

Poverty in California

- **As California’s economy rebounds, the official poverty rate remains high.**

According to official poverty statistics, 16.6% of Californians lacked enough resources—about \$24,000 per year for a family of four—to meet basic needs in 2013. The rate has declined a little from 16.9% in 2012, but it is well above the recent low of 12.4% reached in 2007. Moreover, the official poverty line does not account for California’s housing costs—or other key family needs and resources.

- **When family resources and needs are more fully accounted for, poverty in California is even higher.**

The California Poverty Measure (CPM), a comprehensive new yardstick developed by PPIC and the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, accounts for the cost of living and a range of family resources—including social safety net benefits—and needs. It found that in 2012, 21.8% of Californians were living in poverty—about the same share as in 2011. Poverty was highest among children (24.9%) and lower among older adults (19.7%) and adults age 18–64 (20.9%).

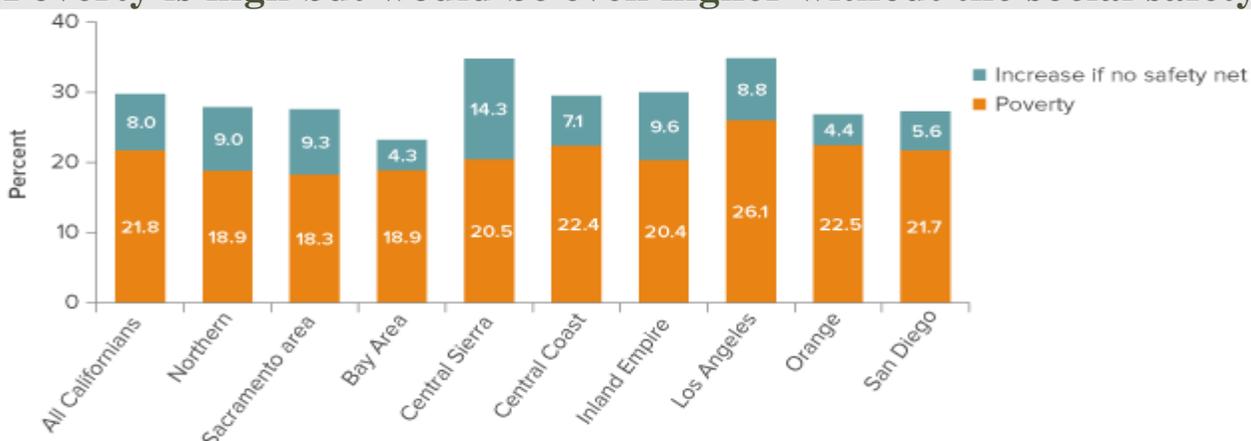
- **Overall, about 4 in 10 California residents are living in or near poverty.**

About one in five (20.1%) of Californians were not in poverty but lived fairly close to the poverty line. All told, 41.8% of state residents were poor or near poor. But the share of Californians in families with less than half the resources needed to meet basic needs was 5.9%, smaller than official poverty statistics indicate.

- **Without social safety net programs, poverty would be higher.**

The largest social safety net and low-income tax programs—CalFresh (California’s food stamp program), CalWORKs (cash assistance for families with children), the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit, Supplemental Security Income (SSI/SSP), federal housing subsidies, and free or low-cost school meals—together kept an estimated 8% of Californians out of poverty in 2012. CalFresh lowered the poverty rate most, by 2.4 percentage points, followed by the EITC (2.2 percentage points). CalWORKs, SSI/SSP, the Child Tax Credit, and housing subsidies lowered the rate 1.1 to 1.3 points. These differing effects reflect program scale and scope, as well as participation rates among eligible families. In some cases, program effects are not additive, but overlapping.

Poverty is high but would be even higher without the social safety net



SOURCE: Estimates from the 2012 California Poverty Measure.

- **Poverty rates and the effect of safety net programs vary by county and region.**

In 2012, Los Angeles County had the highest poverty rate in California: 26.1% of the county’s residents were poor. Rates in Tulare (25.2%), Monterey/San Benito (combined, 24.5%), San Francisco (24.4%), and Lake/Mendocino (combined, 24.4%) were also among the highest. Two northern California counties, Nevada and Sierra, had the lowest rates (combined, 10.9%). Safety net programs cut poverty 14.3 percentage points in the Central Sierra region, but just 4.3–4.4 percentage points in the Bay Area and Orange County.

Poverty rates vary widely across California’s counties

County	Poverty	County	Poverty	County	Poverty
Alameda	19.1%	Madera	22.6%	San Luis Obispo	16.5%
Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Inyo, Mariposa, Mono, Tuolumne	15.0	Marin	16.0	San Mateo	18.0
Butte	21.3	Merced	19.0	Santa Barbara	23.8
Colusa, Glenn, Tehama, Trinity	17.6	Monterey, San Benito	24.5	Santa Clara	18.3
Contra Costa	17.1	Napa	16.0	Santa Cruz	20.6
Del Norte, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas	19.6	Nevada, Sierra	10.9	Shasta	14.8
El Dorado	13.3	Orange	22.5	Solano	18.1
Fresno	21.0	Placer	13.2	Sonoma	18.7
Humboldt	20.7	Riverside	21.2	Stanislaus	23.5
Imperial	13.4	Sacramento	19.5	Sutter, Yuba	19.6
Kern	18.7	San Bernardino	20.6	Tulare	25.2
Kings	17.0	San Diego	21.7	Ventura	19.1
Lake, Mendocino	24.4	San Francisco	24.4	Yolo	22.5
Los Angeles	26.1	San Joaquin	19.0		

SOURCE: Estimates are from the 2012 California Poverty Measure.

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). Across counties, the precision ranges from ± 1% to ± 7%. For more detail on county poverty rates, see our [interactive map](#).

- **Minorities and less-educated Californians have higher poverty rates.**

Latinos (31.7%) and African Americans (20.8%) had much higher poverty rates than whites (13.7%) in 2012. Asians (18.4%) fell in between. More education is generally associated with lower poverty rates: the rate for adults age 25–64 with college degrees was 8.1%, compared with 39.9% for those without high school diplomas.

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

In 2012, 78.3% of poor Californians lived in families with at least one adult working, excluding families made up only of adults age 65 and older. For 54.9% of those in poverty, at least one family member reported working full time. For another 23.4%, at least one adult was working part time.

SOURCES: All estimates are based on the California Poverty Measure unless otherwise noted. Official poverty statistics are based on the 2012 American Community Survey. For more on the CPM, see Bohn et al., *The California Poverty Measure* (PPIC, 2013) and Wimer et al., *Poverty and Deep Poverty in California* (2015).