

The Economics of Child Abuse

A Report by Safe & Sound

April 2026

A Study of California

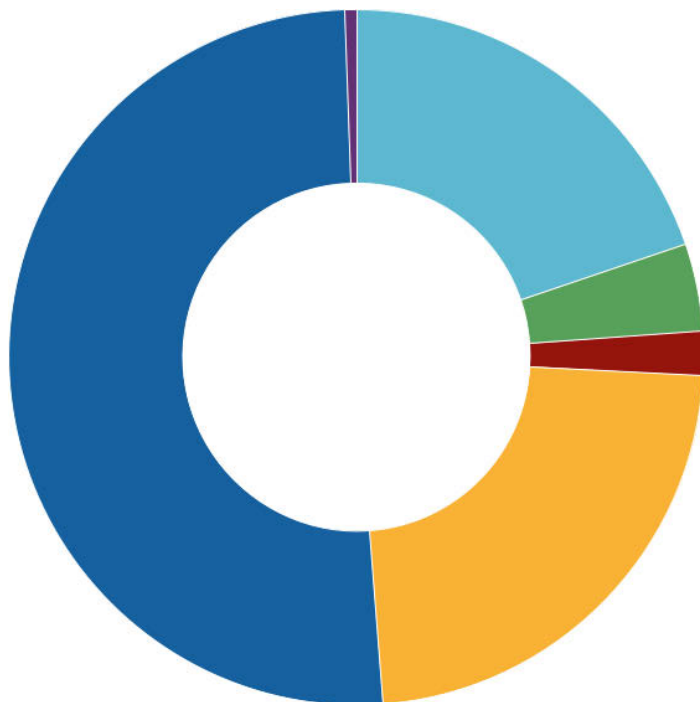
Child abuse and neglect is preventable, but costly and traumatic when it happens.

Communities play a critical role in strengthening families and protecting children, as well as creating circumstances that make them vulnerable. Although child abuse and neglect impacts every community in California, every community can join together to provide families with the resources and supports they need to thrive and to develop the policies and practices that prioritize prevention.

In this report, Safe & Sound delves into the 2025 economic costs associated with child abuse and neglect in California. Our report makes clear - the cost of a system that focuses on intervention instead of prevention is too high for both the families impacted by child abuse and neglect and for all Californians. Upstream investments in prevention have the potential to pay huge dividends to individuals, families, and wider society. 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 Impacts of Child Abuse

The cumulative financial impact to California for the **45,976** verified survivors of abuse and neglect and **106** abuse and neglect fatalities in 2025 is **\$18,302,300,000**. 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 - \$3,602,033,490

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

EDUCATION - \$744,332,490

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

CRIMINAL JUSTICE - \$379,895,340

Abused and neglected children are 59 percent more likely to be arrested as juveniles, and 28 percent more likely to have an adult criminal record.

