

# Low pay for child care workers puts more than half at poverty level, study finds <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

A majority of child care workers in California are paid so little they qualify for public assistance programs, according to a new report on the early education workforce.

Fifty-eight percent of child care workers in California are on one or more public assistance programs, such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a federally funded program that helps pay for food, housing and other expenses, the report by UC Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment found. This is according to the most recent data by the American Community Survey and Current Population Survey.

Researchers said while there is little debate about how "woefully underfunded" some early childhood programs are, policy rarely addresses workers' economic well-being. In 2017, the median wage for childcare workers in California was \$12.29 per hour, a 3 percent increase from 2015. Statewide, the median annual income for child care workers is \$25,570, the report states.

The federal poverty level, based on annual income \$24,250 for a family of four. This differs from the California Poverty Measure which factors in the state's cost of living. Based on this measure, the poverty level in California is \$30,000, for a family of four giving California one of the highest rates of poverty in the nation.

In a state-by-state analysis researchers found that only five states including Colorado and Arizona pay child care workers enough to meet the livable wage standards in the state. Nationwide, 53 percent of child care workers were on at least one public assistance program between 2014 and 2016, the Early Workforce Index report states. In 2017, the median wage for U.S. child care workers was \$10.72 per hour or \$22.290 per year.

The report, released June 27, includes a comprehensive analysis of efforts made in 50 states to improve early childhood education workforce conditions, such as work environments and compensation.

Child care workers in the report include adults who work with infants and toddlers in child care centers and some home-based settings. In California, education and training requirements vary among child care programs and there are different credential requirements for staff such as lead teacher or teacher assistant and aide. Statewide, licensed child care centers and homes do not have a degree requirement and child workers are not required to have a bachelor's degree. Some child care centers who contract directly with the state do require staff to have some early childhood education coursework or college units.

"While a major goal of early childhood services has been to relieve poverty among children, many of these same efforts continue to generate poverty in the early care and education workforce, who are predominantly female, ethnically and racially diverse and often have children of their own," the report states.

The report measures the rate of improvement in five main categories: compensation (goals for increasing how much child care workers and other early educators earn as starting and ongoing wages), workforce data (developing and improving the way states collect and analyze data on early childhood programs), qualifications (goals for increasing access to education and training, aligning education requirements for those who teach children under age 5), financial resources (steps taken to increase funding for early education programs and teaching staff) and work environments (availability of quality supports for staff such as lesson planning time). The report provides a state-by-state comparison in all five categories.

In four of the five categories, California's status is listed as "stalled." For the fifth category — work environments — information wasn't available. "Stalled" is defined as the state making limited or no progress. Researchers used a scoring system of 0-12 for each policy area. A zero to 4 earned a "stalled" rating.

The report states there has been limited progress in raising the wages of child care workers and even the modest increases that have been made are unequal.

Nationwide, median wages for child care workers increased by 7 percent between 2015 and 2017. Child care workers are classified as "low wage" based on median wages across occupations.

Researchers have also identified what they call a "racial wage gap," which predominantly affects women of color, who comprise 40 percent of the workforce. After accounting for educational attainment, African-American early educators still earn 78 cents less per hour or (\$1,622.40 less per year for a full-time worker) than their white counterparts, said Marcy Whitebook, workforce specialist for The Center for the Study of Early Child Care Employment at UC Berkeley. This estimate includes African-American child care workers who work at centers and some preschool teachers, researchers said. Women of color also occupy a disproportionate share of the lowest-paying jobs in the field and hold fewer leadership positions, the report states.

The report also found those who work with infants and toddlers earn less than those who work with children ages 3 to 5. Nationwide, this pay difference disproportionately affects African-Americans, 52 percent of whom work with infants and toddlers compared to 43 percent of all child care workers in child care centers.

One key recommendation in the report is to establish a process to include more child care workers and other early educators, such as preschool teachers, in conversations about how to reform or improve the profession. It states that many child care workers and preschool teachers are left out of critical conversations on policies that directly impact their well-being.

**Related link:** Early childhood workforce index 2018 <sup>[3]</sup>

**Region:** United States <sup>[4]</sup>

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