

Money isn't Everything: Survey finds other Factors beside Income make a State Successful

By Sarah Ryley | November 4, 2011

Not all places are created equal.

The first-ever “opportunity index” ranks counties and states based on 16 factors — such as unemployment, preschool attendance and high school graduation rates, violent crime and access to healthy food — to determine which areas offer the best chance of living up to the American dream of merit-based opportunity.

The results, commissioned by a newly formed coalition of citizen and political leaders called Opportunity Nation, paints pictures of vastly different Americas.

An area’s opportunity index score had a greater correlation with the percentage of its teenagers in school or working, and the percentage of homes with high-speed Internet access, than it did with median income.

Nevada ranks the lowest with an opportunity index of just 21.3 out of a possible 100, followed by Mississippi (29.8) and West Virginia (31.5). At the top are Connecticut (89), Minnesota (81.2) and Massachusetts (80.9).

“There’s been so much emphasis on inequality and especially on the split between the top 1 percent and the bottom 99 percent,” said Isabell Sawhill, a senior fellow of economic studies at the Brookings Institution, referring to the Occupy Wall Street movement against America’s economic inequities.

But “even within the 99 percent, there are major differences that are leading to a society which is going to consist of haves and have nots in the future unless we do something different,” Sawhill said.

Nevada, with the lowest opportunity index in the nation, is a prime example.

It ranks No. 16 in terms of median household income, at \$55,585. Yet it has the lowest percentage of children in preschool, teenagers working and graduating high school on time, and adults working and involved in groups and volunteer work, according to the study.

The state ranks only behind the District of Columbia — an entirely urban area — in violent crimes. Nevada has 702 violent crimes per 100,000 people.

“By always looking at income and always focusing only on jobs, we neglect all of these other incredibly important factors,” said Sarah Burd-Sharps, co-director of the American Human Development Project, which developed the index.

In contrast, Minnesota, which ranks No. 2 on the opportunity index, has roughly the same median income at \$57,000, but has the highest percentage of its teens working and in school, and among the highest high school graduation, volunteerism and group involvement rates. It ranks No. 41 in violent crime.

Mississippi and Connecticut are more in line with conventional thinking on the relationship between income and opportunity.