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## Families with Young Children in California: Findings from the California Health Interview Survey, 2011-2014, by Geography and Home Language

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*“Although half of young families in California are poor, the majority are two-parent families who view their communities positively.”*

**SUMMARY:** Using data from the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) for the years 2011-2014, this report presents findings on families with children ages 0-5 years. It breaks down differences between urban, suburban, and rural families, and it highlights the characteristics of families who speak a language other than English in the home. As more than half of families with young children in California speak a language other than English in the

home, the characteristics of dual language households are highlighted. In 1998, California passed the California Children and Families Act to improve development for children from the prenatal stage to five years of age. One goal of this ongoing commitment is to expand our understanding of the social and physical environments that can impact a child's well-being and school readiness.

The first five years of a child's life are a critical period of development. Often, this is also a time when the child's parents are in the beginning stages of their careers and face the competing demands of working and caring for young children. This report presents data that reflect the characteristics and challenges facing families of young children in California.

Specifically, data are presented on family structure, parental education, household income, public program participation, race/ethnicity, immigration status, and language(s) spoken in the home. Neighborhood characteristics are also shown, including the breakdown of urban, suburban, and rural residents; perceived neighborhood safety and cohesion; and civic engagement.

The data source for this report, the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS),

is particularly interested in whether people perceive their neighbors to be a positive presence in their lives. Research has shown that the social capital gained from living in cohesive communities can buffer the effect of socioeconomic deprivation on health.<sup>1</sup> Using validated measures, CHIS has fielded questions on perceived neighborhood safety and cohesion since 2003. In CHIS 2011-2014, respondents were asked how often they felt safe in their neighborhood and whether they agreed that their neighbors helped one another, could be trusted, and watched out to make sure neighborhood children did not get into trouble. Civic engagement during the past 12 months was measured by asking respondents whether they had performed any volunteer or unpaid community service, had volunteered for an organization that addressed community problems, or had met informally with others to address community problems.



“Nearly half of California families with young children are low income.”

### **Families with Young Children in California: Characteristics and Demographics**

Parents and legal guardians surveyed for this report (hereafter referred to as “parents”) spanned a wide range of ages (Exhibit 1), from 18 to 78 years, with a mean of 34.5 years. Approximately 92 percent of respondents were under age 45. Over half of the respondents were women, at 55.8 percent, with men representing 44.2 percent of the respondents.

#### ***Family Structure and Parental Education***

The majority of parents of young children were married (71.8 percent) or living in a marriage-like relationship (13.4 percent). Nine percent of the parents were single and had never been married, and about 6 percent were separated, divorced, or widowed. Family size ranged from 2 to 12, with 4 being the average family size across all demographic groups.

Sixty percent of respondents had more than a high school education. More than one-third (37.7 percent) had a bachelor’s degree or higher, and an additional 22.2 percent had completed some college. Twenty-one percent had a high school diploma or GED only. Almost 20 percent had less than 12 years of education.

#### ***Income and Public Program Participation***

Forty percent of children lived in households with an annual income at or above 300 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), and 13.3 percent were in the 200-299 percent category. Twenty-two percent had household incomes that were 100-199 percent FPL, and 24.7 percent had incomes below 100 percent FPL. This means that close to half of the families with young children had incomes below 200 percent FPL, which is the income eligibility cutoff for many public programs. Among parent respondents with household incomes below 200 percent FPL, 46.6 percent reported that they were enrolled in Medi-Cal—California’s version of Medicaid—and 37.8 percent received food stamp benefits, known as Cal-Fresh. Among female

respondents whose incomes were below 200 percent FPL, 67.1 percent participated in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).<sup>2</sup>

#### ***Race/Ethnicity, Immigration Status, and Languages Spoken in the Home***

Close to half of those surveyed for this report were Hispanic (47.1 percent), followed by Whites (32.9 percent), Asians (13.3 percent), African-Americans (4.3 percent), and other races (2.3 percent). More than half (56.3 percent) of the interviewed parents had been born in the United States, and an additional 15.9 percent were naturalized citizens. Thirteen percent were legal permanent residents with a green card, and 14.4 percent were neither citizens nor permanent residents. Forty-two percent of households spoke only English in the home, about 40 percent spoke English and another language, and 20.3 percent did not speak English in the home. Children in the latter two groups were dual language learners (DLLs), a group that is explored in detail below.

