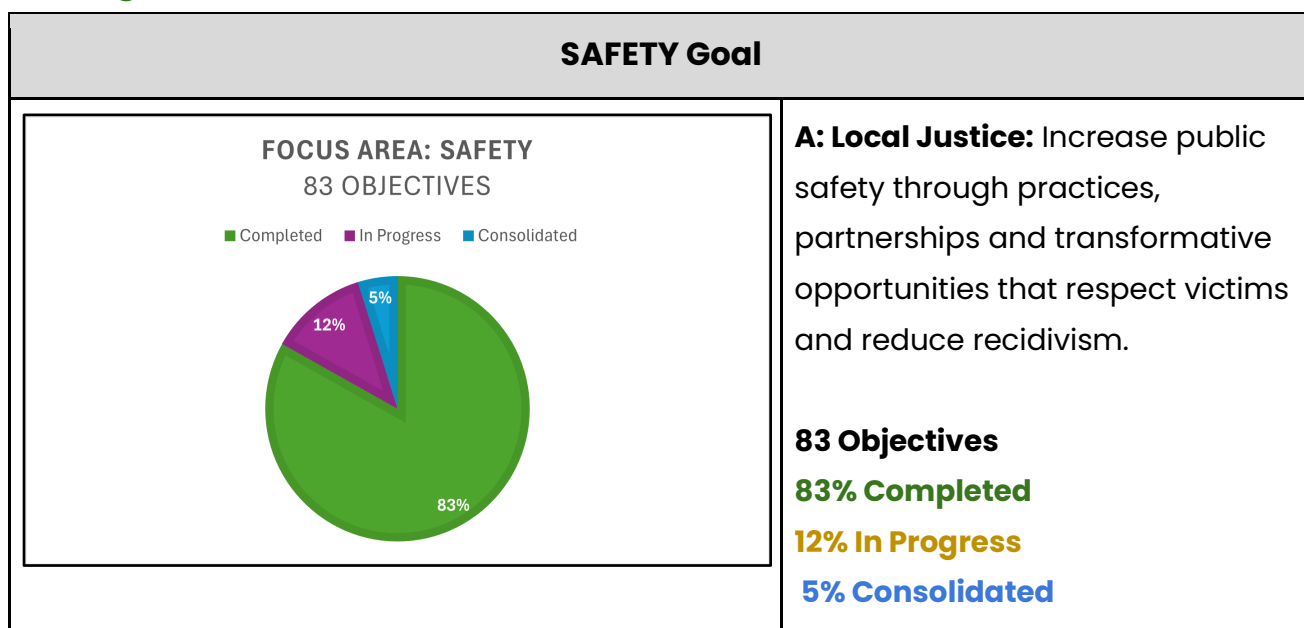
Survey Perspectives & Data Trends

Nearly half of survey respondents (47%) reported feeling more concerned about crime in Santa Cruz County compared to 2018. This perception comes alongside quantitative data showing relatively stable violent crime rates and a significant decline in property crime during the same period. Perceptions of

⁵ County of Santa Cruz. (2025). *Violent crime rate per 1,000 residents, California and Santa Cruz County and unincorporated areas*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.santacruzcountyca.gov/VisionSantaCruz/CommunityResults/TransparencyPortal.aspx>

safety do not fully align with Countywide crime trends, particularly for property crime, which has declined significantly even as concern has risen.

Alignment in Action



SAFETY Brights Spots
<p>→ Firefighting Capabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased the number of County volunteer firefighters by 20%, adding 14 new recruits over two years. Increased the reliability of County Fire response fleet by purchasing 8 new vehicles in 2024. 

- **Forensic DNA Lab**– An **accredited Forensic DNA Laboratory** was designed and completed in 2025, and is currently operating and working towards accreditation. Once accredited, the Sheriff’s Office will be able to reduce DNA evidence turnaround time from **six months to two days**.
- **Hispanic/Latino Youth Diversion**– From 2023–2024, increased diversions from the justice system by **41% for Hispanic/Latino youth** by implementing collaborative upstream prevention.
- **Neighborhood Justice Program**– Starting in 2021, established, implemented and promoted the Neighborhood Justice Program to use restorative justice principles to **resolve over 500** low level criminal offenses.
- **Public Defender’s Office**
 - In 2022, created a new in-house **Public Defender’s Office**.
 - From 2023–2024, shifted the Public Defender intake process to provide full holistic intakes and full outcome reporting for **65% of clients**.



Leadership Perspective: Insights from the Board, County Staff & Community Partners

Throughline: Across Board interviews, surveys, and focus groups, there was consistent alignment around progress in diversion and restorative justice efforts, as well as growing partnerships with community-based organizations. At the same time, stakeholders raised concerns about the visibility of homelessness, gaps in behavioral health response, and inequities in system involvement—particularly for communities of color.

What We Did Well: As identified by Supervisors, County Staff, & Community Partners

- **Diversion and restorative justice efforts:** Investments in alternatives to incarceration—such as youth diversion, restorative justice circles, and

pretrial release programs—were seen as promising steps toward more effective and equitable public safety strategies.

- **Behavioral health coordination:** Stakeholders noted progress in connecting law enforcement with behavioral health services, including co-responder models and crisis intervention training.
- **Improved collaboration with community partners:** The County was recognized for working more closely with nonprofit organizations and community leaders to address root causes of harm and support prevention.
- **Transparency in certain safety areas:** Some departments have improved data collection and community engagement around public safety, increasing visibility into their decision-making processes.
- **Equity-centered partnerships:** County staff and partners elevated the importance of culturally grounded programs, including support for diversion initiatives led by organizations serving youth and communities of color.

The County is making some strides in data collection & transparency to address disparities.
~Focus Group Participant

Gaps & Areas for Continued Attention: As raised across interviews, focus groups, & survey responses

- **Increased visibility of homelessness and public safety concerns:** The growing visibility of unsheltered homelessness—particularly in public spaces—has contributed to heightened perceptions of safety concerns among community members, even when not directly linked to specific incidents.
- **Limited data transparency and accountability:** There is no consistent mechanism for publishing disaggregated justice system data (e.g., arrests, charging, sentencing, treatment outcomes), which limits progress on diversion goals and public trust.

- **Behavioral health and SUD service gaps:** Stakeholders emphasized the need for more robust mental health and substance use disorder (SUD) treatment options as alternatives to incarceration and emergency response.
- **Limited focus on upstream prevention:** While there is growing interest in alternatives to incarceration (e.g. diversion, restorative justice), stakeholders noted a lack of sustained investment in community-based violence prevention, youth engagement, and other proactive safety strategies that address root causes of harm.
- **Structural inequities in the legal system:** Communities of color remain disproportionately represented in the criminal legal system, with ongoing disparities in diversion access, pretrial outcomes, and treatment pathways. While some equity efforts exist, progress often relies on community-based partners rather than being fully embedded within County systems, policies, and budgets.

What young people had to say about safety:

Bright Spots

- **Opportunities for youth input:** Youth appreciated commissions and town halls that invited their participation in County discussions.
- **Supportive environments for LGBTQIA+ youth:** Programs and nonprofits helped create affirming spaces that promoted safety and inclusion for queer youth.
- **Nonprofit-driven safety support:** Community-based organizations were seen as filling important safety and advocacy roles

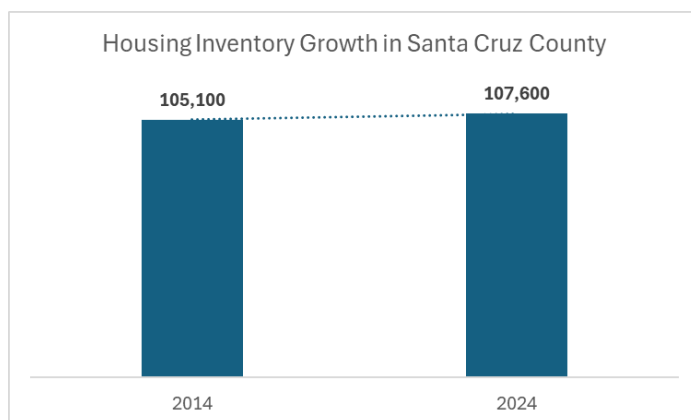
Areas for Continued Attention

- **Community violence:** Youth noted persistent exposure to violence and a lack of effective prevention strategies.
- **Unsafe walking and biking infrastructure:** Poor lighting, unsafe sidewalks, and lack of crosswalks put youth at risk.
- **Underrepresented communities:** LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and immigrant youth felt their experiences were not well reflected in safety policies or County services.

Focus Area: Attainable Housing

Goals

The Housing focus area of the 2018–2024 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan aims to create attainable housing through four key strategies: developing affordable housing by lowering barriers and accessing new funding; sustaining and rejuvenating communities through integrated living, working, and recreational spaces; increasing and diversifying local housing options with smart growth, adaptive reuse, and innovation; and expanding services to reduce homelessness and improve housing stability. This comprehensive approach supports the creation of inclusive and sustainable communities throughout the County.



County Service Mandates

Santa Cruz County fulfills critical responsibilities in housing and land use through the Planning Division of the Community Development and Infrastructure (CDI) department. The Planning Division is responsible for implementing state housing mandates, including the County's Housing Element, the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA), and zoning and permitting regulations that guide development in unincorporated areas.

These mandates require the County to plan for and enable the production of housing across income levels, ensure compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and remove barriers to affordable housing development, including accessory dwelling units and infill projects.

The County also delivers direct housing services through the Housing for Health division in the Human Services Department, which coordinates programs that prevent and address homelessness. These services are funded through a complex mix of federal, state, and local grants and taxes, most of which are one-time not ongoing revenues, and include housing navigation, case management, rental subsidies, and supportive housing programs for individuals and families experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Housing for Health also leads cross-sector collaborations to align services and investments that promote long-term housing stability.

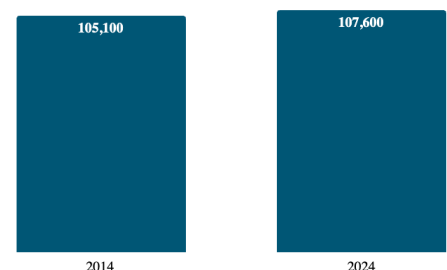
While much of this work is driven by legal requirements, Santa Cruz County continues to implement its housing responsibilities in ways that reflect community values—focusing on equity, resilience, and opportunity. By aligning planning, permitting, and services, the County is building toward a future where more residents have access to stable, affordable, and connected places to live.

It is helpful when we have direct staff we can contact.
~Survey Respondent

Community Well-Being & Resilience

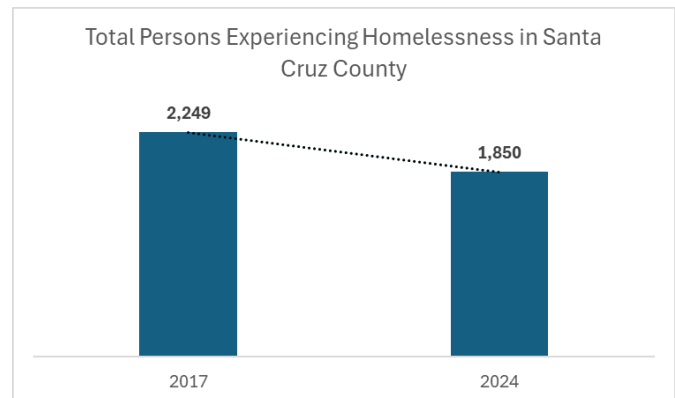
Despite the focus on attainable housing in the 2018–2024 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan, progress has been mixed. Housing inventory increased by only 2.5% from 2014 to 2024⁶, indicating limited growth in new housing development and expansion of housing stock over the ten-year period. This data emphasizes the need for continued efforts to address housing availability in the county.

Housing Inventory Growth in Santa Cruz County



⁶ California Department of Housing and Community Development. (2025). *Housing inventory growth in Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.hcd.ca.gov/planning-and-community-development/housing-element-implementation-and-apr-dashboard>

However, during this period, the county achieved a 17.7% decline in the total number of persons experiencing homelessness between 2017 and 2024⁷, indicating meaningful progress in efforts to improve housing stability and expand homelessness services. These trends suggest that while structural housing shortages persist, targeted interventions under the plan have contributed to positive outcomes for the county's most vulnerable residents.



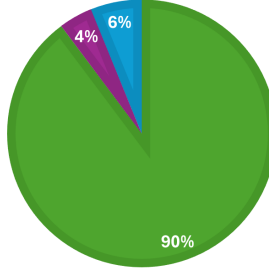
Survey Perspectives & Data Trends

Over two-thirds of survey respondents (68%) said their housing situation is less affordable today than in 2018. This perception aligns with ongoing concerns about housing availability, as the County's housing stock grew by only 2.5% over the past decade.

Youth voices have informed the Youth Homeless Demonstration Project. Youth need support to be able to contribute to decision-making.
~Focus Group Participant

⁷ Housing for Health Partnership. (2024). *2024 Point-in-Time count: Executive summary*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from https://housingforhealthpartnership.org/Portals/29/HAP/Providers/Data/H4HP_2024PITCount_Executive%20Summary.pdf

Alignment in Action

HOUSING Goals									
<p>FOCUS AREA: HOUSING 49 OBJECTIVES</p> <p>■ Completed ■ In Progress ■ Consolidated</p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Housing Objectives Status</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Status</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Completed</td> <td>90%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>In Progress</td> <td>4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Consolidated</td> <td>6%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Status	Percentage	Completed	90%	In Progress	4%	Consolidated	6%
Status	Percentage								
Completed	90%								
In Progress	4%								
Consolidated	6%								
<p>A: Affordable Housing: Partner to develop affordable housing, lower barriers to housing solutions, and access new funding sources.</p> <p>15 Objectives 93% Completed 7% In Progress 0% Consolidated</p>	<p>B: Community Development: Sustain and rejuvenate communities by integrating places to live, work and play.</p> <p>16 Project Alignment (Operational Plan) 94% Completed 0% In Progress 6% Consolidated</p>								
<p>C: Local Inventory: Increase and diversify housing options through smart growth programs, adaptive reuse and innovation.</p> <p>6 Objectives 100% Completed 0% In Progress 0% Consolidated</p>	<p>D: Homelessness: Expand services to reduce homelessness and increase housing stability.</p> <p>17 Objectives 82% Completed 6% In Progress 12% Consolidated</p>								

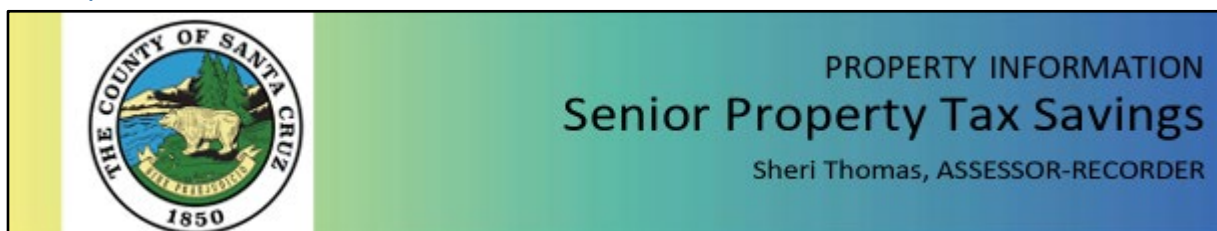
HOUSING Brights Spots

- **Homeless Navigation**– Starting in 2020, contracted with two service providers to operate **year-round homeless and navigation services** in North and South County.
- **Housing Element**– Submitted the new 2023 Housing Element to the state, shaped by inclusive community input and focused on addressing **key housing needs** and barriers.



Aptos Village Phase 2 in March 2024. Credit: Stephen Baxter/Santa Cruz Local file

- **Permanent Supportive Housing**– Over two years, in collaboration with community partners, increased the number of permanent supportive housing slots from 500 to 838, an **increase of 67.6%**.
- **Senior Tax Relief**– Over two years, conducted **broad outreach** with community organizations to provide education to older adults about property tax exclusions, exemptions and assistance.



- **Sustainability Update**– From 2022–2023, adopted the General Plan Sustainability Update and conducted stakeholder and public **training workshops**.
- **Tiny Homes & Accessory Dwelling Units**
 - Adopted an ordinance permitting **Tiny Homes on Wheels** in the County in 2022.
 - **Increased permits** issued for accessory dwelling units (ADUs) by 10% over 2018–19.

