

The Home Kitchen Pathway



A Data-Driven Review of California's MEHKO Program

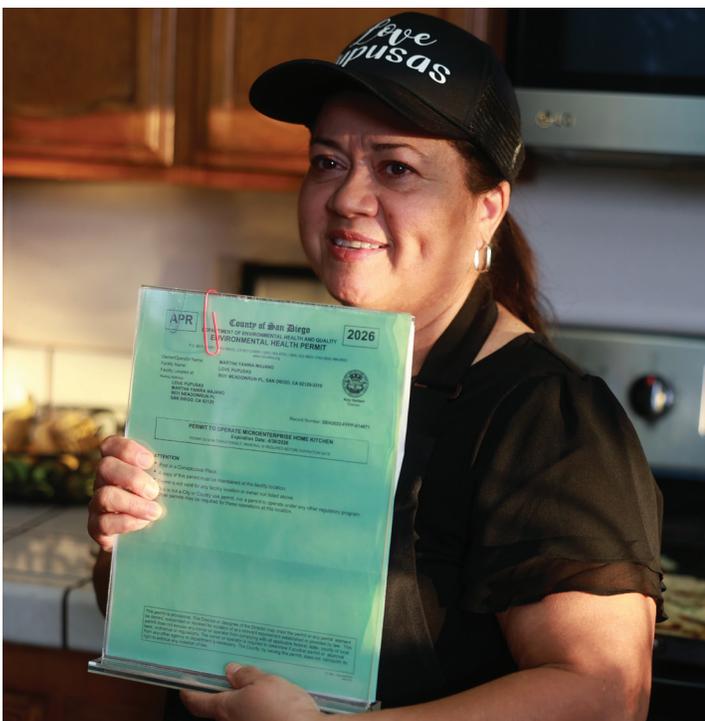


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This report was prepared by Will von Geldern (University of Washington) in collaboration with Lauren Wolfer and Roya Bagheri of the COOK Alliance. It also incorporates findings from surveys and focus groups conducted and analyzed by EMC Research. The authors thank the California Workforce Development Board and the California Association for Microenterprise Opportunity (CAMEO) Network for their support of this work.

I. Executive Summary

Small businesses are the backbone of the American economy and an essential part of California's unique, diverse culture. But starting a food business is out of reach for many aspiring entrepreneurs who do not have access to startup capital or cannot bear the financial risks of opening a traditional food establishment. Because of the high cost of food business ownership, many Californians opt to begin their food ventures from home. In response, the California Legislature recently created a first-of-its-kind program to legitimize these businesses. The Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operation (MEHKO) program allows individuals to apply for a permit to sell freshly prepared meals directly to consumers from their licensed and inspected home kitchens.

Since 2019, 18 jurisdictions around California have opted into the program and more than 60% of California's population now lives in an area where MEHKOs are allowed. This report looks at the growth and community impacts of the MEHKO program in its first five years in those jurisdictions. Our analysis of survey data and documents collected from local environmental health and code enforcement agencies shows that MEHKOs operate safely, are very diverse, and integrate well into many different communities. Complaints about MEHKOs are uncommon, while problems associated with unpermitted operators remain widespread. MEHKO operators also report positive financial outcomes, income flexibility that supports household and caregiving needs, and skill development.

- **MEHKOs have an exceptional safety and community impact record.** 97% of MEHKOs have never faced a single formal complaint of any kind, including concerns about noise, traffic, parking, nuisance, or food safety issues.
- **Foodborne illness reports are extremely rare.** Environmental health agencies identified only two (2) foodborne illness complaints across the 898 MEHKOs that received permits between 2019 and 2024.
- **MEHKOs are led by diverse entrepreneurs.** More than three-quarters (79%) of MEHKO operators are people of color, compared to a national entrepreneurial landscape that is majority white.¹ About 70% of MEHKO operators are women, well above the overall share² of female new U.S. entrepreneurs.
- **MEHKO permits create meaningful economic and household benefits.** 73% said their MEHKO helped them financially. Operators cited financial stability, work-life balance, and stronger community ties as the top benefits of operating a MEHKO.

- **Californians support MEHKOs and want to see the program grow.** Although general awareness of the program is low, nine-in-ten Californians said they would support their county implementing a system for legal, permitted MEHKOs.

II. Background: AB 626

Many Californians have a preference for supporting local food and agriculture, but the barriers to entry in food business ownership often prevent entrepreneurs – particularly women, people of color, and immigrants – from meeting this need with permitted, licensed businesses. In the culinary industry, getting started can cost more than \$100,000 for a food truck³ and upwards of \$475,000 for a full-service restaurant.⁴

Prior to 2012, the California Retail Food Code (CRFC) required all food sold to consumers to be made at an inspected commercial kitchen. With the passage of the California Homemade Food Act in 2013, certain shelf-stable, non-perishable food products such as bread, fruit jams, and dried fruit could be made in private home kitchens and be sold to consumers through entities known as “cottage food operations” (CFOs). While the Cottage Food law created a legal pathway for some home-based producers, however, its limited list of allowed products is limited in cultural diversity and excludes freshly prepared foods. As a result, many aspiring cooks whose offerings fell outside the scope of the CFO permit did not have a viable legal option and continued operating without permits or formal food safety training.

To address this gap in regulation, Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia sponsored Assembly Bill 626 to create a new Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operations (MEHKO) permit program. Assemblymember Garcia said that existing cottage foods laws were “overly complicated and prevent marginalized populations from exploring new business ventures.” AB 626 aimed to “support healthy, self-reliant communities by legitimizing an important lever of economic empowerment for home cooks who lack access to the professional food world; knocking down barriers to expand opportunities for American dreams.”⁵ The bill was passed and signed by Governor Jerry Brown in September 2018.

AB 626 created the nation’s first framework for regulating small-scale, direct sales of freshly prepared meals from home cooks to consumers. The innovative program was crafted by a broad coalition of advocates under COOK Alliance, working alongside the California Conference of Environmental Health Directors (CCDEH) and other

stakeholders in the state's public health, food, and entrepreneurial communities. Because of the innovative nature of the program, AB 626 required jurisdictions to affirmatively opt in, unlike Cottage Food and other retail food programs that apply statewide by default. In practice, this means that each of California's 58 county health departments, along with the four cities that operate their own health departments, may issue MEHKO permits only after their local governing body adopts an ordinance or resolution authorizing the program.

The Legislature refined the MEHKO framework through AB 377 in 2019, a cleanup bill developed with support from major health agencies and the California State Association of Counties (CSAC). In 2023, the passage of AB 1325 raised both the meal and income limits and clarified the definition of a meal, giving home based chefs greater operational flexibility.

Understanding MEHKO regulations

AB 626 created a program that provides incubator-level or supplemental income opportunities by allowing individuals to legally prepare and sell meals from their primary residence under a permit designed for small-scale food enterprises.

To keep operations small in scale and maintain public health safeguards, state law sets production and sales limits, which were increased by AB 1325 in 2023:

- 30 meals per day
- 90 meals per week
- \$100,000 gross annual sales cap (adjusted annually for inflation)

MEHKOs must prepare, cook, and serve all food on the same day, and all sales must be direct to consumers. Takeout, delivery, dine-in service are allowed, but wholesale, catering, sales at events or farmers markets, and the use of third-party delivery apps are prohibited. MEHKOs may offer a wide range of hot and cold foods, but higher-risk activities such as producing homemade dairy products, serving raw oysters, or preparing foods that require a HACCP plan are not allowed.

To obtain a permit, operators submit standard operating procedures and a menu for approval and complete a home inspection by local environmental health. Operators must also maintain an active Food Safety Manager certification. MEHKOs receive an

annual inspection, and additional inspections may occur when warranted, such as in response to a complaint or a potential food safety concern.

Local program adoption

Riverside County launched the first MEHKO program in 2019, and 17 other jurisdictions have followed suit since then. More than 60% of California’s population now lives in an area where MEHKOs are allowed and over 1,200 permits have been issued (as of publication).

Some jurisdictions have chosen to introduce MEHKO permits through temporary pilot programs, generally lasting two or three years. These pilots are often initiated in response to early questions from municipalities about potential community impacts such as parking, traffic, noise, grease disposal, or waste generation. To date, every completed pilot has been adopted as a permanent program.

Table 1 shows the status of MEHKO program implementation in California jurisdictions, including areas that have begun formal exploration of the program or have ongoing advocacy efforts (at the time of publication).

"The pilot provided the county and cities with an opportunity to evaluate the feasibility, community impacts, and estimated program costs prior to deciding on a permanent program. So far, there have been no significant issues or complaints reported regarding permitted operations, and permitted operations have been able to operate safely."

