

Poverty in California

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➤ **Despite improvements, the official poverty rate remains high.**

According to official poverty statistics, 13.3% of Californians lacked enough resources—about \$24,900 per year for a family of four—to meet basic needs in 2017. The rate has declined significantly from 14.3% in 2016, but it remains above the most recent low of 12.4% in 2007. Moreover, the **official poverty line** does not account for California's housing costs or other critical family expenses and resources.

➤ **Poverty in California is even higher when factoring in key family needs and resources.**

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. It accounts for the cost of living and a range of family needs and resources, including social safety net benefits. According to the CPM, 17.8% of Californians (about 6.9 million) lacked enough resources to meet basic needs in 2017—about \$32,500 per year for a family of four, nearly \$7,600 higher than the official poverty line. Poverty was highest among children (19.3%) and lower among adults age 18–64 (17.1%) and those age 65 and older (18.5%). The overall poverty rate declined substantially in 2017, after two years with little improvement.

➤ **Almost four in ten Californians are living in or near poverty.**

Nearly one in five (18.5%) Californians were not in poverty but lived fairly close to the poverty line (up to one and a half times above it). All told, almost four in ten (36.4%) state residents were poor or near poor in 2017. But the share of Californians in families with less than half the resources needed to meet basic needs was 4.9%, a deep poverty rate that is smaller than official poverty statistics indicate.

➤ **Without social safety net programs, more Californians would live in poverty.**

The largest social safety net programs kept an estimated 7.1% of Californians out of poverty in 2017. These programs include CalFresh (California's main food assistance program), the Earned Income Tax Credits (both the federal EITC and the CalEITC), CalWORKs (cash assistance for families with children), the Child Tax Credit (CTC), Supplemental Security Income (SSI/SSP), General Assistance (GA), federal housing subsidies, the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and school meals. CalFresh and the combined EITCs lowered the poverty rate most, by 1.7 percentage points each. CalWORKs lowered the rate by 0.9 points. These differing effects reflect program scale and scope as well as participation rates among eligible families.

➤ **Poverty rates and the effect of safety net programs vary regionally.**

Los Angeles (23.0%), Santa Barbara (22.0%), and Santa Cruz (21.7%) Counties had the highest poverty rates in California (2015–2017 average). El Dorado County had the lowest rate, at 10.7%. Rates vary even more widely (from 5.1% to 44.5%) across **local areas and state assembly, state senate, and congressional districts**. Safety net programs reduce poverty much more in inland areas: without these resources in family budgets, 13.1% more people in the Central Valley and Sierra would be poor, compared with 3.7% more in the Bay Area.

➤ **Latinos and less-educated Californians continue to have dramatically higher poverty rates.**

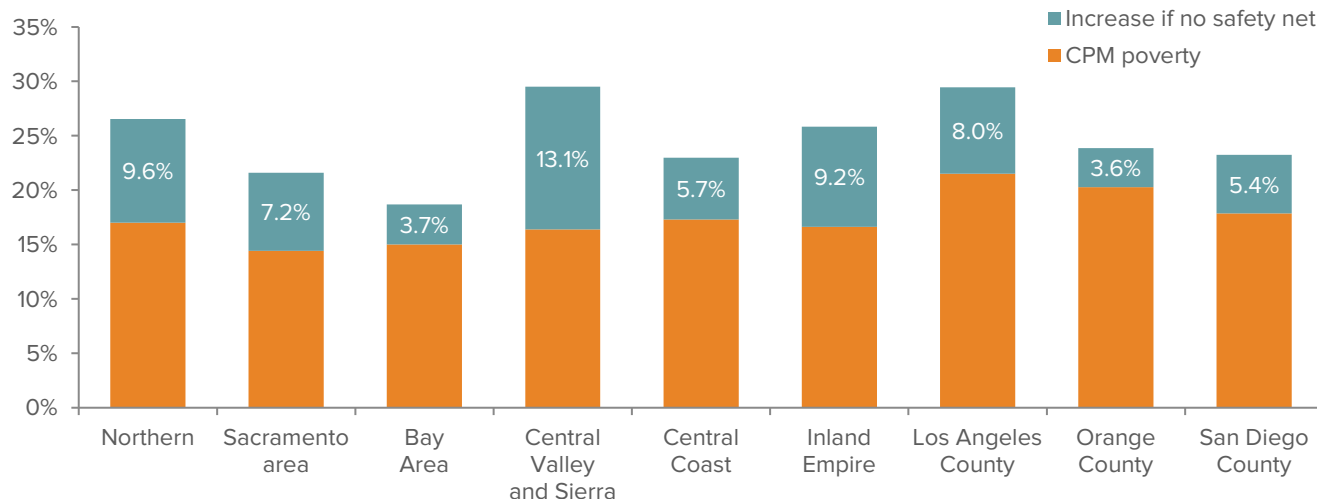
In 2017, **23.6% of Latinos lived in poverty**, compared with 17.6% of African Americans, 16.4% of Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, and 12.5% of whites. Though poverty among Latinos is down from 30.9% in 2011, Latinos remain disproportionately poor (making up 52.2% of poor Californians but 39.4% of all Californians). More education continues to be associated with strikingly lower poverty rates: 7.8% of adults age 25–64 with a college degree were in poverty, compared with 31.8% of those without a high school diploma.

