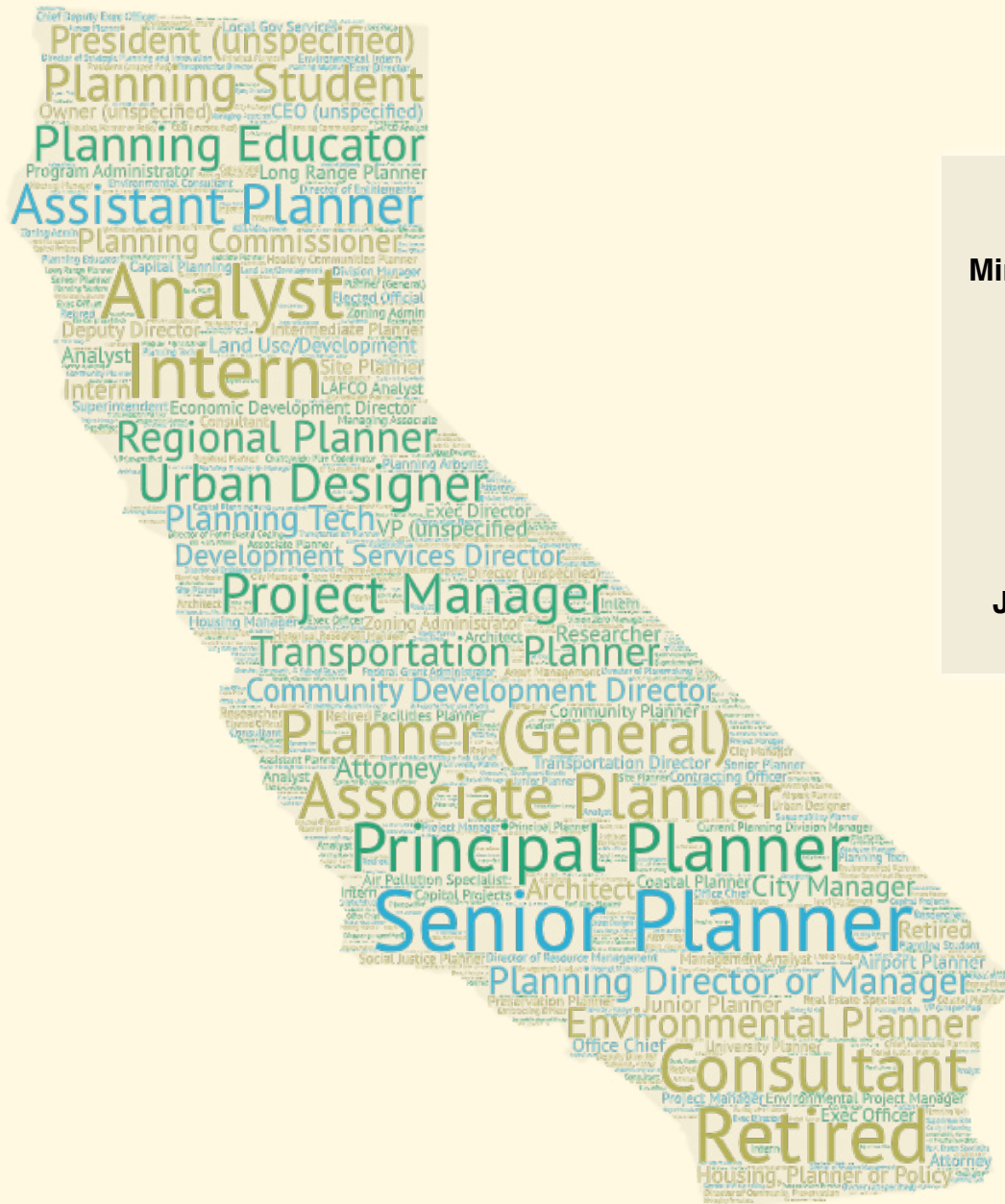




American Planning Association  
**California Chapter**

*Creating Great Communities*

# *The Planning Profession in California: Results from a Survey of the State’s Planners*



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# Executive Summary

APA California has a rich history dating back to the 1930s. As the planning profession has grown in California, so too has APA California. In 2019, the organization had close to 7,000 members. Yet despite its size and longevity, until recently APA California did not have detailed information about its membership. As a remedy to this, in 2019, the APA California board commissioned a first-of-its-kind survey that was distributed to planners across the state (members and nonmembers alike) to take the pulse of the “State of the Planning Profession in California” and collect baseline data. Close to 800 planners completed the survey and this report shares the findings.<sup>1</sup>

The survey contained 40 questions and the responses were organized into three sections. Key findings include the following:

## Demographics and Professional Experience

- *Gender:* 50.5 percent of the respondents identify as male and 48 percent identify as female.
- *Race and Ethnicity:* The respondents are majority White (68.4 percent) followed by Asian (12.1 percent), Latino/Hispanic (9.4 percent), African American/Black (3.4 percent) and Native American (0.2 percent).
- *Age:* Approximately 70 percent of the survey respondents are between the ages of 26 and 55.
- *Income:* Half of the survey respondents (49.8 percent) report an annual income of over \$100,000.
- *Location of Employment:* The majority of respondents work in urban areas (61.3 percent) with close to one-third (30 percent) working in suburban areas and 4.3 percent practicing planning in rural areas.

## Engagement with APA

- *Value of an APA Membership:* Respondents identified many merits of APA membership with networking most frequently cited, followed by APA serving as a “support system” or “planning community.”
- *Participation in APA Membership:* Respondents utilize many components of their APA membership with a strong preference towards publications such as reading *Planning*, the monthly APA National publication (55.2 percent of respondents), and reading APA California Section newsletters (53.5 percent). Participation in the APA California Chapter annual conference was also cited by many respondents (44.2 percent).

## Career Development

- *Undergraduate Planning Education:* While only 33 percent of respondents indicated that they have an undergraduate degree in planning, 88 percent of respondents with a bachelor’s degree in planning believe that their planning degree has been useful for their career.

- *Graduate Planning Education:* Of those respondents with a graduate education, 50 percent indicated that they have a graduate degree in planning and 94 percent of these respondents believe that their planning degree has been useful for their career.
- *Educational Institutions:* A majority of the respondents with a graduate degree (64 percent) received their degree from a public university in California.
- *Skills Desired by Planning Employers:* Respondents in a hiring or supervisory position indicate that strong communication, writing and analytical skills are highly desired when they hire planners.
- *Skills Desired by Planning Practitioners:* Skills identified as most important to respondents' success in their planning career include project management and analytical and organizational skills.
- *AICP Certification Status:* A majority of the California-based planners in our sample (59.5 percent) indicate that they are members of AICP with planners under the age of 35 much less likely to have AICP certification than older planners.
- *Value of AICP Certification:* When asked if AICP certification has been valuable to one's career, 62 percent of the survey participants with this certification responded in the affirmative.
- *Most Compelling Future Challenges (in late 2019 when the survey was administered):* Recognizing that the survey was administered prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, at the time of the survey respondents indicated that affordable housing, climate change and aging infrastructure are the most compelling future challenges that planners in California need to address.

## Reflections and Future Steps

This survey was designed to capture the pulse of the state of the planning profession in California. The responses indicate that the vitals are strong, but there are also areas in need of more attention. Foremost, at present the planning profession in California does not adequately represent the rich diversity of the state. More needs to be done to create pipelines for increased diversity in the profession. According to the responses received, the profession is also heavily skewed towards planning practice in urban and suburban areas. This finding should be explored in more depth to better ascertain, understand, and respond to planning challenges and opportunities in our rural communities. Our urban, suburban and rural communities are inextricably interwoven.

Due to the positive response to this inaugural survey effort, we recommend that APA California board members develop and institutionalize a regular method for surveying its membership. This would provide longitudinal information on trends over time. For example, as data is collected over time, APA California could better measure the extent to which it is becoming a more inclusive profession that genuinely reflects the state's demographics. It could also track and ascertain the extent to which planning schools are adequately preparing their students to confidently and authoritatively address the many challenges our state will confront in the coming decades. Of particular importance to the APA California Board, it could continue to document and respond to the ways in which California planners are finding measurable value from their APA membership. We also recommend that APA California develop and institutionalize a regular method for surveying planning students in Planning Accreditation Board (PAB) accredited and non-accredited programs. These students are the future of planning in California and their motivations and interests should be understood.



## Remarks from APA California's Past President

The purpose of any professional organization is to help its members strive for excellence. As the planning profession has grown in California, so too has APA California. In 2019, when I started my term as president, we had almost 7,000 members. California is a diverse state in all senses of the word and the communities we plan for reflect this diversity in the issues they face. What did our members need to meet the challenges they faced? How could APA support them so they could help their communities thrive? As APA California approached its 75th year as an association, we knew very little about our membership. Who were they? How did they feel about the profession? And most importantly, how could APA California support them to reach our shared mission of making great communities?

As a remedy to this, in 2019, the APA California board commissioned a first-of-its-kind survey that was distributed to planners across the state (members and nonmembers alike) to take the pulse of the “State of the Planning Profession in California” and collect baseline data. Close to 800 planners completed the survey.

I am so pleased to present this report which summarizes the results of our chapter's first-ever member survey. I hope that you will use it as an opportunity to reflect on where we stand today as a profession. You'll learn about the demographic makeup of our members, how they engage with the American Planning Association, factors that shaped their career development, and the most compelling challenges that we as planners will face in the future.

It is my hope that this survey will be conducted regularly so that we may continue to chart the state of our profession over time with the goal of supporting our members and advancing professional excellence. If you have questions or responses to the findings of this report, please contact Marc Yeber, Vice President for Marketing and Membership at [marketing@apacalifornia.org](mailto:marketing@apacalifornia.org) so that they may be shared with the APA California Board.

