

Baton Rouge gets best, worst rating in study



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NEW ORLEANS (AP) -- Baton Rouge is Louisiana's best place to live and its worst, a new report says.

A coalition of groups analyzed 2007 data on health, education and earnings to form a quality of life index.

The "best" rating for Baton Rouge cited a suburban swath of predominantly white southern East Baton Rouge Parish combined with West Baton Rouge Parish. The "worst" rating came for sections of downtown and north Baton Rouge, which are predominantly black.

The report, spearheaded by Oxfam America, the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation and other groups, said someone in the first area "can expect to live, on average, nearly half a decade longer, earns twice as much, is almost three times more likely to have a bachelor's degree, and is three times less likely to have dropped out of high school" than someone living in the other section.

The differences reflect a broader gap in quality of life across Louisiana between black and white residents, a condition also especially noted in Mississippi, Alabama and Nebraska.

The disparities were striking, said Kristen Lewis, co-author of the report and co-director of the American Human Development Project, which has produced this and other reports adapting a United Nations formula to create the

10-point "human development index."

For example, she said whites in affluent neighborhoods of New Orleans scored as well in the group's index as top-rated states. But, she said, "African Americans living in rural Tangipahoa have a score that corresponds to the human development level of the average American in the early 1950s."

Louisiana's overall score of 3.92 put it above only West Virginia and Mississippi among the 50 states and Washington, D.C., the report said. The group's national report, using 2005 statistics, put Connecticut first at 6.37, followed by Massachusetts (6.27) and Washington, D.C. (6.14).

The area of Baton Rouge scoring lowest in Louisiana - 2.51 on the index - is 88 percent black. The top-rated area spanning parts of East and West Baton Rouge parishes that scored 5.73 is 70 percent white.

Other sections of East Baton Rouge - one including Zachary, Baker and unincorporated parts of the city, and one including parts of downtown and the LSU campus area - also are in Louisiana's top 10, with scores of 4.47 and 5.12 respectively.

The Baton Rouge area grew rapidly after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, because many evacuees either couldn't or didn't want to return to coastal parishes. Pre- and post-storm reports cannot be compared because the earlier report was sorted by congressional district rather than the 36 smaller data areas on which this one is based, Lewis said.

Those are areas which had about 100,000 residents in the 2000 Census. While Orleans, East Baton Rouge and Jefferson parishes each is divided among four areas, as many as 10 less populated parishes are gathered into a single unit.

The median for personal earnings in 2007 - the most recent year for which population, health, education and earnings statistics all were available - was \$24,376 for the state. That means half of all residents age 16 and up earned more than that, and half earned less.

The report also looked at white and black residents of each area. A six-parish area of Avoyelles, Concordia, Winn, Grant, Iassie and Catahoula was next-to-last overall, at 2.76, last for whites at 3.26 and 33rd for African Americans, at 1.55.

"Whites living in bottom-ranked Avoyelles-Concordia have a higher HD Index score than African Americans in all but four parish groups," the report said. Those were much of Jefferson Parish, where the index was 4.22 for African Americans; the southeastern half of St. Tammany Parish, 3.64; the northern part of East Baton Rouge, 3.41; and the top-rated part of the Baton Rouge area, 3.36.

On the Internet: American Human Development Project: <http://www.measureofamerica.org/>

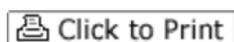
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