

# The Southern California Survey 2007: Continuities, Changes, and More Diversified Opinions about Quality of Life

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Public attitudes and opinions are important in the policy realm. In order to develop sound legislation and policy, leaders need to understand what people value and what concerns they may have. To better address these questions the UCLA Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies instituted the Southern California Survey (SCS) in 2005. The survey, now in its third year and final year, is designed to gather the views and opinions of Southern California residents on critical public policy issues in this region. This essay presents findings from the most recently completed survey of Southern California residents (those living in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura), as well as some comparisons to previous years. Basic information about the survey is included in the box below and details of the survey can be found at: <http://lewis.spsr.ucla.edu/special/socalsurvey/index.cfm>. Imperial County, though not part of the SCS samples, is part of the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) region which also includes the five counties mentioned above.



## About the Survey

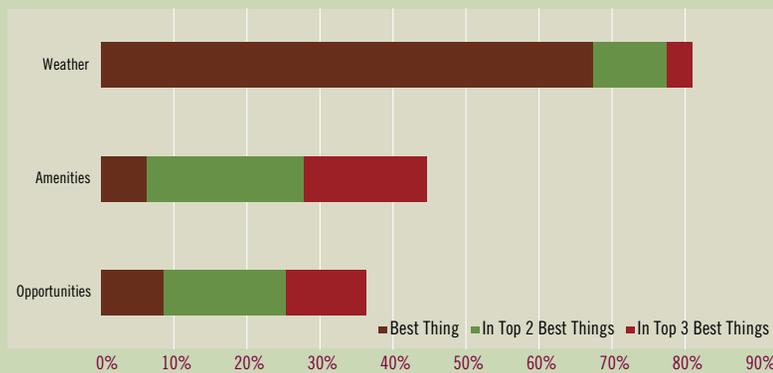
*The 2007 Southern California Public Opinion Survey is supported by the UCLA Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies and is designed to gather the views and opinions of Southern California residents on critical public policy issues in this region.*

*The Survey was conducted in English and Spanish during the months of February, March, April and May 2007 using random digit dialing, and the data were collected by The Social Science Research Center at California State University, Fullerton. There are 1502 completed surveys for the five counties: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura. The sample is divided proportionally by county household population. The characteristics of the sample by age, ethnicity, income, education and nativity are roughly consistent with the 2005 American Community Survey, though SCS respondents do tend to be slightly older. There is a sampling error of +/- 2.5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level for the full sample. (Sampling error may be larger for subpopulations)*

While this essay does identify problems in the region, it should be noted that Southern California is an attractive place to live. Over three-quarters of survey respondents believe the weather is the best thing about the region, but others also mentioned amenities (such as outdoor recreation, cultural amenities, entertainment, restaurants/food, and shopping), (45%), and opportunities, including educational and economic opportunities, among others (36%), (see Figure 1). Two thirds of survey respondents also believe that things are going somewhat well or very well in the region as far as quality of life is concerned (see

Figure 2). In addition, 66 percent of respondents believe things will stay the same or get better in the next twelve months, versus only 31 percent who believe things will get worse. Residents in Ventura County are most satisfied with quality of life, with 76 percent of residents believing things are going somewhat or very well. Residents of San Bernardino County are least satisfied, though 60 percent still say things are going very well or somewhat well.

