

Precision Taxation: A Survey of Adults in Howard County, Maryland

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ABSTRACT

Wealth taxes are a type of tax that is imposed based on the individual's assets above a certain threshold (1). Progressive income taxes, by contrast, apply higher rates to higher earners. This study measured attitudes toward both taxes among adults in Howard County, Maryland, and examined whether residents believed that higher income tax rates lead to greater tax evasion. An anonymous online questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms through the author's personal network and local Facebook, Nextdoor, and Reddit groups, yielding a nonprobability convenience sample of 83 adult respondents. Participants reported demographic information and rated their agreement (5-point scale) with implementing a progressive income tax and a wealth tax and indicated whether they believed higher income-tax rates increase evasion. Responses were summarized with counts, percentages, medians, and interquartile ranges. Wilson score confidence intervals were calculated for proportions, paired agreement ratings were compared using a Wilcoxon signed-rank test and a Spearman rank correlation, and belief in evasion was compared across age groups using Fisher's exact test and a Cochran–Armitage test for trend. Support for a progressive income tax (median 4, IQR 3–5) exceeded support for a wealth tax (median 3, IQR 2–5), and 72.3% of respondents believed higher income-tax rates would increase evasion. Because the sample was small, local, self-selected, and demographically unrepresentative, the findings are exploratory and cannot be generalized to Howard County or the United States.

Keywords: Wealth tax; progressive income tax; wealth inequality; tax evasion; public opinion

INTRODUCTION

For decades, tax cuts on the wealthy have been argued as a tool for stimulating economic growth, creating jobs, and helping the entire population. Supporters of these policies claim that reducing the tax burden on the wealthy benefits the broader population through increased investment and innovation, an effect termed “trickle-down.” However, after many years of such

policies, wealth inequality and economic recessions have persisted in the United States, raising questions about the ability of tax cuts to support the nation and its population. Currently, the top 1% owns roughly 25% of overall assets, while the bottom 50% owns roughly 6% (2).

U.S. tax policy has been heavily influenced by supply-side economics since the 1980s. Under the approach termed Reaganomics, taxes on high earners, capital, and business were lowered on the expectation that the resulting investment would support economic growth. The recorded outcomes were mixed. Boot (3) reports that following these tax cuts, unemployment rose from 7.4% to over 10%, approximately 500,000 people lost access to welfare, and the federal deficit was projected to exceed

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\$100 billion. Boot also documents unequal distribution of the subsequent gains, with income for the top 1% of families growing by 75% while the bottom 90% saw growth of 7%. Despite these documented shortcomings, supply-side reasoning has remained central to federal tax policy and continues to shape contemporary debate.

An alternative position holds that tax increases can support the economy by redistributing wealth. Advocates of this view have called for wealth taxes, which are imposed on an individual's net worth or assets above a certain threshold (1). These differ from income taxes, which are imposed on the annual earnings or profits of individuals and businesses from wages, salaries, and investments (2), and from progressive taxes, which apply graduated rates so that higher earners pay a higher percentage.

Evidence that the effects of tax cuts are not confined to the 1980s comes from more recent cases. In 2012, Kansas Governor Brownback cut the top tax rate by 30%, after which job growth reached 4.2% compared with 9.4% nationally, with labor force participation slightly declining (4). Examining 18 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations, Hope and Limberg (5) found that major tax cuts produced an average increase of 0.7% in the top 1% share of pre-tax national income within five years, with no statistically significant effect on real GDP per capita or unemployment. The absence of measurable gains in output or employment suggests that income accruing to the wealthy was not translated into job creation or investment. U.S. corporate tax trends from 1988 to 2012 point in a similar direction: although cash effective tax rates fell sharply, marginal tax incentives, the measure most relevant to investment decisions, declined less than average tax burdens (6). Where marginal incentives remain relatively unchanged, firms have limited reason to increase investment or hiring, so reductions may raise corporate profits and wealth concentration while leaving overall economic performance largely unchanged.

