



**PPIC**

PUBLIC POLICY  
INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA

# Work and Economic Insecurity in California

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# Appendix A. Quantitative Data and Methods

This report combines an examination of economic and income trends from quantitative data with insights on Californians’ experiences and preferences drawn from focus groups with workers who are struggling to make ends meet, and from PPIC’s Statewide Survey. This appendix provides information on quantitative data and methods used in this report.

## Economic and Demographic Data

### American Community Survey

We use the American Community Survey (ACS) to describe worker demographics, employment characteristics, and recent earnings trends. The ACS is a large-scale population survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau that represents roughly a 1 percent sample of U.S. residents. The California sample is over 350,000 observations annually (excluding those living in group quarters). The ACS provides detailed economic and demographic information on individuals and households. Though slightly less detailed than the CPS-ASEC and produced with a longer lag, the ACS is useful for understanding income differences across California regions and demographic groups. The ACS is available from 2005-2023. Like the CPS-ASEC, the ACS is a cross-sectional survey representing snapshots of the California population at various points in time. As with the CPS, we access harmonized ACS data published by the Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota (Ruggles et al. 2025).

The ACS asks about current employment status, and about income and some employment characteristics over the last 12 months. Unlike the CPS, this survey is fielded on a rolling basis throughout the calendar year, so annual income estimates are essentially an average of income over a two-year period. We interpret income amounts from the 2023 ACS as pertaining to calendar year 2023.

Table A1 shows summary statistics for California prime-age workers based on 2023 ACS data.

**TABLE A1**  
California worker characteristics  
**PANEL A: Worker demographics**

		Lower earners (%)	Middle earners (%)	Higher earners (%)	All (%)
Gender	Female	51.8	46	38.5	46.5
	Male	48.2	54	61.6	53.5
Race/ethnicity	Latino	55.1	39.3	18.1	40.5
	Asian/Pacific Islander	13.5	16.7	27.5	18.3
	Black	5.2	5.6	3.9	4.9
	White	21.2	33.1	44.8	31.3
	Other	4.4	5.4	5.8	5
Age	25-34	42.8	36.5	24.9	36.1
	35-44	30.9	35.2	39.4	34.4
	45-54	26.3	28.3	35.8	29.5

Foreign born	Born in US	61.6	72.9	68.6	66.6
	Born abroad	38.4	27.1	31.4	33.4
Education	Less than HS	18.6	6	1.4	10.4
	HS diploma	26.8	17.9	5.7	18.5
	Some college	21.9	19.9	10.2	18.1
	Associate's	8.5	9.1	4.9	7.7
	BA	17.6	30.8	40.6	27.6
	Advanced degree	6.6	16.2	37.3	17.8

### PANEL B: Household demographics

		Lower earners	Middle earners	Higher earners
People in household	Average number of members in household	3.6	3.2	3
Earners in household (%)	Single earner, single adult	9.1	13.1	14.9
	Single earner, multiple adults	10.1	9.3	11.9
	Multiple earners, multiple adults	80.8	77.6	73.2

### PANEL C: Work characteristics

		Lower earners	Middle earners	Higher earners	All
Worker type (%)	Self-employed	5	4.2	5.3	4.9
	Works for wages	95.1	95.8	94.7	95.2
Work schedule (%)	Full-time, full-year	61.7	89.7	92.1	77.8
	Part-time	38.3	10.3	7.9	22.2
Remote work (%)	Typically worked from home	8.8	14	24.6	14.6
Hours	Average number of hours worked per week	36.2	42.1	43.6	40

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of IPUMS ACS data (2023).

NOTES: N=11,830,668. Earnings thresholds represent the 33<sup>rd</sup> (\$51,500) and 66<sup>th</sup> (\$97,800) percentiles of the earnings distribution for full-time, full-year prime-age workers in California in 2023. Summary statistics are for all California prime-age workers in 2023 with earnings data. For additional details see the "Metrics" section below.

## Current Population Survey

We examine long-term income and earnings trends using the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) of the Current Population Survey (CPS), which is administered by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The CPS is a representative sample of the noninstitutionalized civilian population. The CPS-ASEC is fielded between February and April of each year and results are released toward the end of each calendar year. The ASEC asks respondents about their labor market status,

demographic identifiers, and income in the previous calendar year, among other things. We access the CPS via the Integrated Public Use Microdata series CPS data (IPUMS-CPS) published by the Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota (Flood et al. 2024).

We use the CPS to examine annual income from 1980-2023. Since the CPS is designed to be cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal, we are unable to follow individuals or families over time. For this reason, we can only make inferences based on representative populations or cohorts across the cross-sections of the CPS. The CPS is designed to be representative of state-level populations but does not permit robust analysis within more narrowly defined regions or subgroups. The advantage of the CPS for our purposes is that its long time series allows us to track income and labor market activity over a longer period of time.

The CPS-ASEC redesigned questions on income and health insurance between the 2014 and 2015 surveys (pertaining to income for the previous calendar years 2013 and 2014, respectively) and updated its processing for missing data starting in the 2018 survey. Both of these changes affect estimates of the income distribution.<sup>1</sup> As a result of these two changes, results from 2014 forward are not strictly comparable to previous years. Fortunately, there are data products that allow us to construct a consistent series over the full time period of our study. We use (1) the CPS split sample in 2014 to adjust for the changes implemented in 2015 and (2) a 2018 bridge file to adjust for the changes in 2017 income implemented in 2018. This process is described in the technical appendix to Bohn et al. 2020. CPS-ASEC also released revised entropy weights to account for increased non-response during the pandemic; we use these weights for survey years 2019-2021.<sup>2</sup>

### Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U)

We obtain inflation statistics that are originally calculated by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The BLS measures changes in prices for a range of items across the country. This measurement is done by first sampling Core-Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs), which are geographic sampling units around urban cores defined by the Office of Management and Budget. After CBSAs are selected, surveys on prices for selected items in a “fixed basket of goods” are measured on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. In addition to all items in the CPI-U series, specific series used for this report include (1) Housing: residential rent; (2) Food & Beverages: Food at home; (3) Housing: Fuel and Utilities; and (4) Transportation: Gasoline.<sup>3</sup>

We obtained the BLS unadjusted inflation series from the California Department of Finance (DOF). As of 2018 through 2024, the BLS sampled four CBSAs in California for measuring the CPI-U:<sup>4</sup> Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim (includes parts of Los Angeles and Orange counties), Riverside-San Bernardino (includes parts of Riverside and San Bernardino counties), San Diego-Carlsbad, and San Francisco (includes parts of Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, and San Mateo counties). The DOF organizes inflation statistics for these four CBSAs as well as calculates a California-specific CPI-U measure by taking a weighted average across them. These data can be obtained here:

**Site:** <https://dof.ca.gov/forecasting/economics/economic-indicators/inflation/>

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<sup>1</sup> Rothbaum, Jonathan. 2019. *Processing Changes in the CPS ASEC*. US Census Bureau, SEHSD Working Paper Number 2019-18. Semega, Jessica and Edward Welniak. 2013. Evaluating the 2013 CPS ASEC Income Redesign Content Test Proceedings of the 2013 Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology (FCSM) Research Conference. Trudi Renwick, 2015, A Comparison of Official Poverty Estimates in the Redesigned Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement; Expert Meeting on Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance.