HEALTHCARE - \$4,190,407,980

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 - \$9,256,015,560

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

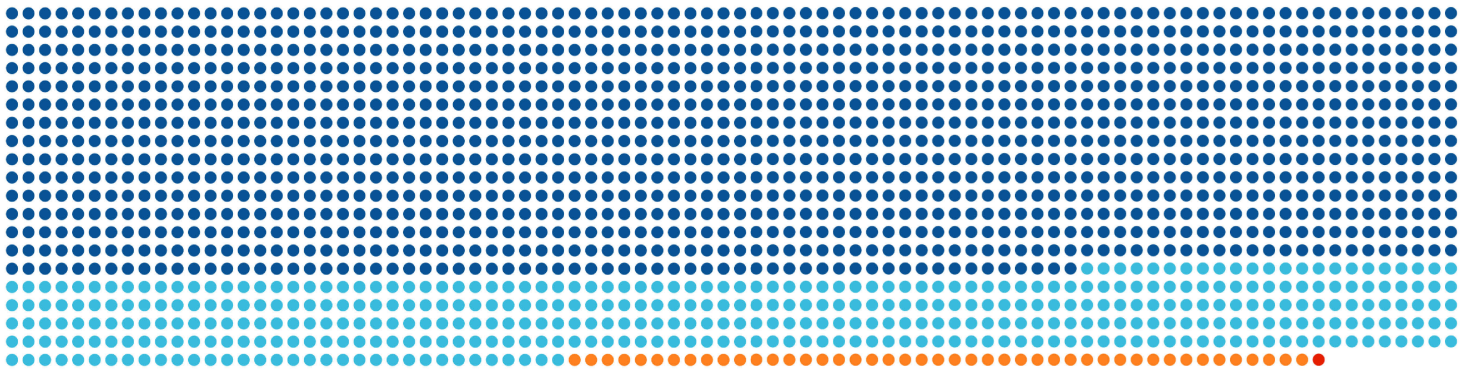
FATALITY - \$1,659,116

Accounts for the victims' lost wages and healthcare costs.

We thank the UC Berkeley Haas School of Business for the underlying calculations, Stacy Cook-LaPointe, MS, Ed.D Candidate University of Colorado Denver for current analysis, and the Hellman Foundation for funding this year's report built on funding from Blue Shield of California Foundation, California Department of Social Services—Office of Child Abuse Prevention, Casey Family Programs, County Welfare Directors Association of California, S.H.Cowell Foundation, The Golden Door Foundation, The HAND Foundation, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and Zellerbach Family Foundation. To learn more, please visit economics.safeandsound.org.



One Dot = 1000 Children



1,297,108

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

409,401

Reported Survivors, or 0.78 every minute.

45,976

Substantiated Survivors, or 125 children each day.

106

Fatalities from child abuse and neglect.

California's Community Conditions

Community Conditions, also known as Community Protective Factors, form the backbone of a prevention strategy. 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

[Poverty](#) is one of the highest predictors for child welfare involvement, particularly neglect. A community's ability to [reduce barriers](#) and increase access to housing, healthcare, food security, legal support, education, [livable wage employment](#), and high-quality child care dramatically prevents neglect.

Social Support and Connection

Cohesive and connected communities provide a foundation of support for families. Community institutions like schools, churches, community centers, and [family resource centers](#) are an essential basis for social support. If these institutions are effective and accessible to all, they contribute to forming critical parent and [family social connections](#), which prevent child abuse and neglect. Moreover, those communities that normalize help-seeking, acknowledge parenting is hard, and are willing to address the stigma of child abuse and neglect create conditions that prevent child abuse and neglect.

Social Contract

Policies driven by community necessity and collaborative partnerships provide a solid foundation for strengthening families. A functioning social contract promotes [positive social norms](#) about parenting and advances restorative justice practices. Strong communities also have well-functioning response systems so that when abuse and neglect do occur, appropriate intervention programs, like [Safe Care](#), can help prevent further harm.

Racial and Social Justice

Communities engaged in addressing the policies and practices that contribute to racial and social injustice [provide a roadmap](#) to improving outcomes for children and families. Increasing access and addressing bias throughout the system promotes racial equity.

Racial disproportionality in the child welfare system stems from multiple, complex factors. Not only has structural racism resulted in economic inequality, discrimination, and lack of access to supportive resources for Black, Native American, and Latino communities, but these communities are also subject to implicit and explicit biases, [resulting in higher rates of reporting abuse and neglect](#) as well as increased rates of child welfare intervention. Initiatives that promote racial equity are critical in their own right and promote the other Community Protective Factors listed here.

Support for Building Individual Protective Factors

In addition to community conditions that directly support children and families, parents and caregivers must have access to resources that will help them strengthen their [individual protective factors](#). These include parental resilience, social connections, parenting and child development knowledge, concrete support in times of need, and children's social and emotional competence. Research shows that [concrete financial](#) support reduces neglect and increases a family's access to vital basic needs.