A related claim is that unequal accumulated wealth is eventually redistributed through investment and trickle-down effects, but this is not supported by the available long-run evidence. Piketty's (7) analysis of income and wealth data across advanced economies found that declines in top marginal income and capital tax rates, particularly in the United States since the 1980s, were commonly followed by sharp increases in the top 1% share of income and wealth. Modeling work reaches a similar conclusion: Banzhaf (2) finds that even highly progressive income taxes only slightly

reduce wealth inequality, while a flat wealth tax increase of approximately 1% can achieve redistributive effects comparable to a 60% income tax rate. Taken together, these studies report that the tax cuts they examined were not followed by measurable gains in growth or reductions in inequality.

Research on raising taxes has examined both revenue and distributional effects. Lin and Jia's (8) simulation of the Laffer curve, which describes the relationship between tax rates and government revenue (9), finds that revenue in China peaks at a labor tax rate of 35–40%, well above the current rate of 10%, indicating that higher rates can coexist with a functioning economy even where GDP losses occur. For the United States, Trabandt and Uhlig (10) estimate potential revenue increases of approximately 30% through higher labor income taxes and 6% through higher capital income taxes, suggesting that existing tax-raising capacity has not been fully used.

On distribution, Jalles and Karras (11) provide empirical evidence that from 1970 onward, increases in tax progressivity were associated with a decline in the Gini index, a measure of how evenly wealth is distributed across society, even after accounting for overall tax levels. This suggests that inequality is shaped not only by how much is taxed but by which taxes are used. At the local level, Howard County Councilmember Jung noted that the county's housing taxes, its largest revenue source, are not structured progressively (12). Banzhaf (2) further argues that income taxation alone is unlikely to eliminate wealth inequality regardless of progressivity, since assets can be held in untaxed forms, and that a flat wealth tax is comparatively easy to administer and audit because liability is simpler to calculate. He also notes that most evasion occurs through use of loopholes rather than outright nonpayment, which suggests that a clearly defined rate may reduce opportunities for evasion.

A common objection to raising taxes on the wealthy is that higher rates increase evasion. Several lines of research identify mechanisms that may support compliance. Schechtl and Tisch (1) report majority support for a net wealth tax across three nations, at 78% in the United States and 86% in Germany and the United Kingdom, indicating that such a policy would not lack public backing. Papp and Takáts (9) model taxpayers' joint decisions about working and evading, conditional on perceived detection risk and penalty, and find that evasion fell by 40% following a 1% rate reduction, suggesting that rate calibration can reduce evasion incentives. Alm (13) identifies trust as a major determinant of compliance with policies requiring voluntary behavioral change,

and notes that transparency and accountability in local government, information about neighbors' compliance, visible links between taxes and local services, and educational outreach can each strengthen it. Consistent with this, a preprint by Jopia and Aranda (14), which has not undergone peer review, reports that a nation's left- or right-wing orientation had little impact on economic growth, which was instead associated with strong political institutions, low corruption, and an effective judicial system. Finally, Kleven *et al.* (15) found that income subject to third-party reporting had evasion rates near 0%, compared with 37% for self-reported income, and that audits reduced evasion only for self-reported income. This indicates that structural design, rather than enforcement intensity alone, is central to compliance. Together, these findings suggest that concerns about evasion under higher rates may be addressable through institutional trust, rate design, and third-party reporting.

This study measured attitudes toward these policies among adults in Howard County, Maryland. Specifically, it assessed respondents' level of agreement with implementing a progressive income tax and a wealth tax, and whether they believed that higher income tax rates lead to greater tax evasion. It was hypothesized that agreement with a progressive income tax would exceed agreement with a wealth tax, and that a majority of respondents would believe higher income tax rates increase evasion. The survey measured stated attitudes only; it does not test whether either tax reduces inequality, raises revenue, improves compliance, or affects economic growth. Evidence on those questions comes from the literature reviewed above.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The data were collected through a descriptive survey, Appendix A, that was distributed across Howard County to adults using a Google Form from March 13 to March 24, 2026. First, the survey was sent to family friends and neighbors. This accounted for around 40 responses, which is around half of the 83 total responses. This method, though allowing for a large amount of responses, may have increased the chance of bias in the survey, due to the potential similarity in beliefs. Next, the survey was sent through social media groups on Facebook, Nextdoor, and Reddit. On Facebook, the survey was sent to the Clarksville Happenings, Western Howard County Shares, Howard County Neighbors United, and HoCo United groups. On Nextdoor, the survey was sent on the Columbia page and on Reddit, the survey was