**Figure 1: Top Three Best Things About Living in Southern California**

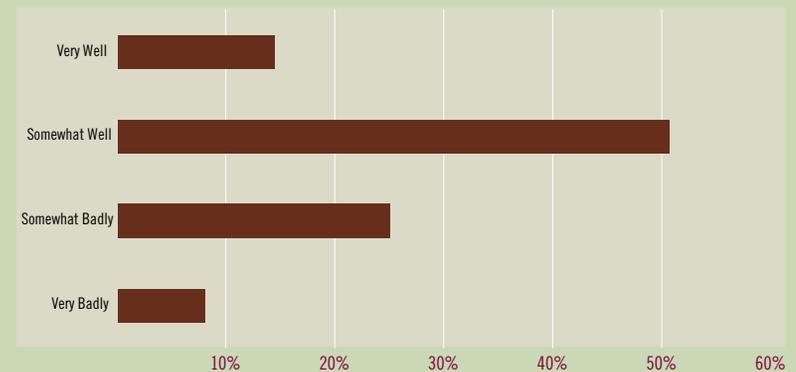


Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey 2007, N=1502

Data from the 2007 Los Angeles Riots 15th Anniversary Resident Follow Up Survey conducted by the Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles (Guerra, et al, 2007) indicate that residents of Los Angeles are generally optimistic about the city as well, though not quite as positive as southern California residents in general. In Los Angeles, 51 percent believe that things in the city are going in the right direction, or staying the same, and 39 percent say they are going in the wrong direction. Interestingly, the Los Angeles survey also found that naturalized citizens were most optimistic, as 58 percent feel things are going in the right direction or staying the same, versus 48 percent of U.S. born residents, and 52 percent of non-citizens. On the other side, 46 percent

of native born Angelenos feel things are going in the wrong direction, versus 31 percent of non-natives (naturalized and non-citizens). The SCS did not find such significant differences in opinion among these groups on the quality of life questions, though non-citizens do appear slightly more positive than others. Finally, as for financial security, 69 percent of southern California residents report feeling financially secure, and 19% said they felt very secure, which is about the same as last year. Despite these positives, however, residents do have some serious concerns about life in the region. One challenge in improving the quality of life in Southern California is to continue to find innovative solutions for the major problems identified by residents in the survey.

**Figure 2: How are things going in Southern California?**



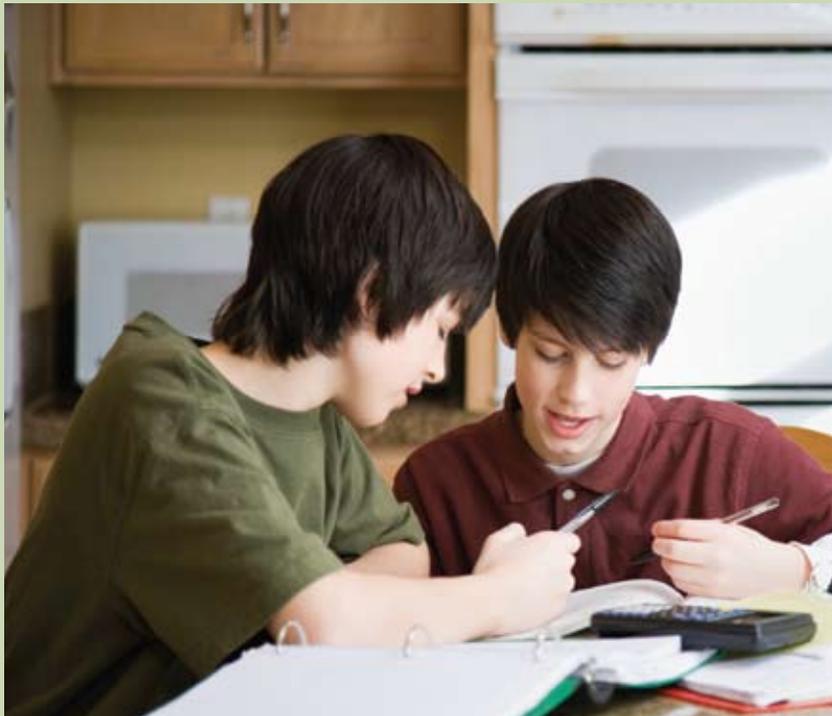
Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey 2007, N=1502

In 2007 Southern Californians rated the top problems in the region as:

- Immigration
- Transportation
- Crime
- Economy

- Education
- Pollution/Environment

Immigration has emerged as the top problem in the region, outranking even the usual traffic and transportation concerns (though not by much). The region has been the primary gateway for immigration, both legal and illegal, for several decades, but clearly the national debate has put this issue firmly on the radar over the past year. The economy, crime, and education made the top problems list again this year, as did the environment, though it was bumped from third place down to sixth place on the list. Air quality is undoubtedly a concern this year as it was last year, but perhaps has been overshadowed by the national focus on immigration.

