designing options for California's young children

Achieving Fair Access to Early Education

FEWER CHILDREN, REGIONAL GAPS ACROSS CALIFORNIA

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KEY FINDINGS

- Almost half of California families with a 3 or 4-year-old (48%) cannot find any preschool program with available slots, whether financed through parental fees or public dollars.
- California has made progress in widening pre-k access to 4-year-olds, reaching a 69% enrollment rate by 2016, while the quality of programs continues to vary sharply.
- Just one in eight families with an infant or toddler can find a licensed center to provide care, whether publicly subsidized or privately funded.
- Availability of early childhood programs varies dramatically across California counties.
- The number of young children, 0-5 years of age, is declining statewide. However, several counties will continue to experience steady growth in child population.
- Several counties face rising child populations and low pre-k supply.

Many young children and families benefit from early care and education (ECE) programs across California. Two-thirds of California's 4-year-olds attend a licensed program, a notable achievement for the nation's largest state.

However, the proportion of children served by these programs varies sharply across counties. Projected changes in the size and distribution of California's child population may exacerbate these disparities.

This brief details variation in ECE program enrollment across California's diverse counties. In 2016, for example, 77% of 4-year-olds were enrolled in either licensed center-based care or Transitional Kindergarten in Santa Clara County compared to just 42% in Tulare County. We document such disparities in various programs for differing age groups.

Evidence continues to accumulate detailing how California pre-k advances children's growth and preliteracy skills, at least in four counties.[1] But empirical findings also reveal wide variability in the quality of pre-k offerings, and wages paid to many preschool teachers and classroom aides remain low.

We examine recent and projected trends in child population growth across counties. From 2010 to 2016, for example, some counties experienced over 20% increases in the number of 3- and 4-year-olds, while others experienced equally large or greater decreases.

Lastly, we discuss implications for public policy aimed at improving the quality of and access to ECE programs. For example, declining child populations in higher-cost counties may render increases in per-child spending more affordable.

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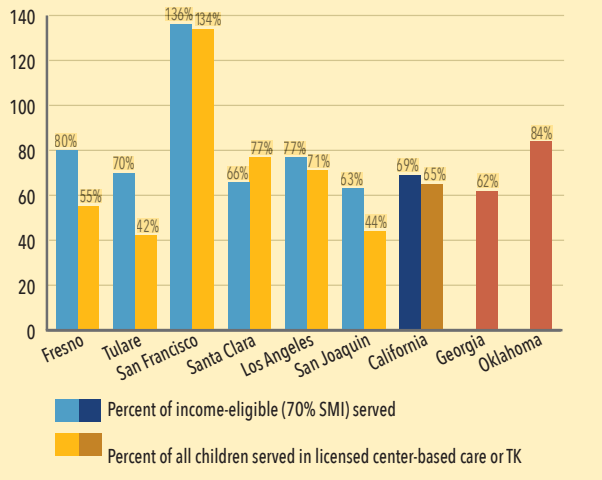
ACCESS FOR 4-YEAR-OLDS

We know that quality preschool can advance early learning and children's social development, especially for youngsters raised in poverty. One recent study shows that eighth-graders who attended Oklahoma's universal pre-k program displayed stronger achievement and were less likely to repeat a grade, compared with otherwise similar children who did not attend preschool.[2] Research from Berkeley details how preschool classrooms that offer cognitively challenging tasks similarly boost the early growth of many middle-class children.[3]

Good news for California is that fact that almost two-thirds (65%) of the state's 4-year-olds attended a preschool at least part-day in 2016, according to data compiled by the American Institutes for Research. This access is made possible through both public funding and family spending on pre-k tuition. Even more – 69% – of subsidy-eligible children attend a publicly-funded ECE program (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Proportion of 4-year-olds served by county



Source: American Institutes for Research, Early Learning Needs Assessment Tool, www.elneedsassessment.org.

These enrollment rates for California are similar to those in other states that provide universal public preschool for 4-year-olds. Oklahoma exhibits the highest pre-k attendance rate of any state, enrolling 84% of their 4-year-olds in the state pre-k program or Head Start. Georgia enrolls 62% of the state's 4-year-olds in publicly supported centers. Our counts for California combine child enrollments in both subsidized and fee-based centers.

