

# SunSentinel OPINION

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## SUN SENTINEL EDITORIAL

# Florida shines at favoring the rich, punishing the poor

Florida is first in a lot of things, Gov. Ron DeSantis likes to say, but it's debatable. For instance, the No. 1 education ranking is by a commercial magazine, U.S. News & World Report, whose methodology is controversial.

But there's one category in which Florida is unarguably first — first of the worst. The state has the nation's most regressive state and local tax structure.

That's the judgment of ITEP, the progressive Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, which ranks states every five years.

Florida, previously third-worst, now tops everyone else in the degree of unfairness, in which people who can afford it least are taxed more heavily than those who can afford it the most.

Here, the poorest fifth of the under-65 population (those earning less than \$19,600) pay 13.2% of their family income in state or local taxes, while the wealthiest, whose incomes average \$3.2 million, pay only 2.7%. That compares to 7.2% nationwide.

## Soaking the poor

Florida taxes the poorest nearly five times harder than the wealthiest. Four other states take an even bigger bite out of them, but Florida has the worst inequality index across the board. It's because this state depends so heavily on taxing property and purchases and has no personal income tax or estate tax.

Five of the nine states that rank next worst — Washington, Tennessee, Nevada, South Dakota and Texas — also lack a personal income tax.

Florida's taxes are regressive across the board, according to ITEP's analysis.

Families in the second income bracket — between \$19,600 and \$35,700, including everyone earning only Florida's



Florida has been ranked as the most regressive, unequal state in the country in terms of tax policy. COURTESY

current \$12 an hour minimum wage — pay 10.9% in state and local taxes. That's more than \$1 for every \$10 they earn, four times what the richest pay.

Florida's middle-income families — earning from \$35,700 to \$61,500 — pay an effective rate of 9.5%, three and a half times that of the rich.

Those in the fourth bracket — \$61,500 to \$118,300 — pay 8.4%. From there to \$270,600, the tax bite is 6.4%. For the next bracket, earning up to \$735,700, it's 5%, with the wealthiest paying only 2.7%.

## Gross inequities

The slope is regressive in every tax category, even property, where the rates are flat and the homestead exemption is less of an advantage to the wealthiest homeowners. Tenants pay it through their rent.

Politicians and lobbyists responsible for these gross inequities will tell you that a wealthier person pays more in actual dollars.

That's beside the point; the right measures of a tax's burden and fairness are in how it relates to one's income.

If the burdens were reversed, or just evened out, Florida's taxes would no longer be regressive. That's how it is in the 10 jurisdictions that ITEP ranks fairest: Washington, D.C., Minnesota, Vermont, New York, California, New Jersey, Maine, Massachusetts, New Mexico and Oregon. Each has a personal income tax.

With a tax structure skewed to favor the wealthy, it's no wonder Florida's population grows by an estimated 365,000 people a year.

PolitiFact verified DeSantis' claim that Florida has the largest net in-migration from other states. California, his favorite example, takes 12% from the wealthiest people, second only to New York. The poor and middle class are taxed nearly as heavily in both states.

## How the rich get richer

The "freedom" that DeSantis extols seems to be freedom from fair taxation.

The poorest pay the lowest tax burden in only seven states, ITEP found. The richest have the lightest load in 41.

That explains in part how the rich get richer. People see that, and it contributes to their dissatisfaction with politics. But they rarely assign a deserved share of the blame for state policies that foster inequality.

Florida's sales tax is particularly favorable to the rich because it applies primarily to consumer items. Services, such as advertising, estate planning, landscaping, and other professional fees are tax-free.

Two governors tried to make Flori-

da's tax structure fairer by taxing most services. Neither succeeded.

## Bob Martinez's moment

Republican Gov. Bob Martinez inherited a rare opportunity in 1987. Facing a huge anticipated deficit, Democratic legislative leaders provided for repeal of all sales tax exemptions in 1987. At Martinez's urging, they agreed to tax most services rather than raise the sales tax from five cents on the dollar to six. It would have made the tax code fairer to all.

Opposition to taxing advertising was fierce from Florida broadcasters and newspapers. The powerful real estate brokers' lobby railed against a services tax. Martinez and the Legislature succumbed to the pressure, repealed the tax, and raised the basic tax on merchandise to its present statewide rate of 6%.

That made the state's main source of revenue more regressive, not less. Democratic Gov. Lawton Chiles revived the services tax in 1992 but it went nowhere.

Reform of any sort is unthinkable in today's Florida. Some proposals would make the system worse.

One is Agriculture Commissioner Wilton Simpson's proposal to exempt agricultural equipment from property taxes that other businesses pay on their machinery and inventory.

Even so, tax reform remains an urgent, if overlooked issue, for the 2026 governor's race and beyond.

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## ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

# How children can recover from the horrors of war



By Paula Delgado-Kling

In my country, Colombia, since I was old enough to read a newspaper, the headlines talked of bombs demolishing entire rural towns, leaving families and children homeless and displaced. These were slightly less horrific images of what I see nowadays happening in Gaza and Israel. In

Colombia, the ones causing the suffering were FARC, a now-defunct terrorist group, most of whom have splintered into separate drug-trafficking groups. The FARC were as bloody as Hamas. The FARC held war councils among their members in which the verdict included teenagers ordered to shoot one another. It was a morose exercise in testing allegiances. The FARC kidnapped policemen and soldiers and kept them chained and exposed to the elements as prisoners of war, for up to 14 years in one case. The FARC locked a bomb around a civilian woman's neck and watched her face as the timer counted down to her death.