<sup>2</sup> Rothbaum, Jonathan, and Adam Bee. 2020. *Coronavirus Infects Surveys Too: Nonresponse Bias During the Pandemic in the CPS ASEC*. US Census Bureau, SEHSD Working Paper Number 2020-10.

<sup>3</sup> For more background see: [https://www.bls.gov/opub/hom/cpi/design.htm#\\_edn2](https://www.bls.gov/opub/hom/cpi/design.htm#_edn2)

<sup>4</sup> Details on CBSAs can be found here: [CPI Handbook of Methods Appendix 1: CPI Geographic Sample: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)

**File:** Monthly (by Expenditure Detail): from 2000 (CPI\_Expenditure\_Detail-6.xlsx)

Note, although we rely on measures of inflation for rent from the BLS, there are other options available, such as Zillow. We rely on the CPI numbers for a few reasons. First, we are using this data source for other series, and keeping a single source makes analyses more comparable. Second, the four CBSAs included in BLS’s sampling align with four of the geographic regions covered by the focus groups. Finally, because the CPI is based on the “same basket of goods” over time, it focuses on rents paid for already occupied units, which is a reflection of realized expenses. This differs from measures of open-unit rentals that are currently on the market, such as those provided by Zillow. For more on these differences, see: Brookings (2024) - [CPI vs Zillow](#)

## Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey

We obtain statistics on job openings, unemployment, and quits for California from the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) administered by the BLS. This survey is administered to over 21,000 establishments in the U.S. to collect measures of job transitions across firms. Although this survey does not support state-level estimates from these responses alone, the BLS creates model-based estimates for each state that we report on here.<sup>5</sup> Specific data series we used were obtained from here:

**Site:** <https://data.bls.gov/series-report>

### Series included:

JTS000000060000000JOL	Job openings
JTS000000060000000QUL	Quits
JTS000000060000000UOR	Unemployed persons per job opening ratio

## Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics

The Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (BLS) program produces employment and wage estimates annually for approximately 830 occupations in the US. These estimates are available for the nation, for individual states, and for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas; national occupational estimates for specific industries are also available. The OEWS survey covers wage and salary workers in nonfarm establishments and does not include the self-employed, owners and partners in unincorporated firms, household workers, or unpaid family workers. OEWS data are published annually with a May reference date and are available each year from 1997 to 2024.

For this report, we use California state-level information on annual employment and median earnings by occupation. We use BLS’s 22 major occupational categories (excluding military) based on two-digit Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes. Each major occupational category is grouped into low, middle, or high-wage occupations based on median annual earnings in 2024. For years prior to 2024, each major occupational category remains in the same wage group that it was assigned to in 2024.

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<sup>5</sup> For methodological details from the BLS, see: [https://www.bls.gov/jlt/jlt\\_statedata\\_methodology.htm](https://www.bls.gov/jlt/jlt_statedata_methodology.htm)

## California Credit Dashboard

We obtained debt delinquency rates for California from the California Policy Lab’s California Credit Dashboard. This data panel consists of a 2% sample of individuals with credit reports that was provided by Experian, one of the three major credit bureaus. Data from the dashboard can be obtained here:

**Site:** <https://capolicylab.org/california-credit-dashboard/>

For more information on the data, Hoover et al. (2024) provides technical details.

## PPIC Statewide Survey

The main source of PPIC Statewide Survey data cited in this report is the Californians and Their Economic Well-Being survey that has been conducted annually since 2020. The PPIC Statewide Surveys are conducted by Ipsos, using its online KnowledgePanel, in English, Spanish, Chinese (simplified or traditional), Vietnamese, and Korean according to respondents’ preferences.

KnowledgePanel members are recruited through probability-based sampling and include both those with internet access and those without. KnowledgePanel provides internet access for those who do not have it and, if needed, a device to access the internet when they join the panel. KnowledgePanel members are primarily recruited using address-based sampling (ABS) methodology, which improves population coverage, particularly for hard-to-reach populations. KnowledgePanel includes households with landlines and cell phones, including those with cellphones only and those without phones. To qualify for the survey, a panel member must be age 18 or older and reside in California. A general population sample of Californians was selected using Ipsos’s PPS (probability proportional to size) sampling procedure to select study-specific samples. An oversample of lower-income panelists with household income under \$40,000 augmented the general population sample.

Ipsos uses the US Census Bureau’s 2018–2022 American Community Survey’s (ACS) Public Use Microdata Series for California (with regional coding information from the University of Minnesota’s Integrated Public Use Microdata Series for California) to compare certain demographic characteristics of the survey sample—region, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and education—with the characteristics of California’s adult population. The survey sample was closely comparable to the ACS figures. We also used voter registration data from the California Secretary of State to compare the party registration of registered voters in our sample to party registration statewide. The sample of Californians is first weighted using an initial sampling or base weight that corrects for any differences in the probability of selecting various segments of the KnowledgePanel sample. This base weight is further adjusted using an iterative proportional fitting (raking) procedure that aligns sample demographics to population benchmarks from the 2018–2022 ACS data as well as party registration benchmarks from the California Secretary of State’s voter registration file.

Additional details about the survey methodology, sample sizes, weighting, and margins of errors can be found in the PPIC Statewide Survey reports on the [PPIC Statewide Survey website](#) and at [www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/SurveyMethodology.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/SurveyMethodology.pdf) and are available upon request through [surveys@ppic.org](mailto:surveys@ppic.org).

## Metrics

**Lower-, middle-, and higher-earning workers.** To define lower, middle, and higher earner groups, we first calculate California workers’ annual earnings using 2023 ACS data. Annual earnings include income from

wages/salaries (pre-tax) and self-employment or business and are adjusted to 2024 dollars. To create thresholds, we restrict the sample to full-time, full-year prime-age workers who worked the previous year as ACS earnings capture last year's earnings. With the sample restricted to full-time, full-year prime-age workers, we identify the 33<sup>rd</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> percentiles so that by definition, one-third of full-time, full-year workers fall into the lower third (below the 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile), middle third (between 33<sup>rd</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> percentiles), and higher third (above 66<sup>th</sup> percentile) of the full-time, full-year prime-age earnings distribution. While these thresholds are established based on full-time, full-year prime-age workers, we can apply the same thresholds to *all* prime-age California workers. When doing this, we find that 47% of all California prime-age workers fall below the 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile of the full-time, full-year prime-age worker earnings distribution. About 27% fall in the middle, and 27% fall in the top. This is largely explained by more part-time workers (who were not included in calculating the threshold) falling into the lower earnings group, although there are part-time workers in the middle and higher earnings groups. We can also apply the full-time, full-year prime-age worker earnings distribution to our focus group participants who provided earnings data prior to being selected. As we focused on speaking to lower and middle-wage workers, we find that 55% of focus group participants fall into the lower earnings group and 45% are in the middle earnings group.

**Family income.** When we examine family-level income in this report, we use methods described in [Bohn et al. 2020](#) to normalize dollar values to pertain to a family of four.

# Appendix B: Focus Group Information

## Focus Group Background and Selection Criteria

PPIC worked with Seven Letter Insight to conduct a series of 12 focus groups with a total of 137 Californians living in six California regions—Central Valley, Central or Northern Coast, Inland Empire, Los Angeles, Bay Area, and San Diego. Focus groups took place in July and August 2025.