I want to recognize our University Liaisons Rick Kos and Mirle Rabinowitz Bussell, our Board Student Representative Elizabeth Owen and Jana Ruijgrok Neubauerova for their dedication to this project and to a job well done.

I believe that working together, planners can lead our state through the current challenges we face and rise to meet whatever the future holds. Together we can create not just resilient communities, but great communities.

**Julia Lave Johnston, Immediate Past President**  
APA California Chapter



# Part I – Background

## 1.1 Introduction

As the American Planning Association entered its one hundredth year, the California Chapter of the APA sponsored a statewide survey of its nearly 7,000 members and other planners from across the state.<sup>2</sup> The objective of the Fall 2019 survey was to take the pulse of the “State of the Planning Profession in California” and address questions such as: Are we as planners up for the challenges facing our communities? How do planners and others feel about the profession? Is APA providing planners with the support they need to be successful? Do young people still see planning as a desirable profession?

In short, the objective of the survey was to help us better address the future of the planning profession in California. This was the first time that APA California reached out to its full membership in the form of a survey. A total of 787 planners completed the survey and they had a lot to say. Their views are captured in this report.

The findings will be shared with both public and private planning organizations, as well as National APA. We hope that the survey results will be of interest and have practical value to California planners. For example, the state’s academic planning programs might use the findings to develop and invest in curriculum development that will better support planners and the planning profession.

The survey consisted of three sections:

- **Demographics and Professional Experience:** This section collected information about the respondents, including their length of time in the profession, job title, sector in which they work (or from which they retired), areas of specialization, location of employment, age, and salary. We also included questions about the respondents’ racial/ethnic identity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. While some respondents were not comfortable sharing this information, we included these questions in order to align our findings with National APA surveys which collect data on these personal characteristics.
- **Engagement with APA:** This section queried respondents’ interactions with the American Planning Association. We collected information on APA membership status, thoughts on the value of APA membership to their career, and the respondents’ participation in various APA activities such as conferences and webinars.
- **Career Development:** This section included questions about the respondents’ academic path, their perceived value of their degree(s) to their career development, factors that led to their choice of planning as a career, skills and knowledge that they use/possess or wish to strengthen, and participation in AICP. Also included were questions for respondents who have been in a position to hire new planners and the skills that they feel are the most essential qualities in a new planning hire. We also asked questions about planning practice and opinions regarding the most compelling challenges that planners in California need to address.

## 1.2 The State of APA California

***APA California has approximately 7,000 members and is one of the largest state APA chapters in the United States.***

APA California has approximately 7,000 members and is one of the largest state APA chapters in the United States. It is divided into eight different regional sections ranging from the San Diego Section at the southernmost border to the Sacramento Valley and Northern Sections towards the northernmost reaches of the state. The survey findings presented in this report provide a rich, albeit not complete, portrait of planners across the state that enhances basic membership data collected annually by APA California.

APA California has been a presence in the state for over 75 years. It is one of the oldest state APA chapters and has a history that began in the early 1930s with the establishment of the California Planners Institute (CPI). From the beginning, planning in California was distinct and differed from the ways that planning was practiced on the East Coast and had a much greater emphasis on urban design and the environment compared to the rest of the country. As such, it made sense for California to have its own professional planning organization. In 1948, the CPI merged with the American Institute of Planners (AIP). In 1978, when AIP merged with the American Society of Planning Officials to become the American Planning Association, the California Chapter of the American Planning Association was established.<sup>3</sup>

As with most professional organizations in the early to mid-part of the 20th century, early membership in APA California lacked diversity. For example, in the year preceding CPI's merger with AIP, a CPI membership publication listed 102 planners, of whom only five were women. Racial and ethnic diversity was equally dismal. It would take many decades for women's involvement with planning, and APA California, to achieve closer parity to their male colleagues. The 1970s saw APA California elect its first woman as chapter president, Dorothy Walker. Also at this time, Margarita P. McCoy became the first woman to receive the rank of full professor in planning as well as the first female chairperson of an academic planning department (at Cal Poly Pomona).<sup>4</sup>

Racial and ethnic minorities continued to be underrepresented in the profession well through the 20th century. In fact, planners of color were not even mentioned in chapter publications until the 1960s and these references were infrequent. Despite their lack of visibility, planners of color had a significant impact on the state. Planning academics such as Dr. Edward Blakely and Dr. Leobardo Estrada had a significant impact on planning practice and pedagogy.<sup>5</sup>

As illustrated by the findings presented in this report, planning practice in California has diversified in the 21st century, but we still have a long way to go as planners to build a constituency that reflects the communities we serve.



## 1.3 About the Survey

***This survey was the first of its kind of the entire membership of APA California***

As noted previously, this was the first survey of its kind of the entire membership of APA California. As such, the content is original but informed by prior surveys of planners and the planning profession, including the 2018 Planners Salary Survey conducted by APA National and the American Institute of Certified Planners.

The survey was administered using a web-based portal. The survey instrument was prepared by a committee of planning academics and practitioners in consultation with the board of APA California.<sup>6</sup> The survey was designed in spring 2019, piloted in early August 2019, and revised and completed by the end of August 2019. The survey consisted of 40 total questions. Some of the questions were open-ended and some of the questions were optional. As such, responses for some of the questions did not receive full participation. The data analysis accounts for this.

The survey was widely publicized at the State and Section levels and was announced in Section and Chapter newsletters, websites, e-blasts and other publications. It was launched to coincide with the start of the APA California state conference held in Santa Barbara, September 15-18, 2019. In an effort to capture the breadth and depth of planning in California, the survey was open to participation from members and non-members of APA.

The introduction to the survey included a message from Julia Lave Johnston, then-President of APA California, providing context on the survey's intent and significance. It also offered the opportunity for participants to be entered into a drawing to win a free registration to a future APA California state conference.

Analysis of the survey responses was completed by a team of faculty and students from the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at San José State University and the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the University of California, San Diego. The findings are presented in the following sections.

# Part 2 – Findings

## 2.1 Demographics and Professional Experience

### Gender Identity

This question was designed to be as inclusive as possible and respondents were directed to self-identify gender affiliation. The responses were coded into five categories: Male, Female, Non-conforming, Transgender, and Other.<sup>7</sup>

As shown in Figure 1, of this group, men represent 50.5 percent and women represent 48 percent of the respondents. Four respondents (0.6 percent) identify as gender non-conforming and one (0.2 percent) identifies as transgender.

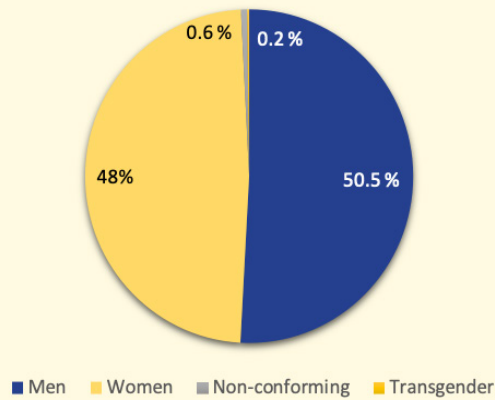


Figure 1: Survey Respondents' Gender Identity

### Race and Ethnicity

One important survey question — of especially high interest to the APA California Board members in particular — asked respondents to indicate their race and/or ethnicity. Similar to the question on gender identity, respondents were directed to self-identify their race and/or ethnicity. The responses were coded into six categories:

Asian, African American/Black, White, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and Other.<sup>8</sup> Figure 2 shows that White planners account for 68.4 percent of respondents while Non-White respondents represent 31.6 percent. California planners who responded to the survey identified their race/ethnicity as follows:

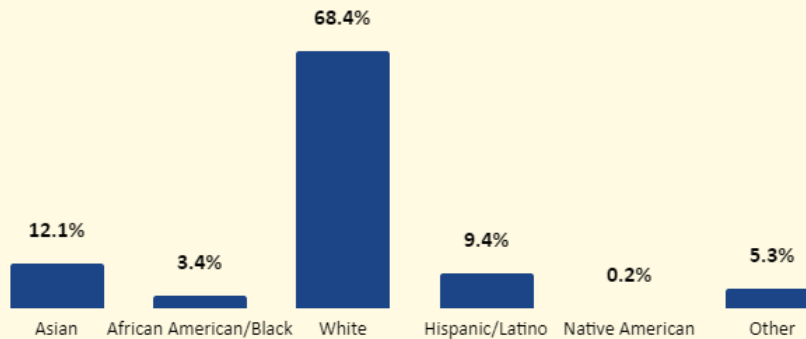


Figure 2: Survey Respondents' Race

## Race Relative to California Population

For comparison, according to the US Census estimates for 2019, the racial/ethnic distribution in California is as follows:

- White (36.8 percent)
- Asian (15.3 percent)
- Latino/Hispanic (39.3 percent)
- African American/Black (6.5 percent)
- American Indian and Alaska Native (1.6 percent)

The data show that the ethnic and racial distribution of California planners generally does not reflect the racial and ethnic distribution of Californians.

## Age

Along with the race and ethnicity of planners in California, we were eager to develop a sense of the age distribution of the state's planners. Respondents were asked to select their age based on seven different ranges. The distribution of ages is as follows:

### Survey Respondents' Age (n=753)

- Younger than 25 (4.8 percent)
- 26 - 35 years (22.4 percent)
- 36 - 45 years (26.3 percent)
- 46 - 55 years (21.6 percent)
- 56 - 65 years (15.8 percent)
- 66 - 74 years (6.8 percent)
- 75 and older (2.3 percent)

Approximately 70 percent of the survey respondents are between the ages of 26 and 55. As shown in Figure 3, cross-tabulated data indicates that the older participants in the survey identify as White at much higher rates than younger participants. Also, older participants in the survey identify as male at higher rates than younger participants (see Figure 4).

