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PUBLIC POLICY
INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA

DECEMBER 2020

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The Importance of CalFresh and CalWORKs in Children's Early Years



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SUMMARY

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Technical appendices to this report are available on the PPIC website.

CalFresh and CalWORKs, two of California's chief social safety net programs, provide food and cash assistance to low-income citizens and permanent residents. Together with refundable tax credits, they are the state's largest poverty-mitigating programs for children. More recently, COVID-19 and the resulting economic downturn have turned a spotlight on the need for foundational safety net programs like CalFresh and CalWORKs to respond swiftly when a crisis disrupts family finances.

In this report, we assess the role these programs play in children's early lives, using administrative data that show how many children participate, how often, and for how long. Our intent is to better understand the stages in children's early years when families may be likely to need support through CalFresh, CalWORKs, or both programs. We find:

- **Nearly half of California children participate in CalFresh, CalWORKs, or both over their early years.** This is double the share of children who participate in an average month: about 14 percent of children ages 0–5 access CalFresh only, and 9 percent participate in both CalFresh and CalWORKs. Latino and African American children have sharply higher levels of CalFresh participation over the course of their early years.
- **For many children growing up in a recession, CalFresh and CalWORKs provide important short-term support for family resources.** Even a deep recession and slow recovery during the Great Recession did not lead to more months participating. At the same time, more children combine assistance from CalFresh and CalWORKs during recessions, suggesting that children who need only a boost from CalFresh in good economic times require support from both programs in difficult economic times.
- **Assistance tends to begin early in life among children who ever access CalFresh.** Over half participate for the first time by age one. But among these participants, 40 percent of children join CalFresh after a delay of at least three months after birth. Delays are less common for children also in CalWORKs—signaling that the most impoverished families may access assistance relatively more rapidly than those in less poverty.
- **Most young children who access CalFresh do so only once for about a year, but brief gaps in enrollment affect a third of young children.** These interruptions occur more frequently for children who also access CalWORKs (42% higher) and for Latino children (20% higher).

The fact that half of California’s children from birth through age five benefit from assistance through CalWORKs and/or CalFresh reflects the centrality of these programs in California’s social safety net. It also suggests that severe economic need is more common than statistics on point-in-time poverty or caseloads would lead us to conclude. Furthermore, children who might need only a boost from CalFresh in good economic times may require support from both programs during an economic crisis, when employment is scarce. Given the importance of adequate resources early in life, continuing policymaker efforts to address hurdles to participation can advance equitable access and may improve future outcomes for children.

Introduction

CalFresh and CalWORKs, two of the largest social safety net programs in California, provide food and cash assistance to low-income citizens and permanent residents.¹ In June 2020, 4.8 million Californians participated in CalFresh, and about 905,000 accessed CalWORKs. Monthly benefit amounts averaged \$166 per person for CalFresh and \$276 per person for CalWORKs.² Federal and state policies have held benefit amounts constant for both programs during the coronavirus pandemic—or increased them in the case of certain CalFresh families—and extended timelines for submitting required paperwork.

In this report, we use rich administrative information on the CalWORKs and CalFresh programs to offer a picture of the support these programs provide for children throughout the early years of childhood. When children face poverty and a lack of resources early in life, the detrimental impacts of the experience can multiply over time, especially effects on child health and on education outcomes (Hoynes, Schanzenbach, and Almond 2016; Bailey, et al. 2020; Bastian and Micheltore 2018; Ratcliffe 2015). Longer poverty spells are linked to lasting, adverse consequences for children (Ratcliffe 2015).

In light of these long-term consequences, it is crucial to examine when and for how long children participate in safety net programs and the circumstances surrounding any disruptions to their participation. However, most readily available statistics for tracking poverty and the safety net do not take a long-term view. National estimates from survey data are dated and rely on imperfectly recorded reports of program participation (Sandoval, Rank, and Hirschl 2009).

Our assessment of the reach of CalFresh and CalWORKs over time can inform policymaker efforts to craft responsive, equitable programs. We find that these programs are common features of young childhood in California—therefore, changes can affect children broadly. Furthermore, our analysis offers insight into whether children of different demographic backgrounds experience the programs differently, into how common poverty is among children of some racial/ethnic backgrounds, and about the reach of CalFresh and CalWORKs among these different groups.

The COVID-19 economic crisis also highlights the need for foundational safety net programs like CalFresh and CalWORKs that support families in the short run and in the longer term. The pandemic raises the question of whether these programs are as responsive as they could be—whether that responsiveness is limited by federal or state laws, by funding constraints, or by the reluctance of families to participate due to stigma or fear of reprisal.

In this report, we first describe the scope of CalFresh and CalWORKs as it relates to young children, from birth through age five. To draw insights for the current economic crisis, we also examine the change in shares of young children ever participating in CalFresh alone or in combination with CalWORKs over the course of the Great Recession. Finally, we provide evidence assessing whether children may experience the programs differently across key characteristics: child’s race/ethnicity and parents’ immigration status and proficiency in written English. By examining participation over a span of children’s first five years, we can begin to provide updated and California-specific insights into the breadth of these programs and troubling gaps in assistance for young children.

¹ The federal names of these programs are the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

² CalFresh participation and issuance data drawn from the CDSS [CalFresh Data Dashboard](#), updated 8/5/2020. CalWORKs participation drawn from CDSS [CA237 CW](#) reports, updated 9/9/2020. CalWORKs issuance drawn from CDSS [Public Assistance Facts and Figures](#) for July 2019–December 2019.

CalFresh and CalWORKs Are Two of the State's Biggest Safety Net Programs for Children

CalFresh and CalWORKs work together to provide a basic nutrition and cash safety net for Californians, particularly for children. CalFresh provides nutrition assistance to low-income Californians and lowers poverty among young children by 3.2 points (a 15% reduction). CalWORKs provides cash assistance to low-income families with dependent children, and lowers poverty among children by 1.7 points, or 8 percent (Danielson, Thorman, and Bohn 2020).

Children are eligible for CalFresh if they are citizens or permanent residents regardless of whether their parents are ineligible for CalFresh based on immigration status, and children remain eligible for their portion of the grant through CalWORKs even if their parents have lost eligibility. In recent years, state and local administrators and stakeholders have focused on enrolling more eligible children in these programs, particularly for CalFresh.³ In the past decade, policymakers eliminated a CalFresh requirement that applicants be fingerprinted, made Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients eligible for CalFresh, and switched to semi-annual reporting, which has reduced paperwork for families when monthly income changes modestly; also, the initial income screen was raised to 200 percent of the federal poverty line (Danielson and Klerman 2011).⁴

In the CalWORKs program, California policymakers have chosen to maintain a safety net for children even when parents are ineligible. While parents are subject to work requirements and time limits on assistance, children do not lose eligibility if their parents reach a time limit or are noncompliant with program requirements. Although state lawmakers achieved budget savings by cutting CalWORKs grant amounts and shortening time limits for adults during the last recession, in the past several years, grants have been increased substantially (Legislative Analyst 2019).⁵

CalFresh and CalWORKs Participants Differ

Young children whose families participate in CalFresh or CalWORKs experience poverty, but to varying degrees. To be eligible for CalFresh, a family must have cash income below 200 percent of the federal poverty line and below 100 percent after certain allowed deductions for child care, housing expenses, and the like. In 2020, this is equivalent to net annual income under \$21,720 for a family of three. To be eligible for CalWORKs, a family must have income below about 78 percent of the federal poverty line, or about \$16,900 for a family of three.

Figure 1 illustrates monthly cash and CalFresh sources of income for CalWORKs and CalFresh families, and reveals CalWORKs families are in deeper poverty, with much lower levels of earnings and cash resources from other sources. While family incomes can change rapidly from month to month, \$1,155 monthly in cash and CalFresh food benefits is equivalent to \$13,900 annually for a family of three. In the case of CalFresh, \$1,441 monthly—if income remains constant—equates to about \$17,300 annually.⁶ Because CalWORKs families are in deeper poverty, their typical CalFresh benefit (\$437) is also larger than for families who participate only in CalFresh (\$357).

³ See the CDSS [CalFresh Data Dashboard](#) for the state's tracking of participation among those eligible using the Program Reach Index (PRI).

⁴ In 2020, this is equivalent to annual income under \$43,440 for a family of three. For a timeline and summary of major program changes, see California Department of Social Services (2020a, pp 13–18).

