

Poverty Brief

Brief #2 in the Poverty Brief Series

Poverty in San Diego County: Family and Child Poverty, Deep Poverty, Housing, and Employment

County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency, Public Health Services, Community Health Statistics Unit
Prepared August 2025

Summary

Although San Diego County appears to have low poverty rates compared to other counties across the country, there are communities throughout the county that are experiencing disproportionate levels of poverty.

- In 2023, 20% or more of families with children in approximately 16% of San Diego County's census tracts and 20% or more of children aged 18 and younger in 19% of San Diego County's census tracts were living below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).
- Approximately 162,157 residents were living below 50% the FPL (deep poverty) in 2023. Additionally, there were communities within San Diego County with deep poverty rates as high as 36%.
- In 2023, 42% of households in San Diego County were housing cost-burdened.
- In 2023, the unemployment rate was 5.9% in San Diego County overall; however, there were communities within San Diego County with unemployment rates as high as 27.6%.

162,157

San Diego County residents
were living in deep poverty.



2 in 5

San Diego County households
were housing cost-burdened.



5.9%

The unemployment rate was
5.9% in San Diego County.

Key Message

To achieve health equity in San Diego County, family and child poverty must be addressed at the community level by first identifying communities living in poverty and struggling to make ends meet. Prevention and reduction of family and child poverty within San Diego communities can reduce negative health and well-being outcomes in adulthood and prevent the cycle of poverty from continuing. Additionally, identifying communities with high rates of other social determinants of health (SDOH) that may increase the risk of falling into poverty, including unstable housing and employment, can inform policy makers of communities in need of targeted resources and interventions.



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August 2025

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The Public Health Services department, County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, has maintained national public health accreditation, since May 17, 2016, and was re-accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board on August 21, 2023.

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Introduction

Poverty as a Social Determinant of Health

In the United States, it is estimated that medical care accounts for only 10-20 percent of the modifiable contributors to healthy outcomes in a population. The other 80-90 percent are health behaviors and “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, and the systems put in place to deal with illness,” known as social determinants of health (SDOH).¹ This means that a large proportion of disease burden within a community is shaped by SDOH, such as distribution of income, poverty, and access to healthcare and healthy food.

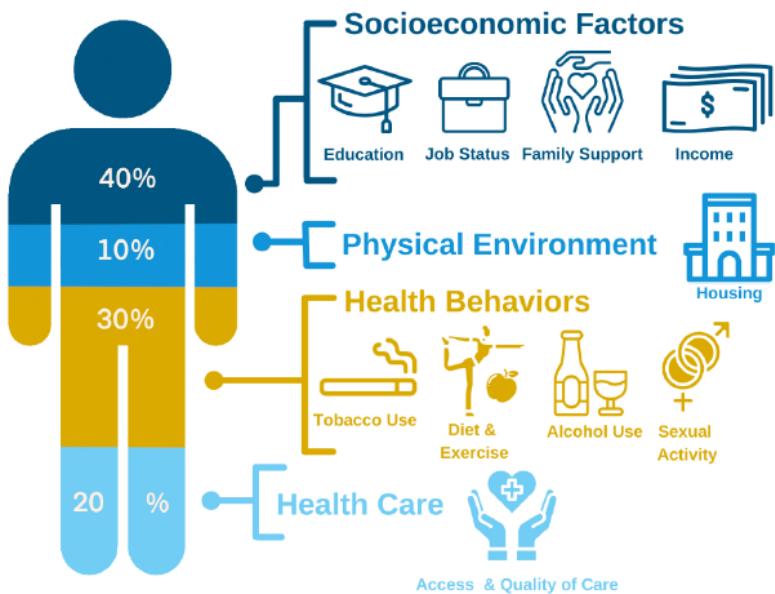


Figure 1: Social Determinants of Health (SDOH), UCLA Health.²

Poverty is an important SDOH because it frequently interacts with various other SDOH which, together, influence health behaviors and outcomes. The distribution of income within a community is often a significant contribution to disproportionate burden of disease among low- and high-income groups. Additionally, individuals experiencing poverty are more likely to live in the same geographic areas rather than living spread out evenly across the nation.³ Areas of concentrated poverty tend to have less access to positive resources, such as healthy food, education, safe neighborhoods, freedom from discrimination, and adequate housing. As a result, communities of lower socioeconomic status (SES), particularly those with high rates of poverty, have higher rates of morbidity and mortality.⁴ These health inequities increase as poverty rates increase.

Many SDOH influence the prevalence of poverty in individuals and communities, including but not limited to, housing and stable employment. Affordable housing and adequate, stable employment decrease the risk of falling into poverty.^{5,6} Additionally, experiencing poverty in childhood increases the risk of negative health and well-being outcomes in adulthood.⁷ Although San Diego County appears to have a low poverty rate compared to other counties in the nation, there remain areas of severe concentrated poverty throughout the county where communities are struggling to make ends meet. Addressing poverty in San Diego County is crucial to achieving health equity.