sent on the r/ColumbiaMD and r/HowardCountyMD subreddits (online groups). These groups were chosen for their large number of members across Howard County. The recruitment of respondents was nonprobability and convenience-based, and participation was voluntary and self-selected. Eligibility was limited to adults residing in Howard County, Maryland, as stated on the introductory page of the form. Both criteria were self-reported and could not be verified, since the form did not request an exact age, a street address, or a ZIP code. This study was conducted as an independent high school research project under the supervision of Ms. Sharbaugh in the Independent Research G/T Program, but was not reviewed by a formal institutional review board. The introductory page of the Google Form informed participants of the study's purpose and intended use of the data and stated that responses were anonymous and that no personally identifying information would be collected, with consent indicated by voluntary submission of the form. Because responses were fully anonymous, the form did not require a Google account login, did not restrict submissions to one per account, and did not collect IP addresses or email addresses. Duplicate submission was discouraged only by written instruction in the form prompt. No timestamp screening or manual review for duplicate or ineligible responses was conducted, and no responses were excluded; all 83 submissions are included in the analysis.

As part of the study, an interview was conducted with Howard County Councilmember Deb Jung on December 9, 2025, to provide local context on county tax policy. She was informed of the study's purpose and consented to being interviewed and quoted. The interview was used as descriptive background rather than as survey data and was not combined with the quantitative results.

RESULTS

The quantitative data describe the age, gender, ethnicity, and income of respondents, their support for progressive income and wealth taxes, and their beliefs about tax evasion. Table 1 reports the age distribution of the sample.

Respondents ranged from under 20 to over 71 years old. The sample was concentrated in the middle-aged range, with the largest groups being 41 to 50 (28 respondents, 33.7%), 51 to 60 (16, 19.3%), and 31 to 40 (13, 15.7%). Together these three groups made up more than two-thirds of the sample. The youngest groups were the smallest, with only 1 respondent (1.2%) under

20 and 6 (7.2%) aged 20 to 30. Respondents aged 41 to 70 account for 56 of 83 (67.5%), and only 7 (8.4%) are under 30, against the Howard County median age of approximately 40 years (16). Table 2 reports the gender of respondents.

The respondents were 44.6% female and 50.6% male, with 3 participants declining to report and 1 participant selecting another category. Howard County's adult population is approximately 51% female (16), so the sample underrepresents women relative to the county. Table 3 reports the ethnic composition of the sample.

Table 1. Age distribution of respondents ($n = 83$).

Age group	N (%)
<20	1 (1.2%)
20-30	6 (7.2%)
31-40	13 (15.7%)
41-50	28 (33.7%)
51-60	16 (19.3%)
61-70	12 (14.5%)
71+	7 (8.4%)
Total	83 (100%)

Table 2. Gender of respondents ($n = 83$).

Gender	N (%)
Male	42 (50.6%)
Female	37 (44.6%)
Prefer not to say	3 (3.6%)
Other	1 (1.2%)
Total	83 (100%)

Table 3. Ethnicity of respondents ($n = 83$; respondents could select more than one category, so counts sum to more than 83).

