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More Than Numbers

Inside the Community Assessment Project, what it means for locals and why it is important for Santa Cruz County

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By Elizabeth Limbach



“People think that how you improve quality of life is so complicated that it can’t be done, but really, it should be no more complicated than this,” says Susan Brutschy matter-of-factly.

Brutschy, the enthusiastic president of local social research nonprofit Applied Survey Research (ASR), is referring to her firm’s magnum opus, the Santa Cruz County Community Assessment Project (CAP), an extensive annual report on the county’s quality of life. The report includes a variety of data—from the acres of organic farmland (3,341) and how many miles the average resident commutes to work (26.9) to what percentage of the county’s children live beneath the federal poverty level (17.8). It also notes that, in 2009, 72 percent of

residents surveyed were “very satisfied” with their overall quality of life.

But the interesting information doesn’t stop there.

By combining primary data gathered from an extensive telephone survey of more than 700 residents, with secondary data aggregated from a wealth of local and state sources, the CAP paints an intricately detailed portrait of life in our community.

When founding entities United Way of Santa Cruz County and Dominican Hospital had their first inklings to create a community report card more than 15 years ago, it wasn’t a very common thing to do. In fact, once they formed a steering committee and contracted ASR to do the dirty (er, data) work, they found that very few such projects existed at all. They learned from and tweaked what there already was, mostly looking to the Jacksonville, Fla., project—the oldest in the country, having started in 1984—and also created much of their own methodology. Now the second oldest CAP in the country, the Santa Cruz County project is an international model for community indicator efforts. It has won numerous awards and recognitions, and its leaders have traveled to places in Europe, and to South Korea, Istanbul and, last month, Israel, to give speeches on how to run a successful community indicator project.

“We’ve been all over the world to talk about this project, and it’s so different not to expect the government to make improvements,” says Brutschy, recalling the attitudes in the countries she has visited. Locally, she has watched as countless Santa Cruz County agencies and leaders have partnered up to effect change at the local level, often after seeing alarming findings in the CAP. She’s also seen a

community-wide effort (“from the bottom up,” she says) to determine what quality of life means to Santa Cruz, how it should be measured in the CAP, and what goals to set for changing the outcomes. “It’s very unique for people to be involved in these initiatives and to say we have to work across public and private to achieve these outcomes,” she adds. “Nobody cares about our community as much as our community members.”

Still, the CAP Report, which celebrated its 15th anniversary last year, mostly lives on the desks of journalists, its pages often earmarked and coffee-stained from constant referencing; legislators, who refer to it for any given statistic about their district—invaluable when writing a speech; and nonprofit and organization heads, who utilize its findings to apply for grants. But the very people the report is talking about—you, your neighbors, your children—have yet to catch wind. An Executive Summary of the report is distributed to each household every fall, and the entire report is available at santacruzcountycap.org, but it still remains a mystery.



HEALTHCARE FOR ALL

Thanks to surprising data about a lack of healthcare among county children, Healthy Kids was founded and now helps families like the Mehtas, who receive affordable comprehensive healthcare for their son, 5-year-old Om.

Photo: Kelly Vaillancourt

“Media and legislators use it, but the average Joe doesn’t seem to know it’s here,” notes Deanna

Zachary, project manager at ASR. “Everyone should get it on their doorstep, but I don’t know how many people are opening and reading it. But it’s an incredible resource.”

While ASR is a neutral research group, it is anything but a stale data collector. Zachary, Brutschy and the rest aim to present the data in the most attention-grabbing way possible and, hopefully, in the process, inspire more people to do something with those numbers. “We understand our role is to be data people, but data people who make data friendly and usable, not data that just goes up on a shelf,” says Brutschy. “The utilization for us is to help and to train and encourage people to use the information to do a better job to achieve a difference in most quality of life indicators. It doesn’t sound that sexy, but that’s our driving force—every single day.”

And, at the end of the day, it is the community’s reactions (and resulting actions) to the expertly presented data that makes the Santa Cruz CAP the shining example it is. “Ours has led to more community change efforts than in a lot of other places,” says Zachary. “[Others] do the report, they have excellent data, but they don’t necessarily turn the data into action.”