To view family and child poverty rates, housing, and unemployment by census tract in San Diego County, visit the Poverty Dashboard #2 here: [Poverty Dashboard #2 | Tableau Public](#)

Family and Child Poverty

Currently, the federal government's poverty thresholds and guidelines are used to determine poverty rates throughout the United States. Poverty thresholds vary by family size and number of children. The poverty thresholds for 2023 by family and number of related children under 18 years old are shown in *Table 1* below.⁸

Table 1: Poverty Thresholds for 2023 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years

Size of family unit	Weighted Average Thresholds	Related children under 18 years				
		None	One	Two	Three	Four
One person (unrelated individual):	15,480					
Under age 65.....	15,850	15,852				
Aged 65 and older.....	14,610	14,614				
Two people:	19,680					
Householder under age 65.....	20,490	20,404	21,002			
Householder aged 65 and older.....	18,430	18,418	20,923			
Three people.....	24,230	23,834	24,526	24,549		
Four people.....	31,200	31,428	31,942	30,900	31,008	
Five people.....	36,990	37,901	38,452	37,275	36,363	35,807
Six people.....	41,860	43,593	43,766	42,864	41,999	40,714
Seven people.....	47,670	50,159	50,472	49,393	48,640	47,238
Eight people.....	52,850	56,099	56,594	55,575	54,683	53,416
Nine people or more.....	62,900	67,483	67,810	66,908	66,151	64,908
		Five	Six	Seven	Eight+	
		41,860	39,952			
		47,670	45,602	43,808		
		52,850	51,809	50,136	49,710	
		62,900	63,198	61,651	61,268	58,907

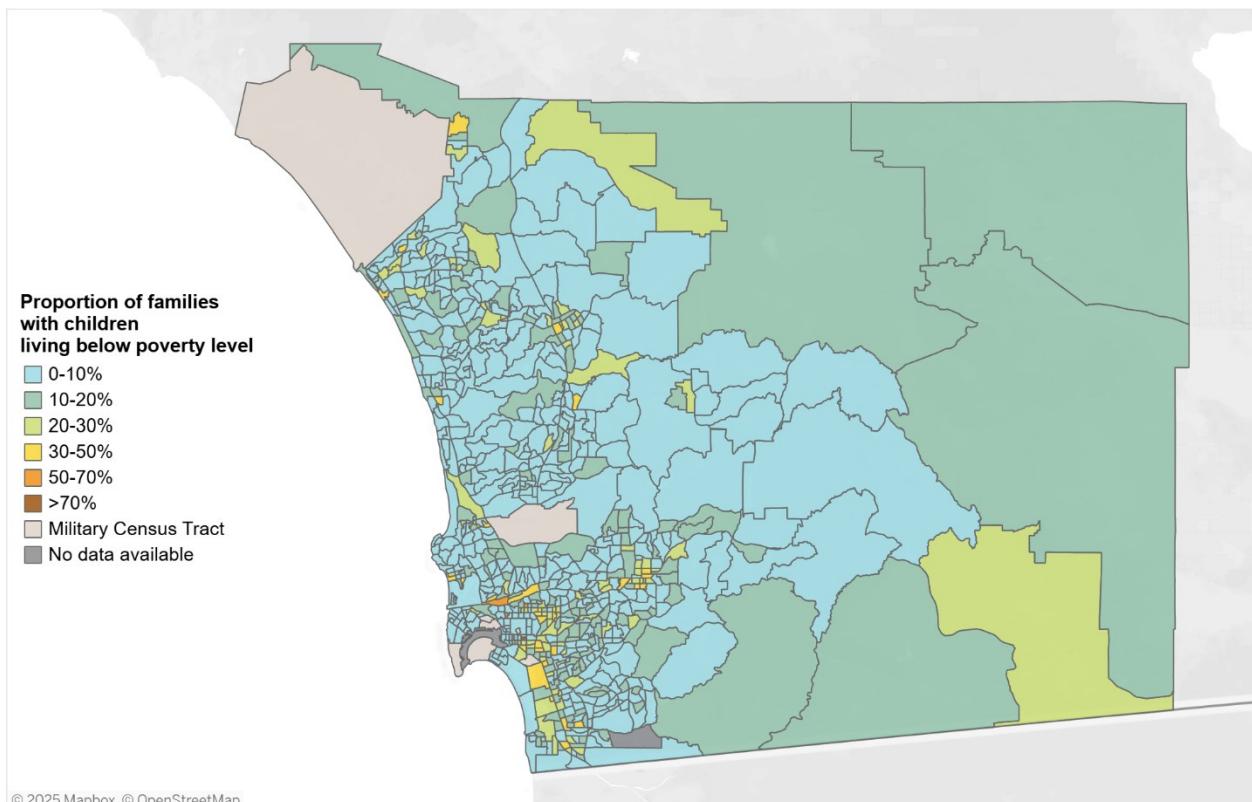
Source: US Census Bureau, 2024.

A family is considered to be living in poverty if their total annual income is less than the poverty threshold established for their family size and composition. When using poverty thresholds to examine poverty, it is important to acknowledge that the federal poverty threshold remains the same across different states, counties, and cities, despite the variability in the cost of living.⁹ This frequently leads to an underestimation of the number of families struggling to make ends meet in high-cost areas, including San Diego County.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the poverty thresholds remain the standard by which communities across the United States measure poverty and determine eligibility for public federal and state financial assistance programs.