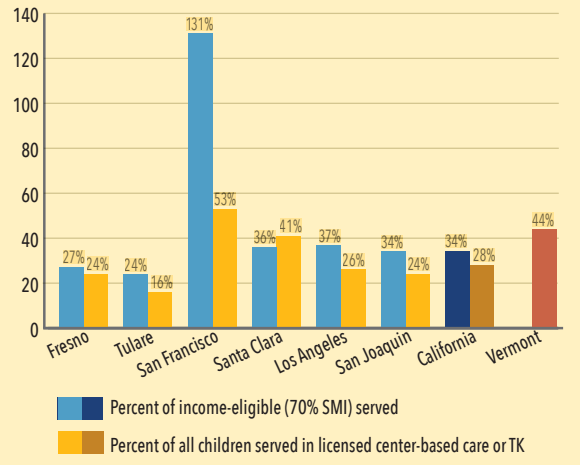
Despite high enrollment statewide, ECE access varies dramatically among counties. In 2016, for example, 77% of 4-year-olds were enrolled in either licensed center-based care or Transitional Kindergarten in Santa Clara County, compared to just 42% in Tulare County.

Variations in household income and countywide financial conditions may contribute to enrollment disparities among counties. Santa Clara, a county with high family incomes and housing costs, on average, enrolls a higher proportion of all 4-year-olds in licensed centers than it does children from subsidy-eligible families. In contrast, some counties, including both high-income San Francisco and the Central Valley counties of Fresno and San Joaquin, display relatively high ECE enrollment rates for subsidy-eligible children.

ACCESS FOR 3-YEAR-OLDS

Fewer than one-third of California's three-year-olds (28%) attended a licensed center in 2016. The proportion enrolled from lower income families was just slightly higher, 34% in the same year (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 Proportion of 3-year-olds served by county



Source: American Institutes for Research, Early Learning Needs Assessment Tool, www.elneedsassessment.org.

Research shows greater long-term benefits for children attending two years of preschool, at least for preschoolers from lower-income families.[4] Several states are working hard to increase pre-k enrollment for 3-year-olds. Vermont, for instance, enrolls over 44% of their 3-year-olds in publicly supported centers.[5] Some of California's better-resourced counties have achieved a level of center-based provision comparable to Vermont.

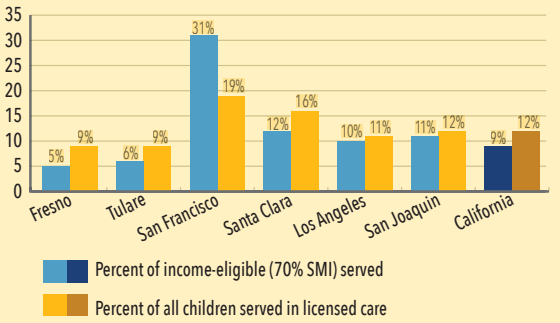
ACCESS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Just 12% of California's infants and toddlers (children from birth to age two) attend a licensed ECE program, including both centers and family child-care homes. This means that the majority of these children are either at home with a parent or cared for by other family members, friends, or neighbors (Figure 3). Most young children, then, are in unlicensed arrangements. The safety and quality of unlicensed arrangements varies widely, and these settings often fail to provide young children with the early language and learning experiences from which they will later benefit in school.[6]

> Just 12% of California's infants and toddlers attend a licensed ECE program.

Again, we see large disparities in access to licensed programs across counties. Just 9% of infants and toddlers in Fresno County are enrolled in licensed care, compared with 19% in San Francisco.

FIGURE 3 Proportion of 0-2 year-olds served by county



Source: American Institutes for Research, Early Learning Needs Assessment Tool, www.elneedsassessment.org.

