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## California Poverty Level Falls Short Of Basic Needs


**CALIFORNIA WATCH**

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[Joanna Lin](#) Posted: 10/4/11 12:13 PM ETReact  
>Story courtesy of [California Watch](#)By [Joanna Lin](#)

A family of four in California would need an average of more than \$63,000 a year – nearly triple the federal poverty level – to cover its basic needs, according to an analysis of the state's cost of living to be released today.

The 2011 Self-Sufficiency Standard, released by the [Insight Center for Community Economic Development](#), a national research organization, shows that in every county in California, the federal poverty level falls short of meeting basic needs: housing, food, child care, health care, transportation and other essential household expenses.

Taking all these costs into consideration, the standard calculates the minimum annual income required for 156 family compositions in each county. The pre-tax income needed to make ends meet for a family of two working, married adults; a preschooler; and a primary school-aged child ranged from \$53,775 in Tulare County to \$86,629 in Marin County. For a family of four, the 2011 [federal poverty level](#), which is based on the cost of food alone and does not take into account regional cost-of-living differences in the contiguous United States, is \$22,350.

"The federal poverty guidelines miss this whole population of individuals and families who are struggling to make ends meet," said Jenny Chung Mejia, an attorney and program manager for the center. "Essentially, what happens is they earn too much to qualify but yet don't have enough to make ends meet; they fall in this sort of policy-benefits gap."

Many people and entities, including policymakers, public agencies, philanthropic organizations, advocates and service

providers, use the Self-Sufficiency Standard as a benchmarking tool to gauge the needs of their communities.

In affluent counties, needs often go unrecognized, Chung Mejia said.

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"The public has this perception that if you live in Marin County, for example, you're not going to be poor," she said.

While figures from the U.S. Census Bureau show 9.1 percent of the population in Marin County lives below the poverty level, the county's median household income – \$83,867 – is lower than its Self-Sufficiency Standard.

Even in counties where median income exceeds the Self-Sufficiency Standard, advocates say the cost of basic needs can be striking.

In Santa Clara County, for example, the median household income, \$85,002, is just slightly higher than the Self-Sufficiency Standard for a family of two adults, a preschooler and a school-aged child. According to the standard, the cost of food for such a family – \$852 a month, based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's low-cost food plan – eats up more than 12 percent of household income.

More than 91,500 students in the county are eligible for free or reduced-price meals at school. But to qualify for the programs, a student's household income must be at or less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level – or \$41,347.50 for a family of four.

"There's this huge gap," said Dana Bunnett, director of Kids in Common, a program of Planned Parenthood Mar Monte that advocates for children in Santa Clara County. "We really have needs for families that go beyond those federal guidelines."

Although the Self-Sufficiency Standard accounts for more basic costs than the federal poverty level does, it misses others that many Californians would consider essential – including cell phone and Internet service.

"That just makes it all the more crazy," Chung Mejia said. "We're just putting forth a very, very modest budget."

*Joanna Lin* is an investigative reporter for California Watch, a project of the non-profit Center for Investigative reporting. Find more [California Watch](#) stories here.

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