In 2023, 9.8% of families in San Diego County were living in poverty, compared to 13.5% of families in the United States and 12.2% of families in California. Although San Diego County appears to have a low family poverty rate compared to other counties in the nation, there remain areas of severe poverty throughout the county where communities are struggling to make ends meet.

The map below shows the percentage of families with children in each census tract living below 100% FPL (Figure 2). Census tracts with a substantial military group quarters population are indicated by a light grey color. The military group quarters population is a special population with unique demographics, needs, and resources.

Figure 2: Family with Children Poverty Rates by Census Tract, San Diego County, 2023



Military census tract includes a substantial military group quarters population, a special population with unique demographics, needs, and resources. Data censored to preserve distribution of civilian data in the map.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1702.

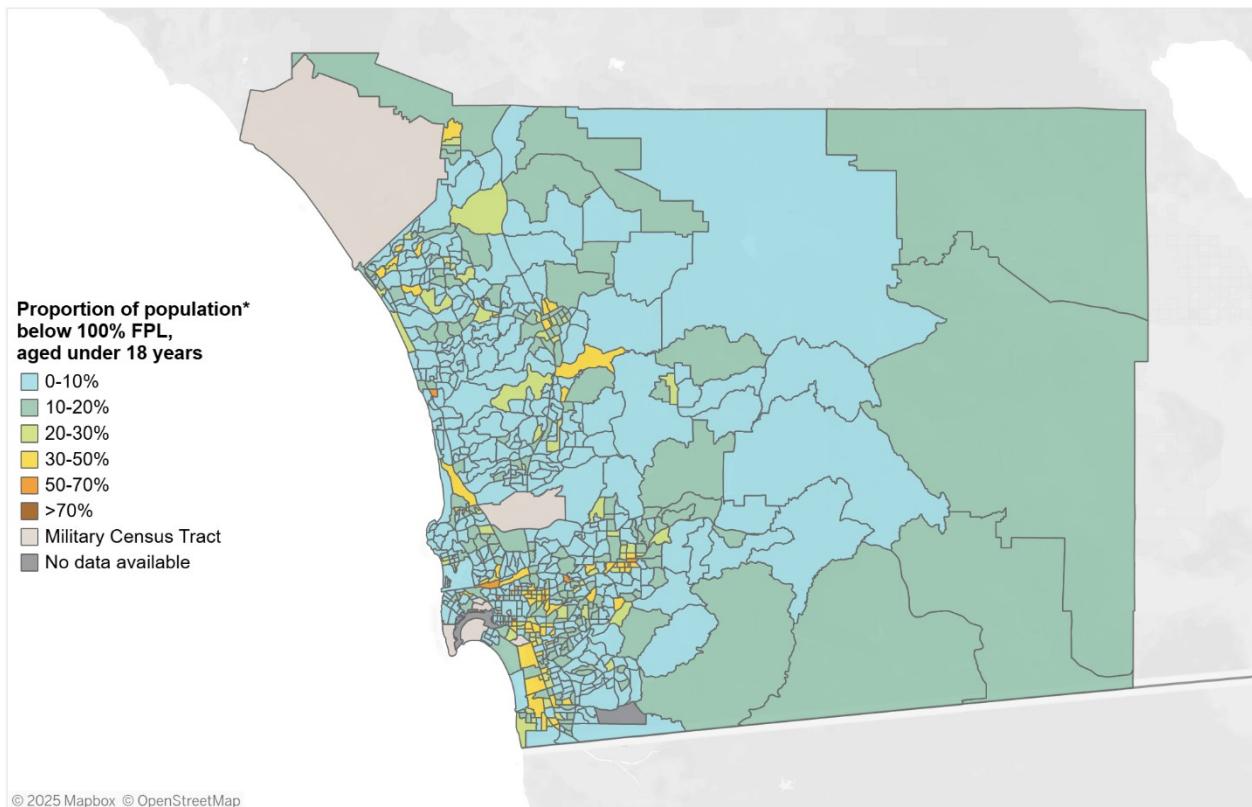
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In San Diego County, 116 census tracts had a family poverty rate of 20% or more in 2023.

Across San Diego County, 9.8% of families were living below 100% of the FPL. However, some geographic areas within San Diego County have significantly higher rates of poverty. In 2023, 20% or more of families with children in approximately 16% of San Diego County's census tracts were living below 100% of the FPL (Figure 2). Previous research has indicated that once the poverty rate in a community reaches 20% or greater, the community is more likely to experience significant systemic issues compared to communities with lower poverty rates.¹¹

Figure 3: Poverty Rate by Census Tract, Ages 18 and Under, San Diego County, 2023



*For whom poverty status was determined. Military census tract includes a substantial military group quarters population, a special population with unique demographics, needs, and resources. Data censored to preserve distribution of civilian data in the map.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1701.

Prepared by: County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency, Public Health Services, Community Health Statistics Unit, June 2025.

