

2008

Northwest Arkansas Community Indicators: A Quality-of-Life Assessment



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The Community & Family Institute



About the Institute

The Community and Family Institute is located in the University of Arkansas' Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice. The Institute was founded in 1997 based on the principle that community improvement, initiative sustainability, and program success are closely tied to assessment of needs, evaluation of community goals and the development of appropriate and pragmatic responses to problems. The Institute is dedicated to helping people build better communities by collecting meaningful data, facilitating information-based planning, and developing custom research strategies for exploring important social issues in the Northwest Arkansas region and beyond.

The Northwest Arkansas Community Indicators Project is a prime example of a comprehensive evaluation of community needs. The goal of this project has been to stimulate dialogue about developing issues in the region and to encourage informed strategies for shaping future policies and effective actions.

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Finally, we want to thank the "too many to name" government and non-profit agencies that participated in the early formative stages of this project, and then delivered on data requests to complete this assessment. Not every indicator, problem, or relevant piece of data is in this report. However, we do hope that this report represents a start for what will be a lengthy conversation on the social issues confronting Northwest Arkansas and how resources might be leveled to address solutions and develop pragmatic plans for growing and prospering through the 21st Century.

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Executive Summary

Northwest Arkansas has experienced considerable transformation in its soft infrastructure (demography, health, education, arts, civic engagement, etc.) over the last thirty years. The changes occurring in Northwest Arkansas have created a number of significant challenges that the region must acknowledge and address head-on, but certainly not all the changes have had a negative effect. The region's metamorphosis has invigorated communities throughout the area and created a tremendous set of social, economic, and cultural opportunities.

The intent of this quality of life report is two-fold. First, is to provide the people of Northwest Arkansas with an empirically grounded understanding of the changes taking place in their communities and the consequences of those changes. The second is to serve as a resource for citizens, service providers, and other stakeholders as they discuss the region's challenges, build upon its successes, and plan for its future.

A regional approach that examines, in detail, the quality of life in the four counties of Northwest Arkansas (Benton, Carroll, Madison, and Washington), is the report's focus. Focusing on life in these four counties forces one to ask big questions that transcend jurisdictional boundaries.

Quality of Life

We begin the report by exploring residents' opinions of Northwest Arkansas as a place to live. A representative sample of residents were asked: *How would you rate Northwest Arkansas as a place to live?*

- ★ The majority of residents rated Northwest Arkansas as an “*excellent*” or “*good*” place to live.
- ★ Residents' evaluations of Northwest Arkansas changed only slightly between 2000 and 2008.

Sociodemographic Composition

- ★ Between 1990 and 2000, the population in Northwest Arkansas expanded dramatically. Since 2000, population growth in the region has slowed down considerably, although Benton and Washington Counties continue to experience double-digit growth rates.
- ★ Much of the population growth in Northwest Arkansas has come from the in-migration of foreign-born residents. Since 1990, increases in the number of foreign-born residents in Northwest Arkansas has outpaced the growth in foreign-born residents in other regions of the state.
- ★ In 2000, nearly 10 percent of the populations of Benton, Carroll, and Washington Counties was Hispanic.

Income & Poverty

- ★ Per capita income has grown over the last several decades in Arkansas and in the Northwest Arkansas region. By 2006, both Washington and Benton Counties had higher per-capita incomes than the state average.
- ★ Since 1980, all Northwest Arkansas counties, except for Madison County, had lower percentages of people living in poverty than the state as a whole. However, recent data show an upturn in the percentage of people living in poverty in Northwest Arkansas since 2004.
- ★ With the exception of Madison County, the percentage of children living in poverty in Northwest Arkansas has increased steadily since 1980.

Housing & Homelessness

- ★ The majority of available housing stock in Northwest Arkansas is single-family units. Since 1980, single-family housing units have represented nearly 75 percent of all housing units in Northwest Arkansas.
- ★ The percentage of multi-family dwellings increased in both Benton and Washington Counties since 1980--in both cases, the percentage of multi-family dwellings has been slightly higher than the state average.
- ★ Northwest Arkansans pay nearly three hundred dollars more a year in fair market rent than the average renter in Arkansas.
- ★ In 2007, the total number of observed and estimated "invisible" homeless persons in Benton and Washington Counties was 1,170.