As the CAP enters yet another year of information overload, and busily reaches out to residents for input on what the next set of five-year community goals should be—you can cast your vote at goodtimesantacruz.com—we look back over some of the ways in which the report’s numbers represent real community change.

Making Money

One of the best uses of CAP data is found in the nonprofit sector, where grant writers look to its pages to help garner funds. Kirsten Liske is the vice president of Pollution Prevention and Zero Waste Programs for local nonprofit behemoth Ecology Action (EA). She has seen CAP data help win grants firsthand because of its ability to demonstrate the community's priorities, goals, problem areas, and because of the way its aggregated nature allows for detailed cross-referencing, such as putting environmental issues in the context of demographics and community concerns.

One of EA's more interesting uses of the CAP finds us at Gateway Elementary School on West Cliff Drive, a small school perched on the edge of the vastly beautiful Monterey Bay. Ecology Action received an Urban Pollution Prevention Grant, which it used to form the Model Schools and Green Gardener programs. "We wanted to work with schools on, ideally, not having pollutants in the community, finding different ways of managing pests in yards or on school sites, dealing with erosion, and keeping storm water on site by capturing it and using it," says Liske.



RAINY DAY

Local nonprofit Ecology Action used CAP data to secure a grant for a program that brought a rainwater catchment system to Gateway Elementary and other area schools.

Photo Courtesy of Ecology Action

Gateway was a good starting place because of its coastal location. "Any storm water that runs off their site doesn't have a chance of getting cleaned up before going into the Bay," remarks Liske. As one of six demonstration sites for the program, which provides waste water and integrated pest management training to schools throughout the Monterey Bay Area, the school now has a rainwater catchment system that stores storm water on campus, where the students then use it to water their school garden. "They aren't having to pump out of our aquifer, it's not running off into the street," says Liske, "and they have a great use for it."

Liske and EA used CAP data that shows the prevalence of water issue concerns in their application for the grant, which was awarded by the State Water Resources Control Board. The top three environmental concerns in the 2009 community survey were water availability (18.1 percent of respondents), water pollution (15.3 percent), and water quality (10.1 percent). The CAP shows these findings alongside the top concerns from the past several years, when air pollution, traffic and general pollution frequented the top three. It's evident that the worry is currently about all things water.

"They wanted to know what the local issues with the local water supply are," says Liske. "The CAP pointed us in the right direction. They were also interested in if the community is engaged. The CAP's community survey shows water quality is a top concern for the residents.

"The CAP helps to flush out those needs that the funders want to see," she adds.

Healthy Kids

In 1995, there was no local data showing how many residents were covered by health insurance. So, determined to fill that hole, the CAP created a question in its survey asking individuals if they and their families had coverage. The response was dramatic: 25 percent of respondents had no health insurance. Alarmed, worried and outraged, a network of local organizations set about planning a summit conference to hash out a plan of action. After watching CAP data on health insurance for a few years, the gathering took place in 2001.

The group's consensus was to provide universal healthcare to the county's children. "Children are the low-hanging fruit," explains Leslie Conner, program and policy director of Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County (HIP). "It's more affordable to cover kids, and it's also where prevention has the biggest impact. Asthma, obesity, chronic disease—if you can get to kids earlier, they have better chances of becoming healthy adults."

The resulting program was Healthy Kids, a healthcare system for county children ages 0 to 18 created by The United Way, Santa Cruz Community Foundation and First 5, a childhood health initiative funded by Proposition 10. Healthy Kids launched in 2004 with the goal of covering every uninsured Santa Cruz County child—estimated to be 5,000 in total, including 2,300 who would qualify for Healthy Kids and 2,700 who would be eligible for partner programs Healthy Families or Medi-Cal. But, as they would soon learn, they had greatly underestimated the need.



GETTING FIT

After the CAP publicized the high rate of childhood obesity in Santa Cruz County, more than 150 agencies united to create anti-obesity efforts Go For Health, 5210 and Jovenes Sanos.