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In San Diego County, 140 census tracts had a child poverty rate of 20% or more in 2023.

In 2023, 20% or more of children aged 18 or younger in approximately 19% of San Diego County's census tracts were living below 100% of the FPL (Figure 3). Previous research has indicated that experiencing poverty during childhood increases the risk of poor health, developmental, and educational outcomes. This can lead to persistent poverty and continue across generations.⁷

In 2023, census tract 41.02 (Central San Diego Subregional Area (SRA) within Central Region) had the highest percentage of families with children living in poverty and the highest child poverty rate.

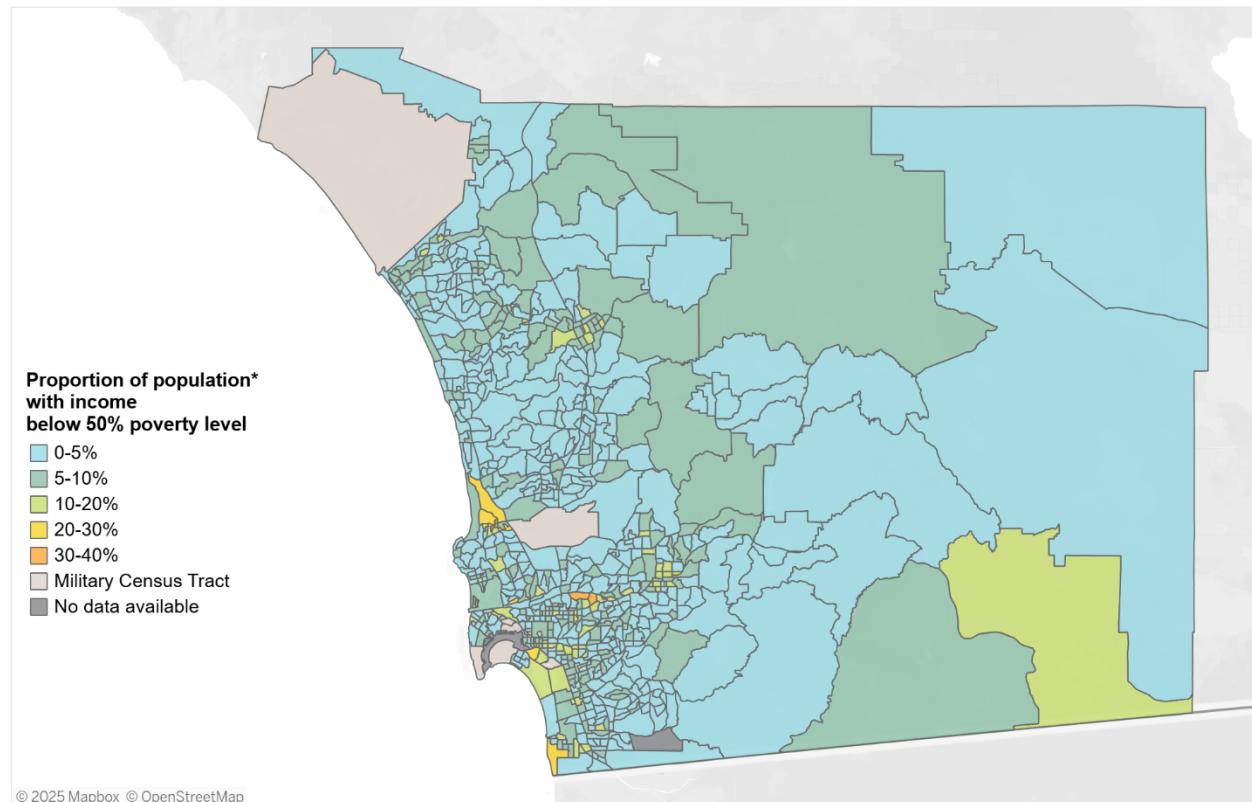
Across the County, 9.8% of San Diego families and 12% of children were living below 100% of the FPL. However, some geographic areas within San Diego County have significantly higher rates of poverty, including census tract 41.02 (Central San Diego SRA within Central Region), where over 91% of families with children were living below 100% FPL, and nearly 95% of children under 18 were living below 100% FPL (Figure 3).

Deep Poverty

Deep poverty is defined by the Census Bureau as households living below 50% of the established poverty threshold. Previous research has indicated that deep poverty is more likely to be chronic and continue from generation to generation. Additionally, single mothers and their children and individuals under the age of 25 are more likely to live in deep poverty.⁷

The map below shows the percentage of residents in each census tract living below 50% FPL (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage of Population Living in Deep Poverty by Census Tract, San Diego County, 2023



*For whom poverty status was determined. Military census tract includes a substantial military group quarters population, a special population with unique demographics, needs, and resources. Data censored to preserve distribution of civilian data in the map.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1701.

Prepared by: County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency, Public Health Services, Community Health Statistics Unit, June 2025.

Contact: PHS.CHSU.HHSA@sdcounty.ca.gov

In 2023, 5.1% of the population in San Diego County was living in deep poverty.