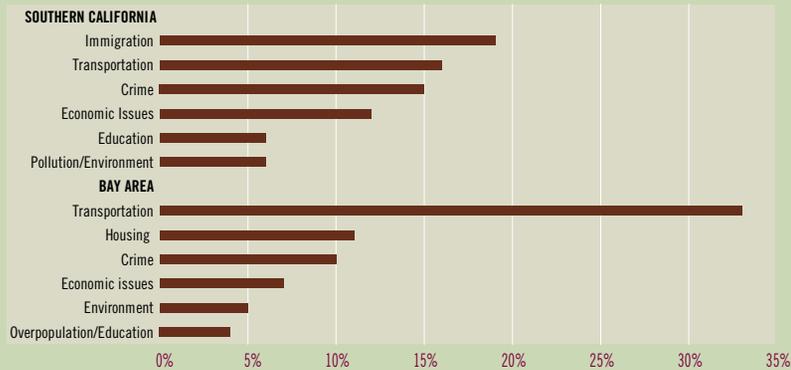


The Southern California Survey (SCS) also looked at local government performance in the region and found that a majority of Southern California residents have some degree of confidence in their local government, although they have less confidence in local government's ability to solve the problems that most affect them.

### **Overview of Region's Most Important Problems**

Figure 3 displays the top six problems in Southern California, as well as the top six problems in the Bay Area, for comparison (Bay Area Council, 2007). Immigration, transportation, crime, the economy, education and the environment are the top six problems cited by Southern California Survey respondents. Many of these problems are related to life in a large metropolitan area, so it is not surprising that the Bay Area shares some of the same concerns (the Bay Area is the second largest metropolitan region in the state following Southern California). Transportation is a top concern in both regions, though it ranks more highly in the Bay Area. Housing is still a top concern in the Bay Area, as it was last year, but in Southern California it has not made the top problems list since 2005. The economy, crime, and education continue to be high on the list in both regions. We also looked at the top problem by county in Southern California and immigration was the top concern in Ventura, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Orange counties, though it tied with transportation for the top spot in Orange County. Crime was the top concern in Los Angeles County. Figure 4 displays the top problems in the region by all three responses (respondents were asked to name the top three problems in the region).

**Figure 3: Top Problems in Southern California and the Bay Area**



Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey 2007, N=1502; Bay Area Poll

**Figure 4: Top Problems by First, Second and Third Response**

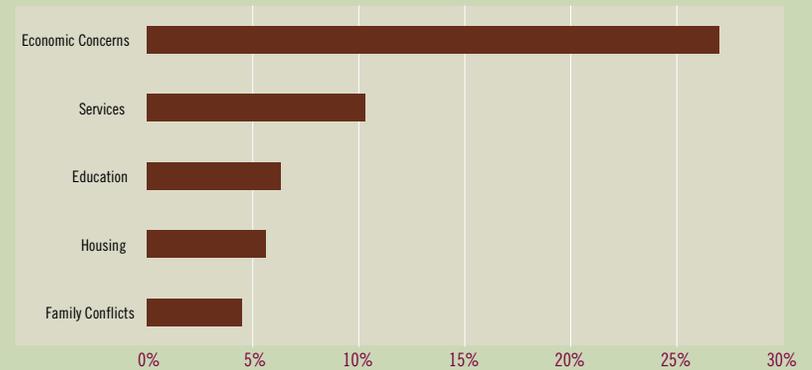


Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey 2007, N=1502

The SCS also asked respondents about the top problems facing his or her own family today (see Figure 5). The greatest concern for families is economic issues, including jobs, finances, debt, cost of living, and retirement, among others. Services are the second top problem. This category included any government or social services, but health care was the primary concern here. Education, including paying for college,

was the third top problem. Finally, housing costs, and family conflicts, including having enough time for family, were also big concerns.

