Site Updated with New ACS Data

The US Census Bureau's American Community Survey recently released data for 2007, which allowed us to update dozens of indicators with new data on the Spokane Community Indicators site. ACS uses a very large sample to provide annual estimates of series that were previously enumerated and consequently available only every ten years.

Health and Housing Category Expansions

Since the last issue of Measuring Community was published, new indicators have been added to the Health and Housing Categories of the Spokane Community Indicators website. The five new Health indicators include data on people in Spokane County without medical insurance - broken down by income and age; information on dental care in Spokane - including measures for offices accepting Medicaid; and data on Spokane's youth and adult overweight/obese population. The four new Housing indicators display the percent of renters’ wages spent on rent; vacancy rates based on different types of rental units, and homeownership data broken down by race and income levels.

Slumping scores & a new superintendent - will the WASL pass the test?

The answer to this question may have come in the form of a new test. Just one week after Washington's recently elected Superintendent of Public Instruction, Randy Dorn, took office, he proposed a plan for replacing the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) with the Washington Comprehensive Assessment Program (WCAP). It would actually be two tests: the Measurements of Student Progress (MSP) for grades 3-8, and the High School Proficiency Exams (HSPE) for older students.

These proposed changes should not be too surprising, since Dorn did promise major alterations to the test while campaigning for office. In fact, even prior to the November election, modifications of the WASL had already begun to take place. As a result of those actions, some students will experience shorter WASL's this spring compared with previous years. If the Superintendent's plan for the WCAP is approved, the upcoming 2009 WASL testing season could be the last, as the new plan calls for the WCAP to be up and running as early as 2010. These changes are welcomed by those who criticize the WASL; still, just as many are worried that changing or replacing the standardized
test could leave students and teachers without good standard assessments.

As it stands now, proponents of the WASL say they feel it is a good measure of a school's ability to teach standard material from the main academic categories. They also suggest that the scores can be used to make decisions regarding teacher and staff performance, or teaching methods and curriculum. However, opponents argue that it is an unfair measure for schools that don't have enough resources and whose students' scores are consequently low. They also claim it puts too much pressure on teachers to "teach the test" instead of having the flexibility to explore subjects as they see fit and to reflect on current events and students' interests.

Additionally, the WASL includes written essays and requires that students show much of their work; supporters view this as a good judgment of students' writing abilities. Opponents however, say it makes administering the test lengthier and more expensive - something that the new test plan addresses by shortening those sections and giving computerized tests by 2012. Obviously these issues will have to be weighed before any solid changes are finalized.

Across the State, students' scores drive most of the arguments for and against the WASL. In Spokane County, overall WASL test scores from all 13 districts, measured by how many students passed math, reading, and writing sections of the test, have increased since 1998. In fact, the percent of students in the County who passed all sections of the WASL in 2008 is more than double the number that passed in 1998. This shows progress on both the students' and teachers' part. However, County 10th graders experienced a decrease in scores from 2007 to 2008. This decline matches state scores as well, where averages also dipped. Reasons for the dip differ across the various districts within the County, but many are due to declining scores in the math section. Still, County 4th graders did better in 2008 than in 2007, surpassing their counterparts across the rest of the state, where the average score went down.

Digging a little deeper into the data, one can see disparities between different districts. In the City of Spokane schools, WASL scores are below the County average, while the Central Valley schools are above. A likely factor here is poverty, since City schools are filled with children from low income families: over 42% of K-12 students in city schools qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (see indicator 3.28). Districts with the highest passing percents were outside of the City of Spokane: of all 4th graders in the County, the two highest scoring districts were Freeman with 68% and Mead with 66%. For the 10th grade, the districts with the highest percent of passing students were found in Mead (55%), West Valley (55%), and Cheney (54%).

When the scores are broken down by the different sections of the WASL, the outlook changes somewhat. In Spokane County, both the 4th and 10th graders have always scored higher on the WASL math test than the State average. The story is similar for the Cities of Spokane and Spokane Valley, with the exception of Spokane City 10th graders. Overall though, the WASL math test is a high point for local schools since math is usually the section that exhibits much lower passing shares compared to other sections of the test.

Scores in the reading section were even better. For 2008, nearly 80% of County 4th graders met the standards, as did over 80% of 10th graders. Districts in the two large cities had similar scores too. Likewise, writing scores for the County surpassed the State scores - another result to be proud of. Districts in the two cities showed similar writing scores to average County scores.

Looking at the bigger picture, one can see that for Spokane County as a whole, there is more here to smile about than not. Both the 4th and 10th grade overall WASL scores for the County are above State averages. In fact, 4th graders in Spokane County have scored higher than State averages in every year since 1998, and 10th graders have beaten state averages in every year but one, and even if the test changes these scores suggest that the students will continue to do well.
To see the graph of the overall WASL scores click here. On the same page, you may follow the "Download Data" link for more detailed score data, as well as to see the scores for 7th graders. Data for the separate WASL tests are also available via links on the main category page.