In San Diego County, 5.1% of the population was living below 50% of the FPL, compared to 5.7% in California and 5.9% in the United States. Overall, the rate of deep poverty appears to be low. However, there are communities within San Diego where 20% or more of the population is living in deep poverty (Figure 4).

In 2023, 5% or more of the population in 276 census tracts in San Diego County were living in deep poverty.

Over 37% of the census tracts in San Diego County had 5% or more of its population living below 50% of the FPL in 2023 (Figure 4).

In 2023, about 162,157 residents were living in deep poverty in San Diego County.

Within the 736 census tracts in San Diego County, 162,157 residents were living below 50% of the FPL in 2023. In 2023, 2,652 residents were living in deep poverty in census tract 29.04 (Mid-City SRA within Central Region), over 36% of the total census tract population for whom poverty status was determined and the greatest number of residents living in deep poverty in San Diego County (Figure 4).

Healthy People 2030: Economic Stability

Economic stability is a social determinant of health (SDOH), described as the connection between the financial resources people have and their health.¹² Limited access to essential resources increases the risk of adverse health outcomes. Employment, food insecurity, housing instability, and poverty are key issues that affect economic stability in the United States.

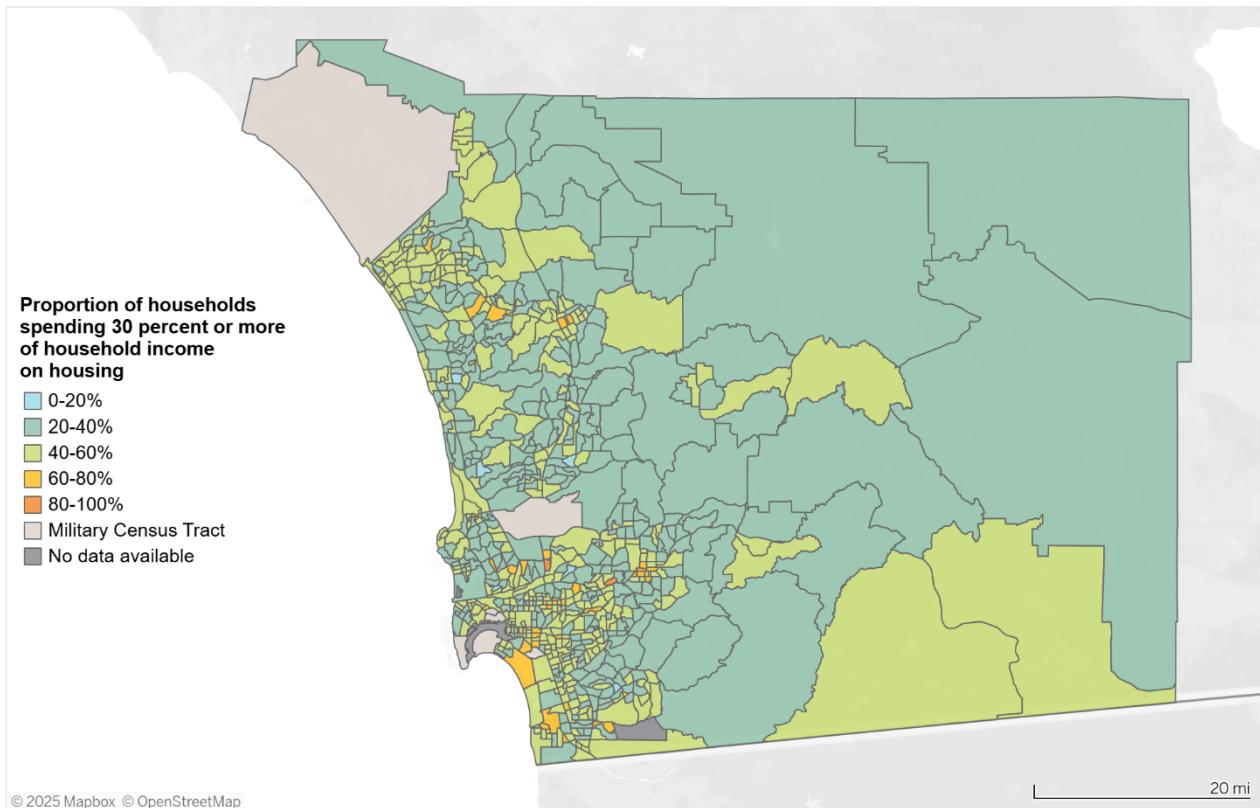
Economic stability is included in the Healthy People 2030 objectives. Healthy People 2030 is a federal initiative aiming to improve the health of all Americans. The initiative consists of science-based, 10-year national objectives to identify health improvement priorities nationwide, as well as provide measurable benchmarks for the nation's overall health.¹³ In this brief, two Healthy People 2030 objectives were measured among census tracts in San Diego County, including: reduce the proportion of families that spend more than 30 percent of income on housing, and increase employment in working-age people.

