

Child Poverty in California

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➤ **Child poverty rates remain substantially higher than before the recession.**

According to official poverty statistics, 19.9% of children in California lived in families without enough resources to make ends meet in 2016. This is down significantly from 2015 (21.2%) but well above the most recent low in 2007 (17.3%). The official poverty measure is a long-standing yardstick that does not account for differences in the cost of living across the United States or within California, family needs like medical or child care expenses, or the boost that safety net benefits give to many families, especially those with children.

➤ **Without the social safety net, child poverty would be much higher.**

The California Poverty Measure (CPM), a joint research effort by PPIC and the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, is a more comprehensive approach to gauging poverty in California. We find that 21.3% of children (about 1.9 million) were in poverty in 2016, nearly the same as in 2015. Without safety net resources, 35.3% of children (about 3.2 million) would live in poverty. Because many safety net programs focus specifically on helping children, they keep a larger share of children than adults from falling into poverty.

➤ **CalFresh and the EITC help the most children avoid poverty.**

California's largest social safety net programs for children continue to be CalFresh (California's main food assistance program), CalWORKs (cash assistance for families with children), the Earned Income Tax Credit (both the federal EITC and the CalEITC), the federal Child Tax Credit (CTC), Supplemental Security Income (SSI/SSP), federal housing subsidies, the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and school breakfast and lunch. In 2016, CalFresh and the combined EITCs lowered the child poverty rate by the largest amount (4.0 and 3.9 percentage points, respectively). CalWORKs, the CTC, housing subsidies, and school meals reduced child poverty by 1.5 to 2.3 points each. These differing effects reflect the scale and scope of each program as well as participation rates among eligible families.

➤ **Close to half of California's children live in or near poverty, but few are in deep poverty.**

In 2016, 24.4% of children lived above, but fairly close to, the poverty line (up to one and a half times above it). All told, 45.8% of children in the state were poor or near poor. However, a much lower 4.8% of California's children were in deep poverty (in families with less than half of the resources needed to make ends meet).

➤ **Child poverty varies substantially across California counties and districts.**

From 2014 to 2016, Los Angeles County had on average the highest child poverty rate in California: 27.8%. Rates in Santa Cruz (27.2%) and Santa Barbara (26.3%) Counties were also among the highest. El Dorado County had the lowest poverty rate among children (10.6%). Child poverty rates vary even more widely (from 6.8% to 45.8%) across [state assembly](#), [state senate](#), and [US congressional districts](#).

➤ **Race and parental education are both associated with child poverty.**

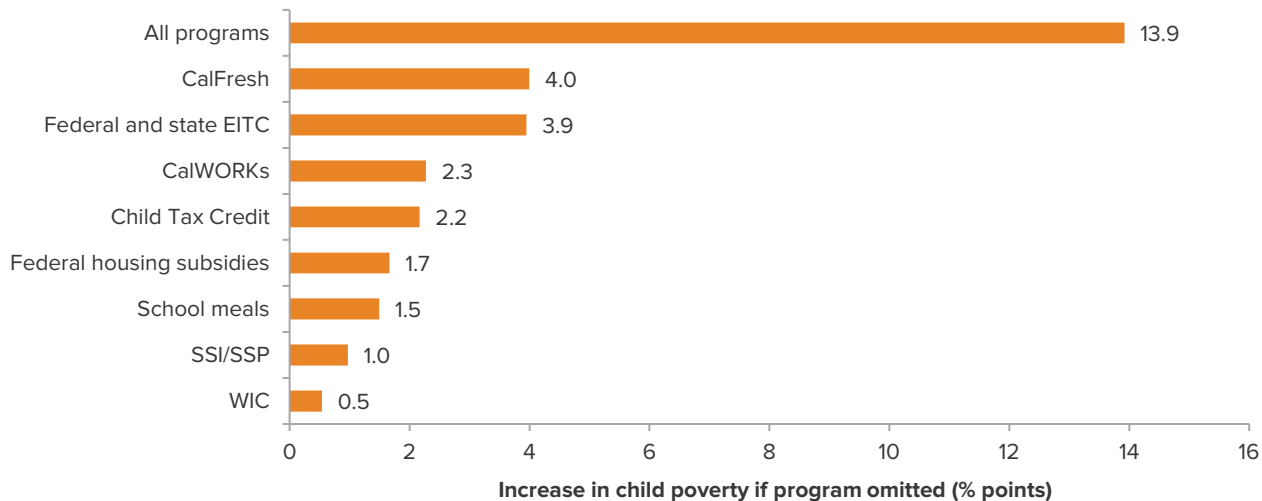
The poverty rate for Latino children (28.3%) was more than double that of white children (11.6%) in California in 2016. The poverty rate among African American (20.0%) and Asian American (16.2%) children was also high. The relationship between child poverty and parents' educational attainment is striking. Among children in families where no adult had completed high school (about 10.3% of children), 53.0% were in poverty. Among families where someone held at least a bachelor's degree, only 8.0% of children were poor. Children age 5 and under had slightly higher poverty rates than older children (21.8% vs. 21.2%).

