

A District by District Look at Poverty in California

California and its residents have experienced eight years of hardship and tough decisions. But while the economy and our state are finally in recovery, many Californians continue to live in deep poverty.

The combination of 1) severe cuts to our safety net, 2) many years of high unemployment, 3) a labor market that has yet to recover for many of our low-skilled workers, 4) a post-secondary education system that is increasingly unaffordable, and 5) wages for low-wage workers that are inadequate to meet the costs of living in California has resulted in growing inequity and on-going suffering.

Since 2006 the incidence of poverty in California has been steadily increasing. Using data from the Official Poverty Measure (the more conservative of the poverty measures), poverty for the total population of California has increased from 13% in 2006 to 17% in 2012. During that same time period, the poverty rate for California children increased from 18% to 24%.

We can do better.

The Women's Foundation of California in partnership with the California State Database is releasing Senate and Assembly District-specific data to aid senators, assemblymembers and their staff in policy-level decisions related to reducing poverty. With this data we aim to shed light on poverty in California and we hope to inspire joint and decisive action needed to reverse the trend and reduce poverty.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Official Poverty Measure (OPM), 15% of the total population of California and 21% of our children are living in poverty. The OPM is based on a 1965 formula that uses three times the cost of food as the measure of poverty. However, this measure is particularly inadequate in areas where the costs of living are high (particularly for housing). In 2010 the U.S. Census Bureau developed an alternative measure for poverty called the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). When calculating poverty, SPM considers not only the cost of living expenditures (food, clothing, housing, transportation), but also government benefits, such as CalWORKs and CalFresh.

In California the difference between the two measures is particularly great. When poverty rates are calculated using the more relevant and accurate SPM, the poverty data for our state is appalling: 23.8% of Californians and 26.6% of California children are living in poverty according to the SPM.

State-Wide Trends

Because the mapping for this project was done using American Community Survey data that relies on the OPM, poverty in California is underestimated. Nevertheless, the patterns revealed in these calculations tell the same story. Californians who are single mothers heads of households; African American or Latino/a; and/or have a high-school degree or less are disproportionately poor. In addition, families with children are more likely to live in poverty.

- Latinos represent 38% of our state population, but constitute 54% of those living in poverty.
- As a group women are more likely to live in poverty; 54% compared to 46% of men.

- Households headed by single women reveal the greatest proportional gap. They comprise 13% of all families, yet represent 39% of the households living in poverty.

Research has consistently established the correlation between educational attainment and income. This correlation continues to hold true in California today. Of California households, 36% have a high school degree or less. These households comprise the vast majority of the California households living in poverty: 66%.

District Trends

Not surprisingly, the rate of poverty varies significantly from one district to another. The highest incidence of poverty is in legislative districts in the Central Valley, the Inland Empire and parts of urban Los Angeles. For example, in Senate District 14 (which includes Modesto, Clovis, parts of Fresno) 59% of the families headed by mothers are living in poverty.

Implications

Policy makers can—and have the responsibility to—impact these poverty patterns and trends in California. Indeed, if they do not intervene with intentional policy solutions, California will not thrive and the inequities will continue to grow. But, it is important that policy makers consider a comprehensive plan and not single policy fixes.

We must not only rebuild our safety net so that it is there when families and individuals are in crisis and need help moving out of poverty. We also need to build a tax structure that is equitable, improve access to higher education for middle class and poor students and raise wages for low wage workers. This comprehensive plan is a multi-year effort, but one that we must begin this year.

Methodology

The data in the District Maps and District Data Tables comes from poverty estimates released by the American Community Survey (ACS), which, in turn, are based on the OMB in Statistical Policy Directive 14. Poverty is determined by dollar value thresholds that vary by size of family, number of related children, and, for one- and two-person families, age of householder.

District Maps: The poverty data displayed on the 80 Assembly maps and 40 Senate district maps is the percent of female householder families with related children under 18 years of age, with no husband present living in poverty. The percent is calculated over total families, including families with and without related minor children.

District Data Tables: The district data sheets contain a breakdown of poverty data for families and individuals from American Community Survey 2008–2012 for the State of California and its 80 Assembly districts and 40 Senate districts. The total population in the tables is for the population for whom the Census Bureau determines poverty and therefore is less than the estimated actual total population. For instance, the 2008–2012 estimated total population is 37,325,068 while the 2008–2012 estimated population for whom poverty was determined is 36,575,460 as it does not include institutionalized people, people in military group quarters, people in college dormitories, and unrelated individuals under 15 years old. (*The full description of the data and the methodology are available upon request.*)