Seven Letter Insight conducted focus groups on a virtual platform, with one team member moderating discussion and others playing supporting roles. All groups were conducted in English and lasted 90 minutes. Participants also completed a 30-minute individual exercise immediately prior to joining the focus group, in which they answered multiple-choice and open-ended questions to warm up for discussion.

Researchers ensured that participants gave informed consent to participating by providing all prospective participants with a formal consent question to complete as part of the screening questionnaire, and then providing those invited to participate in the study with a longer consent form, which they had to review and sign prior to engaging in any research activities. As an incentive for participating, participants received an honorarium of \$150 upon completion of both the pre-discussion activity and the focus group session.

Focus groups were purposefully designed to include Californians who were working but not economically secure. Specifically, the sample restrictions were as follows:

- Regions:
  - Exclude if from far north non-coastal counties, Sierras region, or Orange County
- Counties:
  - Exclude if from Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Imperial, Inyo, Lassen, Mariposa, Modoc, Mono, Nevada, Orange, Plumas, Sierra, Siskiyou, or Tuolumne County
- Work:
  - Exclude if agricultural worker
  - Exclude if unemployed and not looking for work, homemaker, retired
    - If unemployed and looking for work, exclude if looking for work for more than 3 months
- Financial situation
  - Exclude if making over \$40/hour or \$80,000/year
  - Exclude if household can cover expenses comfortably and has some savings or household has total financial security, savings, and money for leisure or investments
  - Exclude if household can afford an unexpected or emergency cash expense of \$1,000 or more
- Demographics
  - Exclude if under 25 or over 54 years old
  - Exclude if currently in school (part-time or full-time)
  - Exclude if does not speak English fluently
- Focus group factors
  - Exclude if not at least somewhat outspoken

- Exclude if no access to internet, no time to participate, or not comfortable with Zoom
- Exclude if does not consent to participate

## Focus Group Summary Statistics

Table B1 shows characteristics of workers who participated in the focus groups.

**TABLE B1**

Focus group participant characteristics

**PANEL A: Worker demographics**

		%
Gender	Female	62
	Male	38
Race/ethnicity	Latino	28.5
	Asian/Pacific Islander	6.6
	Black	12.4
	White	45.3
	Other	6.6
Age	25-29	11.7
	30-34	11.7
	35-39	19.7
	40-44	18.3
	45-49	20.4
	50-54	18.3
Disability	Has disability	14.6
	Does not have disability	83.9
Education	Less than HS	2.2
	HS diploma	15.3
	Some college	36.5
	Associate's	9.5
	BA	26.3
	Advanced degree	10.2
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	83.9
	Gay/lesbian	7.3
	Bisexual	7.3
	Other	1.5
Political leaning	Strong Democrat	11.7

	Democrat	26.3
	Independent leans Democrat	23.4
	Independent	19
	Independent leans Republican	9.5
	Republican	9.5
	Strong Republican	0.7
2024 presidential voting	Kamala Harris	60.6
	Donald Trump	17.5
	Other candidate	8.8
	Did not vote	13.1

### PANEL B: Household demographics

		%
People in HH	One	21.9
	Two	27
	Three	23.4
	Four	19.7
	Five or more	8
Earners in HH	One	48.2
	Two	43.1
	Three or more	7.3
Non-earners in HH	Zero	32.9
	One	29.9
	Two-four	32.9
	Five or more	0.7

### PANEL C: Work characteristics

		%
Worker type	Full-time	48.9
	Part-time	24.8
	Self-employed	22.6
	Unemployed and looking	3.7
Salaried/wages/contractor	Salaried	32.1
	Hourly wage	39.4
	Contractor/freelancer	24.1
	Other	4.4

Number of jobs	Zero	2.9
	One	82.5
	Two	12.4
	Three or more	2.2
Hours worked per week	<10 hours	2.9
	10-19 hours	7.3
	20-29 hours	19.7
	30-39 hours	24.8
	40-49 hours	35
	50+ hours	9.5
Tips	Receives tips in job	16.1
Wages	Less than \$16.50/hour	0.7
	\$16.50-\$20.00/hour	16.8
	\$20.01-\$25.00/hour	9.5
	\$25.01-\$30.00/hour	8
	\$30.01-\$35.00/hour	2.9
	\$35.01-\$40.00/hour	3.7
	N/A (non-wage worker)	58.4
Income	Less than \$34,000/year	19
	\$34,000 to \$40,000/year	20.4
	\$40,001 to \$50,000/year	15.3
	\$50,001 to \$60,000/year	18.3
	\$60,001 to \$70,000/year	15.3
	\$70,001 to \$80,000/year	10.2
	Missing	1.5

#### PANEL D: Geography

		%
Region	Los Angeles County	17.5
	Bay Area	17.5
	San Diego County	16.8
	Central or Northern Coast	16.1
	Inland Empire	17.5
	Central Valley and Sacramento	14.6
Urban/rural	Urban	38.7
	Rural	8.8
	Suburban	52.6

## PANEL E: Financial situation

		%
Wages meet financial needs	Meeting	40.2
	Falling below	59.9
Household financial situation	Paycheck to paycheck and struggle to cover basic expenses	35
	Can cover basic expenses, but little to no savings	65
In last 12 months...	Not gotten, or postponed getting, needed medical care or surgery	38
	Not filled, or only partially filled, a prescription	17.5
	Received free food or meals from a food pantry, soup kitchen, or meal program	43.1
	Skipped meals or went hungry due to lack of food	29.9
	Had a utility turned off due to lack of payment	13.9
	Been unable to afford telephone or high-speed internet access at home	20.4
	Moved in with others, even for a short period of time	17.5
	Cut back on buying necessary household items	70.1
	Been unable to afford transportation	19.7
	Been unable to afford childcare	9.5
	Been unable to afford elder care	1.5
	Had family members or roommates move in to help pay the rent or mortgage	17.5
	Delayed a home repair or maintenance issue	46.7
	Not paid, or only partially paid, the rent or mortgage	25.6
	Other (SPECIFY)	5.1
None of the above	5.1	
Maximum amount for unexpected/emergency cash expense	\$0	18.3
	\$25	3.7
	\$50	5.8
	\$75	1.5
	\$100	22.6
	\$250	21.2
	\$500	27
Type of assistance received	Housing / rental assistance	5.1
	Public assistance, welfare, or family assistance or safety net assistance	6.6
	Tax credits	9.5
	Childcare vouchers	0.7
	Food stamps	25.6
	Health care assistance	30.7
	Disability	0.7

Financial aid for higher education	1.5
Auto insurance	2.2
Disaster relief	0
Utility assistance	9.5
Other	3.7
Unsure	0.7
No – I don't receive any assistance	44.5

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of focus group screening questionnaires.