Minding the gap: Spokane's household income not keeping pace

In light of the current turbulent economic drama, many Americans have become more sensitized to the goings on in the financial world, especially when it affects their income, savings, and investments. Median household income (MHI) is a widely used indicator of economic well-being, showing the middle value of income for households. Its growth rate is a good measure of the County's economic progress.

At first glance, local MHI data might be discouraging because Spokane County's numbers are, and have always been, lower than the averages for both Washington State and the U.S. However, there is a counterpoint to consider. This measure of income has continued to rise steadily over the years - by 80% since 1990. More specifically, recent increases in MHI of City of Spokane residents have been larger than in the County as a whole. If this trend continues, the MHI of the City will soon surpass that of the overall County.

Indeed, though Spokane County's MHI has been rising like that of the State and the country, its path has not paralleled their growth rate. Simply put, the County has not been able to keep up with the State and national economy. However, Spokane's MHI may not be growing quite as fast comparatively, but when considered with the local cost of living (as approximated by the ACCRA index - indicator 3.7), the gap narrows somewhat.

What does an increase in the MHI mean for the local economy? Since income determines spending, an increase in income usually brings more consumer spending - the largest component of any local economy. Increased consumer spending also leads to more sales tax revenue for local governments. In Washington State, sales taxes are the most or second most important source of local government revenue. Therefore, increased household income is positive for more than just the "average" family; the entire economic community benefits.

A rising local MHI alone may not be enough to benefit the entire local economy, especially if consumers do not spend. Indeed, many economists and businesses alike are looking to see how 2008's 4th quarter spending will differ from years past. Typically, revenues from the 4th quarter are the highest and so trackers of the local economy anxiously await the end of the year.

To see the data for this indicator, click here.

Recent rise in health insurance coverage overshadowed by long term decline

46.5 million: that is the estimate of people in the United States that do not have any form of health insurance. This is about 15 percent of our nation's total population. These people, for whatever reason, do not fall under the jurisdiction of Medicare or Medicaid, and do not receive any insurance from employers, for those who are employed.

In Spokane County, the numbers are a little better: as of 2008, the date of the most recent survey, just under 13 percent of the county's residents were without any kind of medical insurance (See indicator 6.11). This is down from 13.2% in 2006 which was the highest percent throughout the life of the graph. While Spokane's health insurance deficit is a little better than the nation's, 13% is still a large number of people and recent
trends suggest that it could continue to increase (even though there was a small decrease between 2006 and 2008). The years with the most coverage were 2000 and 2002 when only 9.1% of Spokane County residents were without insurance. Indeed, the entire community would benefit from a greater understanding of this trend in health insurance coverage and how it affects our population.

First of all, who are the uninsured? The 13 percent is not spread out evenly among Spokane County's population. Low income families are more likely to be uninsured because they simply cannot afford it. The 'working poor' are the hardest hit because they are often employed by smaller companies that may not offer insurance, and because they are working, they do not qualify for public health care coverage (See indicator 6.13).

It's not surprising to find lower income Americans among the uninsured but what might be surprising, is the age distribution (See indicator 6.12). Over a quarter (27.3%) of people aged 18-34 had no insurance in the County in 2008 and this percent has increased at a faster rate since 2004 than it had in previous years. Likely reasons for some individuals in this age group may be that many are fresh out of high school or college and are too old to be covered by their parents' health plan, are currently looking for work but not yet employed, are currently working for an employer who does not offer insurance, or have some access to insurance but either cannot afford it or think they do not need it.

The older members of the 18-34 age group, however, are even more cause for concern. Perhaps they have a steady job or career but their employer does not offer insurance, or maybe their income level is not high enough to allow them to purchase insurance. Regardless of the individual reasons though, the fact remains that they do not have any type of health insurance coverage. Plus, with this being the largest section of the uninsured population, it should be the first place community leaders look when trying to rectify the problem.

Very few of the youngest (0-17 years old; 5.5%) and oldest (65 plus; 0.5%) are without insurance. This is most likely because they fall under someone else's medical coverage, or because they are covered by public health insurance - Medicare for the elderly and Medicaid for those on welfare or other public assistance. However, even though the numbers are small, the percent of people under 18 who are uninsured has risen by half a percentage point since 2006. For the remainder of the population, those ages 35 to 64, about 9% were without health insurance in 2008, still a fair amount, but it has declined significantly in the past two years and is less than a third of the largest group.

So why should anyone care about the uninsured? There are many ramifications of having a large part of the population without any form of regular health care. The most pressing are the economic implications faced by both the health care providers and by individuals. When people visit the emergency room and cannot afford to pay for the health care they receive, the costs are shifted on to others within the health care system: the hospitals, the physicians, the insurance companies, and finally, to individuals through raised insurance premiums. Simply put, the costs are passed from the uninsured to the insured. Even with this cost-shifting though, uninsured individuals receiving care may still be hit with large bills.