**Figure 5: Top Problems in Your Family**



Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey 2007, N=1502



## Perception of Problems by Demographic Groups

A breakdown of the top three problems according to ethnicity, education, age, and income indicates much more variation in opinion than last year when almost everyone agreed that transportation was the top problem. This year immigration was the top concern among older, White respondents, while crime was the top concern for other ethnic groups and younger respondents, as well as lower income respondents (perhaps reflecting areas where these groups live). Transportation was the top concern only among the highest income earners, and across all levels of education. We do see a good deal of consistency in the third most important problem (not shown in the graph), which almost all agreed to be economic concerns. Economic concerns were also the top problem noted for families across all demographic groups. The top problem as indicated by demographic group (and county) is displayed in Figure 6.



**Figure 6: Most Important Problem by Demographic Groups/County**

		Most Important Problem		
		Immigration	Crime	Transportation
<b>By Ethnicity</b>	White	✓		
	Latino		✓	
	Other		✓	
<b>By Education</b>	High School or Less			✓
	Some College			✓
	BA or Higher			✓
<b>By Age</b>	18 - 35		✓	
	35 - 54	✓		
	55+	✓		
<b>By HH Income</b>	Less than \$50,000		✓	
	\$50,000 - \$100,000	✓		✓ (tie)
	\$100,000+			✓
<b>By County</b>	Los Angeles		✓	
	Orange	✓		✓ (tie)
	Riverside	✓		
	San Bernardino	✓		
	Ventura	✓		

*Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey 2007, N=1502*

## Background on Top Six Problems

The following section provides a brief overview of the top problems identified by residents so the reader has a basic understanding of the more objective challenges facing the public and local government.

### Immigration

The Southern California region is home to over 5 million foreign-born residents (2005 American Community Survey) and has been a primary gateway for immigration throughout the late twentieth century to the present day. In Los Angeles County 36 percent of the population is foreign born. As the immigrant population grows nationally, California is actually seeing fewer immigrant arrivals. According to one source, the number declined by 10 percent in the 1990s and by 30 percent in Los Angeles County (Rodriguez, 2007).



Estimates of the number of illegal immigrants in the U.S. vary widely. As of 2003, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services put the number at 7 million, growing at rate of 500,000 annually, while the Pew Hispanic Center estimates that the number is closer 12 million today, based on the Current Population Survey (Knickerbocker, 2006). Although estimation methods vary, the Public Policy Institute of California claims that the number of illegal immigrants coming to the U.S. is higher than ever, outnumbering legal immigrants for the first time (Johnson, 2006). California is home to more illegal immigrants than any other state in the nation, an estimated 2.4 million, although Arizona has become the primary border crossing area in the past few years, and now has a higher percentage of illegal immigrants per capita (ibid).

The recent congressional debates over immigration have fueled concerns about immigration throughout the state and the nation. The debate has also put immigration at the forefront of Southern California concerns. While the issue was in the top ten problems in 2005, it moved up to the number five spot last year, and the number one spot this year. The

latest attempt at immigration reform, which was highly controversial, ended in June when the bill failed to make it out of the Senate.

### Transportation

Transportation is still a major concern in the region. Although various responses related to transportation were offered, by far the most common response to the question about the region's most important problem was traffic. Although Southern California does not have the highest average commute times in the U.S., it does rank in the top ten for large cities (population 250,000 or greater). The 2005 ACS ranks Riverside (city, not county) as having the fourth longest commute, and Los Angeles the sixth longest commute (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). The region also stands out for the level of congestion. The Texas Transportation Institute recently released their latest report, based on 2005 data, which indicated, "Los Angeles and Orange counties have retained their infamous reputation as the worst region in the nation for traffic delay" according to the Los Angeles Times. Motorists in these counties spend an average of 72 extra hours in rush hour traffic according to the report. Traffic in the Inland Empire is worsening as well, with motorists there averaging 49 extra hours stuck in traffic at peak times. Some experts claim that even these statistics underestimate the severity of congestion in the region (Rabin and Weikel, 2007).

### Crime

According to the California Department of Justice, violent crime has actually been declining since the early-1990s. The violent crime rate decreased considerably in each of the five Southern California counties between the peak year 1992 and 2006, dropping by almost half. Property crimes also decreased by almost one-third in the region between 1996 and 2006. The juvenile felony arrest rate in the region in 2003 was only



about 43 percent of its 1990 level (California Department of Justice, 2007). So overall the concern with crime seems to belie the statistics.