Leadership Perspective: Insights from the Board, County Staff & Community Partners

Throughline: Across Board interviews, survey responses, and focus groups—including those focused on safety, health, and economic development—housing emerged as a consistently urgent and cross-sector concern. Stakeholders highlighted the severe shortage of deeply affordable housing, rising displacement pressures, and the impact of housing instability on both community well-being and workforce retention. There was broad alignment around the need for coordinated housing access, expanded tenant protections, and equitable investment—especially in historically under-resourced communities like South County.

What We Did Well: As identified by Supervisors, County Staff, & Community Partners

- **Increased public investment in affordable housing:** Stakeholders acknowledged the County's increased funding commitments and partnerships to support affordable and supportive housing development, particularly through Measure K and regional coordination.
- **Expanded service partnerships:** Collaborations with community-based organizations and cities have strengthened homelessness response efforts and tenant outreach, especially during the pandemic.
- **Focus on supportive housing:** The County has taken steps to expand permanent supportive housing for individuals with complex behavioral health and housing needs, building on Housing First models.
- **Progress on housing coordination infrastructure:** Efforts to better coordinate access points for housing services—through initiatives like Smart Path and centralized waitlists—were seen as early but important steps.

- **Policy focus on eviction prevention:** Some policy and funding efforts have supported emergency rental assistance, eviction diversion, and legal aid—though unevenly distributed.
- **Equity-centered collaboration:** The County has worked with trusted local partners to elevate the voices of disproportionately impacted communities, particularly low-income renters and farmworker families, in housing conversations.

Gaps & Areas for Continued Attention: As raised across interviews, focus groups, & survey responses

- **Severe shortage of affordable and market-rate housing:** There is a significant unmet demand for both affordable and market-rate units, driven by high construction costs, high interest rates, lack of available construction labor, and lack of infrastructure planning, development, and funding.
- **Displacement and rent burden:** Rising housing costs, limited tenant protections, and the lack of housing supply have accelerated displacement—especially post-eviction—for renters and working-class families.
- **Service fragmentation and system complexity:** Housing access remains difficult to navigate due to siloed programs, decentralized entry points, and a lack of visibility into available services or eligibility pathways.
- **Regulatory and permitting barriers:** Complex zoning laws, lengthy permitting processes, and local resistance have delayed the development of affordable and supportive housing—especially in high-opportunity areas.
- **Loss of workforce due to housing unaffordability:** Perception that local employers and public agencies are struggling to attract and retain middle-income workers—including healthcare, education, and County staff—due to a lack of attainable housing options and rising living costs.

- **Equity gaps in access and voice:** Renters of color, undocumented residents, and South County communities continue to face disproportionate risk of displacement, underrepresentation in housing policy decisions, and limited access to legal and planning support.

Focus Area: Reliable Transportation

Goals

The Transportation focus area of the 2018–2024 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan centers on improving mobility and connectivity throughout the county. It includes efforts to enhance regional mobility through better road infrastructure and commuting solutions; support community mobility by expanding alternative transportation networks and lowering barriers to mobility; improve local roads by upgrading pavement conditions and ensuring road safety; and strengthen public transit by enhancing system functionality and encouraging greater public use. This comprehensive approach aims to foster a more reliable, accessible, and efficient transportation system for all residents.

County Service Mandates

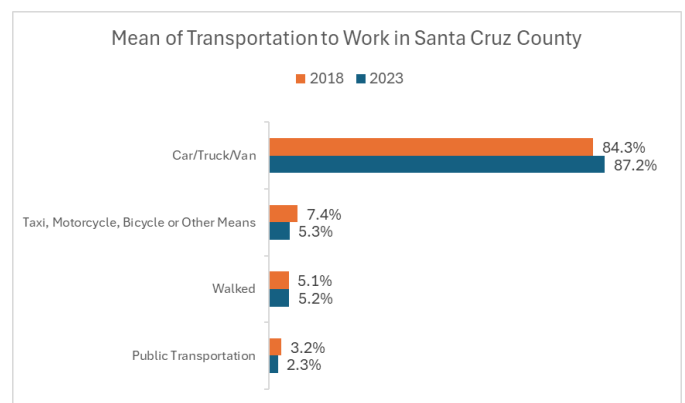
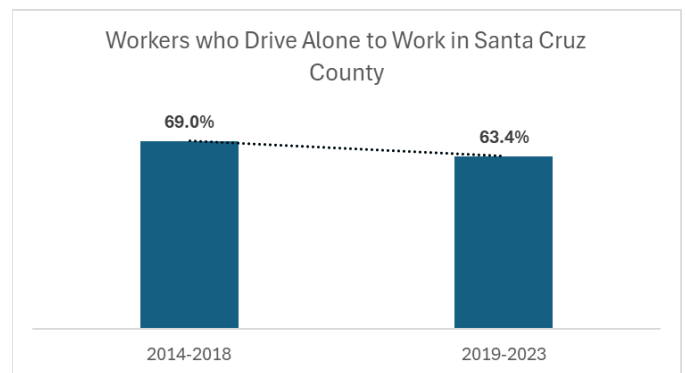
Santa Cruz County fulfills key transportation responsibilities through the Transportation Division of the Community Development and Infrastructure (CDI) department. The County is mandated to operate and maintain the local road system in unincorporated areas, which includes over 600 miles of roadway, hundreds of bridges and culverts, and critical active transportation infrastructure such as bike lanes and pedestrian paths. These responsibilities are governed by state and federal standards for safety, accessibility, and environmental compliance, including the California Streets and Highways Code, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and stormwater regulations.

In addition to ongoing operations and maintenance, the Transportation Division oversees capital projects, traffic safety improvements, and disaster recovery for damaged infrastructure. It also collaborates with regional partners on planning and grant administration for long-term investments in mobility, including active transportation plans, complete streets strategies, and road safety action plans.

While the County’s transportation responsibilities are largely defined by regulatory mandates and technical standards, Santa Cruz County continues to approach this work with a focus on equity, sustainability, and long-term resilience. By investing in safer streets, multimodal access, and community-driven design, the County is working to ensure that every resident—regardless of age, ability, income, or location—can move safely and reliably throughout the community.

Community Well-Being & Resilience

Transportation trends since 2018 show mixed progress toward the goals of the 2018–2024 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan. The share of workers driving alone declined from 69.0% to 63.4%⁸, with no meaningful differences by race/ethnicity, though overall reliance on cars/trucks/vans increased from 84.3% to 87.2%⁹. Use of public transportation and alternative modes declined, reflecting ongoing challenges in shifting travel behavior.

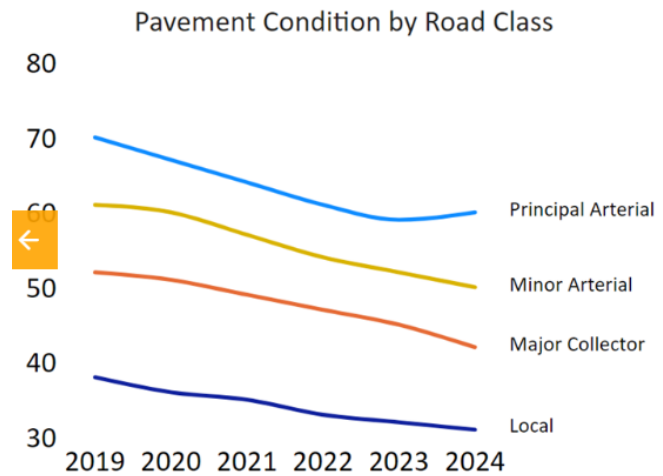


⁸ DataShare Santa Cruz County. (2025). *Workers who drive alone to work in Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=530&localeId=281>

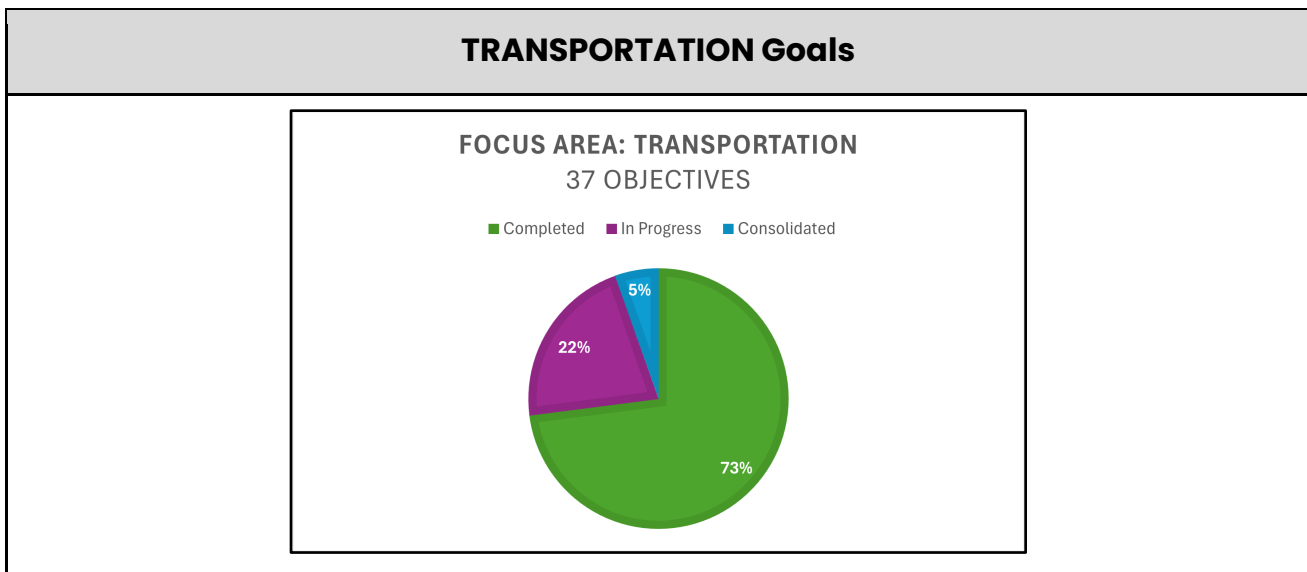
⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2018). *Means of transportation to work in Santa Cruz County* [Table B08134]. 2014–2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved June 3, 2025.

In terms of infrastructure, pavement condition has steadily declined from 2019 to 2024 and remains well below the statewide average¹⁰. This trend suggests challenges in achieving the plan’s goal of improving local road conditions and ensuring road safety.

While there has been some movement toward reducing solo driving, other transportation outcomes—such as increased vehicle dependence, declining transit use, and deteriorating pavement—point to areas where progress has been limited or where additional efforts may be needed to fully realize Santa Cruz County’s transportation goals.



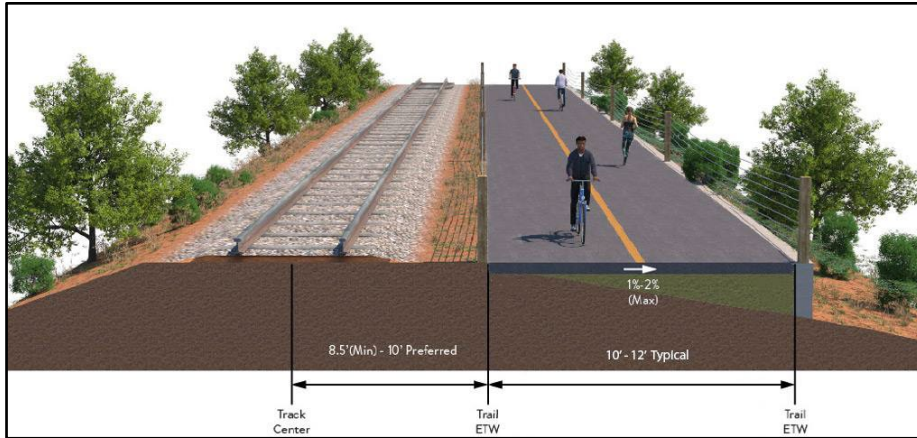
Alignment in Action



¹⁰ County of Santa Cruz. (2025). *Pavement condition by road class*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.santacruzcountyca.gov/VisionSantaCruz/CommunityResults.aspx>

<p>A: Regional Mobility: Improve road infrastructure and intra-county connectivity, and enhance commuting solutions.</p> <p>10 Objectives 50% Completed 30% In Progress 20% Consolidated</p>	<p>B: Community Mobility: Grow alternative transportation networks, and lower barriers to mobility.</p> <p>15 Objectives 67% Completed 27% In Progress 7% Consolidated</p>
<p>C: Local Roads: Upgrade pavement conditions and road safety for everyone.</p> <p>16 Objectives 88% Completed 13% In Progress 0% Consolidated</p>	<p>D: Public Transit: Work to enhance functionality and promote use of public transit.</p> <p>5 Objectives 80% Completed 20% In Progress 0% Consolidated</p>

TRANSPORTATION Brights Spots
<p>→ BIKE LANE IMPROVEMENTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Installed over 25 miles of new bike lanes, including along Soquel Drive between La Fonda Avenue and State Park Drive. In 2023–24, 1,791 lane miles of County roads were street swept, prioritizing bicycle commuter routes and safety, and adjusting future street sweeping activities for the new standard. <p>→ COASTAL RAIL TRAIL– In 2024, completed schematic design and environmental review for segments 10 and 11 of the Coastal Rail Trail project from 17th Avenue to State Park Drive.</p>



- **GREEN VALLEY MULTI-USE PATH PROJECT**– The project upgraded two miles of roadside walking trail to a 8’-10’ wide protected multi-use path. Six bus stops were upgraded, and the work included elementary school programs on bike/pedestrian safety and litter abatement.
- **SEWER REPLACEMENT**– Repaired or replaced **10,730 linear feet** of sewer mains, rated poor or worse, to protect water quality and public health, exceeding the target by 34%.
- **SOQUEL DRIVE CONGESTION MITIGATION**– Enhanced safety for bicyclists and pedestrians and improved travel time reliability for buses and vehicles on Soquel Drive by restriping and buffering bike lanes, as well as laying fiber optic cable to have timed traffic lights along this critical 5.6 mile stretch of road.



- **STORM DAMAGE REPAIR**– Between the 2016-17 and 2023 storms, repaired over 100 damaged sites and spent over \$182 million improving road conditions, with approximately \$76.6 million worth of projects left to repair.

Leadership Perspective: Insights from the Board, County Staff & Community Partners

Throughline: Transportation emerged across data sources as a persistent barrier to safety, accessibility, and opportunity—especially in South County and rural communities. Stakeholders broadly aligned around concerns related to road safety for cyclists and pedestrians, inconsistent transit access, and infrastructure designed primarily for cars. There was shared recognition of the need for more proactive, equity-centered investment in multimodal, sustainable, and community-informed transportation systems.

What We Did Well: As identified by Supervisors, County staff, & community partners

- **Improvements to transit infrastructure:** The County has made progress in select areas through expanded trail systems, safety improvements near schools, and regional collaborations on major transportation corridors.
- **Focus on multimodal planning:** County staff and partners acknowledged increased efforts to plan for active transportation infrastructure alongside road maintenance and capital improvement projects.
- **Collaboration with regional partners:** The County has played a coordinating role in joint transportation planning with cities and regional transportation agencies, especially around corridor improvements.
- **Community-informed projects:** Community members noted successful engagement in specific transportation efforts that integrated input from youth, farmworkers, and older adults.
- **Equity considerations in new plans:** Recent transportation strategies have begun to prioritize historically underserved areas and include language focused on access, safety, and mobility for those without cars.

Gaps & Areas for Continued Attention: As raised across interviews, focus groups, & survey responses

- **Car-centric infrastructure and safety risks:** Much of the County's transportation network remains designed primarily for vehicle traffic, creating unsafe conditions for cyclists, pedestrians, and youth on e-bikes—especially in South County and rural areas with few sidewalks, bike lanes, or traffic-calming features.
- **Inconsistent transit access:** Public transportation is limited in frequency, coverage, and reliability—creating significant mobility barriers for those without vehicles, including youth, older adults, and working families.
- **Infrastructure vulnerability and delayed response:** Natural disasters like storms and landslides have highlighted gaps in road repair responsiveness—especially in mountain and rural areas. These challenges are compounded by volatile funding, permitting delays, and long timelines for capital improvements. The 2017 and 2023 storm seasons, for example, each produced nearly seven times as much damage (measured by both estimated costs and number of sites) of an average storm season. This scale of impact is anticipated to continue, compromising the County's ability to maintain its infrastructure.
- **Lack of long-term, proactive planning:** Stakeholders expressed concern that transportation investments are often reactive rather than forward-looking, with limited alignment to growth patterns, climate resilience, or high-need geographies.
- **Limited EV infrastructure in low-income areas:** Expansion of electric vehicle infrastructure has not kept pace with environmental goals or equity needs, limiting access for lower-income residents and renters.
- **Equity gaps in transportation infrastructure:** South County communities continue to lack sidewalks, bike lanes, and safe routes to

schools, and older adults and essential workers face limited transportation options—exacerbating disparities in access to work, healthcare, and education.