- Heather Forshey, San Mateo County Director of Environmental Health Services, at a Board of Supervisors meeting on September 12, 2023

Table 1: MEHKO program status by jurisdiction

MEHKO Program Status	Jurisdiction
Permanent program	Alameda County, City of Berkeley, Imperial County, Lake County, Los Angeles County, Monterey County, Riverside County, Santa Barbara County, Solano County, Sonoma County
Permanent program following pilot	San Diego County, San Benito County, San Mateo County, Santa Clara County
Existing pilot program	Amador County, Contra Costa County, Santa Cruz County
Early-stage activity (formal consideration or active advocacy efforts)	City of Long Beach, City of Pasadena, El Dorado County, Fresno County, Humboldt County, Inyo County, Marin County, Mendocino County, Orange County, Sacramento County, San Bernardino County, San Francisco County, San Luis Obispo County, Tehama County, Trinity County, Ventura County

As the program has expanded since the passage of AB 626, the lack of research on MEHKO has made it difficult to evaluate the program’s effectiveness. In this report, we use several sources of data to show how the program has affected local entrepreneurs and their communities.

III. Data and Methodology

To assess the MEHKO program in its first five years, we collected and analyzed public data on permits issued, food safety outcomes, and other community impacts of MEHKOs. We created three new datasets by submitting public records requests to local agencies across the state, and we commissioned an independent research firm to conduct two surveys and one set of focus groups and analyze the findings.

Data from administrative records

We collected three types of administrative data: permit records, environmental health complaint data, and code enforcement complaint data. To build the first statewide dataset covering all MEHKO permits issued in the program’s first five years, we

submitted public records requests to every environmental health agency with an active MEHKO program. All records request language used throughout this study was reviewed by California Conference of Directors of Environmental Health (CCDEH) MEHKO Technical Liaison Kendra Wise, M.S., REHS. From the permit records we received, we collected business names and addresses, along with permit details such as dates of issuance, renewal, and cancellation when available. This dataset created a complete record of permits issued during the program's first five years. It also allowed us to identify MEHKO addresses for later complaint-related records requests and to define the sampling frame for the permit holder survey.⁶

We then submitted a second round of public records requests to every environmental health agency with a MEHKO program to obtain all complaints involving MEHKOs. We also requested all complaints concerning unpermitted residential food sales within these same jurisdictions, covering the period from each program's start date through December 2024. Because environmental health agencies can identify complaints by permit status or by whether food was being sold from a residence, we did not specify complaint categories; agencies were asked to provide any and all complaints they had received. Complaints in both categories included referrals from other agencies.

For clarity, this report uses "MEHKO" only to refer to permitted operations, although the phrase "permitted MEHKO" is sometimes used informally in public discourse. Because MEHKOs are, by definition, permitted operations, establishments without a MEHKO permit are referred to in this report as unpermitted home-based food vendors. References to unpermitted activity include only food enterprises operating from a private residence and using the home kitchen; street or sidewalk vending, which occurs off the home's property and is regulated separately, is not included.

Finally, we submitted requests to every city in jurisdictions with active MEHKO programs to document community impact complaints about MEHKOs and unpermitted home-based food businesses. These requests were submitted to city clerks and code enforcement divisions and included records from law enforcement, planning, and other related agencies. Because these agencies do not categorize complaints by permit type or note when a household is operating as a MEHKO, we could not request "all MEHKO complaints" in the same manner used with environmental health agencies. Instead, we requested two types of records from code enforcement agencies. First, we asked for all code enforcement cases related to noise, traffic, parking, waste disposal, signage, or any other nuisance or community impact concerns, limited to the specific addresses identified as MEHKOs in the statewide permit dataset. Second, we requested all code

enforcement complaints related to food sales from a residence, regardless of address, for the same timeframe (from each program's start date through December 2024). For addresses in unincorporated areas of counties with active MEHKO programs, we submitted the same requests to county-level code enforcement agencies.

All complaint documents were hand coded to identify the number of distinct complaints submitted and the topics referenced in each one. Each complaint was also reviewed to determine whether it was related to MEHKO activity; for example, a complaint about a resident leaving furniture on the curb was not considered relevant. In reviewing the complaint records, we identified several instances in which an address had received a complaint related to food sales from a residence before later obtaining a MEHKO permit. Because these complaints occurred prior to the issuance of the permit, they were classified as involving an unpermitted home-based food vendor. Complaints were categorized as MEHKO complaints only when the activity took place after a permit had been issued.

The analysis of food safety and community impact data includes all jurisdictions for which detailed records were available. Los Angeles County did not begin issuing MEHKO permits until November 2024, and Santa Cruz and Sonoma Counties did not begin issuing permits until 2025, placing them outside the timeframe of this study, which examines the program's first five years. Lake County provided only a total count of MEHKO permits issued, which documented participation in the program but did not offer the detail needed for deeper analysis.

Surveys and focus groups

We also commissioned an independent research firm, EMC Research, to conduct two surveys and a set of three focus groups. The first survey was sent to all permit holders identified in our statewide permit dataset, and collected information about MEHKO operators and their experiences with the program. This survey collected responses from 230 permit holders in both English and Spanish. Survey questions covered business details, program perceptions, and demographic information.

A second survey collected responses about the MEHKO program and consumer behaviors from a group of 1,020 California residents in both English and Spanish. This survey was intended to gauge consumers' awareness and levels of support for the MEHKO program and home-based food businesses, as well as other aspects of consumer

behavior related to food and restaurants. Responses for both surveys were collected in September and October 2025.

Finally, EMC recruited 22 focus group participants from the list of MEHKO operators who had completed the permit holder survey and opted into participating in additional research. Three online focus groups were conducted, with eight participants in each of two English-language groups and six participants in a single Spanish-language group. These focus groups were intended to elicit longer and more detailed responses about permit holders' use of the new program, as well as the benefits and challenges of operating a MEHKO. Focus groups were conducted in November 2025.

IV. Findings

Food safety and community impacts

Analysis of complaint data collected across environmental health departments and city and county agencies, including code enforcement, law enforcement, and planning, found that during the program's first five years, 97% of MEHKOs did not receive a single complaint. As of December 2024, the close of the study period, 898 permits had been issued in 14 jurisdictions. During this period, environmental health agencies identified two isolated foodborne illness complaints involving MEHKOs, neither of which was verified as caused by MEHKO food.

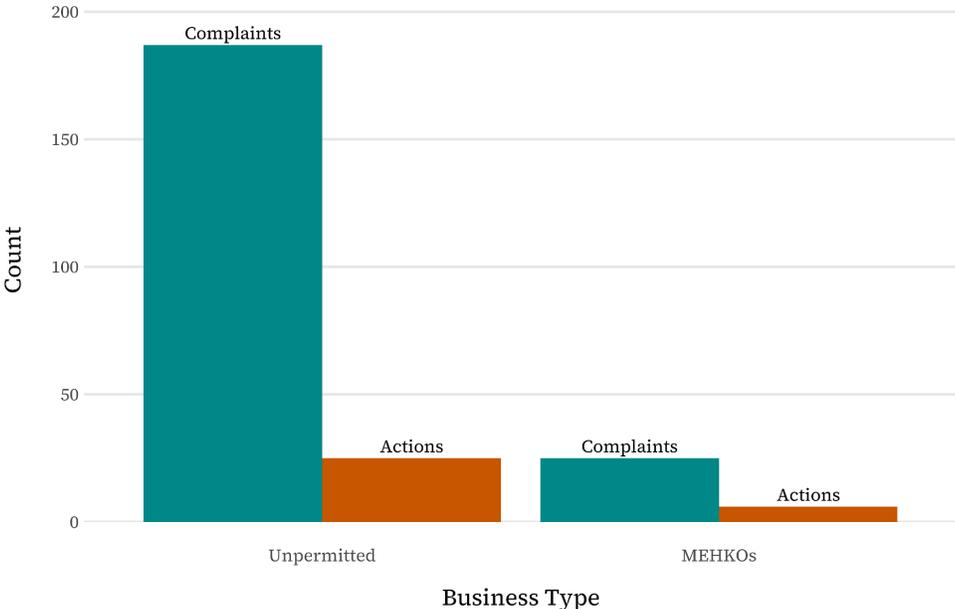
By contrast, most complaints documented across agencies involved unpermitted home-based food vendors, not MEHKOs. We identified 606 complaints about unpermitted vendors during the study period. Of these, 56 complaints involved addresses that later obtained a MEHKO permit. Only 32 complaints involving MEHKOs were identified during this same period, underscoring the substantial difference in complaint volume between permitted and unpermitted home food enterprises.

