

Betting on casinos pays off

RESERVATIONS: Education and income levels rise. An Inland newcomer to gaming hopes to win too.

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By MICHELLE DeARMOND and DAVID OLSON / The Press-Enterprise

UC Riverside researchers report a growing inequality between gaming and nongaming tribes, with the average casino tribe experiencing a 27 percent growth in income over a decade as many nongaming tribes remain stagnant or decline in income and education. Some poor tribes experienced as much as a 56 percent drop in per-capita income.



Rodrigo Pena / The Press-Enterprise

Tribal members hope for jobs, says Columba Quintero-Cruz, who directs a program that provides government benefits.

The statewide study by UC Riverside's Center for California Native Nations offers the first detailed look at the impacts of tribal gaming in California, where increasing numbers of the state's 107 tribes have opened casinos since the 1980s.

One Inland tribe hopes to get an income boost of its own with the opening of a casino, perhaps within the next year, along the busy Highway 86, which connects Mexico to the Coachella Valley.

The Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians plan a 349-slot-machine casino to get money for their members and to improve their remote reservation, which is challenged by unpaved roads, dilapidated homes and unreliable utilities.

After watching its neighbors in the Coachella Valley enjoy a gambling boom, the Torres-Martinez tribe signed its own agreement with the state a few years ago allowing it to open two casinos. The tribe of some 700 members, many of whom live on the reservation in Riverside and Imperial counties, will put the first casino next to a truck stop it opened last year.

The Study's Findings

UC Riverside released its study of gaming's effects last week at the Western Indian Gaming Conference, prompting a state tribal leader to encourage gaming tribes to do more to help nongaming tribes.

Casinos are not an option for a number of the state's tribes, many of which have reservations that are far from urban areas and major roadways, and many tribes have been unable to start other profitable businesses.

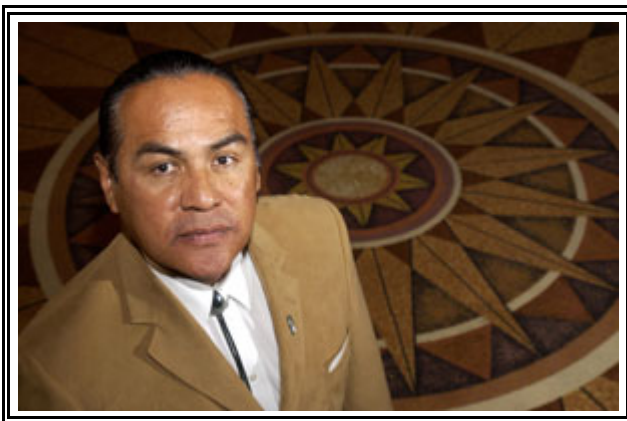
In gaming tribes, the percentage of families living in poverty dropped to about 26 percent in 2000, compared with 10.5 percent for California overall. The poverty rates of families in nongaming tribes continue to be nearly 30 percent.

"That so many families are still in poverty is unacceptable," said Anthony Miranda, chairman of the California Nations Indian Gaming Association and a member of the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians near Temecula. "We cannot leave our brothers and sisters behind; lest our collective dream of self-sufficiency remains unfulfilled."

Miranda proposed an economic summit in which gaming tribes could offer their services to nongaming tribes, helping them gain access to capital or working with them to develop nongaming enterprises, such as energy plants.

As sovereign nations, tribes traditionally have often operated independently, but it's time for more collaboration, he said.

Comparing Tribes



Amanda Lucidon / The Press-Enterprise
Raymond Torres Sr. is tribal chairman of the
Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians who
plan a 349-slot-machine casino.

The study includes an exhaustive analysis of income, education and employment levels of gaming and nongaming tribes compared with one another, the state and the country as a whole between 1990 and 2000. Additionally, the researchers studied how gaming has improved the income and employment levels of the areas surrounding reservations and looked at how much money gaming tribes have shared with poorer tribes.