Families & Households

- ★ The percentage of children living in poverty in Northwest Arkansas counties between 1990-2000 increased slightly. However, since peaking in 2001 the percentage of children living in poverty has leveled off.
- ★ In Northwest Arkansas, only Benton County experienced significant growth in the number of households with children under the age of 18. By 2006, nearly 40 percent of households in Benton County had at least one child.
- ★ Relative to many of the other counties in the northern part of the state, the Northwest Arkansas region has a higher proportion of households with children.

Education

- ★ Reading proficiency scores for 4th and 8th students in Northwest Arkansas dropped between 2006 and 2007.
- ★ The percentage of the population in the Northwest Arkansas counties with more than a high school education increased since 1980.
- ★ All four Northwest Arkansas counties and the state of Arkansas improved their graduation rates between 2006 and 2007. All of the Northwest Arkansas counties had higher percentages of students graduating high school compared to the United States average in 2007 (approximately 75%).
- ★ Since 1999, student enrollment at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville has been steadily increasing and by 2006, nearly 18,000 students entered the university. Likewise, enrollments at Northwest Arkansas Community College have increased since 1999.

Health

- ★ Prenatal care in Northwest Arkansas is waning. While the rate of pregnant women not receiving prenatal services was lower than the state average in 2000, by 2003 all four Northwest Arkansas counties had higher-than-average rates of pregnant women not receiving prenatal care.
- ★ Mortality rates for heart disease, cancer, and stroke declined since 1990 in the state of Arkansas. In the period 2002-2004, only Benton County had higher rates of heart disease than the state average.
- ★ In 2004, nearly 20 percent of Northwest Arkansas residents were without health insurance.
- ★ The percentage of overweight adults has declined in Northwest Arkansas since 2004. However, fewer adults are exercising regularly and more are being diagnosed with diabetes.

Public Safety

- ★ After peaking in the 1990s, crime rates declined in Northwest Arkansas. However, crime rates in Washington County have been consistently higher than the state and other Northwest Arkansas counties.
- ★ Whereas the violent crime rate for the United States has been declining since 1991, Northwest Arkansas has experienced a steady increase in the volume of violent crime since 1977.
- ★ Arrest rates for illegal drug possession increased steadily between 1988 and 2005.
- ★ Since 1997, the ratio of sworn police officers to citizens in Northwest Arkansas is below the U.S. average, but consistent with the state of Arkansas as a whole.

Aging & Elderly

- ★ Northwest Arkansas has a higher percentage of the elderly employed than the rest of the state.
- ★ The percentage of elderly living in poverty in Arkansas and Northwest Arkansas counties has steadily decreased over the last fifteen years.
- ★ Northwest Arkansas is getting younger. By 2000 only Madison and Carroll Counties had higher-than-average proportions of elderly residents.
- ★ Carroll and Benton Counties had the highest age-adjusted mortality rates for influenza and pneumonia up until 1999, but by 2004, only Carroll County had mortality rates higher than the state average.

Natural Environment

- ★ In 2000, Carroll and Madison County generated nearly twice as much off-stream water usage as the other counties in Northwest Arkansas.
- ★ In 2008, the two largest and the fastest growing counties (Benton and Washington) contain more facilities engaging in environmentally harmful activities than the two rural counties (Carroll and Madison) in the region.
- ★ The vast majority of Northwest Arkansas workers - in excess of 70 percent - drive to work alone. However, the rate is declining.

Civic Engagement & Arts

- ★ In 2007, Northwest Arkansans volunteered in greater percentages than the state and United States average.
- ★ Since 1980, Northwest Arkansas voters have demonstrated a higher rate of participation in presidential elections than the rest of the country.
- ★ Northwest Arkansas counties have higher rates of self-employment in the arts than other counties in the state.
- ★ With 90 charitable foundations throughout Northwest Arkansas, and over 2.5 billion dollars in assets, these organizations gave away nearly 17 percent of their total monies available in 2008.