Most people approach statistics with either blank confusion or deep suspicion. After all, reducing three-dimensional realities like our daily lives to a series of numbers is an intimidating task, and interpreting them back to relevance is even more baffling. And because there are so many different ways to read them, we hear echoes of Mark Twain’s famous words: “There are lies, damned lies and statistics.”

But sometimes statistics can paint a vivid picture. The folks behind the Grant County Trends Website do a masterful job of taking demographic information and showing us how far our communities have come — and possibly even where they’re headed.

Population Growth

Take population growth, for instance. We all know that Grant County has grown more populous. Ask anyone who has lived here for any amount of time and they’ll tell you all about it. (Heck, you might have trouble getting them to stop telling you.) But do you realize that in the last thirty years, the number of people in this county has nearly doubled? Yep. Since 1981 Grant County has gone from 48,524 people in 1981 to 87,700 in 2010.

So how did this happen? Well, one way to increase the population is by migration, people moving into the county. And if we look at the numbers, sure enough, there have been times when a whole lot of people moved here. After some ups and downs in the 1980s, we see an upswing in the number of people moving into Grant County in the ‘90s, peaking at the middle of the decade. Since people usually move where the jobs are, it’s probably not a coincidence that the 1990s were also a time of industrial expansion in this area.

But not all the population growth comes from outside the county. People living here do have babies, after all. And if you look at the graphs showing median ages and age of population for Grant County and the rest of Washington, you can see that we have them a little more often than other parts of the state. Religion, culture and confidence in the future all play a part in that trend.

Some of the new Grant County people are coming from a lot farther away than Seattle or Spokane. We
have a much higher percentage of immigrants overall than the rest of Washington state has. In 2009, 13.3 percent of Grant County residents were non-citizens, compared to 6.7 percent for Washington and 7 percent for the United States overall. That also corresponds to languages. From 2007 to 2009, 19.8 percent of the US population and 16.9 percent of Washingtonians spoke something other than English at home. In Grant County that number was 32.5 percent. Nearly a third of our residents are most comfortable using some other language. At the same time, a look at the latest census report shows that almost half of that number speak English “very well.” In other words, we have a good-sized bilingual population here in Grant County, much higher than in other parts of the state.

Crime Rate

What about our crime rate? Like so many other statistical matters, it depends on how you look at it. Property crime arrests by both youth and adults stay a little above the state and national rates, although the youth rate fluctuates more. But violent crime arrests are well below the average for Washington and the US overall. So it’s safer to walk around the streets at night in Grant County than in, say, Seattle. Thanks to some excellent police forces, Grant County is a comparatively safe place to live.

Unemployment

How about unemployment? Well, a quick glance suggests that our unemployment rate is higher than in the urban areas of Washington. But look a little closer at the sort of employment that we’re measuring. Because Grant County is mostly rural, seasonal agricultural work is a large part of our economy. Here’s where the statistics get tricky. The unemployment figure is based on the number of people filling
jobs, which in the case of seasonal ag work means people who leave when the job is over. In other words, the worker has moved on to work somewhere else, but the unemployment figure assumes he’s still here and out of work. The same thing applies to the people who come into the area for large construction projects like those at REC Silicon and SGL/BMW. Once you figure that disparity in, Grant County’s numbers look much brighter.

The recent economic downturn had an interesting effect on Grant County’s numbers. Our unemployment figures rose and fell along with the state and national rates; ours was higher (according to the charts), but it was higher by the same amount from year to year. Then in 2008, unemployment in Grant County dropped to 5.7 percent while Washington’s dropped less dramatically to 4. Since then, we’ve had an economic crash that sent unemployment rates up to between nine and ten percent – for us, Washington and the whole country. But remember the ag work adjustment above? When you factor in the seasonal work, our unemployment is actually much, much lower than in other places. Times are tight, but the effect on Grant County has been much less than elsewhere.

**Education**

Education is another good indicator of the health of a community. Grant County has smaller class sizes in schools than the rest of Washington, and has had since at least 1997. Since we have a larger per-
percentage of children than the rest of the state, school enrollment has risen steadily, but it appears that our schools have kept pace with the growth. A good measure of Grant County's commitment to education may be found in the response to school levies. In 2009, Grant County residents spent 0.7 percent of their total personal income on school levies, whereas Washingtonians spent 0.5 percent overall. That may not sound like much, but when you consider that our per capita income is lower than the whole state by a much wider margin, it means that we take our schools seriously. Everybody talks about education – it's enshrined in the Washington State Constitution as "the paramount duty of the state" – but here in Grant County, we put our money where our mouth is.

Naturally, for every statistic we've cited here, you can probably find another to contradict it. Such is the nature of numbers, as Twain pointed out. So go have a look at the Grant County Trends Website (www.grantcountytrends.ewu.edu) and see for yourself. Compare, contrast and twiddle with the figures all you like. Some things are improving, some things are showing signs of trouble. But the big picture is still the same: Grant County is a great place to live. It all adds up.