

Listening to Learn:

Stories from Rural Northwest Families

Prepared by
Children First for Oregon &
Washington Kids Count

Final Report of the Northwest
Rural Communities Project

This project was funded by
a generous grant from the
Annie E. Casey Foundation.

**July
2004**

FIGURE 1. Location of Focus Groups and Metro/Non-Metro Counties in Oregon and Washington.



A photograph of a young child with blonde hair, wearing a white shirt and dark overalls, running away from the camera on a dirt road. A small dog is running alongside the child. The road is flanked by tall grass and leads towards a bright, hazy horizon.

Listening to Learn:

Stories from Rural Northwest Families

**Prepared by
Children First for Oregon &
Washington Kids Count**

**Final Report of the Northwest
Rural Communities Project**

**This project was funded by
a generous grant from the
Annie E. Casey Foundation.**

**July
2004**



Children First for Oregon staff:

Tripp Somerville,
Interim Executive Director

Tina Koteck, *Policy Director*

Beth Kapsch, *Policy and
Outreach Associate*



Washington Kids Count, Human Services Policy Center, University of Washington:

Richard Brandon, *Director*

Lori Pfingst,
Research Assistant

S. Louise Carter,
Communications Director

Acknowledgements

Many individuals and organizations contributed their time and expertise to help to document the needs of rural families and their children living in the Pacific Northwest.

This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their generous support and dedication to improving the lives of rural families nationwide. We acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

A special thank you to the families and community leaders who took time out of their busy schedules to share their experiences and knowledge of their communities with us.

Thank you to the volunteer local coordinators for doing an outstanding job of handling focus group logistics and recruitment. They were indispensable to the success of the Project.

Colville – Nancy Foll and Antionette Dupuy, Rural Resources

Forks - Irene Smith, Forks Elementary School

Madras – Angie Spannaus, Madras Community Action Team, Central Oregon Partnership

Mattawa – Leo Gaeta and Flavia Lauriano, Columbia Basin Health

Omak – Racie McKee and Nancy Schulberg, Omak Community Learning Center

Ontario – Anna Klug, Vale Head Start, Malheur County Child Development Center

Roseburg – Donna Zyzwieski, UCAN Head Start

Siletz – Deann Brown, Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians Head Start

Finally, thank you to the following individuals for the time, commitment, and technical assistance on the Project:

Sheri Hill, Marie Hoeven, Carrie Evans and Jezreela Anderson, who were part of the original project team

Kathy Moore, Carole Cochran and Richard Rathge, Great Plains Rural Collaborative

Cathy Kirk and Florence Krueger, for their critical support on the Mattawa focus group

Dr. Bruce Weber, Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics, Oregon State University

Susan Hill, volunteer translator, for translating our forms into Spanish

Maria Mercedes, for translating and transcribing the Mattawa focus group transcript

Alex Baron, Chris Flores, David Irick, Diana Spence and Guirong Zhou, University of Washington graduate and undergraduate students who helped with mapping data

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Building a Voice for Families in the Rural Northwest	2
Why Rural Communities Matter	4
A Demographic Snapshot of the Rural Northwest	6
Grappling with Economic Challenges	7
Common Themes of This Report	9
The Benefits of Rural Life: “We Like It Here”	10
Raising a Family in the Rural Northwest: “It’s great, but...” .	11
Unemployment and Economic Reality	11
Inadequate Child Care	12
Concerns about Educational Opportunities	16
Lack of Youth Activities	18
Health Care Challenges	19
Transportation Difficulties	21
What Do Rural Families Need?	22
Policy Opportunities: Focusing on Rural Families	24
Appendix A: Methodology	29

List of Figures

1. Location of Focus Groups and Metro/Non-Metro Counties in Oregon and Washington	inside cover
2. Percent of Children Living in Low-Income Households	5
3. Percent Increase in Rural Population by Race/Ethnicity, 1990-2000	6
4. Number of Years with High Unemployment (over 8%), 1992-2001	8
5. Women with Children Under Age 6: Percent in the Labor Force	13
6. Child Care Availability in Oregon’s Rural Counties	15
7. Child Care Availability in Washington’s Rural Counties	15
8. Percent of Adults over 25 with AA Degree or Higher in Rural and Urban Counties	17
9. Demographic Overview of Focus Group Locations	30
10. Profile of Focus Group Participants	31



Introduction

Building a Voice for Families in the Rural Northwest

Children First for Oregon and Washington Kids Count, partners in the national Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT project, undertook the Northwest Rural Communities Project to better understand the lives of children and families living in our rural communities and to document their experiences for community and state leaders, the media, and the public. In this report we share the stories told by parents in eight Oregon and Washington locales, plus data analyses about the issues they raised. We conclude by presenting policy recommendations that address some of the challenges facing Northwest rural communities and their families. We hope these recommendations will help state leaders, in collaboration with local leaders, to address the unique needs and circumstances of the distinct communities that make up the rural Northwest.

The Northwest Rural Communities Project is one of several multi-state projects, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, that are exploring child well being in rural America. This initiative grew out of a concern that, while rural families face challenges in raising healthy, successful children, no existing body of research documents those challenges in a way that builds a collective voice for change. These projects create an opportunity to focus attention on rural families, provide useful data to policy-makers and encourage smart investments to strengthen the well being of rural families.

Listening to Learn

In the summer of 2003, project staff visited eight rural communities where we conducted focus group discussions with lower-income parents. Two of the locations were selected to reflect the cultural diversity of the rural Northwest: a predominantly Spanish-speaking focus group (Mattawa) and a Native American tribal community (Siletz). For additional context for each focus group, we also interviewed local decision-makers, educators, service providers and business leaders about the benefits and barriers to raising children in their communities. Wherever

possible, we collected quantitative data to broaden the stories told by the parents. For more information on our methodology and the demographics of the focus group communities, please see Appendix A.

We called on three towns west of the Cascade Mountain Range:

- **Forks, WA:** A long-time logging community of about 3,000 in Clallam County on Washington's Olympic Peninsula. A third of the workers in Forks now hold government jobs. The major industries are corrections, education, and health care.
- **Roseburg, OR:** The county seat of rural Douglas County, where more than a quarter of adults work in education, health, and social services. With a population of about 20,000, Roseburg itself is not a small rural town. We selected it as a focus group location because of available meeting space for rural residents from nearby small towns, such as Sutherlin, Yoncalla and Glendale.
- **Siletz, OR:** A small community in Lincoln County (1,133 residents in 2000) near the Central Oregon coast. The predominant industries are (1) educational, health, and social services, and (2) arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, and food services — primarily related to tourism.

And five east of the mountains:

- **Colville, WA:** In the northeast corner of the state, this Stevens County community is home to about 5,000 people, with more than 84 percent of adults having at least completed high school. About a quarter of the population works in education, health and social services.
- **Madras, OR:** This Jefferson County town in the high-desert country north of Bend was once known as the "mint capital of the world." Now, the dominance of agriculture is giving way to manufacturing and tourism in this community of about 5,000.
- **Mattawa, WA:** A little southeast of the center of the state, the population of this mostly agricultural community on the Columbia River is just over 2,600. The residents are predominately Hispanic, with more than half arriving in the U.S. between 1990 and 2000.
- **Omak, WA:** This town of about 5,000 in north central Washington's Okanogan County was built on logging and agriculture (especially apples). Omak has a high concentration of seasonal workers.
- **Ontario, OR:** In Malheur County, this town of about 11,000 sits on the Idaho border. Major industries are education, health, social services and manufacturing. We selected it as a focus group location because of available meeting space for residents of Ontario and nearby small towns such as Vale and Nyssa.

Some of these communities once prospered on the bounty of their forests, but now strive to diversify their economies to balance a growing dependence on tourism. Others, in the clear-sky domains of the central and eastern plateaus, struggle to survive in a modern agricultural economy.

Focusing on Low-Income Families

Nearly 480,000 children live in rural counties in Oregon and Washington, and 45 percent of these children live in low-income households¹, a larger proportion than the region's metro counties where approximately one-third of children are low-income (see Figure 2). Focusing on the needs of nearly half the children in rural counties provides an opportunity to strengthen entire communities.

Why Rural Communities Matter

Omak parent: "When I first moved up here ...a very influential person who lives here told me ... 'You're not going to be an overnight success or a millionaire, but it is God's country. It's a safe place to raise your children.' So it's a trade off."

Rural advocates are routinely asked why families stay in rural areas with limited economic opportunities. If there are no good jobs, why not relocate? Why invest in areas of the state where economic growth appears unlikely? Why, in a nutshell, shouldn't everyone just pick up and move to the big city?

