**Indicator News**

**The state of Priority Spokane’s funded research on middle school outcomes**

*Priority Spokane*, a project launched as a result of the Community Indicators Initiative (CII), was developed to engage community leaders to prioritize issues facing Spokane County residents. After a lengthy process involving over 100 people, education was overwhelmingly voted the highest concern, specifically, public high school dropout rates. Gonzaga University was recently awarded funding from the Inland Northwest Community and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations to assist Priority Spokane by researching best practice intervention methods for middle school students. Middle school intervention was picked, based on studies showing this to be the crucial age for preventing students from dropping out of high school. Spokane School District was chosen as the focus, due to its low high school completion rates.

Gonzaga University’s research has three phases. For the past two months, a team from the university has begun work on the initial phases of the project: developing strategies and evidence, as well as establishing a framework to evaluate the current situation in Spokane Schools. Phase 2 will identify specific models and programs that are implementing these strategies. In Phase 3, the research team will collaborate with local school- and community-based stakeholders who work with middle school students. The research team hopes that this part of the process will answer the question: What is the current state of services for middle school students in Spokane Schools? Gonzaga University’s initial report is available [here](#) and a final written report will be submitted to Priority Spokane by June 30th, 2010.

**Northeast Washington Trends website now live**

EWU’s Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis recently launched the Northeast Washington Trends website. The site, [northeastwashingtontrends.org](http://northeastwashingtontrends.org), covers Ferry, Stevens, and Pend Oreille Counties in the northeast corner of Washington. The site has the same overall goal as the Spokane site – providing citizens, local governments, businesses and non-profit agencies alike with easy access to meaningful, unbiased data and information.

**Grant County Indicator website underway**

Grant County in central Washington will soon have a community indicator website. The focus groups, which will decide what indicators to include on the website, will begin meeting in June. Funding for this project was provided by a federal appropriation passed in 2009. The website will operate much in the same way the Spokane CII does and will be similar in appearance. The Institute will provide all data and content for this sixth indicator website, based on what the focus groups decide. The website will be finished by late fall. For more information about this latest project, please contact our Community Indicators Project Coordinator, Sarah Reynolds at [sreynolds@ewu.edu](mailto:sreynolds@ewu.edu).
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Find Spokane CII on Facebook. Help us spread the word about indicators by becoming a fan of our page. Visitors can post messages or photos, begin discussions, or simply give a shout out to the CII. Become a fan of our page and don’t forget to tell your friends: Spokane CII Fan Page. Note: you must have a Facebook account to view our page or to become a fan. You can join Facebook via their homepage.

Featured Indicators

Spokane County follows the state and national median age trend

The most notable observation of the median age of Spokane County’s residents is that it is almost exactly the same as both the State of Washington and the US as a whole. This has been the case for its match with the US since at least 2000, when national data became available, and since at least 1980 with the State. In other words, Spokane County residents have about the same age make-up as the State and the nation. Indicator 1.3 on the Spokane Community Indicators website illustrates this nicely.

Median age is calculated annually by the Washington State Office of Financial Management (OFM) and is based on their population estimates published each April. Basically, the median age tells us how old the middle of a population is. Recall that the median age splits a population in half: 50 percent of the people in the population are older than the median age and 50 percent are younger. In 2009, that value sat at about 37 years of age for both the County and the State.

Another characteristic is that the median age has been steadily increasing over the last 30 years. In 1980 it was just over 29 years. Since then it has increased by about eight years. So why would the median age increase? Why might it be younger or older in another area? Why do we want to know what it is? The answers to the first two questions differ for different geographic regions.

Yi Zhao, who works for the Forecasting Division of OFM, points out that in the US - and in Spokane County - the baby boomer generation has a lot to do with age structure. She said that the baby boomers will start to turn 65 next year so we will see an increase in the 65 and over population group. This will inevitably impact the median age. In general, the number of people aging in this country and in Spokane County is increasing. We want to know these numbers and the trend they form because this will have an effect on the local economy - what happens when baby boomers retire? Will the local workforce be able to replace their skills? It will also impact policy decisions about funding for senior programs, for Medicare, as well as other decisions concerning nursing homes, home health care, and retirement communities. Likewise if the trend were to reverse, we would want to consider what a larger population of younger people would mean for the local area.