Ethnicity	N (%)
Asian or Pacific Islander	27 (32.5%)
Black or African American	4 (4.8%)
Hispanic or Latino	6 (7.2%)
Native American	0 (0%)
White or Caucasian	39 (47%)
Multiracial	2 (2.4%)
Other	11 (13.3%)

The respondents could select more than one ethnicity, so the percentages add to more than 100%. Most identified as White or Caucasian (39, 47%), followed by Asian or Pacific Islander (27, 32.5%). Smaller numbers identified as Other (11, 13.3%), Hispanic or Latino (6, 7.2%), Black or African American (4, 4.8%), and Multiracial (2, 2.4%), and no respondents identified as Native American. This can be compared to the US Census results of Howard County in July of 2025, showing 50.4% White, 21.6% Black or African American, 0.9% Native American, 21.4% Asian and 0.1% Pacific Islander, 5.7% Multiracial, and 9.4% Hispanic or Latino (16). The survey overrepresents Asian people and underrepresents African Americans, which may affect the representativeness of the estimates. The large share of Asian or Pacific Islander respondents may reflect that the survey was first sent to family and family friends, many of whom are Asian. Because several of these groups contain very few respondents, comparisons across ethnicity should be interpreted with caution. Table 4 reports household income.

Table 4. Annual income of respondents ($n = 81$; two respondents did not answer this item).

Income Group	N (%)
<30k	5 (6.2%)
30k-50k	8 (9.9%)
51-80k	6 (7.4%)
81-100k	7 (8.6%)
101-150k	15 (18.5%)
150-200k	12 (14.8%)
200k+	17 (21%)
Prefer not to say	11 (13.6%)
Total	81 (100%)

The reported income ranged from under 30k to over 200k but was concentrated in the higher brackets. The n value is 81 instead of the 83 total respondents because two respondents did not fill out the question. The largest groups were 200k+ (17, 21%) and 101 to 150k (15, 18.5%), while 11 respondents (13.6%) chose not to report their income. The concentration in the upper brackets is expected given the affluence of Howard County. Of the 81 respondents who answered the income item, 11 declined to specify a bracket. Among the 70 who did,

44 (62.9%) reported income above \$101,000. The county median household income is \$149,763 (16), though this comparison is only approximate, since the survey asked respondents for their individual annual income rather than total household income, and households with more than one earner will report higher combined figures. Before rating either policy, respondents were asked whether they had previously heard of a progressive income tax and of a wealth tax. 59 of 83 (71.1%) reported prior familiarity with a progressive income tax and 58 of 83 (69.9%) with a wealth tax. Both items were included to establish baseline familiarity and were not used in any comparison. Table 5 summarizes agreement with each tax.

Table 5. Agreement with implementing a progressive income tax and a wealth tax ($n = 83$; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; no missing responses).

Response	Progressive Income Tax	Wealth Tax
1 (strongly disagree)	7	18
2	11	14
3 (neutral)	14	14
4	20	14
5 (strongly agree)	31	23
Median (IQR)	4 (3 to 5)	3 (2 to 5)

The support for the progressive income tax was higher and concentrated toward the top of the scale, with a median of 4 (IQR 3 to 5), indicating that the median response fell in the agreement range, and the largest single group strongly agreed (31, 37.3%). Wealth tax support was lower and more evenly spread across the scale, with a median of 3 (IQR 2 to 5), indicating a median response at the neutral point and responses were divided between agreement and disagreement. Because the same 83 respondents rated both taxes, the two were compared using a Wilcoxon signed-rank test, which is appropriate for paired responses, and support for the progressive income tax was significantly higher than for the wealth tax ($W = 167$, $p = 0.002$). Agreement ratings of 4 or 5 were given by 51 of 83 respondents for the progressive income tax (61.4%, 95% CI 50.7% to 71.2%) and 37 of 83 for the wealth tax (44.6%, 95% CI 34.4% to 55.3%). The confidence intervals for proportions were calculated using the Wilson score method. Table 6 shows the number of people who believed that higher income tax rates would lead to higher rates of evasion.

Table 6. Belief that higher income tax rates would lead to higher rates of evasion ($n = 83$).