Photo Courtesy of United Way

"Once we announced it, we enrolled people much faster than we'd anticipated," says Christina Cuevas, program director for the Santa Cruz County Community Foundation. "People were just waiting for something. Here was finally an opportunity for all families—if they were eligible or ineligible for public funding—to come through one door and to be helped to get to the right place to get their kids coverage."

Twenty-eight children were enrolled in 2004, the inaugural year, but by January 2005, enrollment was up to 1,050. As of March, 2010, the total enrollment had reached 15,028. Since 2004, Healthy Kids has raised more than \$13 million to provide these 15,000-plus kids with medical, dental, vision and mental health services.

Originally, the program was to be picked up by the state a few years in, but (surprise!) the Golden State is in debt, and taking over programs like Healthy Kids has fallen to the wayside. After losing state supporters, Healthy Kids has entered a funding gap of \$500,000, but is still hanging on—unlike many similar programs in other California counties, which Cuevas says are chronically closing their doors.

Despite financial restrictions, the program continues to branch out in increasingly creative ways. Although there is an enrollment freeze for 6- to 18-year-olds (and a waiting list of 230), the 0- to 5-year-old program is still wide open. In an attempt to enroll every uninsured child in that bracket, Healthy Kids has increased its outreach, sending Certified Application Assistors (CAA)s to enroll families in the field, including in the maternity ward of hospitals. “Instead of waiting until they are out of the hospital and it’s a couple months down the road, where there is a very complicated application system, we do it right there in the hospital room,” says Conner. “We enroll them to Medi-Cal, we assign them to a primary provider, and we also orient them to First 5’s New Birth Kit.”

Xochitl Zaragoza is the CAA in the new Downtown Santa Cruz enrollment office, a small but cheerful space at 903 Pacific Ave. Her job, along with the other CAAs, is to make enrolling in Healthy Kids, Healthy Families or Medi-Cal as accessible, easy and painless as possible for the county’s low-income population. “The idea is to be more accessible to those who don’t have transportation or need to come on their work breaks, and make it so they can bring their kids,” she says, gesturing to the office’s colorful collection of children’s books.

Outreach has also extended into schools, which is where 5-year-old Om Mehta’s parents first heard about the program. “I used to work at CVS Pharmacy, for eight years, and I lost my job,” says his mother, Mina. “Getting insurance was really hard. My friend suggested I apply to Healthy Kids. At first I didn’t think we’d be eligible. I talked to Om’s teacher and she helped us get in touch with the office here, and it was so easy. We are really, really happy.”



ASR’s Zachary believes the formation of Healthy Kids is the perfect example of the shift from reliance on federal and state government to handle needs (like healthcare), to local entities rolling up their sleeves and doing it themselves—all the while being inspired and motivated by data seen in the CAP. “With Healthy Kids, [stakeholders] said, ‘well, George Bush isn’t going to help us, the state is broke—we’re going to have to do it ourselves,’” says Zachary. She says the DIY attitude is a result of our country’s political context, and a “unique mentality here, where citizen action is needed and growing. It’s really the next frontier.”

A Tale of Too Much

As the self-professed “data dork” in charge of publicizing CAP findings, Zachary often runs across interesting and sometimes shocking trends. One of her most memorable discoveries was the prevalence of obesity, especially among youngsters. In 2002, 16.2 percent of Santa Cruz County children under the age of 5 were overweight or obese, as were 24.3 percent of children between 5 and 19 years old. “Certainly with obesity people didn’t know it was that bad,” she recalls. “People had a perception that Santa Cruz is a really healthy place, and it just wasn’t true.”

It wasn’t until the report gathered, presented and publicized the stats that people took notice. “What I’ve found over the years is that those data act as a shock to the community,” says Zachary. “People picked up

on [the obesity data] and it led people to talk about it, eventually saying ‘we have to do something about this.’”

