

The Best and Worst Places to Grow Up: How Your Area Compares



Worst in U.S.

Best

[...or use my location](#)

Gender

All kids

Boys

Girls

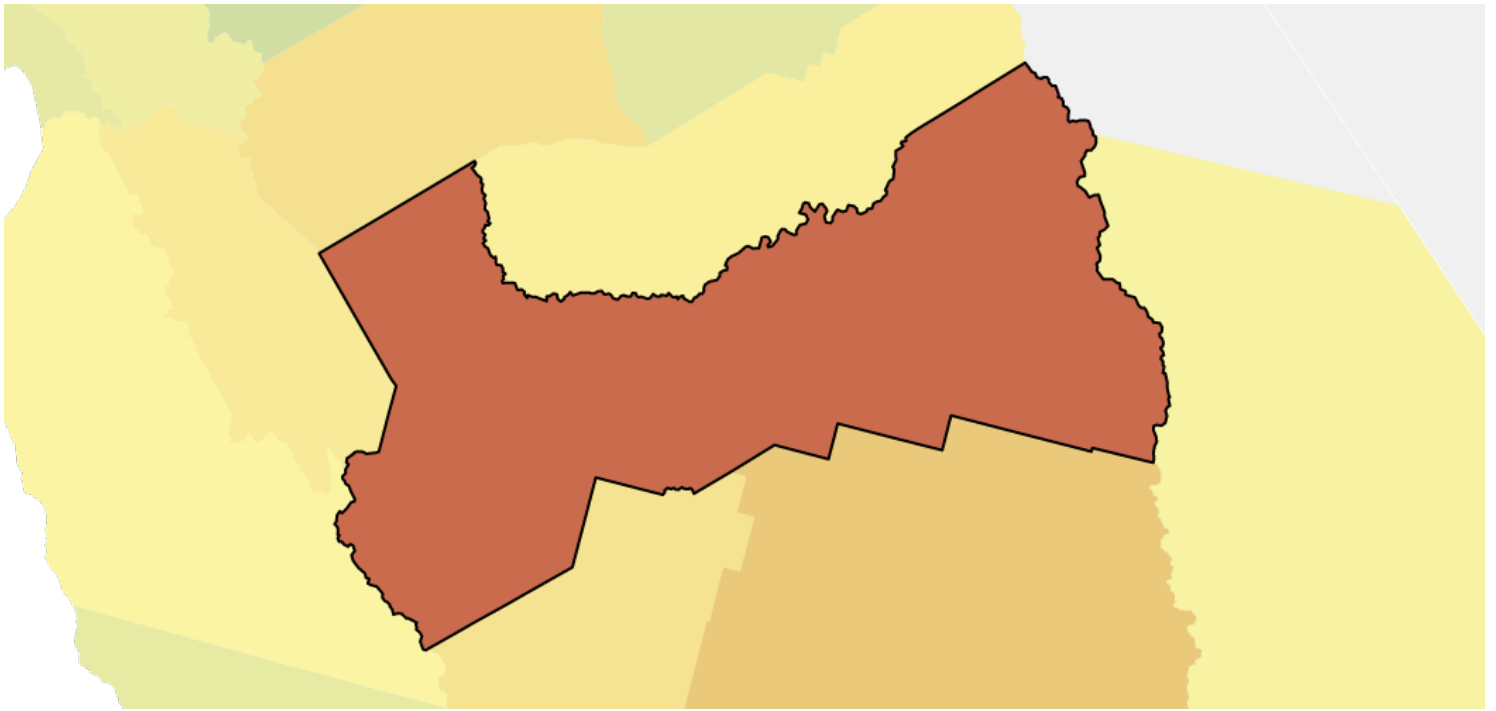
Income percentile

25th

50th

75th

99th



How much extra money a county causes children in poor families to make, compared with children in poor families nationwide.

+\$4,500

+\$1,500

+\$0 U.S. avg.

-\$1,500

-\$4,500

Fresno County is extremely bad for income mobility for children in poor families. It is among the worst counties in the U.S.

