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Even as U.S. economic opportunity falls, study finds broader gains

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By Moriah Costa

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Reuters) - Economic opportunity has dropped in the United States over the past 40 years, but a broader gauge of opportunity incorporating crime, education and healthcare has been on the rise, according to a study released on Tuesday.

The study released by advocacy group Opportunity Nation and research group Measure of America showed that opportunity increased 13 percent from 1970 to 2010, even as economic opportunity decreased by 22 percent.

"I think that the important thing to recognize is that opportunity is more than just the unemployment rate," said Mark Edwards, executive director of Opportunity Nation, a bipartisan group that seeks to expand economic mobility.

"Access to education is important, access to healthcare is important. These are all pieces that are critical to opportunity," he said.

The study measured data from a variety of government sources to determine a measure of success in each state and Washington, D.C., in terms of economics, education and community life. The study took into account a range of factors from access to healthcare to household income and violent crime.

It found that educational opportunity rose by 80 percent and community opportunity increased by 20 percent, more than offsetting the decline in terms of economics.

The slow recovery from the 2007-2009 recession weighed on the measure of economic opportunity, as did a 30 percent increase in income inequality and a 12 percent rise in poverty.

Based on the broad measure, however, almost every state has seen opportunity increase over the past four decades, with the biggest gain in Virginia. Only Nevada and Michigan registered declines. (Reporting by Moriah Costa; Editing by Leslie Adler and Lisa Shumaker)

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