**The data show that the ethnic and racial distribution of California planners generally does not reflect the racial and ethnic distribution of Californians.**

This may suggest targeted efforts that California APA members can undertake to invite a wider group of people to consider pursuing a career in urban planning.

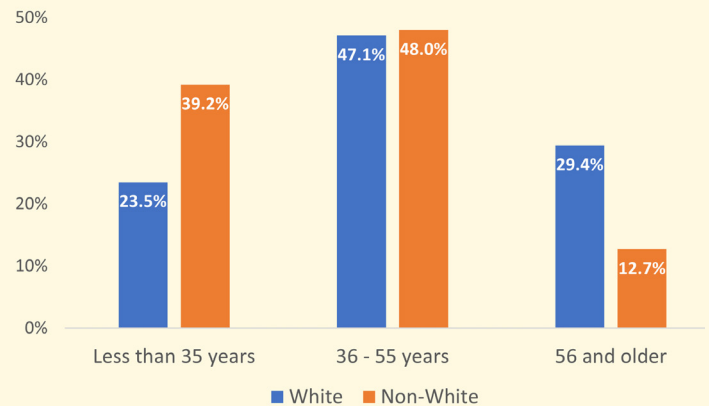


Figure 3: Respondents' Age by Race

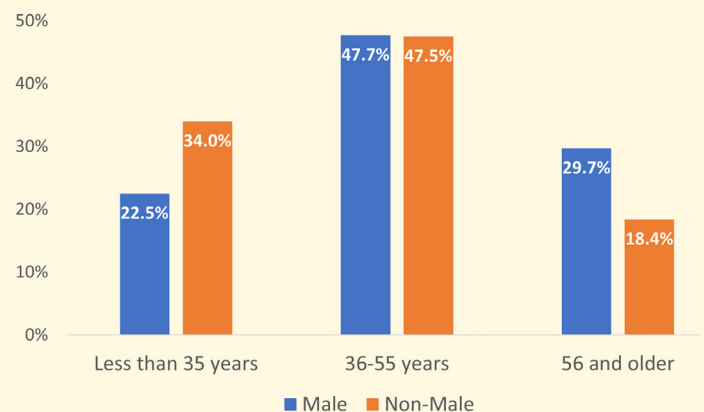


Figure 4: Respondents' Age by Gender

## Annual Income

**Half of the survey respondents report an annual income of over \$100,000 with one third earning over \$125,000 annually.**

It should be noted that 10.9 percent of our respondents chose not to disclose income information. The data also indicate that 72.9 percent of survey respondents who practice planning in California earn an annual income greater than the state's median household income in 2019. Income distribution of the respondents is shown below.

When we look at the income data by gender as shown in Figures 5 and 6 below, we see that, compared to all of the respondents, a higher percentage of men earn more than the median household income in California. Similarly, a higher percentage of White respondents earn salaries near the median household income in California compared to other races and ethnicities.

### Survey Respondents' 2019 Reported Annual Income (n=753)

- Less than \$40k (4.9 percent)
- \$40k - \$59k (4.2 percent)
- \$60k - \$79k (15 percent)
- \$80k - \$99k (15.1 percent)
- \$100k - \$124k (21.5 percent)
- \$125k and more (28.3 percent)
- Prefer not to answer (10.9 percent)

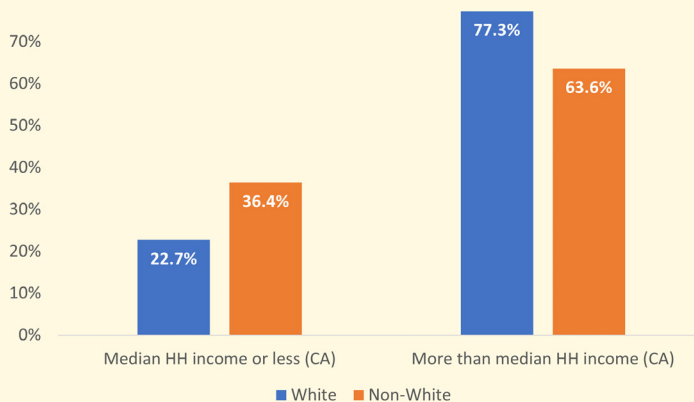


Figure 5: Respondents' Income by Race

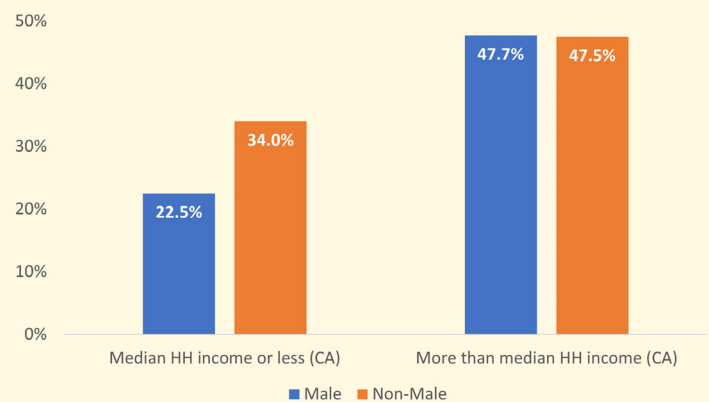


Figure 6: Respondents' Income by Gender

## Location of Employment

With an interest in different dimensions of diversity among California's planners, the survey also included questions on another aspect of diversity: the locations in which our state's planners engage the public across California's vast expanse. The survey responses indicate that most California planners work in urban

areas (59.3 percent). Almost one-third (30 percent) work in suburban areas and 4.3 percent of respondents noted that they practice planning in rural areas. Only two percent of respondents indicated that they work in exurban areas.

## County of Employment

California has 58 counties and survey respondents represent 40 of them. As shown in Figure 7 below, 43 percent of survey respondents are employed in Southern California (Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties).

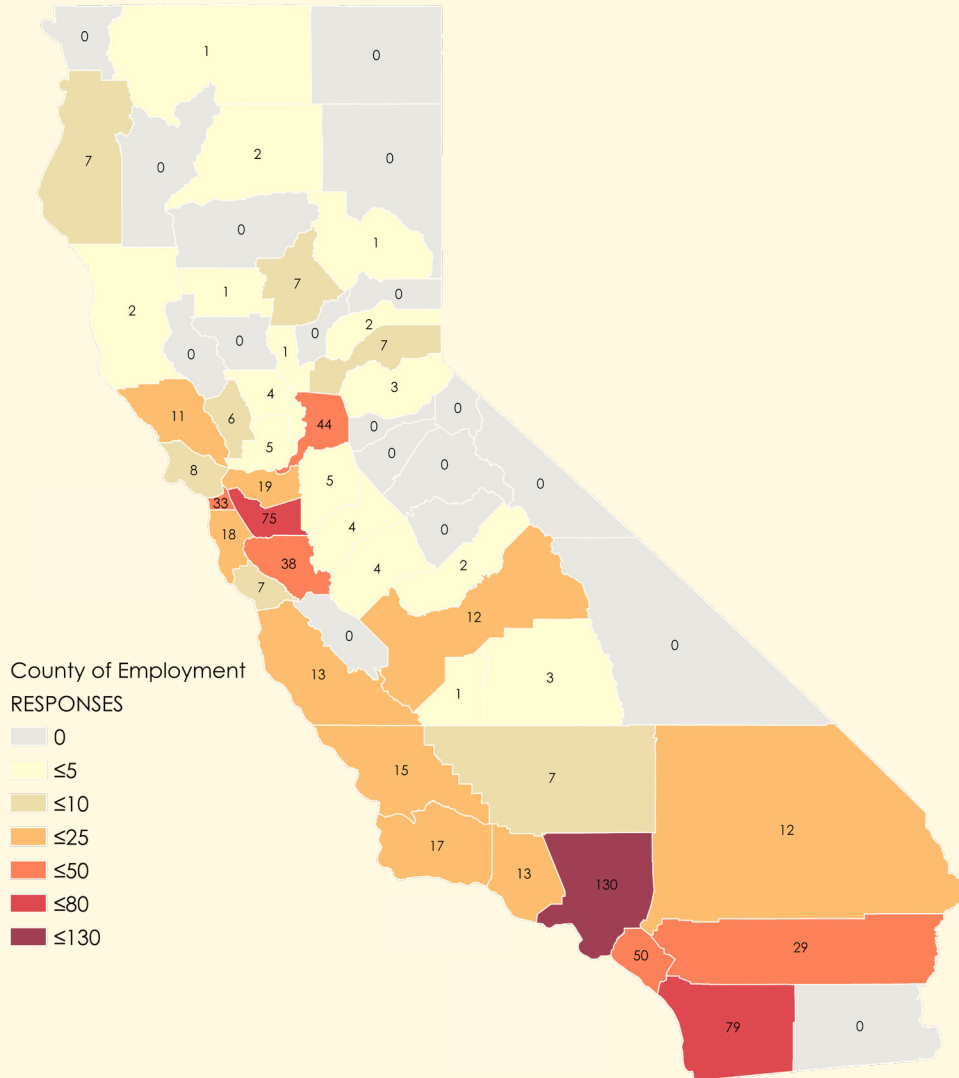


Figure 7: Survey Respondents' County of Employment

## Years of Planning Experience

We were eager to develop a sense of the longevity of California planners - are many just getting started in their careers? Does the field appear to be retaining its professionals for long periods of time? The respondents in this survey have a diverse range of experience in the field of planning. In terms of their tenure in the field, the survey respondents are fairly evenly distributed between entry level, mid-career, and senior planners (see Figure 8).