[Location matters](#) – enormously. If you're poor and live in the Fresno area, it's better to be in Madera County than in Tulare County or Fresno County. Not only that, the younger you are when you move to Madera, the better you will do on average. Children who move at earlier ages are less likely to become single parents, more likely to go to college and more likely to earn more.

But even Madera County is below the national average. Every year a poor child spends in Madera County subtracts about \$10 from his or her annual household income at age 26, compared with a childhood spent in the average American county. Over the course of a full childhood, which is up to age 20 for the purposes of this analysis, the difference adds up to about \$300, or 1 percent, more or less in average income as a young adult.

These findings, particularly those that show how much each additional year matters, are from a [new study](#) by Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren that has huge consequences on how we think about poverty and mobility in the United States. The pair, economists at Harvard, have long been known for their work [on income mobility](#), but the latest findings go further. Now, the researchers are no longer confined to talking about which counties merely correlate well with income mobility; new data suggests some places actually cause it.

Consider Fresno County, Calif., our best guess for where you might be reading this article. (Feel free to change to another place by selecting a new county on the map or using the search boxes throughout this page.)

It's among the worst counties in the U.S. in helping poor children up the income ladder. It ranks 97th out of 2,478 counties, better than only about 4 percent of counties. It is relatively worse for poor boys than it is for poor girls.

Here are the estimates for how much 20 years of childhood in Fresno County adds or takes away from a child's income (compared with an average county), along with the national percentile ranking for each.

What a Childhood in Fresno County Does to Future Income

For poor kids

Group	Income chg.	Nat. pct.
All kids	-\$3,380	4%
Boys	-\$4,120	2%
Girls	-\$2,360	13%

For average-income kids

Group	Income chg.	Nat. pct.
All kids	-\$2,090	6%
Boys	-\$2,530	4%
Girls	-\$1,540	13%

For rich kids

Group	Income chg.	Nat. pct.
All kids	-\$590	19%
Boys	-\$640	21%
Girls	-\$530	22%

For kids in the top 1%

Group	Income chg.	Nat. pct.
All kids	+\$740	45%
Boys	+\$1,040	61%
Girls	+\$400	34%

Across the country, the researchers found five factors associated with strong upward mobility: less segregation by income and race, lower levels of income inequality, better schools, lower rates of violent crime, and a larger share of

two-parent households. In general, the effects of place are sharper for boys than for girls, and for lower-income children than for rich.

“The broader lesson of our analysis,” Mr. Chetty and Mr. Hendren write, “is that social mobility should be tackled at a local level.” Here’s where Fresno County stands among .

How Fresno County ranks among places in the Fresno area

County	Poor boys	Poor girls	Average boys	Average girls	Rich boys	Rich girls	Richest boys	Richest girls	Median rent
Madera	1st	3rd	1st	2nd	1st	3rd	2nd	3rd	\$616
Kings	2nd	2nd	2nd	1st	3rd	2nd	3rd	2nd	\$573
Tulare	3rd	1st	4th	3rd	4th	4th	4th	4th	\$567
Fresno	4th	4th	3rd	4th	2nd	1st	1st	1st	\$593

In some places, the new estimates of mobility conflict with earlier estimates. For example, [previous estimates](#) suggested that New York City was a good place for lower-income children to grow up: Children raised in lower-income families in New York had above-average outcomes in adulthood.

But New York appeared above average in part because it has a large number of immigrants, who have good rates of upward mobility no matter where they live: Nothing about New York in particular caused these children to do better.

To remove variation that was simply caused by different types of people living in different areas, Mr. Chetty and Mr. Hendren based the latest estimates on the incomes of more than five million children who moved between areas when they were growing up in the 1980s and 1990s. These estimates are causal: They suggest moving a given child to a new area would in fact cause him or her to do better or worse.

In the new estimates, Manhattan ranks among the worst counties in the country for girls from lower-income families.

Here, better or worse is measured by the household incomes of children in early adulthood. This makes New York look worse than it would if individual incomes were used, because it, along with Northern California, has some of the lowest marriage rates in the country. Manhattan is actually better than most of the country at raising the *individual* incomes of poor girls. Marriage rates, too, are strongly affected by where children grow up.