Housing

Adequate and affordable housing is crucial to living healthy lives. When individuals spend a large portion of their income on housing, they may be unable to afford other essentials, including healthy food, healthcare, and transportation.⁵ Housing instability has also been linked to increased stress and mental health problems. Together, these issues may lead to increased risk of poor health and well-being outcomes.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban development, households should not spend more than 30% of household income on housing.¹⁴ A household becomes cost-burdened when more than 30% of the household income is spent on housing, and severely cost-burdened when more than 50% is spent on housing.¹⁴ Therefore, the Healthy People 2030 objective aims to reduce the proportion of families that spend more than 30 percent of income on housing to 25.5% across the nation.

Figure 5: Proportion of Households Spending 30 Percent or More of Household Income on Housing by Census Tract, San Diego County, 2023



Military census tract includes a substantial military group quarters population, a special population with unique demographics, needs, and resources. Data censored to preserve distribution of civilian data in the map.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S2503.

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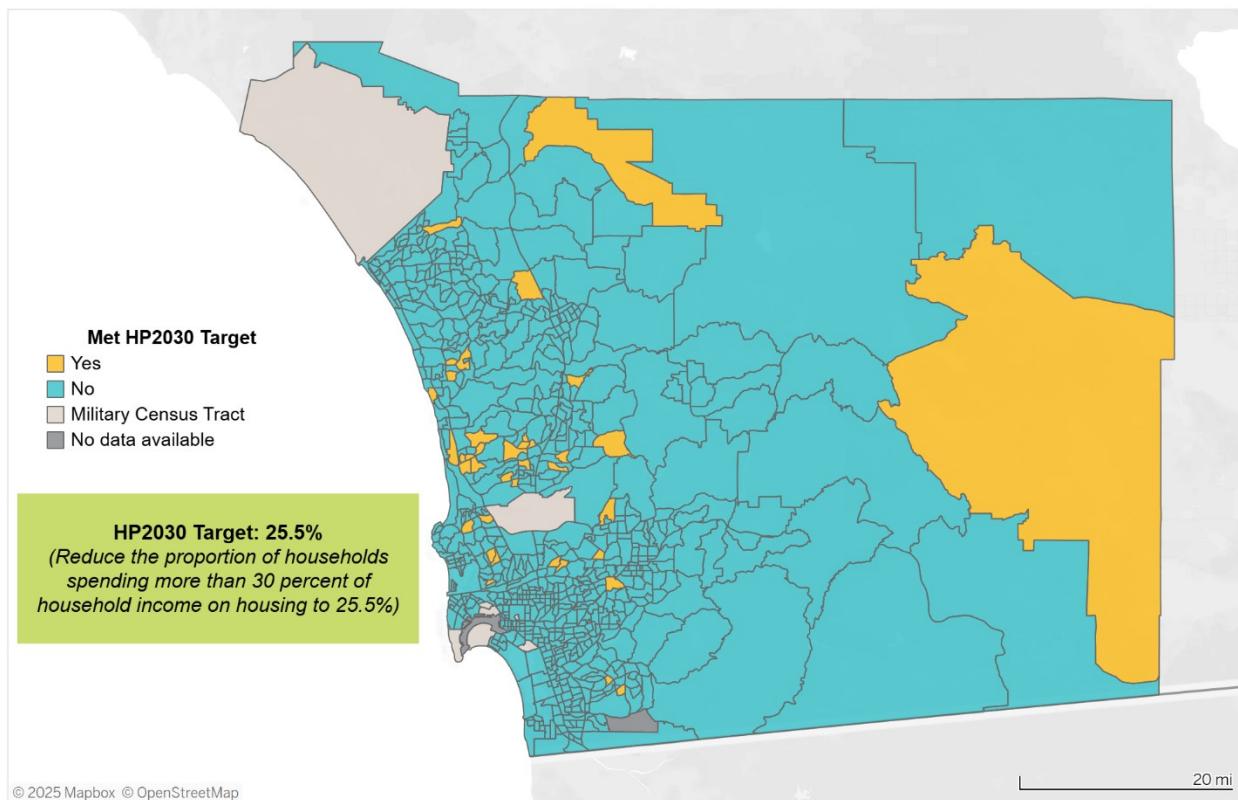
San Diego County, 42% of households were cost-burdened in 2023.

More than 2 in 5 households (42.4%) in San Diego County spent 30 percent or more of their income on housing in 2023, compared to 40.1% in California and 30.7% in the United States (Figure 5).

In 2023, the highest proportion of households who were cost-burdened in San Diego County was 86.4% in census tract 95.11 (Elliott-Navajo SRA within North Central Region).

More than 80% of households in census tract 95.11 (Elliott-Navajo SRA within North Central Region) and census tract 150.02 (La Mesa SRA within East Region) spent 30 percent or more of their income on housing (Figure 5).

Figure 6: Proportion of Households Spending 30 Percent or More of Household Income on Housing by Census Tract, San Diego County, 2023



Military census tract includes a substantial military group quarters population, a special population with unique demographics, needs, and resources. Data censored to preserve distribution of civilian data in the map.
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau; 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S2503.
 Prepared by: County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency, Public Health Services, Community Health Statistics Unit, June 2025.
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In 2023, 93.5% of census tracts in San Diego County did not meet the Healthy People 2030 target.