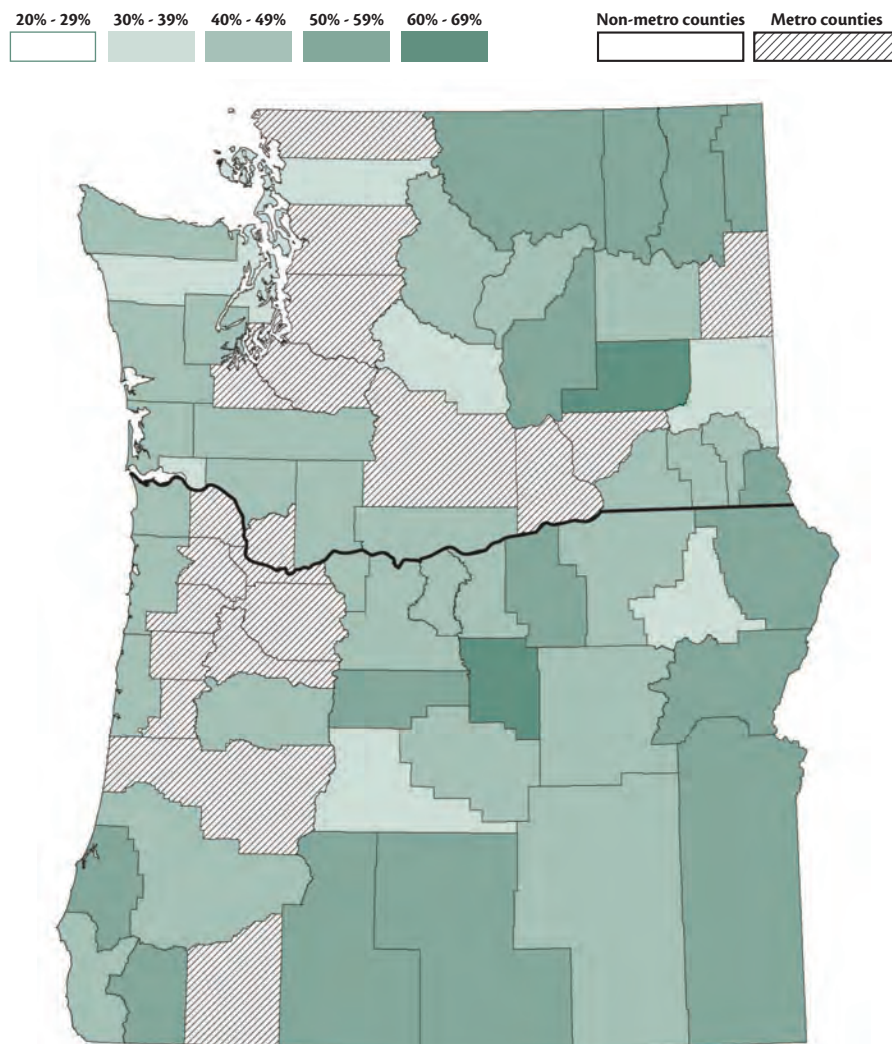
Economic development theorists point out that promoting diversity and choice is essential in our rapidly changing world. One fifth of Americans live in rural areas. Over the past half century, the Northwest's economic base has shifted from agriculture, timber, and manufacturing to service, communications, and information technology. While this shift has necessitated some movement away from rural areas, the high-tech revolution has created new opportunities for people to work far from urban centers. At the same time, we still depend on agriculture and other natural resource industries. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, rural communities anchor the cultural history of our region.

People who live in the rural Northwest stay in spite of their communities' lack of economic opportunity. The families in our study stay for the beauty of the natural landscape and the benefits of small-town life — a strong sense of community and a feeling that they are far from many of the ills that plague urban and suburban life. The values associated with rural life are congruent with traditional American values — family, hard work, self-sufficiency, and membership in a tight-knit community. Despite the obvious drawbacks, many people would like to live in a rural setting² — something that is increasingly common among retirees. Rural life can represent an attractive alternative to hectic urban lifestyles.

¹ For purposes of this project, "low-income" is defined as a household income equal to less than twice the federal poverty level -- \$36,800 for a family of four in 2003.

² A 1998 Gallup poll found that 60 percent of Americans wanted to live on a farm, in a rural area, or in a small town.

FIGURE 2. Percent of Children Living in Low-Income Households in Oregon and Washington by County.

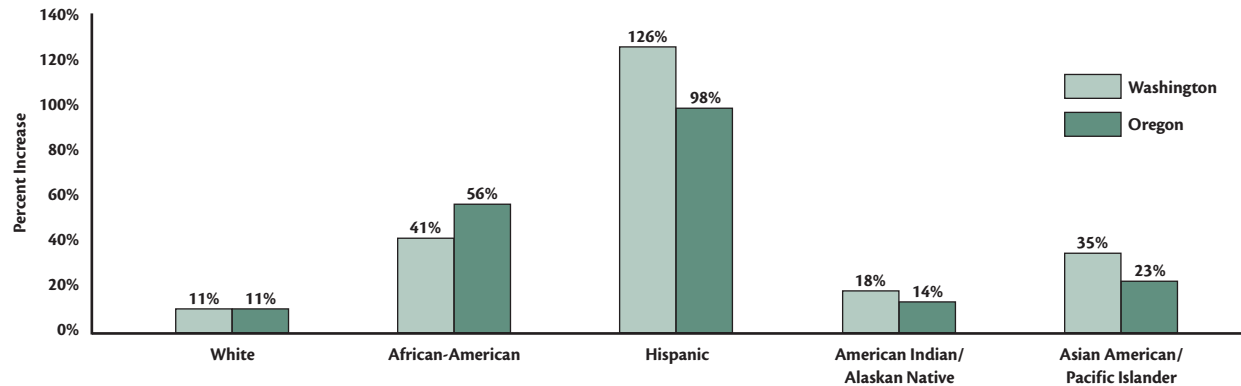


Nearly 480,000 children live in rural counties in Oregon and Washington, and 45 percent of these children live in low-income households, a larger proportion than the region's metro counties where approximately one-third of children are low-income.

Note: "Low-income" defined as household income at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (\$36,800 for a family of four in 2003).
Source: NWRCP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data (2000).

The rural Hispanic population more than doubled from 1990 to 2000.

FIGURE 3. Percent Increase in Rural Population by Race/Ethnicity, 1990-2000.



Source: NWRCP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data (1990 and 2000).

A Demographic Snapshot of the Rural Northwest

The demographic data for rural Northwest counties reflect both continuity and change. According to the 2000 Census, more than one-fifth of the combined populations of Oregon and Washington live in non-metropolitan counties — the same as in 1990. Over the last decade the entire Northwest experienced significant population growth, up 21 percent since 1990. Rural counties as a whole were no exception, although some counties saw little or no increase.³ Although all age groups experienced growth, the distribution of age groups remained nearly the same. Child populations, however, have grown more slowly in rural than urban areas. In Oregon and Washington, the population under age 18 increased 10 percent and 16 percent respectively, while urban child populations in both states increased by about 20 percent.

Diversity in the Rural Northwest

In both Oregon and Washington, the rural Hispanic population more than doubled from 1990 to 2000 (see Figure 3). The overall ethnic diversity of rural counties increased as the Hispanic population grew, but this increase in diversity is not evenly spread across communities, as evidenced by a look at the counties where we conducted focus groups. While urban diversity typically occurs within relatively few square miles, aggregating

³ Population statistics are from 1999 (Census 2000). Deschutes County in Oregon and San Juan County in Washington had the largest population increases, 54 percent and 40 percent respectively. In June 2003, Deschutes was reclassified as a metropolitan county by the federal government.



rural population data can lead to false conclusions about rural diversity. In fact, many Northwest rural communities are remarkably homogeneous. For example, in 2000, the Hispanic populations of Mattawa and Colville were 90 percent and 2 percent, respectively — both significant deviations from the state's rural Hispanic population average of 7 percent. The proportion of Native Americans in the focus group counties ranged from a low of less than 1 percent (Ontario, OR and Mattawa, WA) to a high of 21 percent (Siletz, OR). And two communities (Roseburg, OR and Colville, WA) were 93 percent non-Hispanic, white.

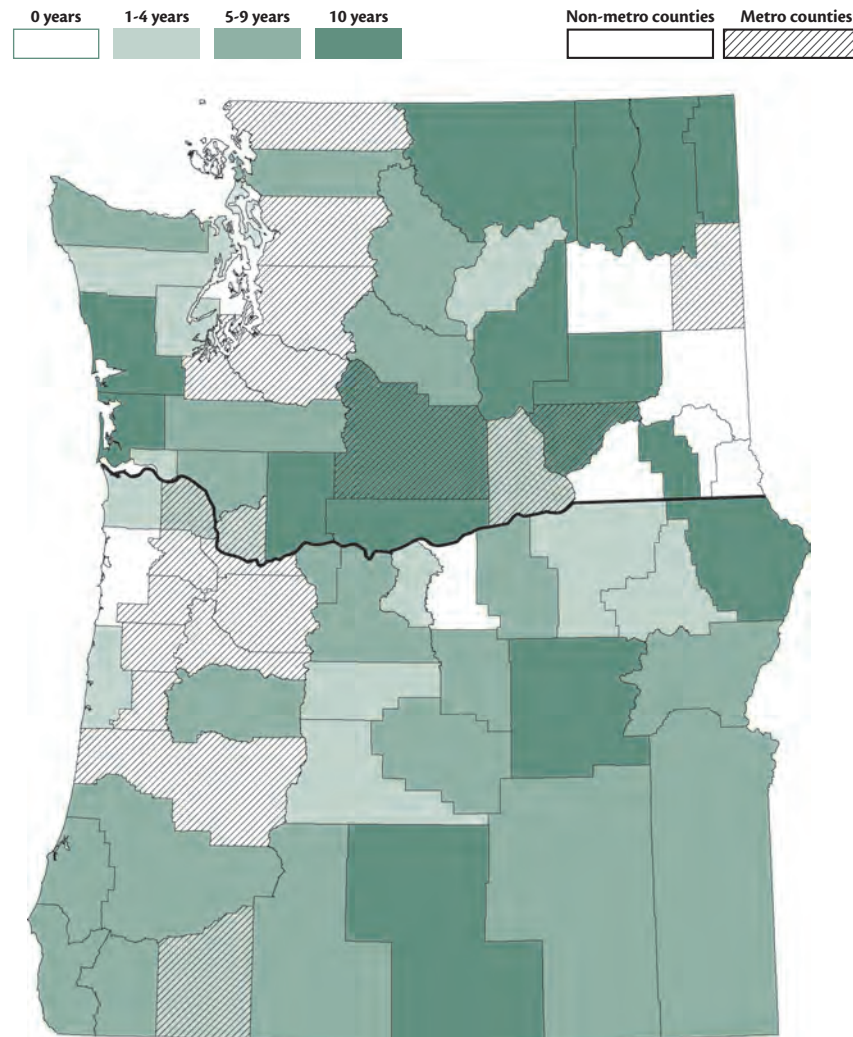
Several of the local leaders we interviewed spoke enthusiastically about the increasing diversity of their towns, especially in reference to small businesses and multicultural opportunities in their communities. They saw diversity as an asset than can pay educational, economic and social dividends.

