



Upfront: The picture of Dorian Marin: 'Portrait of Marin' presents a view many would prefer stashed in the attic
By Peter Seidman | February 10, 2012

Reaction to a recently released report commissioned by the Marin Community Foundation that looks at economic and social disparity in Marin came fast and furious. Letters to the editor excoriated the foundation for the effrontery of suggesting that based on health, income and education, Marin is far from a homogeneous and happy community for all who live here. "Portrait of Marin" uses public records and hard statistics to show that while most of the county is far above average, not everyone has an equal chance to succeed and reach the level of well-being most Marinites have achieved.

It's the very fact that overall the county ranks much higher than average when it comes to health and education and income that hides the harsh reality that inequality exists. It takes something like the "Portrait of Marin" report to draw back the curtain, allowing people to see the county's reflection in the mirror. The image revealed is disturbing and not all that pretty, a stark contrast to the vapid perception of hot-tubbing Marin that became a cliché.

The unmasking has triggered visceral reactions from critics of the foundation and the report. But while harsh letters continue to circulate, those who support the foundation and accept the report's findings view the foundation's effort as a step forward toward social justice (a legitimate term that in itself would inflame many of the same people who criticize the foundation).

"Reaction was stronger than I expected," says Thomas Peters, CEO and president of the foundation. "It's a funny thing what facts and descriptive statistics can trigger. There is this patina of perception in Marin that we are a rich county. You hear it said over and over, and folks believe it to be generally true." But, says Peters, the report illustrates that "it's certainly not true for a really significant population of people living in Marin." The report should be a revelation leading to positive action rather than an instigation of negative reaction. But it's far from a perfect world. And Marin is far from a perfect county.

The Human Development Project, an adjunct of the nonprofit Social Science Research Council, produced the report. According to its mission statement, "The Social Science Research Council leads innovation, builds interdisciplinary and international networks, and focuses on research on important public issues." The Research Council held its first meeting in 1923 and currently concentrates on examining issues using economics, sociology and political science. That integrated nature of investigation carries over to the Human Development Project. The foundation of the Human Development Project comes from a change in the way some academics studied the relative happiness of societies. The United Nations picked up the approach and recognized that merely looking at a developing nation's gross domestic product and other financial indicators couldn't alone describe the existential health of a country. From that premise grew a new way of seeing human development, how ordinary people fare in a society, whether they are healthy, free to live where they choose, whether they have access to good education and recreation. That came in large part from work that Amartya Sen, a Nobel laureate and Harvard economist, formulated. He posits that there are more contributors to a rich life than economic activity, and those contributors affect health, well-being and economic success.

That integrated approach formed the underpinnings of the first United Nations Human Development Project report in 1990. Since then, reports have described conditions in more than 140 countries, and the methodology used to compile them has become an accepted form of study. The American Human Development Project picked up on the international effort and began compiling reports in this country. It produced one for the country as a

whole, and as part of a look at states, the project compiled a California report. The report commissioned by the Marin Community Foundation is the first time the Human Development project has focused on a county. The Human Development methodology uses statistics derived from public information to look at the health, education, housing and recreational opportunities available to people. Those statistics then get boiled down to a scale that allows a comparative analysis. In Marin, the report compares towns in the county. (It also includes West Marin and unincorporated areas.)

Sarah Burd-Sharps and Kristen Lewis, co-directors of the American Human Development Project, are the authors of the Marin report. In an introduction, they lay out a harsh reality that many Marinites either have not recognized around them or have purposely refused to accept.

"A lack of affordable housing is one of Marin's largest challenges today, with ripple effects in multiple [directions]." The authors note the aging of the county's population and stress that Marin needs more housing to accommodate that fast-growing group. In addition, the report continues, "Too many of the county's teachers, public safety workers, medical support personnel, and others who keep Marin running cannot afford to live near their jobs; as a result, 61,500 people commute each day from neighboring counties to work in Marin, with negative impact on both traffic and the environment."

That's hardly news to anyone who has followed demographic and housing trends in the county. But the report's conclusion reinforces the contention that the need for more affordable housing underlies many of the issues the county faces.

