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JUNE 2018

Strengthening Public Systems and Supports in California to Help Women Make Ends Meet

Women are more likely than men to live in poverty in California. This is true for women at all stages of life, but especially during the period when women are often expanding their families and again late in life (Figure 1). Women's economic hardship is a result of interconnected factors including gender- and race-based discrimination and weak public systems and supports. Moreover, the persistence of race-based discrimination means that some women face greater challenges in achieving economic security.¹ In particular, in California a greater share of black, Latinx, and Native American women live in poverty, cannot afford enough food, and struggle to pay for housing, as compared to Asian and white women (Figure 2).

This means that women are more likely than men to rely on public systems and supports – such as food assistance, health care coverage, and subsidized early care and education – to afford the basics for themselves and their children. Economic insecurity threatens women's health and well-being, with potential long-term consequences for them and their children. State and local policymakers should take steps to strengthen California's public systems and supports by encouraging and facilitating participation in programs that help families make ends meet, reinvesting in key supports that were cut during and after the Great Recession, and boosting access to safe and affordable housing for women and their families.

KEY POLICIES

Policies to encourage and facilitate participation in public systems and supports include the following:

- State policymakers can **further integrate enrollment systems** for public systems and supports so that women and their families can easily access the full array of benefits and services for which they qualify. Streamlining enrollment could boost participation in a variety of programs.²
- Local jurisdictions can **increase multicultural and multilingual outreach** to women and families with low incomes in order to boost enrollment in safety-net programs, such as CalFresh; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and free- and reduced-price school lunch programs; as well as increasing the number of workers claiming the CalEITC.

Policies to reinvest in services cut during and after the Great Recession include the following:

- The state can **increase CalWORKs grants and reinstate the state cost-of-living adjustment (COLA)** to ensure that women and their children currently receiving assistance are not living in deep poverty. The state can also **boost SSI/SSP grants and reinstate the state COLA** to ensure that older women receiving benefits are not living in poverty.

Policies to increase access to safe and affordable housing include the following:

- State policymakers can **increase the supply of affordable housing units** by providing state funding for affordable housing development through grants or the Low Income Housing Tax Credit, and requiring streamlining of the permitting and approval process for housing developments that include affordable units.
- State policymakers can follow the lead of 11 other states in **strengthening California's anti-discrimination laws** by specifying in state law that federal Housing Choice Vouchers are considered a source of tenant income.³ California law prohibits discrimination based on source of income, so with this change, it would be illegal for property owners to discriminate against families who use a voucher to pay for their rental home.
- State and/or local leaders can **bolster tenant protections**, such as by requiring property owners to provide a reason for an eviction (a "just cause" eviction). In addition, state policymakers can **enhance current law on nuisance evictions**, which affect many families but can be particularly harmful for women and low-income communities of color, who must be able to call the police when they are in danger without fear of eviction.
- Finally, communities can follow the lead of Los Angeles County, New York City, and other jurisdictions in **investing in legal services for families with low incomes who face evictions**. Providing legal assistance for individuals facing eviction has been found to reduce the chance that they will be evicted from their home.⁴

FIGURE 1 Percentage of Women and Men Living Below the Official Poverty Line in California, 2016