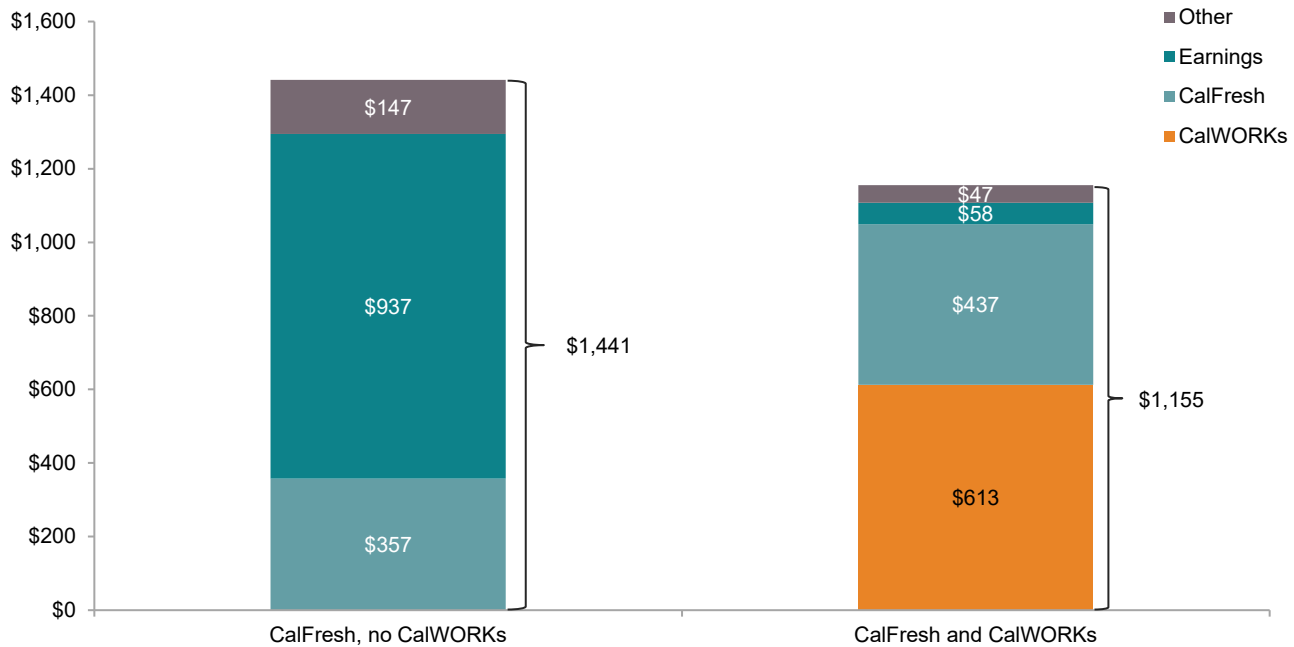
⁵ Time limits are slated to increase from 48 to 60 months again starting in May 2022 (Legislative Analyst's Office 2020a).

⁶ Note that Figure 1 includes resources from CalFresh benefits, but these benefits are not used in determining federal poverty levels. CalWORKs cash benefits are considered in determining a family's official poverty status.

By design, almost all CalWORKs families participate in CalFresh, but the reverse is not true. Throughout this report, we examine the trajectories of children whose families participate in CalWORKs (and by definition also CalFresh) separately from those who access only CalFresh.

FIGURE 1

Monthly income for CalFresh-only families is higher than for families in CalFresh and CalWORKs



SOURCE: Author calculations from the SNAP (CalFresh) RADEP for federal fiscal year 2018.

NOTES: Bars show cases with children 0–5 with aid from CalFresh only or from both CalWORKs and CalFresh in the same month. Amounts are adjusted to correspond to a case with three aided members in 2020 dollars.

CalFresh and CalWORKs Reflect the Diversity of California’s Children

Young children who participated in CalFresh and/or CalWORKs may have received benefits for as briefly as one month or for their entire childhood through age five, which we explore in further detail below.

There are roughly 270,000 CalFresh participants in the 2012 birth cohort we studied (see textbox below). About 61 percent are Latino, while 17 percent are white, 10 percent are African American, 6 percent are multiracial or other race, and 5 percent are Asian American/Pacific Islander (Figure 2).⁷ In most CalFresh cases with children, adults have requested written materials in English, but 29 percent have requested materials in other languages, most often Spanish.⁸ These requests may indicate adults are proficient in English, although they are an imperfect signal. For example, adults may default to English because they are not proficient in any written language, or older children may translate for their parents. Because language preference may provide insights into children’s

⁷ See [Technical Appendix Table A3](#) for detailed racial/ethnic demographics of children in 2012 cohort as recorded in the SNAP and TANF LDBs. Race/ethnic categorizations used in this report include Latino children of any race and non-Latino children who are recorded as white, African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, and multiracial or other. Relative to their shares in the population, the administrative data show that African American children are most overrepresented among CalFresh and CalWORKs participants, and Asian American/Pacific Islander children are most underrepresented. According to the 2018 ACS among children age 0–5, 52 percent are Latino, 25 percent are white, 11 percent are API, 7 percent are multiracial or other, and 5 percent are African American. We discuss disparities in poverty rates for African American and Latino children as compared to white children below.

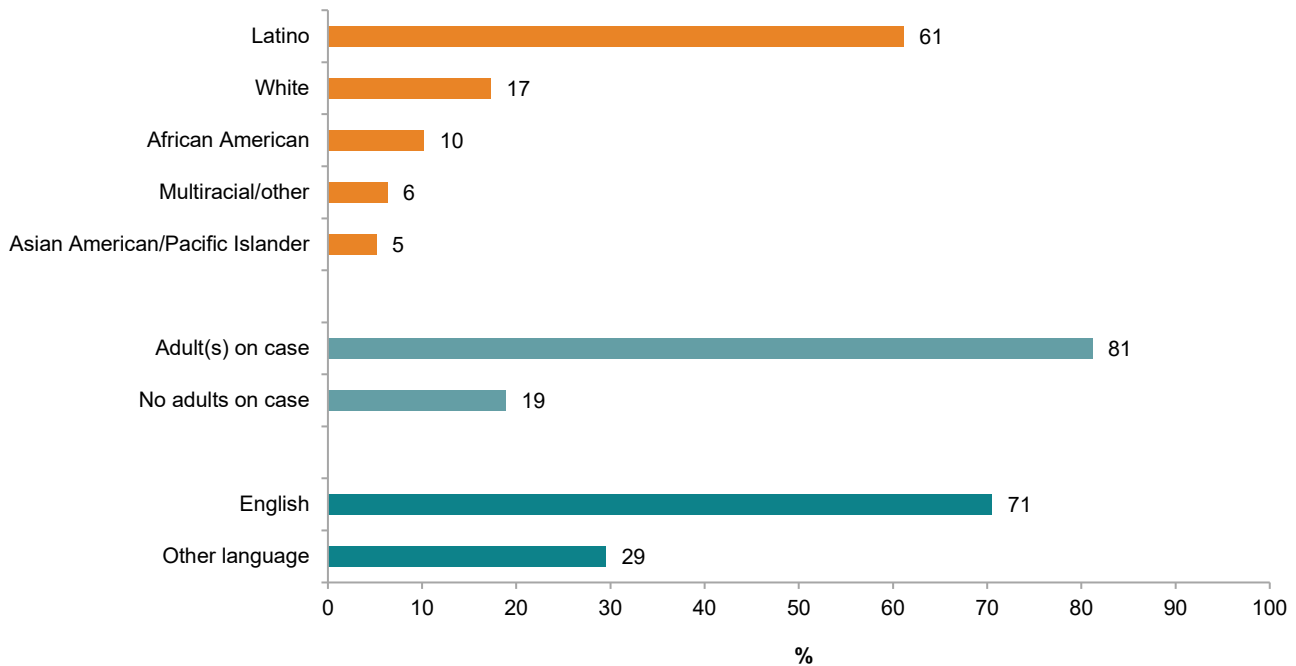
⁸ See [Technical Appendix Table A4](#) for a breakdown of the different languages in which case materials are provided.

participation, we further examine whether young children in families receiving case materials in a non-English language have different experiences of CalFresh and CalWORKs than children in cases using English materials.

Most children access CalFresh as members of cases that include adults—typically their parents—but 19 percent do not. Typically, a CalFresh case includes only children when parents are undocumented immigrants who are ineligible for CalFresh.⁹ Below we explore whether children in such child-only, mixed-status families have a different experience of CalFresh and CalWORKs than children not in mixed-status families.

FIGURE 2

Demographics vary among children who ever participate in CalFresh and CalWORKs



SOURCE: Author calculations from the SNAP (CalFresh) and TANF (CalWORKs) LDBs.

NOTE: Each set of bars divides children born in 2012 who ever participated in CalFresh or CalWORKs through age five by the specific characteristic. Latino children may be of any race.

Point-in-Time Estimates Understate the Importance of CalFresh and CalWORKs

Millions of Californians participate in CalFresh, and the program responded rapidly to the COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders, growing from about 4.1 million Californians in February 2020 to 4.8 million in June (CDSS CalFresh Data Dashboard).¹⁰ CalWORKs remained relatively constant, growing from about 870,000 to 910,000 Californians between January and June 2020 (CDSS CA237 CW); although when the federal

⁹ Some cases that include both adults and children nonetheless have one or more ineligible immigrant adults in the household. These children (an estimated 9% of all SNAP children ages 0–5) are not flagged as ‘mixed-status’ families in our analysis. See [Technical Appendix A](#) for additional details.