### The Economy

The economy is again the fourth most important problem in the region, down from the second most important concern two years ago. However, it is by far the highest concern within families in the region. The State of California Employment Development Department Labor Market statistics indicate that the annual average unemployment rate remained virtually the same (averaging a fairly low 4.7 percent) in all five southern California counties from January-February 2006 to January-February 2007. The rate is higher for certain groups and communities though, and there is some concern that many of the jobs most available in the region are service jobs and jobs in the informal economy, both of which are lower paying and provide few or no benefits or security. However another reason for the large number of responses in this category had to do with both the high cost of living in the region, and rising energy costs. The U.S. Energy Information Administration website confirms

that residential electricity prices have been rising steadily over the past few years (both nationally, and in the Pacific region), as have retail gasoline prices (although with more price fluctuations along the way). California ranks in the top ten in a comparison of retail energy costs by state, and these costs increased about 7 percent from February 2006 to February 2007 (Data Center Knowledge).

### Education

Education is a statewide problem as well as a local one. A recent PPIC survey on the state of education in California found that 80 percent of Californians believe the quality of education in the state is at least somewhat of a problem, and 52 percent consider it a big problem, which is virtually unchanged from a similar survey in 2000 (Public Policy Institute of California, 2007). However PPIC also found that statewide, “the number of residents ranking education and schools as the most important issue facing California has fallen to its lowest point in three years” (ibid). They suggest that perhaps frustration with education in the state has led to a disengagement from the issue. Education statistics vary widely throughout the southern California region, and throughout





each county, depending on the school district. In Los Angeles County there have been improvements over the past several years, yet the United Way reports that less than one third of 3rd graders scored at or above the national average for reading in 2005. Only 60 percent of high school students will graduate with a diploma, compared to 72 percent for the state and 90 percent for the nation. Education has been a top issue on the SCS for each of the past three years.

### **Pollution/Environment**

Although this year the environment placed sixth in the top problems ranking, in last year's SCS the environment ranked third. In that survey, about 60 percent of responses indicated pollution, or more specifically air pollution, as the greatest concern. A separate question later in the 2006 survey asked respondents about the most important environmental issue facing Southern California today. Over 50 percent rated air pollution as the most important environmental issue, with water pollution a distant second, at 9 percent. In some ways air quality in California in general has greatly improved over the past two decades. Several dangerous air pollutants that were at harmful levels twenty years ago no longer exceed health-based standards (California

Air Resources Board). However, air quality continues to merit serious concern. As noted in the other guest essay in this report, SCAG is seeking declaration of a state and federal emergency to address the region's air quality. The major culprit is PM<sub>2.5</sub> pollution, but standards for other particulate matter and for ozone continue to be revised. Earlier this year the Air Resources Board released a study estimating 5,400 premature deaths per year due to PM<sub>2.5</sub> in the South Coast Air Basin, which is completely within the SCAG region. While pollution did not make the top five list of concerns on the survey this year, it is likely that the furor over immigration simply stole attention away from the issue as last year's survey confirms that residents are worried about pollution levels in the region.

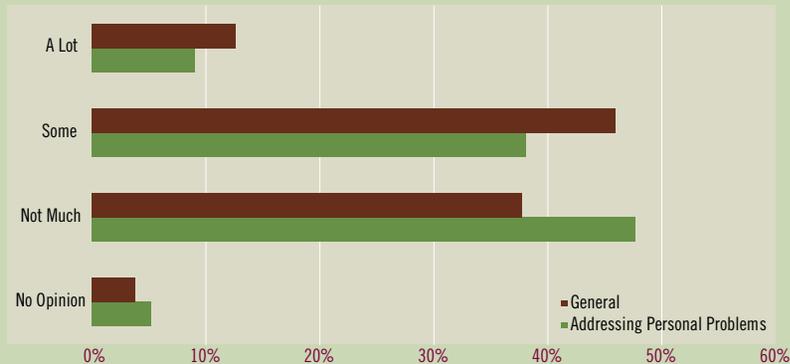
### **Confidence in Southern California Local Government**

We should point out that perceptions of local government can differ greatly, as local governance is a fairly complex and fragmented system. Southern California's system of local government is broken up among several counties, almost two hundred cities, and numerous special districts. While California's local government structure is less complex than others nationwide the overlapping responsibilities can make it difficult at times to know who is in charge on any particular issue. However, it is useful to know how residents perceive their local government and how they feel about its performance on the region's problems.

