

Northwest Rural Communities Project



ON RURAL LIFE:

"I used to live in a big city, so I love knowing that my neighbors watch my kids or watch when I come around the corner. I like the smallness of the town."

ON THE ECONOMY:

"I can't make it even month to month, much less save anything."

ON SCHOOLS:

"I like the personalized attention to my child. He gets a lot of personal attention, his teachers know him just by sight and it's really nice. They are small classrooms."

ON THE FUTURE:

"I want more for my child than what I go through every day. ... Because when I was a kid, we didn't have choices."

Focusing on Rural Families

The opportunities and challenges of raising children in rural areas of the Pacific Northwest are often not presented adequately when state decision-makers develop policies and strategies to invest in families. Children First for Oregon and Washington Kids Count undertook the Northwest Rural Communities Project to understand better the lives of children and families in rural communities and to document these experiences for community and state leaders, the media and the public. We specifically focused on families raising children on limited resources.

Nearly 480,000 children live in rural counties in Oregon and Washington, with 45 percent of them living in low-income households (compared to the region's metro areas where approximately one-third of children are low-income).

While metro areas have been jolted by the current economic downturn, rural communities have been struggling with great uncertainty for some time, having never fully recovered from the decline in natural resource and agriculture-related jobs over the previous two decades. Rural areas have had difficulty attracting new businesses because of location, limited infrastructure or lack of a skilled workforce. Because many workers in these communities are public employees, recent state and local budget cuts have added to the insecurity. Unemployment in Northwest non-metro counties has been higher than state averages for years. In fact, 20 rural counties have had unemployment rates higher than eight percent for ten years or more.

Of course, unemployment rates paint only one part of the economic picture. For those able to find work, a job is often not enough to meet the basic needs of their families. Employment does not guarantee a family can pay rent, buy food or afford health care, child care, school clothes or other necessities. Many working poor parents juggle two or even three jobs to cobble together enough for their families' needs.

Listening to Learn

Between May and August, the Northwest Rural Communities Project conducted eight focus group discussions with parents earning a low income. A total of 79 parents of 168 children shared their stories in Oregon (Madras, Ontario, Roseburg and Siletz) and in Washington (Colville, Forks, Mattawa and Omak). The groups included a Spanish-language discussion (Mattawa) and a Native American tribal community (Siletz) to reflect the cultural diversity of the rural Northwest. For additional context, the Project also interviewed 34 local decision-makers, educators, service providers and business leaders about the benefits and barriers to raising children in their communities.

An analysis of the focus group discussions is underway. The goal is to identify themes and issues that rise above the specifics of each community. This information will then be put together with available data indicators to provide a comprehensive portrait of the lives of low-income rural families.



Highlights of the Emerging Story

The preliminary analysis reveals an emerging story of hope – parents looking forward positively for their children and themselves – coupled with realism and frustration about the state of their communities and the challenges they face in providing the best for their children.

Parents like raising their children in the Northwest’s rural areas because of the safety and security afforded by small communities, the beautiful environment and for many, the proximity to family. For the most part, the benefits of rural life for their children outweigh the challenges.

- ▶ **The number one challenge is economic** – the lack of jobs in general and the lack of good paying jobs with family-friendly hours in particular. Lack of affordable, safe and quality child care is a significant work and family financial support issue for low-income families.
- ▶ **Education is an important issue for low-income rural parents.** They praise Head Start, care deeply about their schools and desire more educational opportunities for themselves, especially when further education may bring a chance for better employment. There is universal concern about decreased K-12 funding, specifically growing class sizes, few after school activities and unaffordable sports programs.
- ▶ **Parents worry that older children have little to do and will get into trouble unless something is done about it.** The lack of supervised youth activities and the expense of programs that do exist pose significant problems for low-income working parents. Transportation to activities can be a considerable time and cost burden – and parents must have cars because public transportation is scarce to nonexistent and distances are often considerable.

These themes – employment, education and youth activities – and others will be explored in depth in the final report, to be released in February 2004.

About the Project

The Northwest Rural Communities Project is a collaborative effort of Children First for Oregon and Washington Kids Count, made possible by a generous grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This 14-month project seeks to increase public understanding of the challenges facing low-income families in Pacific Northwest rural communities.

Shaded and green counties are classified as rural (non-metro) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In the counties selected for the Project (in green), between 40 to 58 percent of children live in low-income households.



ON RURAL LIFE:

“The jobs aren’t really good right now, but you know, it’s just a nice place to live life.”

ON YOUTH ACTIVITIES:

“I wish we had a center for all age children with varied activities... so they could have a place to go where kids are going to be safe.”

ON THE CHALLENGES:

“I’ve tried everything. I do daycare and Tupperware and Herbalife and Avon and I’m not kidding. ...And I’m still doing daycare. Because it’s the only way we can make ends meet.”

ON THE OPPORTUNITIES:

“There’s just lots to do here. You’ve got the ocean. You’ve got the mountains. You’ve got hot springs. You’ve got hikes. You’ve got everything here. I love it here.”



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