¹⁰ Giannarelli, Wheaton, and Acs (2020) use simulation to estimate the role of the federal expansion of SNAP benefits in the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act (FFCRA) in reducing poverty nationally.

government expanded Unemployment Insurance eligibility, it undoubtedly reduced the need for CalWORKs in the spring and summer.¹¹

A look at average monthly caseloads over 2016 to 2018 reveals that an estimated 14 percent of children between the ages of zero and five participated in CalFresh and an additional 9 percent participated in both CalWORKs and CalFresh. Between 2005 and 2012 (the peak), caseloads of young children nearly doubled in size for both programs combined, from about 500,000 children to over 900,000 children.¹²

Prior to 2010, more young children participated in both CalWORKs and CalFresh each month than in CalFresh alone. Those numbers changed over the Great Recession—with the rise in poverty caused by the economic collapse, participation in both programs grew. Both programs also remained above prerecession levels after the recession ended because poverty among young children in California peaked in 2012. However, the number of young children in CalFresh grew more rapidly and began to decline later than for CalWORKs (Figure 3). By 2012, CalFresh had about half a million children under six participating, while CalWORKs had 400,000. This gap has grown, and as of 2018, one and a half times as many young children accessed CalFresh on average as both programs (418,000 vs. 271,000).¹³

The reversal may be due to state and county efforts to increase CalFresh participation among those eligible, along with other changes that reduced program barriers—like eliminating fingerprinting in CalFresh—and increased program access (like [Modified Categorical Eligibility](#)).¹⁴ Time limits and grant reductions in CalWORKs also may have reduced children’s participation indirectly.¹⁵

¹¹ Unemployment insurance benefits are among an applicant’s income sources when determining eligibility for CalWORKs, and the potential to receive Unemployment Insurance must be considered when determining an applicant’s eligibility for the program ([California Department of Social Services 2020b](#)).

¹² The CalFresh/CalWORKs combined caseload for young children peaked in 2011, but the CalFresh caseload peaked in 2015. It is likely that many children moving off CalWORKs in 2011 and after remained on CalFresh for longer.

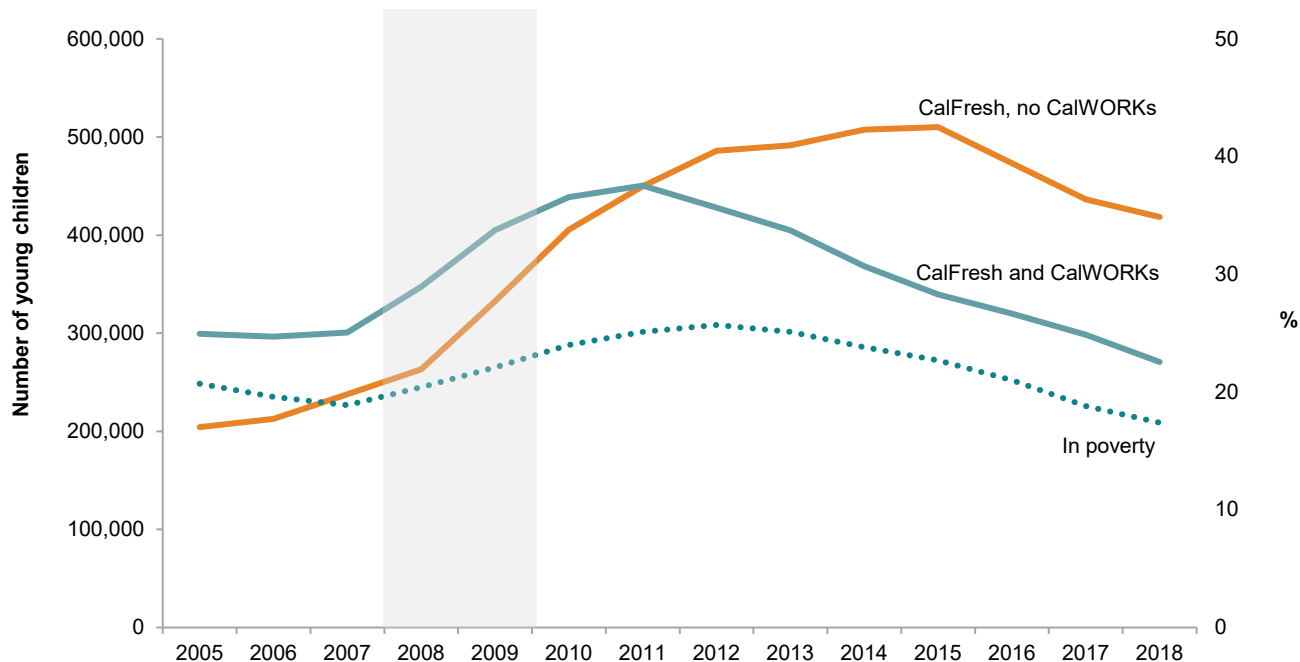
¹³ Children made up almost half of the total CalFresh caseload in 2018 (49.4%), including 12.6 percent preschool-aged and 36.8 percent school-aged children (USDA 2020). This caseload perspective is substantially different from a longitudinal perspective on participation in one or both programs. See Figure 10 and accompanying text.

¹⁴ For a detailed timeline of major federal and California policy changes, see California Department of Social Services (2020a, pp 9–18 and pp 23–34).

¹⁵ This could be the case if parents are less likely to apply for CalWORKs when more conditions are attached to participating in the program. Also, a few children may have become ineligible for CalWORKs after parents lost assistance because the eligible case size dropped but family income sources did not. While federal CalWORKs funding is block granted rather than being an entitlement, this does not directly affect whether eligible families receive cash assistance. In other words, there are no waiting lists. However, indirectly, state policymakers do consider how to shape program policies to ensure that state and federal funds are adequate to meet expected demand.

FIGURE 3

After the Great Recession, participating in CalFresh alone has become more typical than combining CalWORKs and CalFresh



SOURCES: Author calculations from the SNAP and TANF LDBs and the 2005–2018 California samples of the American Community Survey. Shaded box shows NBER demarcated recession (December 2007–June 2009).

NOTES: Dotted line shows percent of children ages 0–5 living under the official poverty line (right-hand axis). Solid lines show number of children ages 0–5 with aid from CalFresh or both CalWORKs and CalFresh in the same month (left-hand axis). Between 3 percent and 9 percent of children recorded as participating in either or both programs were recorded as receiving only CalWORKs in a given month. In the figure, those children are shown as participating in both programs.

CalFresh and CalWORKs in Children’s Early Years

Monthly caseload counts show CalFresh and CalWORKs are important safety nets for young children; however, by comparing monthly snapshots over years, we can see the many distinct families who experience one or more episodes of poverty at some point over a longer span of time. Family circumstances—from losing a job to grappling with health problems to caring for a family member—that contribute to episodes of poverty are far more common than annual poverty rates suggest (Danielson, Thorman, and Bohn 2020; Duncan 1984; Huff Stevens 1994; Huff Stevens 2019; Morduch and Schneider 2017; Ratcliffe and McKernan 2012). Economic instability has been on the rise—and particularly so for less-educated, single mother, and African American families (Hardy, Hill, and Romich 2019).

At any point in time, some families struggle with persistent need, some are in the midst of a single spell, and others have or will have experienced repeated episodes of poverty. Thus, one corollary of moving in and out of poverty—and thus in and out of program participation—is that the number of individuals accessing safety net supports over a span of time should be higher than those accessing a program at a point in time. We find this to be the case, by approximately a two-to-one margin.

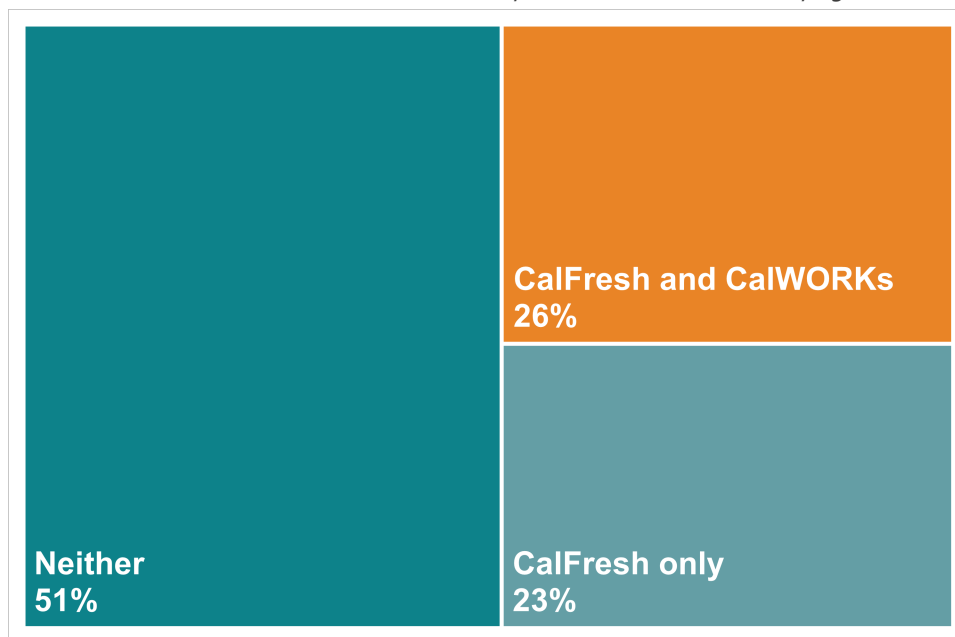
CalFresh and CalWORKs Assist Half of California Children by Age Five

To provide a picture of how poverty and assistance affect the early lives of children, we estimate the share of California children whose families participated in CalFresh or CalWORKs from birth through age five. We start by looking at the most recent cohort of young children, those born in 2012, since we have data to observe their trajectories through 2018.¹⁶

Twenty-six percent of young children participated in CalFresh and CalWORKs at some point in their early years. Another 23 percent had assistance from CalFresh, but not CalWORKs (Figure 4).¹⁷ In total, 49 percent of children in California were assisted by these programs in their early years, about 1.8 to 2.4 times what point-in-time estimates indicate.