To further understand the differences between the more and less experienced planners, we cross-tabulated respondents' years of experience and gender. The data show that of the close to 30 percent of respondents who have 21 or more years of experience, it skews heavily male (64.9 percent), whereas when we look at respondents with less than 10 years of experience, we see proportionately more non-males (58.1 percent) than males (41.9 percent).

We also cross-tabulated race and respondents' years of experience. The data reveal that planners with 21 or more years of experience tend to skew White (84.1 percent). Interestingly, when we examine planners with less than 10 years of experience, we see a notable difference: more non-Whites (37.5 percent) than Whites (62.5 percent). This may suggest a fundamental shift in the demographic makeup of California planners over time as the younger non-White planners advance through their careers in the coming decades.

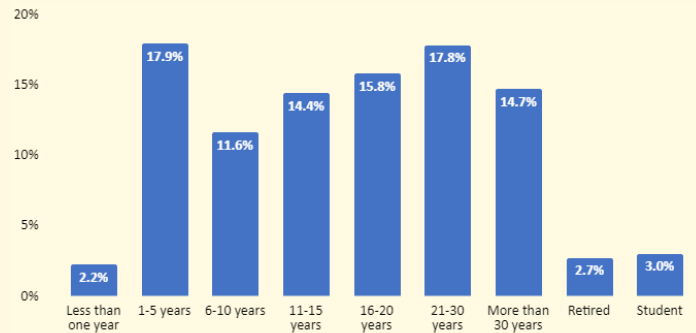


Figure 8: Years of Planning Experience

### Survey Respondents' Years of Planning Experience (n=787)<sup>9</sup>

- 1 - 5 years (17.9 percent)
- 6 - 10 years (11.6 percent)
- 11 - 15 years (14.4 percent)
- 16 - 20 years (15.8 percent)
- 21 - 30 years (17.8 percent)
- More than 30 years (14.7 percent)



## Employment Sector

Of the respondents who work in the public sector, over two-thirds are employed by either a local city or county government. The remaining one-third of respondents who do not work in the public sector work in either private consulting (28.7 percent), the nonprofit sector (1.6 percent), private higher education institution, development or construction firms (1.2 percent).

## Job Title

Respondents were asked to list their job title in an open-ended survey question. We received 759 responses and the highest number of respondents, 108 total, indicated that they hold the title of “senior planner.” This finding was particularly interesting in light of the response to the “years of planning experience” question summarized above since over half of survey respondents have over 11 years of planning experience.

Of the respondents who listed their job title, the most frequently cited titles were as follows:

### Top Job Titles held by Survey Respondents (n=759)

- Senior Planner (108 responses)
- Principal Planner (77 responses)
- Associate Planner (73 responses)
- Planning Director or Manager (55 responses)
- General Planner, no level or area of focus specified (37 responses)
- Community Development Director (37 responses)
- Transportation Planner, no level specified (34 responses)
- Project Manager (29 responses)
- Assistant Planner (26 responses)
- Environmental Planner, no level specified (25 responses)

**Close to two-thirds of the survey respondents work in the public sector.**

*This image illustrates the range of reported job titles from the survey respondents.*



## Area of Specialization in Planning

For this question, respondents were asked to select all of the areas of specialization that apply to their work.<sup>10</sup> The ten most frequently cited areas of specialization are illustrated below in Figure 9.

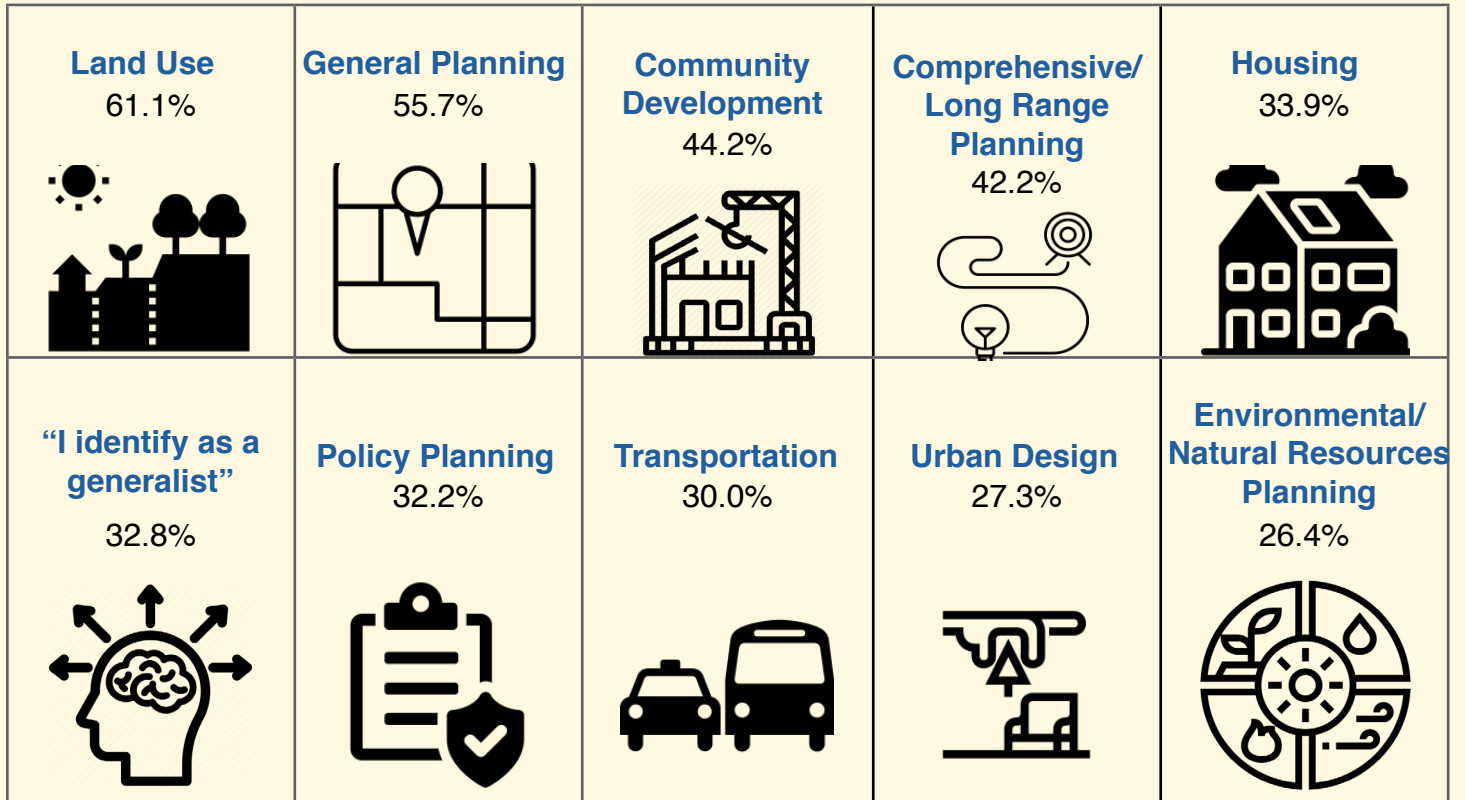


Figure 9: Ten Most Cited Areas of Specialization in Planning

The five least represented areas of specialization amongst respondents are illustrated below in Figure 10.

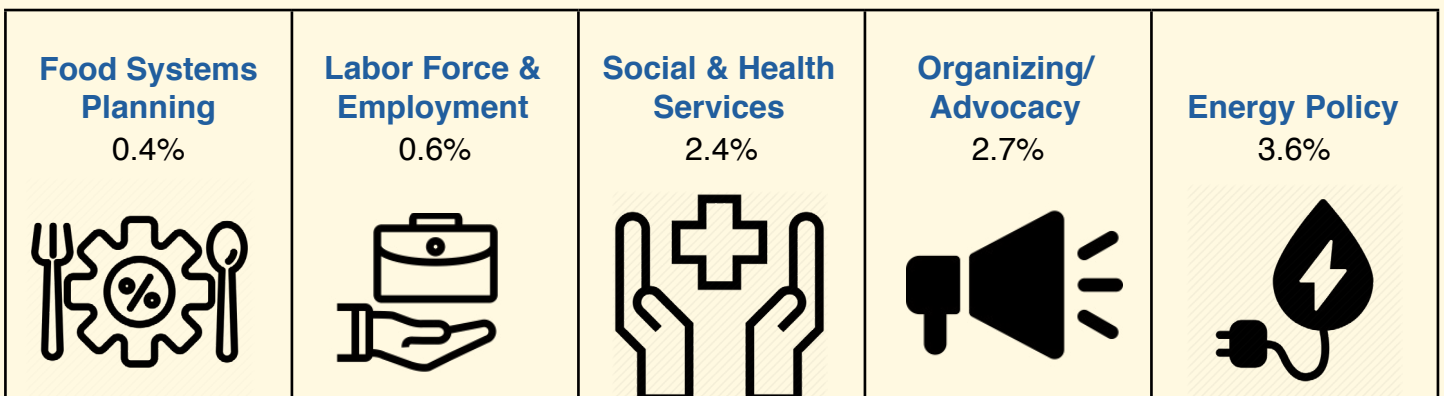


Figure 10: Five Least Cited Areas of Specialization in Planning

We thought it might be interesting to compare the survey results to data from a recent national survey of planners. The “National APA” column in Figure 11 contains data from the 2018 Planners Salary Survey conducted by APA and the American Institute of Certified Planners.