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California's Risk Factors

We need to invest in building robust and connected Community Conditions because there co-exists a variety of factors that place children and their families at greater risk for abuse and neglect. Some of these factors that are endemic to California communities are:

Disproportionate Impact of Race & Ethnicity

[Institutional racism and systemic oppression](#) over generations have disproportionately impacted families of color, significantly contributing to the inequity of child abuse and neglect rates along racial and ethnic lines in California. Rates of substantiation are significantly higher among Black and Native American children than White and Asian children. Rates of substantiation among Latinx families are also somewhat higher than their population percentage.

Racial disproportionality in the child welfare system is integrally linked to [institutional and structural racism](#). Structural racism has resulted in higher levels of poverty, discrimination, and lack of access to supportive resources for Black, Native American, and Latino communities as well as implicit and explicit biases, [resulting in disproportionate](#) involvement of child welfare and law enforcement in the lives of families of color. Thus, initiatives that promote racial equity are critical and promote the other Community Protective Factors listed here.

Socioeconomic Inequality & Poverty

Poverty does not impact everyone equally. It is more prevalent if you are young, old, disabled, and/or a non-white ethnicity. And while California is a state endowed with great wealth, 19.2% of its children live in poverty. California's relatively high median income of \$89,300 can hide the fact that 20% of families earn less than \$18,170 per year. The relationship between poverty and increased stressors accelerates the underlying factors of child maltreatment.

High Unemployment Rates

Evidence shows a dramatic increase in neglect and abuse when there is [parental unemployment](#). When a parent experiences unemployment, children in the home have up to an 82% increased risk of maltreatment.

Lack of Adequate & Affordable Housing

With housing costs in California double the national average, Californians spend a disproportionate amount of their income on [housing](#). California lost over 20,000 affordable rental units from 1997-2021—most of which were owned by for-profit entities.

Homelessness

Homelessness is a major driver of temporary family separation, increasing family stress and the number of caregivers in a child's life. The [US Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) conducted a count of homeless families in 2024 and found that more than 16,000 family members were homeless in shelters around the state. Among U.S. States, California has the second highest number of people in families experiencing homelessness, second only to New York State.

Compared to other states where family homelessness is a challenge, homeless families in California are more likely to be unsheltered - that is, on the street, in cars or abandoned buildings, or in other places not suitable for human habitation. In 2024, five out of the top ten cities with the highest percentages of homelessness [were in California](#).

Community Violence

Families exposed to a culture of violence often experience trauma, strain, and fear, all of which can increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. And while [California has seen a significant drop in its violent crime rate](#) - in many large cities, murders are now at or near record lows - community violence remains a significant risk factor. [In 2022, nearly 7,000 violent deaths](#) occurred in California, with 51% involving firearms (1,673 suicides and 1,647 homicides). Firearms made up 73% of homicides and 39% of suicides in 2021.

Non-fatal firearm assaults are more common than deaths, leading to over 30,000 hospitalizations and 160,000 emergency visits in 2022. Gun violence has wide-ranging effects on public health, causing injury, disability, trauma, and economic instability, particularly in communities of color, where poverty and inequities are worsened.

Substance Use

Families with problematic alcohol or drug use often experience trauma, strain, and fear. [Multiple studies](#) indicate there is an increased risk of child maltreatment when parents use opioids, which is similar to other substance abuse. A critical difference with opioid abuse is the length of time in the child protective services system. Close to [six thousand people](#) have died by opioid overdose in California.

Social Isolation & New Parents

Research indicates that [social isolation](#) increases child maltreatment. This increase relates to a mother's feelings of isolation and distress. Researchers also found in longitudinal studies that [social isolation and child maltreatment](#) increased midlife cognitive malfunction.

Another significant factor impacting feelings of isolation is the age of the child. Infancy and toddlerhood bring specific stressors into a family's life. A [survey conducted](#) in California in 2024 found that 67% of parents with very young children experienced emotional distress, including stress, anxiety, and depression.

