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Results are in: California's San Joaquin Valley is the worst

Michael Doyle | McClatchy Newspapers

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WASHINGTON — Poverty, poor health and plenty of school dropouts have put the San Joaquin Valley's 20th Congressional District dead last in a new national scorecard that ranks the overall well-being of residents.

Even notoriously grim Appalachia fares better than the congressional district that sweeps in Fresno, Kings and Kern counties, the study, which was released Wednesday, shows. The assessment of health, education and income ranks the district 436th out of 436 districts nationwide.

"We have significant issues in the Valley that reflect rural inequality," said Adela de la Torre, a University of California at Davis professor and adviser for the new study. "The Valley has always been an area that's underserved."

The study, "The Measure of America," applies to the United States, for the first time, a so-called "human development" standard previously used to evaluate developing countries from Afghanistan to Zambia. The domestic results are sobering.

For instance, only 6.5 percent of the 20th Congressional District's adults have graduated from college. In the top-ranked New York City district, 62.6 percent of adult residents claim a college degree.

Only half of the Valley district's households post annual incomes above \$16,767. In the New York City district, half claim incomes above \$51,139. Most poignantly, the residents of Manhattan's Upper East Side live on the average four and a half years longer than residents of the Valley district.

"These two districts are very, very far apart in human development," study co-author Kristen Lewis noted.

The San Joaquin Valley's manifold woes have been previously identified in studies by everyone from Modesto's Great Valley Center to the Congressional Research Service. This latest 246-page study provides a somewhat different lens.

The authors, affiliated with the non-partisan Social Science Research Council and Columbia University Press, tallied health, education and income statistics. They called their "human development index" a measure of "three basic building blocks" of a good life.

"We have difficult challenges; there is no doubt," acknowledged Rep. Jim Costa, the Fresno Democrat who has represented the 20th Congressional District since 2005.

Costa, echoing de la Torre, stressed that "we lag in terms of dollars spent in the Valley, compared to other parts of the United States." The non-partisan Congressional Research Service likewise noted in a December 2005 report requested by Costa and other Valley lawmakers that the region "received fewer federal funds" than other parts of California or the United States overall.

At the same time, Costa stressed that "we've seen improvements" in areas like unemployment, and he predicted further improvements could result after developments like the opening of a proposed new University of California medical school in Merced.

"Manhattan's Upper East Side is obviously going to have higher income and more people with advanced degrees," Costa added. "But this does not mean that a farmer who did not go to college is worse off than anyone else."

By explicitly ranking all 435 congressional districts, in addition to the District of Columbia, the authors funded by Oxfam America, the Rockefeller Foundation and other non-profits put individual lawmakers on the spot.

This has tactical implications, as the new report includes an "eight point human development agenda" whose generally liberal-sounding tenets range from boosting incomes and increasing paid maternal leave to making health care affordable for all Americans.

"It could not come at a better time," said Raymond Offenheiser, president of Oxfam International. "We are in the midst of an electrifying election, when voters are hungry for change."

Four congressional districts, for instance, share portions of Fresno County, and other San Joaquin Valley counties likewise struggle with persistently low incomes and high dropout rates. Nonetheless, the 21st Congressional District represented by Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, ranked 378th, the 19th Congressional District represented by Rep. George Radanovich, R-Mariposa, ranked 235th, and the 18th Congressional District represented by Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, ranked 403rd on the new scorecard

Higher income and better school performance go hand in hand. However, researchers noted that the wealthy and well-schooled do not necessarily live significantly longer.

California, overall, ranks 11th on the scorecard that puts wealthy Connecticut in the top spot. Residents of last-place Mississippi can expect to live six years less than the average resident of either California or Connecticut, the study shows.

ON THE WEB

The study is available at: [Measure of America](#)

The 2005 Congressional Research Service study of the Valley is available at:

[CRS: San Joaquin Valley](#)

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