Indicator News

**Five new indicators added to CII**

In response to the recently completed report from the Regional Affordable Housing Task Force, three indicators have been added to the Housing category on the Spokane Community Indicators Initiative (CII) website. All are related to homelessness within the county: a one-day count of all homeless, the number of homeless families who have children, and the number of homeless youth under the age of 18. We also added one indicator to the People category, the number of families consisting of a single parent with at least one child. In the Health category, we added an indicator for the number of people with a disability living in the County. The additions respond to one of the Task Force’s recommendations: to improve the tracking of sub-populations in the County likely to need affordable housing.

**Now you can compare CII graphs to each other!**

There is a new feature on the CII website: the Compare tool. Visitors can now do side-by-side comparisons of graphs of any indicator from any category on the website. For example, if you wanted to compare population growth in the City of Spokane with the same indicator for Spokane County, you would first choose the desired indicator from the drop down menus and then pick whether you want to view city or county data from the tabs below the menu. Comparisons can also be made between two different indicators. With over 150 indicators on the website to choose from—many with both county and city level data available—there are hundreds of possible combinations. The button for this tool is located in the bottom left corner of the CII website, or click here to try it out now.

**IPPEA releases latest Monograph**

The newest report in the Monograph series published by the Institute for Public Policy & Economic Analysis (Institute), A Comparison of Cluster Formation in Spokane and Similar MSA’s, looks at cluster development and economic development in Spokane compared to seven other similarly sized Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) around the country. In addition, the monograph reports on how cluster formation has advanced in Spokane since 1990. Read the monograph on the Institute’s website here.

Featured Indicators

**Overweight and obesity as much a community problem as it is an individual battle**

For many in the Inland Northwest, summer is a good time to play at our local parks or to take walks to a farmers market. For many more, summer is a good time to go cycling and hiking, and to be active outside after a long cold winter. Spokane stages numerous events for the physically active individual, for two of which—Bloomsday and Hoopfest—it is famous. However, for many local residents, adding physical activity into daily life is not always easy.

The evidence: Spokane County is seeing high numbers of overweight and obese people. As shown in indicator 6.17 on the Spokane Community Indicator Initiative website (CII), more than one in three Spokane County adults are overweight and one in four are obese. (Check “more
information” on the CII website for how overweight and obese are defined). The share of people who are overweight in the County has gone down slightly overall, from 38.4% in 2003 to 37.1% in 2007, but that is still a high number. Since 2003, the share of obese adults has increased from 21.8% of the population to 25.3%, an increase of 16% in five years. The local rates are not significantly different from the US or State rates, but just because we are in line with the benchmarks does not always mean that we are living healthfully. The entire country could use a look in the mirror, so-to-speak.

For our youth population, the numbers are similar: almost one out of every four teenagers (in the 8th, 10th, and 12th grades), or 23.4%, was overweight or obese last year. The share has remained virtually unchanged since 2006. Moreover, related indicator 6.15 shows that only a third of our teens are getting enough exercise. After assessing the statistics for overweight and obesity among youth and adults, Julie Banks, Financial Development Director for the YMCA of the Inland Northwest, said simply “...the trend is alarming.”

Why do we see such high numbers? The answer is not as simple as some might think. Heleen Dewey, who works with the Physical Activity & Nutrition Program at the Spokane Regional Health District (SRHD), gave several reasons for why people become (and remain) overweight or obese. She cited poverty as one, which is linked to a general lack of access to recreational activities. She also listed eating convenient instead of healthy foods and too much screen time (i.e. computers, TV, gaming, etc). Banks added that a lot of the problem has to do with choices—the ones we are given and the ones we make. “As I struggle with my own daily choices, I realize how our choices have been narrowed to promote unhealthy habits. This is evident in our dependence on motorized vehicles for all transportation and in the foods that are readily available and convenient.” She and Dewey both note the lack of easily accessible fresh foods in parts of Spokane that do not have grocery stores within close proximity to households, or at least not fully stocked and affordable stores. Many of us take for granted that we can easily drive to multiple stores to get the healthy foods for ourselves and our families.