Focus Area: Sustainable Environment

Goals

The Environment focus area of the 2018–2024 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan is centered on promoting a sustainable and resilient natural environment. It focuses on enhancing access to outdoor experiences in parks, open spaces, and water areas; protecting and restoring natural resources such as air, water, forests, coastline, and agricultural lands; supporting local conservation through efforts in clean air and water, renewable energy, recycling, and reuse; and building resilience to climate change impacts, including sea-level rise and changing weather patterns. This comprehensive approach aims to safeguard environmental quality and foster sustainability for current and future generations.

County Service Mandates

Santa Cruz County's environmental responsibilities span multiple departments and divisions, many of which are governed by state and federal mandates. The Environmental Health Division of the Health Services Agency (HSA) enforces public health and environmental safety standards, including water quality protection, septic and well permitting, hazardous materials management, and solid waste oversight.

The Office of Response, Recovery, and Resilience (OR3) coordinates inter-departmental climate action and adaptation plan (CAAP), emergency preparedness, and disaster recovery. OR3 leads long-range resilience planning, greenhouse gas reduction efforts, and interagency coordination to address wildfire risk, sea-level rise, and other climate-related hazards.

The Parks, Open Space, and Cultural Services Department manages public parks and natural lands, providing access to outdoor spaces while preserving native habitats. This includes trail maintenance, wildfire prevention, and

restoration efforts in partnership with local communities and conservation organizations.

The General Services Department oversees County facilities and leads internal sustainability efforts, including renewable energy installations, green building practices, and waste reduction initiatives aligned with state environmental regulations.

The Agricultural Commissioner regulates pesticide use, inspects agricultural products, and supports the health of local ecosystems by monitoring invasive pests and protecting pollinators. The Agricultural Extension, in partnership with UC Cooperative Extension, provides education and technical support on sustainable farming and natural resource management.

The Planning Division within the Community Development and Infrastructure (CDI) department enforces environmental regulations related to land use, resource conservation, and stormwater management. The Special Services Division manages solid waste, flood control infrastructure, and drainage systems essential to protecting water quality and public safety.

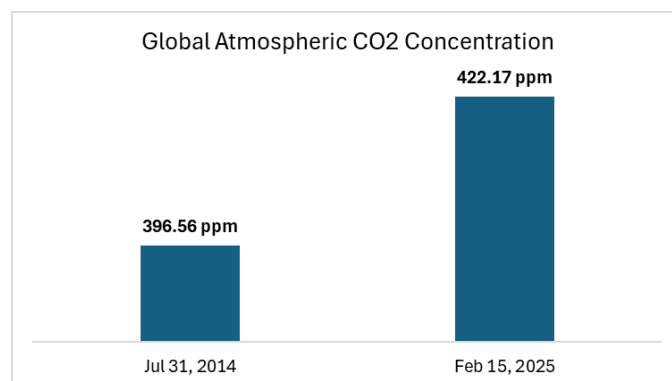
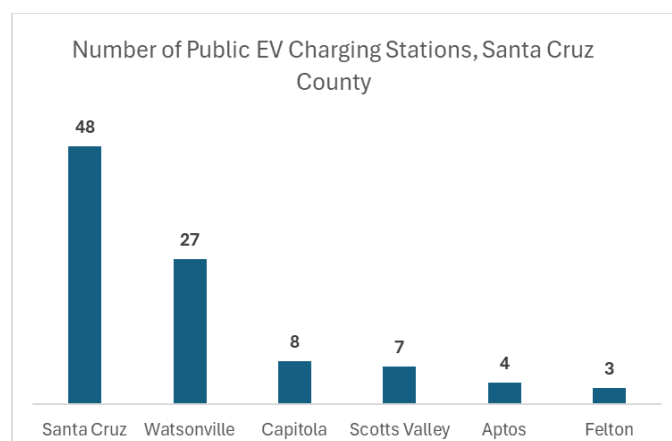
The Cannabis Licensing Office ensures local cannabis operations meet environmental standards, including water conservation, erosion control, and habitat protection, in alignment with state licensing requirements.

While these environmental responsibilities are distributed across departments, the County remains committed to a unified, equity-centered approach to environmental stewardship through the CAAP. By aligning regulatory compliance with community priorities and long-term sustainability goals, the County works to prioritize and secure funding for mitigation and resilience actions that ensure a healthy, thriving environment for all residents.

Community Well-Being & Resilience

Recent environmental trends reflect both progress and ongoing challenges in meeting the goals of the 2018–2024 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan.

Transportation is the largest local contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. The expansion of public EV charging infrastructure—with 48 stations in Santa Cruz, 27 in Watsonville, and smaller networks in other areas¹¹—supports local efforts to promote clean transportation and reduce emissions. However, on a broader scale, global atmospheric CO₂ concentrations have continued to rise, increasing from 396.56 ppm in 2014 to 422.17 ppm in 2025¹², underscoring the persistent challenge of climate change.



During this time period, the County has experienced 8 federally declared disasters that have had significant impacts on community and the environment. These climate-related events including wildfires, extreme weather and poor air quality underscore the need for resilience and adaptation strategies in the face of ongoing environmental pressures.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Energy. (2025). *Alternative fueling station locator: Public EV charging stations in Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 5, 2025, from https://afdc.energy.gov/fuels/electricity-locations#/analyze?region=US-CA&tab=fuel&fuel=ELEC&ev_levels=all

¹² National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (2025). *Global atmospheric CO₂ concentration*. Retrieved June 5, 2025, from <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/e5bb44474dc84990b6411598bcdcdffb0>

Survey Perspectives & Data Trends

The majority of survey respondents (57%) said they are more concerned about the environment today than they were in 2018. This increased concern aligns with recent climate-related events—such as wildfires, extreme weather, and poor air quality—that have affected the region in recent years. While local progress has been made in expanding alternative transportation infrastructure, the survey responses underscore growing public awareness of ongoing environmental challenges.

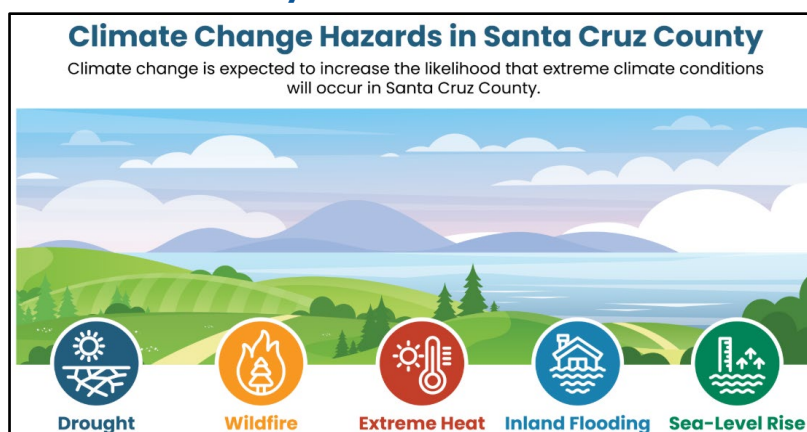
Alignment in Action

ENVIRONMENT Goals			
<div><div>FOCUS AREA: ENVIRONMENT 118 OBJECTIVES</div><div><div>Completed</div><div>In Progress</div><div>Consolidated</div></div><div><div>81%</div><div>10%</div><div>9%</div></div></div>			
<div><div>A: Outdoor Experience:</div><div>Ensure access to and enhance experience in parks, open spaces, water areas and outdoor activities.</div><div>10 Objectives</div><div>90% Completed</div><div>0% In Progress</div><div>10% Consolidated</div></div>		<div><div>B: Natural Resources:</div><div>Protect and restore natural resources, including water, air, forests, coastline and agricultural lands.</div><div>34 Objectives</div><div>91% Completed</div><div>3% In Progress</div><div>6% Consolidated</div></div>	
<div><div>C: Local Conservation:</div><div>Support and</div></div>		<div><div>D: Climate Change:</div><div>Increase resilience to</div></div>	

<p>strengthen efforts for clean air and water, conservation, renewable energy, recycling and reuse.</p> <p>37 Objectives</p> <p>81% Completed</p> <p>5% In Progress</p> <p>14% Consolidated</p>	<p>climate change impacts, including sea-level rise and changing weather patterns.</p> <p>58 Objectives</p> <p>76% Completed</p> <p>16% In Progress</p> <p>9% Consolidated</p>
--	---

ENVIRONMENT Brights Spots

- **CLIMATE ACTION STRATEGY**– In 2022, updated the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan (CAAP) through community input with an increased emphasis on **community resilience and social vulnerability**.



- **EV INFRASTRUCTURE**– Secured \$3.96 million in CARB funding and committed \$5.14 million in County match for the planned installation of 64 new EV chargers, including 52 publicly accessible units and 3 DC fast chargers.
- **REPLACED 90 COUNTY FLEET VEHICLES**– Including 16 fully electric, and installed 8 new EV chargers across County sites to accelerate fleet decarbonization.
- **MULTIMODAL TRANSPORTATION**– Enhanced networks via Coastal Rail Trail buildout, buffered bike lanes, Green Valley Multi-Use Path, and a regional bike share program in collaboration with Santa Cruz, Capitola, Cabrillo College, and UCSC.

- **GROUNDWATER SUSTAINABILITY**– Secured a \$2 million EPA grant to evaluate a wastewater treatment system in Boulder Creek, reducing reliance on limited water sources.
- **ADAPTATION PROJECTS**– Supported National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s \$71.1 million award to the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation, including \$5M for the Watsonville Slough Restoration.
- **WILDFIRE PLANNING AND MITIGATION**– Secured a \$100K Fire Safe Council GIS grant, and a \$250K FEMA hazard mitigation grant to support development of a collaborative hazard mitigation plan.
- **EFFICIENT WATER USE**– Partnered with Pajaro Valley growers to reduce water use by 5,000 acre feet per year through conservation efforts– a **10% reduction**.
- **LEO’S HAVEN & CHANTICLEER PARK**– In 2020, with community support, completed construction and opened LEO’s Haven **inclusive playground** at Chanticleer Park.



- **PAJARO FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT**– Worked with Army Corps of Engineers to amend its cost-benefit analysis policy, allowing communities at-risk of flooding but with lower property values to be deemed worthy of protection, resulting in approval of a **\$600 million levee improvement project**.
- **SAFE PESTICIDE USE**– Over two years, increased pesticide use **permits by 15%** to foster safe and effective pesticide use, protect agricultural lands and natural resources.

Leadership Perspective: Insights from the Board, County Staff & Community Partners

Throughline: There was strong alignment across interviews, focus groups, and survey responses that the County is experiencing escalating climate-related threats—such as wildfires, floods, and poor air quality—and must act urgently to strengthen local resilience. While there has been meaningful progress in areas like conservation and electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure, stakeholders emphasized the need to move faster, embed equity in environmental investments, and expand access to parks, green spaces, and climate protection for low-income and rural communities.

What We Did Well: As identified by Supervisors, County Staff, & Community Partners

- **Expanded electric vehicle infrastructure:** The County has made strides in supporting EV adoption through new charging stations and regional partnerships.
- **Progress in land conservation:** Stakeholders noted strong momentum in protecting natural resources, with several open space and coastal conservation initiatives advancing in recent years.
- **Climate adaptation planning:** The County has developed and updated climate action plans and hazard mitigation strategies, laying the groundwork for stronger environmental resilience.
- **Public education and engagement efforts:** Some departments have increased community engagement around fire safety, flood response, and climate-related risk reduction.
- **Targeted partnerships for youth programs:** There have been early investments in youth engagement and outdoor access programs through parks and community-based organizations.
- **Equity language in recent plans:** Recent strategic documents incorporate more explicit commitments to climate equity and prioritize support for vulnerable populations.

Gaps & Areas for Continued Attention: As raised across interviews, focus groups, & survey responses

- **Escalating climate threats and challenging individual and institutional recovery capacity:** Wildfires, floods, and extreme weather are intensifying, yet response and recovery systems at the individual (insurance, property defense) and institutional (fiscal constraints from impact of multiple disasters in a short time-frame) levels are strained—especially in high-risk zones.
- **Slow pace of implementation:** While planning documents exist, stakeholders expressed concern about the County’s capacity to implement climate strategies at the necessary scale and speed.
- **Limited investment in green infrastructure:** Stakeholders called for more nature-based solutions—such as tree canopy, permeable surfaces, and cooling corridors—particularly in heat-vulnerable and densely developed areas.
- **Lack of localized air quality protections:** Participants noted the need for stronger indoor air filtration, community cooling/shelter centers, and neighborhood-level alerts in areas most impacted by wildfire smoke and heat.
- **Incomplete outdoor equity efforts:** Equity goals around park access, outdoor learning, and nature-based youth programming have seen limited follow-through, with low completion rates and short-term pilot funding.
- **Disproportionate climate burden on low-income and rural communities:** Residents in mobile homes, agricultural areas, and unincorporated regions often face the greatest environmental risks—yet have the least access to mitigation resources, emergency support, or public green spaces.

Focus Area: Dynamic Economy

Goals

Through its Economy focus area, the 2018–2024 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan seeks to advance economic growth and community well-being. The plan focuses on developing a skilled regional workforce with access to quality, family-wage jobs; fostering community vitality by supporting vibrant shopping, dining, cultural, and gathering spaces; strengthening local businesses through innovation, flexibility, and technology; and expanding educational opportunities by promoting partnerships in early learning, higher education, and vocational and lifelong learning. Together, these strategies aim to cultivate a dynamic and resilient regional economy.

County Service Mandates

The County's primary mandated responsibility in the economic realm is the administration of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which is housed within the Human Services Department (HSD). Through this federal program, the County provides employment services, job training, and career development to adults, dislocated workers, and youth. Services are delivered in partnership with the local Workforce Development Board and funded by federal allocations aimed at improving workforce readiness and economic mobility, especially for individuals facing barriers to employment.

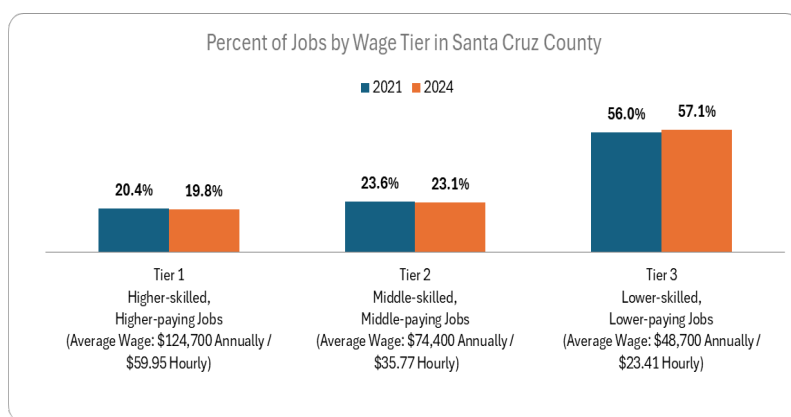
Beyond WIOA, most of the County's economic development work is discretionary. The County Executive Office (CEO) leads and coordinates a range of initiatives designed to support local businesses, encourage entrepreneurship, and align public investments with broader economic and community development goals. This includes efforts to expand access to broadband, attract and retain employers, promote small business resilience, and facilitate regional collaboration through public-private partnerships.

While not mandated, these activities reflect the County’s recognition that a vibrant economy is foundational to community well-being. By investing in workforce development, business support, and inclusive economic opportunity, Santa Cruz County aims to help residents thrive in a changing economic landscape—especially those historically excluded from full participation. The County’s approach centers on alignment, collaboration, and strategic use of limited resources to advance equity and economic resilience across the region.

Community Well-Being & Resilience

Economic data reflect both progress and persistent challenges in achieving the goals of the 2018–2024 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan. Efforts to strengthen the regional workforce and promote family-wage jobs show limited movement, with Tier 3 (lower-wage) jobs—averaging \$48,700

annually or \$23.41/hour—remaining the majority at 57.1% in 2024 and little growth in higher-wage Tier 1 jobs (\$124,700 annually, \$59.95/hour) or middle-wage Tier 2 employment (\$74,400 annually, \$35.77/hour)¹³. This distribution highlights the limited availability of jobs that support economic security, particularly for households facing high housing costs and cost-of-living burdens.

