

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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### **How Are We Doing?**

“How am I doing?” That was the trademark comment of New York’s former mayor Ed Koch. It is a natural question for all of us as we go through our daily routines. A response might come in the form of this additional question, “Relative to what?”

How is Massachusetts doing? With the help of a publication mailed to my office this summer, I can respond to both of those questions on as they apply to our state. Called *50 State Comparisons*, it ranks the states and DC in 57 categories ranging from demographics to economics to education.

Massachusetts is doing very well overall, and two tables show us leading the nation.

Our infant mortality rate is the lowest in the country, a significant achievement for a health system that serves inner city populations. Our medical centers have neonatal units that care for high-risk premature infants, a service that might lead to higher mortality, yet they contribute to our position. The states nearest to our 5 per 1000 have fewer urban centers, and demographically similar states lag far behind.

We have the lowest highway death rate as measured by fatal crashes per billion miles traveled. Other small states are clustered behind us, but again our 9 fatal crashes per billion miles traveled is markedly lower than the others. Since many other states enforce primary seat belt usage, just think how low the death rate might plunge if we all wore our seat belts.

Supporting factors for the preceding statistics may be our low number of uninsured residents (only 4 states are lower) and the high level of highway expenditures (we rank 10<sup>th</sup>). Our roads are still judged to be among the roughest in the nation in spite of those expenditures. Do you think the Big Dig has anything to do with that ranking?

Education spending stands out for both praise and concern. Our public school spending ranks fifth, and public school teachers are tenth in income with average salaries of \$49,000. Public higher education shows a sharp contrast, placing us ahead of only Vermont and New Hampshire in per capita commitment of tax dollars. The state’s lack of commitment to public higher education is a tradition in need of change.

One table shows Massachusetts high schoolers below average in SAT scores. It seems to indicate that our education dollars are not well spent, but that is not the case. It is an example of the saying, “Statistics don’t lie, but statisticians do.” Top-ranked states have test results for fewer than 10% of their students, while 79% of Massachusetts students take SAT exams. When compared with similar student populations, as recent news articles indicate, our students are near the top.

Some numbers can be read as good or bad, depending on one’s point of view. Individual viewpoints on gambling might lead to different response to these numbers. On the one hand, we spend \$663 per capita on the lottery. On the other hand, we get what we pay for because the lottery’s expense ratio is among the lowest.

If you view government projects as “bringing home the bacon,” the measure of federal government “pork” placing us as number 49 is not a good thing. Another indicator says we rank 13<sup>th</sup> in federal expenditures per capita. Maybe that mean we get our money the old-fashioned way ...we earn it.

Other statistics show that we are income leaders with a median income that trails only Connecticut and New Jersey. We have the 8<sup>th</sup> lowest poverty rate. Our tax burden as a percent of income is relatively low, 40<sup>th</sup> of the 51 jurisdictions. We have the dubious distinction of ranking number two in debt per capita, though our bond rating is solid. And at number 40 (Nevada is number one) we trail most states in population growth.