

Inland Area Fares Poorly in Look at Well-Being

By David Olson | May 17, 2011

The Inland area lags behind the rest of California and the nation in well-being and access to opportunities, according to a report being released today. The study, by the New York-based Social Science Research Council, finds that Inland residents die younger, earn less and have far less education than other Californians.

But it found a large gap within the region. Areas centered in Rancho Cucamonga, Chino Hills and Murrieta ranked well above the state average on the council's "human development index," while the city of San Bernardino, the eastern San Bernardino County desert and Ontario were near the bottom.

The region's score of 4.58 -- on a scale of 0 to 10 -- compares with 5.46 for California and 5.09 for the United States. Council researchers calculated the index based upon life expectancy, income, educational attainment and school enrollment. Data came from U.S. Census Bureau estimates and the California Department of Public Health.

The average Inland resident can expect to live 78.3 years, compared with 80.1 statewide. Only about 19 percent of Inland residents have at least a bachelor's degree; 30 percent of residents statewide do. Inland residents typically earn nearly \$2,500 a year less than other Californians. Although this is the first report to rank California regions using a model based upon the United Nations' Human Development Index, other studies also have made similarly gloomy conclusions about income, education and health in the Inland area.

Hans Johnson, lead author of the 2008 report "The Inland Empire in 2015," said one reason the region ranks so low on such reports is that it is a focus for cheaper housing for the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area.

Lower incomes generally are correlated with less education and less access to health care, which is why the Inland area fares so poorly in all categories, said Johnson, senior fellow at the San Francisco-based Public Policy Institute of California.

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Being part of the Los Angeles megalopolis also means that many highly skilled, highly educated people in the Inland area move toward the coast because of a shortage of professional jobs in the Inland area and, in some cases, because of a perceived higher quality of life in coastal counties, said David Stewart, dean of the School of Business Administration at UC Riverside.

The Inland region can't do anything about its scorching summers or lack of beachfront property, but it needs to work harder to attract high-skill jobs, Stewart said. It's no coincidence that many of the Inland area's more affluent neighborhoods are near the western edge of the region. Residents live there because they could buy large homes for less money than near the coast, but they still commute into Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties for high-paying jobs, he said.

With 27 colleges and universities, the Inland area each year produces thousands of college graduates who could help boost the region's economy.

"The problem is that many of those students have to go elsewhere to get a job, even though they might like to stay in the region," Stewart said.

SAVING GRACES: Carole Beswick, president and CEO of nonprofit Inland Action, a group of Inland leaders, said those colleges and universities, the region's natural beauty and its economic links with the rest of Southern California give the area built-in advantages that are cause for optimism. "I don't think we have deficits that are intractable," she said. "We have a lot going for us."

The study finds bright spots for the region. Income and education gaps between ethnic and racial groups are lower than in the rest of the state. Latinos, the poorest large ethnic or racial group in the state, earn about \$12,500 a year less than whites in the Inland area. The gap is nearly \$23,000 in Los Angeles and Orange counties. African-Americans in the Inland area earn about \$2,000 a year more than the typical resident of the region, but blacks in the San Francisco-Oakland area make about \$7,000 a year less than the average worker in that region.

The study bases its data on median income, the midpoint of all incomes in the state and each region.

Johnson said the smaller gaps are largely because the Inland area attracts many middle-class blacks and Latinos who leave Los Angeles and Orange counties for larger, less expensive homes.

The study used 233 census-designated areas to examine geographic differences. A region centered in Rancho Cucamonga ranked 79, with a human-development score of 6.21, the highest in the Inland area. A San Bernardino-based area had the lowest Inland score, 3.23, ranking it 219th. Rancho Cucamonga residents typically earn nearly \$15,000 more and live 4½ years longer than their San Bernardino counterparts.

EFFORTS TO IMPROVE

San Bernardino Mayor Patrick Morris said the city's low ranking is not surprising.

The older, relatively small homes that make up much of the city's housing stock attract people with modest incomes, and the rail yards that have long provided jobs brought with them pollution that can damage residents' health. But Morris said the city's plummeting crime rate, and efforts at improving access to nutritious foods and cleaning up the rail areas, are signs the quality of life for San Bernardino residents is improving.

Sarah Burd-Sharps, lead author of the report, said she hopes the study will not just sit on a shelf as a collection of sad statistics but will spur government, foundations and others to develop policies and programs to narrow the gaps and improve people's lives.

"This is a way to start the conversation," Burd-Sharps said.