NOTES: N=137. San Francisco Bay Area includes Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma counties. Central Valley and Sacramento includes Butte, Colusa, El Dorado, Fresno, Glenn, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, Placer, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Shasta, Stanislaus, Sutter, Tehama, Tulare, Yolo, and Yuba counties. Coastal includes Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, Mendocino, Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz, Trinity, and Ventura counties. San Diego includes Imperial and San Diego counties. Inland Empire includes Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Analysis of survey data from these 137 workers reveals key demographic information about the sample. About six in 10 were women and seven in 10 were 30 to 49-years-old. Compared to California's adult workers, there was overrepresentation of Black (12%) and white (45%) workers, and underrepresentation of Asian/Pacific Islander (7%) and Latino (29%) workers. About one in four had a four-year college degree, with 10 percent having an advanced degree and another 10 percent having an associate's degree. About 20 percent identified as Republican, 19 percent were independent, and 61 percent were Democrats. About half lived in households with three or more people and half lived in households with at least two earners.

In terms of participants' work and financial situations, 32 percent reported being salaried workers, with 39% percent reporting earning hourly wages, and 24 percent identifying as contractors or freelancers. About 15 percent of the sample worked more than one job and seven in ten worked more than 30 hours per week. About 52 percent could not afford a maximum unexpected or emergency cash payment of \$100, with 18 percent unable to afford any unexpected expense. About 70 percent reported cutting back on buying necessary household items in the last 12 months and 25 percent had not paid or only partially paid rent or mortgage. Around four in ten had not gotten or postponed medical care and three in ten reported skipping a meal or going hungry at least once in the last year. About 45 percent of participants reported not receiving any assistance in the last 12 months, while 26 percent received food assistance (i.e., CalFresh) and 31 percent received healthcare assistance (i.e., Medi-Cal).

# Focus Group Moderator's Guide

## Section I: INTRODUCTION + WARM UP [10 mins]

**### MODERATOR TO REMIND:** Throughout this focus group, for confidentiality purposes, we will only be using your first name. We kindly ask you not to mention any personal identifying information or the name of your employer unless necessary. **###**

**### MODERATOR TO REMIND:** We would also like to remind you that this session is being recorded for research and transcription purposes only. The recordings will never be published or released and will only be available to the direct research team working on this project. **###**

**### MODERATOR TO REMIND:** And lastly, I'd like to let you know that I do have my research team who is currently watching the session as well, although you cannot see them in the Zoom call. That said – anything and everything you say here remains anonymous in final reporting and will not be attributed to you in any way. **###**

**LIGHTNING ROUND:** What is one word or phrase to describe **how you're feeling about your current financial situation?** What **factors** contribute to that feeling?

- **EXERCISE A:** Which of these pictures best describes how you're feeling?

How does the number of income-earners in your household contribute to your financial situation?

## Section II: ECONOMIC SECURITY [30 mins]

I want to talk about **economic** and **financial security** now. What do those terms mean to you, personally?

**EXERCISE D-1:** Fill in the blank. “*My current economic and financial security are \_\_\_ because \_\_\_.*”

- Which factors **contribute the most** to your sense of financial security? What factors **take away from** your sense of financial security?
- **Probe on / listen out for:** job quality, employer quality, salary, benefits, specific expenses, work/life balance, ability to plan for the future, economic and other uncertainty, etc.

By a show of hands, who here has **ever had to make a difficult choice about which expenses to prioritize** in a given month – for example, paying bills or buying groceries/medicines?

- How do these choices impact you, personally?
- Physical health
- Mental health / stress
- Economic mobility
- Has anyone made any significant changes to their lives as a result of these choices?
- **EXERCISE C-1:** Do you agree or disagree with this statement from a California state lawmaker? Why?

**EXERCISE D-2:** Fill in the blank. “If I were given \$500 right now, I would do / feel \_\_\_.”

Who would agree that you “are **struggling to make ends meet?**”

Who would agree that you “are **living paycheck-to-paycheck?**”

Of the two – which more accurately describes your current situation – and why?

What are some **strategies** you use to make ends meet for your household?

- **PROBE if not mentioned:** Do you go anywhere for support?
- *[If yes]* What kind of support? *[Listen out for / probe if not mentioned: CBOs, formal and informal networks of support, government]*
- *[If no]* Why not? Is anything holding you back? *[Listen out for / probe if not mentioned: confusion about where to turn, behavioral barriers, social stigma, lack of bandwidth, etc.]*
- Is it **easy or difficult for you** to access the financial supports (either from the state of California or your community) you need to get by? Can you give me some examples? *[Listen out for / probe if not mentioned: specific programs and services]*

Now, I’m going to show you a recent news article. How does this make you feel? **EXERCISE B-1:** “California now world’s fourth-largest economy”

- **PROBE:** Do you feel left behind / left out of this large economy?

Do you agree or disagree with the statement, “**I feel like I play a meaningful role and have a meaningful voice in the California economy.**” By a show of hands, who agrees? Who disagrees? Why? *[Probe on examples]*

- Are there any parts of the economy that you feel you can’t access that you’d like to?
- **EXERCISE D-3:** Fill in the blank. “I would feel like I play a more meaningful role and have a more meaningful voice in the California economy if \_\_\_.”

Are you **optimistic** or **pessimistic** about the future?

- Does anyone have a financial plan for the future? What does that look like for you?
- Does planning for the future cause you any stress? *[Probe on / listen out for: their financial future]*
- **EXERCISE D-4:** Fill in the blank. “Financially, I am \_\_\_ about the future because \_\_\_.”

Now, I’m going to show you another recent news article. How does this make you feel? **EXERCISE B-2:** “California’s economy expected to slow as unemployment rate rises”

- **PROBE:** Does reading this make any of you change your views? Why?

### Section III: NARRATIVES AND WORLDVIEWS [25 mins]

What's the **biggest challenge** you're facing when it comes to **improving your economic situation**? Is there anything holding you back or holding you down?

- ***Listen out for / Probe if not mentioned:***
  - *state and federal policies*
  - *larger economic issues*
  - *AI & technology*
  - *climate change*
  - *inflation/cost of living*
  - *access to training/education/better career paths*
  - *systemic inequities*
  - *immigration*
  - *childcare access and cost*
  - *transportation access and cost*
  - *housing & homeownership*

**\*\*\*As a reminder – we're not going to be naming any specific employers.**

- Do you like your job? Is the work **fulfilling**?
- Does your job pay you a "**living wage**?" And what does that term mean for you?
- **EXERCISE D-5:** Fill in the blank. "*To me, a living wage would allow me to \_\_\_\_ and make me feel \_\_\_\_.*"
- Do you feel you can advance professionally with your current employer? Or is the ability to advance limited?
- Does your **employer** act as a source of help and support? Or the opposite – are they holding you back? Can you give me an example of what you mean?
- For those of you who don't find your job fulfilling or don't feel you're making a "living wage" – **what's holding you back from finding a new job with better pay?**

We're going to take a vote. Do you **agree or disagree** with the following statement? "**I feel I have sources of support to participate in the workforce.**" By a show of hands, who agrees? Who disagrees? Why? [*Probe on examples*]

From your perspective, is it important for workers to organize so that employers do not take advantage of them? Why?

- Would you, personally, like to see labor unions have more or less influence than they have today? Why?

**(PRIORITIZE)** Do you feel like there are any champions or advocates out there who are working on your behalf? Who or what is helping you out the most?

- **Listen out for / Probe if not mentioned:** state and federal resources/supports like food stamps / SNAP / CalFresh, tax credits, politicians, labor advocacy groups & unions, etc.
- **Listen out for:** how much, if at all, participants distinguish between federal, state, and local government as agents who can address issues
- **EXERCISES C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, and C-6:** Do you agree or disagree with this statement from a California state lawmaker/politician? Why?

