Family Income & Childhood Poverty in California

What It Is
On kidsdata.org, family income and poverty are measured against a variety of income, resource, and self-sufficiency criteria:
- Federal Poverty Threshold
- Federal Poverty Guideline
- Supplemental Poverty Measure
- California Poverty Measure
- Self-Sufficiency Standard

For each of these measures, kidsdata.org provides estimates of the share of children (or families with children) without the economic means necessary for an adequate standard of living. Depending on the data source, additional measures and breakdowns also are available.

Why This Topic Is Important
Income and well being are intricately linked. Poverty can alter children’s developmental trajectories in cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical health. The effects of poverty on child health and well being can begin during pregnancy, as low-income women are more likely to experience malnutrition and stress, and are less likely to receive adequate prenatal care. Children who face economic hardship when they are young, or who experience deep and prolonged poverty, are at greatest risk for poor outcomes. The effects of poverty and the stress associated with it can be lasting, contributing to increased risk of dropping out of school, poor adult health, and poor employment outcomes, among other adverse consequences. The impacts extend beyond individuals, too. For example, it is estimated that the total annual cost of child poverty in the U.S. is more than a trillion dollars, due in part to loss of economic productivity and increased health care costs. In addition, for every dollar spent on poverty reduction strategies, the U.S. could save an estimated $7 related to the economic costs of poverty.

How Children Are Faring
In 2018, an estimated 17% of California children lived below the federal poverty threshold ($25,465 annually for a family of two adults and two children). Across counties with data in 2018, official child poverty rates ranged from less than 4% in Marin County to more than 30% in Fresno County. In Merced and Tulare counties in 2018, more than one in eight children lived in deep poverty—i.e., on annual income lower than half the federal poverty threshold ($12,732 for two adults and two children in 2018).
The Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) accounts for expenses (e.g., state-level differences in housing costs) and resources (e.g., government safety net program benefits) not captured in the official poverty measure. According to SPM estimates, 13% of California children lived in poverty in 2020. California’s SPM child poverty rate consistently exceeds comparable U.S. figures. More than one in five African American/black and Hispanic/Latino children in California lived below their SPM threshold in 2018-2020, compared with fewer than one in twelve of their white and multiracial peers.

The California Poverty Measure (CPM) builds on the SPM by adjusting for California-specific safety net policies and for regional variation in the cost of living within the state. CPM data from 2017-2019 show that 19% of children statewide lived in poverty and 4% lived in deep poverty. In the absence of social safety net programs, it is estimated that the child poverty rate would have been 13 percentage points higher and the deep poverty rate 10 percentage points higher during this period. CPM child poverty rates vary widely across counties, from 10% in Placer County to 24% in Orange County, among regions with data in 2017-2019. Overall, children whose parents are single, non-U.S. citizens, or who did not finish high school tend to experience higher rates of CPM poverty and deep poverty than children in families with married parents, U.S. citizens, and higher levels of educational attainment.

The Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS) represents the estimated income a family needs to adequately meet its basic needs without public or private assistance. Across California counties, the SSS for a family of two adults and two school-aged children in 2018 ranged from $52,566 (Modoc) to $114,215 (Marin) annually. In 2016, nearly half (48%) of all families with children statewide lived on incomes below their SSS.

View references for this text and additional research on this topic: https://www.kidsdata.org/topic/38/family-income-and-poverty/summary