

WHEN NUMBERS BRING KNOWLEDGE, COMMUNITY MEMBERS BENEFIT

By Ron Barry

Numbers aren't always everybody's "thing."

Without them, though, your school officials and other government leaders would be far less equipped to make the decisions they need to make.

But WHOSE numbers do you use? In today's often antagonistic political climate – especially when so many media outlets have switched from information to partisan "infotainment" – it's getting tougher and tougher to find believable numbers with which to work.

In Tennessee, at least one entity is making an effort to provide leaders and citizens with pure numbers – and occasional analysis – intended to genuinely inform them toward more efficient use of taxpayer money and to help them see how they compare to others in the Volunteer state.

The Sycamore Institute is its name. Based in Nashville, it describes itself as a non-profit, independent, nonpartisan public policy research center for Tennessee. It "exists to help policy makers, the media, and the public understand complex issues that affect and connect Tennesseans' health and prosperity."

Sycamore, its website says, "takes a neutral and objective approach to analyze and explain public policy issues. We are not beholden to any political, government, academic, or other organization." Its leadership and staff "come from across the political spectrum, but we all believe that data and evidence create the best foundation for effective public policy."

It touts itself as a group of researchers, providing "information, analysis, and opportunities for learning and discussion. We are not lobbyists or advocates for particular legislative proposals, political perspectives, or party agendas."



That's one reason why The Sycamore Institute tends to deal in cold, hard numbers. And one of its latest projects provides information that local citizens may find particularly interesting when they seek to understand why Crockett County's leaders do what they do.

Researchers crunched the numbers from U.S. Census Bureau statistics gathered from 2018-2022 to rank Tennessee counties on a number of factors. The Census Bureau uses a five-year average because it reflects more accurately on rural areas – and Tennessee is a predominantly rural state.

Some of the information produced isn't surprising. For instance, Tennessee's 95 counties continued to experience large differences in income levels, poverty rates, educational attainment, and health insurance status in 2018-2022. It doesn't take a genius to see that Williamson County – home to much of Nashville's booming music industry personnel and artists – does better financially than Lake County, stuck way up in the northwest corner of rural West Tennessee.

But some of the other informational tidbits are very interesting. For instance: Would you have guessed that fully 32 of the 95 Tennessee counties are considered to be entirely rural?

To qualify as an urban area, a territory identified according to criteria must encompass at least 2,000 housing units or have a population of at least 5,000. That means – in 32 Tennessee counties – there isn't a single town or city within its borders that has a population of at least 5,000 people, or contains at least 2,000 housing units. Crockett County is one of those 32 counties, since its largest town (Bells) had a little over 2,400 residents in 2022.

Educationally, Tennessee ranked behind 38 states and the District of Columbia in the share of adults (25+) with at least a bachelor's degree and in the share of individuals with health insurance.

But let's bring the numbers closer to home.

Here's where Crockett County stands in several of the categories researched by The Sycamore Institute:

In "percentage of county residents living in urban areas," Crockett (with no urban areas) is at 0%. (If you're curious, 23 Tennessee counties are considered urban, because more than 50% of their residents are in urban areas. The rest – 72 counties – are considered rural, with 32 of them being entirely rural.)

In "median household income," Crockett is basically right at the median figure but is ahead of almost all other West Tennessee counties except for Fayette and Tipton.

In “poverty rate by county,” Crockett is just slightly higher than the state average of 14%, but lower than West Tennessee’s overall average of 17.4%. However, Crockett’s percentage for children (under age 18) is higher than the state average of 19.2%. The overall poverty average for Crockett citizens is improved because the rate for Crockett’s senior citizens (65+) is very low, at around 4.5% (the Tennessee average is 10.1%).

The percentage of Crockett County residents with college degrees (less than one-third) is on the low end compared to the rest of the state, as is the percentage of adults with a high school diploma or its equivalent (although this figure is very near the 80% range).

When it comes to health insurance, Crockett’s overall population without it exceeds the state’s median of 10.1%, although the percentages for both children and senior adults are significantly improved from the median.

In another statistical report analyzed by The Sycamore Institute, Tennessee ranks 36th in overall child well-being for the fourth straight year, according to the **2024 KIDS COUNT**® Data Book, a 50-state report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation studying recent data on how kids across the country are faring. This year, the annual report highlights key education issues Tennessee and other states are grappling with in the wake of the pandemic – including learning loss and chronic absenteeism.

Tennessee’s overall ranking in education was 32nd. National assessment data revealed large declines in proficiency between 2019 and 2022, but Tennessee’s own state assessments show significant gains from 2022 to 2023 – rebounding in many areas to or beyond pre-pandemic levels. The Data Book also shows that 23% of Tennessee students were chronically absent during the 2021-2022 school year, a historic high.