The figure on page 17 shows that the greatest disparities between National APA and APA

California reported specializations were in: housing (14.9 percent more in California) and policy planning (8.2 percent more in California); economic development (8.7 percent less in California), comprehensive/long range planning (5.8 percent less in California), and parks, open space and recreation (5.5 percent less in California).

<b>Specializations</b>	<b>National APA (Percent)</b>	<b>California APA (Percent)</b>
Climate Action Planning	--	8
Code Enforcement	--	11
Community Development	48	44
Comprehensive Long Range Planning	48	42
Economic Development	27	18
Educational Institutional or Military Facilities	4	4
Energy Policy	3	4
Environmental Natural Resources Planning	--	26
Food Systems Planning	2	0.4
GIS Urban Data Analytics	--	10
Hazard Mitigation and Disaster Recovery Planning	8	9
Historic Preservation	13	15
Housing	19	34
Infrastructure	15	15
Labor Force and Employment	2	0.6
Land Use	58	61
Natural Resources and the Environment	19	16
Organizing/Advocacy	--	3
Parks, Open Space and Recreation	16	11
Planning	--	56
Planning Law	8	11
Policy Planning	24	32
Public Services	7	5
Social and Health Services	2	2
Transportation Planning	32	30
Urban Design	24	27
Generalist	--	33

*Figure 11: Comparison of National APA and APA California Reported Specializations*

## 2.2 Engagement with APA

### APA Membership Status

Of the 736 survey respondents with an APA membership, the distribution of membership status is summarized in the box to the right.

- 81.4 percent have both a California and National APA membership
- 14.3 percent have only a California membership
- 2 percent have only a National membership
- Fewer than two percent do not have an APA membership

### APA California Section Membership

The California Chapter of APA consists of eight local Sections (see Figure 12), each representing a broad range of geographies and number of counties. Of the 704 respondents who have an APA California membership, nearly one third (32.3 percent) belong to the Northern Section. Significant representation from the Northern Section makes sense due to its significant geographic range, many large cities, and the number of counties represented.

The complete distribution of Section membership within the state is as follows:<sup>11</sup>

- Northern (32.3 percent)
- Los Angeles (18.8 percent)
- San Diego (10.7 percent)
- Sacramento Valley (9.9 percent)
- Orange (8.7 percent)
- Central Coast (8.3 percent)
- Inland Empire (5.3 percent)
- Central (3.8 percent)



Figure 12: APA California Section Boundaries (APA California, 2019)





## Participation in APA Membership

Survey respondents indicated that they utilize many components of their APA membership. They were asked to indicate the frequency (never, infrequently, frequently) with which they participated in a range of APA membership resources, programming and events. Levels of participation were measured at the APA National, California Chapter, and local Section levels.

To illustrate this, Figure 13 shows the 12 offerings and the accompanying responses. The membership offerings with the most participation include: reading *Planning* magazine (55.2 percent), reading APA California newsletters (53.5 percent), and participating in the APA California Chapter annual conference (45.2 percent). The Planning International Tours Program appears to be the least utilized membership offering (93.7 percent never use).<sup>12</sup>

Some notable participation levels include disparities between National and California

Chapter participation. National APA Planning Division participation, viewing webinars, and attending the National conference are much lower than participation within the California Chapter. These findings suggest the need for California, one of the largest APA Chapters, to have greater collaboration and representation at National level activities.

Also of relevance are low participation rates in local Section leadership (58.6 percent responded “never”) and local Sections’ Young Planners Group (YPG) (69.7 percent responded “never”). It should be noted, however, that participation levels in YPG may be low because only 17.9 percent of respondents had between one to five years of planning experience (the target demographic for YPG) and few students participated in this survey (only 3 percent of respondents). These participation rates suggest that more effort needs to be made to encourage and create opportunities for members at any stage of their career.

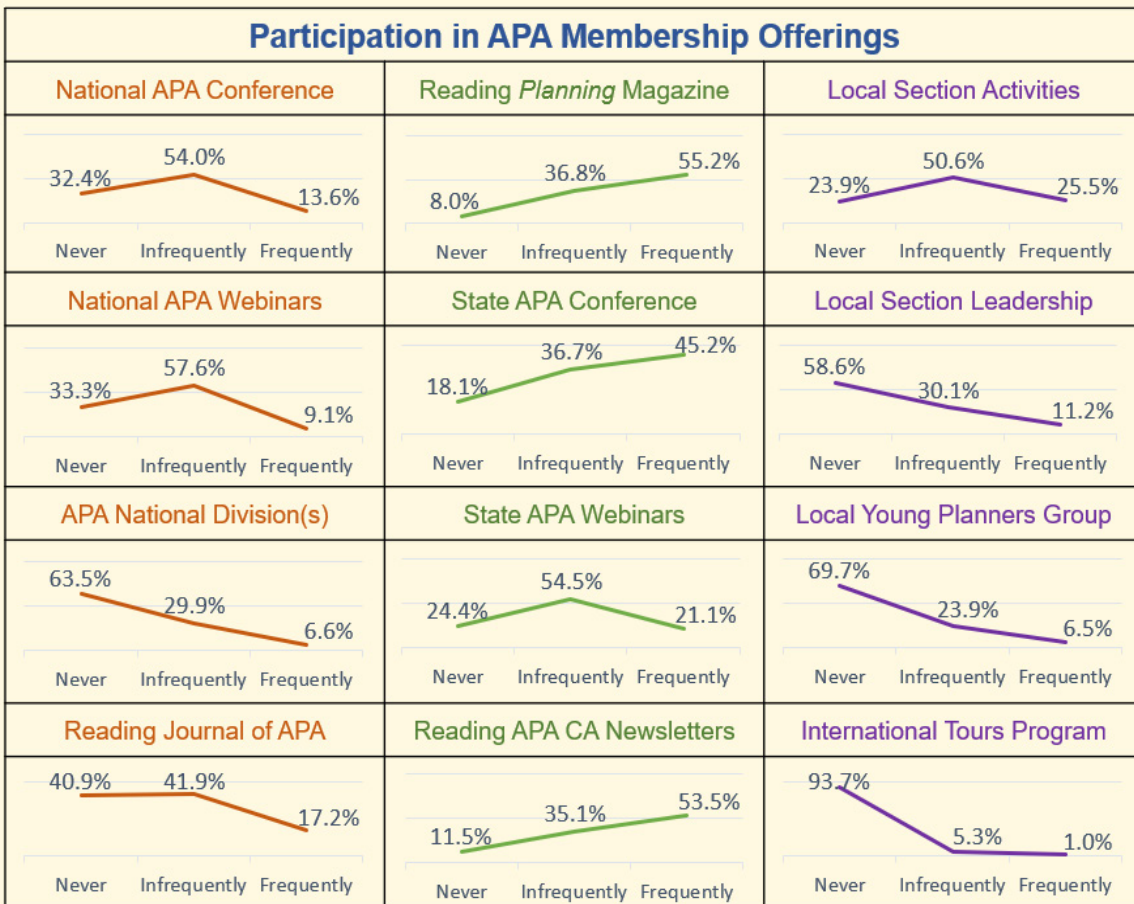


Figure 13: Participation levels across APA membership programs



## 2.3 The Value of a Planning Education

The survey also included a series of questions related to the role of planning education in order to better understand respondents' views as to whether or not a planning education has had a

positive impact on their career. Respondents were asked to evaluate both their undergraduate and, where relevant, graduate school experiences.

### Undergraduate Educational Pathways for Planners

Of the survey participants, one-third indicated that they earned their bachelor's degree in planning while the remaining two-thirds studied a subject other than planning. Additionally, two-thirds of the respondents earned their undergraduate degree at a California public institution and less than one percent of the respondents do not possess a four-year college degree. Of the 181 respondents who completed their bachelor's degree in planning, 88 percent believe their undergraduate planning degree has definitely been useful for their career. Open-ended comments illustrated how their undergraduate degree in planning provided a useful foundation to planning, provided relevant background knowledge, helped them secure their first internship or job, and provided exposure to more specific specializations within planning such as public policy, city governance, GIS, and natural resources. The survey also found that 12 percent of the respondents who earned a bachelor's degree in planning indicated that they

felt their degree was not useful for their career or they were undecided on the degree's value.

For the 368 respondents who completed their bachelor's degree in a subject other than planning, the most common degrees were earned in: environmental sciences (81 respondents), geography (54 respondents), political science (48 respondents), architecture (30 respondents), economics (29 respondents), history (29 respondents), sociology (26 respondents), urban studies (14 respondents), business (11 respondents), and landscape architecture (9 respondents). The survey also found that 52 percent of the respondents with a bachelor's degree outside of planning felt their degree was definitely useful for their career; 19 percent said no or were undecided, and 28 percent did not provide comments.