For the last three years the SCS asked residents about their level of confidence in "your local government." Figure 7 displays the results for 2007. The two questions were about general confidence and confidence in local government's ability to solve the problems that most affect your own household or family. Southern California residents tend to have higher levels of general confidence in local government than

in its ability to solve problems that affect them personally. About 58 percent of respondents have at least some confidence (some or a lot) in local government generally, as opposed to the 47 percent who report some degree of confidence in solving problems that affect them. These figures are very similar to what we found in both the 2005 and 2006 SCS, although we do see a slightly higher percentage of respondents indicating “not much” general confidence in 2007 than we found in 2005 (see figure 8).

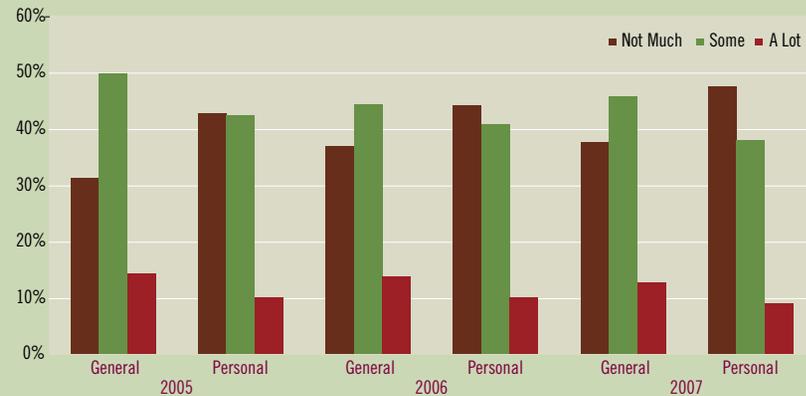
**Figure 7: Confidence in Local Government**



Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey 2007, N=1502



**Figure 8: Confidence in Local Government, 2005-2007**



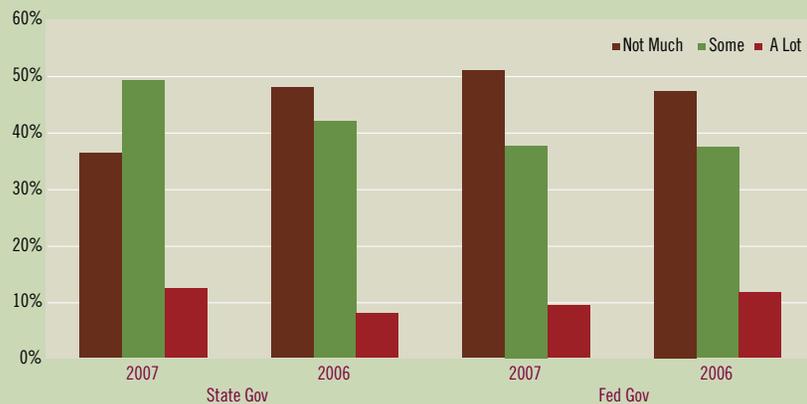
Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey, 2005-2007

For comparison, Figure 9 illustrates the level of confidence in the state and federal government in 2006 and 2007 (these questions were not asked in 2005). While last year there was more confidence in local government than in the state and federal government, this year ratings of state government improved significantly, and were slightly higher than local government confidence ratings. Ratings of the federal government fell slightly. Last year 48 percent reported “not much” confidence in state government, while this year that number was down to 36 percent. Those reporting “not much” confidence in the federal government basically held steady, rising just slightly from 47 percent last year to 51 percent this year (still within the margin of error). Overall 62 percent have at least some confidence in state government while only 47 percent have at least some confidence in the federal government.