As you may know, California has a direct democracy process where voters make laws through citizens' initiatives on the state ballot. How well do you think this system is working, and why?

- **[Provide definition if clarification is needed on citizens' initiatives:** a process that allows everyday people—not elected officials—to propose new laws or constitutional amendments. Instead of going through the traditional legislative process, these proposals are placed directly on the ballot for voters to decide. **For example,** in 2024, there was a ballot measure in California that aimed to raise the state's minimum wage to \$18 per hour. This initiative was brought forward by citizens, but ultimately, voters rejected it.]

We've talked about a few policies/resources/supports at this point. Are these policies and resources accomplishing their jobs?

- What would you change to make them better?
- What elements of these policies are working well?
- Do any of these policies have the OPPOSITE effect on you? Are any of them actively hurting you and your ability to get by?
- **EXERCISE D-6:** Fill in the blank. "If I could create one policy that would help me financially, I would \_\_\_\_."

You all live in [FG region]. How do you think the economic opportunities here **compare with other parts of California?**

- By a show of hands, if you moved to a different region or a different state, do you think you'd be better off than you are now? Why? Is there anything holding you back from moving?
- By a show of hands, is anyone here **thinking about moving from California** to somewhere else? Why?
- **[For those thinking about it]** How seriously have you considered moving somewhere else? For example, have you just thought about it, done research online, talked to someone, etc.?

- Now I'm going to show you a final recent news article. Does this make anyone change their answer about moving? **EXERCISE B-3:** "10 California cities just raise minimum wages. Where can workers earn more?"

#### **Section IV: ECONOMIC TRAJECTORY & ADVANCING ECONOMICALLY [20 mins]**

We're going to take another vote. Who here feels like they're "getting ahead," and who here feels like they're "getting by?"

- *[For those "getting by"]* Why? What would it take for you to feel like you're "getting ahead?"

Do you think that you can "get ahead" / live the kind of life you want in California? Why or why not?

- Have you always thought this way, or has your thinking changed?
- *[If changed]* What caused that change in thinking? *[Listen out for / Probe if not mentioned: changes in communities, current political context, changing labor markets / industries, economic policies, etc.]*
- **EXERCISE D-7:** Fill in the blank. "In order to "get ahead," I would need \_\_\_\_."

Have you seen, or experienced, any **interventions or supports** in your community or elsewhere that help you or others "get ahead" economically?

- If so, what were/are they?
- If not, what would that be / look like for you?

Who, or what, do you think is **best positioned to address the problems in your community** that we've talked about so far during this group? Why?

- *Listen out for / probe on:* employers, nonprofits, religious organizations, state or federal government services, policymakers, etc.

Who would you find the **most credible to communicate about supports available to you because you live in [FG Group Location]**? Why?

- **PROBE:** Would that be persuasive to you? Believable?

#### **Section IV: WRAP-UP [5 mins]**

**WRAP-UP:** If you could give one piece of advice to policymakers in California, what would it be?

**WRAP-UP:** If you could give one piece of advice to employers in California, what would it be?

*Thank you so much for participating. Have a great rest of your evening!*

## Qualitative Coding and Analysis

To process information from the 12 focus group discussions, we received complete transcripts and recordings of each virtual focus group session from Seven Letter Insight. Alongside debriefing what we heard from the focus groups, we primarily employed a deductive approach to code all focus group transcripts using a pre-determined qualitative coding framework that was developed based on the moderator guide, as well as key themes we expected to emerge from the discussions. The qualitative coding framework corresponded to major topics captured in the moderator guide, with several child codes under each major topic. Major topics included perceptions and experiences of economic security and mobility, affordability and cost of living, job availability, access, and quality, career mobility and advancement, economic uncertainty and volatility, and worker power and agency. Despite coding transcripts primarily based on our pre-determined framework, each major topic included a designated child code to capture any new themes that emerged. All 12 focus group transcripts were coded using the Dedoose qualitative coding software. Some direct quotes in this report were lightly edited for length and clarity, but no edits were made to purposefully change the participants' original meaning or intent.

## Appendix C. Supplementary Tables and Figures

**TABLE C1**

Share of households with liquid assets available to cover basic needs for 1 or 3 months

	1 month reserve	3 month reserve
All CA households	69%	58%
Under 35	69%	56%
35 - 64	67%	56%
65 and older	71%	63%
Less than 4-year degree	53%	37%
Bachelor or more	83%	76%
Latino	49%	35%
White	80%	72%
Asian	75%	68%
Black/Other	65%	51%

SOURCES: US Census Bureau, Survey on Income and Program Participation (2022); PPIC-Stanford California Poverty Measure.

NOTES: Estimates of one- and three-month reserves based on comparing cash and near-cash assets to average poverty thresholds in CPM data. See Thorman and McConville (2025) for detail.

**TABLE C2**

Basic income eligibility thresholds for safety net programs in California

Program	1-person household (adult age 25-54)		4-person household (2 adults ages 25-54, 2 children 0-17)		Income standard, if any
	Annual income range (2025)	Maximum benefits	Annual income range (2025)	Maximum benefits	
CalFresh (food assistance)	\$0 - \$15,650	\$298 (monthly)	\$0 - \$32,150	\$994 (monthly)	100% of FPL
California Earned Income Tax Credit (CalEITC)	\$1 - \$31,950	\$294 (annually)	\$1 - \$31,950	\$3,239 (annually)	
California State Preschool Program	n/a	n/a	\$0 - \$127,338	In-kind: free preschool	100% of SMI
CalWORKs (cash assistance plus other supports)	\$0 - \$11,160	\$809 (monthly)	\$0 - \$26,928	\$1,579 (monthly)	
Child Care Development Fund subsidized child care programs (CCDF)	n/a	n/a	\$1- \$108,237*	In-kind: free child care	85% of SMI
Covered California (health insurance and services)	\$15,650 - \$39,125	Subsidy for insurance and services	\$32,150 - \$80,375	Subsidy for insurance and services	100 to 250% of FPL
Covered California (health insurance only)	\$39,125 - \$62,600	Subsidy for insurance	\$80,375 - \$128,600	Subsidy for insurance	250% to 400% of FPL**
Federal Child Tax Credit (CTC)	n/a	n/a	\$1-\$400,000	\$2,200 (annually)	
Federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)	\$1 - \$18,591	\$632 (annually)	\$1 - \$62,688	\$6,960 (annually)	
General Assistance/General Relief (cash assistance)	\$2,652	\$221 (monthly)	n/a	n/a	
Head Start (preschool and home visiting)	\$0 - \$15,650	n/a	\$0 - \$32,150	In-kind: free preschool	100% of FPL
Medi-Cal (health insurance)	\$0 - \$21,597	Free health insurance, no cost-sharing for services***	\$0 - \$44,367 for adults, \$0 - \$85,519 for children	Free health insurance, no cost-sharing for services*	138% of FPL for adults, 266% of FPL for children

School meals	n/a	n/a	all	In-kind: 2 meals per day per student	
SSI/SSP (disability cash assistance)	\$0 - \$14,495	\$1,207 (monthly)	\$0 - \$24,694	\$2,058 (monthly)	
SUN Bucks (summer meal assistance)	n/a	n/a	\$0 - \$59,478	\$120 (annually)	185% of FPL
WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) (food assistance plus other supports)	\$0 - \$28,953	\$47 (monthly)	\$0 - \$59,478	\$78 (monthly)	185% of FPL
Young Child Tax Credit (YCTC)	n/a	n/a	\$1 - \$31,950	\$1,154 (annually)	

SOURCES: Covered California ([Medi-Cal and Covered California](#)); Internal Revenue Service ([EITC](#)); Congressional Research Service ([CTC](#)); California Franchise Tax Board ([CalEITC and YCTC](#)); USDA Food and Nutrition Service ([CalFresh, WIC](#)); California Department of Education ([school meals, CSPP](#)); California Department of Public Health ([WIC](#)); California Department of Social Services ([CalWORKs, SSI/SSP, SUN Bucks](#)); Los Angeles Department of Social Services ([General Relief](#)); Administration for Children and Families ([Head Start](#)).

