

Study finds slightly fewer disparities in city sectors - Wholeness index cites south's dip in major crime, rise in high school grads

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Dallas became a bit more "whole" in the last year with overall disparities in quality of life declining slightly across the city.

That's the core conclusion of a research group that today will release its second annual Dallas Wholeness Index.

Created by the Dallas-based J. McDonald Williams Institute, the index measures citywide variations in 12 indicators, including high school graduation rates, renter occupancy, crime rates, voter turnout and access to retail.

The more similar the indicators are across a city, the more "whole" that city is, researchers assume.

As a city's level of wholeness increases - as disparities, most notably concentrations of poverty and crime, decrease - its overall quality of life and potential for economic growth improves. So goes the thinking.

And by pinpointing disparities, the index also can help leaders identify problem areas that need attention and resources.

"It's a pointer system to let us see how we're doing," said Dr. Timothy Bray, executive director of the institute, the research arm of the Foundation for Community Empowerment.

The wholeness index will be presented and discussed at the third annual Williams Institute conference today at the Adam's Mark Hotel, 400 Olive St. downtown.

This year's index gives Dallas a wholeness score of 66.79, with 0 representing total disparity and 100 that theoretical state where all residents have equality of economic opportunity and are equally self-sufficient and involved in civic life.

The score is a slight improvement over the 2006 mark of 65.49, a change driven mostly by a wholeness-enhancing reduction in major crimes in South Dallas and by increased high school graduation rates in the sector. But voter turnout in South Dallas was low compared with the northern sector, a notable disparity.

Whether Dallas' wholeness level is good, bad, acceptable or whatever is anybody's guess or opinion. Other U.S. cities don't have such an index for comparison. And Dallas only has two years of data for context.

"This tells us wholeness can move," Dr. Bray said. "And we're moving in the right direction."

Because the index is a neutral measure of relative similarities, improvements in one area of the city and declines in another can affect the overall score.

If every neighborhood in the city was equally crime-ridden, or the graduation rate at every high school were 25 percent, that would be wholeness. "We could be more whole with rising crime rates," Dr. Bray said.

But the institute is looking past basic comparisons to trends and the disparities themselves - the places where the rates of crime, graduation, home ownership and the index's other quality-of-life indicators are best and worst.

"It's important to recognize them and ask what went right there," Dr. Bray said of the success stories.

Yet the institute will focus on the trouble spots and go beyond the numbers with follow-up interviews and fieldwork, he said. The goal is to better understand and address the problems and challenges of life in the big city.

"Our focus is on changing lives in neighborhoods in Dallas."

WHOLENESS SCORES

The J. McDonald Williams Institute's 2007 Wholeness Index Report, to be released today, measures disparities in areas of Dallas in 12 indicators. A score of 100 denotes "wholeness," in which all areas of the city are as similar as possible.

MOST DISPARITY

SAT scores - Average SAT scores of students in the Class of 2004-05 attending nonmagnet public high schools - 52.59, up from 51.28 last year

Fit housing - The proportion of houses rated as fit by the Dallas Central Appraisal District - 55.47, up from 55.12 last year

Middle-class housing - Proportion of single-family homes priced in a middle-class range between \$138,446 and \$332,271, figures reached using income statistics - 55.86, up from 50.02 last year

Voter turnout - Percentage of registered voters casting ballots in the November 2006 general election - 59.73, down from 71.09 last year

LEAST DISPARITY

Index crime rate - Compiled from reports to the Dallas Police Department in 2006 of the following crimes: murder, robbery, aggravated assault, theft, burglary and motor vehicle theft - 89.20, up from 81.76 last year

Wealth - Nonwage income from interest, dividends and rents, compared with income from salaries and wages - 82.58, up from 80.38 last year

School holding power - The willingness of middle-class parents who could afford private schools to enroll their children in public elementary schools - 74.97, down from 74.99 last year

Life span - Years of potential life lost when people die before age 65, per 100,000 population - 72.71. This figure from last year's report is being reused because more recent mortality data from the state are not yet available.

OTHER INDICATORS

Families not in poverty - Percentage of families living at or above the poverty level in 2006 - 67.21, down from 67.50 last year

Graduation rate - The proportion of students who began attending nonmagnet public schools in fall 2001 who graduated within four years - 66.99, up from 56.20 last year

Owner occupancy - Percentage of single-family homes occupied by the owner - 63.83, up from 63.56 last year

Access to retail - Ratio of retail sales generated by an area's grocery, drug and clothing stores to the reported spending in that area - 60.38, down from 61.20 last year

• Caption: CHART(S): WHOLENESS SCORES

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