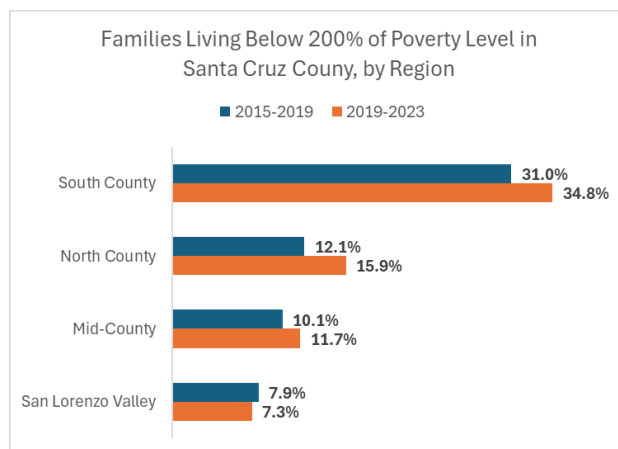


Most county residents experienced higher rates of poverty, and persistent regional disparities in economic well-being are evident with South County

¹³Workforce Development Board of Santa Cruz County. (2025). *2025 State of the workforce report: Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved July 30, 2025, from <https://workforcescc.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/2025-SOW-Report-4.5-Final.pdf>

continuing to experience the highest rates of families living below 200% of the poverty level, rising from 31.0% to 34.8%, compared to lower rates in Mid-County (11.7%) and San Lorenzo Valley (7.3%)¹⁴.

These patterns highlight continuing challenges in achieving a more equitable and resilient local economy, especially in advancing workforce quality and regional economic vitality.

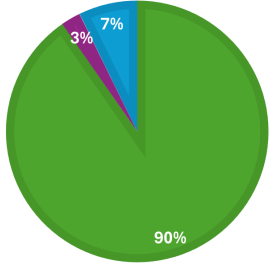


Survey Perspectives & Data Trends

Just over half of survey respondents (52%) said they feel worse off financially today than they did in 2018. This perception aligns with economic data showing limited growth in higher-wage jobs and persistent regional disparities in poverty rates, particularly in South County. While some respondents reported financial improvement, the majority reflected ongoing concerns about affordability and economic security.

¹⁴ DataShare Santa Cruz County. (2025). *Families living below 200% of poverty level in Santa Cruz County, by region*. Retrieved June 5, 2025, from <https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=12167&localeTypeId=28&periodId=4523>

Alignment in Action

ECONOMY Goals									
<p>FOCUS AREA: ECONOMY 83 OBJECTIVES</p> <p>■ Completed ■ In Progress ■ Consolidated</p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Overall Economy Objectives Status</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Status</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Completed</td> <td>90%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>In Progress</td> <td>3%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Consolidated</td> <td>7%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Status	Percentage	Completed	90%	In Progress	3%	Consolidated	7%
Status	Percentage								
Completed	90%								
In Progress	3%								
Consolidated	7%								
<p>A: Regional Workforce: Create opportunities to develop a quality workforce and increase family-wage jobs in support of the regional economy.</p> <p>21 Objectives 86% Completed 5% In Progress 10% Consolidated</p>	<p>B: Community Vitality: Stimulate vibrant and inclusive economies offering robust shopping, dining, cultural and gathering spaces.</p> <p>19 Objectives 84% Completed 0% In Progress 16% Consolidated</p>								
<p>C: Local Businesses: Strengthen and retain small businesses and key sectors through innovation, flexibility and technology.</p> <p>25 Objectives 96% Completed 0% In Progress 4% Consolidated</p>	<p>D: Educational Opportunity: Support partnerships that promote early learning, higher education, and vocational and lifelong studies.</p> <p>18 Objectives 94% Completed 6% In Progress 0% Consolidated</p>								

ECONOMY Brights Spots

- **CANNABIS LICENSING**– Over three years, **licensed 81 registrants**, including operating an effective compliance program with transparent information about violations, corrective actions, and appeal process.
- **SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORT**– Provide \$50,000 per year to the Small Business Development Center at Cabrillo College to support small business advisory services and the annual Small Business Summit.
- **VISIT SANTA CRUZ** – Partnered with Visit Santa Cruz to develop a \$3.5 million advertising budget, supporting tourism that drives sales tax and transient occupancy tax revenue.
- **INCREASED CHILD SUPPORT**– Increased child support payments through ongoing process evaluation and enhanced technology, resulting in payments from over 50% of clients with overdue balances.
- **JOB TRAINING**– Over two years, the number of CalFresh recipients taking part in job training programs **increased by 64%**, especially unemployed youth and individuals experiencing homelessness.
- **LIBRARY PROJECTS**– By 2023, completed the construction or renovation of **6 libraries** in Aptos, Boulder Creek, Capitola, Felton, Live Oak, and Scotts Valley, funded by Measure S and County Library Funds.



Leadership Perspective: Insights from the Board, County Staff & Community Partners

Throughline: Across all engagement methods, participants expressed concern that the County's economic base is fragile and overly dependent on low-wage sectors. Stakeholders emphasized the need for more intentional workforce development, industry diversification, and support for small businesses—especially those in South County and historically marginalized communities. There was broad agreement that economic strategies must be more proactive, coordinated, and inclusive to meet the needs of current and future workers.

What We Did Well: As identified by Supervisors, County Staff, & Community Partners

- **Support for essential industries:** Stakeholders noted targeted County support for agriculture, tourism, and healthcare sectors, including through permitting assistance and pandemic recovery funds.
- **Increased collaboration with workforce boards and employers:** Regional efforts between County departments, Workforce Development Boards, and education partners have helped align some job training efforts with market demand.
- **Business support during the pandemic:** The County rapidly deployed grants and small business relief during COVID-19, with a focus on retaining local jobs and stabilizing the economy.
- **Focus on job quality in select sectors:** Some departments and partners have integrated living wage and benefit standards into contracts and economic programming.
- **Youth workforce development programs:** Stakeholders highlighted positive examples of youth employment and career readiness initiatives, particularly those coordinated through County programs, school districts, and community-based partners.

- **Emerging equity focus in economic strategy:** Some stakeholders noted the inclusion of equity language in newer economic plans, and early-stage efforts to support inclusive entrepreneurship.

Gaps and Areas for Continued Attention: As raised across interviews, focus groups, & survey responses

- **Overreliance on low-wage industries:** Job growth has been concentrated in sectors with limited career ladders, exacerbating affordability challenges for working families.
- **Lack of economic development leadership:** Participants consistently called for the reestablishment of a County economic development team or dedicated effort to coordinate strategy, investment, and partnerships, including opportunities for alignment with Monterey Bay Economic Partnership.
- **Impact of remote work:** A need to continue to study the shift to remote work influencing local labor markets, housing, and commuting and its importance to the local economy and housing affordability.
- **Limited capacity for business growth:** Lack of office and industrial space constrains the growth potential for businesses that want to stay in the county, or move into the county. This results in continued mass commuting over the hill to Silicon Valley.
- **Insufficient workforce development alignment:** There is a need for stronger coordination between employers, education providers, and public agencies to train workers for high-demand, higher-wage jobs.
- **Underinvestment in innovation and business incubation:** Entrepreneurs face regulatory hurdles, high overhead costs, and limited efforts to support startups, succession planning, or business incubation—particularly in underserved regions like South County.
- **Persistent equity gaps in entrepreneurship and access to resources:** Youth, BIPOC, and immigrant entrepreneurs remain underrepresented

in business development efforts and face greater challenges accessing capital, technical support, and County services.

Focus Area: Operational Excellence

Goals

The Operational Excellence focus area of the 2018–2024 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan is designed to strengthen the County’s internal capacity to serve the community. It emphasizes delivering equitable, efficient, and culturally responsive services; building and retaining a diverse, engaged, and high-performing workforce; responsibly maintaining and maximizing use of County infrastructure and assets; and fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation to enhance operations and ensure fiscal stability. These efforts aim to support effective governance and responsive public service.

What helps: a spirit of collaboration & curiosity, assuming good intent, transparency, being organized & efficient with community partner time.
~Survey Respondent

County Service Mandates

Several departments provide mandated services that are foundational to the County’s operations and financial stewardship. The Auditor–Controller–Treasurer–Tax Collector is responsible for managing the County’s finances in accordance with state law, including accounting, payroll, property tax collection and distribution, treasury oversight, and financial reporting. These functions ensure the integrity of public funds and support accountability across all departments and jurisdictions.

The Assessor–Recorder determines the taxable value of property, records official documents, and maintains vital land and ownership records—services mandated by the California Constitution and Revenue and Taxation Code. These assessments form the basis for distributing property tax revenue that funds local government and schools.

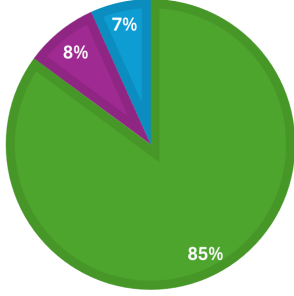
The County Clerk/Elections Department ensures the fairness and accessibility of elections and maintains public records such as marriage licenses, fictitious business names, and passports. These functions are governed by federal and state election and civil code requirements, upholding the democratic process and access to essential services.

Other departments contribute to operational excellence by supporting Countywide infrastructure, systems, and workforce capacity. The Information Services Department (ISD) oversees the County's technology systems, including cybersecurity, digital access, and data systems used by both County staff and the public. ISD plays a vital role in modernizing services and enabling data-driven decision-making.

The Human Resources Department is responsible for recruitment, classification, labor relations, benefits administration, and organizational development. Human Resources supports departments in attracting and retaining a skilled, diverse workforce that reflects the community and delivers services aligned with County values.

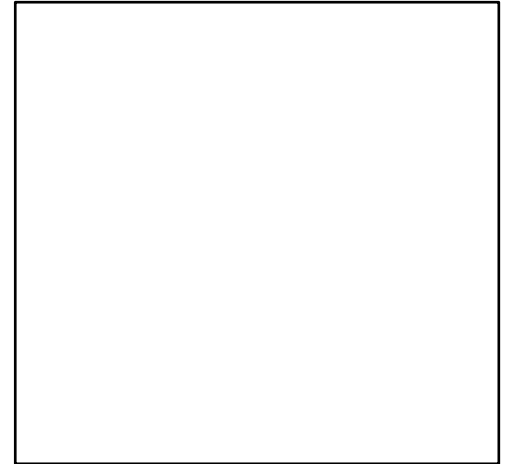
While operational responsibilities are distributed across departments, Santa Cruz County embraces a shared commitment to improving how government works. Through collaborative problem-solving, process improvement, and performance measurement, the County continues to evolve as a learning organization—capable of adapting to community needs and delivering results with integrity and care.

Alignment in Action

OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE Goals									
<p>FOCUS AREA: OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE 208 OBJECTIVES</p> <p>■ Completed ■ In Progress ■ Consolidated</p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Operational Excellence Objectives Status</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Status</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Completed</td> <td>85%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>In Progress</td> <td>8%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Consolidated</td> <td>7%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Status	Percentage	Completed	85%	In Progress	8%	Consolidated	7%
Status	Percentage								
Completed	85%								
In Progress	8%								
Consolidated	7%								
<p>A: Customer Experience Provide our customers with equitable access to efficient, effective and culturally responsive services.</p> <p>98 Objectives 88% Completed 6% In Progress 6% Consolidated</p>	<p>B. County Workforce Attract, grow and retain a diverse, engaged and high – performing County workforce that reflects our community.</p> <p>34 Objectives 76% Completed 6% In Progress 18% Consolidated</p>								
<p>C. County Infrastructure Maximize and responsibly maintain County assets in support of community goals.</p> <p>46 Objectives 80% Completed 13% In Progress 7% Consolidated</p>	<p>D. Continuous Improvement Embrace innovation and continuous improvement to optimize County operations and maintain fiscal stability.</p> <p>83 Objectives 83% Completed 12% In Progress 5% Consolidated</p>								

OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE Brights Spots

- **2020 US CENSUS**– In partnership with the cities and community-based organizations, ensured a **comprehensive count** in the 2020 Census, including adapting strategies for the COVID-19 pandemic and strategies for hard-to-count populations.
- **COUNTY EQUITY STATEMENT**– In collaboration with the Circle on Anti-Racism, Economic, and Social Justice (CARESJ), engaged over 1,000 community members to develop a County commitment to increasing access and belonging.



Created by local artist Elijah Pfotenhauer in Beach Flats Park

- **BUDGET SYSTEM**– Established a new automated, consolidated, and transparent **budgeting system**, launched fully for the 2023-24 budget cycle.
- **COMMISSION DIVERSITY**– Over one year, increased racial representation on boards and commissions by raising awareness, identifying barriers, and implementing inclusive outreach strategies, resulting in a **10% increase** in applications from people of color.
- **FACILITY CONDITION ASSESSMENT**– Completed facility condition assessments and recommendations for all **46 facilities**, ranked in order of priority.
- **RECRUITMENT TOOLS**– In 2023, began a pilot project using **automated business tools** with key County departments, including tracking the impacts on demographics, equity considerations, and time-to-establish eligible lists.

→ **SOUTH COUNTY GOVERNMENT CENTER**–

In 2024, opened the South County Service Center, **centralizing County services** for residents in one location. To date over 45,000 residents have accessed services here, saving commute time and travel emissions.



Leadership Perspective: Insights from the Board, County Staff & Community Partners

Throughline: There was widespread agreement across interviews, focus groups, and survey responses that the County has made meaningful progress where strong cross-sector alignment, transparency, and community-centered practices were present—such as during the COVID response and Housing for Health initiatives. However, persistent challenges related to affordability, fragmented service systems, and inconsistent internal alignment continue to limit the County’s ability to fully deliver on its goals of equity, efficiency, and accountability.

What We Did Well: As identified by Supervisors, County Staff, & Community Partners

- **Improved coordination and transparency:** Many noted stronger cross-sector collaboration since COVID, with improved transparency around County processes and interdepartmental planning.
- **Innovation in systems and tools:** County staff and partners referenced new efforts to improve budget tools, HR processes, and language access services—laying groundwork for a more responsive public sector.
- **Strategic investment in South County:** The County invested in mobile services, bilingual outreach, and a new Government Center in Watsonville, signaling a shift toward geographic equity.
- **Support for essential workers and youth:** Some departments expanded youth employment and frontline worker support, increasing retention and engagement in critical roles.
- **Public engagement and communication improvements:** Community members described more opportunities for input during budget planning, emergency response, and service design processes.

- **Early equity planning foundations:** The adoption of an Equity Statement and increased language in planning documents was seen as a foundational step toward systemic change.

Gaps & Areas for Continued Attention: As raised across interviews, focus groups, & survey responses

- **County staffing and affordability barriers:** The high cost of living—especially housing and childcare—continues to impact County staff retention and service quality, with essential workers leaving the County due to wage stagnation and limited supports.
- **Siloed services and slow systems change:** Stakeholders described County services as fragmented or hard to navigate, with inconsistent coordination and long delays in improving permitting, planning, and behavioral health systems.
- **Limited internal alignment with the Strategic Plan:** While some County staff see clear connections to strategic goals, others reported little communication or support for implementation, reducing organizational cohesion and impact.
- **Gaps in leadership communication and trust:** County staff and community partners expressed frustration around top-down decisions, budget cuts, and lack of early engagement—calling for more honest, inclusive communication practices. Many raised concerns about how community needs and input are reflected in actual budget and resource allocation decisions.
- **Data transparency and storytelling challenges:** Participants noted a lack of accessible, disaggregated data and meaningful metrics to evaluate progress, particularly on equity and service outcomes.
- **Permitting and planning bottlenecks:** The County’s permitting and planning processes were frequently described as slow, complex, and lacking transparency—limiting progress on housing, business development, and infrastructure, particularly in underserved areas.

- **Equity implementation remains uneven:** Despite adoption of the County Equity Statement, stakeholders emphasized that equity metrics, funding, leadership diversity, and culturally responsive practices remain inconsistent across departments.

What young people had to say:

Bright Spots

- **Youth engagement infrastructure:** Programs like the Youth Advisory Task Force and public input forums were recognized as important venues for youth voice.
- **Trusted public institutions:** Libraries, parks and rec, and school-based supports were described as well-organized, inclusive, and valuable across communities.
- **Community-based partnerships:** Collaborations with nonprofits helped expand access to services, especially for mental health, food distribution, and education.
- **Digital and language accessibility efforts:** Where present, multilingual and tech-accessible programs were praised for helping more youth and families participate.