Grappling with Economic Challenges

Although population growth in rural counties kept pace with urban growth, rural economies did not share equally in the boom of the late 1990s. Most rural communities have struggled with economic uncertainty for decades, never recovering from the dramatic losses of natural-resource and agriculture-related employment opportunities of previous decades. Rural areas have had difficulty attracting higher-paying manufacturing and

Unemployment in the rural Northwest has surpassed state averages for years, exceeding 8 percent for at least a decade in sixteen Northwest rural counties.

FIGURE 4. Number of Years with High Unemployment (over 8%) in Oregon and Washington by County (1992-2001).



Source: NWRCP analysis of Oregon and Washington unemployment data.

service jobs. Low-wage jobs, particularly those tied to the seasonal swings of tourism, have not provided stable, adequate incomes for rural residents. Unemployment in the rural Northwest has surpassed state averages for years, exceeding 8 percent for at least a decade in sixteen Northwest rural counties (see Figure 4).

Common Themes of This Report

Analysis of the focus group meetings revealed a set of common themes across all eight groups. First and foremost, the overwhelming majority of participants said they like rural living and want to stay in their communities. This strong and consistent preference for rural life was tempered by discussions of on-going struggles that sorted themselves into six additional themes:

UNEMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC REALITY: Rural parents want to work and make enough to provide for their families, but often cannot find jobs that enable them to do so.

INADEQUATE CHILD CARE: One barrier to stable employment is the absence of affordable, quality child care.

CONCERNS ABOUT EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES: Rural parents are dissatisfied with the educational opportunities available for older children and themselves.

LACK OF YOUTH ACTIVITIES: When there is nothing to do, teenagers head for trouble.

HEALTH CARE CHALLENGES: The main issues were affordability and access to specialists.

TRANSPORTATION DIFFICULTIES: As expected in remote locales, transportation issues were woven into most of the other themes.

By exploring these common themes through the voices of parents and available statistical data, we also learned about the many ways in which Northwest rural communities differ from one another — economically, culturally, and in the availability of resources. Therefore, we encourage state and local leaders to use our policy recommendations as a framework within which they can customize solutions to suit individual communities. Although the problems facing rural families may seem daunting, we must act: nearly half of all Northwest rural children live at or near the poverty line; and nearly one in four children in the Northwest lives in a rural community. These children and their families need our energy, attention and continued investments.



The Benefits of Rural Life:

“We like it here”

Ontario parent:

“My parents are here, my grandparents are here, my brothers and my sisters are here, and all of their kids are here. We are very family-oriented people...”

The dominant sentiment expressed during the focus groups was hope — parents looking positively to the future for their children and themselves. Yet these parents tempered their optimism with a practical understanding of the economic realities of their communities and the challenges they face in providing for their children.

Parents emphasized the benefits of raising their children in rural communities, citing the safety of small towns, the beautiful environment, knowing their neighbors, and for many, the proximity to family. One Omak parent humorously recounted an early experience as a newcomer in his tight-knit community in north central Washington: “... *pretty much everybody knows everybody. The biggest kick I got when I moved here eight years ago is in the newspaper — [they print a story] if your dog’s barking at night.*”

Another Omak parent felt secure leaving her daughter at the neighborhood swimming pool all day: “*It’s a community. Everybody watches somebody else’s kid.*” A mother from Siletz was pleased that she worked only a few miles from her son’s school and the skate park where he hangs out. She didn’t worry about his safety, and she was always nearby if something happened. Being close to the coast was an extra bonus. “*In the summertime,*” she said, “*it’s almost too beautiful!*” Secure in the knowledge that neighbors would look out for them, parents emphatically believed that their children were unlikely to become victims of crime.

Douglas County parent:

“It’s just a nice place to live life... I like the scene here.”

Finally, living near family plays an important role in the quality of rural life. The feeling of home runs especially strong when one’s family helped build a community. Plus, extended family provides crucial support and social networks. An Ontario (OR) parent spoke of the generational ties common in rural communities: “*My parents are here, my grandparents are here, my brothers and my sisters are here, and all of their kids are here. We are very family-oriented people, so we do stuff together every weekend... And I love it.*” We also heard stories of families moving to be closer to their relatives.



Raising a Family in the Rural Northwest: “It’s great, but...”

Unemployment and Economic Reality:

“We want to work and provide for our families.”

More than any other factor, employment opportunities shape the lives of families in rural communities. Parents told us stories of anxiety and frustration with their communities’ economic shortfalls — the lack of jobs in general, lack of family-wage jobs with family-friendly hours in particular, and lack of opportunity to pursue “careers.” While parents may be willing to forego financial wealth for the benefits of small-town life, they believe they deserve to get ahead by working hard and earning a wage to meet their families’ basic needs.

“We’ve been considering moving because my husband just lost his job in October and he hasn’t been able to find another job because jobs are so rare right now. He’s gone on at least 50 interviews and hasn’t had a single bite. ... I love this area and I grew up here and I would love to stay.... We just don’t know what to do. You have to make a living.” This story is common in Oregon’s Douglas County, an area once dominated by the timber industry and still mired in a recession that has proven especially tenacious in the Pacific Northwest.

About 450 miles to the northeast, in the upper right-hand corner of Washington State, a mother in Colville with 13 years of bookkeeping experience was unemployed for a year and a half, during which she lost her house and other assets: *“I used to make \$12.71 an hour. Now I’m making \$8.25 with no benefits.... You don’t like to complain ... but still, being a single parent with three kids, that was kind of hard to do.”*

For those able to find work, a job does not guarantee that a family can afford rent, food, health care, child care, school clothes, or other necessities. Rural parents want to earn enough to provide for their families. Unable to make ends meet in a community where unemployment was 17 percent in 2000, an Omak mother was conflicted about going to the local food bank: *“I feel guilty when I have to use it because my husband does have a job. ... But sometimes at the end of the month those kids have gotten into my food stash and I’m down to nothing and I have to hit the food bank.”* Like many other Northwest rural communities, Omak has an overabundance of low-paying service jobs and suffers from the cyclical underemployment inherent in seasonal industries.

The Northwest’s natural beauty, agricultural wealth, and recreational variety create economic opportunities for many rural communities. As stand-alone pillars for a region’s prosperity, however, these opportunities typically yield low-wage, seasonal employment that forces working parents to rely on an unreliable mix of jobs to support their families year-round. A Mattawa parent reports, *“In the wintertime, you work very little The wages we make are not enough for all the things you need.”* Those “things” include the basics — housing, food, utilities, child care, clothes, medical expenses, and transportation.

Mattawa parent:

“In the wintertime, you work very little The wages we make are not enough for all the things you need.”

Rural parents whose children have special needs face additional challenges, as reflected in this Omak mother’s description of her struggle to balance job responsibilities with tending to her child’s medical needs: *“There’s a whole new set of issues with a child with a disability. Our son has a seizure disorder. Well, if your son’s having a seizure, I guess you’re probably not going to be to work at eight o’clock when you’re supposed to be.”* Distance and limited community resources exacerbate the ongoing difficulties of finding necessary services, equipment, and specialist care.