#### ***Area of Residence, Neighborhood Safety and Cohesion, and Civic Involvement***

Three-quarters of the families in the survey were urban residents, 14.5 percent lived in the suburbs, and about 10 percent lived in rural areas. Eighty percent of parent respondents felt safe in their neighborhood all or most of the time, and the same percentage agreed or strongly agreed that their neighbors helped one another. More than three-quarters agreed or strongly agreed that their neighbors could be trusted, and there were similar responses to the statement that neighbors “watch out that children are safe and don’t get into trouble.”

Perceived neighborhood safety and cohesion differed by income category. Seventy percent of parents with household incomes below 100 percent FPL felt safe in their neighborhoods all or most of the time, and 30 percent felt safe only some or none of the time. By contrast, 93 percent of those with incomes at or above 300 percent FPL said they felt safe

## Parents with Young Children, CHIS 2011-2014 (n=6,600)

CHARACTERISTICS	% 95% CI
<b>Family Structure and Parental Education</b>	
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	71.8 70.0-73.2
Living with partner	13.4 12.0-14.7
Widowed	0.4 0.1-0.6
Divorced	2.2 1.7-2.7
Separated	3.4 2.7-4.0
Never married	9.0 7.9-10.1
<b>Family Size</b>	
Mean	3.9
95% CI for mean	3.9-4.0
Range	2.0-12.0
<b>Education</b>	
<12 years	19.5 18.0-21.0
12 years/GED	20.6 19.0-22.2
Some college	22.2 20.6-23.8
BA/BS or higher	37.7 35.8-39.6
<b>Income and Public Program Participation</b>	
<b>Income (% FPL)</b>	
0-99% FPL	24.7 23.0-26.4
100-199% FPL	22.0 20.3-23.7
200-299% FPL	13.3 12.1-14.6
300% FPL and above	40.0 38.1-41.8
<b>Public Program Participation (among those whose income is &lt; 200% FPL)</b>	
Medi-Cal	46.6 43.4-49.8
Women, Infants and Children (WIC)	67.1 63.4-70.7
Food Stamps	37.8 34.8-40.8
<b>Race/Ethnicity, Immigration Status, Languages Spoken in the Home</b>	
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Hispanic	47.1 45.3-48.9
White, Non-Hispanic	32.9 31.3-34.5
Asian	13.3 12.1-15.6
African-American	4.3 3.6-4.9
Two or more races	1.5 1.1-1.9
Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	0.5 0.2-0.8
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.3 0.2-0.5

## Exhibit 1

CHARACTERISTICS	% 95% CI
<b>Immigration Status</b>	
U.S-Born	56.3 54.4-58.2
Naturalized Citizen	15.9 14.4-17.4
Green Card	13.4 12.0-14.8
No Green Card	14.4 13.0-15.8
<b>Languages Spoken in the Home</b>	
English only	41.7 39.8-43.6
English and another language	38.0 36.2-39.9
Other language only	20.3 18.7-22.0
<b>Area of Residence, Neighborhood Cohesion, Civic Involvement</b>	
<b>Urban/Suburban/Rural</b>	
Urban	75.6 74.0-77.2
Suburban	14.5 13.0-15.9
Rural	9.9 9.0-10.9
<b>Neighborhood Cohesion</b>	
<b>How often feel safe in neighborhood</b>	
All of the time	43.8 42.0-45.7
Most of the time	39.5 37.5-41.4
Some of the time	14.9 13.4-16.4
None of the time	1.80 1.3-2.3
<b>Neighbors help each other</b>	
Strongly Agree	19.5 18.0-21.1
Agree	59.3 57.2-61.3
Disagree	17.6 15.9-19.4
Strongly Disagree	3.6 2.8-4.3
<b>Neighbors can be trusted</b>	
Strongly Agree	15.0 13.8-16.3
Agree	62.3 60.4-64.2
Disagree	18.90 17.3-20.5
Strongly Disagree	3.8 3.0-4.6
<b>Neighbors watch out that children are safe and don't get into trouble</b>	
Strongly Agree	17.9 16.5-19.3
Agree	60.3 58.3-62.2
Disagree	17.8 16.3-19.3
Strongly Disagree	3.2 2.3-4.1
<b>Civic Involvement, Past 12 Months</b>	
Volunteer/community service	36.7 34.8-38.6
Volunteer in organization addressing community problems	10.2 9.1-11.2
Meet informally to address community problems	14.1 12.7-15.4