Environmental health agencies received far more complaints than code enforcement and other local agencies. Of the 638 total complaints reviewed across all jurisdictions (606 involving unpermitted vendors and 32 involving MEHKOs), about 85% were submitted to environmental health departments rather than to code enforcement or other local agencies. Most complainants contacted environmental health agencies rather than code enforcement agencies, regardless of the subject matter of their complaints. This pattern suggests that residents typically view environmental health as the primary authority for concerns related to food sales or food activity in residential

settings, even when complaints involve issues outside traditional food-safety oversight. This trend held for both permitted and unpermitted operators, though it was more pronounced for unpermitted vendors (88%) than for MEHKOs (68%).

We also found that most complaints did not require enforcement actions on the part of the relevant agency. We requested details of enforcement actions such as inspections, citations, or notices of violation that occurred in response to complaints, and this data showed that 71% of all complaints across the dataset did not result in any enforcement action. More than four in five enforcement actions (83%) were taken by environmental health departments. Figure 1 shows the number of complaints and actions from both MEHKOs and unpermitted establishments.

Figure 1: Community Impact Complaints and Agency Actions



Enforcement involving MEHKOs was rare. Over the program’s first five years, nine MEHKO-related complaints resulted in administrative enforcement actions, involving eight different MEHKOs. Some complaints prompted investigations by local agencies, but only subsequent administrative steps such as notices of violation, citations, or a temporary closure were considered enforcement actions. Across these nine cases, agencies issued a small number of modest administrative measures.

Code enforcement carried out six actions, primarily addressing business license issues, signage, or concerns related to how the property was being used, such as verifying compliance with local home-business rules or confirming that the operation was not taking place at an unapproved location. Environmental health departments took three actions to address instances where MEHKO rules were not followed, such as the use of an outdoor flat-top grill or unapproved menu changes. Only one case resulted in a temporary closure, which was lifted once the operator corrected the identified violations. We did not find evidence of any permanent closures or permit revocations.

These modest enforcement outcomes reflect the broader pattern in the complaint data. Many complaints focused only on the presence of a home-based food business rather than on any specific nuisance conditions (such as allegations of noise, traffic, parking, alcohol service, waste disposal, signage, or foodborne illness reports). More than half of all complaints we reviewed (52.7%) mentioned no issues beyond the simple fact that food was being prepared and sold from a residence. For instance, a complaint received by the City of Seaside Building & Code Enforcement Department said only “Unlicensed restaurant business operating out of the single-family residence.” with no other issues mentioned. Complaints of this kind were common and did not reference any specific nuisance concerns.

One MEHKO was the subject of two complaints to the City of Eastvale stating that the home was operating as a restaurant and that the business was preparing to begin offering dine-in service. Code enforcement responded to the complainant by clarifying that the business had already received a MEHKO permit and was operating within the rules of the program. When broken out by type, 74.4% of complaints about unpermitted home-based food vendors solely referenced that a business was operating. Among MEHKO complaints, 40% contained no substantive concerns.

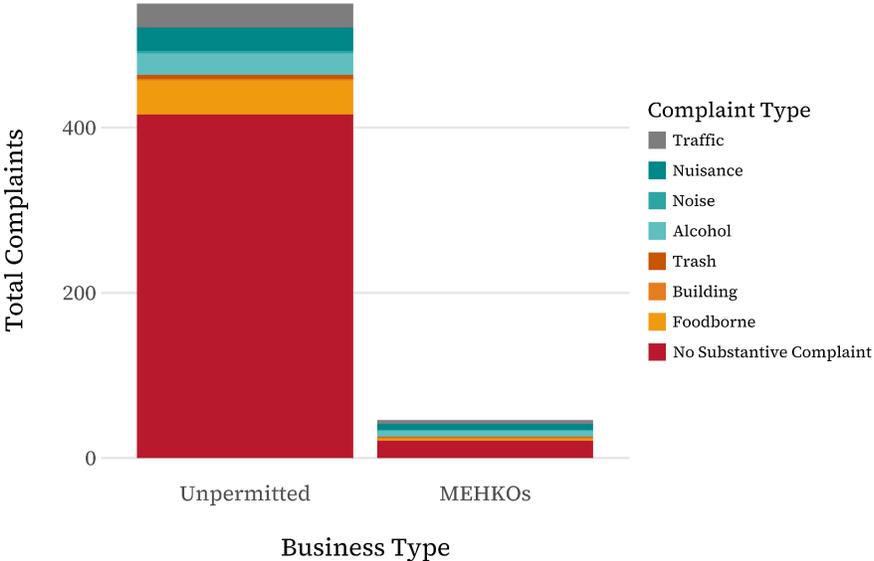
Consumer survey data collected by EMC Research provides additional context for understanding these complaint patterns. The survey found that public awareness of MEHKOs is very low, indicating that most Californians are unfamiliar with the program or do not know that a legal pathway exists for selling home-prepared meals. In this context, it is unsurprising that many complaints simply reported that food was being prepared and sold from a residence, without identifying any specific nuisance conditions. When residents are unaware that home-based food sales may be permitted, they may interpret such activity as inherently illegal and submit complaints on that

basis alone. This awareness data, which is discussed in greater detail later in the report, helps explain why many complaints lacked specific concerns.

While MEHKOs had a lower proportion of nonsubstantive complaints than unpermitted home-based vendors, the overall number of complaints involving MEHKOs was very small. This suggests that permitted home kitchens have lower neighborhood visibility overall, likely due to program safeguards such as limits on meal volume, prohibitions on signage, and restrictions on outdoor equipment. These requirements reduce the kinds of operational cues that typically prompt residents to submit existence-only complaints.

Beyond nonsubstantive complaints, the remaining concerns raised about MEHKOs tended to focus on a small set of neighborhood-level issues. These included matters such as signage, customer behavior, and occasional questions about traffic or alcohol service, with very few references to food safety. Other complaints about MEHKOs referenced nuisances such as signage and customer behavior (15%), service of alcohol (15%), traffic (10.6%), building issues and foodborne illness (4.3% each), and noise or excess waste (2% each). Importantly, the 4.3% attributed to foodborne illness reflects only two isolated and unverified complaints during the five-year study period.

Figure 2: Complaint Types



By contrast, substantive complaints about unpermitted home-based food vendors more often referenced traffic concerns (5.7%), service of alcohol (5.5%), public nuisance (5%),

and excess waste, building issues, or noise (0.8% each). Complaints about unpermitted vendors were also more likely to reference foodborne illness (7%), based on a much larger volume of complaints.

The permit process has allowed many unpermitted operators to formalize their businesses and enter a regulated food safety system. Forty-three unpermitted businesses that were the subject of a complaint later obtained a MEHKO permit, and more than 80% of them never faced a further substantive complaint after becoming permitted. This pattern indicates that formalizing operations through the MEHKO permit process can meaningfully improve food safety outcomes. In Riverside County, for example, one business faced four separate complaints in a single year related to operating without a permit and other food safety-related violations. After completing the inspection process and receiving a MEHKO permit in 2021, the business has not been referenced in any further complaints. In another case from 2021, an unpermitted home-based food vendor faced multiple complaints after a customer and her co-workers reported getting sick. The owner had believed that a city-issued seller's permit was sufficient for food sales, but the Department of Environmental Health issued a cease-and-desist order. After learning of the MEHKO option, the owner applied for and obtained a permit – and has not received a single complaint since.

Findings from EMC Research's surveys and focus groups further demonstrate how the MEHKO permit contributes to improved food safety practices. Participants reported that the permit process helped them strengthen their sanitation routines and deepen their understanding of safe food handling. The process requires applicants to complete Food Safety Manager Certification, the highest level of food safety training used in retail food settings, and includes an inspection of their home kitchens. One operator noted: "I always washed my hands, but actually scrubbing between your fingers, under your nails, and up to your elbows, that stuck with me. I do it every day now. It's just a habit."

Another described how the program shifted their perspective toward safety more broadly: "Now I look at everything through a health perspective. I'm more conscious about safety... And now when I go out, I'm super critical of other people—like, you didn't even change your gloves!"

