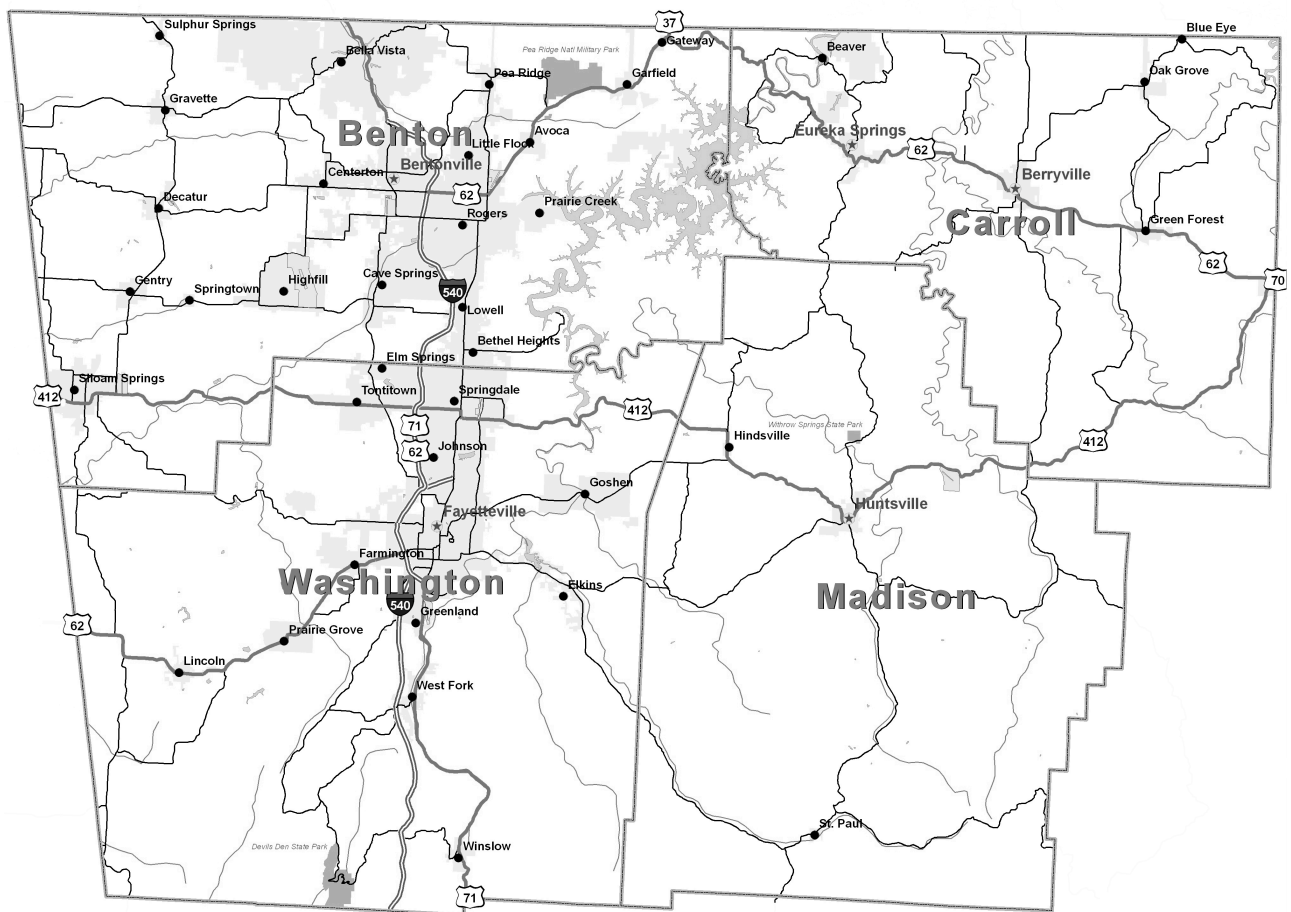


Chapter 1

Introduction:

Quality-of-Life in Northwest Arkansas



Taking pictures and telling a story...It's a way to catalog history, interpret the present, and preserve the past for future generations. The intent of this report is to tell the story of life in Northwest Arkansas.

But, there is more to telling a story than simply compiling facts. That is only the first step. In addition, the information gathered must also be presented in a manner that is accessible, understandable, and contextualized. To accomplish this task, this report presents a composite of community indicators across eleven quality-of-life domains to tell the story of Northwest Arkansas. If the strategy has been successful, the story told will be one that residents of the region can relate to, connect with, and be inspired to action by.

Getting Started

In November 2007, representatives from the University of Arkansas' Community & Family Institute, the Northwest Arkansas Community Foundation, and the United Way of Northwest Arkansas began a conversation about the importance of developing an ongoing assessment of the quality-of-life in Northwest Arkansas. The group brainstormed about the types of indicators that might best assess community life, develop stakeholder interest, advance regional accountability, and most importantly, connect donors to their passions.

A stakeholders meeting was held in May 2008 with over 200 individuals representing more than 60 organizations from around Northwest Arkansas in attendance. Institutional representatives from public, private, and non-profit sectors were asked to participate in focus groups organized around specific topic area domains. Each focus group was asked to generate a list of topic-specific indicators. (For example, the education focus group generated a list of indicators to measure educational outcomes.) Unfortunately, not every suggested indicator found its way into this report. In some cases, information simply did not exist (and therefore could not be collected), or when it did exist it was not in a usable form.

Why a Regional Approach?