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

In 2017, 79.6% of poor Californians lived in families with at least one working adult, excluding families of only adults age 65 and older. For 44.9% of those in poverty, at least one family member reported working full time for the entire year, while 34.7% had a family member who worked part time and/or part of the year.



Poverty would be even higher without the social safety net, especially in inland and northern areas



Source: Estimates from the 2017 CPM.

Notes: “No safety net” bars show the estimated increment to the poverty rate if resources from safety net programs are not counted. Program effects may be overlapping and are not simply additive. Northern counties: Butte, Colusa, Del Norte, Glenn, Humboldt, Lake, Lassen, Mendocino, Modoc, Nevada, Plumas, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Tehama, and Trinity. Sacramento area counties: El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, Sutter, Yolo, and Yuba. Bay Area counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Solano, and Sonoma. Central Valley and Sierra counties: Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Fresno, Inyo, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Mono, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Tuolumne. Central Coast counties: Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura. Inland Empire counties: Imperial, Riverside, and San Bernardino.

Poverty rates vary widely across California’s counties

County	Poverty rate (%)	County	Poverty rate (%)	County	Poverty rate (%)
Alameda	15.4	Madera	17.5	San Luis Obispo	17.2
Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Inyo, Mariposa, Mono, Tuolumne	13.4	Marin	17.9	San Mateo	16.5
Butte	18.6	Merced	16.8	Santa Barbara	22.0
Colusa, Glenn, Tehama, Trinity	17.9	Monterey, San Benito	17.9	Santa Clara	16.0
Contra Costa	14.3	Napa	15.5	Santa Cruz	21.7
Del Norte, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Siskiyou	15.6	Nevada, Sierra	18.6	Shasta	18.3
El Dorado	10.7	Orange	20.4	Solano	14.6
Fresno	18.0	Placer	12.5	Sonoma	15.8
Humboldt	18.9	Riverside	17.6	Stanislaus	14.2
Imperial	18.8	Sacramento	16.4	Sutter, Yuba	15.1
Kern	17.7	San Bernardino	17.2	Tulare	19.0
Kings	14.5	San Diego	19.3	Ventura	16.9
Lake, Mendocino	19.3	San Francisco	18.4	Yolo	19.9
Los Angeles	23.0	San Joaquin	15.6		

Source: Estimates from the 2015–2017 CPM combined.

Notes: 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 statewide margin of error is ±0.2 percentage points. The median county margin of error is ±2.0 percentage points. Margins of error calculated for a 99 percent confidence interval. For more county-level information and poverty rates by local area and state assembly, state senate, and federal congressional district, see our [interactive maps](#).

Sources: All estimates are based on the California Poverty Measure (CPM) unless otherwise noted. Official poverty statistics are from the data.census.gov. For more about the CPM, including methodological changes that affect the comparability with prior publications, 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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