Survey data reinforces this theme. Ninety-two percent (92%) of respondents agreed that the MEHKO permit helped them formalize their home food business, and many indicated that the training and oversight required by the program enhanced their

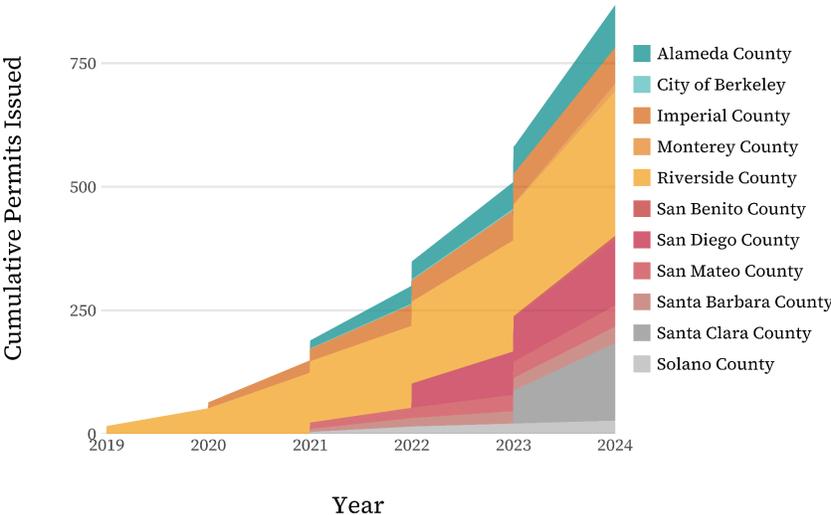
day-to-day operations. Several operators also stated in focus groups that highlighting their permitted status serves as a marketing tool that builds customer trust and distinguishes them from unpermitted vendors. As one participant noted: “I put the permanent permit number on my ads. I think if you put your license down there, you stand out from other people who are just doing stuff, because right now there’s a lot of people on NextDoor that are selling food, and I know half of them are not licensed.”

Taken together, these findings suggest that the MEHKO permitting process is contributing to a safer food system. By requiring Food Safety Manager Certification and establishing clear operating rules, the program helps ensure that home-based food businesses operate safely and provides oversight not possible with unpermitted vendors, thereby reducing the risks associated with informal food activity.

Program growth

The number of permits issued statewide has increased steadily each year since the program was created in 2019. As of December 2024 (the end date of our public records requests), 898 permits had been issued in 14 jurisdictions. Rather than showing a high number of applications around the time that each local program was initially created, permit issuance data shows that most programs have grown consistently with each passing year. Figure 3 shows the cumulative number of permits issued as each new jurisdiction adopted new MEHKO programs. Appendix B shows the number of permits issued by jurisdiction at the time of data collection.

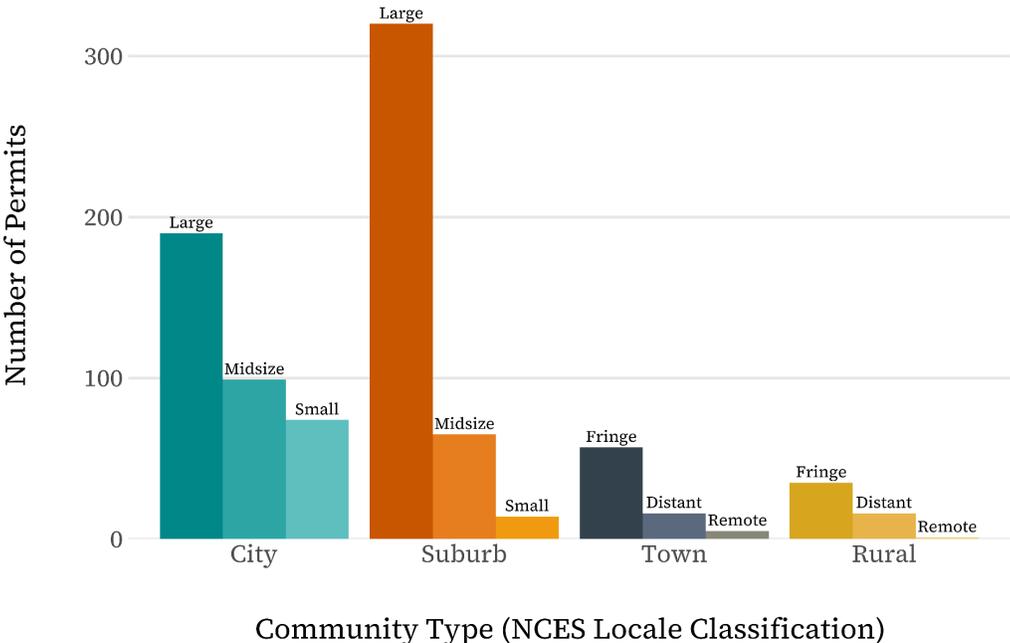
Figure 3: MEHKO Permits by Jurisdiction



Permits have been issued in geographically diverse neighborhoods. Using classifications from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), we identified whether each permit was issued in a city, suburb, town, or rural community.⁷ MEHKOs were distributed across all of these settings, with the largest share in suburban neighborhoods (44.7%), followed by urban areas (40.7%) and rural or town communities (14.5%). Rural operators described how MEHKOs fill gaps created by limited commercial options and zoning restrictions. One survey respondent shared, “We live in a rural area and we're in need of a restaurant. Local zoning did not allow a typical restaurant so the MEHKO was perfect.” Another explained, “I’m pretty rural, I live 12 miles from the closest grocery store... A neighbor told me about it, because people up here wanted me to cook for them.”

Survey data also showed that 58% of operators owned their home, 31% rented, and 5% lived with family. For some homeowners, MEHKO income helped them manage essential housing expenses. As one respondent noted, “Currently operating a MEHKO has given us the opportunity to profit and pay for expenses such as property tax and mortgage.”

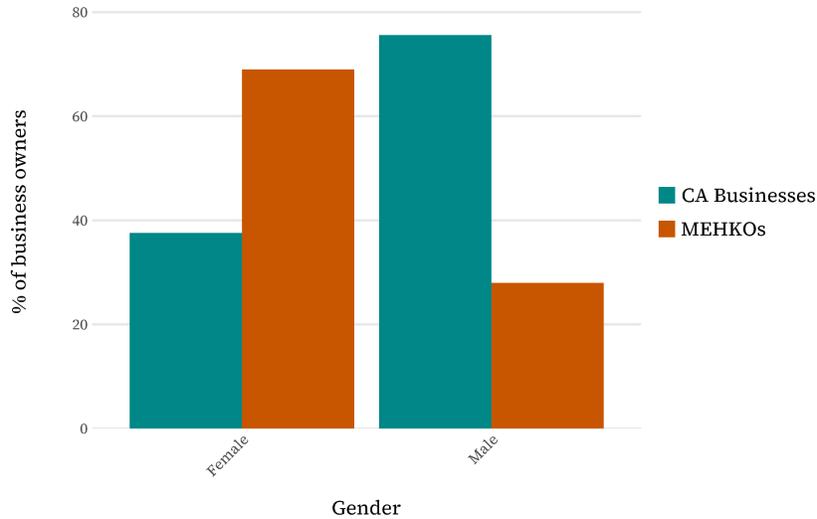
Figure 4: MEHKO Permits by Community Type



MEHKO operator demographics

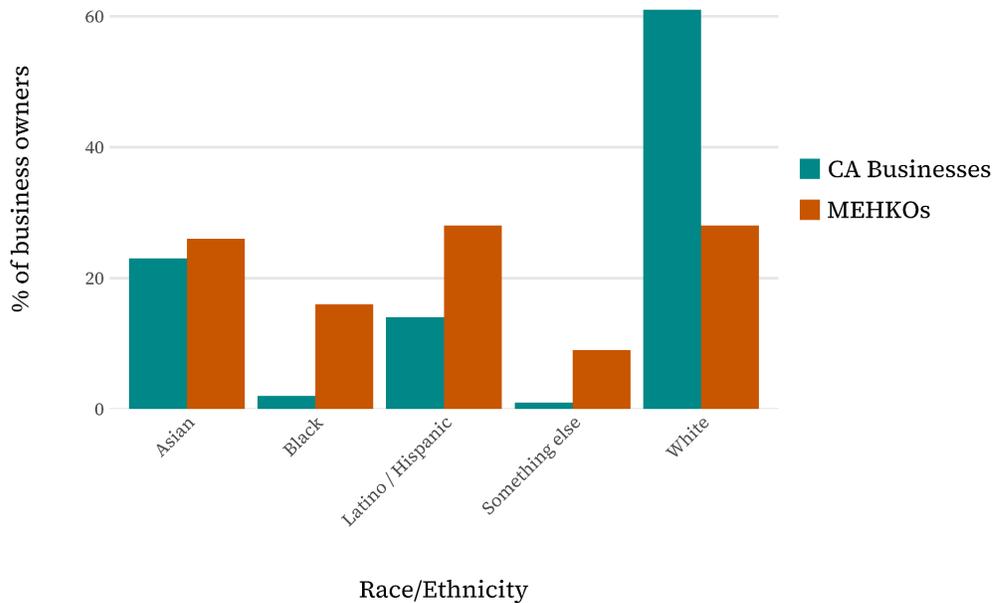
The MEHKO program is reaching entrepreneurs who are often underrepresented in traditional business ownership. Approximately 70% of MEHKO permit holders are women, in comparison to about 45% of new U.S. entrepreneurs.²