More than 150 different agencies united to conquer the local obesity epidemic, launching the Go For Health initiative in 2004. “When [the collaborative] saw the numbers all together, it shed some light on the gravity of the situation, and they were able to muster up more community support and political will to really do something about this,” remembers Shebreh Kalantari-Johnson, former director of community organizing for United Way, which oversaw Go For Health. After the birth of Go For Health came partner programs 5210, a social marketing health campaign, and Jovenes Sanos, a particularly inspiring program that is run by Watsonville teenagers. The motivated teens focus on effecting three sectors: city policy (like where fast food joints can be located, and getting more safe bike lanes), schools (increasing opportunities for physical activity, hosting fruit and veggies stands), and markets (swapping candy for healthy snacks in the check-out aisles).

The CAP, meanwhile, included “By the year 2010, the prevalence of childhood obesity in Santa Cruz County will be reduced by 5 percent” in the 2005-2010 set of goals. Last year’s numbers didn’t show much of a budge—the number of overweight or obese kids less than 5 years old decreased by .2 percent, but the amount of 5- to 19-year-olds rose by 2.7 percent—although it can take many years for efforts like Go For Health, Jovenes Sanos and 5210 to register on the data radar. Still, it’s possible that a similar goal will be reworked into the next set of CAP goals, depending on community input; “Decrease the percentage of children who are overweight” is in the running.

And although the charts aren’t yet showing the impact of local anti-obesity efforts, Kalantari-Johnson is an eyewitness to the positive effects they’ve had on their target group. The 20 or so youth involved in Jovenes Sanos, for example, have cut back on soda and adopted other healthier habits, and have become young experts in community organizing and effecting policy. But she says it’s only a matter of time, with the help of the data dorks behind the CAP, that an even larger change is seen. “It’s important to have data to back up what you’re going to do,” she says. “If you go in front of decision makers without it, it’s heard or not heard. But if you come with data and show evidence of the problem and how it will work, people will listen. Then you start to see some change.”

She adds, “Numbers aren’t the whole story but they’re a very important piece of the story.”

All Eyes on Homelessness

While efforts like Healthy Kids and Jovenes Sanos were born from alarming numbers in the report, action has also been spurred by a lack of available data. Peter Connery, vice president of ASR, remembers the shortcomings in homelessness data that led to the creation of the Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey (HCS).

“The lack of data on homelessness was fairly obvious to folks,” he says. “As a result there was a lot of interest in the community and among the service providers to learn more about it.” An assemblage of entities, including the county and all of its cities, established the HCS, the first of which was conducted in 2000. Now required (and funded) by the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD), taking a headcount of the subpopulation was more of an anomaly than a norm when Santa Cruz began doing it.

The census takes place every two years, early on a late-January morning. About 70 census takers are paired into teams (one volunteer and one homeless person who is being paid \$10 an hour for their help) and canvas the county—every park, encampment, beach, gulch, and underpass—visually identifying homeless persons. They add their total to the previous night’s head counts at the county’s homeless shelters to reach a grand total. In 2009, they counted 2,265 unsheltered and sheltered homeless persons. Thirty-two percent had spent the night in a shelter; the vast majority counted were out in the bitter January cold.

“We know going in that whatever numbers we report, which are strictly based on observations, will be an undercount because it’s a group that doesn’t want to be found,” says Connery. “Albeit the numbers we report will be more than any other strategy will typically get.”



663 of those surveyed were mentally ill, **627** were substance abusers, **272** were veterans, **18** had HIV/AIDS, **119** were victims of domestic violence, and **17** were unaccompanied youth. Reported in the 2009 Homeless Census and Survey.

Photo: Charles Mixon

The survey component collects qualitative data through extensive peer-to-peer interviews the homeless employees conduct in the field. “We use the results of those surveys to paint the qualitative picture of homelessness in Santa Cruz,” explains Connery. For example, contrary to popular belief, they found that 62.3 percent of the homeless persons surveyed in 2009 were county residents before becoming homeless. “It’s called the Magnet Theory—that you build infrastructure and that attracts your target group,” says Connery. “But year in and year out we have shown that two-thirds of our homeless lived a ‘normal’ life, or a working life, in Santa Cruz County before becoming homeless.”

