

# The Economics of Child Abuse

## A Study of California

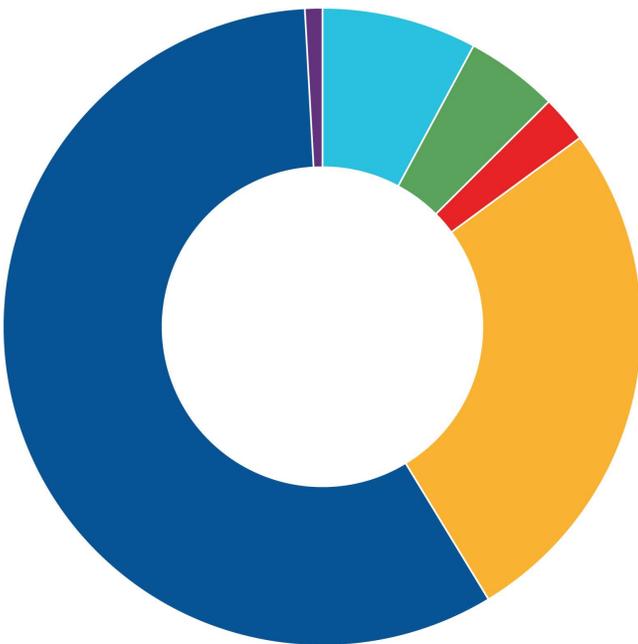
A Report by Safe & Sound  
April 2024

Child and family well-being—safety, physical and mental health, social connections, and financial stability—is essential for thriving communities. Child trauma, abuse and neglect will continue to exact a high cost on California's children and communities without the necessary investments to build individual and community [Protective Factors](#), resiliency, and parent and caregiver capacity. Child abuse and neglect can lower rates of educational attainment, negatively impact mental and physical health, and drive costly and destructive incarceration.

In this report, Safe & Sound delves into the 2023 economic costs associated with child abuse and neglect across California. While our report shines a light on the billions of dollars lost to child abuse and neglect, we also show the very real investments that could be made in approaches we know create child and family well-being, and prevent child trauma, abuse and neglect. It is time for policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels to invest in the proactive support children and families need to safely stay together and thrive.

## The Financial Impact of Child Abuse: \$16.5 Billion

This is the cumulative financial impact to California for the **47,963 substantiated survivors** of child abuse and neglect and **86 related fatalities** in 2023. Though these costs are accrued over the course of the victim's life, the ripple effect of costs to the community and society—both tangible and intangible—will continue until we begin to make the necessary preventive investments in child and family well-being to reduce and ultimately end child abuse and neglect.



### CHILD WELFARE - \$1,297,690,459

Victims may require intervention services, foster care, and counseling services.

### EDUCATION - \$775,694,336

Abused and neglected children are 77% more likely to require special education.

### CRIMINAL JUSTICE - \$393,585,803

Children who have experienced abuse or neglect are 59% more likely to be arrested as juveniles, and 28% more likely to have an adult criminal record.

### HEALTHCARE - \$4,369,488,698

Victims may require hospital care, mental health services, and other medical services during childhood, and have a higher incidence of physical and mental health issues throughout adulthood.

### LIFETIME PRODUCTIVITY - \$9,567,614,171

Victims' lifetime earnings are reduced as a result of lower educational attainment, higher medical needs, and increased involvement with the justice system.

### FATALITIES - \$146,204,534

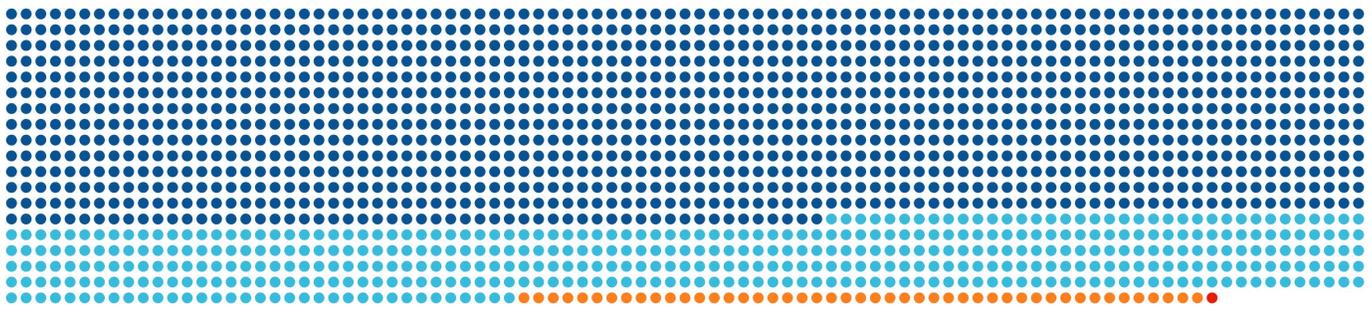
Accounts for the victims' lost wages and healthcare costs.