Another worry is the risk of communicable diseases - those without insurance are not likely to visit a doctor or receive treatment when sick, therefore they are also more likely to spread the disease to anyone who comes into contact with them. The uninsured are also at a higher risk for being generally unhealthy. It has been suggested that people without insurance (and therefore without regular access to health care) have a 25 percent higher risk of mortality.

The implications of high rates of un-insurance are numerous and are felt socially, economically, and personally. Challenges like this are important and should be
considered when it comes time to make public policy decisions. This is one community indicator that everyone should be concerned about.

Reference:

Indicators in Action

Interview with United Way President & CEO, Tim Henkel

A key goal for the Spokane Community Indicators Initiative is to know that the trends provided are being used by community leaders. We recently had the opportunity to interview Spokane County United Way President and CEO, Tim Henkel. The local chapter of the United Way devotes their resources to various health and human care needs in the Spokane area. We asked Mr. Henkel about the group's use of trend-based data as well as their involvement with the Community Indicators Initiative. Our questions and his responses follow.

Q: How does Spokane United Way use trend-based data to help make decisions?
A: We are in the early phase of incorporating trend based data into our funding decisions. We will be asking the agencies we support to provide us with measurable outcomes on services that they provide which are aimed at the desired outcomes we wish to see through the investment of United Way funds. Volunteers and staff will use the outcomes achieved and will look at local trends that address our desired outcomes to make our investment decisions. Utilizing trend-based data is critical for us to communicate to the broader community of the impact of their collective investments made through United Way.

Q: Have you followed the development of the Spokane Community Indicators Initiative?
A: We have been involved in the many discussions and meetings that led to the creation and development of the Spokane Community Indicators Initiative. We see the Community Indicators process as a valuable community tool to help shape and guide community investments and policy.

Q: How do you think the web site can be used by the citizens of Spokane?
A: Clearly the non-profit, governmental and education sectors need this type of information as one tool to help guide its work. In addition local businesses and others can use it as a tool to attract businesses and employees to the community. The site could also be used by students and teachers at all levels to conduct research on issues important to the community.

Q: From your knowledge of the various trends tracked by the Spokane CI site, which ones jump out?
A: As we put more of our focus on addressing critical issues in the community in the areas of: early learning issues; all children achieve their potential by successfully completing high school; and to protect our children from harm, we will be carefully monitoring several relevant indicators on the Spokane site. We will look at the specific indicators on these issues, but will also be using the Community Indicators to look at other indicators that might impact these issues such as the teen pregnancy rates and K-12 free and reduced lunch use.

Q: Any final comments about the future of community indicators in Spokane?
A: The Community Indicators site is only as good as the information it tracks. The information on the site was carefully compiled using input from many sectors in order to track what the community felt were important to monitor. As the community becomes...
more sophisticated in the many uses of the information on the site and in other places, the site can maintain its importance by evolving to track different data or drop items tracked to sustain its relevance and importance for the community. Just as important will be how the many partners in the community use the information available on the site. The long term goal for the community should be to seek improvement in indicators that the community finds unacceptable, and at the same time maintain or improve on indicators that prove the community is strong, vital, and creative.

Indicator Insider

Institute Launches Two New Websites

EWU’s Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis - the co-founder of the Spokane Community Indicators Initiative and this newsletter - recently launched two additional websites: one for Walla Walla County, WallaWallaTrends.com, and another for North central Washington, ChelanDouglasTrends.org. Both of the new sites have 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.

Looking Beyond Spokane

The Community Indicators Consortium (CIC) recently handed out their Innovation Awards. The awards are sponsored by the Urban Markets Initiative at the Brookings Institution. This year’s awardees were "Our Kids Count" of the Ontario, Canada based Our Kids Network website and the "Georgia Indicators of Child and Family Wellbeing" from the Georgia Family Connection Partnership. View CIC website

Performance & Results for Washington

Washington State’s Office of Financial Management recently launched a new website. The State Government Performance and Results site promises transparency and provides easily accessible information about the State's agencies and their strategic plans, agency spending, and performance monitoring. Reports provide information about how taxpayers’ money is spent and explain what Washingtonians get in return. View the Performance and Results website.

Welcome our new CII coordinator!

Sarah Reynolds, M.S., comes to us from upstate New York, via Maryland. She is now in charge of all written updates to the site, as well as those on the other CI sites coordinated by the Institute. She is also the editor of our e-newsletter. Sarah has her M.S. in Geography from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where she specialized in Biogeography and GIS. She is a great addition to our team. /Patrick Jones/

www.communityindicators.ewu.edu