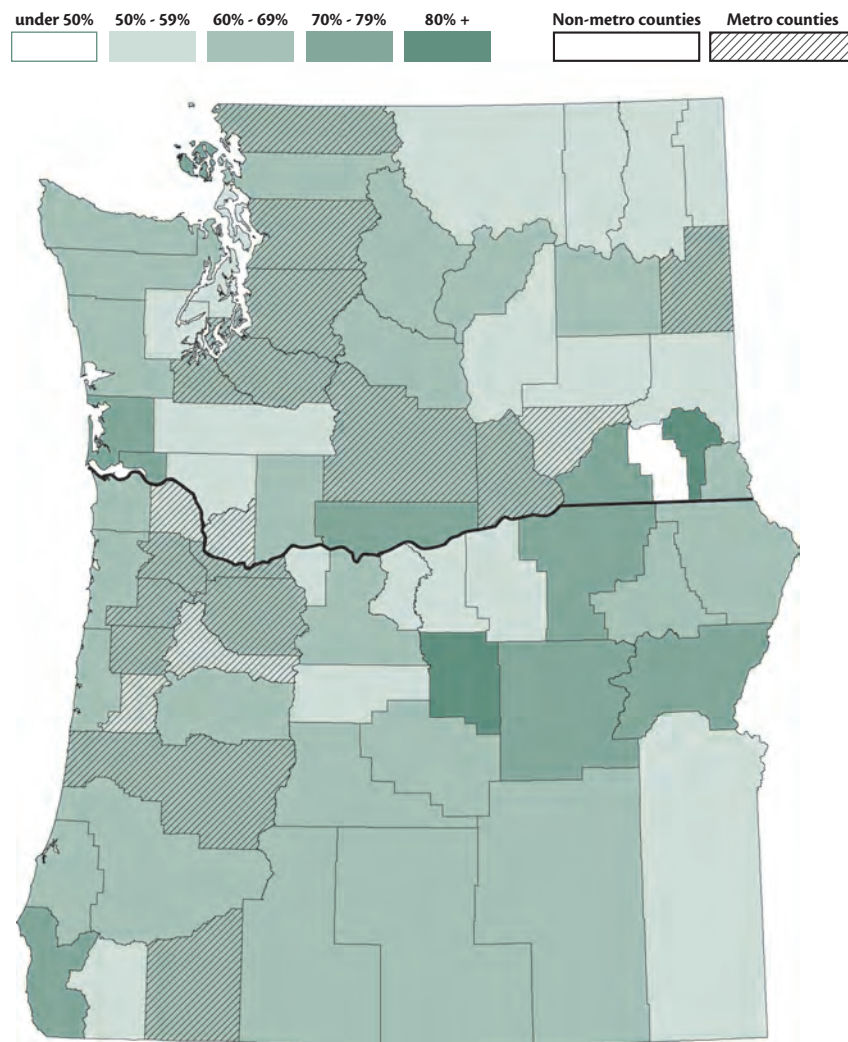
The majority of parents we spoke to both wanted to work and expressed a deep pride in the work they do. They welcome new businesses with the hope they will bring steady work, fair wages, and a chance for family financial security. However, as in any community, economic diversity is essential. When a dominant industry offers limited or seasonal employment, workers and their families suffer.

Inadequate Child Care:

“We need reliable, safe, and affordable child care that accommodates evening work schedules.”

Concerns about child care are woven into the fabric of family life in the rural Northwest, as the realities of low-wage employment and swing shift jobs confront working parents with daily challenges. Although limited data are available on the demand for child care in rural counties, we know that 62 percent of rural Northwest moms with children under age 6 are working or looking for work (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. Women with Children Under Age 6 in Oregon and Washington by County (percent in the labor force).



62 percent of rural Northwest moms with children under age 6 are working or looking for work.

Note: The population of women is defined as women age 16 or over, with children under age 6, who are either working, in the armed forces or looking for work.
Source: NWRCP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data (2000).

Forks Parent: *“It’s very expensive right now. I’m a single mom too and I looked into the childcare options here and I find them substandard.”*

Like many parents, lower-income mothers and fathers in rural counties struggle to find affordable, quality child care. Talking about the inadequacies of existing job opportunities, this Madras parent expressed a common frustration: *“Even if you find a job ... it doesn’t cover daycare It’s hard to work and cover it, especially if you’re a single mom or single dad.”*

As costs rise and wages stagnate, affordability looms even larger as a barrier to safe, quality care. In Oregon, for example, 65 percent of families earning less than the state median income cannot find affordable care.⁴ While county-level data are unavailable, rural counties increasingly rely on low-wage service jobs that don’t pay enough to cover child care, as reflected in comments from a Douglas County mom: *“I figured out that if I worked 40 hours a week [and] I paid daycare for two children that I would bring home \$40 a month. So we decided that for \$40 a month we should raise our own kids.”*

Quality of child care was a recurring issue. An Omak mother spoke of hearing *“horror stories”* about local child care centers, and a Colville parent admitted her anxieties about safety and quality: *“It’s tough to think that somebody you’re entrusting your child to is getting paid less than you are. It’s kind of scary.”* Greater choice of child care providers is typically tied to population density, as sparsely populated areas often do not reach the critical mass necessary to support center-based care or an adequate number of trained and regulated home-based providers. As illustrated in Figures 6 and 7, more than 75 percent of rural Oregon and Washington counties are below state averages in availability of care for children younger than 13.

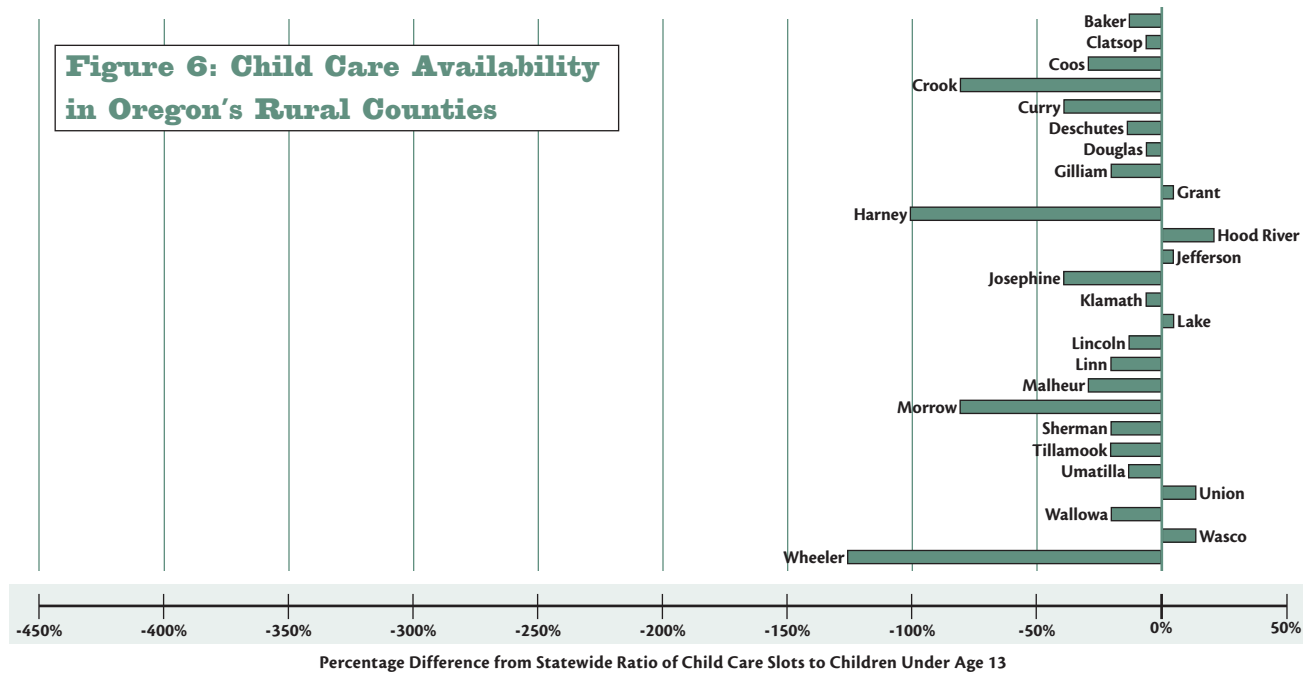
From the perspective of child care providers, it’s hard to stay afloat if you’re serving a community where employment is sporadic and unpredictable. A Colville mother who had worked in a child care center shared her experience: *“...I did the bills and I knew what we got paid wasn’t going to cover payroll for the next payday...”*

Across all kinds of rural communities, parents accommodate their work schedules by piecing together a patchwork quilt of care from family, friends, neighbors,⁵ and licensed professionals. Factory production and call centers often require parents to rotate through night, swing, and day shifts; seasonal harvests demand extra long days, often seven days a week; food service and/or hospitality positions necessitate flexible schedules and odd hours. Because most licensed child care providers do not offer care on nights and weekends, neighbors and extended family play a crucial role in keeping the child care quilt intact. An Ontario parent voiced concern about what happens when an extended family network is not available: *“... our big industries are [food processing plants] and those jobs are rotating shifts. And you get on swing there, and usually ... both the mom and the dad ... work there. If they’re on swing shift, who’s at home with those kids?”*

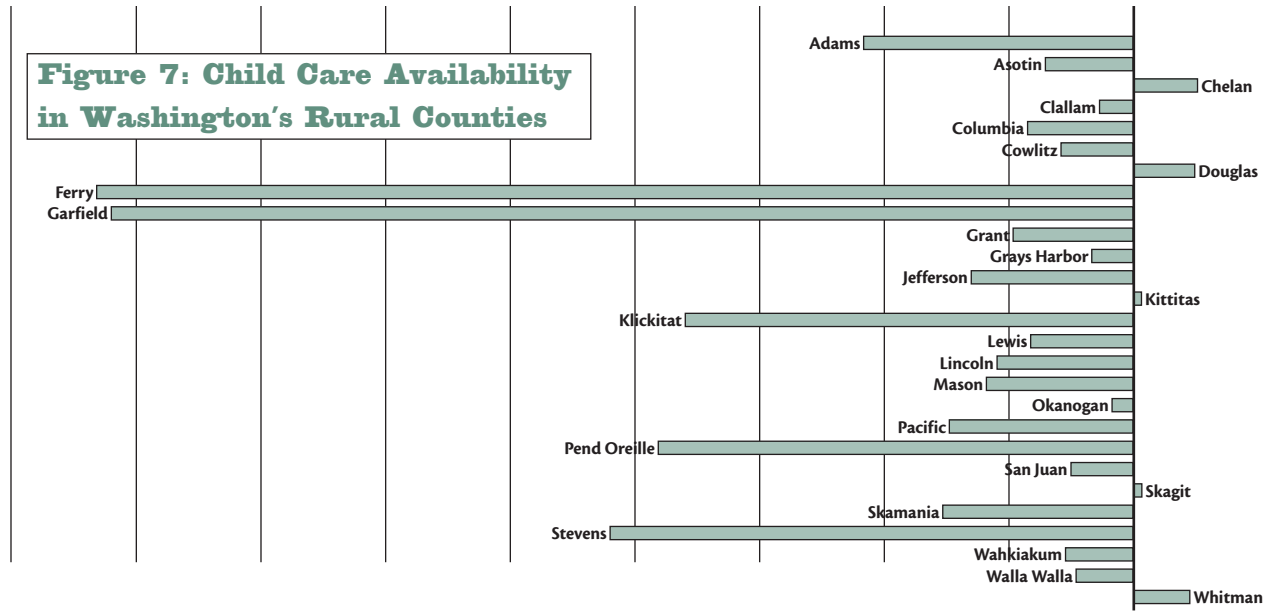
⁴ Oregon Population Survey, 2002. “Affordable” is defined as spending no more than 10 percent of income on child care.