➤ **Most poor children are in working families.**

In 2016, 83.5% of poor children in California lived in families with at least one working adult. Half of poor children (52.2%) lived in families with at least one adult working full time for the entire year, and a third (31.3%) had at least one adult in the family working part time and/or part of the year.



Child poverty is high but would be even higher in the absence of the social safety net



Source: Estimates from the 2016 CPM.

Note: “All programs” bar shows the combined effect of the individual programs listed below—but the individual program bars do not sum to the top bar due to overlapping program effects. The CalWORKs bar includes receipt of General Assistance, California’s cash assistance program for adults without dependent children; amounts received in families with children are very small.

Child poverty rates vary widely across California’s counties

County	Child poverty rate (%)	County	Child poverty rate (%)	County	Child poverty rate (%)
Alameda	18.6	Madera*	18.0	San Luis Obispo*	20.1
Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Inyo, Mariposa, Mono, Tuolumne*	13.2	Marin	22.2	San Mateo	21.0
Butte*	15.6	Merced*	21.7	Santa Barbara*	26.3
Colusa, Glenn, Tehama, Trinity*	17.9	Monterey, San Benito	24.1	Santa Clara	17.1
Contra Costa	16.9	Napa*	22.2	Santa Cruz*	27.2
Del Norte, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Siskiyou*	14.0	Nevada, Sierra*	16.9	Shasta*	15.8
El Dorado*	10.6	Orange	24.3	Solano	17.3
Fresno	21.0	Placer	10.7	Sonoma	20.0
Humboldt*	15.9	Riverside	19.5	Stanislaus	16.0
Imperial*	19.3	Sacramento	18.4	Sutter, Yuba*	17.9
Kern	20.8	San Bernardino	19.9	Tulare	22.1
Kings*	17.0	San Diego	22.9	Ventura	21.6
Lake, Mendocino*	23.1	San Francisco	17.5	Yolo*	15.4
Los Angeles	27.8	San Joaquin	16.4		

Source: Estimates from the 2014–2016 CPM combined.

Note: For some counties, poverty rates cannot be calculated individually. Those counties are grouped. All estimates are subject to uncertainty due to sampling variability. The uncertainty is greater for less populous counties and county groups (because of smaller survey sample sizes). The median county margin of error is ±4.2 percentage points. For counties and county groups marked with an asterisk (*), the margins of error range from ±4.2 to ±8.7 percentage points. Margins of error calculated for a 99 percent confidence interval. For more county-level information and for poverty rates by state assembly, state senate, and federal congressional districts, see our [interactive maps](#).

Sources: All estimates are based on the California Poverty Measure (CPM) unless otherwise noted. Official poverty statistics are from the [American Community Survey](#). For more about the CPM, see Bohn et al., *The California Poverty Measure* (PPIC, 2013). For methodological changes that affect comparability with publications prior to 2016, see Bohn et al., *The California Poverty Measure: 2014* (Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017).

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