NOTES: "Annual income range" columns show approximate annual incomes eligible for each program; "income standard, if any" column shows maximum income for eligibility in terms of the standard to which it is benchmarked, such as the Federal Poverty Level or the State Median Income. "Household" refers to a group of people who apply for benefits together, which can differ from the composition of a family or group who reside together.

Table shows simplified versions of income eligibility requirements, for conciseness; many programs have categorical or employment-related eligibility requirements, and multiple ways to measure income. For example, CalFresh income ranges shown here reflect income net of deductions, and CalWORKs ranges reflect income for applicants (rather than continuing participants) and benefits in the state's high cost region (where dollar values are higher). Tax credits for 2-adult families shown for filers with married filing jointly status. GA/GR programs differ among the counties that offer them; this table shows thresholds for Los Angeles, which has the state's largest program. Availability of child care slots in CCDF, CSPP, and Head Start programs is limited by available funding. WIC family estimate reflects one breastfeeding adult, an infant, and a child between 1 and 5 years old.

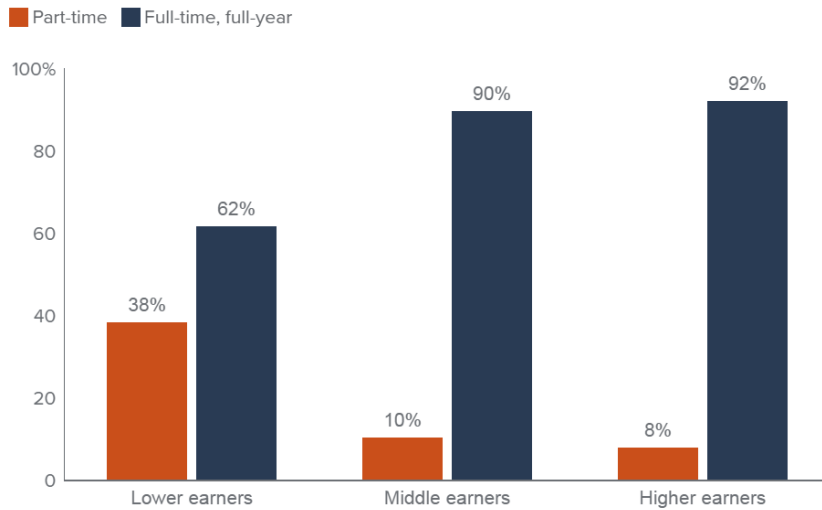
\* CCDF subsidized child care is available to families who need child care in order to work or attend education or training programs.

\*\*Subsidies for marketplace coverage were expanded to families with incomes up to 600% FPL in 2021. Those expansions are slated to expire in 2026 absent changes to federal policy.

\*\*\* Small group of Medi-Cal enrollees with incomes above these thresholds pay a 'share of cost' for premiums and services. New policy changes slated to start July 2027 will also require some undocumented immigrants to contribute to premium costs.

**FIGURE C1**

Prime-age workers in California who work full-time vs. part-time

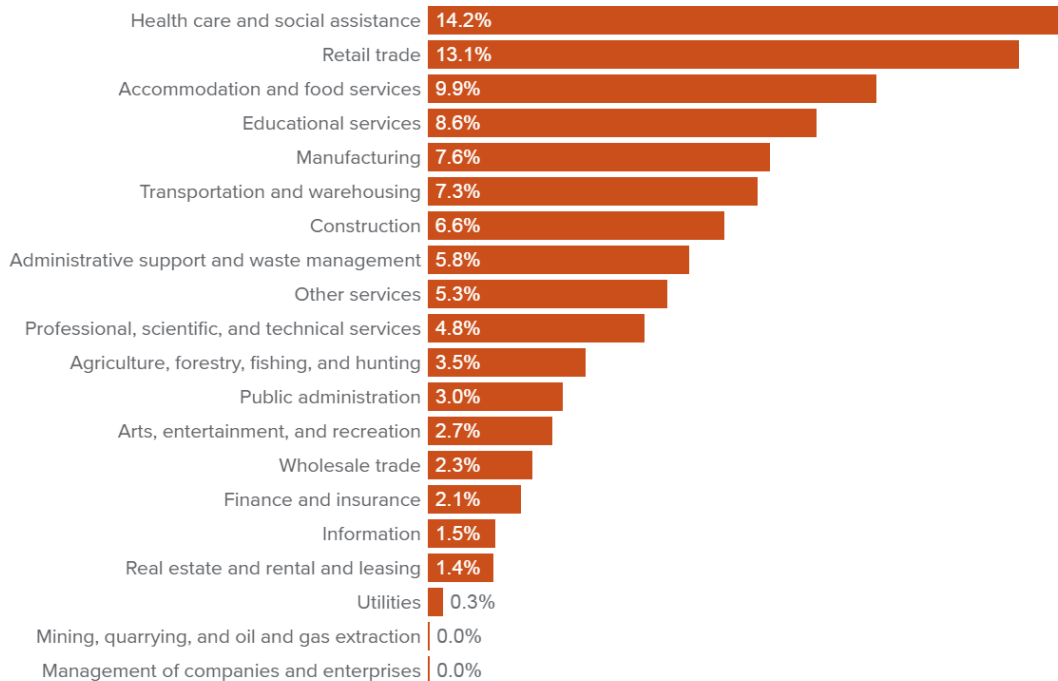


SOURCE: Authors' analysis of IPUMS ACS (2023).

NOTES: Lower earning workers are defined as workers earning below a third of the median full-time, full-year prime-age worker in California in 2023 (\$51,500). Middle earning workers are defined as workers earning between one-third and two-thirds of the median full-time, full-year prime-age worker in California (\$51,600-\$97,800). Higher earning workers are defined as workers earning between above two-thirds of the median full-time, full-year prime-age worker in California (\$97,900). Earnings are adjusted to 2024 dollars and include income from wages/salaries and self-employment or business. Full-time, full-year is defined as working over 35 hours per week for at least 50 weeks per year.