FIGURE 4

About half of California children are assisted by CalFresh or CalWORKs by age five



SOURCE: Author calculations from the SNAP (CalFresh) and TANF (CalWORKs) LDBs.

NOTE: Estimates based on the first 72 months for children who turned six in 2018. Denominator reflects estimate of number of children in each cohort ever in California from birth through age five, based on CDC, SEER, and ACS data (see [Technical Appendix B](#)).

While we cannot determine how many California children experience poverty from these data alone, our estimates do indicate that, for at least half of young children, resources fall short of meeting basic needs at one or more points through age five. It also reaffirms that CalFresh is a far wider safety net for children than CalWORKs, reaching almost half of children at some point in their early years. Still, CalWORKs reaches a quarter of young children

¹⁶ Because families may move in and/or out of California between children's ages 0–5, we specifically estimate: the number of young children born in 2012 who ever lived in California over the course of those early years and then calculate the share of children born in 2012 who ever accessed CalFresh or CalWORKs by 2018. See [Technical Appendix B](#).

¹⁷ This disaggregation of children's participation in both programs does not distinguish between simultaneous and staggered receipt of CalFresh and CalWORKs. In other words, children who participated in CalFresh alone for some of ages 0–5, but who also accessed CalWORKs at some point, are categorized as "CalFresh and CalWORKs." It also does not reflect the small number of children who are recorded as only accessing CalWORKs. Children with no record of CalWORKs participation by their sixth birthdays are categorized as "CalFresh only." See [Technical Appendix A](#) for more details.

despite targeting a much poorer demographic and having time limit, work requirement, and sanction provisions that can constrain adults' participation substantially.¹⁸

As a group, children typically experience higher poverty rates than adults, but stark disparities exist across racial/ethnic groups. African American children experienced the highest poverty and deep poverty rates in 2018 (33% in poverty and 21% in deep poverty), followed by Latino children (23% in poverty and 10% in deep poverty). Poverty rates among white, Asian American/Pacific Islander, and other race children are dramatically lower (8%–10%).¹⁹ These differences stem from other disparities, including overrepresentation in low-wage jobs, lower levels of educational attainment, and higher unemployment rates and less intergenerational economic mobility for African Americans. These disparities in turn reflect long-term patterns of discrimination and reduced access to opportunity (Chetty, et al. 2019; Chetty and Hendren 2018; Johnson and Mejia 2020; Quillian, et al. 2017; Wakefield and Wildeman 2014).

Given that much higher shares of African American and Latino children live in families with incomes below the poverty line, we would expect higher shares participating in CalFresh and CalWORKs.²⁰ Figure 5 shows about 58 percent of Latino and 95 percent of African American children have participated in CalFresh and/or CalWORKs through age five. In contrast, 23 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islander, 33 percent of white children, and 47 percent of multiracial and other race children accessed these programs. While these estimates reflect some unavoidable imprecision, regardless of how we calculate the number of children in each racial/ethnic group, African American children participate at very high levels relative to other children, and the share of Latino children participating is at least twice that of white or Asian American/Pacific Islander children.²¹ Overall, these estimates paint an unambiguous picture of racial inequality for California children.

¹⁸ We also assess correlations between county unemployment rates, poverty levels, CalFresh reach of eligible participants (the Program Reach Index, or PRI, as calculated by the California Department of Social Services), and child race/ethnic makeup and the share of county children participating in CalFresh in ages 0 through 5 (Technical Appendix Table C9). We find positive associations between participation in CalFresh and CalWORKs and the share of county children who are Latino, African American, or multiracial or another race, and negative associations with the share who are Asian American/Pacific Islander. However, after controlling for factors that drive eligibility (the unemployment rate, child poverty, and PRI), the correlations are much smaller, and only significant in the case of share of county child population that is African American. We find smaller associations between participation in CalFresh alone and county race/ethnic demographics, and the association with the share of county children who are African American is negative. Associations with other race/ethnic groups are not significant after we adjust for county differences in eligibility and outreach. This suggests that access in early years is more common for counties with higher shares of white children compared with African American children. Nonetheless, poverty and program accessibility appear to be major factors driving program use.

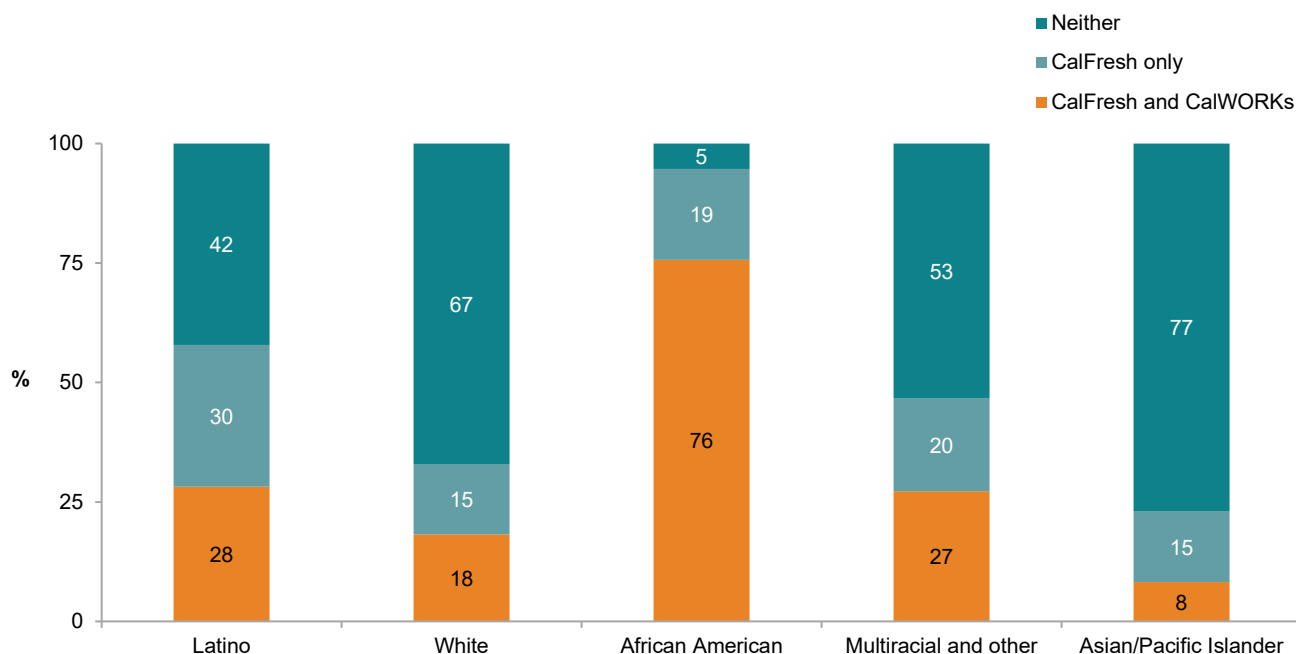
¹⁹ These poverty and deep poverty rates are calculated from the California sample of the 2018 American Community Survey and indicate official poverty. Sample sizes for African American children ages 0–5 are smaller than for Latino children (784 vs. 10,572), so the estimates for African American children are less precise. Unlike the California Poverty Measure (Danielson, Thorman, and Bohn 2020), official poverty counts only pre-tax cash income and does not adjust poverty thresholds for the differing cost of living across the state. We use official poverty statistics here rather than the California Poverty Measure because they better reflect income eligibility for CalFresh and CalWORKs.

²⁰ We know that providing benefits to families when they are not in fact eligible is uncommon. For example, California's rate of overpayments in the SNAP program—which includes both payments to eligible families that were too high and payments made to ineligible families—was 6.42 percent in 2019 (Food and Nutrition Service 2020). We are unable to determine whether take-up among eligible children is lower for some racial/ethnic groups than for others. However, researchers have documented immigrants' concerns about participating in public programs and provided evidence of systematically lower participation in TANF among even US-born Latinos (Bernstein et al. 2020; Pedraza and Zhu 2015). In other words, the participation we observe among Latino children is likely systematically lower than it is for white and African American children with equivalent need.

²¹ There are multiple sources of potential error that point in both directions. In the SNAP and TANF LDBs, race/ethnicity may be recorded inconsistently. Population denominators drawn from survey data are subject to sampling and non-sampling error, our method of constructing population denominators is imperfect, and small changes in denominator estimates have larger effects on estimates of participation for groups with small populations. See Technical Appendix B for a detailed discussion of the population denominators we construct to arrive at these estimates.

FIGURE 5

Participation in CalFresh and CalWORKs is higher among African American and Latino children



SOURCE: Author calculations from the SNAP (CalFresh) LDB and TANF (CalWORKs) LDB. Denominator reflects estimate of number of children in each cohort ever in California from birth through age five, based on CDC, SEER, and ACS data.