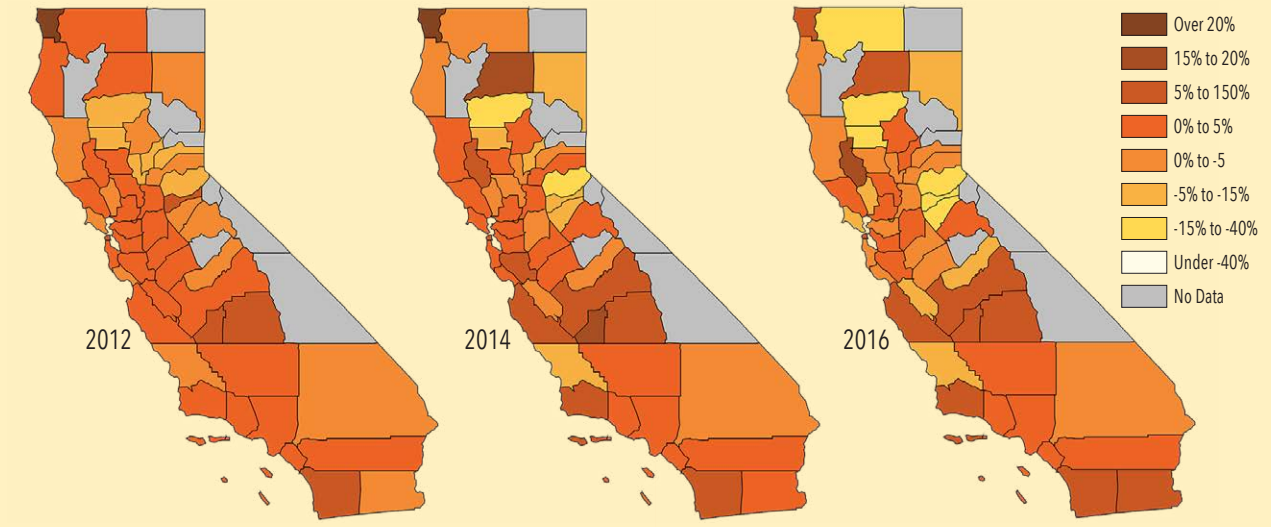
GROWTH AND DECLINE – COUNTIES VARY IN CHILD POPULATION TRENDS

On top of access disparities, data point to another trend that may influence ECE policy and planning: child population decline.

The number of children entering kindergarten rose from about 500,000 in 2008 to almost 600,000 in 2016. But this trend recently reversed. California's most recent apex of births occurred in 2010, when just over 559,000 children were born statewide. This number fell to 513,000 by 2016, according to census data. However, recent rates of child population growth or decline have varied sharply among the state's counties.

Figure 4 shows clear recent declines in counts of young children residing in higher-cost counties and ongoing growth in the number of preschoolers that populate new exurbs and lower-cost regions of the Central Valley. Several counties in the Central Valley, such as Fresno and Tulare,

FIGURE 4 Child population growth, ages 3 and 4. Percentage change, 2010 base year



NOTE: Counties with fewer than 1,000 0 to 2 year olds or fewer than 1,000 3 and 4 year olds in 2018 omitted. Source: American Community Survey, Census Bureau.

have shown steady growth in numbers of 3 and 4-year-olds, between 5% and 15% since 2010. Just north, the count of preschool-age children has declined in Madera and San Benito counties. A handful of rural counties, where ECE center slots are scarce, have experienced growth in child populations.

This variability in birth rates among counties will likely continue through 2030, given local differences in fertility rates and maternal education, shifting housing patterns and out-migration of many families from high-cost counties, especially in Silicon Valley and the Los Angeles region.[7]

The count of infants and toddlers is expected to fall by 2% statewide between 2016 and 2022. But in San Joaquin and Fresno counties, for example, child populations are projected to climb by similar percentages.

Growth rates may increase in fast-growing suburbs as families flee expensive housing markets. The same is true in Central Valley counties through 2030 – where birth rates will remain comparatively high. While the child population in these counties is on the rise, the supply of public ECE programs is relatively low. In contrast, major urban counties that have fostered significant expansion of preschool will serve decreasing child populations for the foreseeable future.