Connery hopes that the picture painted by the HCS will lead to increased and better shelters and

homeless services, more events like this year’s Project Homeless Connect, and an overall adjustment to general misconceptions.

“There’s an old saying: What gets measured, gets done,” he says. “The corollary to that is that when we measure things and are aware of objective data, it enables us to see how we are progressing in areas of community importance, or where we are regressing. It enables us to more effectively program our services so that we can be a better community. And in a time of precious assets, it enables us to redirect energies or increase our attention to areas in which we may be falling behind.”

Goals Galore

“The story,” says Brutschy, “is not just about Santa Cruz measuring itself. It’s about Santa Cruz taking the opportunity to say, ‘Let’s be intentional about the resources that we bring to bear.’”

And in order to make this a real community affair, every five years, CAP stakeholders go through an arduous process of designing a set of community goals. The CAP wouldn’t be much without its goals—just a packet of data with no emphasis on using it. And the goals wouldn’t mean much if it weren’t for the thousands (yes—thousands) of locals who help determine them, and the heroes who help us meet them.

The last round of goals was set in 2005, meaning a fresh batch is being whipped up as this is being written. Several teams representing six different sectors—economy, natural environment, social environment, education, health, and public safety—survey residents and narrow down their concerns into a handful of tangible community goals, which are then voted on to determine the final list of goals (about two per sector). As mentioned, Good Times has partnered with the CAP, and is featuring a CAP Goal Survey on its website (goodtimesantacruz.com), where you can have your say. The goals will be announced this fall, when the 2010 CAP Report and 2010 Community Heroes will also be presented. Awarding the heroes in Brutschy’s favorite part (“It’s when we get all weepy and happy,” she says) because it’s evidence that progress is being made—like the many programs that were born from the diagramed pages of the CAP Report, it’s proof that the numbers can create conversation, partnership, and change. Whether it’s simply by voting on the community goals or working toward accomplishing one, she only hopes that more people will get involved.

“This is where regular people should have an ability to say ‘these are our outcomes: is that OK with us? Are we spending and acting appropriately to make a difference with these outcomes?’ I think this will be the next frontier in community work.

“It’s not enough to measure,” she continues. “It’s about whether we are making the right decisions with our resources to help Santa Cruz County. Forget what the state says, forget what Washington D.C. says, what does it look like here, for us?”

IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

- 23.8 percent of 2009 respondents spent more than 50 percent of their income (after taxes) on housing
- Cancer is the leading cause of death, followed by coronary heart disease
- Violent crime hasn’t budged since 2000: there are 4.7 violent crimes for every 1,000 people
- 496 was the total average daily jail population in the county in 2008
- 847 calls to police were made in the county for domestic violence in 2008
- There is a high rate of breastfeeding: 96 percent versus California’s 86 percent of in hospital breastfeeding
- There is a low rate of immunization: In 2008, 85 percent of kindergartners had them versus 92 percent of all California kindergartners
- 13.3 percent of 2009 respondents said marijuana for recreational use is acceptable

- 31 percent of CAP respondents said meth was a problem in their neighborhood (highest in the San Lorenzo Valley, at 43 percent)
- More high schoolers are graduating: drop-out rates declined from 21 percent in 2006 to 14 percent in 2008
- High voter turnout: 87 percent in the November 2008 election (versus 79 percent statewide)
- 1,843,886 pounds of pesticides were used on Santa Cruz farmland in 2007
- The No. 1 contributor to quality of life, receiving 76.2 percent of responses, was “scenery/geography/climate,” which has been the top result since 2000
- 1.6 percent of the population is comprised of babies less than 1 year old
- There are 231.5 miles of recreational trail
- Echoing the national economic trends, the county saw unemployment jump from 7.3 in 2008 to 10.6 percent in 2009 (it is now 11.5 percent, according to the California Employment Development Department)
- There were 1,537 notices of default in 2008
- Food insecurity is worse: Second Harvest Food Bank served 32,618 people in 2003—that number steadily increased to become 48,161 in 2008

[Take the CAP Community Goals Survey click here](#)