Figure 5: Gender of Business Owners



As seen in Figure 6, operators were also more racially and ethnically diverse than California business owners overall. Survey responses indicated that 79% of MEHKO operators are people of color. Approximately 28% of respondents identified as Latino or Hispanic, 28% as White, 26% as Asian, 16% as Black, and 9% identified with another racial category. By comparison, recent analysis of Census Bureau data by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) shows that just 2.0% of California business owners identified as Black, 14.7% as Latino or Hispanic, 23% as Asian, and 60.1% as White, with just 0.7% identifying with another category.⁸

Figure 6: Race/Ethnicity of Business Owners



Finally, immigrant entrepreneurs make up a large share of MEHKO operators. Nearly half (46%) of MEHKOs are led by immigrants, and many bring cultural and regional food traditions into their businesses. Operators born outside the U.S. emphasized the importance of MEHKOs in allowing them to share their heritage and safely participate in the local economy. As one participant explained: “I started a MEHKO business to share the traditional Uyghur food I grew up with and keep my culture alive in my new community. Cooking from home allows me to connect with people through food, support my family, and build a small business doing what I love.” Spanish-speaking operators also referenced a feeling of safety or security stemming from the legal status of their businesses. One focus group participant said: “We protect ourselves as immigrants who are moving forward in this country since we have a valid permit within our home that is closed, [we’re] protected where we are.”

Operations

Across California, MEHKOs encompass a wide range of home-based food businesses, reflecting the diversity of cooks, cuisines, identities, and communities they serve. Within the parameters of a residential kitchen, operators adapt their menus, workflow, and service models to fit the scale and requirements of home production. Many are motivated by a desire to share cultural dishes that are not widely available in their

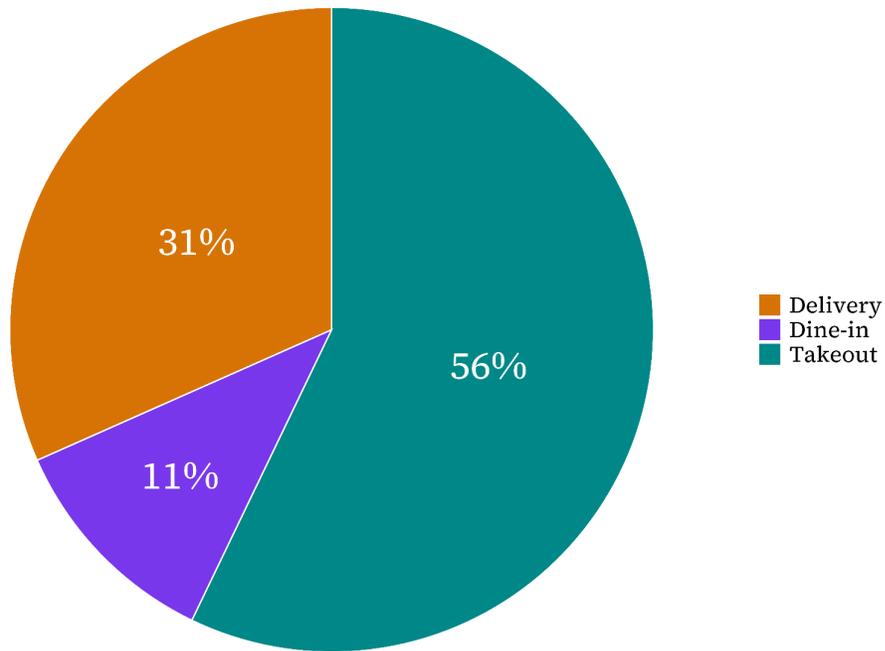
communities. As one survey respondent explained, “The biggest benefit is my ability to legally promote my traditional Afghan cuisine. I could not afford the overhead to rent a commercial kitchen and MEHKO has given me the opportunity to cook without that cost.” Another described seeing “the need for authentic Jamaican cuisine in the Coachella Valley area,” adding, “I learned from the best, my mom. So why not share this with my community?”

Other operators center local agriculture, plant-based cooking, or sustainable ingredients. One focus group participant noted, “The fact that I get to grow my own food and sell that is pretty amazing... Being able to do that, I think is so cool. Like, you can grow your own food and then sell that to people. What restaurants are really doing that?” Survey respondents likewise described using their businesses to support and educate their communities: “I’ve been able to work with and support local farmers and educate my neighborhood on the benefits of wholesome, local, organic foods from scratch.” Another emphasized the demand for healthier options in underserved areas: “I am a trained chef and I wanted to cook from home and provide healthy vegan meals to my community. There are very few vegan meal options in my area.”

Operators reported a diverse range of products and services when asked about their offerings in the survey. Cultural dishes rooted in the operators’ communities (44%) were cited most often, followed by dishes made with locally sourced ingredients (35%), family-style meals or party trays (34%), custom meals for specialized diets (29%), and private parties (27%). Additional offerings included pre-order cakes and pastries (20%) and dishes prepared with ingredients grown by the operator (13%), underscoring the diversity of business approaches within the MEHKO program.

California law allows MEHKOs to serve customers via takeout, delivery, or dine-in. Survey respondents most commonly relied on customer pick up, with 56% identifying takeout as their primary method of service. Delivery was the second most common approach (31%). Because third-party delivery platforms such as Uber Eats and DoorDash are prohibited, delivery must be conducted by the operator, a household member, or an employee (MEHKOs may have the equivalent of one full-time employee). Dine-in was relatively uncommon, with only 11% of respondents identifying it as their primary service method.

Figure 7: Primary Method of Service



The MEHKO model also accommodates a wide range of business structures and personal schedules. Operators most commonly reported serving their products 1–3 times per week (36%). Twenty-six percent (26%) said they served food 1–3 times per month, while 22% offered their products seasonally or only occasionally. Occasional operations may include cooks who prepare traditional foods during specific cultural or holiday periods—such as making tamales in December—or individuals who use their permit to generate supplemental income during periods of unemployment or reduced work hours. Sixteen percent (16%) of respondents were open four or more days per week. As one operator noted, “I’ve been able to make some money without having a huge financial initial lay out. I have also been able to cook on my own schedule, and to set my own ‘open’ days.”

Motivations for starting a MEHKO

Although operators are highly diverse, survey and focus group data allowed us to identify several common motivations for starting a MEHKO. Nearly all permit holders cited starting a food business with minimal overhead expenses (99%), flexibility with lifestyle (98%), and the opportunity to own a business (97%) as reasons for pursuing the

program. A substantial majority also highlighted running an environmentally sustainable business (86%), earning additional income to pay for housing (85%), sharing cultural dishes with their community (85%), providing food not otherwise available in their area (83%), and supplementing retirement income (75%).

Quotes from focus group participants further illustrate these motivations. One operator shared, “We started a MEHKO to have independence and not rely on others to make a living. We also wanted to provide good food within the community. And we wanted to create a community space.” This perspective reflects the combination of economic self sufficiency and community focused goals that many MEHKO operators described.

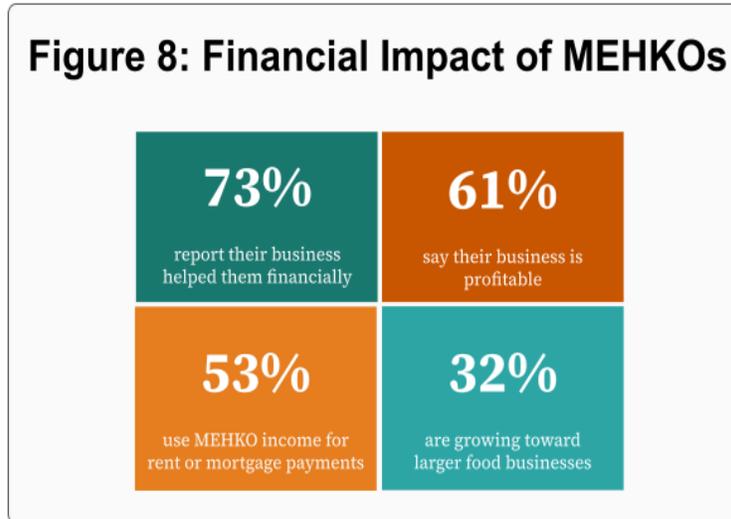
Other operators emphasized how the MEHKO model makes entrepreneurship possible while supporting family needs or accommodating disabilities. As one survey participant explained, “The MEHKO license has afforded me the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of running my own business without sacrificing time with my family. Working from home, sharing nutritious vegan food to my community brings me more joy than words can express!” Another added, “I wanted to start this business because I’m disadvantaged by certain disabilities. I owned a restaurant a small shop years back and I wanted to start serving my quality food items again.”