⁵ See “Understanding Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care in WA State”, Human Services Policy Center, University of Washington (2002), http://www.hspc.org/publications/early_ed/FFN_exec_summary_2002.pdf. The study found that this largely undocumented segment of the work force is the most common source of non-parental care for infants, toddlers, and school-age children in WA state.

**Figure 6: Child Care Availability
in Oregon's Rural Counties**



**Figure 7: Child Care Availability
in Washington's Rural Counties**



Greater choice of child care providers is typically tied to population density, as sparsely populated areas often do not reach the critical mass necessary to support center-based care or an adequate number of trained and regulated home-based providers.

Sources: NWRCP analysis of Oregon data (2002) provided by the Child Care Division, Oregon Employment Department and of Washington data (2000) from "Licensed Child Care in Washington State: 2000," Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, January 2002.

Concerns about Educational Opportunities: “Education Lifts Up the Whole Family”

Following the tradition of the American Dream, the rural parents we spoke with believe education is essential for a successful life. In many rural communities, schools serve as central meeting places for social interaction, and parents tie their children’s future — and in many cases, their own — to a strong education, beginning with preschool and extending through college. In general, the parents in our focus groups expressed satisfaction with Head Start — a proven, high-quality early education program — and with elementary education, but shared concerns about the quality of middle and high schools. They also demonstrated a strong commitment to steering their children toward college. At the same time, they saw continuing education as the ticket to improving their own employability and income.

Head Start is a standout early childhood development program in many parts of the rural Northwest. While maintaining its core, proven strategies, Head Start educators tailor their programs to each community’s unique needs. More racially diverse, agricultural communities offer Migrant Head Start with appropriate language and cultural components. In Ontario, Head Start providers recognized the role many fathers were playing in their children’s lives and created a program just for dads. The enthusiasm of this Siletz parent was echoed in several other sessions: “[Our] 4-year-old goes to Tribal Head Start, which I believe is the most fabulous thing in the whole world and that is one of the reasons I stay here — it’s absolutely fabulous. Hands down.”

An Omak parent offered high praise for the local elementary school: “The teachers know what is going on with each and every kid.... I had no idea [my daughter] was skipping breakfast and lunch until one day [the teacher] said, your daughter is not eating ... when you have teachers and aides that care, they keep in touch with you.” In Douglas County too, parents reported small class sizes and teachers who cared deeply about their students: “My child ... gets a lot of personal attention. His teachers know him just by sight, and it’s just really nice.” Finally, in Mattawa, a community where English is rarely spoken at home and most adults have not graduated from high school, a parent commended the local schools: “They are good, and they have a lot of advantages. For instance, my children were taught how to read in English and Spanish in one week. The schools have good services.”

While parents were pleased with their children’s elementary school experiences, our quantitative analysis suggested that satisfaction may not be tightly linked to academic performance. In Washington State, only 49 percent of rural 4th graders met math standards on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), compared to 58 percent of suburban and 59 percent of urban 4th graders.⁶ Factors such as poverty and unemployment can sometimes override the effects of the positive personal interactions cited by the focus group participants. Still, rural parents’ commitment to their children’s early education suggests that they are willing to participate in making necessary improvements.

⁶ “The State of Washington’s Children, Winter 2003,” Washington Kids Count, http://hspc.org/wkc/annual/state_WA_children/SWC2003report.pdf.

Ontario Parent: *“I insist on [my son going to college]. I can’t make him do it, but if he sees a positive role model, with me going to school, then I’m going to do it.”*

In most communities, parental confidence in public education ends with elementary school. Rural parents worry that middle and high schools offer neither the personal attention nor the academic quality that their children need. A Madras parent spoke of how, in elementary school, her child had loved the school and the teachers. Middle school was a different story: *“They have gangs up there. They have a police officer on duty the kids are skipping school and getting beaten up. And they are drinking.”* Parents are afraid their children will get lost in the system, especially in areas where school districts are consolidating. While rural school districts struggle financially at all levels, parents feel that the economic pinch is tightest in middle and high schools, with their larger classes and limited diversity in curriculum.

The rural parents we talked to are passionate about their children going to college, which they see as the first step to a “real career,” to work that is meaningful and more stable than what they can find with only a high school diploma. A Siletz parent said, *“You want them to go to college so they can choose something long term that they are going to enjoy doing every year of their life.”* A Douglas County mom agreed: *“I just want my child... to actually have the opportunity to be a lawyer or to have choices, ... not just be thrown into the mill or a gas station because when I was a kid, we didn’t have choices.”*

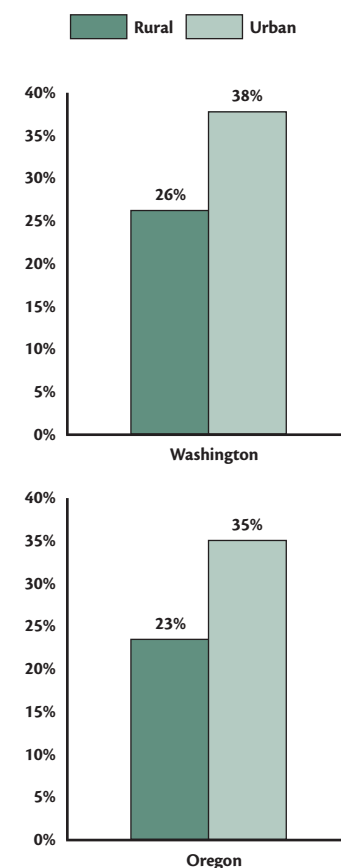
This report of limited educational options in the parental generation was substantiated by our quantitative analysis. As shown in Figure 8, adults in rural counties are less likely than their urban peers to have two- or four-year degrees.

While many rural adults would like to go back to school, making up for lost opportunities is not easy. Although community colleges offer affordable access to new skills and academic degrees, state budget cuts have forced them to raise tuition and/or offer fewer classes. According to the 2000 Census, despite increases in population, college enrollment *decreased* between 1990 and 2000 in three of the eight focus group communities (Madras, Siletz, and Colville). A mother from Douglas County lamented, *“My husband wants to go to college but I told him, I can’t take on a fifth job; I’m too tired.”* Access is a problem too: with a few exceptions, most full-service community colleges are located near major population centers and involve long commutes for rural students.

For the next generation, however, programs like Washington’s Running Start enable academically qualified high school juniors and seniors — at no additional cost — to enroll in, and get credit for, community college courses while still in high school. Parents in the Washington focus groups could not say enough good things about this program. Enrolled students can take care of basic prerequisites for four-year colleges and save up to two years of tuition. An increasing number of community college courses are offered on-line, improving access to educational opportunities in remote areas.

Educational resources for children with special needs are restricted in small and financially stressed communities. Many rural schools lack both equipment and teacher training that are necessary for educating special-needs children. One mother felt that Omak lagged far behind larger communities in serving the needs of these students:

FIGURE 8.
Educational Attainment:
Percent of Adults over 25 with AA Degree or Higher in Rural and Urban Counties.



Source: NWRCP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data (2000).



“When I go to trainings and conferences and stuff regarding disabilities outside of our area, [I find] that they are light years ahead of us, and we just kind of are at a standstill...”

At the same time that they recognize deficiencies in the current system, parents in the rural Northwest envision a bright future in which their children will receive a quality education from pre-school to college. These parents readily acknowledge that they want much more for their children than they’ve been able to achieve for themselves.

Lack of Youth Activities:

“We need more for kids to do.”

Recognizing that education is not the whole story, parents want their children, particularly those in middle and high school, to be able to participate in enriching activities outside of school. Rural communities struggle to meet parents’ expectations for organized youth programs and community recreation programs. A parent from Forks lamented that her kids had to go to Port Angeles — a 46-mile drive — to participate in supervised activities.

Many parents agreed that the need to invest in youth activities is a relatively recent development in rural life. A long-time resident of Omak reflected that, *“Years ago there was more to do. When I first came here 40 years ago, they [had] a roller skating rink; they had [a youth club] where they played records and had dances they had drive-in theaters ... plus a downtown theater, and a lot of that is no longer here. So I think, sometimes, children do not have enough to do unless they are, you know, in a church group or something like that.”*

Many factors contribute to the lack of youth activities, but inadequate funding was cited most frequently. Parents are now expected to pay for extracurricular activities — clubs, sports, music lessons — that were previously funded by schools. In Douglas County, *“... it’s \$50 for your kids to play a sport ... plus all your towel fees and everything else.”* Many parents complained that, even with fees, sports were the only options in their communities, leaving out kids with more artistic or academic inclinations.