\* References available upon request.



Read the full report

<https://economics.safeandsound.org>



● One Dot = 1000 Children

**1,265,843**

**Estimated Survivors**, based on national estimates of child abuse prevalence

**444,755**

**Reported Survivors**, or 0.85 every minute

**47,963**

**Substantiated Survivors**, or 141 children each day

**86**

**Fatalities** from child abuse and neglect

## California's Community Protective Factors

Strong communities are essential to the well-being and safety of children and families. Every community has Protective Factors, or characteristics that are proven to help lower rates of child abuse and neglect. Ongoing research from the Center for the Study of Social Policy suggests that the following Community Conditions nurture strong families:

### Equitable Access to Essential Needs

This includes policies and programs that support equitable access to economic opportunities, family-friendly employment, health care, housing, high-quality childcare, education, and food security. Economic support and high-quality and affordable childcare are two essential needs that have been shown through research to reduce abuse and neglect.

### Social Support and Connection

This means an acknowledgement across community members that parenting is hard and all caregivers can benefit from community support. Cohesive neighborhoods and community institutions like schools, churches, community centers, and family resource centers contribute to building these social connections and reducing abuse and neglect.

### Social Contract

This represents a collective understanding about what support can be provided by institutions, and what support must come from friends, family, and neighbors. Strong communities promote positive social norms about parenting and provide well-functioning response systems to prevent further harm when abuse and neglect occurs.

### Racial and Social Justice

This means fostering an anti-racist and equitable social structure. Institutional racism and systemic oppression over generations have prevented many families of color from accessing the other social and economic factors listed here. Initiatives that promote racial equity are critical to promoting Community Protective Factors and mitigating Community Risk Factors.

### Support for Building Individual Protective Factors

In addition to the community conditions listed above, it is important that parents and caregivers have access to resources that will help them strengthen their individual protective factors, including parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and the social and emotional competence of children.

## California's Community Risk Factors

A variety of factors place children and their families at greater risk for abuse and neglect. Below are Risk Factors that are endemic to California communities, as well as communities across the country. Many of these factors were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, and communities continue to feel an ongoing impact to their well-being.

### Disproportionate Impact of Race & Ethnicity

Families of color are overrepresented in the child welfare system. Causes of racial disproportionality include institutional and structural racism on parents of color, implicit bias in the child welfare system and society in general, economic inequality, and the disproportionate involvement of child welfare and law enforcement in the lives of families of color.

### Socioeconomic Inequality & Poverty

Pandemics typically raise income inequality. Research has shown that the economic hardship triggered by the pandemic has disproportionately impacted people of color.

### Lack of Adequate & Affordable Housing

While California's eviction moratorium has prevented mass homelessness, the pandemic has increased the number of housing-burdened families.

### High Unemployment Rates

As of February 2024, California has the highest unemployment rate in the country at 5.3%, up from 5.2% in January and 4.5% in 2022. In December 2023, California had 18,373,900 employed people, which is a 32,700 person decrease from November, and 983,000 unemployed people, which is a 29,200 person increase from the previous month. High levels of unemployment increase economic uncertainty and stress for families.

### Homelessness

Homelessness is a major driver of temporary family separation, not only increasing family stress but also the number of caregivers in a child's life, which places the child at greater risk for abuse and neglect.

### Community Violence

Across the state, families exposed to a culture of violence often experience trauma, stress, and fear, all of which increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.

### Substance Abuse

Families with problematic alcohol or drug use often experience trauma, stress, and fear.

### Social Isolation & Marginalization

Social isolation and loneliness are important risk factors for child abuse. The COVID pandemic and subsequent social distancing measures have led to a population-wide increase in social isolation.

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