So it is evident that the median age of Spokane County’s population holds a lot more information than just a number. Right now, evident from the graph in 1.3, Spokane is neither an “older” or “younger” community - rather, we are right on par with the national age structure. It will be interesting to see if, and by how much, the median age changes here and across the country in the coming years. Following this trend can help local leaders plan ahead so that they will be ready to serve the local community members, no matter what their age.
Spokane County recycles about the same amount of waste now as in the past but improvements are expected

Green, it’s a word heard quite often these days in the media and in conversations about sustainability. It seems like most people are trying to be more eco-conscious in their day-to-day activities. Use less packaging, drive efficient cars, turn off lights, recycle more - and the list goes on. So with all the ‘green’ talk, why has the recycling rate in Spokane County remained basically unchanged over the last decade?

Indicator number 5.23 on the Spokane Community Indicators website illustrates that in 1998, the county recycled 45% of its municipal solid waste (MSW). MSW includes both residential and commercial garbage. From 1998 to 2003 there was a slight increase in the percent of waste that was recycled in Spokane County. Since then it has decreased to 42%, slightly lower than where it was in 1998. One would think that this trend might have increased in the current environmentally charged, green-living climate.

For the entire state of Washington, the average recycling rate is 45%, only a little better than locally. Unlike the county, Washington State as a whole has improved its rate by about 10 percentage points over the past decade, surpassing the rate in the county. Again we can ask: “Why?” Why is the state average improving while the county is not?

Ann Murphy and Suzanne Tresko from the Spokane Regional Solid Waste System look at the numbers a little differently and urge us all to consider an important point made in this graph: that Spokane recycled more than the State average for most of the last decade; only in the past few years has the state average caught up with and passed the local rate. They also point out that a higher recycling rate does not always equal more waste being recycled. “... Some jurisdictions in the state have mandatory recycling. While that may increase the recycling rate on the front end of the statistic trail, it is unclear what amount that is collected as recyclables, actually gets recycled. Jurisdictions that collect more recyclables often do it with a single stream method, which means that there are additional sorting costs after the materials are collected.” As a result of those extra costs, Murphy and Tresko say that a lot of the post-collection sorting is done overseas.

An additional factor to consider is the amount of waste generated in the first place. Spokane residents dispose of less MSW on a per capita basis than the state average, and since waste reduction is often seen as a top priority, with recycling after that, Spokane looks a little better. Indicator 5.22 looks at this more closely.

As for the lack of improvement in the County’s recycling rate, Murphy and Tresko suggest that change for the better may be on the way: “While Spokane started out with a bang and hit high marks early on, we plan on seeing the recycling rate go up as additional materials are added to recycling services in the near future.” It will be interesting to see if this trend can keep up with our green expectations.

Spokane County’s teen pregnancy rate declining; lower than Washington and US

Over the last decade, teenage pregnancy in Spokane County has gone down. Throughout the same period, the local rate has been below what we see for Washington State as a whole and the entire US. This point is illustrated in the graph for indicator 6.5 on the Spokane Community Indicators website.

For every 1,000 18 and 19 year old women in Spokane County, 79 of them were pregnant during 2008 - slightly higher than in 2007 but 16 fewer than in 1998. For all of Washington, the rate was 88 per 1,000 in 2008. The data for the US lag that of the state and the county by a few years; but in 2005, when the local and state rates were similar to where they were in 2008, the US rate was 118 pregnancies per 1,000 young women.

There is a second age group measured here, girls ages 15 to 17. The rate for that age group in the County was 24 pregnancies per 1,000 girls in 2008. For the entire state
the rate was 27 pregnancies. The lag for national data also applies to this age group, but in 2005 it was 41 pregnancies per 1,000 girls. The state and local rates in 2005 were very similar to what they are now and the 2005 US rate is almost double the County rate. Teen pregnancy is decreasing everywhere though, a positive sign that something is working.

Just what, exactly, is working though? What are the reasons behind the numbers and what programs are in place? Also, and this may be the most important question, how can we ensure this downward trend continues?

Lisa Hinton, from the Spokane Regional Health District’s Communicable Disease Prevention program, has worked with local teen pregnancy prevention in the past and says that those questions are difficult to answer. As to what programs might be responsible for the decline, Hinton says “You cannot pinpoint the decrease in teen pregnancy rates to a specific strategy or program. I think a culmination of strategies such as comprehensive sex education and increased access to reproductive health services for our youth can be seen as successful contributors.” She says that work towards preventing teen pregnancies throughout Spokane County has been community-based.

Aside from a slight increase from 2004 to 2006 and then a tip up again in 2008, the overall rate has decreased by about 17 percent across the county since the late 1990s. Beginning in 1995, there was a teen pregnancy prevention program in place at the Health District called “Your Choice, not Chance” but according to Hinton, funding for that program was cut in early 2009 leaving the Health District without a specific prevention program. However, the program that Hinton currently works with - Communicable Disease Prevention - aims to limit the transmission of STDs, a related issue that can affect all ages. Also, Planned Parenthood of Greater Washington and North Idaho has a current campaign for evidence-based, age-appropriate sexual education in schools called “Fighting for Real Sex Ed.”

