16 BILLION HOURS

Measuring the Value of Household Production in California

Released by the California Partners Project, in partnership with the Office of the First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom

Every year, Californians spend roughly 16 billion hours cooking meals, cleaning homes, raising children, buying groceries, and caring for aging parents — about half as many hours as the entire state spends in paid employment — and women do more than two-thirds of it.

A new analysis takes a closer look at what goes uncounted, for the first time at the state level.

KEY FINDINGS

Women perform 68.5% of all household production hours in California: for every hour men spend on this work, women spend more than two. Women do the majority of the work in every single category measured: cooking, childcare, housework, shopping, elderly care.

Women's share of the work is worth an estimated $163 billion to $268 billion, roughly 4.4% to 7.2% of the state's average annual GDP over that period.

The gap is widest in cooking and childcare, the categories of work that recur daily, cannot be postponed, and carry the heaviest mental load of planning and anticipating what a household needs.

$238-389 billion

Total estimated value of household production in California

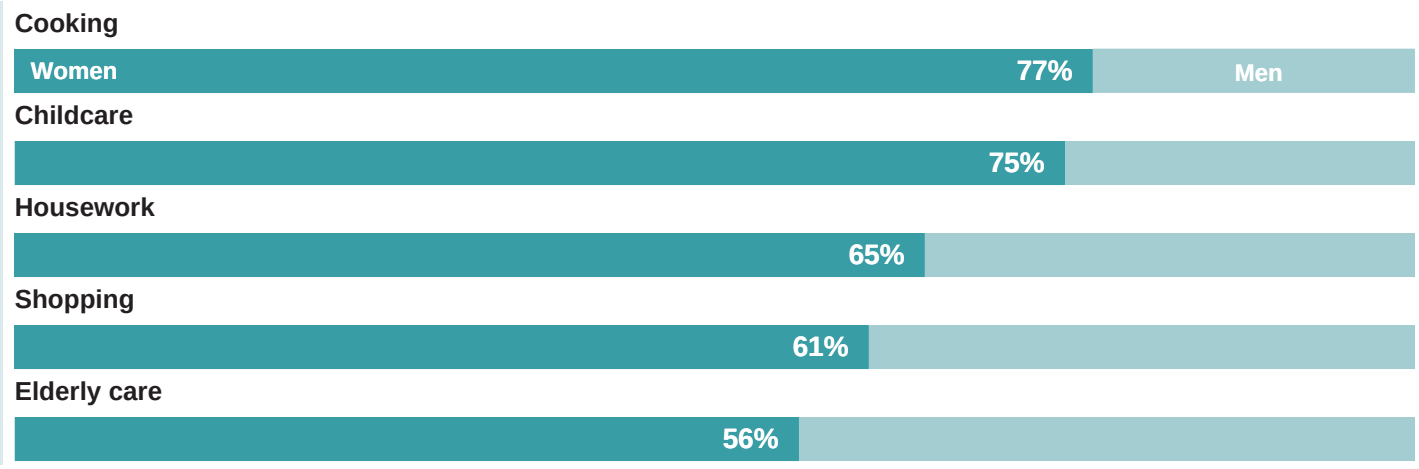
≈ 6.4% to 10.4% of state GDP

$163-268 billion

Estimated value of women's share of household production in California

≈ 4.4% to 7.2% of state GDP

WHO DOES THE WORK, BY ACTIVITY



Source: California Department of Finance analysis of American Time Use Survey data, 2021-2024.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The uneven division of unpaid work is one of the most-cited drivers of the gender pay gap and of women's lower lifetime earnings. In California, full-time working women earn 88 cents for every dollar a man earns, and recent pay data from large private employers, collected by the Civil Rights Department, shows that women make up 47% of those workers but 53% of those in the lowest pay range. Moreover, mothers' hourly wages also tend to fall by an estimated 5% to 7% per child. Nationally, unpaid family caregiving reduces mothers' lifetime earnings by an estimated 15% — more than $350,000.

Women are doing this on top of record paid work, not instead of it. Prime-age women's labor force participation reached an all-time high of 78.5% in early 2026.

Two demographic shifts are also approaching. By 2040, 22% of Californians will be 65 or older, up from 14% in 2020, while the working-age population stays essentially flat. A growing "sandwich generation" is going to be juggling childcare, elderly care, and work at the same time.

INTERPRETING THE GAP

Nationally, the gender gap in household production has narrowed but not closed. In 2003, women spent about an hour more per day than men on housework, cooking, and other household tasks.; by 2024, the difference was about 40 minutes, a change of roughly one minute a year. These national figures cover fewer categories than this analysis, leaving out childcare, elderly care, and shopping, but they show that how households share this work can change over time.

Progress does not mean an identical split of household work in every home. It means women and men can divide this work in the way that suits them, without being constrained by the cost of childcare, limited workplace flexibility, or expectations based on gender. As those constraints ease, the gap is likely to narrow, though some difference may remain as preferences and norms evolve. The hours gap is best read as one indicator of progress, not a standalone measure of success.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis draws on the American Time Use Survey, a federal survey in which respondents keep a detailed diary of how they spent the previous 24 hours. Four years of California responses (2021–2024) were pooled to produce a large enough sample for reliable state-level estimates.

Five categories were measured: cooking, housework other than cooking, shopping, childcare, and elderly care, including the travel required by each. Those hours were valued two ways to produce a range. Lower bound: what it would cost to hire one person, at minimum wage, to do all of it. Upper bound: what it would cost to hire a professional for each task. All figures are expressed in the same dollars as the survey years and measured against California's average annual GDP over that period, $3.73 trillion. Because these estimates are tied to wages, they rise as California's minimum wage and other wages rise, reflecting the higher cost families would face to pay for this work.

This is a conservative estimate. The true figure is likely higher than $389 billion. Several categories were excluded because California-only sample sizes were too small to be reliable: care for children outside the household, care for adults other than elders, and secondary childcare.

NOTES AND SOURCES

Figures by race, ethnicity, or parental status are not statistically reliable at the California level with current data — a notable limitation on the depth of analysis possible at the state level.

Analysis by the California Department of Finance using American Time Use Survey data (2021–2024) and California occupational wage data from the Employment Development Department. Wage-gap figures from the California Civil Rights Department and the National Women's Law Center. Estimate of the decrease in wages after the birth of a child from the American Sociological Review (study by Michelle Budig and Paula England, 2001). Lifetime earnings figures from the Gender Equity Policy Institute. Labor force participation and national time-use trends from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Population projections from the California Department of Finance via the Public Policy Institute of California.

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