IMPLICATONS FOR STATE AND LOCAL POLICY

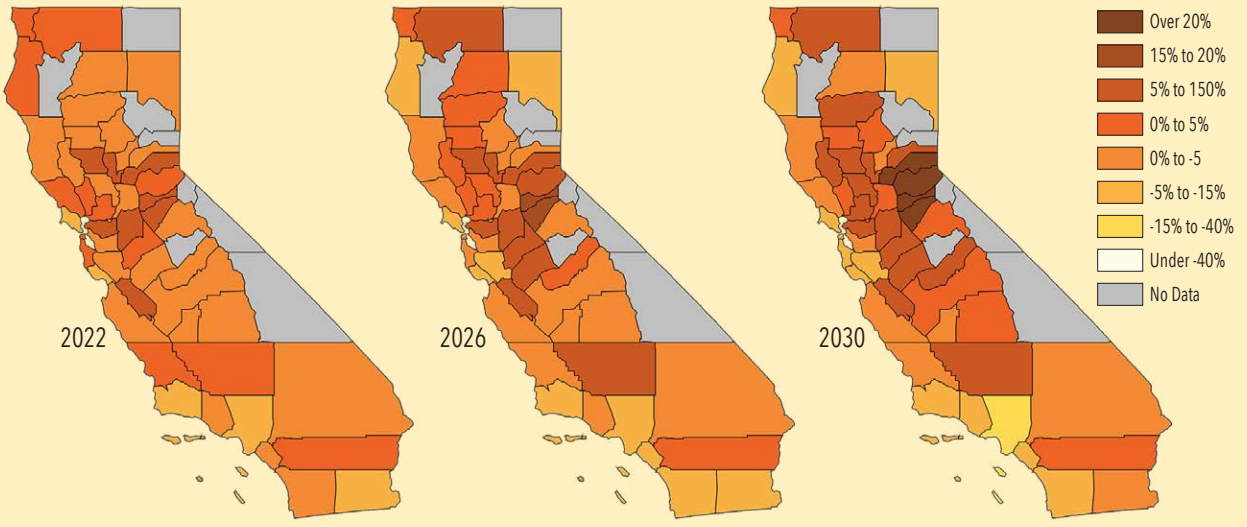
- *California's population of young children is declining.* This means that school enrollments will drift downward, a trend already being felt in several urban districts. Classroom space will open-up, although not in the counties where child populations will continue to grow.

- *The state nears universal access to preschool among 4-year-olds*, matching enrollment rates of leading states and cities. Parent fees finance many of these slots in California, while state and local governments fund a growing share.

- *Wide disparities persist in the availability of ECE slots among counties.* Spaces for 3-year-olds remain especially scarce. Licensed care for infants and toddlers remains even more difficult to find. How to balance the demands of work and family, equalize access to ECE programs, and enhance quality offers a daunting challenge for policy makers and local practitioners.

- Putting together trends in birth rates and pre-k supply, we discover that several counties experience a double-edged disparity: they have few existing ECE programs

FIGURE 5 **Child population growth, ages 3 and 4. Percentage change, 2018 base year**



NOTE: Counties with fewer than 1,000 0 to 2 year olds or fewer than 1,000 3 and 4 year olds in 2018 omitted. Source: California Department of Finance

and will confront steadily growing child populations in coming decades.

What consequences for state policy do these demographic and evolving enrollment patterns suggest? And do these changing conditions open new windows for inventive policy action?

Declining school enrollments, for instance, may free-up facilities for new pre-k classrooms in some counties. Though this may not help counties where child populations will continue to grow and where preschool supply is most scarce. State and local resources saved from declining K-12 enrollments statewide could be redirected to expand and improve the quality of pre-k.

A second implication of this report is that how the state funds local ECE programs could become more responsive to diverse county contexts. The state currently contracts with thousands of local agencies, many situated in counties with comparatively high pre-k enrollment rates and, of late, shrinking child populations.

Declining school enrollments may free-up facilities for new pre-k classrooms in some counties.

Funding streams could better flow to counties where family demand will grow. As policy makers rethink the state's role in supporting young families and children, bolstering the authority and management capacity of lead county agencies might be considered.

The state could then more keenly focus on reducing disparities in access to and the quality of ECE options among counties. In turn, counties might be awarded greater authority and technical capacity to plan where and how to equalize family access to early childhood

THE EFFICACY OF LOCAL ACTION – SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco hosts a small population of children under age 5, relative to most California counties, along with a strong supply of pre-k slots. Still, gaps in services for families with infants, toddlers and preschoolers persist.

"Generally with preschool access, we're doing really well," in part because voters have backed a Children and Youth Fund through slightly higher property taxes, September Jarrett, executive director of the San Francisco Office of Early Care and Education, told us.

But she adds that parents' demand for high-quality child care remains strong, because "this is not a community where one wage earner can support a family." Even with preschool slots, most families need full-day programs, not half-day offerings.

San Francisco also introduced a new voucher program last summer, the Early Learning Scholarship. The goal of the new effort, Jarrett says, is to move away from a state funding model where dollars are tied year after year to certain agencies. Now scholarship dollars, under the city's "child enrollment model", follows families who are choosing from among high-quality options.

The program focuses on the most disadvantaged children and incents providers to raise quality. So far, 320 centers and family child-care homes have opted to participate.

