Unemployment in California

What It Is
On kidsdata.org, estimates of children under age 18 living in families without secure parental employment (in which no resident parent worked 35 hours or more per week for at least 50 weeks in the previous 12 months) are available for the U.S., California, and counties and county groups as single-year estimates, and for regions of 10,000+ residents and legislative districts as five-year estimates.

Kidsdata.org also provides estimates of unemployed persons in the labor force ages 16 and older. Unemployment numbers and rates reflect persons who are not employed, are available to work, and have looked for work in the previous four weeks.

Why This Topic Is Important
Unemployment and underemployment can lead to financial and family instability. In addition to limiting parents’ ability to meet their families’ basic needs, financial stress can affect their ability to provide for their children emotionally. Research has linked parental unemployment to short- and long-term mental health problems in children, as well as negative academic and employment outcomes later in life.

Unemployment also can cause families to fall below the poverty level. Children who experience economic hardship when they are young, particularly hardship that is extreme or prolonged, are at increased risk for adverse health and developmental outcomes. Stable parental employment (with adequate pay and benefits) can counteract this hardship and help ensure that children’s basic needs are met and that they have safe, stable family environments in which to thrive.

Recent unemployment crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Great Recession, hit certain families particularly hard, including parents of color, women, immigrants, less-educated parents, and lower-income families. Leaders can address the systemic issues behind these inequities, as well as support programs and policies to meet the needs of these vulnerable families.

How Children Are Faring
In 2018, an estimated 28% of California children living in families had no parent with full-time, year-round employment in the previous 12 months, compared with 26% of children nationwide. At the local level, the percentage of children without secure parental employment ranged from less than 10% to more than 50% across cities, school districts, and counties with at least 10,000 residents in
Unemployment Rate

Definition: Estimated percentage of persons in the labor force who are not working but are available to work and have looked for work in the previous four weeks (e.g., in 2020, the unemployment rate in California was 10.1%).


California and U.S. unemployment rates, after reaching twenty-year lows in 2019 (4.2% and 3.7%, respectively), more than doubled in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. An estimated 1.9 million California workers (10.1%) were unemployed in 2020, with rates across counties ranging from 7% to more than 20%.

View references for this text and additional research on this topic: https://www.kidsdata.org/topic/43/unemployment/summary