
Frequently Asked Questions

- ❖ **Q: What is the [2008 California Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard](#)?**
A: The recently updated 2008 *California Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard (Self-Sufficiency Standard)* quantifies the costs of meeting basic needs for California's working families. The *Self-Sufficiency Standard* measures county-specific level costs for: housing, food, child care, health care, transportation, and other necessary basic needs, plus applicable state and federal taxes and tax credits. The necessary wages defined in the *Self-Sufficiency Standard* are modest, but they are not so low that they fail to adequately provide for a family. Released by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development and calculated by Dr. Diana Pearce of the University of Washington, the *Self-Sufficiency Standard* is the only *county-specific* financial measure of its kind and is available for *156 different family compositions*. The *Self-Sufficiency Standard* has been calculated for 36 states.

- ❖ **Q: Where does the data featured in the *Self-Sufficiency Standard* come from?**
A: The *Self-Sufficiency Standard* methodology uses widely accepted and credible national and state data sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Geographically relevant data is used for each county in California, reflecting local market rates for items such as housing, food, child care, health care, and transportation.

- ❖ **Q: What is *CFES*?**
A: *Californians For Economic Security (CFES)* is a statewide research-driven coalition led by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, a national research, consulting, and legal organization located in Oakland, California. *CFES* is guided by a statewide steering committee of organizations including policymakers, advocates, researchers, service providers, public agencies, foundations, and community membership organizations dedicated to ensuring the well-being of working families across California.

- ❖ **Q: Why was the *Self-Sufficiency Standard* updated for 2008?**
A: Due to the rising costs of basic items like food, housing, gas, health care, and child care, the income that California's working families need just to make ends meet has risen dramatically in the past 5 years. The *Self-Sufficiency Standard* reveals that since 2003, the median income needed by working families to meet their basic needs has risen 43% (from \$31,252 to \$44,768).¹ The 2008 *Self-Sufficiency Standard* was updated to reflect these rising costs for all of California's 58 counties, making it the most accurate tool available to evaluate the economic health of working families and advance policies and programs that move families toward economic security.

- ❖ **Q: How is the *Self-Sufficiency Standard* different from the Federal Poverty Level?**

¹ The 43% median cost of living increase is based on a family comprised of one adult, one preschooler, and one school-age child.

A: The *Self-Sufficiency Standard* is based on the costs individuals and families face on a daily basis – housing, food, child care, health care, transportation, and other basic necessary costs – and is calculated for 156 different family compositions in 58 different counties. The *Self-Sufficiency Standard* uses geographically specific data to provide an accurate measure of working families’ real cost of living in their specific community. The *Self-Sufficiency Standard* shows that many Californians who are not poor, as defined by the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), still do not have enough income to meet their basic needs.

In contrast, the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a four-decade old, one-size-fits-all measure based solely on the cost of the basic food budget needed to meet minimum nutritional requirements. At \$17,600 for a family of three, the FPL is the same whether you live in a high cost market like San Francisco, California, or a lower-cost market like Topeka, Kansas. The FPL also assumes that food accounts for one-third of a household’s overall expenses, an outdated assumption in today’s marketplace. Yet, the FPL is used to determine income eligibility for many public programs and to allocate state and federal resources to local communities.

❖ **Q: Aren’t the *Self-Sufficiency Standard* Wages “Too High”?**

A: No. Because the *Self-Sufficiency Standard* is calculated using the *real* costs of goods and services purchased in the regular marketplace; it reflects the real expenses families face. The *Self-Sufficiency Standard* is a basic needs budget that does not allow for entertainment, any type of carry out or fast food, or emergency expenses such as car repairs.

❖ **Q: How do families survive living on incomes below the *Self-Sufficiency Standard*?**

A: They struggle to meet their daily expenses, doing things like: choosing between food and medicine, borrowing money from friends and family, maxing out their credit cards—or borrowing against the equity in their homes if they happen to own a home.

❖ **Q: Do you expect employers to pay workers these wages?**

A: Not entirely. Employers are only one of several stakeholders that have a role in ensuring that families have incomes sufficient to cover their costs. The government has a role in ensuring that job training, education and work supports (like child care) are affordable and accessible to families. Employers are responsible for paying decent wages and providing benefits, such as health insurance and retirement to their workers. Individuals are responsible for taking advantage of opportunities to invest in themselves and their potential.

❖ **Q: What can we do about the economic problems families face in California?**

A: As others have already done, urge policymakers, advocates, foundations, public agencies and direct service providers to adopt the *Self-Sufficiency Standard* to measure the economic needs of individuals and families, and ensure that all Californians can live with dignity and economic well-being.

❖ **Q: How do I get more information about the *Self-Sufficiency Standard* for my county?**

A: For more information on the *Self-Sufficiency Standard*, or to find data specific to your county, go to <http://www.insightccd.org/index.php?page=ca-sss>, or contact Jenny Chung by phone at 510.251.2600 x124 or email at jchung@insightccd.org.

❖ **Q: How can my organization become involved with CFES?**

A: To join the *CFES* listserv, go to <http://www.insightccd.org/index.php?page=cfes-listserv>. For more information on becoming involved with *CFES*, contact Jenny Chung by phone at 510.251.2600 x124 or by email at jchung@insightccd.org.