

## Extremes of Wealth and Poverty

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From the viewpoint of someone who has recently moved to Silicon Valley, the region's contrast between the extremes of wealth and poverty is astounding. Low income combined with soaring housing costs is exacerbating homelessness and also forcing long term residents out of the community while the area remains the center of innovation and material civilization. Research indicates that there are about 6700 homeless in Santa Clara County and that in 2013 the average income disparity between the poor and wealthy reached \$300,000 in the Bay Area.

Despite the atrocities being committed in the name of religion, the Baha'i Faith ([www.Bahai.org](http://www.Bahai.org)) views religion as a social force, "the greatest of all means for the establishment of order in the world" and "the basis of all civilization and progress in the history of mankind". It considers, therefore, the spiritual and moral teachings of religion an essential part of any approach to solving social problems.

Baha'i teachings point out that given the different capabilities of individuals, there will always be a continuum of social and economic standing in a society. We are urged, however, to eliminate the *extremes* of wealth and poverty. This teaching revolves around the central principle of the oneness of humankind, that despite our physical differences we are all spiritual beings coming from *one* Source, and as such are *one* human family, like "the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch". We must, therefore, deal "one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship." Furthermore, the Baha'i teachings emphasize the importance of just and fair laws, which safeguard the rights and privileges of all, rich and poor alike. While every individual, even with limitations, is obligated to engage in some work or profession to earn a livelihood, the society is obligated to provide individuals with opportunities for both acquiring and utilizing talent. The importance of generosity and *voluntary* giving is stressed; and wealth is considered praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is expended for philanthropic purposes on measures that would universally ensure the comfort and well-being of the masses of the people, on the promotion of knowledge, on the founding of schools, and on the encouragement of art and industry. In brief, wealth dedicated to the welfare of society is believed to ensure the happiness, prosperity and stability of the world of humanity. Finally, America is called upon to become a land of spiritual distinction and leadership, to lead the way in establishing the oneness of humanity and to "become glorious in spiritual degrees even as it has aspired to material degrees."

Despite current philanthropic efforts, the challenge before the innovative minds of Silicon Valley is to work together with local stakeholders on finding sustainable solutions for building communities where there is no colossal wealth on one side and abject poverty on the other, where the poor are relieved from the stress of want and misery and all are comfortable and content.