These programs, along with support from schools, parents, health care providers, and other community groups will likely be the key players in keeping this trend on the downward path. Providing the necessary information to our youth gives them the tools they need to make the best choices. This is a shared responsibility of the whole community. Lisa Hinton agrees: “...more and more young people are choosing to wait because they are more aware of the outcomes of being sexually active and those who are sexually active are more likely to use protection...knowledge and skills are very powerful.”
Indicators in Action

Interview with Torney Smith, Administrator of the Spokane Public Health District

Torney Smith is the Administrator of the Spokane Regional Health District, the largest public health administration in Eastern Washington. We asked him a few questions about the uses and benefits of trend-based data for both the Health District and the rest of the Spokane community. See below for the full interview.

Q. How do you, as administrator of the largest public health organization in Eastern Washington, use trend-based data to help you make decisions?
A. Public health foundations include being science based and data driven. Whether from the National Center for Health Statistics, the Washington State Department of Health, or acquired statewide or locally, data is used to focus interventions and evaluate performance and outcomes. The use of trend data allows determination of prioritization when compiled with other factors such as intervention strategy, seriousness of the issue, social justice and disparity in the population. Public health data is generally population focused vs. individually focused. The goal of understanding public health data is to establish strategies to prevent illness and injury. In addition to trend data, though more difficult to find, spatial data that is geocoded at a block group level or finer is becoming more important to allow focused interventions at a neighborhood level.

Q. How do you think the Community Indicators can be used by residents of Spokane County?
A. Community indicators are becoming more complete which allows understanding of our community from many perspectives. As residents identify areas of concern or interest it is becoming easier to learn characteristics of that issue. This allows for creative thinking about methods to impact the area of interest. Knowledge is power in creating change. When the knowledge is publically available and easily accessible it becomes easier to raise broad support.

Q. The Spokane Regional Health District has been publishing public health data for years, and now operates a web site Spokane Counts. How do you see the fit of the two efforts?
A. Data that supports understanding about Spokane or our region is important to link whenever possible. Whether our data is printed or available on the web it is to serve the community to make informed decisions. Having the Community Indicators web site is a bonus for this region as it provides many data sets that the health district does not track. Though we at the health district are primarily focused on health data that most would identify as health data, we are also keenly interested in data that define or reflect those social and environmental issues that impact population health and address health disparities. Some of these areas are referred to as the social determinants of health and include income, race, place, education, access to healthy foods, employment, physical environments and other characteristics.

Q. From your knowledge of the various trends tracked by the Spokane CI site, which ones jump out?
A. Local Government Funding for Public Health: Spokane County alarms me as I work in this area. Funding has been flat for more than a decade though costs and service requirements have risen significantly. Compared to other local government services, public health receives far less support. The per capita contribution in 2008 was $13.38 for substance abuse services, $83.31 for mental health services and $6.39 for public health. Per capita personal income lags the state and national amounts which indicates the need to support business interests that can help working persons raise their incomes. This is one social determinant of health we can improve.

Q. Any final comments about the future of community indicators, or more generally, evidence-based decision-making, in Spokane?
A. I believe that informed decisions have the greatest likelihood of success. Decisions based on data are better informed than those build on personal beliefs or biases. I trust that the work of the Community Indicators Initiative of Spokane will grow in its use and awareness among those forming important decisions and setting directions for our community. Each of us as citizens would benefit from a greater depth of understanding about our community. We could act with intent and will be able to measure the impact of the policies and strategies put in place to improve our well being.
Statisticians raise personal income, do you feel any richer?

The Bureau of Economic Analysis, the government agency responsible for estimating local income data and one of our data sources, has revised its per capita personal income estimates as far back as 1969. As a result, indicator 3.1 on the Community Indicators website has changed. On average, the change has been a positive one. A comparison of the old 2008 income data to the new revised 2008 data reveals an increase of nearly four percent, a fairly significant difference. The revised data are displayed in indicator 3.1.

CII now measures net migration in Spokane County

A new indicator has recently been added to the People category on the Spokane Community Indicators Initiative (CII) website. This new indicator, number 1.2 Residual Net Migration as a Share of Total Population, offers a more in-depth look at the number of residents by examining the number of people who have moved into or out of the county. Data for this indicator come from Washington's Office of Financial Management.