

Report calls Tallahassee 'most economically segregated'

Karl Ethers, Tallahassee Democrat 9:26 p.m. EST February 25, 2015

Tallahassee tops the list of the most economically segregated cities in the U.S., according to a report released Monday by the University of Toronto's Martin Prosperity Institute. Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce officials, however, are calling the data "flawed."

Using U.S. Census numbers, researchers Richard Florida and Charlotta Mellander tried to determine how 350 metro areas in the U.S. were ranked by three segregation factors: economics, education and occupation.

Florida's capital city ranked No. 1 on the combined list, followed by Trenton, N.J., Austin, Tucson, San Antonio, Houston and Dallas. Tallahassee also tops the list in overall income segregation, the report found, followed by Cleveland and Detroit.

In other words, the report says the city's rich people (households with incomes over \$200,000) and poor people (households below the poverty level) live in different neighborhoods, separating themselves from each other more than in any other city in the U.S.

"It is not just that the economic divide in America has grown wider; it's that the rich and poor effectively occupy different worlds, even when they live in the same cities and metros," the report says.

Of Tallahassee's 186,000 in population, 30 percent is below the poverty level and the median household income was roughly \$40,000 annually, according to U.S. Census data between 2009 and 2013. The poverty line, as defined by the Census, is an annual income of \$23,000 for a family of four.

The report generally found larger cities with higher population densities were more likely to have more distance between the rich and the poor. That a city of Tallahassee's size has the highest divide is an outlier in the data.

Richard Florida was not available for comment, but Chamber and Leon County Economic Development Council President Sue Dick said the report uses data from outside of the Tallahassee metro area, including Gadsden, Jefferson and Wakulla counties, which skews the results.

"The methodology of the study is fundamentally flawed by using regional data and attributing it to Tallahassee specifically," Dick wrote in an email. "Worse yet, the authors used misleading, emotionally-charged and inaccurate language."

One of the explanations for Tallahassee's anomalous status could be the presence of universities. Segregation of highly educated people is generally greatest in larger, denser cities, but metros with universities have a strong divide between jobs requiring higher education — like doctors, researchers, professors and administrators — and low-skill jobs that provide basic services to the institutions.

Dick noted that with two major universities and a community college in Tallahassee, there is a natural gap between higher wage earners, well established in their careers, and students, who generally have little to no income.

Tallahassee's unemployment rate has remained mostly below the state's rate in the past decade, only rising above it last summer briefly. The number has since declined to 4.9 percent in December, and in the last year the Chamber is reporting 2,700 jobs have been added in the region and it contributed to more than 75 start-up companies.

"Everyone who has lived in Tallahassee or visited here considers it the capital of the quality of life, even as we continue to work on raising the fortunes of every segment of the community," Dick wrote.

The Chamber enlisted Karen Cyphers, a public policy researcher, adjunct professor at Florida State University and Tallahassee-based Sachs Media Group's research division vice president to refute the researchers' report.

Cyphers' rebuttal says the study fails to define "economically segregated" and objects to the use of the politically-charged word to describe the contrast between communities, without noting the strides being taken to address affordable housing, education access, poverty and health care.

"This study, however, fails to capture the true issues we face today," Cyphers' report says, "just as it fails to define our community with a poorly measured and inappropriate term."

Richard Florida, one of the researchers, is the author of "The Rise of the Creative Class," which examined the link between creative workers and the economic success of cities. That book became an international best seller and positioned him as a leading thinker in the area of urban theory.