### Undergraduate Education Value of a Planning Bachelor's Degree

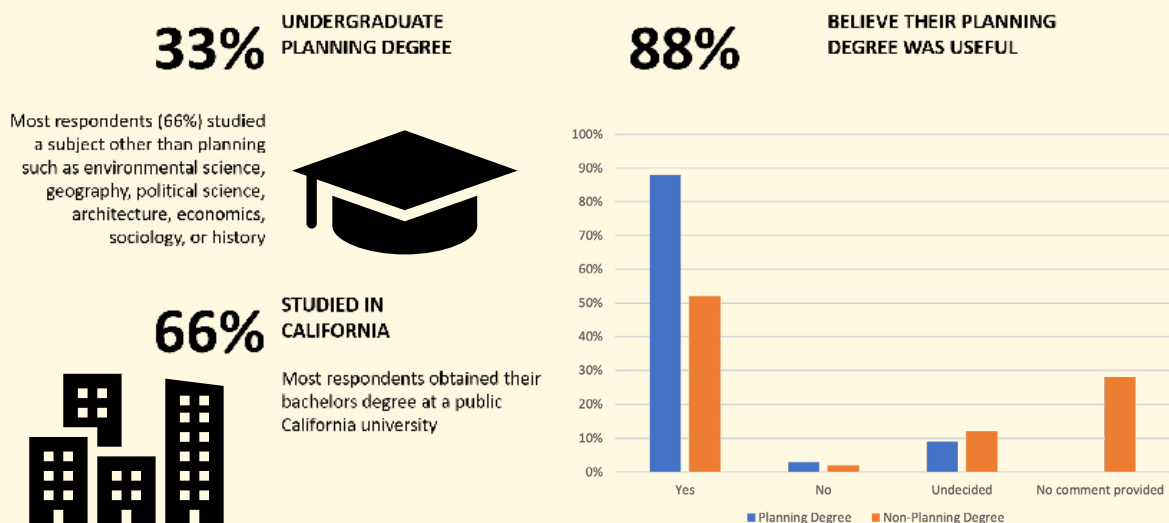


Figure 14: Summary of respondents' undergraduate educational experience

## Graduate Educational Pathways for Planners

**Of the over 81 percent of respondents who have a graduate degree, 50 percent earned their graduate degree in planning. Of these respondents, 94 percent believe that their graduate degree has been useful in their career.**

Looking at graduate education in planning, 81.3 percent of all survey respondents possess a graduate degree. Of those who earned a graduate degree, 50 percent earned a graduate degree in planning and 31.2 percent completed their degree in a subject other than planning. An additional 18.7 percent of respondents do not possess any graduate degree. Of particular note, 62 percent of respondents earned their graduate degree at a public university in California.

Of the 278 respondents who earned a graduate degree in planning, 94 percent believe their graduate degree has definitely been useful towards their career. Open-ended comments from the respondents frequently cited how their graduate degree in planning provided practical knowledge, networking opportunities, and “real-world skills” that helped respondents find their first full time job. Additionally, many commented on how they were able to expand their writing and research skills, gain preparation for eventually obtaining AICP certification, and had the opportunity to dive deeper into planning

specializations such as transportation planning, community development, policy and design. Only 6 percent of respondents indicated that their planning graduate degree was either not valuable or they were unsure of its value.

For the 173 respondents who completed their master’s degree in a subject other than planning, the most common degrees were earned in: public administration (36 respondents), public policy (10 respondents), business administration (9 respondents), landscape architecture (6 respondents), architecture (5 respondents), geography (5 respondents), law (5 respondents), environmental management (4 respondents), or urban design (4 respondents). Among these respondents, 49 percent believe their degree has been valuable and 12 percent believe that their degree either has not been useful or they were undecided on its value. It is worth noting that this question had a low response rate with 39 percent of non-planning graduate degree holders not providing comments.

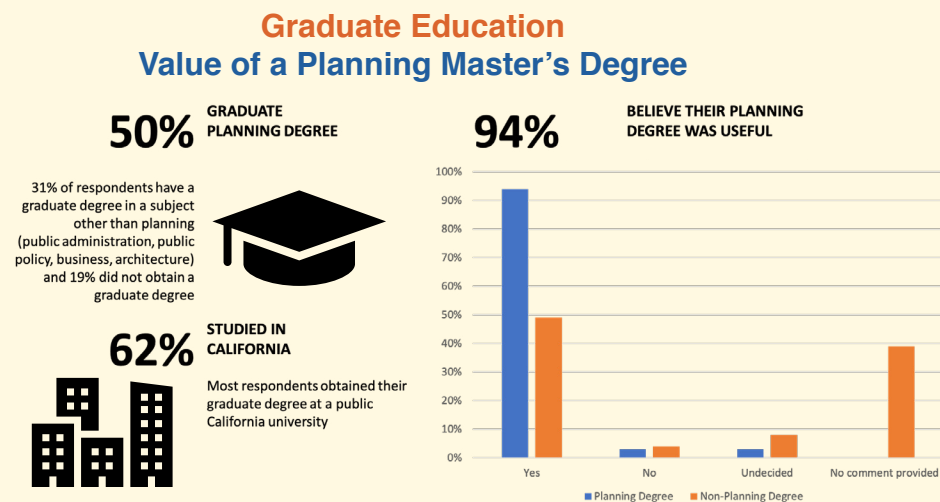


Figure 15: Summary of respondents’ graduate educational experience

## Academic Preparation for a Planning Career

Survey participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended question: “If you earned a degree in planning, what aspects of your academic program best prepared you for your career in planning?” The top ten responses are listed below.

- Introduction to land use principles (37 comments)
- Studio work (35 comments)
- Planning theory (32 comments)
- Urban design (31 comments)
- Introduction to environmental planning (30 comments)
- Internship experience (29 comments)
- Planning history (27 comments)
- Introduction to planning law (26 comments)
- Economic analysis (20 comments)

A follow-up open-ended question asked: “Considering the above, what could have been strengthened about your academic training in planning?” The top ten responses are listed below.

- More design experience (26 comments)
- More focus on zoning-related topics (21 comments)
- A better understanding of development and impacts of public policy (19 comments)
- More practical, hands-on experience (18 comments)
- Understanding planning politics and laws (17 comments)
- Geographic Information Systems skills (16 comments)
- Project management techniques (16 comments)
- More community engagement and outreach experience (11 comments)

## 2.4 Planning Practice: Skills and Competencies

***According to the survey, many California planners are stewards of the environment who hope to make a positive difference with their career.***

### Factors that led to pursuing a career in planning

Of particular interest to the survey designers were the motivators that attract people to the profession of urban planning — what is the ‘spark’ that brought them to our field and what motivates them today? Therefore, the survey included this straightforward question: “Why did you become a planner?” The open-ended results were quite interesting: many California planners are stewards of the environment who hope to make a positive difference with their career. Many survey respondents expressed a desire to pursue a planning career to:

- Help the environment (114 comments)
- Help their community (65 comments)
- Work for and with people (47 comments)

Most planners discovered the planning field while in school (58 comments), and had an interest in either architecture (46 comments) or urban design (21 comments), the built environment (29 comments), and public transit (12 comments). Interestingly, many planners had a childhood interest in planning (19 comments) and also indicated a love of maps (13 comments).

### Skills desired by planning employers

This question asked for open-ended feedback from those who have played a role in hiring planners. Participants were asked to reflect on the top three or four most essential qualities in a new planning hire. The relevant survey question was directed to respondents in a position to hire new planners.

As with many jobs, strong communication, writing and analytical skills are the most desired in planners looking to enter the workforce. The following list indicates desired skills noted by respondents:

- Communication (112 comments)
- Writing (111 comments)
- Analytical skills (110 comments)
- Interpersonal skills (51 comments)
- Understanding planning processes (50 comments)
- Problem solving and critical thinking (48 comments)
- Verbal communication (45 comments)
- Data analysis (35 comments)
- Familiarity with local and state ordinances (23 comments)
- Project management (20 comments)

## Skills most critical to success in planning career

Respondents were also asked to identify the skills that were most critical to success in their career. Respondents were provided with a list of close to 20 different options and asked to select all that applied to them.<sup>13</sup> This survey question yielded some interesting results. To add additional perspective, we cross-tabulated the results with data collected on the number of years the respondents have been in the planning profession. Respondents were split into three groups: less than 10 years of planning experience, 11-20 years, and 21 or more years.

Project management was the most critical skill for success across all three groups, followed by analytical and organizational skills. Interestingly, results showed that negotiation skills were valued more by planners with more years of experience. The results are shown in the box to the right.

## Skills needed to advance planning career

Directly related to the previous question, respondents were asked to think back — and ahead — to the skills needed to advance as a professional urban planner. Respondents were again split into three groups: less than 10 years of planning experience, 11-20 years, and 21 or more years. While all three groups cited political and negotiation skills as necessary to improve, there were several distinctions between the three experience levels. The results are shown in the box to the right.

*For respondents with less than 10 years of planning experience:*

- Project management skills (62.9 percent)
- Analytical skills (62.6 percent)
- Organizational skills (52.8 percent)

*For respondents with 11-20 years of planning experience:*

- Project management skills (59.5 percent)
- Analytical skills (59.1 percent)
- Organizational skills (51.5 percent)

*For respondents with 21 or more years of planning experience:*

- Analytical skills (46.7 percent)
- Project management skills (42.3 percent)
- Organizational skills (41.6 percent)

*For respondents with less than 10 years of planning experience:*

- Political skills (46.4 percent)
- Negotiation skills (42.9 percent)
- Public speaking and project management skills (34.5 percent each)

*For respondents with 11-20 years of planning experience:*

- Political skills (37.1 percent)
- Negotiation skills (34.5 percent)
- Community engagement (22.7 percent)

*For respondents with 21 or more years of planning experience:*

- Social media (21.2 percent)
- Political skills (15.3 percent)
- Negotiation skills (13.1 percent)

## Impact of relevant planning knowledge areas on career

Respondents were asked to evaluate a list of knowledge areas based on their perceived importance to their career. Knowledge of the planning process (82.5 percent) and local ordinances (80.5 percent) were identified as the most important topics to advance one's planning career. Knowledge of subdivision laws (18.7 percent) and the ability to analyze large data sets (11.7 percent) were cited as least beneficial.