Overall, the responses suggest that economic motivations, particularly the need for flexible and low-cost income opportunities, play the largest role in operators’ decisions to start a MEHKO, alongside meaningful cultural and community-based aspirations.

Benefits of MEHKO ownership

Most survey respondents said that they benefitted financially from their MEHKO. When asked about the financial benefits of their businesses in survey questions, 73% of respondents agreed that their business has helped them financially and 57% of respondents agreed that their MEHKO “provided income when I was unable to find other work.” 61% said their business is profitable, and 53% said that their MEHKO helped them afford their rent or mortgage payments. 95% of respondents also agreed that owning a MEHKO had helped them develop new skills or knowledge, and 32% said their MEHKO helped them grow toward a larger food business, such as a food truck, commercial catering operation, or brick-and-mortar restaurant

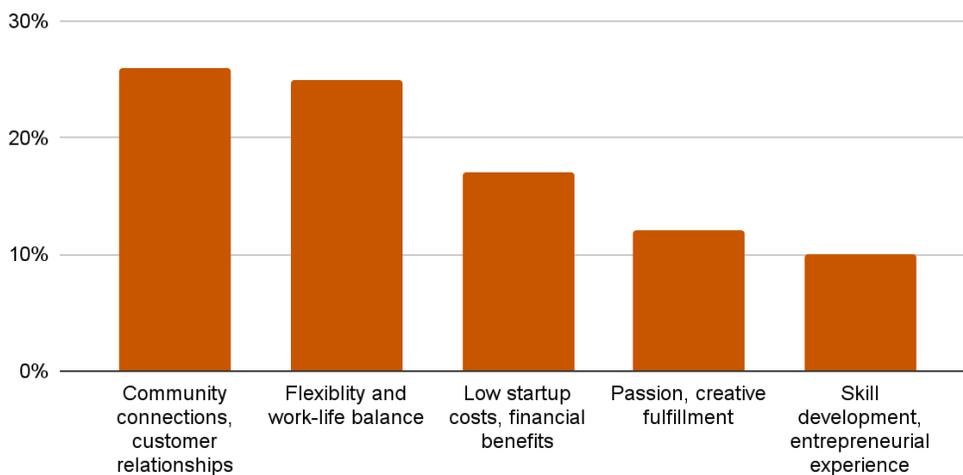
Figure 8: Financial Impact of MEHKOs



MEHKOs offer many other unique benefits as well. Open-ended survey responses also highlighted how MEHKOs contributed to their operators' overall wellbeing. Community connections and relationships were the most commonly mentioned benefit (26% of respondents) followed by flexibility and work-life balance (25%). Seventeen percent (17%) referenced the benefits of low startup costs and financial benefits, while 12% cited passion and creative fulfillment and 10% cited skill development and entrepreneurial experience. The figure below shows some of the most commonly referenced themes based on coding of open-ended responses.

Figure 9: Benefits of MEHKOs

"In 2-3 sentences, what have been the biggest benefits to you of your MEHKO business?"



Focus group respondents also explained how the opportunity to start a MEHKO benefitted them in multiple ways because of the flexibility that it offered. Some respondents, for example, explained that low startup costs allowed them to use a MEHKO to gain control over their work-life balance, stabilize their incomes after a layoff, and manage familial or other responsibilities. As one participant said: “I think it gave me freedom. Look, I need a job to live in this area, and it was an easy, accessible way to start my own thing. And commercial kitchens, all of those things are really not viable, especially having kids...[the MEHKO program] gave me power and freedom.”

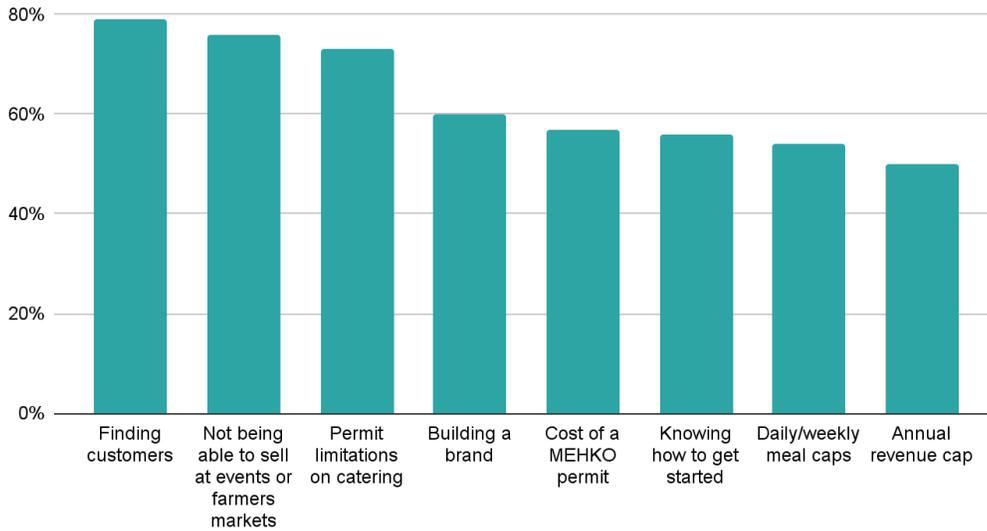
A survey respondent echoed how these benefits overlap, stating, “The biggest benefits of my MEHKO business have been the flexibility to start small with low overhead while legally selling from home, and the ability to directly connect with my community through fresh, homemade products. It's also given me valuable hands-on experience in running a food business, from production to marketing, without the risk of a full-scale storefront.”

Challenges facing MEHKO operators

Despite the many benefits of the MEHKO program, operators continue to face challenges attracting and communicating with customers. Nearly four-fifths (79%) of permit holders reported that finding customers was a challenge for their business – far higher than the 50-60% of respondents who identified taxes, permit costs, and “knowing how to get started” as challenges. Many MEHKO operators rely on word of mouth to grow their business (78%), followed by Instagram (66%) and Facebook (50%). Sixty percent (60%) identified building a brand as a challenge.

Although MEHKOs provide a flexible pathway for starting a food business, the program also operates under several structural restrictions that can make it challenging for operators to find customers. MEHKOs cannot use signage, participate in farmers markets or events, offer catering, or sell through third-party delivery apps, and their production is limited by daily, weekly, and annual caps.

Figure 10: Common challenges



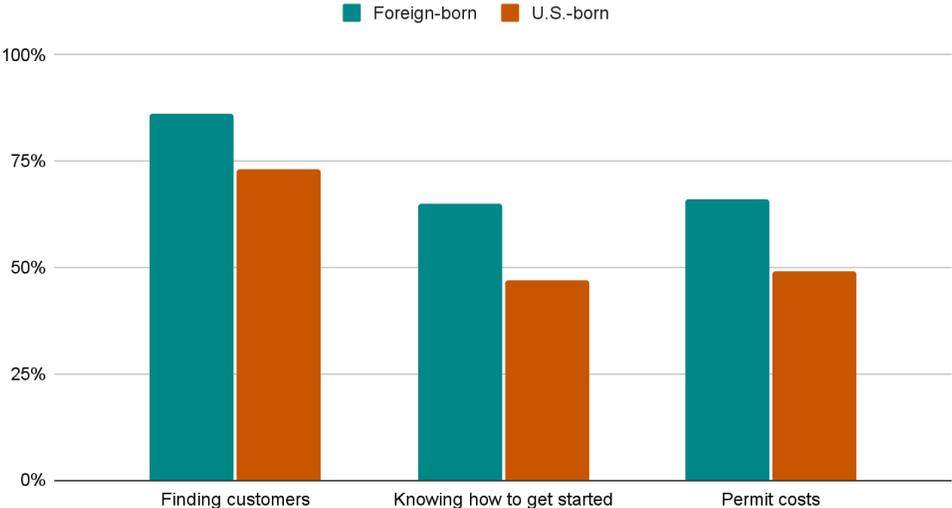
Within this context, operators identified several program requirements as barriers to growth. More than three-quarters (76%) of MEHKO operators identified not being able to sell at events or farmers markets as a challenge, and 73% said the same about permit restrictions on catering. In open-ended responses, many operators also noted that not being able to use delivery platforms such as Uber Eats or DoorDash made it more difficult to reach new customers. Over half (54%) cited the daily and weekly meal caps as a barrier, and 50% identified the annual revenue cap as a limitation. Most respondents also indicated that the cost of the permit was a challenge (57%) and that knowing how to get started was a barrier to entry (56%).

Survey responses also identified several areas of support that operators viewed as most helpful. Operators most frequently cited grants (74%), followed by technology tools for sales (48%), mentorship (47%), opportunities to connect with other MEHKOs (45%), education (36%), and loans (31%).