Areas for Continued Attention

- **Lack of awareness about available services:** Youth reported that many programs exist but are poorly communicated or hard to access.
- **Need for meaningful youth inclusion:** Despite some leadership programs, youth want consistent input in policy making, especially on issues affecting them directly.
- **Regional fragmentation:** Youth described Santa Cruz County as feeling disjointed—Watsonville, SLV, and Santa Cruz operate like separate systems, with uneven access to services.
- **Equity in engagement:** BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and low-income youth emphasized the need for better outreach and language access in all County communications and programs.

Equity Spotlight: Persistent Gaps & Opportunities for Transformation

Amidst the depth of equity-related feedback, the following equity challenges emerged as central to Operational Excellence:

- **Geographic inequities:** South County continues to face disproportionate barriers in service access, economic stability, and civic participation, despite recent investments.
- **Racial disparities in outcomes and representation:** People of color—especially Latinx and Indigenous residents—are overrepresented in vulnerable populations and underrepresented in County leadership and staffing, with limited visible progress.
- **Language and cultural access barriers:** Gaps in bilingual services and culturally responsive communication persist in many departments, limiting access and trust.
- **Limited power and participation:** Youth, immigrants, and lower-income residents often feel excluded from decision-making. There is strong interest in co-governance models and localized, trust-based engagement.
- **Need for data-driven accountability:** Both County staff and community members called for disaggregated data, shared metrics, and transparent public reporting to move from vision to action on equity goals.

Equity can't just be a paragraph. It has to be in every budget and hiring decision.

~Focus Group Participant

Survey Reflections on Alignment, Collaboration, & Accountability

As part of the Foundational Review, County staff and community partners were invited to reflect on how well the County is living into its Strategic Plan values and commitments. Responses revealed a strong sense of alignment with the County's vision and positive working relationships across sectors, while also highlighting gaps in accountability, transparency, and consistency in collaboration. The following themes emerged from these reflections.

What We Did Well: As identified by County staff & community partners

- **Widespread values alignment:** Over 70% of respondents shared that their work aligns with the County’s vision, mission, values, and equity commitments—signaling a strong sense of shared purpose among internal staff and community-facing partners.
- **Familiarity with guiding principles:** A majority of survey participants indicated they are familiar with the County’s vision, mission, and values, reflecting successful internal communication efforts and awareness-building over the past several years.
- **Trusted relationships enable collaboration:** Nearly two-thirds of respondents said they know County staff they trust and can work with to get things done—underscoring the importance of interpersonal relationships in driving effective collaboration and problem-solving.
- **Community partnerships are valued:** Over 60% of respondents agreed that the County collaborates effectively with partners and seeks out their input, highlighting progress toward more inclusive and community-informed governance.

Gaps & Areas for Continued Attention: As raised across survey responses

- **Perceived lack of accountability to stated values:** Fewer than 60% of respondents felt the County demonstrates accountability to its own vision and goals—indicating a disconnect between strategic commitments and visible follow-through.
- **Room to deepen authentic engagement:** While most agreed the County values community partner input, nearly 40% did not—a signal that engagement efforts are not yet reaching or resonating with all audiences.

It’s a great [equity] statement, but the results need to match. We want to see equity in budgets, hiring, and service access.
~Focus Group Participant

- **Consistency across departments:** Respondents noted uneven experiences of collaboration and communication across County teams and departments, suggesting a need for clearer expectations and shared practices to support cross-functional alignment.
- **Visibility and transparency of progress:** Stakeholders expressed interest in more regular communication around how input is used and what progress is being made toward Strategic Plan goals—especially related to equity.

Recommendations for Next Strategic Plan

The Foundational Review surfaced several cross-cutting process improvements to strengthen County operations, trust, and collaboration in the next Strategic Plan. Key recommendations surfaced through focus groups, surveys, and interviews include:

1. Recommendation: Integrate Frameworks that Lead to Action and Alignment

Rationale: Aligning the new Strategic Plan with established frameworks (Health in All Policies, Results Count®, LEAN) ensures the work is equity-driven, data-informed, and focused on measurable results connected to the County's Vision, Mission, and Equity Statement.

Key Actions:

- Validate Strategic Plan focus areas and their connection to the County's Vision, Mission, and Equity Statement.
- Use common language to drive shared outcomes.
- Establish a consistent process for tracking progress and holding leaders accountable for cross-department alignment and results.

2. Recommendation: Engage Community to Identify Priority Focus Areas and Validate with the Board

Rationale: Early agreement on focus areas ensures the next Strategic Plan builds on existing work, maintains continuity, and allows for alignment with standard drivers of health and well-being.

Key Actions:

- Engage community to gather input on the most important conditions of well-being and priority areas for County action.
- Synthesize community input alongside data, population indicators, and operational priorities to identify a set of draft focus areas.

- Present draft focus areas to the Board for review, discussion, and final validation before deepening engagement within focus areas.

3. Recommendation: Deepen Community Participation and Co-Design within Focus Areas

Rationale: Residents—particularly in South County, rural and mountainous areas, and system-impacted communities—report feeling disconnected from County decision-making; co-design processes strengthen trust and produce actionable insights.

Key Actions:

- Implement the County’s community engagement plan with trusted partners and spaces.
- Create Strategic Plan Focus Area Steering Committees representing staff and stakeholders reflecting a range of communities, geographies, and subject expertise, intentionally inclusive of historically underrepresented populations.
- Transparently communicate on how decisions are made and how input will be used.

4. Recommendation: Develop Equity Metrics and Targets for Focus Areas

Rationale: Clear metrics are critical to track progress, improve transparency, and ensure accountability to equity goals.

Key Actions:

- Incorporate Board-approved Community Indicators as a foundation for measuring success, aligned with frameworks like Health in All Policies.
- Require disaggregated data reporting by race, income, and geography across all focus areas.
- Establish equity targets to align partners and encourage targeted strategies.

5. Recommendation: Co-Create Values with County Staff that Accelerate Action and Accountability

Rationale: Staff and Supervisors have called for clearer priorities and shared expectations for how we work together to move work and get results.

Key Actions:

- Facilitate a co-design process with staff to define a limited set of shared leadership values.
- Define how these values can be applied across County work and customized to meet specific department needs.
- Reinforce alignment between values, equity goals, and accountability systems.

6. Recommendation: Present 2026–2032 Strategic Plan that Reflects the Collaboration of Staff and Community

Rationale: The next Strategic Plan should maintain continuity and incorporate shared priorities identified through engagement with staff, partners, and residents.

Key Actions:

- Use collaborative processes to draft and vet plan focus areas and goals.
- Ensure community and staff input are explicitly reflected in plan language and implementation priorities.
- Present a final Strategic Plan that is clear, measurable, and rooted in shared ownership.

Appendix

Community & Stakeholder Participants

Foundational Review Committee:

- Elissa Benson, Santa Cruz County Executive Office
- Bella Bonner, Black Surf Santa Cruz, Inc
- Nicole Coburn, Santa Cruz County Executive Office
- Chris Clark, Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office
- Randy Morris, Santa Cruz County Human Services Department
- Monica Morales, Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency
- Erica Padilla Chavez, Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County

Focus Group Participants

**others participated but opted to not be listed in report*

Business*

- Kristen Brown, Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce
- Zoe Carter, Santa Cruz County Business Council
- Terence Concannon, Visit Santa Cruz County
- Nathan Kieu, Workforce Santa Cruz County
- Alexander Pederson, Santa Cruz County Small Business Development Center

County Staff*

- Meredith Gowell, Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency
- Max Hare, Santa Cruz County Office of the Public Defender
- Elaine Richert, Santa Cruz County Human Services Department
- Nathan Salazar, Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency

Department Heads*

- Jen Herrera, County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency
- Fernando Giraldo, Santa Cruz County Probation Department
- Matt Machado, Director, Santa Cruz County Community Development & Infrastructure
- Randy Morris, County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department
- Tammi Weigl, Information Services at County of Santa Cruz

Health*

- Lisa Hernandez, Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency, Public Health Division
- Maritza Lara, Health Improvement Partnership (HIP) of Santa Cruz County
- Laura Marcus, Dientes Community Dental Care
- Sherri Torres, Salud Para la Gente

Housing*

- Sam Creighton, Tenant Sanctuary
- Mike Johnson, Pajaro Valley Shelter Services
- Elaine Johnson, Housing Santa Cruz County
- Mike Kittredge, Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County
- Paz Padilla, Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County

Safety*

- Karen Delaney, Volunteer Center of Santa Cruz County
- Bernie Escalante, Santa Cruz Police Department
- Sarah Fletcher, Santa Cruz County Probation Department
- Tara George, Santa Cruz County District Attorney's Office
- Sasha Morgan, Superior Court of Santa Cruz
- Sarah Ryan, Capitola Police Department

Social Services*

- Susan Archibald, Santa Cruz Mountains Art Center
- Julio Andrade, Cradle to Career Santa Cruz County
- Meg Clark, Digital NEST
- Julia Feldman, Conflict Resolution Center of Santa Cruz County

Transportation

- Corey Aldridge, Santa Cruz METRO
- Piet Canin, Ecology Action
- Murray Fontes, City of Watsonville
- Aaron Johnston, Granite Rock Company
- Anna Kammer, RTC Bike Advisory Committee
- Steve Wiesner, County of Santa Cruz Department of Public Works

Santa Cruz County Youth Advisory Task Force

- Maximiliano Barraza Hernandez
- Melanie Camacho-Estevez
- Najia Fayez
- Elsy Fabian
- Gracie Graessie
- Juliana Heritage
- Daniel Hernandez
- Dustin Lopez
- Audrey Martinez
- Karen Mendoza Luengas
- Juliet
- Jade Sote
- Jack Smith
- Toryn Thompson
- Dylan Turzak
- Aedan Wall

- Benjamin Williams

Consolidated Focus Group Themes

1. What are the top 2–3 most pressing issues you see in the County—especially in your sector? What’s driving these challenges?

- **Housing Instability and Affordability**

- Severe shortage of deeply affordable and supportive housing, especially for low-income, senior, and system-involved residents.
- Rising housing costs, short-term rentals, and limited tenant protections are displacing vulnerable populations.
- Fragmented systems and underinvestment in eviction prevention, legal aid, and housing navigation services.

- **Behavioral Health, Substance Use, and Workforce Gaps**

- Critical shortage of behavioral health and SUD providers, beds, and outpatient care options.
- Workforce recruitment and retention challenges due to low wages, high cost of living, and loss of federal/state funding.
- Systems are overwhelmed, with ERs and jails absorbing unmet care needs.

- **Systemic Inequities and Service Gaps**

- Persistent racial and geographic disparities in access to housing, health care, safety, and economic opportunity.
- Overreliance on jails for behavioral health crises and lack of alternatives for system-involved individuals.
- County systems are siloed, difficult to navigate, and not responsive to community voice or frontline insight.

- **Economic Strain and Workforce Challenges**

- Rising poverty, stagnant wages, and growth in low-paying jobs create a mismatch with cost of living.
- High costs and regulatory complexity deter business development, especially in unincorporated areas.

- Lack of economic development strategy or incentives for business and workforce growth.
- **Infrastructure and Public Safety Concerns**
 - Deteriorating roads, underfunded public transit, and limited multimodal infrastructure reduce quality of life.
 - Perceptions of rising crime, though often not supported by data, drive fear and misaligned policy responses.

2. What comes up for you as you look at this data? What factors might be shaping these patterns or responses?

- **Disconnection Between Data and Public Perception**
 - Despite improvements in crime rates and service access, fear, racism, and misinformation persist—fueled by social media and political narratives.
- **Equity and Inclusion Challenges**
 - Reported increases in concern about racism and discrimination suggest persistent systemic inequities and exclusion, especially for South County, BIPOC, and immigrant communities.
- **Fragmented Systems and Siloed Planning**
 - Lack of coordination across departments leads to duplicated efforts and missed opportunities for efficiency and equity.
- **Data Use and Transparency**
 - There is broad interest in disaggregated data and localized trends to inform decision-making, but limited visibility into how data shapes County priorities.

3. Where have you seen the County make the most meaningful progress or change over the past several years? What factors made this contribution possible?

- **Cross-Sector Collaboration and Community Engagement**

- COVID-19 catalyzed stronger partnerships across health, housing, and social services.
- Increased community engagement and co-design efforts, particularly around youth and behavioral health.
- **Strategic Investments in Health, Housing, and Safety**
 - New clinics, mobile health units, sobering centers, and diversion programs have expanded access.
 - Formation of Housing for Health and coordinated homelessness efforts are seen as key wins.
- **Transparency and Accountability**
 - Growth in public-facing data, contract oversight, and County staff participation in community spaces.
 - More diverse and responsive leadership emerging within departments and on the Board of Supervisors.

4. Where does the County have the most room to improve—and what’s driving these challenges?

- **Equity and Disparity Reduction**
 - Racial disparities persist across systems—especially justice, health, and housing—with few concrete accountability mechanisms in place.
 - Need for disaggregated data, measurable equity goals, and community co-ownership of outcomes.
- **Service and Workforce Infrastructure**
 - County staff shortages, burnout, and low wages reduce system capacity; workforce housing remains a critical gap.
 - Health clinics and behavioral health facilities are under-resourced and financially unstable.
- **Permitting, Planning, and Bureaucracy**
 - Slow and complex processes hinder housing and economic development.

- Residents and businesses experience regulatory burden, fragmented systems, and limited transparency.
- **Emergency Preparedness and Resilience**
 - Climate and public health crises exposed gaps in planning, funding, and infrastructure maintenance.

5. Where do you see the County living up to its Equity Statement—and where are the largest gaps?

- **Areas of Progress**
 - Increased investment in bilingual County staff, youth voice, and South County infrastructure.
 - County partners are showing up in community spaces and collaborating with trusted messengers.
 - Some departments have made strides in transparency, community-based partnerships, and disaggregated reporting.
- **Ongoing Gaps**
 - Equity work is often rhetorical without clear benchmarks, reporting, or budget alignment.
 - Communities of color, renters, and undocumented residents continue to face systemic barriers.
 - Services for rural, immigrant, and unhoused communities remain insufficient and hard to navigate.

6. What role should the County play in supporting services and systems? Where is trust or coordination most needed?

- **Strategic Convener and Systems Leader**
 - County should lead on systems alignment across cities, CBOs, and sectors, especially in housing, health, and safety.
 - Coordination must include community voice and shift from siloed, compliance-driven approaches.
- **Data-Informed, Equity-Centered Governance**

- Leverage data for resource allocation, policy decisions, and cross-agency learning.
 - Ensure transparency in how decisions are made and outcomes are measured.
 - **Champion for Community Wellbeing**
 - Build trust by being visible, responsive, and grounded in community experience.
 - Support non-traditional partnerships and uplift innovative, community-informed practices.
- 7. What would it take for your voice—and your sector’s voice—to be truly reflected in the Strategic Plan? Where should the County go in the Fall?**
- **Deeper, Targeted Community Engagement**
 - Focus on underserved groups: renters, system-involved individuals, youth, seniors, undocumented residents, and rural communities.
 - Go where people already gather: schools, food banks, senior centers, farmers markets, apartment complexes.
 - **Leverage Trusted Messengers and Community Tables**
 - Engage CBO staff and partners as bridges to hard-to-reach populations.
 - Build on existing collaboratives and participant councils to gather feedback safely and inclusively.
 - **Transparent, Action-Oriented Follow-Up**
 - Communicate how community input will be used, what’s in scope for the County, and how decisions will be made.
 - Prioritize representation from marginalized voices in Fall 2025 strategic planning and implementation.

Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors Interview Synthesis

(May 2025)

1. Since you joined the Board, what do you see as some of the County’s most meaningful accomplishments? What contributed to those successes—from the Board, County staff, or community partners?

- **Health & Safety Investments:**
 - Reinstated Public Health nursing
 - Youth Mental Health Crisis Center; 24/7 crisis services
 - Behavioral health expansion in South County
- **Housing & Homelessness:**
 - Housing for Health program seen as successful
 - Advancing the Housing Element and infrastructure projects
 - Notable decrease in homelessness
- **Disaster & Emergency Response:**
 - Strong pandemic and flood responses
 - “All hands on deck” County culture during crises
- **Civic Infrastructure & Engagement:**
 - South County Government Center and Whiting Park
 - Watsonville Hospital saved
 - Youth Supervisor Academy launched
 - New website and civic engagement tools
- **Justice System Reform:**
 - Probation and in-person jail visits prioritized
- **Internal Coordination & Planning:**
 - Strong CEO leadership and strategic budget tools
 - Increased cross-district Board collaboration

2. What have been some of the biggest challenges you’ve seen the County navigate during your time in office? Were those challenges related to systems, resources, leadership, or something else?