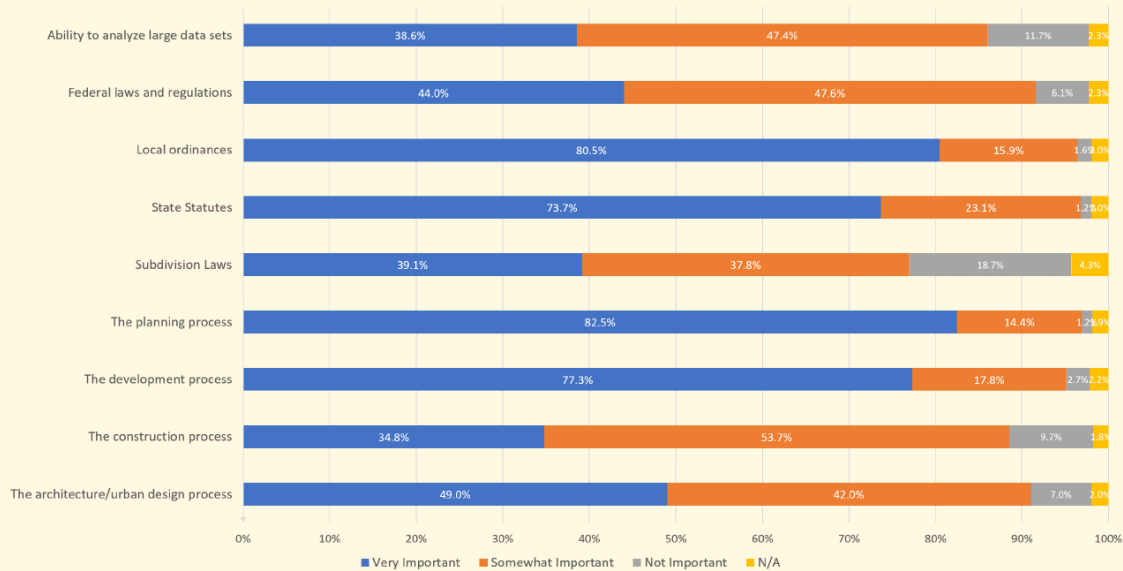


Figure 16: Knowledge areas most beneficial to planning career

## Knowledge in planning areas that will need to be strengthened for career advancement

Respondents were asked to evaluate a list of knowledge areas based on which ones they believe will be most important to strengthen for their future career advancement. Improving knowledge of state statutes (69.3 percent) was cited as most important for future career advancement, followed closely by knowledge of local ordinances (62.6 percent). Respondents felt that improving knowledge of subdivision laws (17.8 percent) would be least beneficial for advancement, followed closely by the ability to analyze large data sets (17.7 percent).

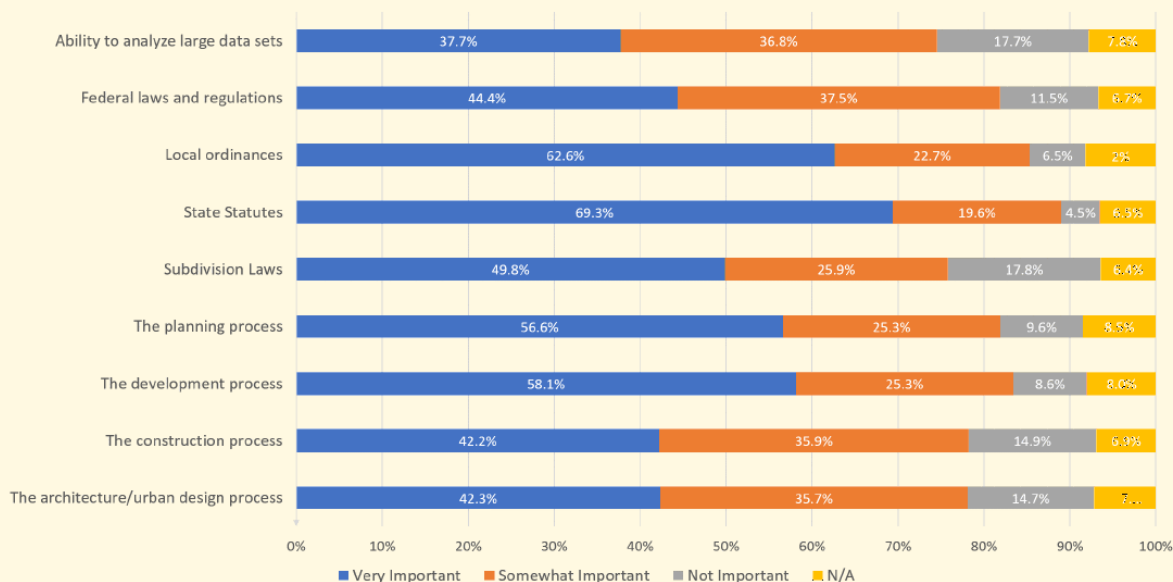


Figure 17: Knowledge areas that will need to be strengthened for career advancement



## AICP Certification Status

A majority of the California-based planners in our sample (59.5 percent) indicated that they are members of AICP, while 40.5 percent said that they are not AICP members.

We thought it might be interesting to cross-tabulate these results with the age and race of the respondents. Doing so revealed that those in the following age groups possess AICP certification:

- Age 35 years or younger (32.9 percent)
- Age 36 - 55 years (67.7 percent)
- Age 56 years or more (70.6 percent)

For the respondents who identified as White, 63.4 percent have AICP certification. Of the non-White respondents, only 50 percent have AICP certification (See Figure 19).

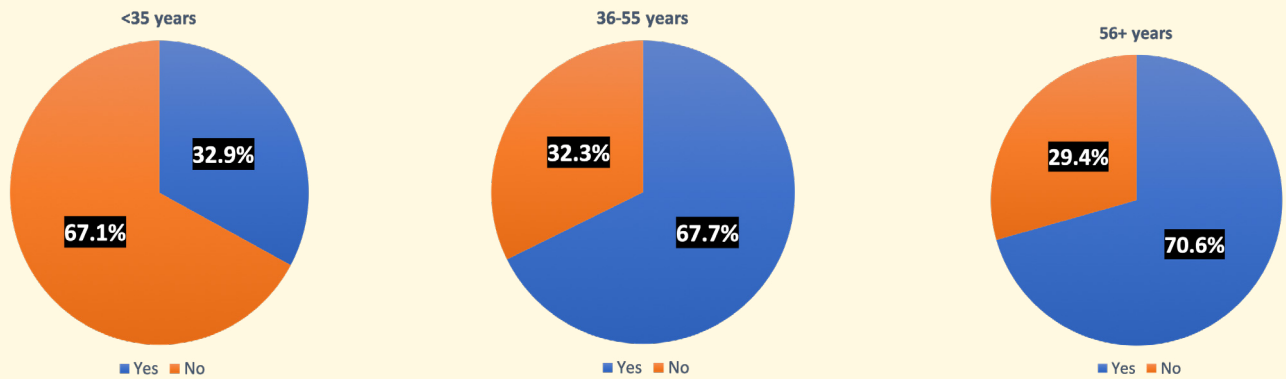


Figure 18: AICP certification status by age

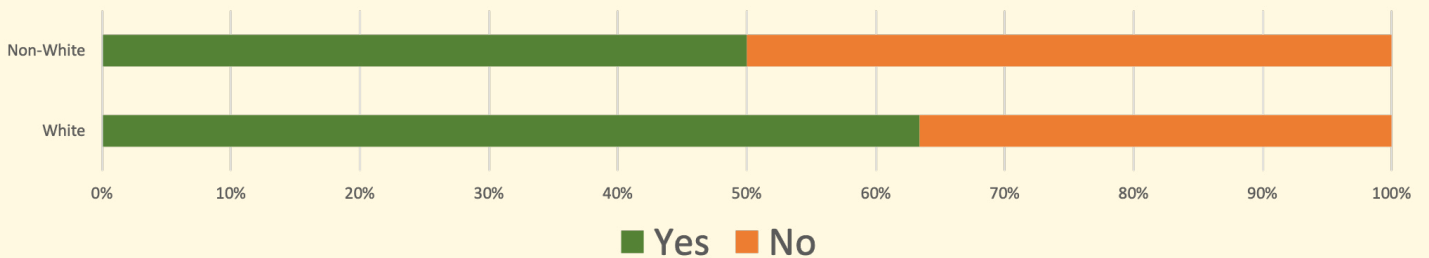


Figure 19: AICP certification status by race

## Value of AICP certification towards career

We received 264 open-ended comments pertaining to the value of AICP certification. When asked if AICP certification has been valuable to one's career, 62 percent of the survey participants with this certification responded in the affirmative. In addition, 25 percent of the respondents were "undecided" and 13 percent of the survey participants responded that their AICP certification has not been valuable. For those who replied "yes," the most common comments cited AICP as demonstrating a commitment to the profession and a code of ethics standard for planners to uphold. Respondents also commented that maintaining their AICP status was a good reason to pursue continuing education and professional development opportunities, and that certification increased their knowledge and helped them stay current on planning topics. Additionally, many respondents said that AICP status aided in their job search by listing it at the top of their resume and that it gave them credibility in interviews. Finally, respondents cited the benefits of a larger support network as reasons their certification has been valuable.

## Additional training and resources necessary to advance in career

Survey participants were provided a list of prospective professional development resources either offered by their employers and/or APA California and were asked to select the ones they felt would enable them to advance in their career. Financial support to attend professional training opportunities (235 responses) and mentorship (233 responses) were the top two selected resources.

Other resources planners feel would be useful to advance their career are summarized in the box to the right.

## Benefits currently offered by planning employers

Survey participants were provided a list of employee benefits and resources and were asked to select all that their employer currently offers. Respondents had the ability to choose multiple options. Reimbursement towards payments made on APA membership dues (373 responses) and to attend APA California's state conference (324 responses) were the most cited benefits planning employees currently receive. Other benefits most commonly available include:

- Payment of AICP dues (291 responses)
- Payment for registration at other conferences and events (259 responses)
- Transportation reimbursement (251 responses)
- Payment of registration for APA National conferences (207 responses)
- Tuition reimbursement for graduate student or job-related courses (163 responses)
- Payment of AICP exam fees (157 responses)
- Payment of CM credit courses (155 responses)

81 respondents said their employer offers none of the above benefits.