Most MEHKO operators are new to entrepreneurship, with 68% reporting no previous experience running a food business. These findings indicate clear opportunities to strengthen support systems for MEHKO operators, particularly as many continue to build credibility in their communities. As one respondent explained, “MEHKOs are still new to many people, and for some potential customers, ordering from a home kitchen can feel unfamiliar or even intimidating, which makes attracting new customers challenging.”

Notably, MEHKO operators born outside the United States experienced several key challenges at higher rates than U.S.-born operators. Figure 11 demonstrates these discrepancies. While 73% of MEHKO operators born in the U.S. reported challenges finding customers, 86% of immigrant operators reported the same concern. Only 49% of U.S. born respondents reported difficulties affording the cost of a permit, while 66% of foreign born respondents did. Knowing how to get started was also less of a concern for U.S. born respondents (47%) than immigrant MEHKO operators (65%).

Figure 11: Increased challenges for immigrant MEHKO operators



Although many respondents cited permit cost as a barrier to entry, most did not view the inspection process as difficult. Nearly all study participants (95%) said the home inspection was easier than expected, and only 15% found it challenging. This indicates that environmental health agencies have created a streamlined and accessible process. Only 7% of operators described the Food Safety Manager Certification as a significant challenge.

Consumer sentiment

Most Californians who participated in our consumer survey said they were not aware of MEHKOs. Despite this, however, support for the concept was very high among respondents. Seventy-one percent (71%) of Californians had no prior awareness of the program, meaning only 29% had heard of it at all. Among the smaller share who reported familiarity with a MEHKO in their area, which was 19%, most learned about these businesses through word of mouth or social media.

After respondents were given a short description of the program that outlined its rules and safeguards, including that MEHKOs are inspected and operators must complete Food Safety Manager Certification, Californians expressed broad support. Eighty percent (80%) agreed that MEHKOs are a good way to try new foods, and 74% said they are good for communities. Support for legalization was even stronger. Ninety percent (90%) said they would support their county implementing a system for legal, permitted MEHKOs.

Consumer survey findings also shed light on what drives interest in MEHKOs. When asked to identify the primary reason they would try food from a home cooking business, 32% selected a desire for authentic, home-cooked taste and quality, and 29% selected an interest in trying new foods and culinary experiences. These motivations align with a respondent who noted, "I am interested in trying food from a home cooking business because it often offers a unique, authentic taste that you cannot get from a restaurant. It feels more personal, like you are getting a homemade meal prepared with care." This perspective reflects broader patterns in the survey, in which many Californians associated MEHKOs with authenticity, creativity, and community benefit.

Overall, these results show that while most Californians are not yet familiar with MEHKOs, clear information leads to strong interest and support. As more consumers understand how the program works and the protections in place, the potential market for home-based food businesses expands considerably.

V. Conclusion

The first five years of MEHKOs in California have created a strong foundation on which this innovative program can continue to grow. With 97% of MEHKOs never receiving a single complaint – and only two unverified foodborne illness reports across nearly 900 early MEHKOs – the program has established an exceptional food safety record. Operators have reported an easier-than-expected inspection process, and our analysis across multiple data sources suggests that these inspections have helped unpermitted establishments improve their food safety practices and raise environmental health standards.

At the same time, MEHKOs are integrating successfully into a wide range of communities across the state. Permit data shows that MEHKOs operate in urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods, reflecting their adaptability to different local needs and food cultures. Community impact complaints remain extremely low, and in many

cases MEHKO permits have helped formerly unpermitted operators avoid future complaints. Consumer attitudes also point to a promising future: while general awareness is still limited, Californians respond very positively once they learn about the program. A large majority say MEHKOs are good for communities, and 90% support their county implementing a legal permitting system.

Looking ahead, the MEHKO program is positioned to continue empowering a broad range of aspiring entrepreneurs. More than three-quarters (79%) of operators are people of color, 70% are women, and almost half are immigrants – groups that have historically faced disproportionate barriers to entry in California’s thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem. MEHKOs offer business owners a pathway to stable income, flexible schedules that support caregiving and other responsibilities, and opportunities to share cultural food traditions that may otherwise be absent from their communities. This report shows that MEHKOs provide both immediate financial benefits and a stepping stone toward larger ventures.

As policymakers consider the next phase of the program, the data analyzed here shows that the MEHKO program has achieved preliminary success in supporting the development of safe, community-rooted, and culturally diverse food businesses across California. These early results point to a program that is meaningfully expanding the table for California’s next generation of food entrepreneurs.

VI. Endnotes

1. Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation (2022). “Who is the Entrepreneur? New Entrepreneurs in the United States, 1996–2021.”
https://www.kauffman.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Kauffman_Trends-in-Entrepreneurship-Who-Is-The-Entrepreneur-2021.pdf
2. Association for Enterprise Opportunity (2025). “Women Business Ownership Fact Sheet.”
<https://epop.norc.org/content/dam/epop/media/in-the-news/pdf/2025-women-business-ownership-fact-sheet.pdf>
3. SBDCNet National Information Clearinghouse (2023). “Food Truck Business”.
<https://www.sbdcnet.org/small-business-research-reports/restaurant-business-full-service/>
4. SBDCNet National Information Clearinghouse (2024). “Full Service Restaurant Business.”
<https://www.sbdcnet.org/small-business-research-reports/restaurant-business-full-service/>
5. Simone Stolzoff (2017). “When home cooks mobilize.”
<https://medium.com/the-dish/when-home-cooks-mobilize-dd97843f383a>
6. We received complete data from all counties with the exception of Lake County, where we were only able to identify the number of permits that had been issued without any further details.
7. Addresses were geocoded and classified using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale framework, which categorizes locations as City, Suburb, Town, or Rural based on population density and proximity to metropolitan areas. Most addresses were geocoded using the U.S. Census Bureau API, and OpenStreetMap and ArcGIS Services were used sequentially to geocode addresses that were not available from the Census Bureau. Percentages reflect percent of valid addresses in each category. Six MEHKO addresses for Lake County were not geocoded because we did not receive address data for those permits.
8. Public Policy Institute of California (2025). “Fact Sheet: California’s Businesses.”
<https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/californias-businesses.pdf>

VII. About the contributors

Will von Geldern is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy & Governance. He studies how public policies impact social determinants of health in socially and economically marginalized communities. Will provided methodological guidance and collected and analyzed data for this report.

COOK Alliance is a nonprofit organization dedicated to legitimizing and uplifting home-based food businesses through training, resources, and policy work.

EMC Research is a national full-service opinion research firm, serving an extensive and diverse range of public and private sector clients since 1989.

CAMEO Network strengthens micro-businesses through a 400+ member network of organizations that provide financing, training, and essential support.

The California Workforce Development Board (CWDB) is the Governor's agent for the development, oversight, and continuous improvement of California's workforce development system.

VIII. Appendices

Appendix A: Complaints Regarding MEHKOs

This appendix item contains a summary of all community impact complaints identified through public records requests submitted to environmental health and code enforcement agencies, as well as their resolution.

Alameda County			
Date	City (MEHKO Program)	Nature of complaint	Resolution
2/26/2024	Hayward (Alameda County)	Complaint to the City of Hayward code enforcement about a restaurant being run out of the home, serving food, alcohol, and customers blocking a nearby intersection.	Initial inspection was conducted, and the inspector ensured all stipulations of business permit were being met. No other action taken.
9/30/2024		Complaint to the City of Hayward code enforcement about a restaurant being run out of the home, serving food, alcohol, and blocking driveways.	No action taken.
1/15/2025	Oakland (Alameda County)	Complaint to the City of Oakland Planning and Building Department about an unapproved accessory structure related to the MEHKO.	Notice of Violation issued, along with administrative fines.

Imperial County			
Date	City (MEHKO Program)	Nature of complaint	Resolution
5/22/2023	Calipatria (Imperial County)	Complaint to Imperial County Public Health about MEHKO operator based in El Centro selling food from their car at a separate location.	Administrative notes indicate that a letter was being prepared, but no letter details were visible.
2/24/2025	El Centro (Imperial County)	Complaint to Imperial County Public Health about a home-based food business operating and offering catering.	The operator had already obtained a permit at the time of complaint submission. No action taken.
7/9/2024	Brawley (Imperial County)	Complaint to Imperial County Public Health about a MEHKO submitting a temporary food facility (TFF) application for a public event.	TFF permit application was denied.
5/3/2021	Salton City (Imperial County)	Complaint to Imperial County Public Health about a MEHKO operator selling alcohol.	Inspector determined that the MEHKO was not selling alcohol. No further action taken.
9/3/2022	Cathedral City (Riverside County)	Complaint to Cathedral City code enforcement about a neighbor operating a home-based business, and signage.	Owner provided evidence of a MEHKO permit. Code enforcement found no signage and patrolled the area for further illegal vending.