Response	N (%)
Yes	60 (72.3%)
No	23 (27.7%)
Total	83 (100%)

Sixty of the 83 respondents (72.3%, 95% CI 61.8% to 80.8%) reported believing that higher income tax rates lead to higher tax evasion, compared with 23 (27.7%) who did not. Belief was reported by a majority of respondents in every age group. The age group with the lowest rate of belief was 31 to 40, with seven of thirteen answering yes and six answering no, while among respondents aged 41 to 50, five of 28 did not believe in the link. No age bracket contained more than 30 respondents, and three categories (<20, 20–30, and 71+) contained fewer than ten. The association between age group and belief was tested using Fisher's exact test, which is appropriate here because several expected cell counts are below five, and was not statistically significant ($p = 0.26$). A Cochran–Armitage test for trend across the ordered age categories was likewise not significant ($z = -1.04$, $p = 0.30$). Because several age categories contain fewer than ten respondents, these tests have low statistical power, and a non-significant result should not be interpreted as evidence that no association exists. Figure 1 shows this belief by age group.

To see whether people who supported one tax also supported the other, a Spearman rank correlation was run between progressive income tax support and wealth

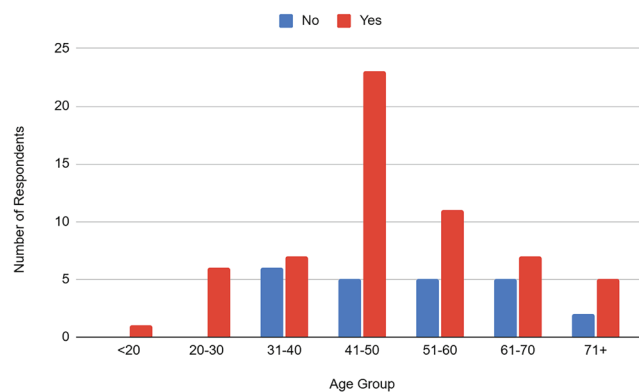


Figure 1. Belief that higher income tax rates increase tax evasion, by age group ($n = 83$).

tax support. This test was chosen because both answers were on a 1 to 5 agreement scale, which is ordered rather than measured on an exact numeric scale, and Spearman is designed for this type of ranked data. A value near 1 indicates that respondents who rated one tax highly also rated the other highly, a value near -1 indicates the opposite, and a value near 0 indicates no clear relationship. The result was a moderate positive correlation ($\rho = 0.47$, $n = 83$, 95% CI 0.28 to 0.62, $p = 0.0000074$). The confidence interval was obtained by Fisher z transformation. The positive sign means that support for the two taxes tended to rise together, so respondents who favored a progressive income tax generally also favored a wealth tax. A coefficient of this magnitude describes a moderate average tendency across the sample rather than a pattern followed by any particular proportion of individual respondents.

DISCUSSION

Among the surveyed respondents, support for a progressive income tax was higher than support for a wealth tax, and a large majority believed that higher income tax rates would increase evasion. These findings describe the attitudes of the 83 people who responded and are not evidence about the effects of either tax. The hypothesis concerned whether respondents would support these taxes, and the results are consistent with it for the progressive income tax, which drew majority agreement, and only partially for the wealth tax, which was more divided.

In addition, a majority of respondents (72.3%) believed that an increase in income tax rates would cause higher tax evasion. This item measured perception rather than behavior, and the survey provides no information on whether these perceptions correspond to actual evasion or to how respondents would vote on such a policy. Examining that relationship would require a study designed to measure both attitudes and behavior.

Several factors other than tax attitudes could account for these patterns. The sample was concentrated in higher income brackets and in the middle-aged range, and it over-represented Asian residents relative to the county, so the observed levels of support may reflect the income, age, and ethnic composition of the respondents rather than the views of Howard County as a whole. Political ideology, education, and homeownership were not measured but are known to shape tax attitudes and could underlie the results. The high local affluence of Howard County may also make wealth taxes feel more

personally relevant to respondents, which could push support in either direction.