Dewey mentioned another reason: How we live today compared to our parents and grandparents. As Banks noted about the choices of convenience, Dewey and Cindy Green, the SRHD’s Division of Health Promotion Program Manager, both pointed out that people used to be more active in their daily lives than they are today. They used to walk to the store, to school, and to parks. This built physical activity into peoples’ everyday lives. They were helping their bodies without even thinking about it. Part of this was related to where people live.

Green said that towns and cities were more ‘walkable,’ compared to the present, with many people now living in sprawling suburban neighborhoods, they are forced to drive to get anywhere. Dewey added that many children do not walk to school because it is either too far or parents don’t feel it is safe. A goal of both the YMCA and the SRHD is to change public policies that would improve the built environment and make it easier for people to make healthy choices. For the YMCA, initiatives like this are a means to extend their impact beyond the walls of their fitness centers.

An example of making Spokane more walkable is to improve existing sidewalks and build new ones where there are none. This would enable people to walk more places instead of driving and would make it possible for others who depend on sidewalks—people who use wheelchairs and/or who have no other means of transportation—to get from place to place much more
easily. In turn, this would encourage higher levels of physical activity as well as enable healthier choices among people in those neighborhoods.

A recurring theme in the discussion of the community’s overweight condition has been convenience. Whether it is the only option or the easiest, more people are choosing quick over healthy food. They are also opting out of exercise for other activities, habits that encourage overweight and obesity. Cindy Green points out that “Overweight and obesity have become the norm.” She noted, “As of 2008, about 62% of the adult population is overweight or obese. Therefore, when people look around themselves, they mostly see people like themselves.” That reinforces the idea that it is all right to be overweight or obese because most other people are as well. Banks suggests that we can all become “health seekers,” a label given by the YMCA to those of us who are trying to lead healthy lives, and re-teach ourselves and our children to choose healthier options in our daily lives. If we do that, then being healthy will become the social norm, rather than the alternative. Making these choices become automatic, says Banks, is key to solving the overweight and obesity crisis.

**Taxable retail sales growth slips into negative territory for 2008**

When people feel good about their finances and about the state of the economy in general, they are more likely to go out and spend money. When they do not feel positive about it, they tend to be more cautious, to hang back and wait to see what happens. This seems to be the case locally, in both the County’s two largest cities and for the County as a whole, as taxable retail sales dramatically slipped last year. Indicator 3.3 plots this decline.

Countywide, 2008 was the first time since 2002 that growth was negative. This time, the drop was larger than the recession of 2001-2002. The County’s retail sales in 2008 were $7.37 billion, down 4.3% from the prior year when taxable sales were $7.69. This downturn, however, was no worse than in the entire state of Washington.

As shown in the “City Data” portion of indicator 3.3, for the City of Spokane, 2008 was the first time in the decade that there were fewer sales than in the previous year. In 2008, in the City of Spokane, retail sales totaled $3.92 billion, dropping by -2.2% from the prior year. Even in the 2001-2002 recession, City of Spokane retail sales growth was positive, although at a much lower rate than prior years. A consolation is that the drop for the City of Spokane was lower than its neighbors and Washington State.

In Spokane Valley, taxable retail sales were $1.8 billion in 2008, down -8.6% since 2007. While Spokane Valley has enjoyed strong sales growth since its inception, up 16.9% since 2004, the decline in 2008 was far greater than in the State, County as a whole and the City of Spokane.

The trends, unfortunately, are continuing. Official taxable retail sales reports from the Washington Department of Revenue are now out for the first quarter of this year. For the County as a whole, the first quarter experienced a drop of -7.7% over 2008. This compares to a much larger drop in the state of -12.8%. The City of Spokane continues to outperform, on a relative basis, but its first quarter revenues were still down by -3.4%. Gavin Cooley, the City of Spokane’s Chief Financial Officer, said that this “...indicator provides another strong confirmation of the strength of Spokane’s economy relative to other economies across the state and country.” He also had some ideas for why the City has performed relatively well, linking its smaller downturn to the “...City’s diversified economy...” and that one reason might be that it “...does not rely too heavily on auto sales or any other single activity.” No reports have been filed yet for Spokane Valley.