- **Systemic & Structural Barriers:**

- FEMA reimbursement delays and disaster recovery bureaucracy
- Planning and permitting bottlenecks, particularly in CDI
- Biased or inequitable service distribution
- Aging population straining services
- Ongoing dysfunction in Community Development and Infrastructure (CDI), especially in Planning and Permitting, cited by nearly all Supervisors as a significant source of delay, inconsistency, and community frustration.
- **Resource Constraints:**
 - Limited property tax base
 - Federal/state cuts to Medi-Cal and public health
 - CORE funding model lacks transparency
- **Leadership & Culture:**
 - Inconsistency in permitting decisions
 - “Service by saying no” culture in some departments
 - Equity values not yet fully embedded across all departments

3. How has your own approach to leadership or your role on the Board evolved since you started? What shifts have you observed in how the Board engages with community priorities?

- **Board-Level Shifts:**
 - Greater collegiality and transparency
 - More intentional public communication
 - Newer Supervisors bringing fresh energy and clarity
- **Supervisor Reflections:**
 - Increased collaboration with state partners
 - More inclusive, consensus-based approaches
 - Opportunities for the Board to lead more boldly

4. Over the past few years, the County has faced major disruptions—like the pandemic, wildfires, flooding, and a deepening housing crisis. How would you describe the County’s ability to adapt and respond? What supported the County’s resilience? What could have helped us respond more effectively?

- **Strengths:**

- Strong COVID-19 and flood responses Community-based organizations, FQHCs, and departments like Public Works and HSA noted for stepping up
- Ability to improvise and respond flexibly in crisis

- **Gaps & Needs:**

- Bureaucratic delays in rebuilding efforts
- Lack of clear emergency roles and MOUs with cities
- Ongoing need for stronger recovery and adaptation systems

5. In your view, how well do County departments and staff reflect the County’s vision, mission, and equity values in their day-to-day work? Where do you see this alignment most clearly? Where is there still room to grow?

- **Where Alignment Shows Up:**

- Health Services Agency, Sheriff’s Office, Behavioral Health, Parks, Public Defender highlighted for community-centered and equity-focused work

- **Ongoing Gaps:**

- Planning and permitting processes—particularly within Community Development and Infrastructure (CDI)—are seen as misaligned with County equity values, due to inconsistent decision-making, outdated procedures, and slow adaptation to urgent community needs.
- Equity not consistently operationalized across all departments
- Internal biases and inequities in decision-making still present

- Need for department-level accountability and equity assessments

6. Are there any key lessons or takeaways you believe the County should carry into the next Strategic Plan? Are there specific values, practices, or approaches we should prioritize?

- **Strategic Priorities:**
 - **Equity & Health in All Policies (HiAP):** Fully integrate across departments, not just in public health
 - **Affordable Housing:** Set measurable housing goals and address affordability in planning
 - **Mental Health & Substance Use:** Expand prevention and early intervention, especially for youth
 - **Infrastructure:** Data-driven investments in roads, broadband, and parks
 - **Climate Resilience:** Center in planning and emergency prep
- **Planning Approaches:**
 - Build in flexibility to shift as needs evolve
 - Strengthen department accountability with clear implementation rubrics
 - Be bold, measurable, and community-driven—avoid business-as-usual

7. Looking ahead, what emerging issues or community needs do you think the next Strategic Plan must address? Where might we need to innovate, shift direction, or do things differently?


- The next Strategic Plan must be ambitious, focused, and measurable.
- Supervisors emphasized the need for bold, outcome-driven goals—not just listings of existing efforts.

- Goals should reflect both urgency and accountability, especially around housing, equity, and emergency response.
- Expanded youth mental health infrastructure and leadership development programming, including 24/7 crisis services and youth civic engagement initiatives.

8. Since the 2018 launch of the County’s Strategic Plan, what is the single most meaningful way you (or your department/organization) have contributed to improving lives in Santa Cruz County?


- Championing housing access and supportive infrastructure
- Increasing behavioral health access in South County
- Creating inclusive, South County-centered infrastructure
- Supporting the Housing for Health initiative
- Elevating transparency and youth development
- Responding in unexpected, community-centered ways
- Supervisors raised concerns that systemic bias in decision-making leads to underinvestment in South County; equity frameworks must include regional distribution data and accountability.
- Expand services and infrastructure for the aging population and develop targeted strategies to retain essential workers through affordable housing and workforce support.
- Make affordable housing delivery a measurable, countywide priority with timelines, targets, and cross-departmental accountability.

Survey Result Slides



**County of Santa Cruz Strategic Plan
Foundational Review**

Tuesday, August 05, 2025

Powered by  SurveyMonkey

1



981
Total Responses

Date Created: Tuesday, April 29, 2025

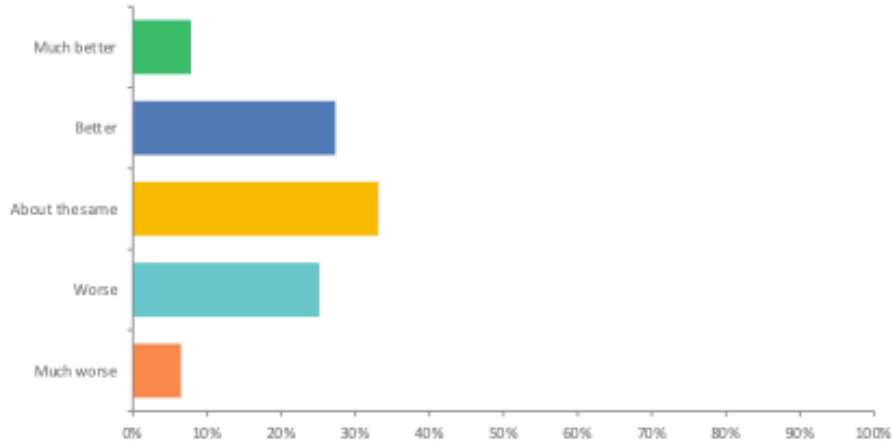
Complete Responses: 981

Powered by  SurveyMonkey

2

Q1: Compared to 2018, how would you rate your overall life satisfaction today?

Answered: 981 Skipped: 0

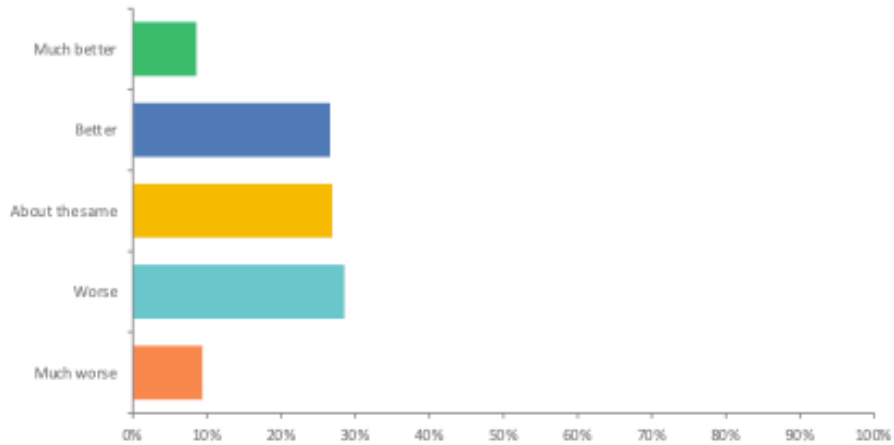


Powered by SurveyMonkey

3

Q2: Compared to 2018, do you feel you are better off financially?

Answered: 981 Skipped: 0

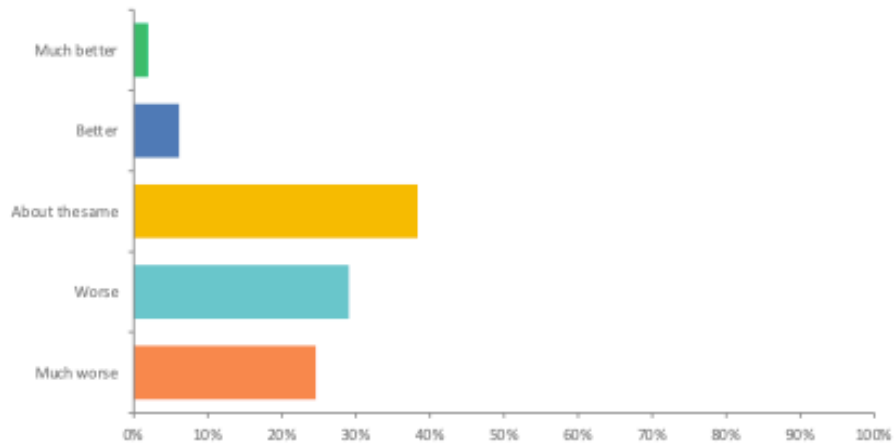


Powered by SurveyMonkey

4

Q3: Compared to 2018, how affordable is your housing situation?

Answered: 981 Skipped: 0

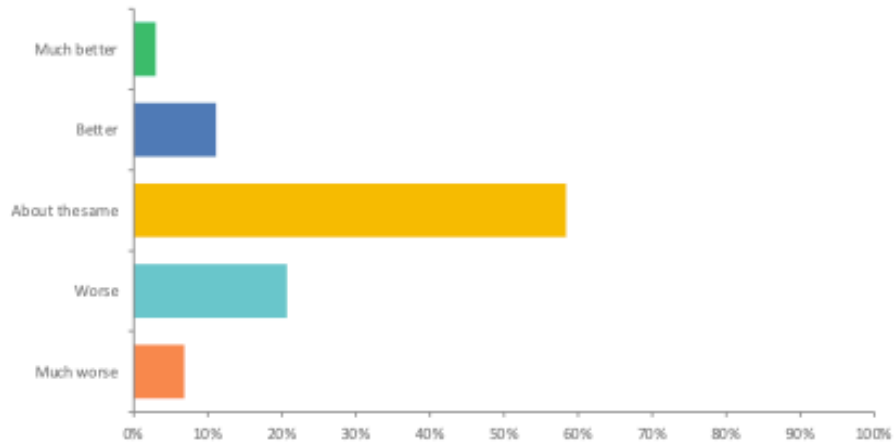


Powered by SurveyMonkey

5

Q4: Compared to 2018, how would you rate your ability to get the health care that you need?

Answered: 981 Skipped: 0

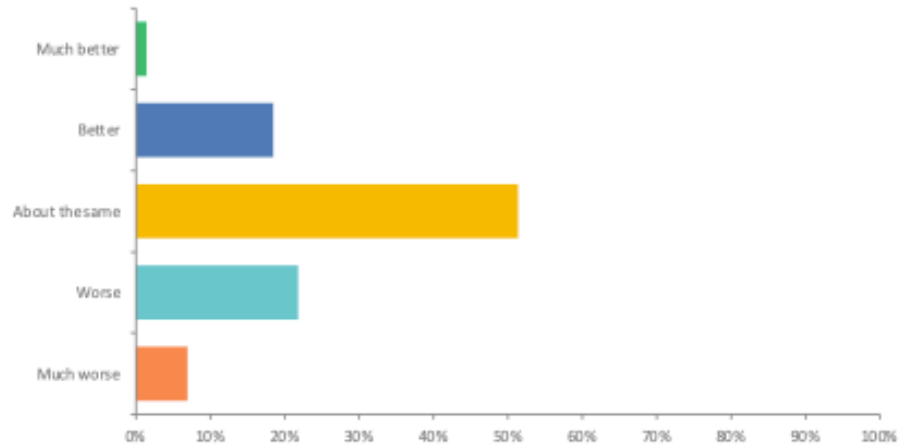


Powered by SurveyMonkey

6

Q5: Compared to 2018, how would you rate the overall quality of County government today?

Answered: 981 Skipped: 0

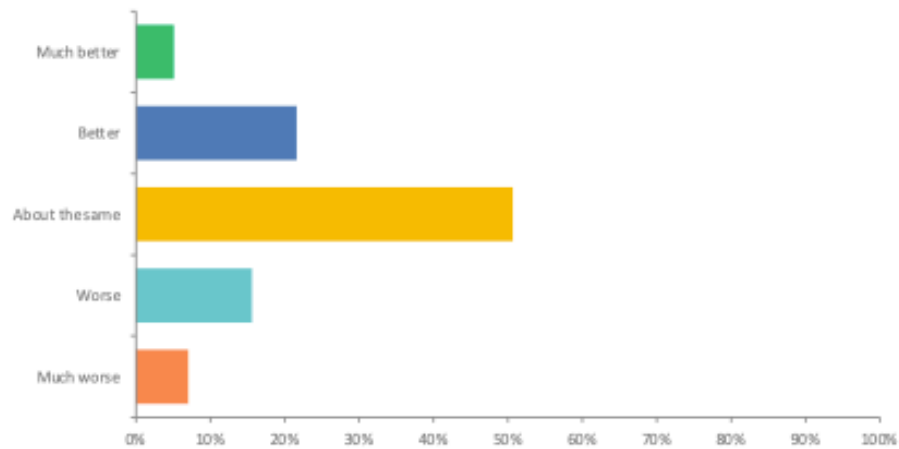


Powered by  SurveyMonkey

7

Q6: Compared to 2018, how strongly do you feel a sense of belonging in Santa Cruz County?

Answered: 981 Skipped: 0

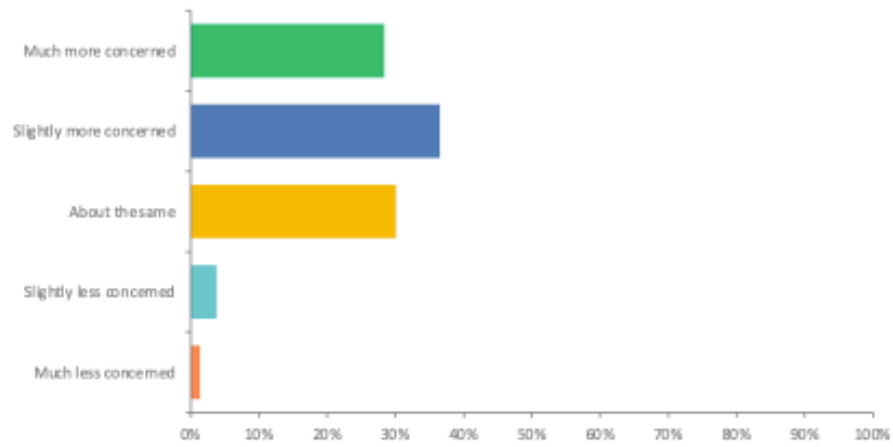


Powered by  SurveyMonkey

8

Q7: Compared to 2018, how concerned are you about the environment in Santa Cruz County?

