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An Op-Ed

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Authors' Note

On June 14, 2024, we set out on a trip to Chinatown, San Francisco, to meet the business owners we had been in contact with through email and phone calls. We aimed to interview them and their team to gather insights into Chinatown's economic situation in the post-COVID era and understand how institutions can best support these small businesses.

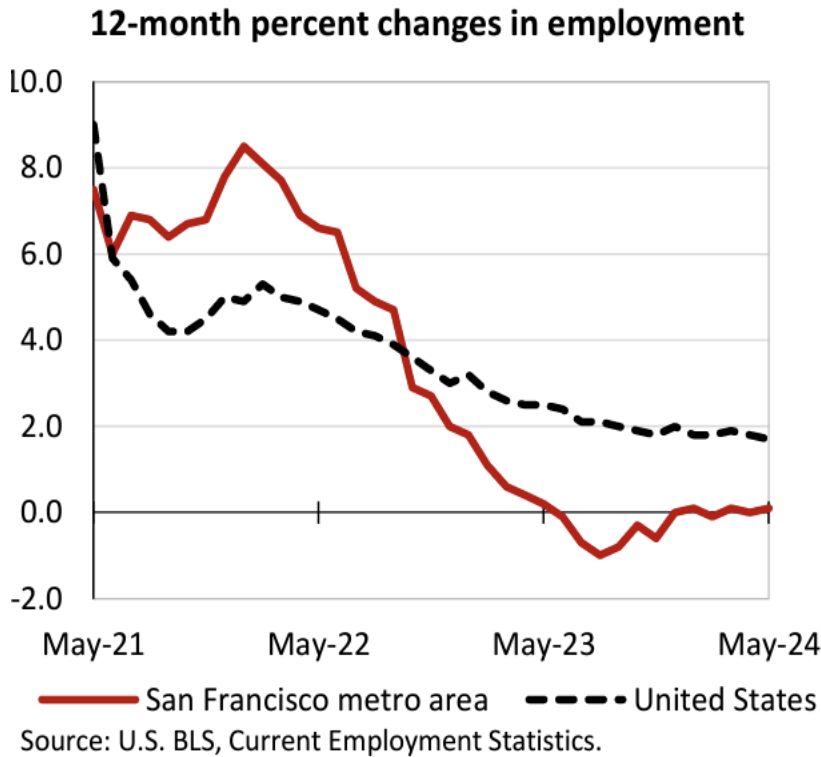
"It's like a ghost town now. Summer, winter, fall, and spring are always like this. I don't think it will get better."

San Francisco's Chinatown, the oldest and one of the most iconic Chinatowns in North America, has long been a vibrant and bustling enclave of cultural and economic activity. Established in the mid-19th century by Chinese immigrants during the California Gold Rush, it has grown into a symbol of resilience and cultural heritage. The neighborhood's distinct architecture, bustling markets, and renowned eateries have attracted both tourists and locals for generations. The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to San Francisco's Chinatown. The initial outbreak led to a significant drop in tourism, a primary economic driver for the area. Fear and misinformation exacerbated the situation, resulting in a stark decline in foot traffic and patronage of local businesses.¹ The rise in anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic further instilled fear among residents and business owners, compounding the already dire situation.²

Resilience Amidst Adversity

Many restaurant operators have expressed pessimistic narratives of decreased safety and declined business activity. They've mentioned that this phenomenon has been prevalent since the pandemic, and the community has not fully recovered. Some restaurant operators commented that some regulars avoided the area entirely during the early post-pandemic year of 2021 simply because restaurant goers were scared that the food carried COVID-19. The owner of a small herb and spice shop laughed and said, "The future? I dare not think about the future." Our research focused on whether members of the Chinatown community had access to resources to help them thrive. The feedback was

mixed. Some residents and small business owners were unaware of government programs to support their businesses.



Those who were aware complained about the difficulty of enrolling in these programs. One interviewee shared her experience of trying multiple times, with community volunteer assistance, for her business to be eligible to accept food stamps. Still, she faced language barriers and found the process inaccessible. On the other hand, some government programs

successfully promoted the community's well-being. For instance, subsidies and free parking provided during COVID-19 helped boost economic activities in the area.⁴

A surprising finding was the level of crime within Chinatown, which persisted due to the surge in anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic. Despite increased policing, residents still expressed security concerns, with some businesses closing early due to safety concerns. The negative impact of the pandemic on tourism still lingers. Reduced tourism has led to declining customers, impacting businesses within and outside Chinatown.⁵ Despite these challenges, there is hope for the future of Chinatown. A restaurant owner hints at a beacon of hope. "There will be low times and high times, but when there is a

low time, it will eventually bounce back." The community's resilience and the role of small businesses and entrepreneurs should be supported for Chinatown to thrive.

Paving the Path to Prosperity

A multifaceted approach is necessary to ensure a brighter future for Chinatown. Policymakers must improve accessibility to government support programs, ensuring that language barriers and bureaucratic hurdles do not prevent businesses from receiving much-needed aid. For instance, [Los Angeles' Business Source Centers](#) offered services in multiple languages to assist small business owners. Additionally, increased efforts to boost tourism, such as promoting cultural events and improving safety, are crucial for revitalizing the local economy.

Community organizations and volunteers are essential in bridging the gap between small business owners and available resources. Their assistance with applications and language support is invaluable and should be expanded and adequately funded. [Seattle's Office of Economic Development \(OED\)](#) worked with community partners to offer translation and interpretation services⁶. [New York City's Department of Small Business Services \(SBS\)](#) provided workshops and one-on-one assistance in various languages⁷. These examples highlight how effective collaboration and targeted initiatives can significantly improve accessibility and support for small businesses.

While the city of San Francisco does have some resources, they are not sufficient for the needs of business owners in the Chinatown area. Tools and accessible translators must be specifically tailored for these cultural neighborhoods of San Francisco, similar to what other cities have already implemented. This includes more translators with backgrounds in the common languages in Chinatown,

applications in many languages, and more attention from the city overall. We need to push for more advertisement and support for these business owners to help them save their businesses during these challenging times.

The resilience and spirit of the Chinatown community must be celebrated and harnessed. Small businesses and entrepreneurs are the backbone of this vibrant neighborhood. By supporting them through targeted initiatives, providing platforms for their voices, and fostering a sense of community solidarity, we can ensure that Chinatown survives and thrives in the years to come.

The future of Chinatown may seem uncertain, but with concerted effort and community collaboration, it holds the promise of recovery and renewal. Let us work together to turn the tide and bring back the vibrancy and prosperity that Chinatown deserves.

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