NOTE: Estimates based on children who turned six in 2018. Estimates vary based on the data sources used to construct the population denominator; our best estimates of CalFresh participation indicate ranges of 58 percent–66 percent for Latino, 27 percent–33 percent for white, 86 percent to 95 percent for African American, 47 percent to 67 percent for multiracial and other, and 20 percent –23 percent for Asian American/Pacific Islander children. This variation should be considered when interpreting the figure. See [Technical Appendix B](#) for further details.

Data sources and time spans

In this report, we primarily draw on individual-level California administrative data that record monthly receipt of CalFresh and CalWORKs. These data span the years 2005–2018. For the main analyses, we group children born in the same calendar year and summarize their monthly participation between the month of their birth and the month before they turn six.

For much of the report we focus on the 2012 cohort—children who turned six in 2018—which is the most recent birth year for which we can follow children from birth through age five; this cohort consists of just under 270,000 children. We note that any children born in 2012 who first participated in CalFresh after turning 6 are not included in our analysis. We characterize the cohort’s experiences from the perspective of the CalFresh program, meaning that age at first participation and number of months of participation refer to children’s receipt of CalFresh benefits. However, we incorporate information about whether the child ever participated in CalWORKs.

Along with information on date of birth, the data include reported race/ethnicity, preferred language of written communications, county of residence, and whether adults or siblings are members of the assistance case. Documentation status is the chief reason adults are ineligible for CalFresh assistance when children are, and we use the absence of adults on the case to flag mixed immigration status households.

See [Technical Appendix A](#) for further details.

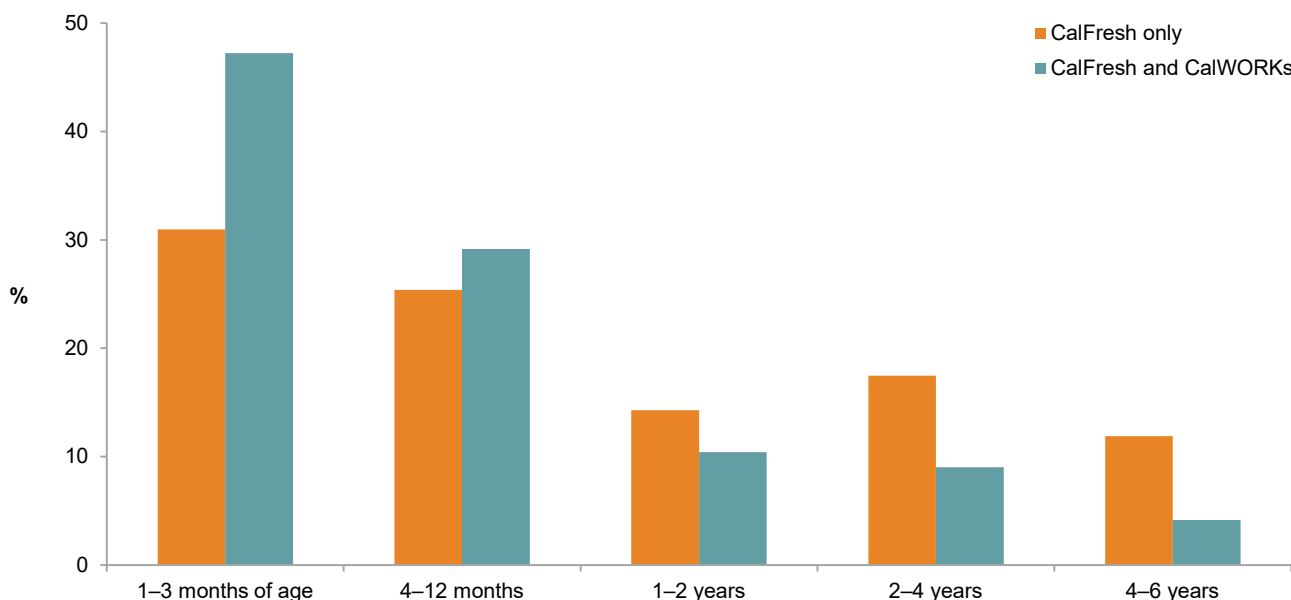
Participation Tends to Begin Early in Life

Birth can be a time when families face challenges with finances, especially if parents lack access to employment benefits like paid family leave, or face barriers in using them. Most young children who participated in CalFresh did so for the first time when they were less than a year old (Figure 6).²² Benefits started somewhat earlier for children also receiving CalWORKs (47% in first three months) compared to those who received only CalFresh (31% in first three months).²³ About a quarter first started receiving CalFresh between 4 and 12 months of age. Still, nearly half of children who accessed only CalFresh first did so between ages one and five (44%), and about a quarter who accessed both programs first did so between age one and age five (23%).²⁴

However, among all children who participated in CalFresh by age five, very few were assisted in the first month of life (2.4%)—most were assisted during their second or third months, suggesting that many parents or guardians experience delays applying for their newborns.²⁵ In the last section, we assess systematic differences in these delays across children’s characteristics.

FIGURE 6

Most children who participate in CalFresh do so first very early in life



SOURCE: Author calculations from the SNAP (CalFresh) LDB and TANF (CalWORKs) LDB.

NOTES: Estimates based on a cohort of children who turned six in 2018. “CalFresh and CalWORKs” indicates children who ever had assistance from either or both programs, whether simultaneously or not. Children with CalWORKs assistance typically also have CalFresh aid. Chart shows age of first access of CalFresh. Age of first CalWORKs access does differ for some children. For a tabulation showing number of children by age of first participation, see [Technical Appendix Table C2](#).

²² Taking a different perspective, we also assessed whether sharp breaks occurred in CalFresh participation at 12 and 60 months of age ([Technical Appendix Figure B3](#)). The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is another nutrition assistance program for which low-income young children may be eligible. Since WIC benefits change at 12 months, and eligibility ends at 60 months, we might expect changes in CalFresh participation at those ages. We do not find this to be the case.

²³ Note that children who ever accessed both programs first joined CalWORKs at a somewhat later age than they did CalFresh. In particular, 39 percent first accessed CalWORKs at 1–3 months of age, 25 percent accessed CalWORKs at 4–12 months of age, and 36 percent accessed CalWORKs at 1–5 years of age.

²⁴ While we observe the timing of participation, we are unable to determine from state administrative data whether children experienced a spell of poverty but their families delayed participating in one or both programs, or whether patterns of program participation reflect heterogeneity in the timing of episodes of poverty.

²⁵ At the same time, 70 percent of children with CalFresh assistance within 12 months of their birth may have had assistance prenatally. In other words, the case they joined had both a female participant who was a potential birth mother and months of assistance within 9 months prior to the child’s birth.

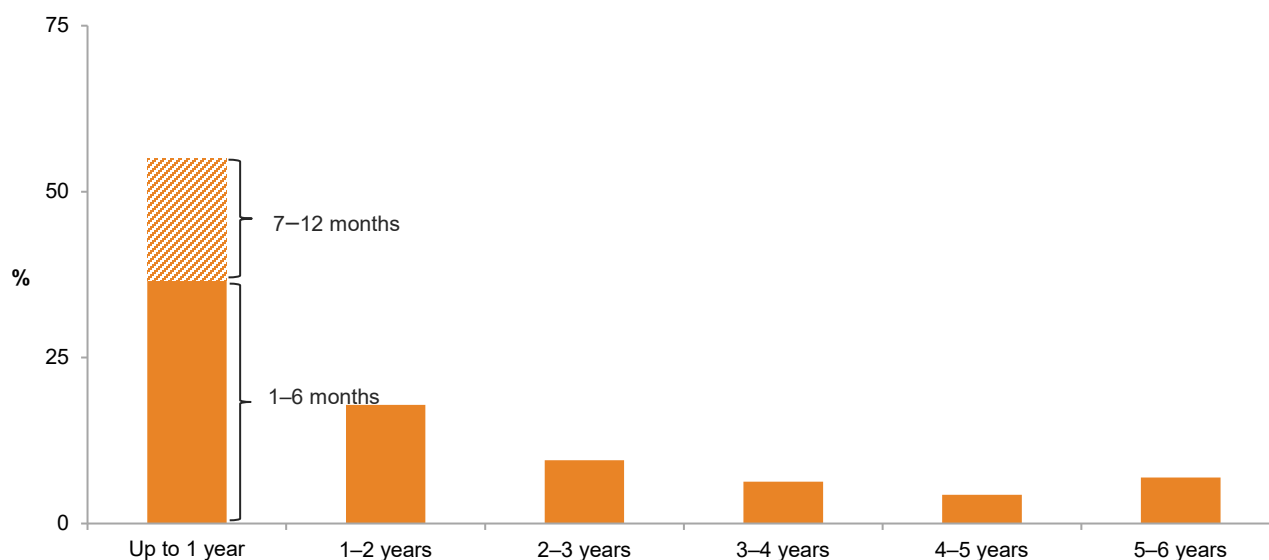
As California increased the share of eligible residents accessing CalFresh—its participation rate—assistance reached eligible children earlier in their lives. For example, half of children born in 2012 accessed CalFresh by eight months of age; in contrast, in an earlier cohort (born in 2005) 27 percent had CalFresh assistance by eight months of age ([Technical Appendix Table C2](#)).²⁶ This suggests that, as the state increased its CalFresh participation rate, it both reached more children and reached them closer to their initial periods of need.²⁷

Consecutive Months of Participation Typically Span One to Two Years

The majority of young children participated in CalFresh just once (62% of those born in 2012).²⁸ Further, this period of participation typically lasted one year or less. Over half of children participating in CalFresh did so for 12 months or less ([Figure 7](#)).²⁹ The figure also shows that 12 months or less is by far the most common span of months of participation while consecutive months longer than two years of assistance are most uncommon.³⁰

These relatively short spells of about a year may indicate that the incidence of poverty is short-lived for many families with young children. However, 7 percent of children received CalFresh for at least five out of their first six years.³¹

FIGURE 7
Consecutive months of CalFresh typically span a year or less



SOURCE: Author calculations from the SNAP (CalFresh) LDB and TANF (CalWORKs) LDB.