I met Leonor, a former FARC child soldier, in July 2001, when she was two weeks out of the FARC. She was 17 years old. I followed her recovery for nearly two decades. Although Leonor participated in battles, she was a child at heart and a victim. Much of what she went through to heal, with the help of the Colombian government's rehabilitation program, can be applied to children in Israel and Gaza.

When Leonor came out of war depressed and suicidal, her therapists gave her a goal: to fall in love with life. Something as simple as enjoying the taste of ice cream or laughing for a few moments in a swimming pool with others her age were considered a triumph. During this time, Leonor was encouraged to dance and write poetry. One of her proudest moments is performing a dance she choreographed in a theater in Bogota in front of former child soldiers. Art helped her accept that her sadness was justified.

Leonor lived in various group homes with other former teen combatants. Therapists encouraged them to find their individuality and express it. One boy had pink hair. A group of boys played basketball at a local park, and with their minds engaged and the camaraderie shared with teammates, they forgot for a few hours that most suffered from insomnia. Leonor volunteered as a model in a fashion show, and she credits having her makeup and hair done professionally as having awoken in her a sense of pride.

The teens I met were desperate to experience a childhood. In a video filmed by



Palestinian children line up to receive a portion of food at a makeshift charity kitchen in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, on Nov. 8 amid the ongoing battles between Israel and the militant group Hamas. SAID KHATIB/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

the FARC and found by the army, children, as visibly young as 8 years old, can be seen giggling as they are taught maneuver exercises using wooden rifles. They regarded training for war as a game, akin to how our kids respond to laser tag.

Eventually, Leonor returned to school, which gave her hope for a future. As the years passed, she was introduced to different trades, like jewelry-making. Others picked up gardening, farming, carpentry and electrical skills, which to this day have helped them to secure a paycheck.

Throughout this time, Leonor met with mental health professionals. Their sessions emphasized reuniting with her family. My mom was always in my thoughts, Leonor told me. Yet, she was also aware that her family was conditioned by her community, and hence by the fabric of her hometown, whose DNA was FARC-centered. Therapy pushed a pause button on her life and gave her perspective.

The children of Israel and Gaza will need to pause a moment and be given a chance to be children again. Art, dance, creative writing and sports can be an opportunity for children who have been through war to fall in love with life again.

*Paula Delgado-Kling holds degrees in comparative literature/French civilizations, international affairs and creative writing from Brown University, Columbia University and The New School, respectively. Delgado-Kling followed the life of a former child soldier in her homeland of Colombia for nearly two decades to create the nonfiction book, "Leonor: The Story of a Lost Childhood." Visit PaulaDelgadoKling.com.*



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The county is wrong: Tunnel is better option

Thank you for the article about the bridge vs. tunnel debate, including the letter from Assistant County Administrator Kevin Kelleher. As a downtown Fort Lauderdale resident, I would like to refute his points and add some new ones in favor of a tunnel.

First, I can understand why county commissioners prefer the cheap bridge built through the center of our beautiful downtown: It's not in their backyard or their constituents'. They don't have to look at it every day and deal with the construction. I say this after living through the Henry E. Kinney Tunnel renovation and the lovely Tunnel Top Park for three years. Our city has become a labyrinth of detours.

Second, this is a "forever project," at least in my lifetime. It shouldn't be based solely on cost. What if the builders of the Lincoln and Holland tunnels in New York and New Jersey thought that way? Or, for that matter, the Kinney tunnel?

To the county's points. Do they really believe that people who own property near a bridge will gleefully give up their land? Both sides will need land for either a bridge or tunnel. On flooding, I agree our engineers should consult with the experts in Miami, where the Port Miami Tunnel is a proven success. Perhaps we can improve upon it. As for traffic, I laughed about 10,000 dump trucks invading our roads. What about the thousands of dump trucks and cement trucks needed to build a bridge of the size demanded?

We can all agree that we need commuter rail for coastal cities. How it's done and who should bear the costs are the main factors. We're all paying for this project, whether through federal taxes or local taxes, and we will live with the results for a lifetime.

Joanne Snead, Fort Lauderdale

### Neglecting our children

An article in the Sun Sentinel described

how 15 GOP-led states, including Florida, have rejected participation in a federal program to provide food to needy children.

Regardless of one's political party affiliation, this short-sighted GOP action is reprehensible and serves as another clear example of why the GOP needs to be defeated in the upcoming (and subsequent) elections. After reading the article, honestly ask yourself: Do you really think the Republican Party gives a damn about children?

How ironic that the foundation of the GOP anti-abortion platform is supposedly based upon giving children a chance to live and let kids be kids (a standard stump-speech line for Ron DeSantis). However, their actions reveal their true agenda: Once children are born, forget about them. That's the message our Florida governor and his 14 colleagues have made abundantly clear.

Dr. Mark N. Levine, Coconut Creek

### Biden and the economy

Much is written about inflation and how poorly President Joe Biden has managed it. But the facts prove differently. The stock market continues to climb, inflation is down to 3.1%, more people are employed largely due to higher wages, many major prescription drug prices have dropped and gasoline is often below \$3 a gallon.

Shopping, dining out and traveling have increased, Social Security benefits continue to rise, albeit less than needed. The economy has never been perfect under any president, but if Donald Trump were in office, he would shout to the heavens that this is the best economy our country has ever seen. So, if all is so good, why the public unhappiness? Soaring price increases are one reason, but that's not due to Biden — it's the greed of big business. They want their profits to grow so that their executives can get multimillion-dollar salaries and bonuses. To them, the struggling public matters little.

Seymour Brotman, Delray Beach

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