Still, Jarrett argues that "a free universal preschool [program] that has learning standards could serve the state so much better than what we have now." It could provide the foundation on which portable vouchers cover parents working odd-hours, while encouraging higher quality among a diversity of providers.

CHILD POPULATIONS STILL GROWING – SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY

The count of young children is beginning to decline statewide. But that's not the case in San Joaquin County. Between 2018 and 2022, the population of children from birth to age 2 is expected to increase by 2%, then jump another 5% to 10% by 2030. This county already suffers from scarce supply of pre-k slots and family supports for infants and toddlers.

Yet, how the state funds preschool slots does not flexibly meet the needs of families, Lani Schiff-Ross, First 5 director in San Joaquin County, told us. Local agencies recently sent back $1.7 million to the state for budgeted slots that went unfilled. This stemmed from the fact that many young parents work irregular or unpredictable hours, evenings, weekends, and even graveyard shifts. "We have some providers that aren't full, but there are waitlists" for parents hoping to match odd-hour work schedules, Shiff-Ross reports.

She adds that program providers are seeing greater behavioral problems and other social-emotional issues among young children in this county marked by high rates of family poverty. "It's not just that the population is going up, the needs are going up as well," Shiff-Ross said.

Members of the Berkeley Panel include Catherine Atkin, Erin Gabel, Angie Garling, Rebecca Gomez, Ted Lempert, Scott Moore, Karla Pleitez Howell, Patricia Lozano, Hanna Melnick, Sarah Neville-Morgan, Michael Olenick, Kendra Rogers, Chris Steinhauser, Gerry Shelton, Deborah Stipek, Samantha Tran, Pete Weldy, and Lisa Wilkin. The authors are responsible for any errors or misinterpretations.

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programs. State decision makers may not have the best knowledge of which neighborhoods are most in need of new ECE centers, or where and how to best lift quality in local communities.

ENSURING *QUALITY* PRESCHOOL FOR ALL CHILDREN

This analysis does not examine the quality of preschools statewide, which we know varies dramatically across local programs. Advancing wider access to mediocre pre-k would not be a wise public policy.

Future research briefs from the Berkeley Think Tank will review evidence on how to best lift preschool and child care quality. We are learning about what specific investments and program strategies most effectively lift developmental outcomes for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children. Stay tuned for these forthcoming reviews, along with policy options informed by these empirical findings.

Several counties in the Central Valley
face a complicated problem in out years:
They host scarce availability of pre-k slots
while experiencing rising counts of young children.

THE BERKELEY THINK TANK ON EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY

Policy thinkers and sage practitioners have come together to compile evidence that informs promising options for equalizing access to quality pre-k and early childhood programs for California's diverse families. Scholars at Berkeley's Institute of Human Development facilitate deliberations of the 17-member Think Tank Panel.

Rather than draft a tidy blueprint, the Think Tank aims to first synthesize key pieces of evidence regarding demographic trends, enrollment in extant programs for youngsters, age 0-5 years, and dimensions of quality that elevate children's early growth and learning. Then, we put forward realistic policy options, estimate costs, and focus on trade-offs – based on core principles and always thinking long term. Broad consensus among stakeholders is required to boldly move forward. Our North Star shines bright: seeking to build an easily accessed set of quality early-childhood options for California's families.

More information: *b_fuller@berkeley.edu* and *https://choosechildren.org/*

ENDNOTES

1 Evidence from Los Angeles: *http://child360.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/LAUP_CDSR_FULLREPORT_REGDISC_rev20170112.pdf*. San Francisco: *http://glenpricegroup.com/sites/laupresearch/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/05/Evaluating-PFA-Effectiveness-Research-Brief.pdf*. Santa Clara: *https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3696565.pdf?casa_token=2so6UOO-wBsAAAAA:IIgb-voXBLmSYQ2-WMAeuRinmxrd87kP6ayl1g6u1LoNoXJR7fO-JE21xdalGoredc4doyPJq-HAo-rMlErL3liqpm99NaXoTZ9kFl-da8i63kugrlzwWu*. San Mateo: *https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2131.html*.

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3 Fuller, B., Bein, E., Bridges, M., Kim, Y., & Rabe-Hesketh, S. (2017). Do academic preschools yield stronger benefits? Cognitive emphasis, dosage, and early learning. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 52, 1-11.