In addition to wanting greater enrichment opportunities for their children, rural parents know well the risks of allowing youth to become bored and complacent. Some comments from Ontario: *“Basically they’re either in sports or they’re running in the street.”* And, *“The kids are out getting in more trouble. They are drinking. They are doing drugs. They’re doing a lot more”*

The benefits of adolescent extracurricular activities — social, academic, and long-term financial — are well established,⁷ and research has consistently documented a link between youth idleness and adolescent risky behavior.⁸ In addition to reducing the probability of educational and occupational success for young people, the absence of activities to engage rural youth jeopardizes the broader community safety — one of the most attractive features of rural life.

⁷ Broh, Beckett A. (2002) “Linking extracurricular programming to academic achievement: Who benefits and why?” *Sociology of Education*; v75, 1; 69-96.

⁸ Cohen, Deborah A. et al. (2002) “When and where do youths have sex? The potential role of adult supervision,” *Pediatrics* v1, 10; e66.

Health Care Challenges:

“It’s way too expensive and getting specialty care is difficult.”

Meeting the health care needs of rural Americans is not a new problem. Compared to urban areas, residents of the rural United States are more likely to be uninsured, more likely to depend on public programs such as Medicaid for the insurance they do have, less likely to have jobs that provide health insurance, and less likely to receive regular check-ups and preventive care.⁹ Rural communities also suffer from a shortage of health care providers — primary care physicians, specialists, dentists, and mental health professionals. Nearly all rural counties in Oregon and Washington are designated federal Health Professional Shortage Areas, and such specialists as obstetricians and gynecologists are particularly scarce.¹⁰

The parents we met — from the eastern border of the Oregon desert to the northwestern corner of Washington’s Olympic Peninsula — discussed the barriers they and their rural neighbors encounter in accessing quality health care. High costs were mentioned most often. This mom from Madras spoke for many of the parents when she described juggling her daughter’s medical needs with other essential family needs: *“When [teachers] tell you that your child is ill and that maybe you should take her to the doctor, [I think] ‘Do you have the extra one hundred and ten dollars to spare?’ Because I can either take her to the doctor or we can go buy electricity.”*

Cost barriers seem to pop up at every turn. In many cases, private health insurance is unattainable because employers — often small businesses that cannot afford employee benefits — do not offer a health plan. Even when employers offered coverage, parents talked about not being able to afford their share of the monthly premiums. Many parents in the focus groups had obtained health insurance for their children through state public health insurance programs, but the parents were not covered, thus putting the entire family at risk of financial instability: A Douglas County mother’s story was typical: *“When [my husband] worked at the bank, it cost us six hundred dollars a month for him to get insurance for us ...and that was like quite a huge chunk. So we were still on food stamps on top of that, so, finally, I sent out the paperwork for the Oregon Health Plan and my kids finally got on it, but I have no insurance now....”*

In both Oregon and Washington, state budget deficits over the last several years have led to cuts in public health insurance programs. Certain cutbacks, such as the imposition of a six-month waiting period for the Oregon Health Plan, can leave families vulnerable to tremendous medical debts. In Washington, Hispanic parents and key informants talked about the negative effects of the state’s decision in 2002 to eliminate state-funded health coverage for thousands of immigrant children. While some children remain eligible for the state’s Basic Health plan, they remain

Compared to urban areas, residents of the rural United States are more likely to be uninsured, more likely to depend on public programs such as Medicaid for the insurance they do have, less likely to have jobs that provide health insurance, and less likely to receive regular check-ups and preventive care.

⁹ “The Uninsured in Rural America”, Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, 2003.

¹⁰ For maps of the Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) or Medically Underserved Areas/Medically Underserved Populations (MUAs/MUPs), go to the Washington State Department of Health’s Office of Community and Rural Health website www.doh.wa.gov/hsqa/ocrh or Oregon Health & Science University’s Office of Rural Health website <http://www.ohsu.edu/oregonruralhealth>.

Omak parent: *“We have to travel five hours away for our son’s doctors’ appointments because of his disability.”*

Parents repeatedly expressed admiration and appreciation for the doctors who stay in rural areas and provide quality care.

uninsured because their parents are not able to navigate the complicated application and re-certification processes. A Forks parent explains, *“A lot of families fall through the cracks.... The paperwork’s really sophisticated.”* Moreover, Basic Health does not pay for transportation to and from medical services — a critical need in places like Mattawa that have no hospitals or specialists.

Going to the doctor can become an all-day affair as this Omak parent explains, *“We have to travel five hours away for our son’s doctors’ appointments because of his disability.”* To transport their children to health care providers, rural families must factor in the necessity of taking significant time off work — and the possible consequences, including pay loss or an unforgiving employer. Unlike in an urban community where running late or missing an appointment means losing a couple of hours, rural parents have to think in terms of days, not hours. Parents in Colville and Omak reported that non-emergency medical transportation services were available to people receiving public medical assistance, but they said scheduling and reliability were sometimes a problem.

Whether health care is available in the community, in the next town over, or a day’s drive away, rural families share a common, heightened concern for the quality of health care. A mother from Siletz explained that doctors come and go, each learning anew that she can’t afford to stay *“...because the majority of the community is low-income.... It is real hard to keep quality consistent care here.... You have to re-establish a relationship with another provider and it’s very strained.”* Parents do not know where to turn if they don’t have confidence in the local primary care physician or if their child needs a specialist.

Even when families like their local doctor, they often struggle to get an appointment, as providers cannot always meet the overwhelming demand for their services. A dad from Ontario, sandwiched between generations, shared his frustrations with finding treatment for his mother, who has multiple sclerosis: *“...I have a lot of respect for [two local doctors], but they’re so full that they can’t take anybody else.... The good doctors are full and the ones that are [available], in my opinion, are shysters...so, it’s hard.”* Against the backdrop of scarce health care resources, the challenge of finding quality health care leaves many rural families settling for care they feel is inadequate.

Language poses another barrier to access for many rural residents. From Forks: *“... doctors think that Spanish-speaking families use the ER for any little issue instead of calling their doctor but ... they can’t schedule their appointment. Nobody understands. So they ... just go to the ER. They don’t know what to do.”*

The governments of both states are working to improve access to health care in rural areas. Community leaders in Forks and Colville spoke highly of the critical access hospitals in their regions. Last year, the Oregon Legislature approved funding to supplement the medical malpractice premiums of rural doctors so that physicians in high-risk specialties like obstetrics will stay in rural communities. Parents repeatedly expressed admiration and appreciation for the doctors who stay in rural areas and provide quality care.

Transportation Difficulties:

**“Jobs, sports, medical appointments — nothing’s nearby.
And public transportation is just not there.”**

Given the distances between rural towns in the Northwest, as well as distances to urban areas, the lack of adequate transportation significantly impacts the lives of rural residents. While existing data do not enable us to meaningfully quantify rural communities’ transportation needs, transportation barriers clearly affect the everyday lives of rural families.

Because viable public transportation systems simply do not exist in most of the rural Northwest, rural families are forced to rely on personal vehicles. The cost of owning, maintaining, and insuring a vehicle often mandates that low-income families settle for something less than “dependable” transportation. The family truck or car may be 10 or 20 years old — serviceable for driving around town, but perhaps not to the next town, where a larger grocery store charges more reasonable prices and offers more choices. As this Douglas County mother told us: *“...the car I was driving before, I swear I’d have to pull over every 20 minutes to pick up the pieces falling off of it.”*

Transportation is especially crucial when better job opportunities are two or three towns away. Families need to consider whether the wages of a distant job will compensate for increased gas expenses and wear-and-tear on the car. They also need to think about the inevitable extra mid-day trips to pick up a sick child at school or deal with emergencies at home. A mother from Madras decided against an out-of-town job: *“I have a car, but it’s too much to drive down to Bend, where you can find more jobs...the gas is just, it’s too much...I can’t do it.”*

From 1990 to 2000, commute times increased in urban, suburban, and rural areas of the Northwest. According to an analysis of Census transportation data, the increase in commute times was greater in our eight rural focus-group counties than in Oregon and Washington overall. When making these kinds of comparisons, it is important to remember that spending 45 minutes in urban rush-hour traffic — where you might be within walking distance of home or have multiple public transit options — differs significantly from a rural resident traveling 40 miles one-way to get to work.

Inadequate transportation can shape a family’s social interactions and development. As this Madras parent put it, transporting children to various “enriching activities” goes beyond the typical suburban carpool juggling act: *“If you’ve got three kids, you’re on three different teams. It’s impossible. You know, gas is two bucks a gallon. You can’t send them out on the bicycle in the middle of the night.”* The distances among children’s team practices, music lessons, and play rehearsals can necessitate several trips to the gas station each week — more than many low-income, rural families can afford. Even getting together with neighbors or extended family demands extra attention and planning, or may prove too difficult, due to transportation. While transportation is likely a “how” issue for urban and suburban parents, in rural regions the question can often be “if.”

While transportation is likely a “how” issue for urban and suburban parents, in rural regions the question can often be “if.”



What Do Rural Families Need?

