

New 'Portrait of Marin' report explores Marin's income inequality gap

By Rob Rogers

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Head instructor Shawn Koller, right, at First Five Marin, sings with students on Wednesday, February 25, 2009. The Pickleweed Preschool could lose more than half it's funding as a result of the state's budget agreement. (IJ photo/Robert Tong) Robert Tong



Cyclists ride along Ross Commons in Ross, Tuesday. A new report commissioned by the Marin Community Foundation illustrates the stark contrasts in health, life expectancy, education and recreation between Marin's wealthiest residents and those living in the county's low-income and minority neighborhoods. (IJ photo/Alan Dep)

A new report commissioned by the Marin Community Foundation illustrates the stark contrasts in health, life expectancy, education and recreation between Marin's wealthiest residents and those living in the county's low-income and minority neighborhoods.

"A Portrait of Marin," produced by the American Human Development Project, an extension of the nonprofit Social Science Research Council, draws distinctions between towns such as Ross and Tiburon — where residents enjoy long lives, high incomes, extensive educations and access to healthy foods — and those such as the Canal area of San Rafael, which the report compares to rural West Virginia.

Marin Community Foundation leaders say they hope the



A long line of people wait to sign up for a free Thanksgiving turkey at Pickleweed Park Community Center in San Rafael in 2009. (IJ archive/Frankie Frost)

detailed analysis will help guide public policy toward addressing some of the conditions it highlights, including the need for better educational opportunities for low-income students, more parks and better jobs.

"I think it's going to be most helpful in stimulating specific conversations, such as on the disparity of economic opportunity faced by many of the young people in this community," said Thomas

Peters, president and CEO of the Marin Community Foundation, who declined to reveal the cost of producing the report. "With a relatively small additional commitment from all of us, we could get these young people to succeed in school and in their vocations."

The report marks the first time that the American Human Development

Project has focused its research on a single U.S. county. The study notes that, in general, Marin scores well above other California counties and U.S. states with regards to health, education and living standards. The typical worker in Marin earned an annual salary of \$44,246 in 2009, higher than the California median salary of \$31,551 and far above the median U.S. salary of \$29,530. (That salary had dropped, however, from the median Marin salary in 2000 of \$47,995, an indication of the recession



A woman crosses the street in front of the post office in Ross on Tuesday. Ross residents enjoy long lives and high incomes, according to a new report. (IJ photo/Alan Dep)

that followed national trends.)

Within the county, however, the study notes sharp disparities between cities, neighborhoods and demographic groups, stating that "Marin has the second-highest level of income inequality of any California county." According to the report, the top fifth of Marin's taxpayers earn about 71 percent of the county's total income, while the bottom fifth earns only 1.3 percent — and life for those bottom-earners is extraordinarily stressful, the report suggests.

In Ross, the Marin community with the highest "human development index" rating issued by the report, median personal earnings are \$64,378 — more than double those of the typical American worker — and four out of five residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher. At least 90 percent of residents are white, and those residents can expect to live an average of 88 years.

In San Rafael's Canal area, by contrast, median earnings are \$21,000 — about what a typical American worker earned in the late 1960s — and less than half the residents hold a high school diploma. About 76 percent of the residents are Latino, and the average life span is 80.5 years.

"It's no surprise to me that the population of the Canal neighborhood would be rated way below

that of Ross," said Tom Wilson, director of the Canal Alliance, which serves Marin's low-income immigrant populations. "It's not only an immigrant community, but a self-selected group of immigrants: people who came here because they were fleeing oppression, poverty, war and any number of other traumatic events. And about half that population are indigenous peoples, who might speak Spanish as a second language or not at all. It's a unique group."

The report's index of 48 Marin neighborhoods, based on census tracts, places Ross, Tiburon, Mill Valley, Greenbrae, Larkspur, Sausalito and the Glenwood and Peacock Gap areas of San Rafael in the top 10. The bottom eight includes Marin City, the West Marin communities of Nicasio, Point Reyes Station, Dillon Beach and Tomales; the San Rafael neighborhoods of Santa Venetia and the Canal; and Novato's Hamilton, Lynwood, Olive, Deer Island, downtown, Pioneer Park and San Marin neighborhoods.

The report singles out Novato's Hamilton neighborhood as having one of the county's shortest average life spans and an overall lack of access to healthy food and recreation areas.

The report's recommendations include providing better access to high-quality preschool, reducing high school dropout levels among low-income and minority students, and increasing per-student spending levels for students at low-income schools.

The study compares the \$8,237 spent per student at San Rafael High School, where more than half of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunches, and the \$10,340 spent per student at Larkspur's Redwood High, where only 4.6 percent are.

"It's essential that we address our achievement gaps," said Marin County Superintendent of Schools Mary Jane Burke. "Some children require more resources in order to receive the quality education that we all want for our kids." The report also recommends setting aside the county's commitment to preserving open space, agriculture and low-density neighborhoods in order to provide more affordable housing to its workers.

"Improving human development requires that the needs of people to secure basic capabilities take precedence," the report states. "This might mean, that ... zoning laws that limit certain kinds of development (and thus help maintain a neighborhood's character) be suspended for the construction of a multifamily complex with units for low-income families and older adults."

Contact Rob Rogers via e-mail at rrogers@marinij.com

IF YOU GO • The Marin Community Foundation will host "Out of Poverty: From Surviving to Thriving," a meeting to discuss its new "A Portrait of Marin" report, from 1:30 to 4 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 18 at the Osher Marin Jewish Community Center, 200 N. San Pedro Road in San Rafael.

• For more information, visit www.marincf.org/portrait.