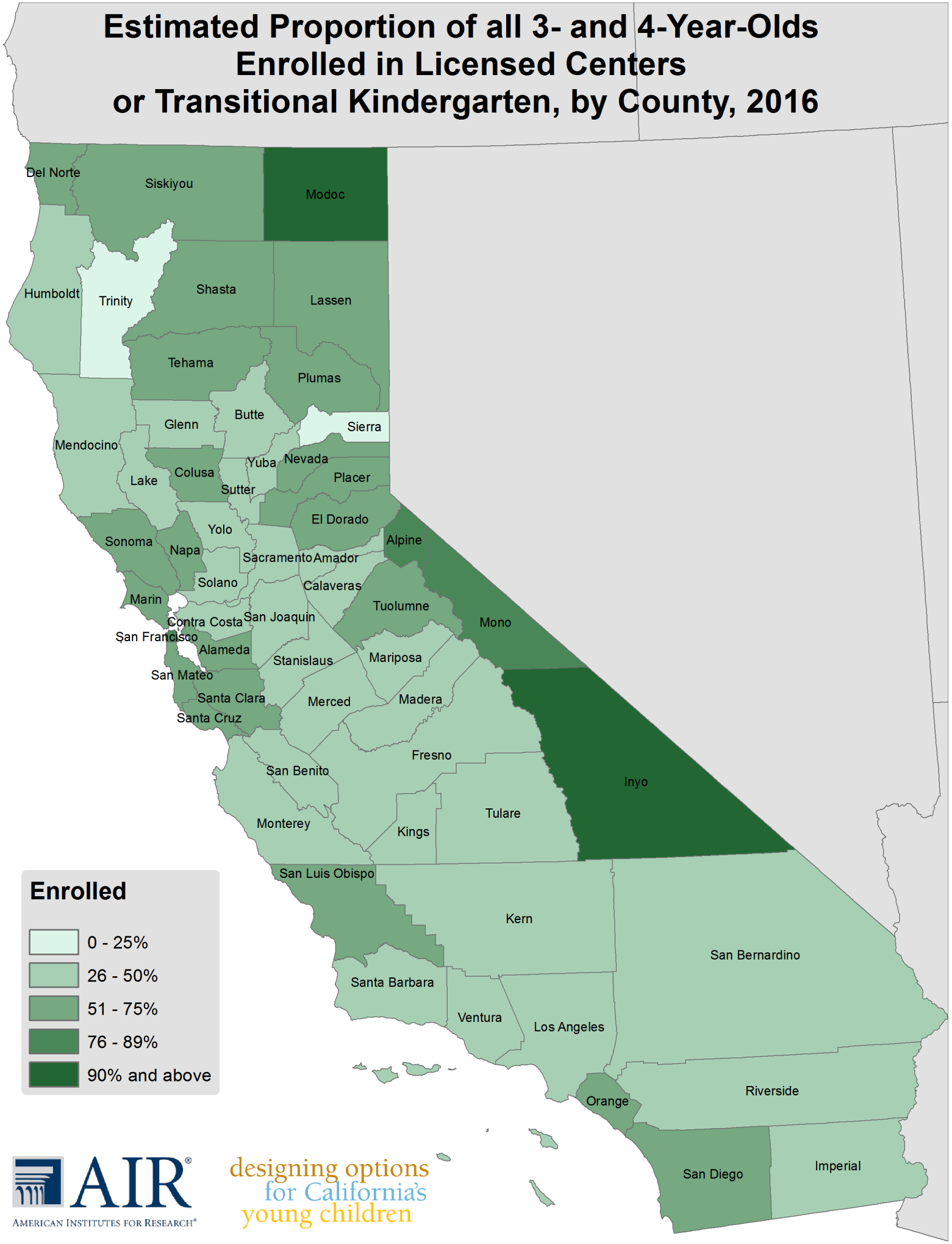
4 Arteaga, I., Humpage, S., Reynolds, A., & Temple, J. (2014). One year of preschool or two – Is It Important for adult outcomes? Results from the Chicago longitudinal study of the child-parent centers. Economics of Education Review, 40, 221–237. *https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775713001015*.

5 Barnett, W., Friedman-Krauss, A., Weisenfeld, G., Horowitz, M., Kasmin, R., & Squires, J. (2017). The state of preschool 2016: State preschool yearbook. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

6 Loeb, S. (2016). Missing the target: We need to focus on informal care rather than preschool. Evidence Speaks Reports, vol. 1, no. 19. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, Economic Studies at Brookings. *https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/childcare2.pdf*.