To compare confidence levels among demographic groups and in different areas in the region we calculated confidence scores for each respondent based on the responses to both of the confidence questions. The maximum score was 4, the minimum was -2. The average

confidence score overall was 0.52. While in previous years we did see some differences in confidence scores by group, this year there was little significant variation. The only significant difference in confidence scores was by region. While Los Angeles county residents had the lowest average confidence scores (.31), Coastal (Ventura, Orange counties) regions had the highest scores (.62). The Inland Empire (Riverside, San Bernardino counties) score was .44, similar to last year. Overall scores have been dropping over the past two years, particularly in the Inland Empire, where confidence scores dropped significantly last year but held steady this year. Los Angeles county scores were also lower this year than the last two years (down from .52 to .31).

**Figure 9: Confidence in State and Federal Government, 2006-2007**



Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey, 2006-2007

### Local Government Performance on the Issues

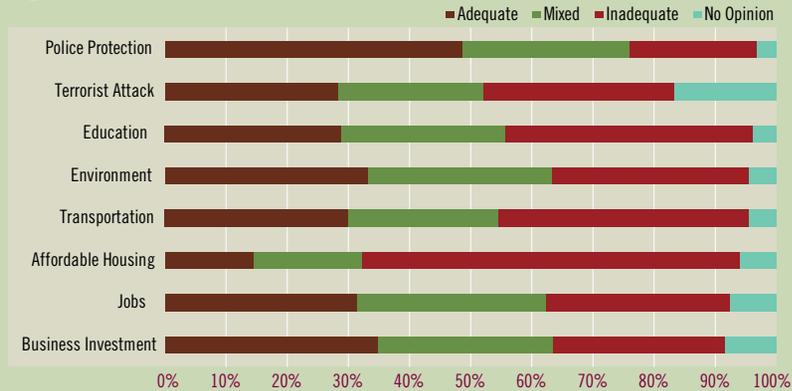
The survey also asked respondents whether the performance of Southern California’s elected officials in several different issue areas has been generally inadequate, mixed, or adequate. Residents are most satisfied with elected officials’ performance on police protection, with almost 50 percent of respondents indicating that local government is doing an

adequate job here. There was also relative satisfaction with protecting the environment, keeping and attracting jobs, and keeping attracting business investment in the region; over 60 percent of respondents indicated that performance on these issues was adequate or mixed. Respondents were slightly less satisfied with performance on improving transportation and education, and preparing for a terrorist attack, and very dissatisfied with performance in providing affordable housing in the region. Over 60% of respondents report elected official’s performance on affordable housing as “inadequate” (see figure 10). In the Los Angeles Riots 15th Anniversary Resident Follow Up Survey, city respondents were asked to rate the issue areas (using a six point scale), as opposed to their elected official’s performance on the issues, but Angelenos were similarly most displeased with the cost and availability of housing. Air quality was also a big concern in the city (the SCS asked about the environment). On the



positive side, city residents were also fairly satisfied with public safety and jobs/economy, similar to responses regionally.

