

# For Richer or for Poorer

## NEW TOOLS REDEFINE WEALTH AND WELL-BEING

by Sabine Heinlein / GSAS '07

**O**n paper, Flushing, Queens, and Stapleton, Staten Island, appear to be in equal economic shape: Both

New York City neighborhoods report per capita incomes of roughly \$20,000 and poverty rates of around 15 percent. In reality, though, they are worlds apart. Flushing residents enjoy a hodgepodge of notable international cuisine—everything from Korean barbecue to Ecuadorian pastries—have run of the scenic 1,255-acre Flushing Meadows Corona Park and are just steps from the Queens Museum of Art, New York Hall of Science, and Shea Stadium. Meanwhile, those living in Stapleton have fewer food options and are more likely to be unemployed and die from HIV, diabetes, or violent crime.

“Income alone tells you very little about quality of life,” says Walter W. Stafford, professor of urban planning and public policy at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. “You’ve got to put people in the context of their communities and the risks and barriers they face.” In his newly released study, “In the Shadow of the UN: The Global North and South in New York City,” Stafford added such context by applying the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index (HDI)—traditionally used to determine the level of

well-being and development in a country—to rank New York City’s 59 community districts. “The goal was to use international tools to look at the UN’s own backyard,” says Diana Salas (WAG ’03), an assistant research scientist with Wagner’s Women of Color Policy Network, which authored the four-year study. Stafford and Salas hope that the report not only redefines the concept of domestic poverty but also offers a comprehensive database to help local government develop more informed intervention strategies.

The study, which considers a variety of indicators to establish a community’s level of prosperity, divides the districts into areas of

“high,” “medium,” and “low” human development. Accordingly, within the medium category, Flushing registered a solid HDI of 0.5 out of 1.0, while Stapleton scored a 0.3. Among the nine districts rated the highest were Manhattan’s Upper East Side and Upper West Side. East Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and nine other districts—almost all in the outer boroughs—fell into the low human development category.

Each neighborhood was first ranked according to residents’ longevity, education, and standard of living. After that, the study gauged secondary variables, such as health, demographics, income, and environment, and, finally, branched out into more detailed considerations, including residents’ immigration status, literacy rates, race, gender, educational achievements, and access to medical facilities, parks, and public transportation.

Last year, Stafford presented the study’s preliminary results to Linda Gibbs, New York City’s deputy mayor for health and human services, and continues to advocate that the government adopt the index as an annual review to gauge social and economic disparity, a measure Brazil and European Union members have used for years. Stafford and his team will bring their tools to the public in fall 2007 in a conference with leaders of nonprofit organizations. “We don’t only want a political discourse,” he says, “but also a civic one.” ■



QUEENS RESIDENTS ENJOY THE WEALTH OF GREEN SPACE IN FLUSHING MEADOWS CORONA PARK.

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