7 For details on county-by-county birth rates, as reported by the state Department of Finance, see: *http://www.dof.ca.gov/forecasting/demographics/projections/Historical_And_Projected_Births/*.

Estimated Proportion of all 3- and 4-Year-Olds Enrolled in Licensed Centers or Transitional Kindergarten, by County, 2016



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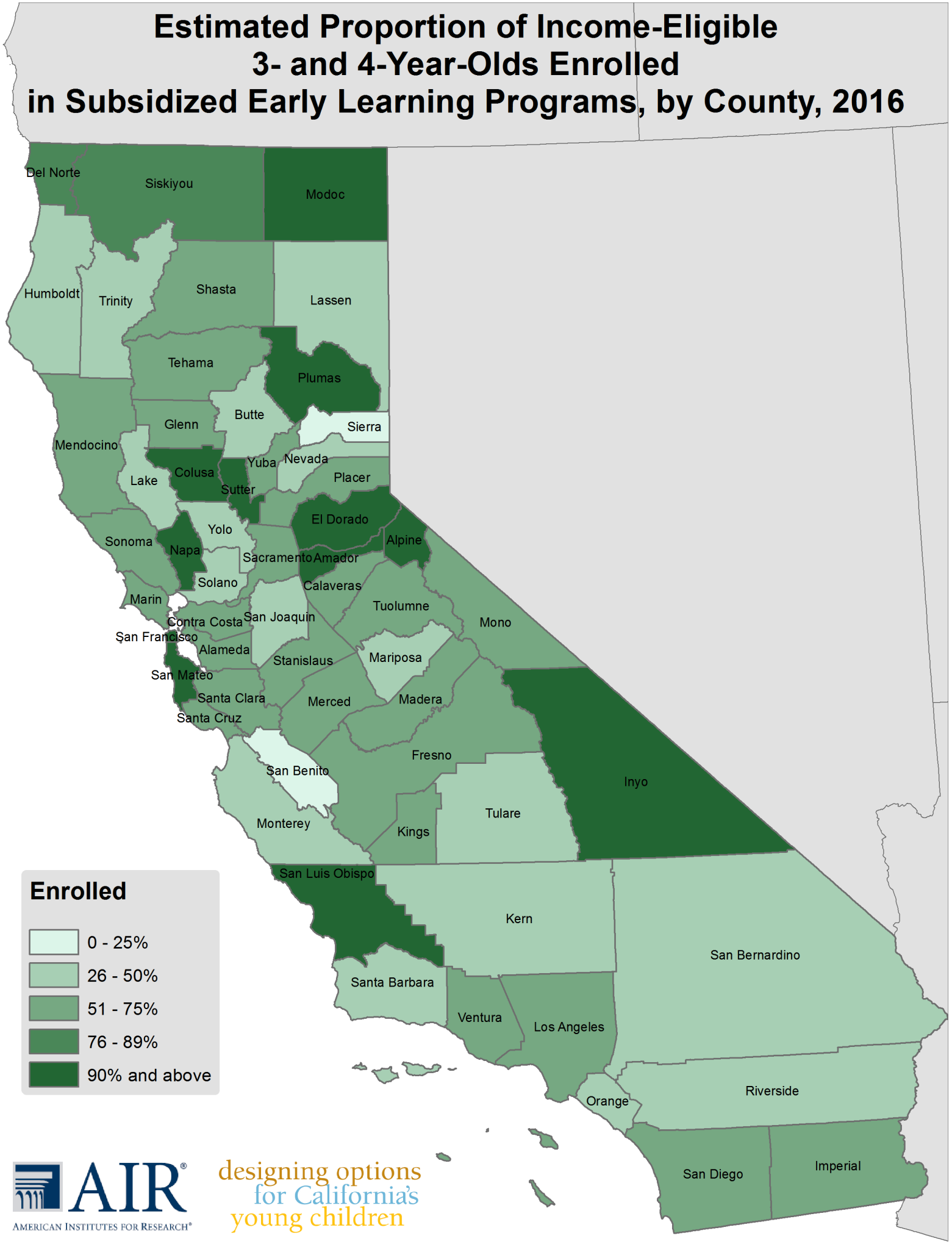
Estimated Proportion of Income-Eligible 3- and 4-Year-Olds Enrolled in Subsidized Early Learning Programs, by County, 2016



