2006 State of Chattanooga Region Report

Community Research Council

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Introduction: A User's Guide to the State of Chattanooga Region Report

October 2006

Dear User:

As Mark Twain noted, there are "lies, damn lies and statistics." The State of Chattanooga Region Report aspires to be more than just a collection of statistics. Our goal is to provide information to the community – to elected officials, policymakers, civic leaders and the public – that helps them to make better decisions about the community's future: put simply, it is hard to know where you want to go and how to get there unless you know where you are starting from.

But that goal can only be realized if the users of the Report – you – have a clearer understanding of what we did, why we did it, what the next several hundred pages of information is supposed to mean and how you can use it.

What We Did

To start, with the exception of data from the State of Chattanooga Region Report Survey, there is no "new" data in this report. All of the data in the Report existed before we started this project. But the data were often locked away in databases that most members of the public did not have access to.

Government agencies collect data all the time. Every time someone calls 911 – or in Chattanooga, 311 – information is collected. Similarly, every time someone applies for TennCare or Food Stamps or a building permit, a government agency collects that information. Sometimes, the agency will use that information to help it manage its work. Sometimes, the agency will report on the data – usually focusing on countywide or citywide reports. But most times, the data is never collected or analyzed in a way that makes it useful beyond just the immediate case.

Our goal was to take all of that information being collected by government – and paid for by taxpayers – and democratize it by unlocking those government databases. Dozens of federal, state and local government agencies have cooperated in this effort by providing the data presented in this report.

We also tried to disaggregate the data whenever possible: in other words, we tried to provide the data at the countywide or citywide level, but also at the neighborhood or zip code level. Most people care as much – if not more – about what is going on in their neighborhood as they do about what is going

on in their city, county or region. And, wherever possible, we also sought to break the data down by different demographic categories – age, race and gender. As will be demonstrated throughout the report, there are frequently real differences in how members of these different subgroups experience life in the Chattanooga region.

How did we pick what to measure? Good question. Because often, what gets measured is what gets acted upon. As we were starting to develop the list of indicators to measure, we looked at indicators used in similar reports in other cities and regions. We also convened a series of working groups, consisting of civic leaders, to ask what they thought it was important to measure.

And then we decided to impose a final "check" on our selection process: we asked members of the public. As part of the survey component of the Report, we asked 1000 residents of Hamilton County which different factors were most important in determining their quality of life. The focus on jobs, education, health, community and safety were reflected in the results of the survey.

The survey was also a means for us to collect information that we could not get from so-called "administrative data" from government agencies. The survey consisted of over 120 questions – asking about respondent demographics (age, race, gender) and a variety of questions ranging from their opinion on metro government to the state of their health.

The combination of the administrative and survey data provides a uniquely comprehensive assessment of life in our region today. It begins to answer the question of where we are, so that we can begin to think about where we want to go and how to get there.

But, again, we are trying to provide information in a way that has meaning. Because data without context are --- well, statistics.

For example, if we told you that the Lookouts had won 20 games this season, what would that mean? Even if we told you that they had won 20 and only lost 10, that wouldn't tell you all that you want to know. Why? Because it doesn't tell you how well they are doing compared to their rivals.

So, when we provide neighborhood level information, you will be able to compare one neighborhood with another and compare it to countywide information as well. When we present data at the countywide or regional level, we try to compare it to other similar midsize regions around the country.

Why We Did It

You are the head of a local foundation – or a member of the Chattanooga City Council or the County Commission – and you want to decide where to focus your resources. Presumably, you'd like to know as much as you can about how well – or poorly – the community is already doing in addressing different problems. And, you might also want to know how the problem differs across the region.

Or, you are the director of development for a local non-profit social services agency and you are seeking new federal funding for a program. The application requires you to identify current need in the community. You need information to help you make your case.

Or, perhaps most important, you live in East Chattanooga – or East Ridge or East Brainerd – and you are worried about crime in your neighborhood. You'd like to know, not just how much crime there is in your neighborhood, but how your neighborhood compares to other parts of the county.

The State of Chattanooga Region Report is written for you. It is designed to provide a common platform of information for users across the county about current conditions in the county. This report provides more up to date information, broken down geographically and demographically, than any other single document. It is encyclopedic in scope.

But it does not – and cannot – answer every question that individual residents or other users may have about the region. While it is comprehensive, it is not complete. But the hope is that by providing a basic platform of knowledge, it will answer a series of important questions and allow people to ask a well informed next set of questions.