*“Racial/ethnic differences in perceived neighborhood safety and cohesion appear to reflect geographic and income differences.”*

all or most of the time, and only 7 percent said they felt safe some or none of the time. Similarly, only 60 percent of those in the lowest income category said their neighbors could be trusted, compared with 90 percent of those in the highest income category.

Racial/ethnic differences in perceived neighborhood safety and cohesion appear to reflect geographic and income differences. Seventy-six percent of Hispanic parents said they felt safe all or most of the time, compared with 92 percent of White parents and 88 percent of Asian parents. Sixty-nine percent of Hispanic parents said their neighbors could be trusted, while about 86 percent of the White and Asian parents said they trusted their neighbors. Hispanics were more likely than Whites and Asians to be in the lowest income category, and they were also more likely to live in urban areas.

With regard to civic involvement, more than one-third of parents with young children reported having performed volunteer or unpaid community service in the past 12 months. Ten percent reported volunteering for an organization that addressed community problems, and 14 percent reported attending informal meetings to address community problems.

### **Characteristics of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Families<sup>3</sup>**

California's population is diverse in its geographic distribution, and geographic variation is associated with differences across several characteristics (see Appendix A). Suburban and rural areas have higher proportions of Whites compared with urban areas, and suburban areas also have a higher percentage of Asian families than do rural or urban areas. Half of the urban parent respondents were Hispanic, compared with 31.9 percent of suburban parents and 40.9 percent of rural parents (Exhibit 1). In terms of income, 70 percent of suburban parents with young children had household incomes

at or above 200 percent FPL, compared to 51.1 percent of urban households with young children and 46.4 percent of young rural families. A smaller proportion of suburban families were enrolled in Medi-Cal or WIC compared to urban families.

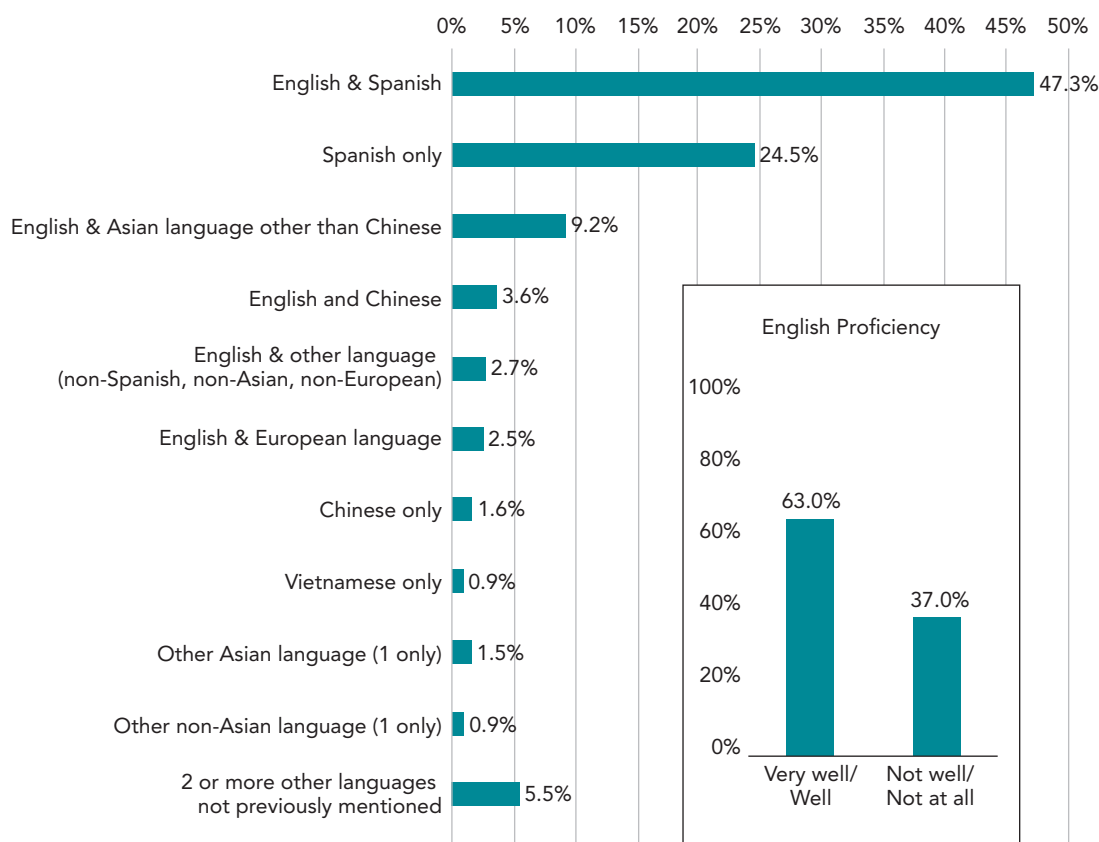
California is diverse, especially in cities. Sixty-two percent of urban families with children ages 0-5 spoke a language other than English in the home, compared with 48 percent of young suburban families and 44.9 percent of young rural families. As described in the next section, many of the families that spoke a language other than English in the home also spoke English in the home.