NOTE: Chart shows the distribution of all spells of participation by length, for children who turned six in 2018. In this figure, one-month gaps in assistance have been recoded to be months with assistance.

²⁶ Children in the 2012 cohort also participated in CalWORKs earlier relative to the 2005 birth cohort ([Technical Appendix Table C2](#)).

²⁷ More research is needed to determine how well periods of economic need align with periods of program participation.

²⁸ See [Technical Appendix Table C4](#) for additional details. The share of young children born in 2012 with one CalWORKs spell is 56 percent.

²⁹ Half of children participating in CalWORKs in their early years did so for 11 months or less. The average span of months on either program was longer—21 months for CalFresh and 18 months for CalWORKs.

³⁰ [Technical Appendix Figure B1](#) shows that ending a spell of CalFresh assistance at six months—or multiples of six months—is more common than at other spell lengths. This is in line with literature that describes case exits that disproportionately occur at points where households must report changes to income or household composition (Hommonoff and Somerville 2020; Mills et al. 2014). Spells of assistance are thus at least partly related to policy choices around reporting and recertification of eligibility. Note, however, that both [Technical Appendix Figure B1](#) and [Figure 7](#) reflect a recoding of one-month gaps in assistance as months on assistance.

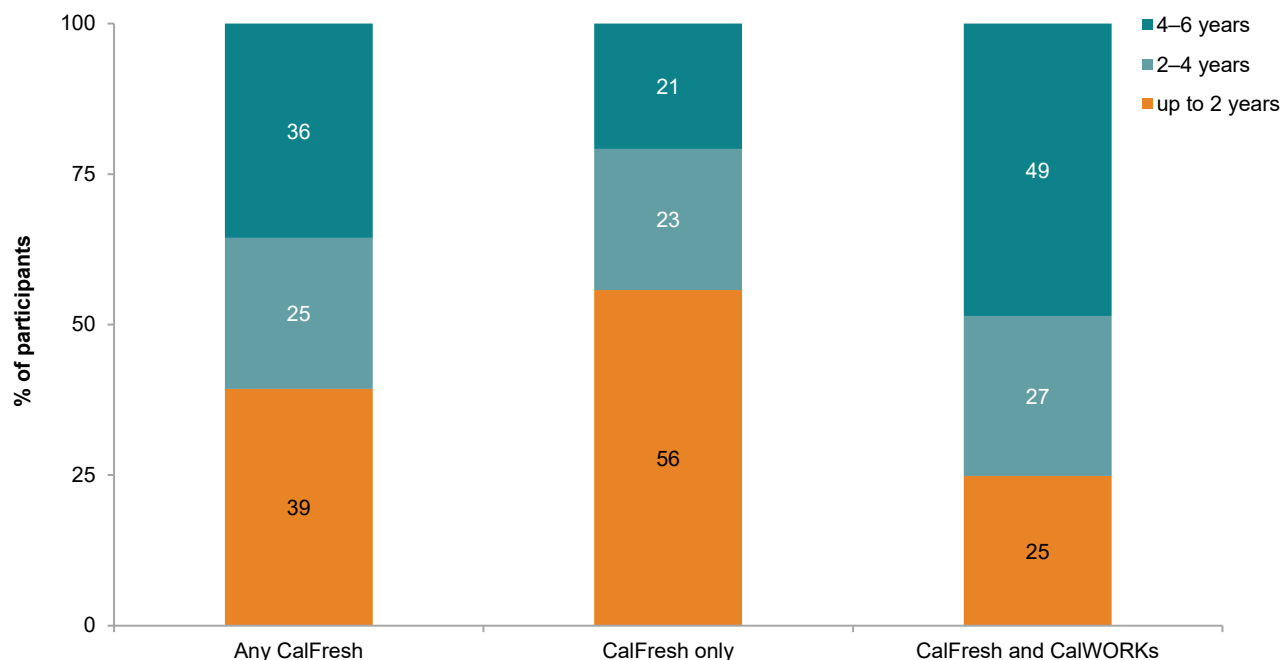
³¹ Among the cohort of children born in 2012, the 90th percentile CalFresh spell was 59 months and the 90th percentile CalWORKs spell was 47 months. See [Technical Appendix Table C3](#) for additional detail.

Most Children Spend under Half of their Early Years with CalFresh Assistance

Across the entire span of early childhood, most children receive assistance from CalFresh for less than half of their early years (Figure 8). Yet children who access only CalFresh spend much shorter periods overall with the program compared with children who access both CalFresh and CalWORKs at some point. Fifty-six percent of children who access only CalFresh accumulate up to two years of CalFresh assistance. For those who access both programs, the numbers are nearly flipped—49 percent accumulate four to six years of CalFresh assistance. For both groups, about a quarter have two to four years of assistance in total.

FIGURE 8

Most children spend less than three out of their first six years with CalFresh assistance



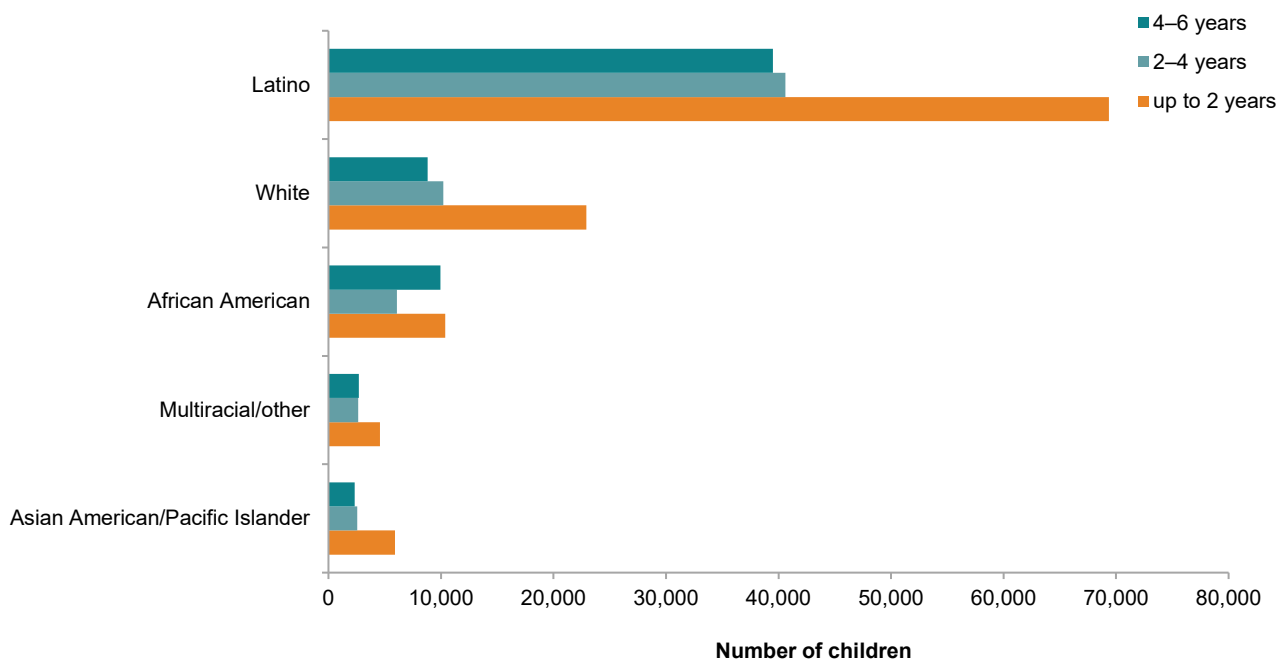
SOURCE: Author calculations from the SNAP (CalFresh) and TANF (CalWORKs) LDBs.

NOTE: Estimates based on children who turned six in 2018. Cumulative years participating in CalFresh shown.

These differing lengths of time with CalFresh in part reflect the relative depth of poverty experienced by children eligible for CalWORKs compared to CalFresh, as well as the months of Transitional CalFresh automatically available to families who leave CalWORKs when their earnings grow. There are also racial/ethnic differences in length of time participating in CalFresh. White, multiracial and other race, Latino, and Asian American/Pacific Islander children typically participate for two years or less, while nearly as many African American children participate for four to six years as do for up to two years (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9

Relatively more African American children participate in CalFresh for most of their early years



SOURCE: Author calculations from the SNAP LDB.

NOTE: Estimates based on children who turned six in 2018. Cumulative years participating in CalFresh shown.