Marshall Farnell, CEO of Spokane County, said the
downward trend for the County has not reversed to-date. “Sales tax revenue data continues to be down for the first 6 months of 2009.” When asked what he thought the trend means for the overall health of the local economy he said that it was not good. He added that “…we need to expand our employment base with high paying jobs.”

Mr. Farnell also said that the outlook for future sales is unknown. There is some good news on the local economic horizon however, and that is that the County expects some positive effects of stimulus money to show up by the middle of this year. Perhaps with a little more money in their pockets, City and County residents will be more likely to spend their money than to save it, thus giving a needed boost to the local economy. Mr. Cooley expects that the City’s downward trend will persist, but that the City will continue to outpace the state, yet another positive spin on an otherwise negative trend.

Hotel room demand driven by big scale events as well as long-standing local attractions

Spokane hosted the 29th National Veteran’s Wheelchair Games last week and Hoopfest—one of the City’s largest annual tourist draws—was in late June. The City will be gearing up for some big shows this coming fall and winter as well, including the return of the Broadway musical The Lion King, US and Canadian Women’s Olympic hockey, and the US Figure Skating Championships, the last item to be held just before the 2010 Winter Olympics. These events and others like them—including Bloomsday—are important for local tourism related businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and retailers because they are a major source of revenue. Specifically, they attract visitors and attendees from beyond the County and State who likely would not have otherwise come to Spokane.

Tracking hotel room use gives us a sense of how well the community is doing with these big events and outside money. According to the graph for indicator 2.14 on the CII site, the number of hotel rooms occupied in 2008—known as room nights—dropped below where it was in 2007. But at 1,530,000, is still the second highest of all the years in the graph. The data for this indicator come from a report from the Spokane Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB). Harry Sladich, the president of the CVB, said that 2007 was a big year mostly due to two events: The Lion King Broadway show and the US Figure Skating Championships. Had it not been for those two key events, Sladich said that 2007 and 2008 room nights would have been much closer and those in 2008 might have even been higher.

What is the outlook for 2009 and into 2010? While there is no doubt that Spokane’s hotels are not immune to the effects of the world economy, Sladich is anticipating a relatively good year for local tourism related businesses. With big events planned for the rest of this year and into the next, local hotel rooms will still get a good amount of use. “The impact on this community is profound,” Sladich said of the large conventions, shows, and events that the CVB works to attract to Spokane each year. While he said that Spokane hotels would exist without these events—indeed most of the annual room nights are from individual travelers—he said we would not see nearly the level of success that local businesses experience without the big events incorporated into the yearly schedule. He added that we would likely lose some of the more dependent businesses whose clientele are largely visitors.

The CVB markets to people in a 500-mile radius from Spokane and Sladich said that for many people who visit the area, Spokane is considered the “big city” to go to. Many come from places in Canada and Montana (and even farther) to be a part of these events or just to shop downtown and see a show. Both the big events and the other, more permanent attractions like the MAC, downtown shopping, or rafting trips, are equally important to Spokane’s tourism businesses. They are tied
together, says Sladich, and we need both to survive and be successful.

The rate of occupancy, the other statistic in indicator, has been above 60% since 2006 and has increased overall since 2002. It gives an idea of how well local tourism demand matches local supply of hotel rooms. If the supply suddenly grew much higher than demand—because of new hotel developments—then the rate would drop. This, however, has not happened in recent years. According to Mr. Sladich, the new development at Northern Quest Casino, scheduled for a “soft” opening on December 31st, will add 250 rooms to the local market. Sladich said it will likely influence the occupancy rate but he does not anticipate it to drop by a huge amount.

One of Spokane's peer cities, Boise, ID, has not done as well with its occupancy rates. Since 2006, rates there slipped from almost 70% to 55.6% in 2008, the first year it has been below Spokane. Salt Lake City, UT also fell in the last year from 69.6% in 2007 to 64.8% in 2008, though it is still higher than Spokane County. Portland, OR, the area with the highest occupancy rate, has remained above 67% in all years of the graph. Though Spokane's rate comes in third out of the four cities mentioned, it has remained steady—a good sign that the current approach to tourism is working.