Fifty-four percent of urban respondents were born in the U.S., compared with 61.8 percent of suburban parents and 66.3 percent of rural parents. The proportion of rural parents who were naturalized U.S. citizens (8.4 percent) was about half that found among urban (16.5 percent) and suburban parents (17.9 percent). The noncitizen proportion was highest among urban parent respondents, at 29.5 percent.

A slightly higher proportion of suburban parents than urban parents were married or living with a partner (90.2 percent vs. 84.0 percent). A greater proportion of urban than suburban parents had fewer than 12 years of education, and suburban parents were more likely than either urban or rural parents to report having had more than 12 years of education (72.1 percent vs. 57.8 percent and 57.7 percent, respectively). While more than half of families living in all areas reported feeling safe in their neighborhoods all or most of the time, the percentage of urban parents who reported feeling safe only some or none of the time was almost double that of parents living in suburban or rural areas (18.9 percent vs. 9.4 percent and 10.7 percent, respectively). Perceptions of neighborhood safety were highest in rural areas, where 54.8

Languages Spoken in the Home, Dual Language Learner Families with Young Children

Exhibit 2



percent of respondents reported feeling safe all of the time. Similarly, while neighborhood cohesion was high across all three areas, it was slightly higher in suburban and rural areas. Indicators of neighborhood cohesion (trusting, getting along with neighbors, and believing that neighbors watch out for the welfare of neighborhood children) ranged from 83 percent to 86 percent in suburban and rural areas, and from 75 percent to 77 percent in urban areas. More suburban parents than urban parents reported having volunteered (45.3 percent vs. 34.8 percent), but there were no differences by area of residence in reports of having worked to address community problems, either formally or informally.

**Characteristics of Dual Language Learner (DLL) Families**

About 60 percent of households in California with children ages 0-5 speak a language other than or in addition to English in the home (Exhibit 2). Most of the children in the respondent families who were dual language learners (DLLs) were in Spanish-speaking families, followed by families speaking an Asian language. Ten percent of respondents spoke only another language in the home, excluding Spanish. More than 60 percent of the parent respondents said they spoke English well or very well, and 37 percent said they spoke English “not well” or “not at all.”