Insights from the Last Recession

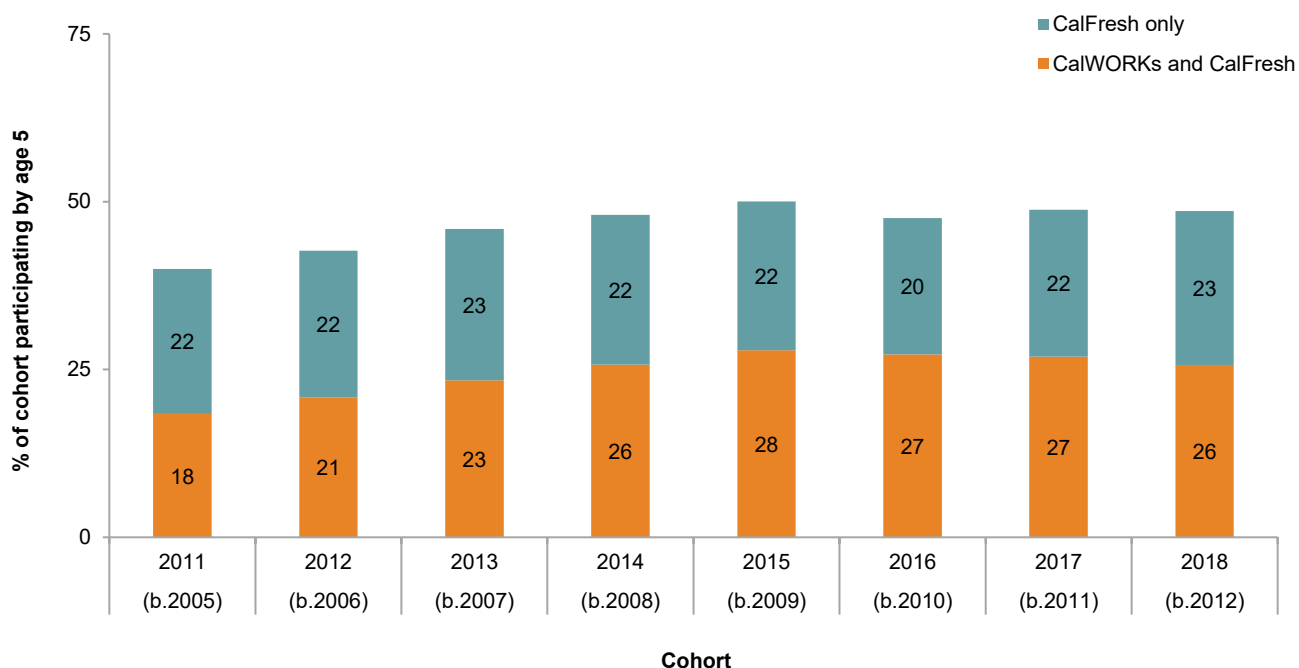
Prior to the Great Recession, fewer California children participated in CalFresh or CalWORKs during their early years. Specifically, 40 percent of children born in 2005 accessed CalFresh or CalWORKs at some point up through age five compared to 49 percent of those born in 2012 (Figure 10). This change was driven by a substantial rise in CalWORKs and CalFresh participation among children born between 2005 and 2009 (from 18% to 28%), followed by a small drop (to 26%) for those born in 2012. Participation in only CalFresh held nearly constant, growing from 22 percent to 23 percent.³²

The cohorts of children born in 2005 and 2012 both spent their early years in relatively robust, expanding economies. Thus, higher program participation likely reflects the high poverty rate that persisted after the Great Recession ended, as well as better access to CalFresh for eligible Californians (CDSS CalFresh Data Dashboard). In other words, even as the economy was improving in 2011 and later—meaning that fewer families were eligible—CalFresh was reaching more children when they were eligible, so the overall share of children with access remained relatively constant.

³² Above, we showed that, since 2011, CalFresh participation at a point in time has outstripped CalWORKs participation. Figure 10 is conceptually different; it shows participation over time for children born between 2005 and 2012. For most of those years, CalWORKs saw more child participants than CalFresh. Further, CalWORKs spells tended to be shorter than CalFresh spells, implying a smaller point-in-time CalWORKs caseload, all else being equal.

FIGURE 10

More children born during the Great Recession participated in CalFresh and CalWORKs through age five



SOURCE: Author calculations from the SNAP LDB and TANF LDB.

NOTES: Each bar indicates the participation for a single birth cohort of children (2005–2012 birth years), where participation occurs at any point from birth through age five. Denominator reflects estimate of number of children in each cohort who ever lived in California through age five, based on CDC, SEER, and ACS data (see [Technical Appendix B](#)).

Changes in the Economy Affect Program Participation

How does growing up in tough economic times affect participation in these programs? What can we learn about how these programs will support young children born in the present economic crisis? National research indicates that SNAP caseloads did grow during the last several recessions while TANF participation grew in response to the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s, but not during the Great Recession (Bitler and Hoynes 2015). In contrast, CalWORKs, California’s TANF program, grew during the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s and during and after the 2007–2009 Great Recession (Murphy, et al. 2019). These differences across time and programs highlight how changes in need and policymaker choices drive the responsiveness of social safety net programs.

Children born in 2008, 2009, or 2010 spent all or most of their early years in the economic reality of the Great Recession. Figure 10 illustrates the increasing share of children statewide who ever participate in one or both of these programs.

As the nation entered a deep recession in late 2007, the share of all children assisted by CalFresh did not increase systematically with a worsening economy in the year of their birth ([Technical Appendix Table C12A](#)). Instead, offsetting patterns occurred between children who participated in both CalFresh and CalWORKs in their early years and those who accessed CalFresh only ([Technical Appendix Table C12B](#)). In particular, for children born in a deteriorating economy, the likelihood that they participated in CalFresh and CalWORKs increased while the likelihood that they accessed CalFresh alone decreased. Because most families—regardless of their poverty status—have some earnings over the course of a year, and because economic downturns tend to be more severe for those with less education and experience, this is unsurprising (Bohn and Danielson 2016). These patterns suggest that CalWORKs is a vital support for children during economic downturns—children who

might need only a boost from CalFresh in good economic times require support from both programs when employment is scarce.

As the economy worsened during the last recession, African American children participated less in CalFresh alone during their first five years, and African-American and multiracial and other race children participated significantly more in both CalFresh and CalWORKs than white children. The shifts are no different for Latino as compared to white children, and are smaller for Asian American/Pacific Islander children.

In the context of the current crisis, with the statewide unemployment rate in 2020 projected to be 5.4 to 7.5 percentage points above the 2019 level (Legislative Analyst 2020b), our models project an increase statewide in program participation. We calculate a rise of roughly 9 to 13 percentage points in the share of young children born in 2020 who will likely participate in CalWORKs by age 5—an increase of 50,000 to 90,000 young children. Fewer are expected to participate in CalFresh alone by age 5, where we find small or no changes in months of assistance in CalFresh in the wake of a severe economic crisis ([Technical Appendix Tables C13A and C13B](#)). That is, more children born this year may need to combine both CalFresh and CalWORKs than would have if the economic downturn had not happened. Though CalFresh caseloads are rising in the current downturn, patterns in the past decade and a half suggest that participating children would have received support from the program at some point during their first five years even in the absence of a downturn.

For many children growing up in a recession, CalFresh and CalWORKs provide important short-term support for family resources. In particular, families add CalWORKs to CalFresh when the economy turns down. In the last recession, more African American children shifted from CalFresh alone to CalFresh and CalWORKs together than Latino and white children, suggesting either that African American children fell deeper into poverty or that take up of CalWORKs among eligible African American families is higher than for eligible families of other race/ethnicities. However, even a deep recession and slow recovery during the Great Recession did not lead to broad changes in longer-term program participation.

Concerns Remain about Equitable Access

A question for policymakers is whether program access is more difficult for children in families with mixed immigration status and limited English proficiency.³³ On the one hand, families may face difficulties getting accurate information about programs, and on the other hand, families may avoid applying to programs out of fear of reprisal from government authorities or because of a stigma associated with assistance. Children in these families then may have systematically different experiences with the programs.³⁴ We are unable to capture all aspects of this complex issue; in particular, we are unable to track children who never participate in CalFresh.

However, we begin to provide answers by flagging participant children likely to be in families with mixed-immigration status and in which adults self-identify as not fluent in written English. We again examine how experiences with CalFresh vary across racial/ethnic groups, variation that may be due to hardships children and parents face at home, work, and school. While it is common for California families to access CalFresh, CalWORKs, or both, systematic differences in access may still remain.

³³ There is no fully accurate way of determining which CalFresh participants live in mixed immigration status households. We capture roughly two thirds of mixed status households by flagging CalFresh children who are on a case with no aided adults. See [Technical Appendix Figure A1](#) and surrounding text for details.

³⁴ See McDaniel, et al. (2017) for a review of the literature on disparate treatment within programs that include TANF (the federal version of CalWORKs), as well as child care, child support, and runaway and homeless youth.

We consider two metrics to assess program disparities among children born in 2012 whose families accessed CalFresh in their early years:³⁵

- **Delayed access at birth:** Among children whose families accessed CalFresh or CalWORKs by their first birthdays, did they participate within their first three months? This measure can suggest difficulties around families completing paperwork in a timely way.
- **Administrative gaps in assistance, or “churn”:** Among children in CalFresh or CalWORKs, how many experience any short gaps in assistance? Brief gaps in assistance are commonly known as churning, typically understood to be lags due to difficulties in meeting reporting requirements.³⁶

We group children by whether they are members of a likely mixed-status family, the chosen language for written materials (English or Spanish, and far more rarely, other languages), and by race/ethnicity.