Answered: 981 Skipped: 0

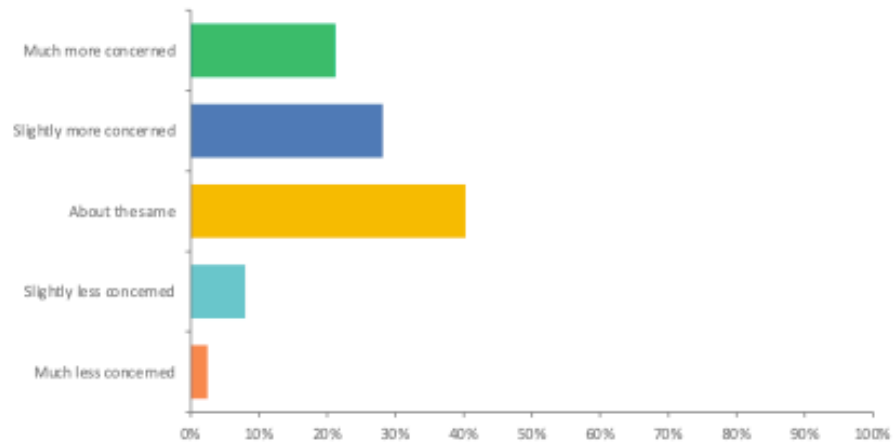


Powered by SurveyMonkey

9

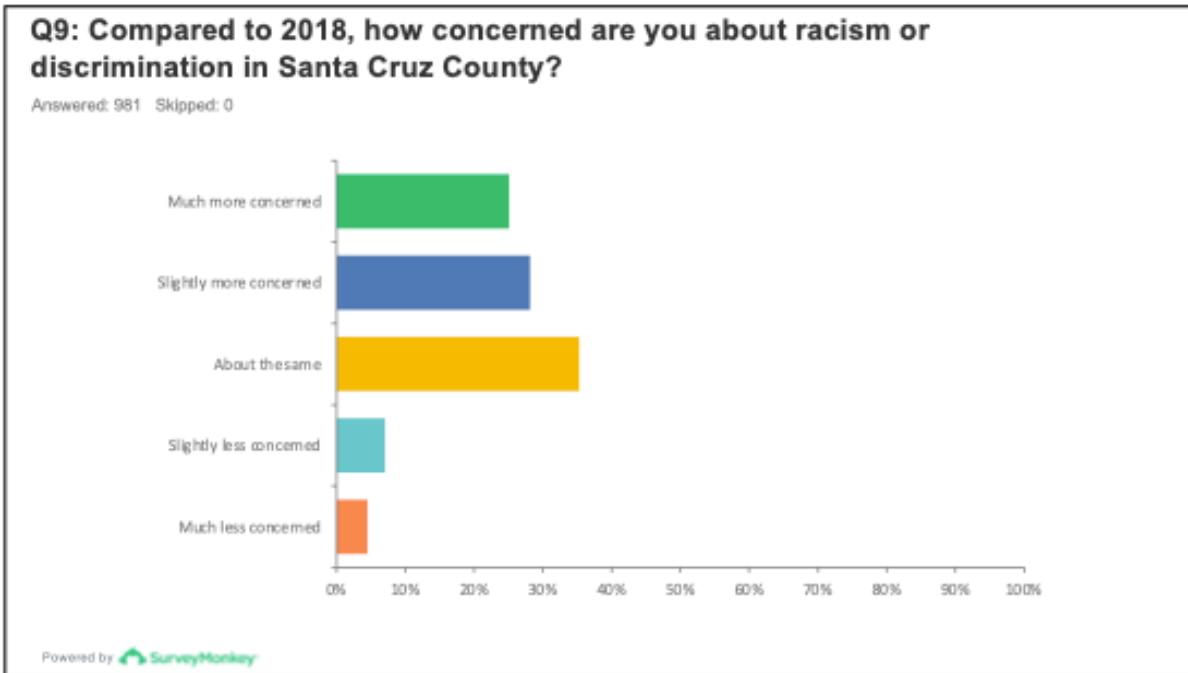
Q8: Compared to 2018, how concerned are you about crime in Santa Cruz County?

Answered: 981 Skipped: 0

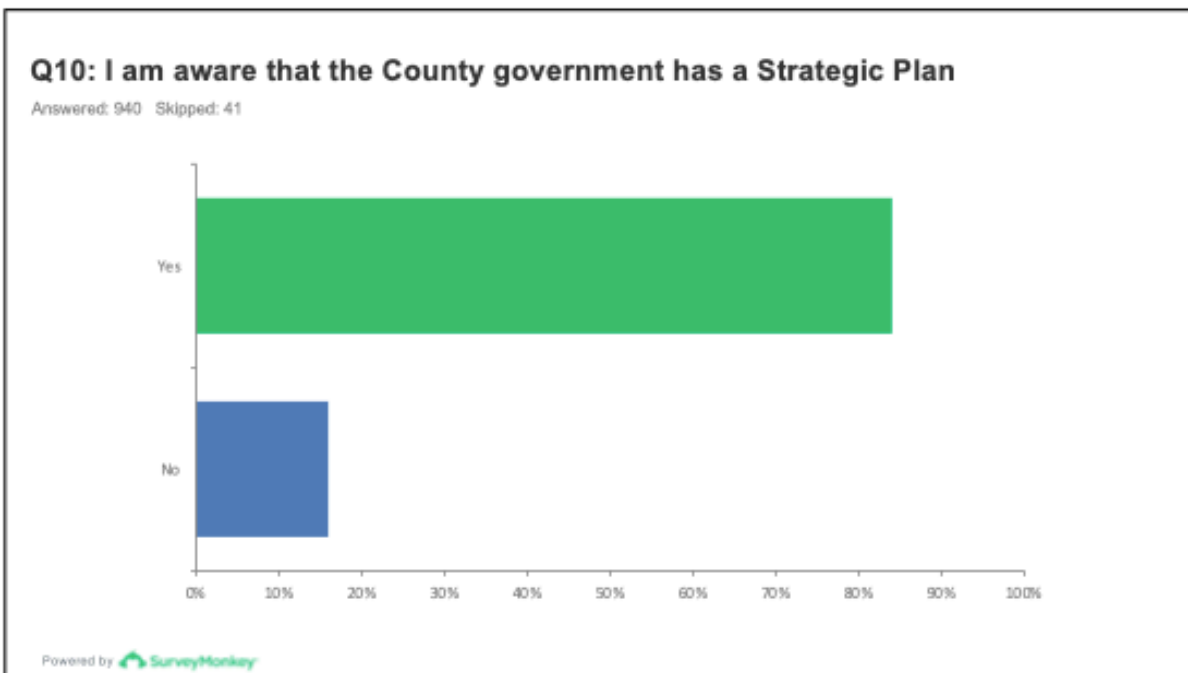


Powered by SurveyMonkey

10



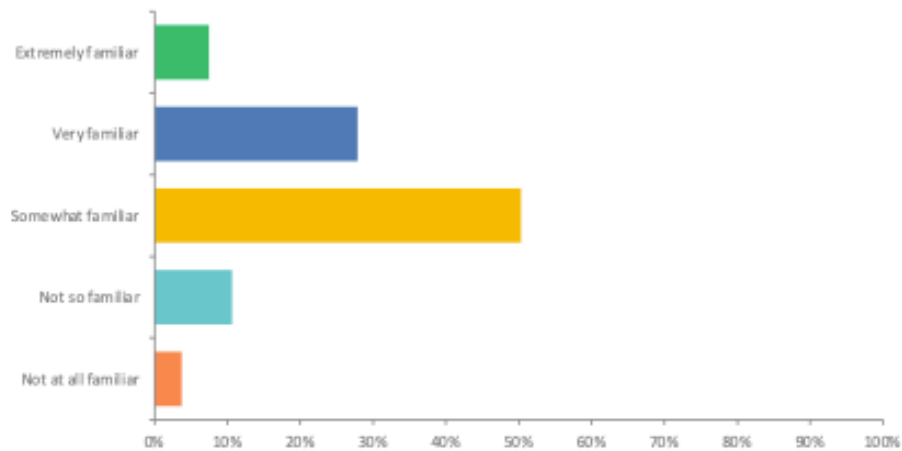
11



12

Q11: I am familiar with the County's vision, mission, values, and equity statement.

Answered: 940 Skipped: 41

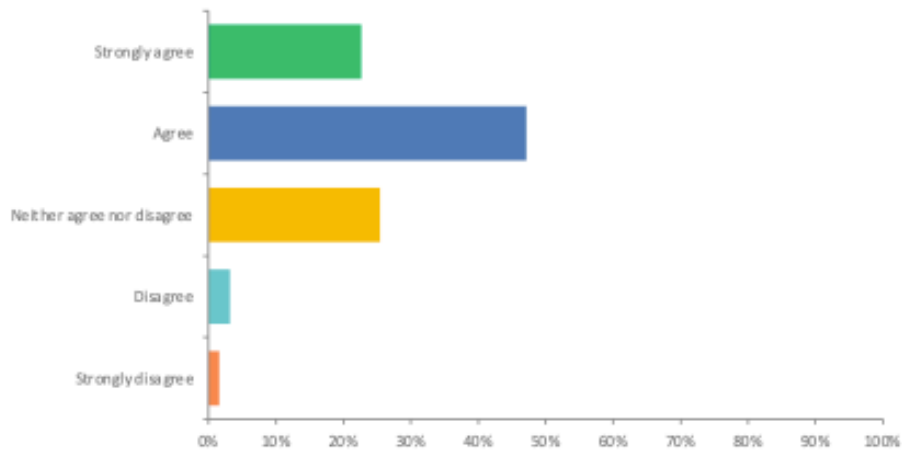


Powered by SurveyMonkey

13

Q12: I feel my work aligns with the County's vision, mission, values, and equity statement.

Answered: 940 Skipped: 41

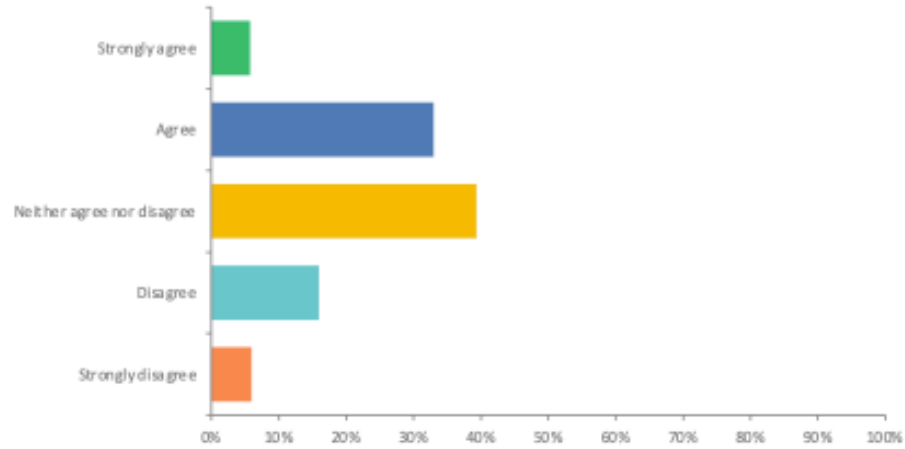


Powered by SurveyMonkey

14

Q13: The County demonstrates accountability to its stated vision, mission, values, and equity goals.

Answered: 940 Skipped: 41

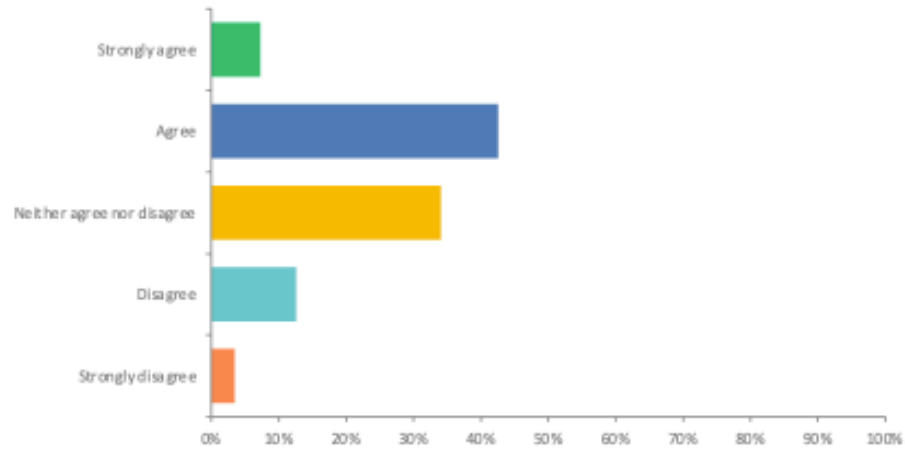


Powered by SurveyMonkey

15

Q14: The County collaborates effectively with community partners and organizations.

Answered: 921 Skipped: 60

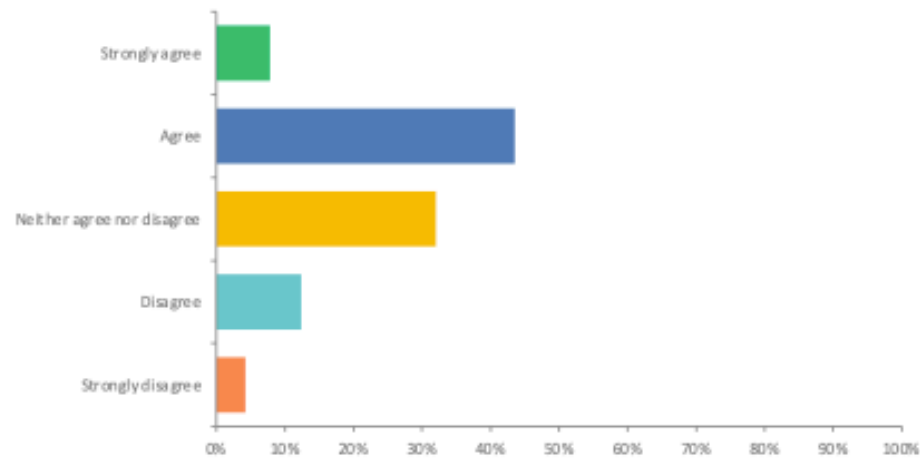


Powered by SurveyMonkey

16

Q15: The County seeks out and values input from community partners.

Answered: 921 Skipped: 60

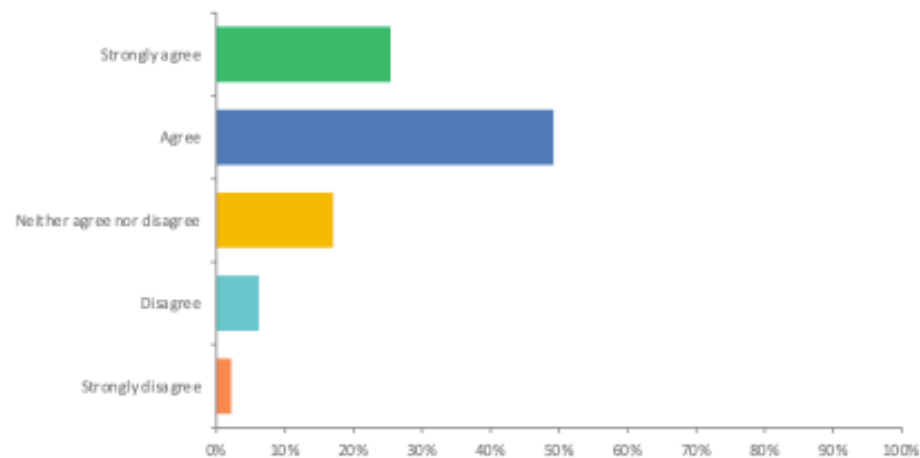


Powered by SurveyMonkey

17

Q16: I know County staff whom I trust and can collaborate with to get things done.

Answered: 921 Skipped: 60

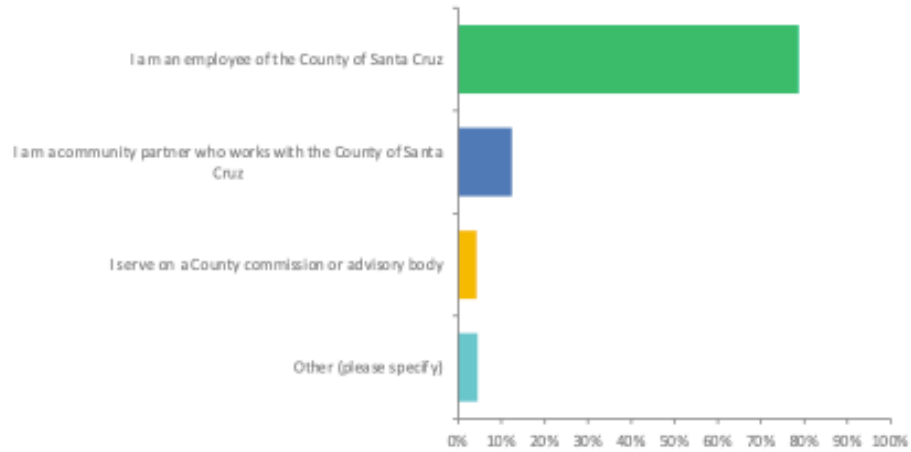


Powered by SurveyMonkey

18

whether you are a County employee or a community partner that works with the County.