Of the parents in DLL families, 70 percent were Hispanic, 10.2 percent were White non-Hispanic, 17.9 percent were Asian, and 2.2 percent were other races (including

*“About 60 percent of households in California with young children speak a language other than English.”*

*“The challenge for California is to encourage early language proficiency in children.”*

African-American) (see Appendix B). About two-thirds of the parent respondents in these families were born outside the U.S., and 23.4 percent had been naturalized. It is important to note that DLL families are not a homogenous population. Parents in the two largest language groups—Spanish and Asian languages—differ in household income and education levels. On average, Asian parents have higher household incomes and higher education levels than Latino parents. These differences may have implications for designing dual language learner programs and initiatives.

### Discussion

Although the overall picture of families with young children in California is one of two-parent families with high educational achievement and strong perceived neighborhood cohesion, there is a significant percentage who are struggling. Forty-six percent of the families with children ages 0-5 years in the survey had household incomes below 200 percent FPL, and 20 percent of the parent respondents had not finished high school. Addressing these economic and educational inequalities must be a high priority for California as we prepare the next generation to enter the labor force.

More than half of the children under age six in the survey were dual language learners (DLLs), the majority of them from homes in which Spanish or an Asian language were spoken. These findings indicate a tremendous potential for foreign language capability among children who will be entering school in California in the next five years. Learning more than one language can increase analytical ability, concept formation, and cognitive flexibility in young children.<sup>4, 5</sup>

The number of dual language learners presents California with opportunities and also with challenges, since dual language acquisition is not uniform across all families with young children. Children from low-income families and those whose parents have not graduated from high school are

more likely to enter kindergarten with less developed primary language skills than children from middle- and upper-income families and from families in which the parents have more education. This difference becomes more pronounced as children grow older and advance through school.<sup>6, 7</sup>

Children who enter school without strong skills in their primary language have more difficulty becoming proficient in English, and they often end up as long-term English-language learners. This puts them at a significant disadvantage when they reach high school, diminishing their higher education and career opportunities.<sup>6, 8</sup>

Research has identified some successful strategies for strengthening language competence in young children before they enter school.<sup>6, 8</sup> Such strategies include encouraging parents to read often to their child in their primary language; promoting storytelling in group settings to develop vocabulary; and using visual aids, gestures, and repetition of key words to reinforce learning.<sup>8</sup> The Talk. Read. Sing.<sup>®</sup> campaign conducted by this study's funder, First 5 California, encourages parents and caregivers to engage with young children in order to promote healthy brain development. More resource-intensive recommendations include providing dual language instruction in preschools and schools, training teachers in best practices for DLL children, and using curricula specifically developed for these students.<sup>6</sup>

This profile expands our understanding of the strengths and challenges of families with young children in California. The strengths lie in high levels of trust and compatibility with neighbors, and with a generation of young children who speak both English and another language. The challenges are in improving these families' perceived neighborhood safety in California's cities, and in enhancing school readiness of dual language learners so that the benefits of being multilingual can be optimized.



This publication contains data from the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), the nation's largest state health survey. Conducted by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, CHIS data give a detailed picture of the health and health care needs of California's large and diverse population. Learn more at: [www.chis.ucla.edu](http://www.chis.ucla.edu)

## Data Source and Methods

Data for the report were drawn from the 2011-2012 and 2013-2014 California Health Interview Surveys. CHIS is an ongoing, random-digit-dial telephone survey of the California population living in households, and it is the largest statewide health survey in the nation (approximately 20,000 households per year). CHIS is conducted in seven languages: English, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Tagalog. For this report, we analyzed data on the 6,600 adult CHIS respondents who were the parent or legal guardian of at least one child age 0-5 years. Results were weighted to the general population to adjust for sampling design and error. Determination of adequate sample size to report data was based on analysis of the coefficient of variation (CV), using a criterion of 30 percent. We did not test for statistical differences, but the reader can determine significance by comparing the confidence intervals. If they do not overlap, the difference is significant. Some of these differences are described in the text.

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## Endnotes

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- 2 The study sample does not map precisely to the WIC population because it excluded women who were pregnant and did not have a child under age five. It included women with a five-year-old and no other child under age five, as well as those with a household income below 200 percent FPL (WIC income eligibility is 185 percent FPL).
- 3 Urban, suburban, and rural designation is based on the Claritas definition, which uses census block population sizes. We used the four-level Claritas and combined the "urban" and "second city" categories into "urban."
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