Delayed Access at Birth

Among children who participated in CalFresh before they turned one, 60 percent had aid during their first three months, but 40 percent first had assistance later.³⁷ Infants are not automatically added to CalFresh cases at birth—a social security number or proof of having filed for one is required. Therefore, families who are new to the process may take some time to submit required paperwork. While family circumstances can change suddenly during children’s early months, systematic differences in these delays suggest that some families have economic need at childbirth, but experience delayed entry to assistance.³⁸ We also consider whether the CalFresh case existed in the three months before the child’s birth. A delay in a pre-existing case could mean the family faced hurdles in adding the child immediately. In contrast, a new case implies new need, which might occur at the child’s birth. See [Technical Appendix Table C10](#) for detailed model estimates.

Among children born to a family already participating in CalFresh, 32 percent did not join the case by their third month. Delays were somewhat more common among Latino children relative to white children for CalFresh only (8%). Delays were less frequent for Asian American/Pacific Islander children (17%), but with no significant differences for children in likely mixed immigration status families, and in families where the case language preference is not English.

Fewer delays occurred among children who combine CalWORKs with CalFresh—who clearly experience deep poverty in young childhood. In other words, these families are able to navigate this aspect of program rules more quickly, although it is unclear from this analysis whether parent initiative or case worker assistance is behind the difference. Overall, delays were about 25 percent less common for children who also eventually had assistance from CalWORKs relative to those in CalFresh only through age five. Delays were similar by race/ethnicity among children with any CalWORKs participation, with the exception of African American children where delays were an additional 16 percent lower as compared to white children ever assisted by CalWORKs.

Among children born to a family that started a new CalFresh case within a year of their birth, a higher share (56%) did not participate in CalFresh by their third month. We find a moderately lower incidence of delays for children who also had CalWORKs assistance (-6%) at some point by age six, and delays are substantially

³⁵ We lack data on children who never participated in CalFresh by the time they turned six, and so are unable to address the experiences of children who are completely disconnected from both programs.

³⁶ Throughout most of this report, we report analyses that recode one-month gaps in assistance as months participating. Here, we examine brief gaps of one to three months specifically.

³⁷ As discussed above, although children born in 2012 participated earlier in CalFresh than those born in 2005, the early delays in participating in CalFresh discussed in this section have not improved markedly over time.

³⁸ To isolate how much each characteristic contributes to systematic differences, we use regression models that control for individual characteristics. The models interact CalWORKs participation with English language, adults on case, and race/ethnicity and also include county dummy variables. Including main effects only produces large, positive associations with CalWORKs and for African American children. See [Technical Appendix Table C10](#) for detailed estimates.

less frequent for African American children with some CalWORKs assistance (–18%) relative to white children with CalWORKs participation. Similarly, we find much lower delays for children in likely mixed-status families, and this is driven by differences for children in mixed-status families who eventually participate in CalWORKs (–21%). Among children in families requesting case materials in a language other than English, we find slightly higher delays for those participating in CalFresh only (6%), but slightly lower delays for those who also participated in CalWORKs (–6%).³⁹

In sum, while delays at birth are common, we find mostly evidence of fewer, or no, delays relative to children in families who may face fewer barriers to participation in CalFresh. In particular, delays are less common for children who participate at some point in CalWORKs—who clearly have at least some experience of deep poverty.

Brief Gaps in Participation

About a third of young children in CalFresh have at least one gap of one to three months in their assistance from birth through age five.⁴⁰ This suggests that it is relatively common for families to experience brief periods of ineligibility, or to miss months of assistance due to delayed submission of required materials. Some children, however, are more likely than others to experience these gaps: children with some assistance from CalWORKs more often have brief gaps in CalFresh assistance than those with CalFresh only (42%). Among children with some CalWORKs participation, those in families with mixed immigration status and in non-English cases saw fewer brief gaps relative to white children (–12% to –14%).⁴¹ Among children with CalFresh only, brief gaps are substantially more common for Latino children (20%) and slightly more so for African American children (4%) relative to white children. See [Technical Appendix Table C11](#) for detailed model results.⁴²

Relatively common delays and brief gaps suggests that children who ever access these programs may not participate for as long as need persists. Why some groups of children have delayed or interrupted access is unclear, although participating in CalWORKs with CalFresh is associated with fewer early delays, perhaps because families applying for CalWORKs face greater economic adversity than those in CalFresh only. However, ever participating in CalWORKs is also associated with more frequent, brief gaps—possibly because families encounter the more complex rules of the CalWORKs program. The relatively good news is that children in non-English and mixed immigration status families typically have fewer delays and less churning on and off assistance, suggesting this group does not face greater barriers to accessing assistance.⁴³

³⁹ These odds are similar whether or not we adjust for county differences, suggesting that case and race/ethnic differences are not driven by differences in the political, economic, and social contexts of the counties in which children live. Across models, we find evidence of greater delays associated with having an older sibling on the case among children who eventually participated in both CalFresh and CalWORKs.

⁴⁰ Comparing children born in 2005 with those born in 2012, we do not see a marked change in the share with any one- to three-month gaps.

⁴¹ The metric of one- to three-month gaps is commonly called “churning” and is a troubling outcome because it indicates both families’ loss of needed assistance and higher administrative costs for counties to reenroll them (Mills, et al. 2014). However, families may also drop off of assistance for longer periods of time—or permanently—due to procedural hurdles despite remaining eligible. It is possible that mixed status and non-English CalFresh cases are experiencing these longer gaps.

⁴² Percentages discussed in the report show model coefficients divided by the mean of the outcome. In [Technical Appendix Table C10](#), we also stratify by whether gap the occurred at a probable reporting month, as measured by being within +/-1 month of multiples of 6 months (e.g., 6, 12, 18, 24, etc., month spells). We use the child’s spell length rather than the case spell. A gap at or near a reporting month is likely due to challenges with paperwork requirements versus income volatility.

⁴³ As discussed above, we observe English proficiency and immigration status imperfectly, and one implication is that our estimates are likely biased towards zero.

Conclusion

CalFresh and CalWORKs reach about half of California children from birth through age five, reflecting the centrality of these programs in the state's safety net. The two programs are a broader social safety net by a factor of two when viewed over the course of children's young lives rather than at a point in time. For young children, episodes of severe economic need at some point are much more common than annual poverty or caseload statistics would lead us to conclude. We find that efforts to enroll more eligible Californians in recent years appear to have notably increased young CalFresh participants, which is good news.

At the same time, our review of the data indicates that program participation—and by extension, underlying economic need—is very common for African American and Latino children at some point in their first five years. Therefore, positive changes to CalFresh and CalWORKs will have an outsized impact on the lives of these two groups of children.

Our analysis provides some answers to a key question in the safety net policy debate: the extent to which programs help families recover from economic crises such as the 2020 pandemic downturn. In recent years, most families with young children do not use these programs as a long-term safety net, suggesting that CalFresh and CalWORKs buttress resources against temporary economic crisis—in other words, spells of poverty—for a large share of their target population. In fact, while more young children required the support of CalFresh and CalWORKs during the 2007–2009 recession, the time they spent on the program did not rise appreciably. Although the 2020 economic downturn is unique in its suddenness and severity, we anticipate that CalWORKs will again serve its role as a safety net for children.

At the same time, several-month delays are common for young children who access CalFresh at birth and several-month gaps are common with ongoing assistance. For CalWORKs children, delays in CalFresh participation at birth are less common, but brief gaps in assistance are more common.

It is critical to understand how much these safety net programs stabilize family incomes, the income trajectories for families before, during, and after CalFresh and CalWORKs participation, and how these aspects of the programs differ for children of varying backgrounds. We plan to take up these questions in future research.

While many decisions about CalFresh and CalWORKs are in the hands of federal policymakers, our analysis suggests that key changes could further improve access for children. For example, providing information about CalFresh at prenatal visits or in the hospital could help families access the benefit closer to the birth of a new child. The ability to add a child based on the mother's due date—or to automatically consider eligibility for a child born to a woman covered by Medi-Cal health insurance—could reduce barriers for families.

To reduce both brief gaps in assistance and delays at birth, it may help to integrate applications and verification of income across programs like Medi-Cal, CalFresh, and WIC. Given the importance of adequate resources early in life, addressing remaining hurdles to participation such as these may have a positive impact on California's young children.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to a number of colleagues both inside and outside of PPIC who provided indispensable comments and guidance on drafts of this report. They include Stephanie Barton, Jared Call, Paulette Cha, Salena Chow, Brittney Gossard, Vicki Hsieh, Shannon McConville, Frank Mecca, Tia Shimada, and Michele Ver Ploeg. Sarah Bohn gratefully acknowledges Louise and John Bryson as well for their support of the John and Louise Bryson Chair in Policy Research. This work would not be possible without data provided by the California Department of Social Services whose staff have been immensely helpful in providing feedback that refines and improves our research. Any errors of fact or interpretation are the authors' responsibility alone.

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