**FIGURE C2**

Almost half of California's lower earning prime-age workers are in four sectors

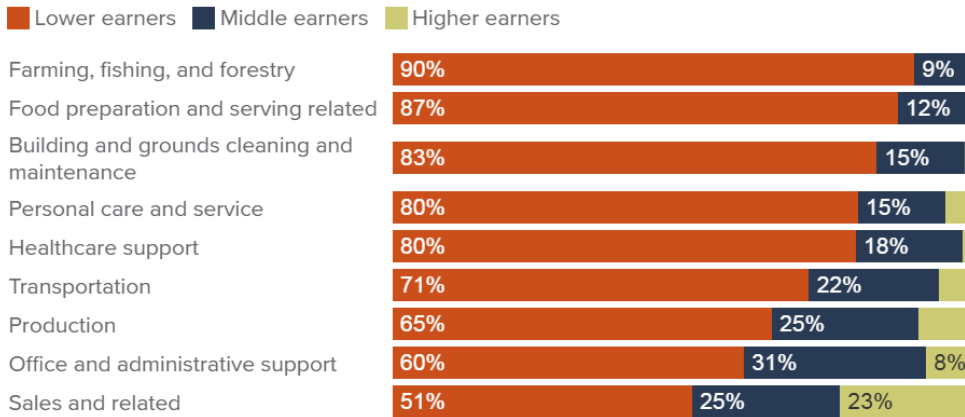


SOURCE: Authors' analysis of IPUMS ACS (2023).

NOTES: Lower earning workers are defined as workers earning below a third of the median full-time, full-year prime-age worker in California in 2023 (\$51,500). Earnings are adjusted to 2024 dollars and include income from wages/salaries and self-employment or business. Employment sectors are based on 2-digit NAICS codes.

**FIGURE C3**

Occupations in California comprised of a majority of lower earning prime-age workers

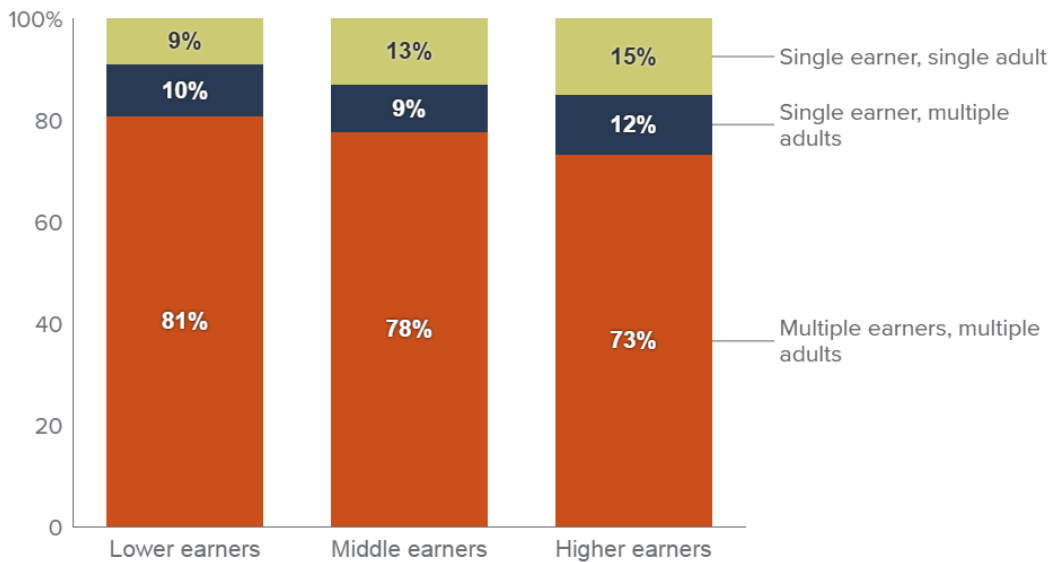


SOURCE: Authors' analysis of IPUMS ACS (2023).

NOTES: Lower earning workers are defined as workers earning below a third of the median full-time, full-year prime-age worker in California in 2023 (\$51,500). Middle earning workers are defined as workers earning between one-third and two-thirds of the median full-time, full-year prime-age worker in California (\$51,600-\$97,800). Higher earning workers are defined as workers earning between above two-thirds of the median full-time, full-year prime-age worker in California (\$97,900). Earnings are adjusted to 2024 dollars and include income from wages/salaries and self-employment or business. Occupations are based on 2-digit SOC codes. Only occupations comprised of a majority of lower earning workers are shown.

**FIGURE C4**

Earners and adults in the household for California's prime-age workers



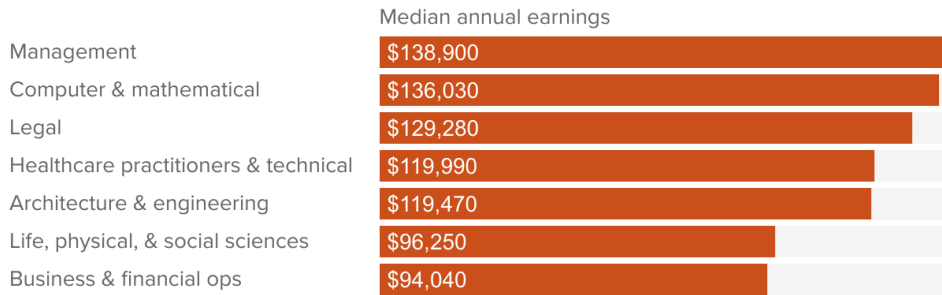
SOURCE: Authors' analysis of IPUMS ACS (2023).

NOTES: Lower earning workers are defined as workers earning below a third of the median full-time, full-year prime-age worker in California in 2023 (\$51,500). Middle earning workers are defined as workers earning between one-third and two-thirds of the median full-time, full-year prime-age worker in California (\$51,600-\$97,800). Higher earning workers are defined as workers earning between above two-thirds of the median full-time, full-year prime-age worker in California (\$97,900). Earnings are adjusted to 2024 dollars and include income from wages/salaries and self-employment or business.

**FIGURE C5**

Median annual earnings by occupation in California (2024)