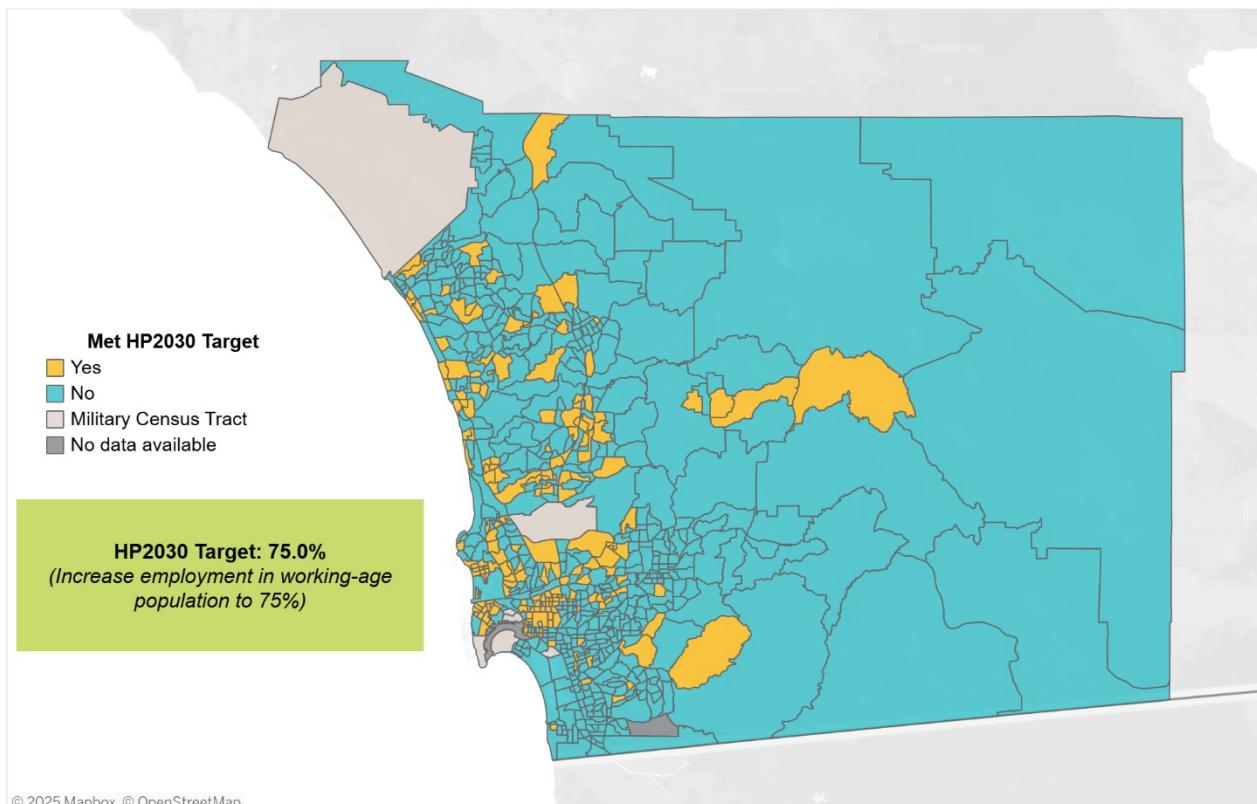
In San Diego County, more than 25.5% of households in 688 census tracts (93.5%) spent 30 percent or more of their income on housing (Figure 6). As the cost of housing increases across San Diego County, residents must spend a larger portion of their income on housing and are at greater risk of housing instability.⁶

Employment

Participation in the labor force with adequate and stable pay is essential to preventing and reducing poverty.⁵ In the United States, 5% of working Americans aged 18 to 64 experienced poverty in 2020 compared to 28.8% of non-working Americans.¹⁵ Without adequate employment, many Americans face financial challenges that can lead to poor health and well-being outcomes. A study from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that healthcare access varies by employment status. Those who were unemployed for less than a year had the greatest issue with healthcare access, and those who were unemployed for a year or more, or were unable to work, had the highest

prevalence of adverse health outcomes.¹⁶ The Healthy People 2030 target aims to increase the percentage of employment among working-age people, ages 16 to 64, to 75% across the nation.⁵

Figure 7: Proportion of Population Employed by Census Tract, Ages 16-64 years, San Diego County, 2023



In 2023, San Diego County did not meet the Healthy People 2030 employment target of 75%.

In 2023, 68.3% of residents aged 16 to 64 in San Diego County were employed, compared to 68.9% in California and 70.8% in the United States (Figure 7).