- Financial support to attend professional conferences (208 responses)
- More collaboration in my workplace (165 responses)
- Financial support to enroll in extension courses related to my career (143 responses)
- Better support from my supervisor (128 responses)
- Financial support to join other professional organizations (98 responses)
- Financial support to pursue an advanced degree (86 responses)
- Financial support to join the APA (73 responses)
- Better support from my colleagues (61 responses)

## PART 3 – Conclusions

### 3.1 Future Challenges

Our state of 40 million needs the talents and passions of urban planners as we continue to attract new residents and workers from around the globe. With this in mind, the survey asked respondents to choose from a list of challenges developed collaboratively by the survey design team. A ranking of the responses is shown in Figure 20.

Affordable housing is viewed by respondents as the most critical priority for planners to address

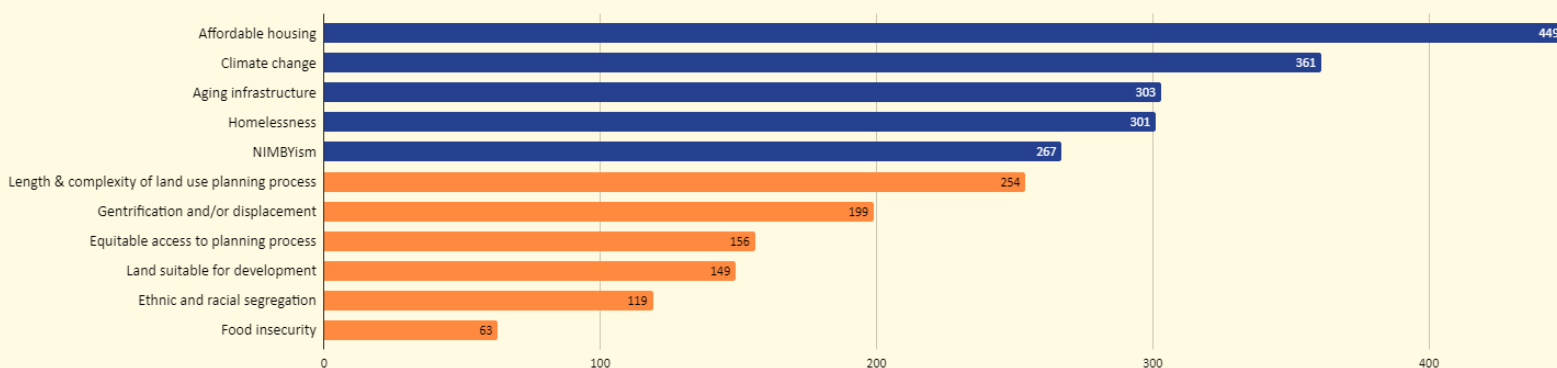


Figure 20: What Are the Top Challenges For the Future? (Fall 2019)

### 3.2 Future Surveys

In informal conversations during the analysis phase of this project, it was suggested that surveying California members routinely would be a valuable method of taking the ‘pulse’ of the state’s many planners. Doing so would also allow us to see trends in all of the topics included in this inaugural survey effort. For example, as data is collected over time, we might determine if we are moving towards becoming a more inclusive profession that genuinely reflects our state’s population. We might also ascertain if planning schools are adequately preparing their students to confidently and authoritatively address the many challenges our state will confront in the coming decades. Of particular importance to the APA California Board, we might see through trend analysis if California planners are finding measurable value in APA events, discussions and other engagement opportunities. Of value

while food insecurity ranked the lowest. These questions were asked in Fall 2019 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the increased influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and many other pivotal discussions on equity, governance, inequality, public health and race that defined 2020 for the planning profession. If asked again in 2020, the significance of many of these challenges would likely change.

to academic institutions would be survey results that indicate whether younger students are sensing that a career in planning is worthwhile to pursue.

Julia Lave Johnston, APA California past-president, and other colleagues enthusiastically support the idea of continued, regularly administered surveys. With this in mind, our survey team reflected upon a number of challenges with conducting the survey and analyzing the results efficiently using the somewhat limited SurveyMonkey platform. We therefore reproduced the survey form in Qualtrics in order to facilitate more robust statistical analysis in the future. We hope that survey administrators in the coming years will find the Qualtrics platform to be helpful.

### 3.3 Enhanced Participation

One very compelling suggestion offered to our team was the idea to conduct a similar survey that is focused on California planning students in order to develop a sense of their ambitions, professional development challenges, and motivations to join the profession.

Our team was very excited about this idea and we hope that future survey administrators will move ahead with this effort. Additionally, we encourage continued comparisons between the findings of surveys aimed at California planners with our counterparts in other states.

### 3.4 Concluding Thoughts

This survey was designed to capture the pulse of the state of the planning profession in California. The responses indicate that the vitals are strong, but there are also areas in need of more attention. Foremost, at present the planning profession in California does not adequately represent the rich diversity of the state. More needs to be done to create pipelines for increased diversity in the profession. The findings also highlight significant variations in experience and compensation based on gender and race. We encourage APA California to focus attention on this and work with its members to pursue policies that promote equity in compensation and career advancement.

According to the survey responses, planning education at both the graduate level and undergraduate level is highly valued by planners in California. This alignment between pedagogy and practice is encouraging and should be actively supported. Education is also a major pathway for increased equity and opportunity for people from diverse backgrounds. Collaboration between APA California and academic planning departments should be actively promoted because it is mutually beneficial.

The survey findings also reveal that the planning profession in California is heavily skewed towards planning practice in urban and suburban areas. This finding should be explored in more depth to better ascertain, understand, and respond to planning challenges and opportunities in our rural communities. Our urban, suburban and rural communities are inextricably interwoven. Additionally, a very small percentage of survey respondents work in the nonprofit sector. While we expected to find large numbers of respondents employed in the public sector, many planning related and planning-adjacent organizations are situated in the nonprofit sector and engage in important advocacy and mission-driven work, particularly in historically underserved communities. It would be worthwhile for APA California to explore this finding in more detail, particularly if planners in the nonprofit sector believe that APA California does not serve their professional interests. This is another potential avenue for APA California to pursue as it elevates its efforts to promote equity and diversity within the profession and the communities our profession serves.

## Author Bios



**Rick Kos, AICP**, Faculty Member, Department of Urban & Regional Planning, San Jose State University

Rick is a faculty member, Graduate Advisor and Practitioner-in-Residence in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at San Jose State University where he teaches GIS and community engagement courses. He recently completed his term as the APA California University Liaison for Northern California.



**Mirle Rabinowitz Bussell, Ph.D.**, Faculty Member, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, UC San Diego

Mirle is a faculty member in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at UC San Diego where she is also the Director of Undergraduate Studies. She has been involved with the APA at the state and local level for many years and she recently completed her term as the APA California University Liaison for Southern California. She is currently a member of the board for the California Planning Foundation.



**Jana Ruijgrok Neubauerova**

Jana earned an MA in Sociology with a thesis on the effects of cultural trauma on education. She is now pursuing a Masters of Urban Planning degree at San Jose State University where she is a research assistant on a health intervention study for minority men.



**Elizabeth Owen**, APA California Chapter Student Representative

Elizabeth Owen is a 2020 alumna of UC San Diego's Urban Studies and Planning Department and a first year Master's in Urban and Regional Planning student at UCLA. Elizabeth's interests are in long-range housing and transportation planning, transit-oriented development, micromobility, and travel behavioral change.



## Endnotes

- 1 It should be noted that the survey was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, membership has dropped to approximately 5,200 members as of early 2021.
- 2 APA California membership data as of December 31, 2019.
- 3 Preston, S. & Mintier, J. (2018). 70 Years' Success, and Counting. <https://www.apacalifornia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/APACA-HISTORY-70th-Anniversary-Publication-FINAL.pdf>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 SurveyMonkey was the selected platform for administering the survey. Due to limitations with its mobile phone interface, when the survey was first released to the public several questions were inaccessible and the survey was temporarily closed in order to resolve the problem. As a result, 151 respondents submitted incomplete surveys and were instructed to start the survey over when the problem was resolved. The corrected survey was released on SurveyMonkey in November 2019 and closed on December 6, 2019.
- 7 The 'Other' responses were those where respondents provided unclear responses or entered statements unrelated to gender identity. Respondents who identified as multiracial are included here as well.
- 8 Respondents who are multiracial but clearly stated that they identify mostly with one racial group over another were coded based on the race/ethnicity they prefer. Those who indicated that they are multiracial and did not express affinity with any one category were coded as 'Other.' Respondents who entered terms that are not related to race or ethnicity were also coded as 'Other.'
- 9 Respondents who are students, retired, or have less than one year of experience comprise 7.9 percent of the sample.
- 10 The list of specializations was taken from the APA 2018 Planners Salary Survey.
- 11 An additional 2.2 percent of respondents were unsure of their Section affiliation.
- 12 The full list includes: National APA conference, National APA webinars, APA National divisions, reading *The Journal of the American Planning Association*, reading *Planning* magazine, state APA conference, state APA webinars, reading APA California section newsletters, local Section activities, local Section leadership, local Section Young Planners Group, Planning International Tours Program.
- 13 The full list includes: writing, public speaking, research skills, analytical skills, problem-solving skills, negotiation skills, listening skills, interpersonal relations, organizational skills, verbal communication skills, political skills, ability to understand the needs of diverse populations, ability to work with diverse populations, graphic and visual communication skills, Geographic Information Systems skills, social media skills, project management, community engagement.