

# On Campus: Central Valley needs more grads, good jobs to keep them here

By Nan Austin  
naustin@modbee.com

How are you doing?

Wind aggravating spring allergies? Money a little tight this month? Kids doing OK in school?

How you and all your neighbors would answer those questions forms the root idea behind the wonky-sounding [Human Development Index](#).

The index uses U.S. Census Bureau data on health, income and education to figure out how well people in an area are doing, simplifying it to a fast-read number between 1 and 10. United Way brought an expert on the index to Modesto and Merced to give a primer to local leaders on what the numbers say about our area.

On Wednesday, Henry Gascon showed neighborhood profiles laid out in “[A Portrait of California 2014-2015](#),” released by [Measure of America](#) in December. Gascon is manager of programs and policy development for United Ways of California.

The statistics for Stanislaus and Merced counties sit below the state and national averages – no surprise. But within those numbers can be found some wide gaps.

Californians have higher incomes, better health and similar education to the nation as a whole, giving the state a Human Development Index score of 5.39, compared to 5.07 for the nation. South San Joaquin County stands at about the California average, but the broad read drops to 3.78 for Merced County and 4.13 for Stanislaus County. West Modesto is far lower, the Oakdale area higher, than the county average.

Less education and lower incomes – related issues – are what drag us down. Health is lower, too, but, in an odd twist, recent immigrants bring that reading up, despite having the lowest education and income of all. Newcomers from Mexico, on average, live 3.6 years longer than non-Latino whites here, and 3.2 years longer than their U.S.-born children, Gascon said.

Home cooking seems to be the difference, he said. Start gulping sugary sodas and high-sodium fast food and we all slide down.

To put the health number in perspective, babies born today in the Silicon Valley (Santa Clara County) are expected to live long enough to blow out 84 candles, five candles more than the American average. Babies born in Merced County have a life expectancy of 79 1/2 years, while Stanislaus County newborns have a statistical date with the grim reaper soon after turning 78.

California rates just past a 5 in education. Stanislaus County comes in at 3.6, and Merced County's score barely tops 3. As in the other numbers, sections of each county rate differently.

Take the numbers of high school dropouts. Nearly twice as many adults over the age of 25 in Ceres, Patterson and Newman never passed 12th grade (31.4 percent) compared with east Modesto (15.9 percent). Nearly three times as many folks in Los Banos and Livingston failed to earn a diploma (37.5 percent) as the national average (13.6 percent).

Boosting those disparities are less-educated immigrants coming in and college graduates leaving the area seeking more opportunity elsewhere. Though nobody tracks the numbers of graduates leaving, the lack of opportunities is plain

as day.

“The presence of universities is usually an economic driver. UC Merced has been in place for 10 years, but we haven’t seen Merced’s economy improve significantly,” Gascon said.

Turlock has higher numbers, thanks to California State University, Stanislaus. “But even around Cal State, Stanislaus, the impact is not as robust as it can be and should be,” Gascon said.

The study shows areas the county can work on, such as expanding the labor market around the universities and expanding technical and vocational education, said Francine DiCiano, head of United Way of Stanislaus.

“We don’t have all the answers, but at least we can get the conversation started,” Gascon said.

Bee education reporter Nan Austin can be reached at [naustin@modbee.com](mailto:naustin@modbee.com) or (209) 578-2339. Follow her on Twitter [@NanAustin](https://twitter.com/NanAustin).