When we asked them to tell us what they needed, rural parents responded with a clear and consistent message. First and foremost, they need **jobs that offer predictable employment and that pay enough so they can support their families**. Achieving this will require thoughtful, long-range planning and economic investment that goes hand-in-hand with:

- Affordable, quality child care
- Quality primary, secondary, and higher education for children and youth; continuing education and job training for adults
- Activities for middle and high school youth
- Accessible and affordable health care
- Improved transportation options

Integrating state- or county-level planning with community needs and priorities can lead to programs that are more thoughtful and comprehensive, and ultimately more successful. Diversifying the economic base of a community involves finding and training a workforce that can satisfy the labor needs of new and evolving industries. This might involve recruiting some of those folks who have set aside their dreams of living “in the country” because rural areas have not typically offered jobs that fit their skills. It might also involve working with community colleges to establish satellite programs to qualify rural workers for employment in industries that want to move into the area. A recent rural telework project in Washington found that if such projects are to succeed, communities must be able to respond quickly to the needs of prospective new businesses.¹¹

¹¹ “Rural Telework Project Final Report”, Rural Telework Project, Washington State University, December 2003 (prepared for U.S. Department of Agriculture Fund for Rural America).

Fulfilling workers' needs for quality child care can lead to additional employment and training opportunities in the child care field. Upgrading middle and secondary education could be paired with expanding after-school opportunities for youth activities and sports, and could include coordinated transportation so that parents in town don't have to drive 40 miles so their kids can play in a basketball game.

Telemedicine and digital connections for schools and libraries are new tools that link rural areas with each other and with urban resources and expertise. These tools, if distributed fairly and paired with appropriate training, can provide far-reaching benefits while saving the time and expense of traveling long distances.

In almost every focus group, participants mentioned the importance of having a central meeting place where members of the community gather for social, educational, and civic events. This place — typically a school or community center — also serves as a clearinghouse for important information. Any realistic attempt at long-term planning must engage local leaders and have strong, broad-based support from the community. Such support does not develop overnight, but evolves slowly from the strengths and preferences of the citizenry. Having a place where ideas can be openly discussed greatly facilitates the process of building constituencies for change.

Solutions must be calibrated to fit the needs of specific communities. **One size definitely does not fit all.** For example, a community college satellite program in computer programming probably wouldn't make sense in Mattawa, where, with 70 percent of the population speaking English "less than very well," the most pressing educational need is English literacy. Conversely, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes would have few takers in Colville, where more than 97 percent of residents speak fluent English.¹²

Integrating state- or county-level planning with community needs and priorities can lead to programs that are more thoughtful and comprehensive, and ultimately more successful.

¹² Census 2000, Summary 3 File.



Policy Opportunities: Focusing on Rural Families

While experts debate the subtleties of a national economic recovery, employment in Oregon and Washington has not rebounded to pre-2001 levels. And recovery at the state level may not include rural communities, given the chronic nature of the economic challenges facing the rural Northwest. Therefore, our recommendations are long-range, broad, and interconnected, as we hope the policies that follow from them will be. We hope our suggestions can serve as a framework for exploring ways to improve the lives of rural families. Because we believe it is crucial to tailor rural solutions to specific rural circumstances, we offer examples of this kind of customization.

1. Build on Community Strengths

Rural communities are blessed with social capital — people like rural life and are willing to help one another, especially in a crisis. Creating or expanding opportunities for old and new neighbors to get acquainted can build on this community strength. Busy schedules often prevent families from getting involved in local decision making. Parent and/or youth advisory groups that meet at convenient times and provide child care can assist elected leaders in promoting policies and programs that improve child well being. Acknowledging each community's particular strengths can help to inform and unite citizens.

2. Design Public Supports to Fit the Needs of Rural Families

Policy-makers in Olympia and Salem sometimes overlook the realities of rural life when designing programs to assist low-income families. State agencies need to encourage flexibility at the local level. For example, requiring a welfare recipient to generate ten job search contacts each week in a town where there are no jobs is simply unrealistic. As an Omak parent put it, *"...by the time you've been in the program a week, you darn well better have*

hit up every ... business in this whole county." State agencies could also prioritize services essential to rural areas, such as transportation to and from specialized medical care, and allocate resources accordingly. The need for such a service might be especially acute in a community like Mattawa, which has no hospital closer than 28 miles. Finally, "word of mouth" is not the best way for families in remote rural areas to learn about available help. Supporting the creation of "211" call centers could provide easy and cost-effective access to community information and referral services.¹³ Government representatives might also facilitate collaborations that assist rural communities in sharing their experiences and boosting their visibility among government agencies and employers.

3. Gather Better Data to Inform Policy Choices Affecting Rural Families

Policy decisions benefit from data that are collected (1) at regular intervals, (2) at levels applicable to rural analysis, and (3) in forms that are comparable across populations. Finding statistics for rural communities can be a challenge because sample sizes are small and often no county- or zip-code-level data are available. Finding data that are comparable across states is an even bigger challenge. Developing strong county-level indicators — particularly for youth activities, child care affordability and availability, education supports (school nurses, counselors, special education services), transportation services, health insurance coverage and health care access — would aid policy-makers in their efforts to help rural families. With appropriate data, adult training and education programs can be designed to match the needs of communities. For example, a Work Source/community college collaboration in Omak offered a four-quarter class to train Natural Resource Technicians, but the dislocated workers who went through the program found that the jobs they trained for were limited and temporary — not what they needed to support their families.

4. Expand Economic Opportunities

The most successful Northwest counties are those that have been able to diversify their industries, but in the current economy even these communities struggle to generate new jobs. Developing small businesses, both individually-owned and networks of small firms, can help grow local economies. Several parents expressed interest in starting their own businesses or pursuing at-home employment as a way to make money while accommodating their child care needs. Mercy Corps Northwest sponsors asset-building and micro-loan programs that help low-income, female, and immigrant entrepreneurs to start, strengthen, and expand small businesses and self-employment ventures.¹⁴ When attempting to attract larger enterprises to rural areas, the "fit" with the community should be carefully evaluated. For example, when a Rural Telework Project tried to create new information-based

¹³ See <http://www.211.org/> for more information.

¹⁴ See the recent series of articles in The Business Journal of Portland, December 2003, or go to <http://www.mercy-corps.org/items/320>.

jobs in three Washington rural communities (Colville, Forks, and Omak), this effort succeeded in only one community — Colville. This experience generated the following policy recommendations for rural economic development: (1) identify a potential fit between employer needs and the local workforce; (2) support rural workforce development; (3) establish government policies that encourage employers to move to rural communities; (4) support community capacity-building through infrastructure development, marketing assistance, and broker/consultant services; and (5) provide technical assistance, training, and capital to support business start-up and expansion efforts in rural areas.¹⁵

5. Review Existing Child Care Policies and Programs through a Rural Lens

Without better access to quality care for their children, low-income parents cannot participate in the stable workforce rural counties need to attract new businesses and grow economically. Policy makers must identify and implement strategies to improve the affordability and accessibility of quality child care — including family, friend, and neighbor care — in rural counties. A review of existing subsidy programs, tax credits, referral networks, provider incentives, and provider training opportunities from a rural perspective would be a solid first step in this direction. We also need consistent rural child care data that report on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, slot availability, and affordability.

6. Provide More for Youth to Do

This message from parents was unambiguous: older children in our towns do not have enough to do, and when they get bored, they get into trouble. Local officials and their nonprofit partners will continue to explore ways to diversify and increase out-of-school activities for children and youth in their communities, but they may need increased support from businesses and foundations to meet their goals. Additionally, greater outreach about existing scholarships for youth activities would help low-income families access these resources and underscore the need for more supports in this area. Efforts aimed at upgrading the social environments of young people should be coordinated with school and community drug prevention programs.

¹⁵ “Rural Telework Project Final Report”, Rural Telework Project, Washington State University, December 2003 (prepared for U.S. Department of Agriculture Fund for Rural America).

7. Explore Ways to Strengthen Education, from Preschool to College

Parents value education and recognize the role good programs play in both their children's future successes and in their own ability to provide for their children. Expanding Head Start to (1) reach all eligible children and (2) offer full-day programs in more areas would benefit many families in the rural Pacific Northwest. Parents spoke appreciatively of small elementary schools with teachers who know their children and pay attention to them. Problems seem to arise in middle school and high school, where schools are larger, sometimes because of budget-driven regional consolidation. "Small school" research and initiatives may provide strategies to improve academic success while retaining the benefits of rural life.¹⁶ Stable and adequate funding for community colleges is vital to shrinking the educational attainment gap between urban and rural areas. Expanding on-line offerings at state colleges could significantly benefit students in remote areas. Programs like Washington's Running Start, which gives high school students a jump-start on college, should be supported and expanded — perhaps through satellite campuses — into rural areas. Adults also need ongoing access — with appropriate financial aid — to community colleges. Children will do better in school and aspire to go to college if their parents pursue higher education. Improvements in education will boost families' earning capabilities and strengthen a community's likelihood of attracting businesses because of a better-educated workforce. Adult educational initiatives can be built into overall community planning, coordinating economic development with workforce training.



8. Continue and Expand Rural Health Initiatives

The federal government and policy-makers in Oregon and Washington recognize the health care deficiencies plaguing rural communities. Responding to the need for better access to specialty care, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has committed \$325 million in loans and grants to strengthen rural distance learning and telemedicine programs.¹⁷ A recent survey of rural patients, rural primary care providers, and urban specialists gave uniformly high marks to telemedicine as a strategy for providing quality care close to home.¹⁸ Attempts to attract physicians to rural areas must be customized to fit the community. For example, distance to urban and rural population centers affects the ability of rural towns to support physician practices, so towns with competing practices nearby may not be able to keep their physicians without offering continuous subsidies (such as enhanced Medicare payments for certified Rural Health Clinics). More remote rural communities may be able to attract medical personnel with incentives such as one-time signing bonuses or forgiveness of medical school loans.