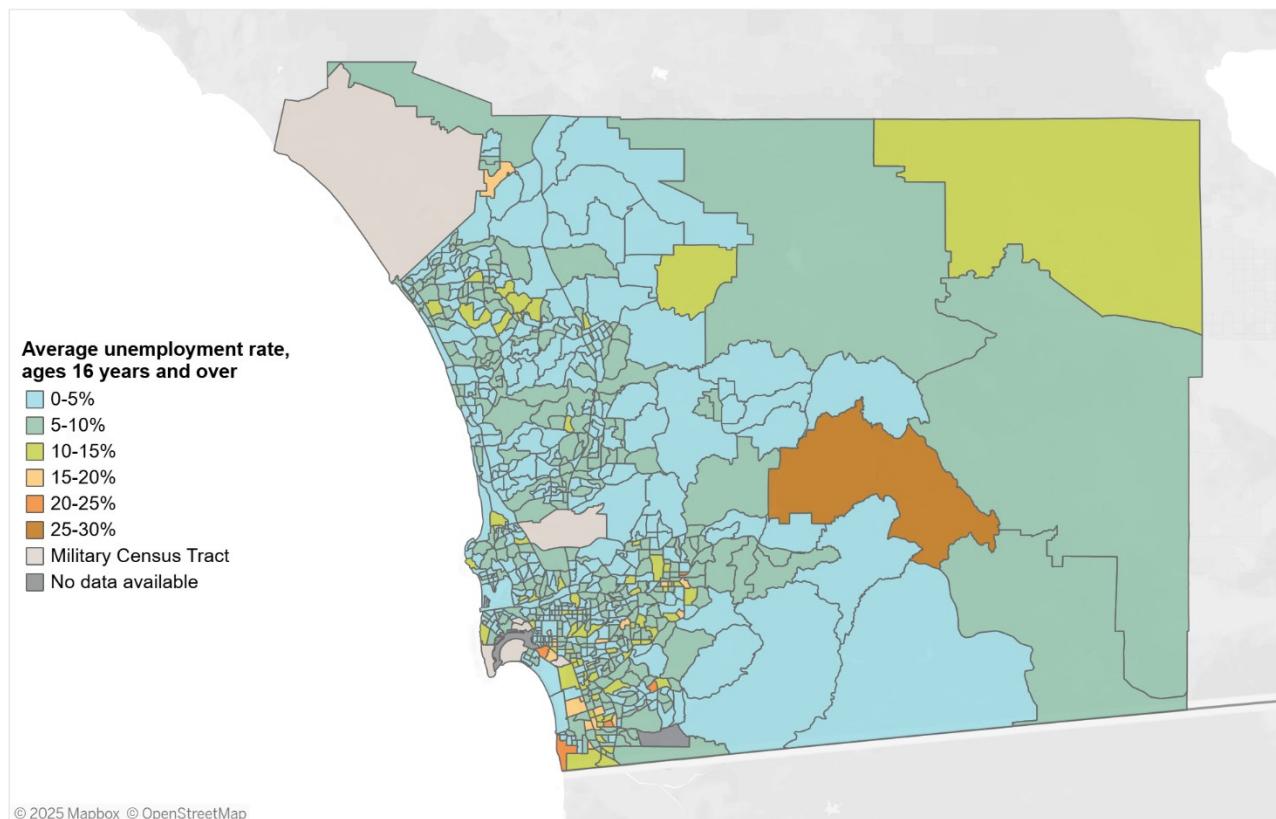
Overall, 193 census tracts in San Diego County met the Healthy People 2030 employment target of 75%.

In 2023, 26.2% (193) of census tracts in San Diego County had an employment rate of more than 75% among residents aged 16 to 64 (Figure 7).

In 2023, census tract 13.01 (Central San Diego SRA within Central Region) had the highest employment rate among residents aged 16 to 64 (92.4%).

Over 9 in 10 residents aged 16 to 64 in census tracts 13.01 and 45.01 (Central San Diego SRA within Central Region), 18.01 (Mid-City SRA within Central Region), 76.02 and 80.03 (Coastal SRA within North Central Region), and 172.01 (Del Mar-Mira Mesa SRA within North Central Region) were employed in 2023 (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Proportion of Population Employed by Census Tract, Ages 16-64 years, San Diego County, 2023



Military census tract includes a substantial military group quarters population, a special population with unique demographics, needs, and resources. Data censored to preserve distribution of civilian data in the map.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S2301.

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In 2023, census tract 209.02 (Laguna-Pine Valley SRA within East Region) and census tract 164.04 (El Cajon SRA within East Region) had the highest unemployment rates.

Over 1 in 4 residents (27.6%) aged 16 years and over were unemployed in census tract 209.02 (Laguna-Pine Valley SRA within East Region) and nearly 1 in 4 residents (22.3%) aged 16 years and over were unemployed in census tract 164.04 (El Cajon SRA within East Region), 4.7 times and 3.8 times the unemployment rate of 5.9% in San Diego County overall, respectively (Figure 8).

Conclusion

Poverty is a social determinant of health (SDOH) that can contribute to inequitable access to resources and opportunities and increase the risk of adverse health outcomes. To achieve health equity in San Diego County, family and child poverty must be addressed at the community level by first identifying communities living in poverty and struggling to make ends meet. Prevention and reduction of family and child poverty within San Diego communities can reduce negative health and well-being outcomes in adulthood and prevent the cycle of poverty from continuing. Additionally, identifying communities with high rates of other SDOH that may increase the risk of falling into poverty, including unstable housing and employment, can inform policy makers of communities in need of targeted resources and interventions. Although San Diego County appears to have low poverty rates compared to other counties across the country, there are communities throughout the county that are experiencing disproportionate levels of poverty.

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