A number of gaming tribes put a certain percentage of their profits into a special fund for nongaming tribes as part of the 1999 state-gaming agreements signed with then-Gov. Gray Davis.

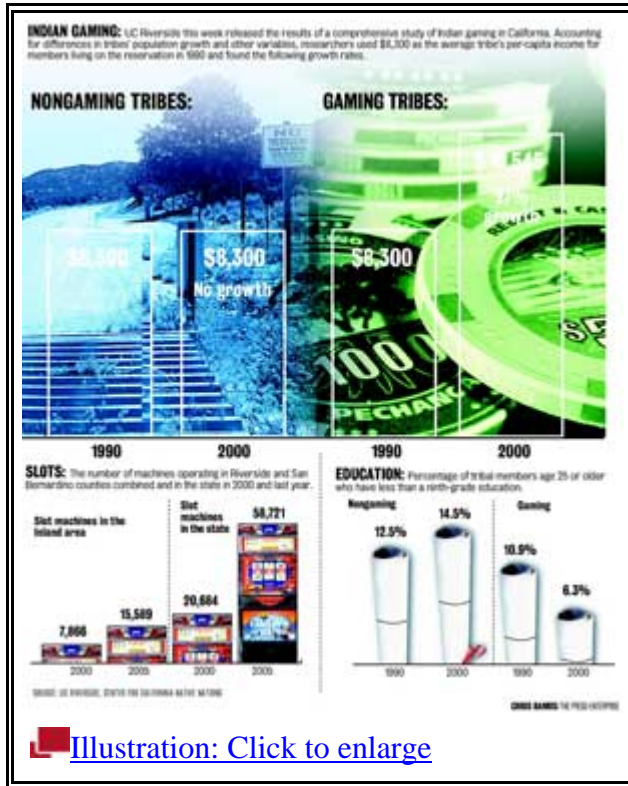
The study shows gaming tribes had fewer adult tribal members who have less than a ninth-grade education. But when it came to higher education, there was little difference. The percentage of tribal members older than age 25 with a college degree was 10 percent for gaming and nongaming tribes alike.

The researchers used census data from 1990 and 2000 to compile the report, so the past six years of gambling growth is not reflected. Income levels even for gaming tribes remained far below the state and national averages for all families in 2000, according to the report.

Voters approved Las Vegas-style gambling for tribes in 2000, and casinos have grown markedly since then. The number of casinos, 40 in 2000, had jumped to 56 in 2005.

Some tribes started offering different forms of gambling in the mid-1980s, but battles with state and federal officials over the legality of those businesses kept many from expanding.

There are 56 casinos statewide, and 10 of those are run by nine tribes in the Inland area. Many of those casinos are among the largest and busiest in the state. The Inland area is home to three nongaming tribes, and of those, only the Torres-Martinez has plans for a casino.



Promise of Change

The members of that tribe look forward to new jobs that would slash a 52 percent unemployment rate among tribal members living on the reservation, said Columba Quintero-Cruz, who directs a program that provides government benefits to members of several Southern California tribes.

The tribe also wants its own police and fire departments, said Joe Loya, tribal resource manager. Currently, public-safety agencies from Riverside and Imperial counties must travel many miles to respond to emergencies, he said.

About 200 tribal members live on the 12,000-acre reservation. Most of the 50 houses are mobile homes, many decades old and dilapidated, said Maxine Resvaloso, the tribal manager and a member of the tribal council.

Grace Bull Child said she and her family suffered frequent electrical outages and were forced to use only one appliance at a time before they recently replaced the electrical panel of their 36-year-old mobile home. But the money they spent on that means there is little for other needed renovations, she said.

Casino money would allow the tribe to build new housing, Resvaloso said.

The new revenue also would fund college scholarships for students, many of whom cannot go to university now because of a lack of money, said Phillip Morreo, a tribal elder.

"Then," Morreo said, "they can come back and be future leaders and help the tribe."

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