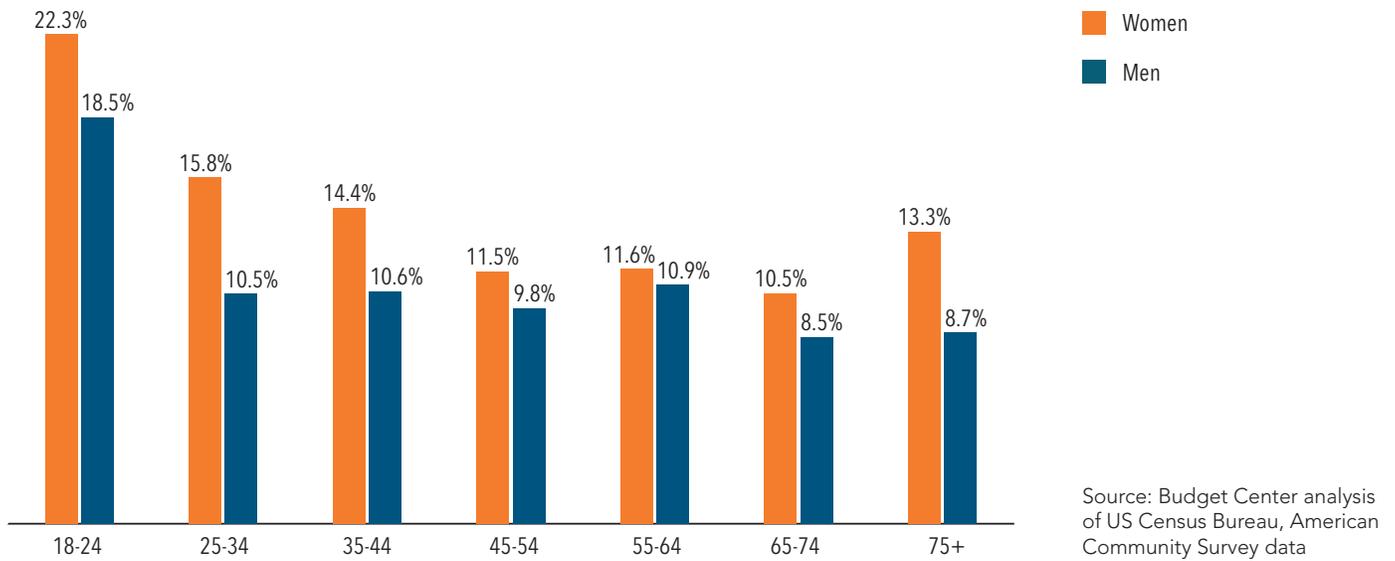
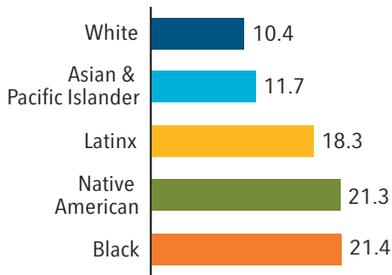
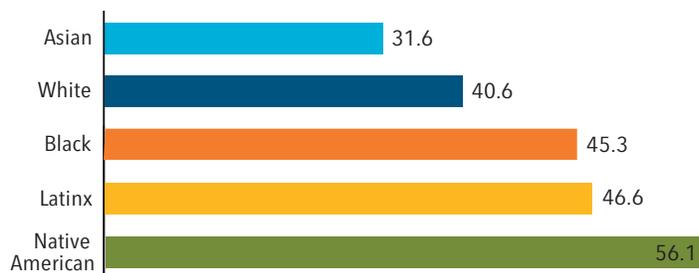


FIGURE 2 Percentage of Women Age 18 and Over Living in Poverty, 2016



Percentage of Low- and Moderate-Income Women Age 18 and Over Who Are Food Insecure, 2014-2016



Percentage of Women in Households That Spend More Than 30% of Their Income on Housing, 2016



Source: Budget Center analysis of data from the US Census Bureau, American Community Survey and University of California, Los Angeles, California Health Interview Survey

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jasmine Tucker, Brandie Temple, and Julie Vogtman, *Cutting Programs for Low-Income People Especially Hurts Women and Their Families* (National Women's Law Center: March 2017).
- ² For more detail see Sonal Ambegaokar, Zoë Neuberger, and Dorothy Rosenbaum, *Opportunities to Streamline Enrollment Across Public Benefits Programs* (Social Interest Solutions and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: November 2017).
- ³ Temple University, Center for Public Health Law Research, *The Policy Surveillance Program: A Law Atlas Project* at <http://lawatlas.org/datasets/state-fair-housing-protections-1498143743>.
- ⁴ D. James Greiner, Cassandra Wolos Pattanayak, and Jonathan Hennessy, "The Limits of Legal Assistance: A Randomized Study in a Massachusetts District Court and Prospects for the Future," *Harvard Law Review* (February 2013), pp. 901-989.

Additional analyses focusing on Work Supports, Boosting Income, and Building Wealth can be found at <http://calbudgetcenter.org/womens-well-being>. We are thankful to a number of individuals who provided comments on policies to boost women's economic security, employment, and earnings in California. A full list can be found at <http://calbudgetcenter.org/womens-well-being/>