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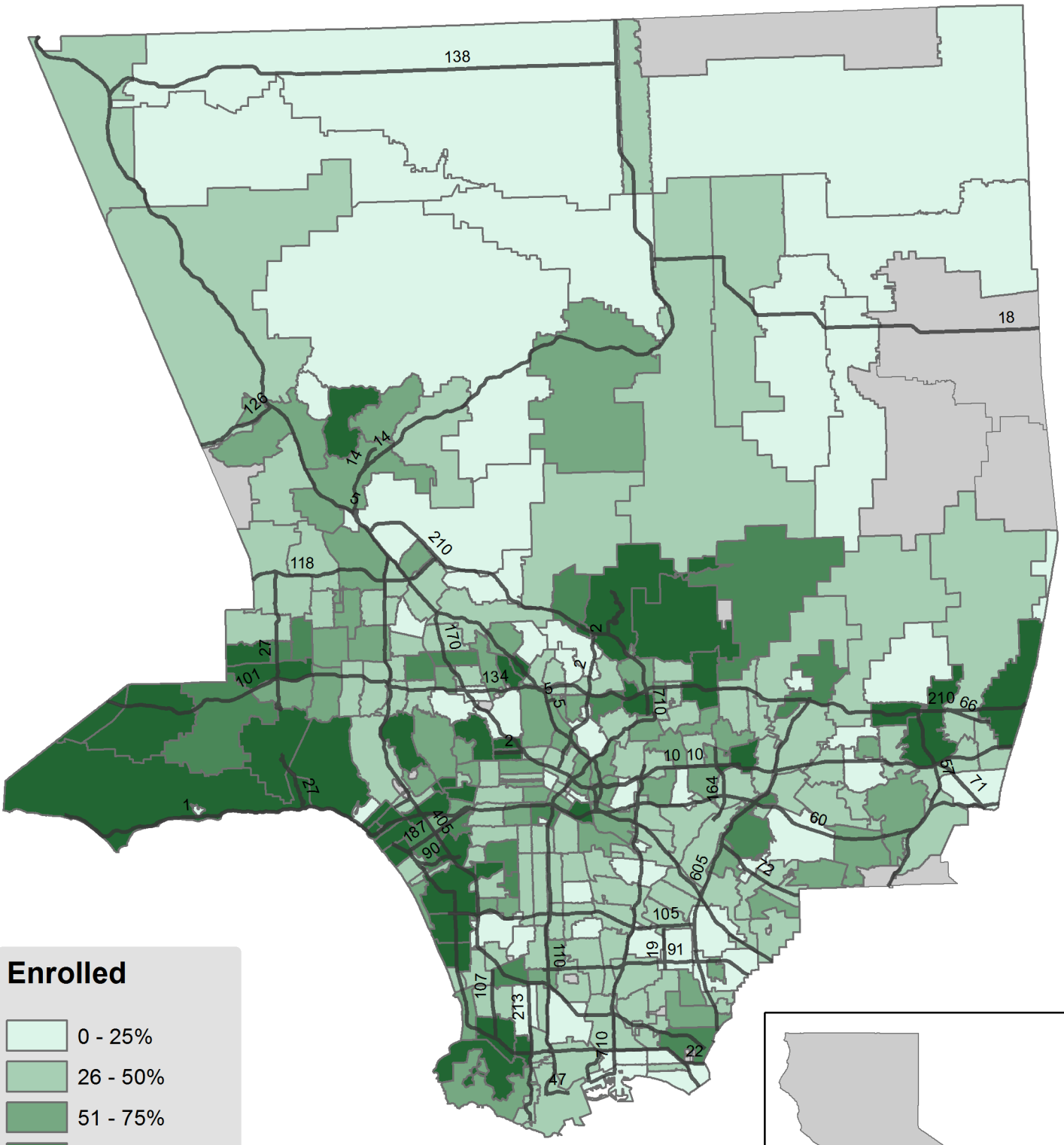
Estimated Proportion of all 3- and 4-Year-Olds Enrolled in Licensed Care Programs or Transitional Kindergarten in Los Angeles County, by ZIP Code, 2016



Enrolled

- 0 - 25%
- 26 - 50%
- 51 - 75%
- 76 - 89%
- 90% and above

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