It seems that the things that define Spokane—Bloomsday, Hoopfest, Spokefest, the Museum of Arts and Culture, the Best of Broadway shows, among many—are also what spurs a good part of the economy. Without these signature events and attractions that continue to draw people to spend a night—and some money—many Spokane businesses would face even tougher sledding in our recessionary economy.

Indicators in Action

**Interview with County Commissioner Bonnie Mager**

Bonnie Mager is the Spokane County Commissioner for District 3. We asked her a few questions recently about how she, as a county commissioner, uses trend-based data and the indicators on the CII website. Our questions and her answers follow.

**Q:** How do you as County Commissioner use trend-based data to help you make decisions?

**A:** I look at the indicators from time to time to see how we are doing as a community and to check for updates to chart our progress. It gives me good data on the indicators that have been selected.

**Q:** Have you followed the development of the Spokane Community Indicators Initiative?

**A:** I was involved at the beginning of the Community Indicators Initiative process and participated in two of the focus groups to identify the indicators for those categories. Community Indicators has spawned Priority Spokane and I have served as a member of the Leadership Team for this project with the purpose of selecting priorities that our community can focus on with time, energy and monetary resources.

**Q:** How do you think the web site can be used by the residents of Spokane County?

**A:** I am very excited with the idea of using the networking capabilities of the internet to create an effective way to connect the community with their chosen priorities and the opportunities that can be generated, plugged into and reported back on, with a minimum of time and effort. We now have the technology to be light years more effective than we were in the past when months of planning often resulted in a failed implementation effort due to the difficulty in readily engaging the community. The web page could become the most important tool in our implementation tool box.

**Q:** From your knowledge of the various trends tracked by the Spokane CI site, which ones jump out?

**A:** Low income housing shortages and transportation issues have been important priorities for me in my job as County Commissioner so I have focused on the trends tracked on those indicators the most.

**Q:** Any final comments about the future of community indicators, or more generally, evidence-based decision-making, in Spokane?

**A:** I think that as the technology advances, the site has the potential to provide the in depth and priority specific information and feedback loop needed to effectively use evidence-based decision-making in our community.
Federal appropriations bill to fund indicator projects in rural Eastern Washington counties

The Institute will begin work on two new indicator projects this summer that, when complete, will paint a numerical picture of four rural counties in the Inland Northwest. The Institute recently secured $190,000 from the Congress to conduct the work, administered by the Small Business Administration. The first project to be started will focus on Ferry, Stevens, and Pend Oreille Counties in the northeastern corner of Washington, and a second project will focus on Grant County, located southwest of Spokane County. The goal of these two projects is to create a website for each region that will give them a first-time comprehensive, easily accessible data portrait of themselves.

Walla Walla Regional Vital Signs – Quality of Life Indicators underway

The Community Council, with the help of the Institute, will launch a new indicator website later this year that will give community members of Columbia and Walla Walla Counties and of Milton-Freewater, OR an idea of how well their region is doing on issues such as childhood poverty and crime rates. The Community Council will assign most of the 39 indicators chosen by the Council a grade ranging from poor to good, based on certain criteria, and will report whether the trend is improving, neutral, or declining compared to previous years. The overall goal is to create for the residents of the Walla Walla Valley a set of priorities and then work to find solutions.

CIC fall conference to be held in Bellevue, WA

The Community Indicators Consortium (CIC), a national network of individuals and organizations interested in learning about and implementing community indicators, will hold their seventh annual international conference at the Meydenbauer Center in Bellevue, WA from October 1-2, 2009. This year’s theme is “Community Indicators as Tools for Social Change.” The conference will focus on four facets of effective indicator efforts: From Planning to Implementation; Creating Partnerships & Crossing Boundaries; Promoting Social Change; and Integrating Indicators & Performance Measures. There will be discussions within these four areas as they relate to indicator topics relevant to everyday life. For more information about the conference and to register online, visit the CIC’s website here.