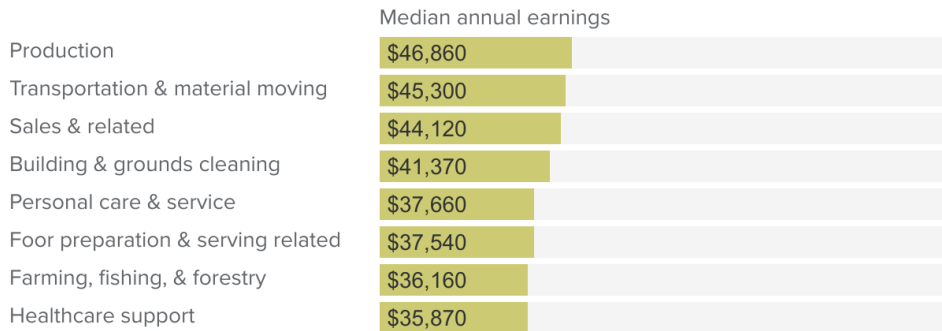
**High-wage**



**Middle-wage**



**Low-wage**

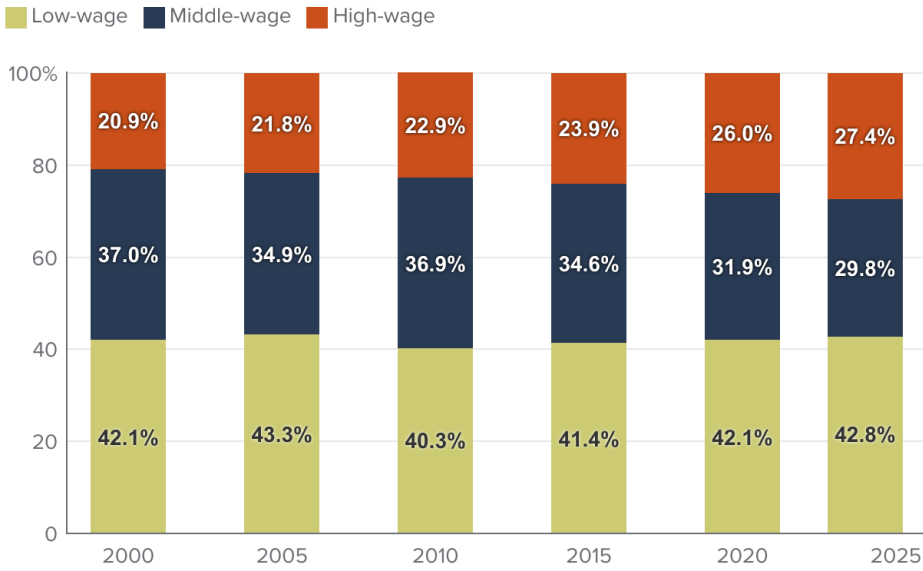


SOURCE: US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS), 2024.

NOTES: Occupations are based on BLS Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) System codes (major 6-digit codes, excluding military occupations).

**FIGURE C6**

Employment share by occupational wage group in California (2000-2024)



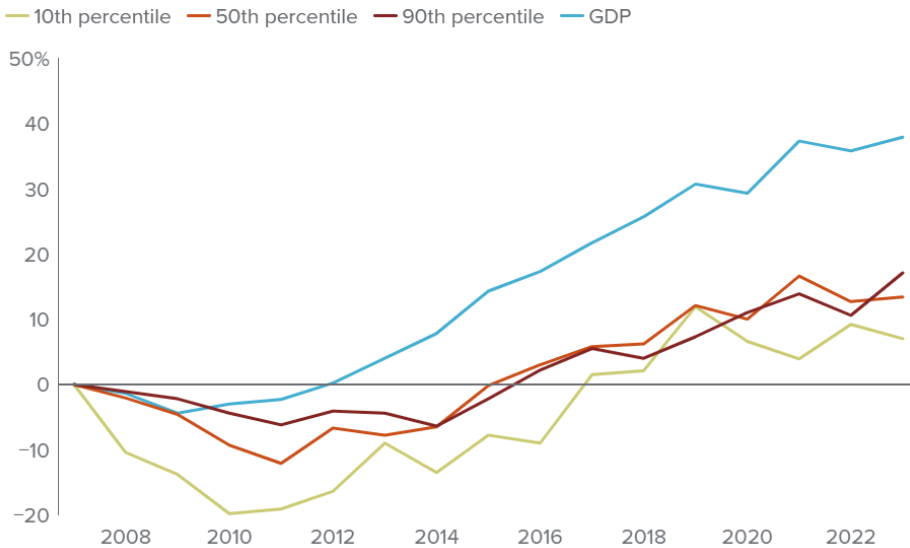
SOURCE: US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS), 2000-2024.

NOTES: Occupations are based on BLS Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) System codes (major 6-digit codes, excluding military occupations).

**FIGURE C7**

California's economy has grown since the start of the Great Recession, outstripping family incomes

Percent change since 2007



SOURCES: Authors' analysis of CPS ASEC data (IPUMS); US BEA Gross Domestic Product All Industry Series: California (not seasonally adjusted), via FRED.

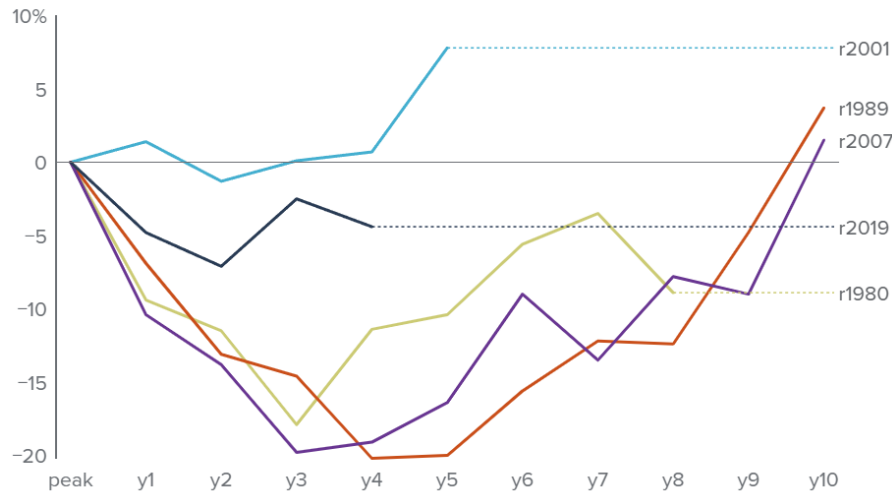
NOTES: Chart shows changes in family income and California's GDP since 2007.

**FIGURE C8**

Income trends in California differ across the distribution during economic downturns

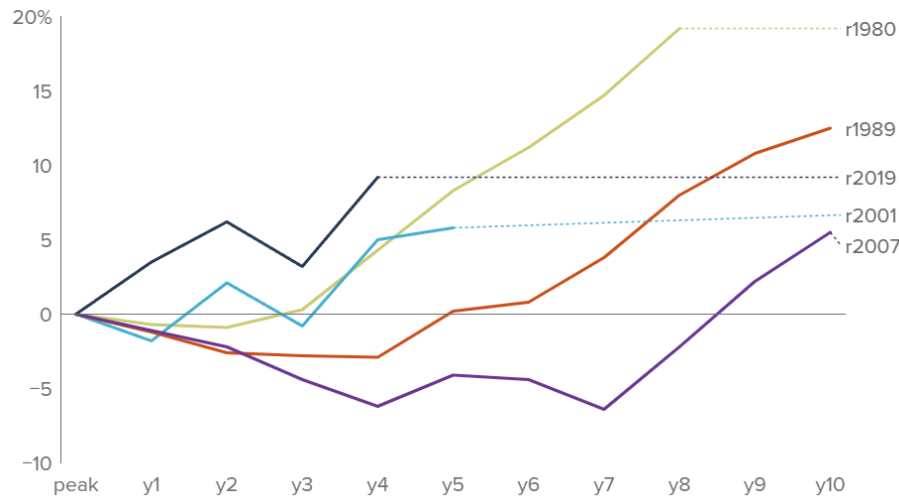
**10th percentile incomes**

Change since year of recession start



**90th percentile incomes**

Change since year of recession start



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of CPS ASEC data.

NOTES: Charts show changes in family income relative to the year noted in line label. Income is family total pre-tax income, which includes income from TANF (cash assistance) and SSI (Supplemental Security Income), but excludes resources from other safety net programs. Dollar values are adjusted to pertain to a family of four. Trends adjusted in years prior to 2017 for recent changes to income questions and processing in the CPS ASEC. Census Bureau research finds 2020 CPS ASEC data overestimate income increases for percentiles across the board between 2018 and 2019, due to lowered response rates among low-income people. Lines refer to 5 recession periods.



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