The report also concludes that educational opportunities here are far from equal. There is a "persistent lagging of school achievement among low-income students and students of color." That gap "hamstrings Marin's competitiveness in an era dominated by the knowledge economy and the need for an educated workforce." The conclusion that triggered an especially high-anxiety reaction painted a picture of Marin as a county of "highly segregated neighborhoods and limited racial and ethnic diversity," which are "an enduring characteristic of Marin." The facts stand for themselves: More than half the county's African-Americans are concentrated in four of the county's census tracts plus San Quentin Prison. Setting aside San Quentin, the report shows stark inequality between the towns that score highest on the Human Development Scale and those at the bottom. Areas included at the bottom of the scale, not surprisingly, are the Canal, Marin City and Hamilton in Novato. Racial and income segregation can have real effects. In Ross, for example, residents can expect to live an average of 88 years, about 10 years longer than the national average. Ross is 90 percent white. In the Canal, which is 76 percent Latino, the average life expectancy is 80.5 years.

Educational opportunities, the availability of affordable housing, attitudes toward health and the concentration of parks and recreation all play a part in determining the level of human development. Critics of the report who say that it's skewed by using the Canal, for instance, as a neighborhood to match against towns like Ross say the Canal includes many undocumented residents, and that accounts for much of the inequality. But that argument fails to take into account the lower human development rating in Marin City and Hamilton, where low income and race are the undeniable variables.

Other critics ask what's the big deal? It's up to individuals to forge their own paths. It's wrong, they say, to expect a larger segment of society to help those who have failed to (in the eyes of the larger society) succeed. It's common to hear those critics say that achieving educational goals and getting a good job and refraining from having children out of marriage are the causative factors in achieving successful human development.

But not all things are equal, as almost any minority resident in the county can attest to. And the contention that people are responsible for pulling themselves out of hardship negates the very reason for the report: A level of inequality (and, yes, bigotry and racism) exists in Marin to an extent that makes it exceedingly hard for many minority and low-income residents to achieve human development success without some kind of leveling mechanism. Sometimes it's hard to see that image in the mirror. But recognizing it is the first step toward easing its negative connotations.

Even though many conclusions in the report are far from new, the inclusion of the cold statistics to back up cross-disciplinary conclusions shines a magnifying-glass light on the county, revealing imperfections. Or, as Peters puts it, the report takes a raft of publicly available data delineating a wide range of human life and uses the measures of education, life expectancy and income. "Those aren't the only measures of life," he says, "but they're pretty key." The income disparity in Marin is as stark as anywhere: The top fifth of Marin residents earns 71 percent of the income in the county. The bottom fifth earns just 1.3 percent. That kind of disparity reflects the segregated society that's endemic in the county.

Some critics who say the foundation's ultimate goal is redistribution of wealth use hyperbole that brings out a kind of hysteria. The report reflects the values of the foundation that stretch back to the wishes of Beryl Buck, whose bequest created the Buck Fund, which now totals more than \$850 million. In addition to the Buck money, the foundation has many other Marin contributors to the health and well-being of the county. When Buck made the bequest, she stipulated that the money "shall always be held and used for exclusively nonprofit, charitable, religious or educational purposes in providing care for the needy...." Those wishes are mirrored in the pages of the "Portrait of Marin."

The last section of the report translates the findings into steps for action. One particularly incendiary conclusion is a call for the county and its cities to reconsider zoning regulations and take another look at the view of open space, with an eye toward increasing the stock of affordable housing. The report's authors apparently did not know that the county long ago developed a policy to accommodate increased affordable housing while preserving open space. The concept involves an urban corridor along Highway 101, where housing density could increase without spreading into open space. The follow-on concept of transit-oriented development hones the idea, as does the plan to run passenger trains between Marin and Sonoma counties on tracks that parallel the freeway. "We are seeing an increase in the number of people living alone, in the number of people who are aging, the number of people who have disabilities," says Peters. "Actually an increase in housing density [along the urban corridor] is an advantage rather than a disadvantage. And we have plenty of places to build without going into open space and agricultural land."

The report's true focus is on those who need a boost to get an even break in Marin society. In response to critics who say inequality is a fact of nature and it's unacceptable to suggest that any adjustment in opportunity is warranted, Peters says, "We as a society depend on the young people that are coming out of all of these communities to be our engineers, our nurses, our educators. These are the people... we will be dependent [on]. To say, 'I've got mine, so I don't need to care about others' is to really have a myopic view of the future." Peters adds that the data is clear: "These kids can achieve to the highest bar of any child coming from the most favored neighborhood. We as a society are way better off investing in at least equalizing opportunity."