What It Means

There are two themes that run throughout this Report: place and change.
Place matters. Place is where we live and where we work and go to school. Place is about communities -- like Ridgedale and Big Ridge. These communities are sometimes part of cities – like Chattanooga, Lookout Mountain and Collegedale. And these cities are part of Hamilton County, which is part of a region defined by a metropolitan statistical area that extends across Tennessee and North Georgia

Our region is centered by an urban area – Chattanooga – and surrounded by suburbs and rural areas. Chattanooga is a midsize city in a midsize metropolitan

area. But we are not like all cities – we bear little resemblance to New York or Los Angeles or Baltimore or Atlanta, or even Nashville and Memphis. But we are like dozens of other parts of the United States with mid size cities that center midsize regions.
Understanding place – and the differences between neighborhoods, between parts of the region and between other midsize cities and regions – is vital to understanding the state of the Chattanooga region today.[1]

And our region is changing. Neighborhoods change. Cities change. Regions change. Sometimes change can be good and sometimes it can be bad. And sometimes, whether change is good or bad depends on who you are and what you have at stake.

The State of Chattanooga Region Report seeks to highlight place and change. We will try to put the data in context and focus on differences by place and time, but we won't try to characterize data as "good news" or "bad news." Instead, we have decided to take a Sergeant Joe Friday approach to the data – "just the facts."

How You Can Use It

To those of you about to "read" the State of Chattanooga Region Report, we say "good luck." We expect most readers will go through the text and say, "wow, lots of information and a lot of numbers, but it was a little overwhelming…. and hard to dance to."

We know. We have tried to make the information as readable and understandable as possible. But we also hope that more people will "use" the Report than will just "read" it. Like an interested reader who starts by looking at a book's index, we know that users will be selective – they will want information about a particular area, particular indicator or a particular region. Because we want the Report to be used more than read, it is organized more to meet the needs of users than readers.

The Report is organized into seven sections:

- Demographics
- Crime and Public Safety
- Health
- Jobs and the Economy
- Education and Learning
- Community Development
- Urban Governance

In each section, the organization will generally be the same. We'll start by framing the section based on information collected in the survey. Then, we'll discuss data at the regional level and compare the Chattanooga to the thirteen other benchmark midsize regions selected for the Report. Finally, we will look at a series of different indicators on a neighborhood level. For each indicator, we will try to explain what is actually being measured and what the findings mean. Where there are clear differences based on place or demographics, we will highlight that as well.

What if you don't understand something in the Report? Ask. Specifically, go to the CRC website (www.researchcouncil.net) and click on the "Ask Eileen" button. You will then be directed to a list of frequently asked questions…and answers. If that doesn't help, you can send an email asking Eileen Robertson Rehberg, our Director of Data Analysis.[2]

What Next

First, tell us what you think. We want to know how we can improve the Report so that it is even better in 2008 – the next scheduled date of publication.

Second, let us tell you more. Not only do we like writing about data, we like talking about it. We're happy to come and speak on the report, the data and how it can be used.

Third, ask more questions. And remember, there really is no such thing as a stupid question.

Most importantly, use this report. We thought about titling the report, "Steal this Book" but then realized (a) Abbe Hoffman already did that 35 years ago and (b) you don't need to steal it – it's free. But just because it is free to users, doesn't mean that it shouldn't be valued. We think that the information that we are providing in the Report can help make the Chattanooga region a better place to live in the years to come. But the only way that will happen is if you – yes, you – use the information.

Sincerely,

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Endnotes

[1.] Because place is so important, we worked hard to try to define neighborhoods in a way that is relevant to the people who live there. We know that many will disagree with some of the neighborhoods as defined in the report. The problem is that neighborhoods generally lack official boundaries: there are some neighborhoods, as defined by civic associations, that have overlapping boundaries. There are also constraints imposed by the level at which the data is available: some data is only available at a zip code level, some is available at the census tract level. There is no perfect answer. But we attempted to define neighborhoods by grouping census tracts into 36 neighborhood areas – with an average population of just under 9,000 residents. We grouped together zip codes into nine sub-county regions: this was particularly important for providing geographic breakdowns of data from the survey.

[2.] "Ask Eileen" shamelessly borrows a wonderful initiative of the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, "Ask Allison," which can be found at www.gnocdc.org.