Finally, the broader literature suggests that progressive and wealth taxes can reduce inequality and raise revenue, and that compliance can be supported through mechanisms such as third-party reporting and institutional trust (2, 11, 13, 15). This survey does not test any of those claims, and local support is only one of many factors relevant to whether such a policy is feasible or effective. Any discussion of national tax policy therefore rests on that external research rather than on the survey, which speaks only to the attitudes of the respondents.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations affecting the reliability and generalizability of the data. There were no eligibility criteria beyond being an adult Howard County resident, and neither adulthood nor residency could be verified, as both were self-reported. Duplicate responses were discouraged in the prompt of the form, and none were excluded. The questionnaire was also author-designed and was not piloted or validated. The question asking about evasion only measured perceived tax evasion rather than actual compliance.

First, the survey received fewer than 100 responses (83 total), which is not large enough to definitively show the beliefs of the hundreds of thousands of adults in the county, and several subgroups, such as the youngest age groups and the Native American, Multiracial, and Black respondents, were too small for stable comparisons. Additionally, this was a nonprobability convenience sample rather than a representative one, with roughly half of the responses coming from the author's family friends and neighbors, and the rest from self-selected members of local Facebook, Nextdoor, and Reddit groups. This introduces many issues with the survey from self-selection bias, due to people with stronger opinions being more likely to respond, an overrepresentation of the author's social circle, reflected in the high proportion of Asian respondents, and political-interest bias, with members of local social media groups may be more politically engaged than the average resident.

Furthermore, because the survey was only sent through a few online channels, people without reliable internet access were much less likely to respond, and because recruitment was confined to a single affluent suburban county, the findings have limited geographic generalizability and should not be extended to Maryland

or to the United States. Finally, because the items dealt with politically sensitive topics, responses may have been influenced by social-desirability bias, in which respondents give more acceptable answers rather than their true views. Taken together, these limitations mean the findings should be treated as exploratory and specific to the respondents surveyed, rather than as conclusive evidence about Howard County or the United States.

CONCLUSION

This study measured attitudes toward progressive income and wealth taxation among 83 adults in Howard County, Maryland. Within this sample, support for a progressive income tax was higher than support for a wealth tax, most respondents rated the progressive income tax favorably while wealth tax responses were more divided, and a majority believed that higher income tax rates would lead to greater evasion. These results, while informative, describe only the respondents surveyed and cannot be generalized to Howard County or the wider United States. Further research using larger and more representative samples would be needed to determine whether these attitudes hold across the county or the nation, and to examine how factors such as income, age, and political ideology relate to support for these taxes. Such work could provide a clearer picture of public opinion to inform future discussion of tax policy.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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APPENDIX A. SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Hello, my name is Kevin and I am a high school student in the Independent Research program. I am researching progressive income taxes and wealth taxes and their effects on people. Your assistance will greatly help in my research. Thank you for taking the time to fill out this short anonymous survey!

- What is your age?
 - <20
 - 20–30
 - 31–40
 - 41–50
 - 51–60
 - 61–70
 - 71+
- What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to say
 - Other
- Which of the following best describes your ethnicity? (Select all that apply.)
 - Asian or Pacific Islander
 - Black or African American
 - Hispanic or Latino
 - Native American
 - White or Caucasian
 - Multiracial
 - Other
- What is your annual income?
 - Less than \$30,000
 - \$30,000–\$50,000
 - \$51,000–\$80,000
 - \$81,000–\$100,000

- \$101,000–\$150,000
- \$150,000–\$200,000
- More than \$200,000
- Prefer not to say
- Other

- Have you ever heard of a progressive income tax?
 - Yes
 - No
- Have you ever heard of a wealth tax?
 - Yes
 - No

Progressive Income Tax

A progressive income tax is when the tax rate you pay increases as your income rises.

Wealth Tax

A wealth tax is when the tax rate is based on all of a taxpayer's assets.

- On a scale from 1-5, how much do you agree with a progressive income tax?

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Agree
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- On a scale from 1-5, how much do you agree with a wealth tax?

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Agree
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- Do you think that higher income tax rates lead to higher rates of tax evasion?
 - Yes
 - No
- Is there anything you would like to add that you think might help me with my research?