Answered: 908 Skipped: 73

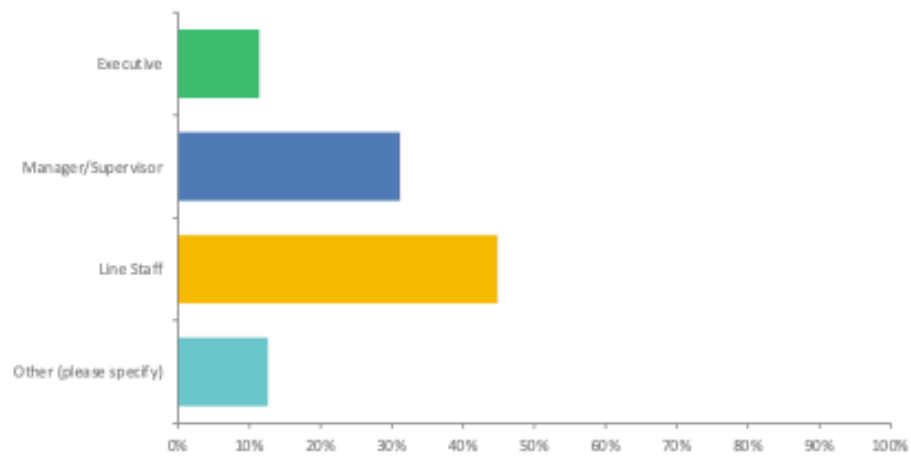


Powered by SurveyMonkey

19

Q24: What is your approximate role in your organization?

Answered: 729 Skipped: 252

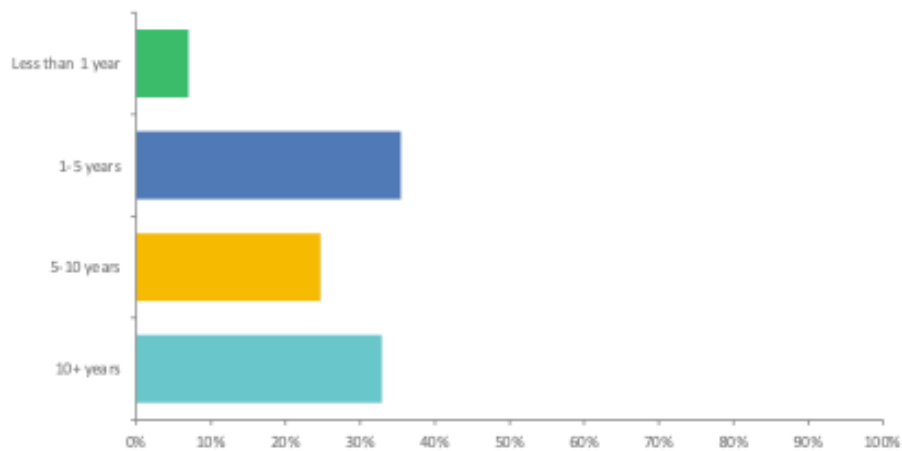


Powered by SurveyMonkey

20

Q25: How long have you worked with your current department or organization?

Answered: 745 Skipped: 236

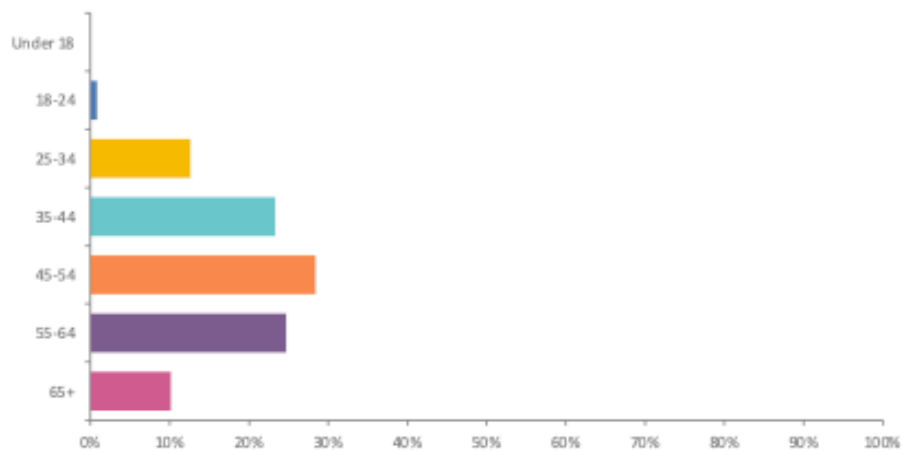


Powered by SurveyMonkey

21

Q27: What is your age?

Answered: 729 Skipped: 252

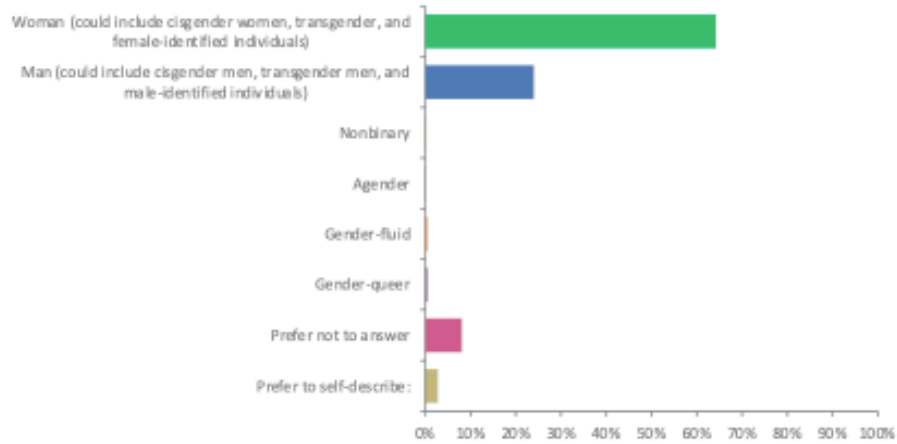


Powered by SurveyMonkey

22

Q28: How would you describe your gender identity?

Answered: 735 Skipped: 246

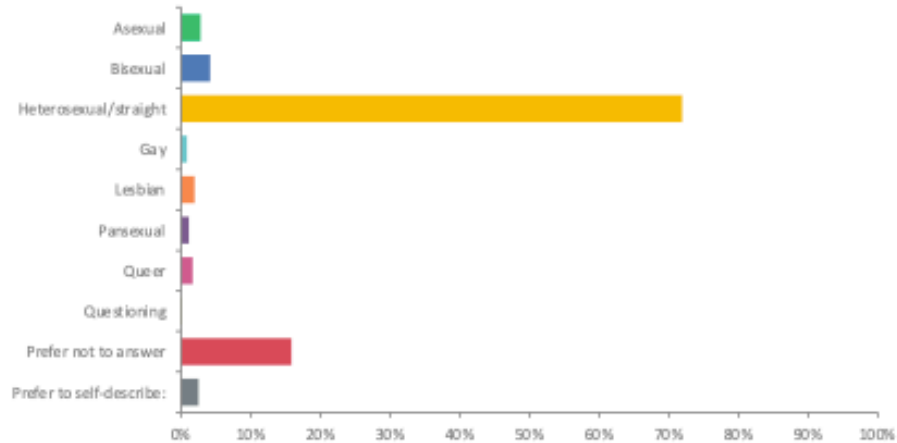


Powered by SurveyMonkey

23

Q29: How would you describe your sexual identity? (Select all that apply.)

Answered: 720 Skipped: 261

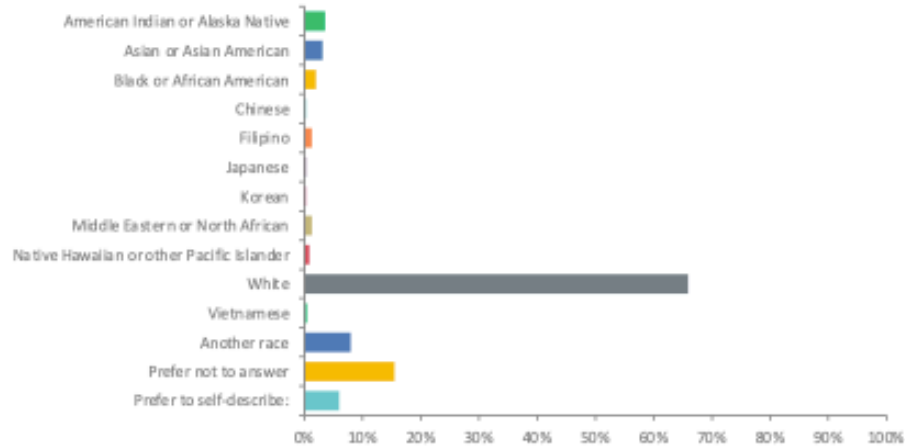


Powered by SurveyMonkey

24

Q30: What is your race? (Select all that apply)

Answered: 704 Skipped: 277

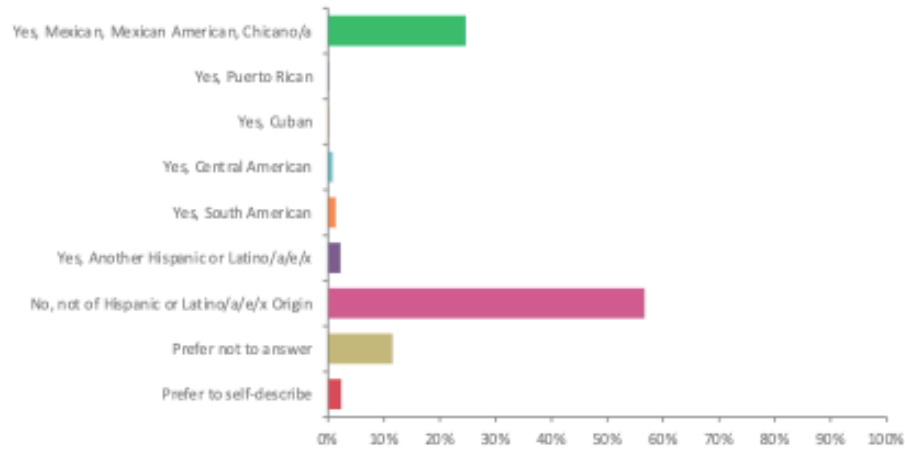


Powered by SurveyMonkey

25

Q31: Are you Hispanic or Latino/a/e/x?

Answered: 718 Skipped: 263



Powered by SurveyMonkey

26

Qualitative Survey Response Themes

What would it take for you to feel more trusting of the County? (County Staff)

- **Transparency & Communication:** Staff want honest, timely updates and consistent messaging, especially regarding budget and staffing decisions.
- **Equity & Accountability:** Concerns about favoritism and inequity in promotions, evaluations, and workload.
- **Inclusion in Decision-Making:** Staff feel their feedback is solicited but not used meaningfully.
- **Compensation & Conditions:** Requests for COLA, flexibility, and support amidst burnout.
- **Leadership & Culture:** Desire for transparent, responsive leadership and a workplace culture rooted in trust.

What would it take for you to feel more trusting of the County? (Community Partners)

- **Transparency & Communication:** Desire for clarity on budget, contracts, and strategic priorities.
- **Funding Equity:** Concerns about sustainability and fairness in resource distribution.
- **Authentic Collaboration:** Frustration with top-down decision-making and performative engagement.
- **Administrative Barriers:** Outdated systems, slow processes, and excessive bureaucracy hinder timely collaboration and service delivery.
- **Equity in Action:** Need for tangible changes in leadership, funding, and representation.

Since the 2018 launch of the County’s Strategic Plan, what is the single most meaningful way you (or your department/organization) have contributed to improving lives in Santa Cruz County?

- **Direct Services:** Focus on underserved groups through housing, health, food, and crisis support.
- **Collaborations:** Successful efforts like Housing for Health and Youth Homeless Demonstration Project.
- **Equity & Inclusion:** Emphasis on cultural responsiveness and increasing access.
- **Disaster Response:** Pandemic and wildfire efforts strengthened trust and coordination.
- **Youth & Families:** Services for mental health, early learning, and childcare.
- **Civic Engagement:** Amplifying community voice and inclusive policy feedback.
- **Arts & Infrastructure:** Contributions to culture, broadband, and housing improvements.

What Helps or Hinders Collaboration with the County?

- **Helps:** Strong relationships, shared goals, clear communication, and resource access.
- **Hinders:** Bureaucracy, inconsistent processes, funding delays, and lack of transparency.
- **Capacity Blind Spots:** Processes that overburden or overlook nonprofit realities.

In your role, how have you seen the Strategic Plan shape department priorities or operations?

- **Positive:** Some departments use it for priority-setting, equity efforts, and service expansion.

- **Mixed:** Others are aware but see little operational impact; viewed more as guidance than strategy.
- **Critical:** Described as aspirational, top-down, or disconnected from frontline realities.

Various Resource Reports:

1. [Age Well Santa Cruz County Community Needs Assessment](#) (2024)
2. [Art & Economic Prosperity 6](#) (2023)
3. [Community Action Board's Community Action Plan](#) (2017–2018)
4. [Community Action Board's Community Action Plan](#) (2024–2025)
5. [Community Assessment Project](#) (2019)
6. [Community Health Assessment](#) (2024)
7. [County Overview of Drug-Related Deaths](#) (2023)
8. [Diagnosing the Crisis in Behavioral Health](#) (2023)
9. [EEO Survey](#) (2022)
10. [First 5 Santa Cruz County Annual Evaluation Report](#) (2017–2018)
11. [First 5 Santa Cruz County Annual Evaluation Report](#) (2023–24)
12. [Human Services Department Annual Report](#) (2017–18)
13. [Human Services Department Annual Report](#) (2022–23)
14. [Monterey Bay Economic Partnership – Data Insights](#)
15. [Rapid Community Assessment Report](#) (March–April 2023)
16. [The Real Cost Measure in California](#) (2023)
17. [Santa Cruz County 2024 Homelessness Point-in-Time Count & Report](#)
18. [Santa Cruz County Black Health Matters Spotlight](#) (2021–2022)
19. [Santa Cruz County Homeless Census & Survey](#) (2017)
20. [Santa Cruz County Homeless Census & Survey](#) (Comprehensive Report 2019)
21. [Santa Cruz County State of the Workforce](#) (2024)
22. [The State of Health in Santa Cruz County](#) (April 2023)
23. [Youth Adult Partnership Survey](#) (2024)
24. [Watsonville Community Hospital Community Needs Assessment](#) (2023)

References

California Department of Housing and Community Development. (2025). *Housing inventory growth in Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.hcd.ca.gov/planning-and-community-development/housing-element-implementation-and-apr-dashboard>

County of Santa Cruz. (2025). *Pavement condition by road class*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.santacruzcountyca.gov/VisionSantaCruz/CommunityResults.aspx>
[X](#)

County of Santa Cruz. (2025). *Probation case closures*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.santacruzcountyca.gov/VisionSantaCruz/CommunityResults.aspx>
[X](#)

County of Santa Cruz. (2025). *Violent crime rate per 1,000 residents, California and Santa Cruz County and unincorporated areas*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from [https://www.santacruzcountyca.gov/VisionSantaCruz/CommunityResults/Tra
nsparencyPortal.aspx](https://www.santacruzcountyca.gov/VisionSantaCruz/CommunityResults/Tra TRANSPARENCYPortal.aspx)

DataShare Santa Cruz County. (2025). *Adults without health insurance, Santa Cruz County average and South County average*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from [https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=90&localeT
ypeld=28&periodId=246](https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=90&localeType=28&periodId=246)

DataShare Santa Cruz County. (2025). *Families living below 200% of poverty level in Santa Cruz County, by region*. Retrieved June 5, 2025, from

<https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=12167&localeTypeId=28&periodId=4523>

DataShare Santa Cruz County. (2025). *People delayed or had difficulty obtaining care in Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=344&localeId=281&localeChartIdx=1>

DataShare Santa Cruz County. (2025). *Self-reported poor mental health days, Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=368&localeId=281>

DataShare Santa Cruz County. (2025). *Workers who drive alone to work in Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.datasharescc.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=530&localeId=281>

Housing for Health Partnership. (2024). *2024 Point-in-Time count: Executive summary*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from https://housingforhealthpartnership.org/Portals/29/HAP/Providers/Data/H4HP_2024PITCount_Executive%20Summary.pdf

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (2025). *Global atmospheric CO₂ concentration*. Retrieved June 5, 2025, from <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/e5bb44474dc84990b6411598bcdcdffb0>

U.S. Department of Energy. (2025). *Alternative fueling station locator: Public EV charging stations in Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved June 5, 2025, from

https://afdc.energy.gov/fuels/electricity-locations#/analyze?region=US-CA&tab=fuel&fuel=ELEC&ev_levels=all

U.S. Census Bureau. (2018). *Means of transportation to work in Santa Cruz County* [Table B08134]. 2014–2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved June 3, 2025.

Workforce Development Board of Santa Cruz County. (2025). *2025 State of the workforce report: Santa Cruz County*. Retrieved July 30, 2025, from <https://workforcescc.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/2025-SOW-Report-4.5-Final.pdf>