Riverside County			
Date	City (MEHKO Program)	Nature of complaint	Resolution
4/2/2022 11/21/2022 3/5/2023	Cathedral City (Riverside County)	Three complaints to Cathedral City code enforcement about a MEHKO operating in the neighborhood. One complaint that referenced excess waste and parking issues, and the other two did not reference any substantive issues outside of the existence of the business.	Code enforcement visited the MEHKO to inform them of business license requirements and other rules. After the MEHKO permit lapsed, code enforcement and environmental health were in contact about a potential joint inspection (status unknown).
No date provided	Cathedral City (Riverside County)	Complaint to Cathedral City code enforcement about a MEHKO operating in the neighborhood.	Code enforcement provided evidence of a business license and the MEHKO permit to the complainant.
6/8/2024 7/2/2024	Eastvale (Riverside County)	Two complaints to code enforcement about a neighbor operating a home-based business, and signage.	Code enforcement identified a MEHKO permit and business license, no violation found.

Riverside County (cont).			
Date	City (MEHKO Program)	Nature of complaint	Resolution
9/22/2023 4/2/2024	Perris (Riverside County)	Two complaints to code enforcement about a business operating on a vacant lot, MEHKO was operating a temporary food facility (TFF) without proper permits.	An inspector visited the site and explained zoning violations to the MEHKO operator, the additional operation was shut down. No further reports after the second complaint.
3/22/2023	Canyon Lake (Riverside County)	Complaint to code enforcement about a MEHKO operating without a business license.	Notice of violation letter sent.
3/14/2022 4/11/2022	Hemet (Riverside County)	Complaint to DEH from a customer who said they became ill after eating a meal from the MEHKO. A second complaint to DEH alleged that the MEHKO was selling beer, other disallowed items, and serving larger than allowable quantities of food for catering purposes.	DEH conducted a site inspection and identified several unapproved changes to standard operating procedures and violations of health requirements. DEH sent a notice of violation and contacted the owner with instructions to stop selling disallowed items and quantities. A temporary closure was ordered, and the business reopened with no further incidents.

Riverside County (cont).			
Date	City (MEHKO Program)	Nature of complaint	Resolution
9/3/2024	Moreno Valley (Riverside County)	Complaint to code enforcement about a zoning violation (home restaurant).	Inspector visited the site, found no violations and closed the case.
12/6/2024	Perris (Riverside County)	Code enforcement inspector identified unpermitted signage.	The MEHKO owner removed the signage. Case closed and no further violations identified.
2/16/2024 12/27/2024	Riverside (Riverside County)	Two complaints to code enforcement about home business operation, one complaint referencing signage and one referencing excess waste, alcohol service, and customer behavior issues.	Inspector observed no violations upon visiting home. Case closed, no further action taken.
9/22/2021	Murrieta (Riverside County)	Complaint to code enforcement about a MEHKO having no business license.	Code enforcement conducted inspection and found no evidence of a business at the address, case closed.
1/24/2023	Lake Elsinore (Riverside County)	Complaint to environmental health about pest infestation in a meal served by a MEHKO.	Inspector called the MEHKO operator who denied allegations from complainant. DEH took no further action.

Riverside County (cont).			
Date	City (MEHKO Program)	Nature of complaint	Resolution
2/27/2024 3/14/2024	Hemet (Riverside County)	Two complaints submitted to environmental health, one about signage and another about foodborne illness.	DEH inspection observed a flat top grill and signage, which are both disallowed per MEHKO guidelines. A citation was issued and DEH conducted an official epidemiological investigation.
San Diego County			
Date	City (MEHKO Program)	Nature of complaint	Resolution
2/23/2023	Chula Vista (San Diego County)	Complaint to code enforcement about a MEHKO operating without a business license.	Code enforcement conducted a record search and determined that the MEHKO did not have a business license. Code enforcement contacted the business owner, who said they never opened the business. Code enforcement conducted two follow up inspections and found no evidence of a business operating.
9/11/2024	Escondido (San Diego County)	Complaint to code enforcement about a MEHKO using illegal signage.	Complaint deemed “not justified” by the specialist that conducted the site inspection.

Santa Barbara County			
Date	City (MEHKO Program)	Nature of complaint	Resolution
5/31/2022	Santa Maria (Santa Barbara County)	Complaint to code enforcement about “an abundance of customers” on the weekends.	The complaint was referred to environmental health, who found no evidence of the MEHKO operating outside of their permit.
10/12/2022	Santa Maria (Santa Barbara County)	Complaint to code enforcement about traffic and parking concerns during a MEHKO’s meal service.	The complaint was referred to environmental health, who closed the complaint. No information about a notice of violation being issued.
Santa Clara County			
Date	City (MEHKO Program)	Nature of complaint	Resolution
7/8/2024	San Martin (Santa Clara County)	Several complaints submitted to code enforcement by the same complainant about noise, unauthorized use of external restrooms, and advertising inconsistent with MEHKO rules.	The complaint was referred to environmental health, who contacted the owner and issued a notice of violation.

Appendix B: Community Impact Complaints by Jurisdiction

This appendix item aggregates community impact complaints identified through public records requests submitted to environmental health and code enforcement agencies in each jurisdiction with active MEHKOs.

Jurisdiction	MEHKO Permits Issued	MEHKO Complaints	Unpermitted Home Vendor Complaints
Alameda County	86	3	38
Amador County	2	0	0
City of Berkeley	3	0	0
Contra Costa County	12	0	225
Imperial County	73	3	53
Lake County	13	NA	NA
Monterey County	15	0	5
Riverside County	293	19	177
San Benito County	8	0	2
San Diego County	133	3	61
San Mateo County	43	0	2
Santa Barbara County	33	3	12
Santa Clara County	157	1	8
Solano County	27	0	23
Total	898	32	606

Appendix C: Community Impact Complaints (Foodborne Illness)

This table aggregates community impact complaints about foodborne illness identified through public records requests submitted to environmental health and code enforcement agencies in each jurisdiction with active MEHKOs.

Jurisdiction	MEHKO Permits Issued	MEHKO Complaints (foodborne illness)	Unpermitted Home Vendor Complaints (foodborne illness)
Alameda County	86	0	5
Amador County	2	0	0
City of Berkeley	3	0	0
Contra Costa County	12	0	17
Imperial County	73	0	5
Lake County	13	NA	NA
Monterey County	15	0	0
Riverside County	293	2	16
San Benito County	8	0	0
San Diego County	133	0	2
San Mateo County	43	0	0
Santa Barbara County	33	0	0
Santa Clara County	157	0	0
Solano County	27	0	0
Total	898	2	45

Appendix D: Example Public Records Requests

This appendix item includes examples of the COOK Alliance public records requests sent to environmental health and code enforcement agencies as a part of the administrative data collection process. Language for all public record requests was reviewed by California Conference of Directors of Environmental Health (CCDEH) MEHKO Technical Liaison Kendra Wise, M.S., REHS.

1. Environmental Health: Permit Details

“We request the following records for all MEHKO permits issued in [jurisdiction] since the program began, regardless of their current status (active or inactive):

- Business name
- Business address
- Permit number
- Permit status (active/inactive)
- Operator full name
- Email address
- Phone number
- Permit issuance date
- Date of last permit renewal (if applicable)

Please provide the records in electronic format (e.g., PDF or Excel). If there are any fees associated with this request, please let me know. Thank you for your assistance with this request! If you need any further information, please let me know.”

2. Environmental Health: Complaints

“We are requesting access to the following records from [program start date] through [request submission date]:

1. Records of any complaints involving MEHKOs, including referrals from other agencies.
2. Records of major risk violations found during inspections of MEHKOs.
3. Records of any permits that were denied to applicants for MEHKO operations, including reasons why they were denied.
4. Records of any emergency or investigatory inspections conducted for MEHKO operations.
5. Records of any complaints related to unpermitted food sales from a residence, including referrals from other agencies.

Please provide the records in electronic format (e.g., PDF or Excel). If there are any fees associated with this request, please let me know in advance.

Thank you for your assistance with this request. If you need any further information, please let me know.”

3. Code Enforcement: Complaints

“We are requesting access to records for any code enforcement cases in [jurisdiction] from [program start date] through [request submission date] related to noise, traffic, parking, waste disposal, signage, or any other nuisance or community impact complaints. These cases should be limited to the following addresses: [address A], [address b], etc. Additionally, we request any records of code enforcement complaints related to food sales from a residence during the same timeframe. Please provide the records in electronic format (e.g., PDF or Excel). If there are any fees associated with this request, please let me know in advance. Thank you for your assistance with this request.”