¹⁶ For more information, see The Rural School and Community Trust's website on "small schools" at <http://www.ruraledu.org/issues/small.htm>.

¹⁷ Telemedicine Information Exchange News, March 17, 2004.

¹⁸ "Satisfaction with Telemedicine Consultation Between Rural Family Physicians and Academic Medical Center Specialists", University of Washington Rural Health Research Center Fact Sheet, 2001.

Non-physician clinicians such as nurse practitioners and physician assistants provide a quarter of general-practice outpatient visits in rural Washington, so recruitment efforts should be addressed to them as well. Improving access to coverage requires a strong and continuing commitment of policy-makers in both states. For example, more stringent Medicaid renewal policies in Washington were expected to reduce enrollment by 19,000 by July of 2005. Instead, more than 20,000 clients — mostly children — lost coverage between April and September of 2003. Many of the focus-group participants expressed deep concern about this policy change. Residents of poor communities should not be penalized because they are unable to plow through additional documentation requirements.¹⁹

9. Help Families Obtain Reliable Transportation

Rural parents need reliable transportation if they are to find and keep the kinds of jobs that will enable them to support their families. They also need to be able to transport their children to and from child care, after-school activities, and essential services. Again, the solution to this problem must be tailored to suit each community's needs. While sparsely populated areas like Siletz (about 1,100) cannot support a comprehensive "fixed-route, fixed-schedule" public transit system, they could potentially benefit from some form of demand-response service, where citizens can request transportation to medical appointments or other approved uses. Transportation planning commissions must involve local residents, government officials, and tribal governments, incorporating not only immediate needs, but also long-range plans for each community's economic, social, and environmental needs. Exploring and implementing car ownership and related programs (such as auto maintenance and insurance assistance) would help low-income families address their transportation needs.²⁰

10. Support the Diversity of Rural Families

The preceding recommendations take for granted an appreciation of and attention to the growing diversity of rural families in the Northwest. For communities with an influx of immigrants, English as a Second Language classes should be widely available. A Madras mother spoke about how language difficulties impeded both access to basic services and participation in the community, *"When we go to the hospital, they don't have a translator.... We wanted to volunteer in the school ..., but when we go there, nobody speaks our language."* Hispanic families have made the Northwest their home because they hope to provide their children with opportunities they never had. Often, however, barriers not encountered by long-time residents thwart their modest aspirations. Outreach to minority populations and expansion of cultural competency programs in the schools will support and strengthen the diversity of families living in rural towns across the Northwest.

¹⁹ "The Costs of Enrollment Instability in Washington State's Medicaid Program", Health Policy Analysis Program, March 2004.

²⁰ See "Shifting into Gear: A Comprehensive Guide to Creating a Car Ownership Program," The National Economic Development and Law Center and The Annie E. Casey Foundation, http://www.aecf.org/publications/data/shifting_into_gear.pdf.

Appendix A - Methodology

The Northwest Rural Communities Project used a two-step process for gathering the data contained in this report. First, we gathered the qualitative data, conducting focus groups with parents and interviewing key informants in each community. Second, we analyzed this information, identified dominant themes and compiled the available data indicators to provide a quantitative picture of the stories heard in the focus groups.

Defining “Rural”. A county-based definition of “rural” was selected because of the compatibility with available data sources. “Rural” was defined as those counties identified as “non-metropolitan” by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB). These counties are outside of designated metropolitan areas, i.e., places with densely populated urban centers or at least one large city. Oregon has 25 non-metropolitan counties (out of 36 total), and Washington has 27 (out of 39 counties).

Qualitative Data. Between May and August of 2003, the Project conducted eight focus group discussions with parents earning a low income. The map on the inside front cover shows the locations of the focus groups.

- **Selecting the Communities.** The non-shaded counties shown in the map on the inside cover are those classified as non-metropolitan (rural) by OMB. Using these counties as a starting point, the selection criteria included the percentage of children living in low-income households, geographical diversity (east and west of the mountains), and the potential for recruiting focus group participants. The groups included a Spanish-language discussion (Mattawa) and a Native American community (Siletz) to reflect the cultural diversity of the rural Northwest.
- **Conducting the Focus Groups.** To recruit participants and conduct the focus groups, we followed the protocols developed by the Rural Great Plains Collaborative Project. A copy of their manual is available at http://www.usd.edu/brbinfo/kc/pdf_files/GuidebookRuralResearch.pdf. To obtain a copy of the questions used in the focus groups or for additional information about this part of the project, please contact Children First for Oregon.
- **Focus Group Participants.** A total of 79 parents of 168 children shared their stories in Oregon and Washington. The groups were comprised of families with children having incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$36,800 for a family of four). The majority of the participants were women (84%); all the men who participated accompanied their spouse or partner. The majority of households (76%) had one to three children, with the average number of children per household being 2.55 children.

Except for Mattawa and Siletz, the only participant recruitment criteria were that the adult be raising children and be low-income. The well-attended, Spanish-speaking focus group in Mattawa resulted in a

FIGURE 9. Demographic Overview of Focus Group Locations

	OREGON				WASHINGTON			
Population**	Madras	Ontario*	Roseburg*	Siletz	Colville	Forks	Mattawa	Omak
Total population 1990	3,443	9,392	17,033	926	4,360	2,862	941	4,117
Total population 2000	5,078	10,985	20,017	1,133	4,988	3,120	2,609	4,721
Percent change in population	47	17	18	22	14	9	177	15
Race**								
Percent White	64	69	94	71	93	82	30	70
Percent American Indian and Alaska Native	6	1	1	21	2	5	1	15
Percent Hispanic (of any race)	36	32	4	2	2	16	90	13
Education**								
Percent less than 9th grade	20	12	5	5	4	7	65	10
Percent high school graduate or higher	63	73	82	79	84	80	19	76
Percent associate degree	4	7	8	5	7	7	1	6
Region of Birth/Language Spoken at Home***								
Percent foreign born	23	9	2	2	3	11	69	8
Percent speak English less than very well	21	11	1	2	1	7	70	6
Unemployment***								
Percent of civilian labor force unemployed	10	14	7	6	12	9	13	17
Major industries***								
Percent agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, mining	7	4	2	5	4	19	70	9
Percent manufacturing	33	14	13	11	14	8	4	11
Percent educational, health & social services	13	22	26	17	23	18	6	22
Low Income Individuals***								
Percent of individuals below 200% poverty	51	46	38	34	40	42	82	52

*Roseburg and Ontario were selected as a focus group locations because of their available meeting space and proximity to nearby small towns.

Source: U.S. Census (2000) Summary 1 File. *Source: U.S. Census (2000) Summary 3 File.

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% because only selected categories were chosen for this table.

significant proportion of Hispanic participants. However, even when we excluded that group from the total count, Hispanic parents still comprised more than a quarter of all participants.

- **Key Informants.** For additional information and 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. The interviews were conducted in person or over the phone using a set of

FIGURE 10. Profile of Focus Group Participants.

Age Ranges of Participants (n = 79)		Length of Time in Community *	
18 to 25 years	20%	Less than 2 years	15%
26 to 35 years	42%	2 to 5 years	25%
36 to 49 years	28%	6 to 10 years	20%
50 years and over	8%	11 to 25 years	24%
Unknown	3%	More than 25 years	11%
		Unknown	4%

Age Ranges of Participants' Children (n = 168)		Ethnicity of Participants (n = 60)**	
Infant to 5 years	40%	White	63%
6 to 12 years	32%	Hispanic	27%
13 to 17 years	15%	Native American	5%
18 and over	7%	Multiracial	5%
Unknown	5%		

* 15 percent of the parents had lived most or all of their lives in the community.

** Mattawa participants excluded — see above.

questions modeled after those used in the focus groups. In general, these interviews confirmed what we heard from the parents about their communities.

- **Analyzing the Data.** Research staff with Washington Kids Count at the University of Washington analyzed the focus group transcripts for dominant themes using ATLAS.ti computer software. The goal was to identify themes and issues that transcended the specifics of each community.

Quantitative Data. The goal of the project was to have the experiences of rural families inform the types of data indicators used to provide the quantitative picture of rural Northwest communities. We tried not to determine the relevant numbers ahead of time because current indicators of child well being often reflect an urban perspective. As noted throughout this report, it is difficult to quantify some of the issues raised by the families because of limited to non-existent state/county data on such things as out-of-school programs, youth activities, child care affordability and health care access. Data sources were also limited because we focused on cross-state comparable, county-level data (hence the reliance on Census 2000 data for most of the information).

Listening to Learn: Stories from Rural Northwest Families

Final Report of the Northwest Rural Communities Project

The Northwest Rural Communities Project is one of several multi-state projects, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, that are exploring child well being in rural America. This initiative grew out of a concern that, while rural families face challenges in raising healthy, successful children, no existing body of research documents those challenges in a way that builds a collective voice for change. These projects create an opportunity to focus attention on rural families, provide useful data to policy-makers and encourage smart investments to strengthen the well being of rural families.



Children First for Oregon
P.O. Box 14914
Portland, OR 97293
(503) 236-9754
www.childrenfirstfororegon.org
office@cfpo.org



Washington Kids Count
Human Services Policy Center
University of Washington
1107 NE 45th Street, Suite 205
Seattle, WA 98105
(206) 685-3135
www.hspc.org