**Figure 10: Government Performance, 2007**

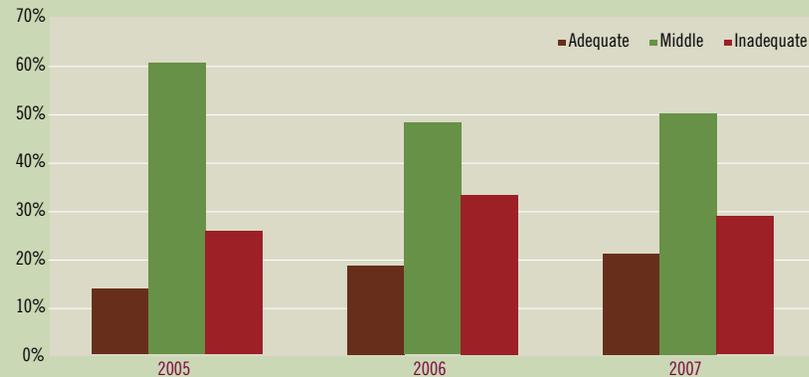


Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey 2007, N=1502

For an overall indicator of local government performance we created a score based on responses to each of the performance questions. Each adequate response received a “1” and each “inadequate” response received a “-1”. (The mixed response did not receive a score). Then we subtracted the “inadequate” scores from the “adequate” scores. If a respondent answered “adequate” on all eight issues areas their net score would be an 8. Conversely, if they responded “inadequate” on all eight issues areas their net score would be a -8. Although almost half of responses (50 percent) are in the “middle” range of -2 to 2, we still see a higher percentage of “inadequate” scores than “adequate” scores. However the scores are slightly better than they have been the last two years. In 2005 fourteen percent of scores were in the “adequate” range. In 2006 that number was up slightly to 18 percent, and this year, 21 percent. However the most significant change is the increase in intensity of opinion from 2005, when 60 percent of responses fell into

the middle range. In 2006 and 2007 middle range responses dropped to 50 percent, and we see a corresponding increase in “adequate” and “inadequate” responses (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Net Performance Scores, 2005-2007**



Source: Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, UCLA, Southern California Survey, 2005-2007

### Government Performance Ratings by Demographic Groups

Opinions on government performance tend to vary by demographics and geography. The differences here are generally slight, as most respondents choose the “middle” category. However there are some significant differences among groups in terms of who is most satisfied with government performance. Those with the lowest levels of education and the lowest incomes tend to give more “adequate” ratings than those in the higher categories. Younger residents are also more satisfied with government performance than older residents. As for ethnicity, Latinos are more satisfied with elected officials than are whites and other ethnic groups. Regionally Los Angeles residents are least satisfied with government performance, while those in the coastal counties are most satisfied. Responses within groups show little change from last year, although we do see a very slight decrease in the percentage of



“inadequate” responses almost across the board, with more significant decreases here among those in the “other” ethnic category, those in the Inland Empire, and those with the highest education levels. This change contrasts with the increase in inadequate ratings we observed among all demographic groups from 2005 to 2006. In a few cases inadequate ratings had risen over ten percent.

The overall picture here is that the majority of respondents, regardless of demographic group, offered an ambivalent response to the questions about government performance, indicating that most residents continue to lack strong opinions one way or the other. However the number of middle range responses continues to be lower than in 2005, indicating stronger feelings about local government performance in 2006 and 2007 than we found in 2005.

### **Discussion**

Public opinion data provide a useful guide to policymakers as they attempt to address the public’s concerns and priorities. However it is

important to note that to some extent these opinions are influenced by factors out of the control of elected officials. The media is one example. Almost three decades of research have confirmed that the media does shape public opinion. For example, Page, et al, (1987), found that different news sources have different effects, with news commentators having a strong positive impact on policy preferences. Entman, (1989), found that the media influences political preferences by affecting what people think about. Agenda setting is a key outcome of media influence, reflecting the increase in perceived importance of any issue extensively covered by the media. More current research continues to refine what we know about who is most influenced by media and how news coverage affects beliefs and preferences.

Research clearly supports the premise that media coverage may increase concern where little is warranted, while diverting attention from issues that need to be addressed. We see this on two levels in this data. The concern with crime has been high on every SCS since 2005, despite a continuing drop in the crime rate, particularly in the past ten years. Without minimizing the level of crime in some areas, which may very well be a significant concern for residents, this does seem to be one issue that tends to be blown out of proportion by the media. Immigration is an issue which has recently received a lot of attention from the media and political leaders. While immigration certainly impacts the region a great deal as a result of the large number of immigrants who live here and enter the country here, it seems likely that the national debates and media coverage on immigration reform have elevated concern more than any specific issue that involves immigration locally. On the other hand, the air quality crisis in the region is a serious health threat that should be one of the foremost concerns for residents. While the region is known for poor air quality, it seems that new information on various particulate matter and the links to health have not been widely

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publicized, which would help generate support for stricter air quality standards. So not only do public opinion polls tell policymakers what problems residents want them to address, it also tells policymakers what key problems are not on the minds of residents, but probably should be.

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