A regional perspective on the quality-of-life in Northwest Arkansas is important because many issues transcend more limited territorial boundaries. Certainly, the Northwest Arkansas region consists of multiple local jurisdictions including counties, cities, townships, and school districts, with each having their own local planning autonomy. Nevertheless, there are a number of critical problems that can only be addressed regionally. In recent times, the Northwest Arkansas Council has made extraordinary efforts to address the hard infrastructure needs of the region (e.g. air and water quality, traffic patterns, transportation, growth) by adopting a regional approach. With a regional approach new alliances can be created, new partnerships forged, and innovative strategies developed to address the soft infrastructure challenges facing Northwest Arkansas in the 21st Century. Hopefully, this report will contribute to these future dialogues.

For the purposes of this report, "Northwest Arkansas" includes Benton, Carroll, Madison, and Washington Counties. While there are other classifications that could be used for identifying the region, this report uses the **county** as the primary unit of analysis. The report systematically compares and contrasts differences between each county. When possible, regional indicators are compared with the state of Arkansas as a whole, and in some cases the United States. These comparisons are made because **place matters**, and while the residents of Northwest Arkansas do, in fact, share a great deal in common, it is also important to note differences when possible.

Much of the information presented in this report reinforces what many already know - Northwest Arkansas is a great place to live. That being said, some of what is presented here highlights some issues of concern, and challenges that the region's residents will have to meet head-on.

A Quality-of-Life Assessment

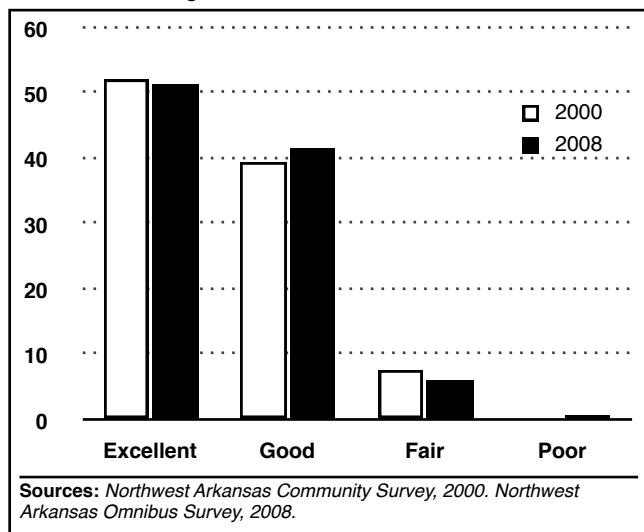
Deciding which quality-of-life domains to address, which indicators best captured the core issues within each of these domains, and how these indicators should be presented was a significant

challenge in the development of this project. A number of local and regional groups, organizations, stakeholders, and interested parties gave critical feedback and input in determining the final product in this report. Ultimately, it was decided that the most effective strategy would be to use broad, bold strokes to paint a portrait of life in Northwest Arkansas.

So, what is “community quality-of-life”? Typically, when people speak of quality-of-life, they refer to the overall well-being of a community. It is comprised of both objective conditions of life in a community as well as residents’ subjective evaluations and interpretations of their experiences.



Figure 1.1
Residents’ Ratings: Northwest Arkansas As A Place To Live



In 2000, and again in 2008, the Community and Family Institute conducted a survey to measure people’s perceptions of life Northwest Arkansas. Among other things, residents were asked, “How would you rate Northwest Arkansas as a place to live?” Results from these two surveys are presented below.

A majority of Northwest Arkansas residents rated Northwest Arkansas as an “excellent” place to live, and another 40 percent provided a “good rating.” In contrast, fewer than 10 percent of residents thought the quality of life in Northwest Arkansas was only “fair” or “poor”. Notably, residents’ ratings of Northwest Arkansas as a place to live have remained stable since 2000.

The **What People Are Saying** section in the report will be revisited from time to time as residents’ opinions are examined in relationship to factual data on the four counties and the Northwest Arkansas region.

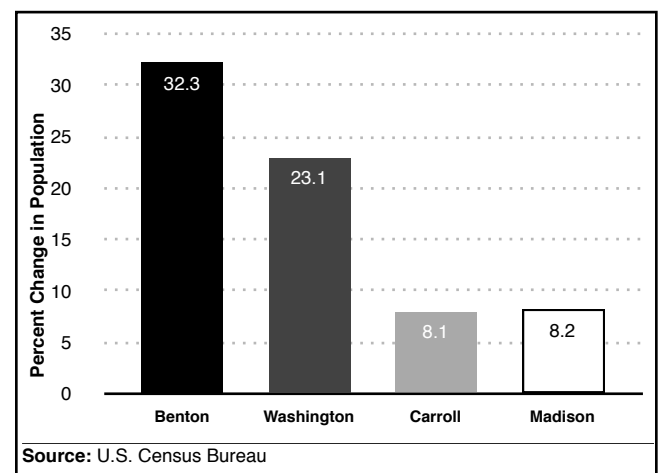
The Northwest Arkansas Region

Northwest Arkansas is made up of a patchwork of small and medium- sized cities. The Northwest Arkansas region is currently experiencing unprecedented population growth, increased diversity, and an expanding economy. No region in the entire state of Arkansas is growing at a faster pace than Northwest Arkansas, and the region is among the fastest growing in the entire south central United States.

Benton County population estimates in 2007 showed 203,107 residents. The largest city in Benton County is Rogers, although Bentonville is gaining ground. A large portion of the growth in the Northwest Arkansas region is taking place in Benton County.

(continued next page)

Figure 1.2
Population Growth in Northwest Arkansas Counties: 2000-2007



Carroll County population estimates in 2007 showed 27,429 residents. The largest city in Carroll County is Berryville.

Madison County, located to the south of Carroll County, had an estimated 15,420 residents in 2007. The largest city in Madison County is Huntsville.

Washington County population estimates showed 194,292 residents in 2007. The largest city in Washington County is Fayetteville.