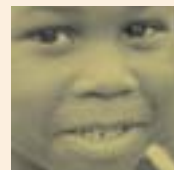
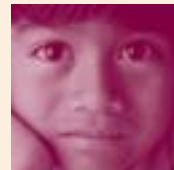




Rural Kids Count!

Sharing the
Stories and
Statistics from
Oklahoma
and
Arkansas

A project of the
Oklahoma
Institute for
Child Advocacy
and
Arkansas
Advocates for
Children and
Families



August 2004

Funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation

This report is dedicated to people living in rural Oklahoma and Arkansas, because rural kids and their families **do count!**

rural kids count!

sharing stories and statistics from Oklahoma and Arkansas

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acknowledgments

rural kids count project

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introduction

Imagine a place where you know your neighbors, where others care about your children, where family matters. Imagine a place where the futures of young people are limited by substance abuse, pregnancy and prejudice. Imagine

the heartbreak of poverty surrounded by the beauty of nature. Imagine a place you love that you might leave if you could find a way. Imagine rural Oklahoma and Arkansas ... communities of contradictions.

background

KIDS COUNT is a project of The Annie E. Casey Foundation that presents an annual state-by-state picture of the status of children in the United States. Along with the national report, the Foundation funds a network of state KIDS COUNT projects, which provides a comparison of the same child health and well-being indicators on a county-by-county basis. In Oklahoma and Arkansas, the KIDS COUNT affiliates are the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy and the Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, non-profit child advocacy organizations that serve as catalysts for

programs and policies to improve the lives of children and youth in their states. These two agencies form the collaborative partnership for the *Rural Kids Count* Project.

In 2000, The Annie E. Casey Foundation launched the *Making Connections* Initiative with the goal of helping urban neighborhoods become better places for children and families. It provided a guiding principle that is equally relevant for rural families and communities: “Children do well when their families do well, and families do better when they



“All kids have needs. Doesn't matter where you live, you still need love, the necessities of life and an education.”

live in supportive communities.” The three kinds of connections the Foundation identified as most critical include: Economic Opportunity, Social Networks and Services and Supports. Following that guide and the Foundation’s Family Economic Success model, the Oklahoma–Arkansas partnership addressed the particular challenges experienced in rural areas related to the following:

■ **Economics**

Employment, Retail Services, Transportation, Housing

■ **Rural Society**

Quality of Life, Community Leadership, Churches-Faith, Recreation and Entertainment, Parental Involvement and Social Concerns

■ **Education**

■ **Services and Supports**

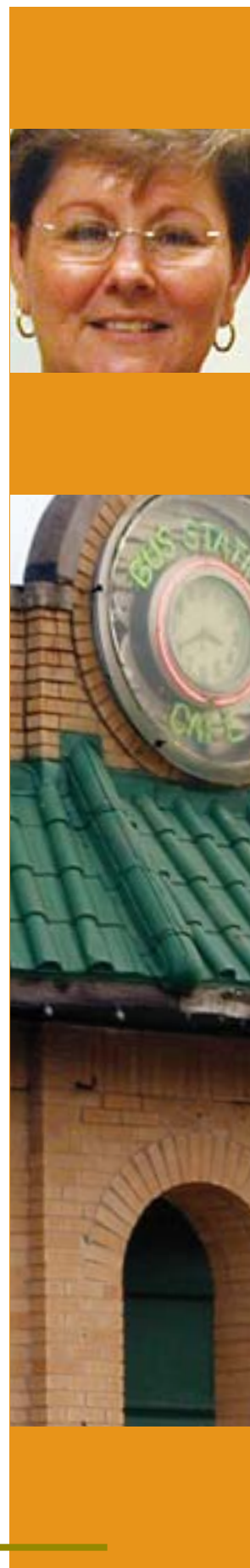
Child Care, Medical and Health, Community Services

The purpose of the *Rural Kids Count* project was to highlight the needs of rural families in poverty in Oklahoma and Arkansas, to deepen the understanding of the issues and circumstances that are barriers to their self-sufficiency and to increase the attention paid to rural poor families in policy discussions. This report presents a picture of daily life in impover-

ished rural areas, blending the stories gathered from focus groups and interviews with the data and statistics. The findings of this report represent an in-depth analysis of the data, issues and life experiences of rural families in poverty and identify recommendations to help rural families and communities improve their economic status.

It is not possible to fully convey the intensity felt by participants in the rural communities we visited to gather information for this report. We found a strong and sincere desire among rural Oklahomans and Arkansans to see their communities stable and thriving—and to be part of that process. Rural residents are resilient and resourceful, characteristics vital to economic and family success. In Oklahoma and Arkansas, it is clear that as families suffer or prosper, their children suffer or prosper. Our goal is to enable more rural families — thus their children — to prosper.

This special *Rural Kids Count* Project was funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation as part of their National KIDS COUNT Family Economic Success Initiative. A partnership between Oklahoma and Arkansas was natural for this effort, as the states share more than a common border. Among poor families struggling to raise





children in rural areas, the two states share similar challenges and opportunities. Though the beauty of their rural areas is striking, it masks changing demographics and an array of problems that negatively impact children and families, as well as the economic future of each state. Two-thirds of the 152 counties in Oklahoma and Arkansas are rural, with most experiencing significant levels of poverty. Beyond poverty lie

other threats to the vitality and survival of rural Oklahoma and Arkansas communities — loss of population, loss of businesses, lack of economic opportunities to attract and keep a strong workforce and lack of jobs that provide the wages and health coverage needed to support families.

defining “rural”

While no single definition of “rural” has achieved universal acceptance, most methods classify areas based on population and proximity to urban communities. The classification scheme presented throughout *Rural Kids Count* relies on the nine-part U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (Continuum), as defined in 2003.

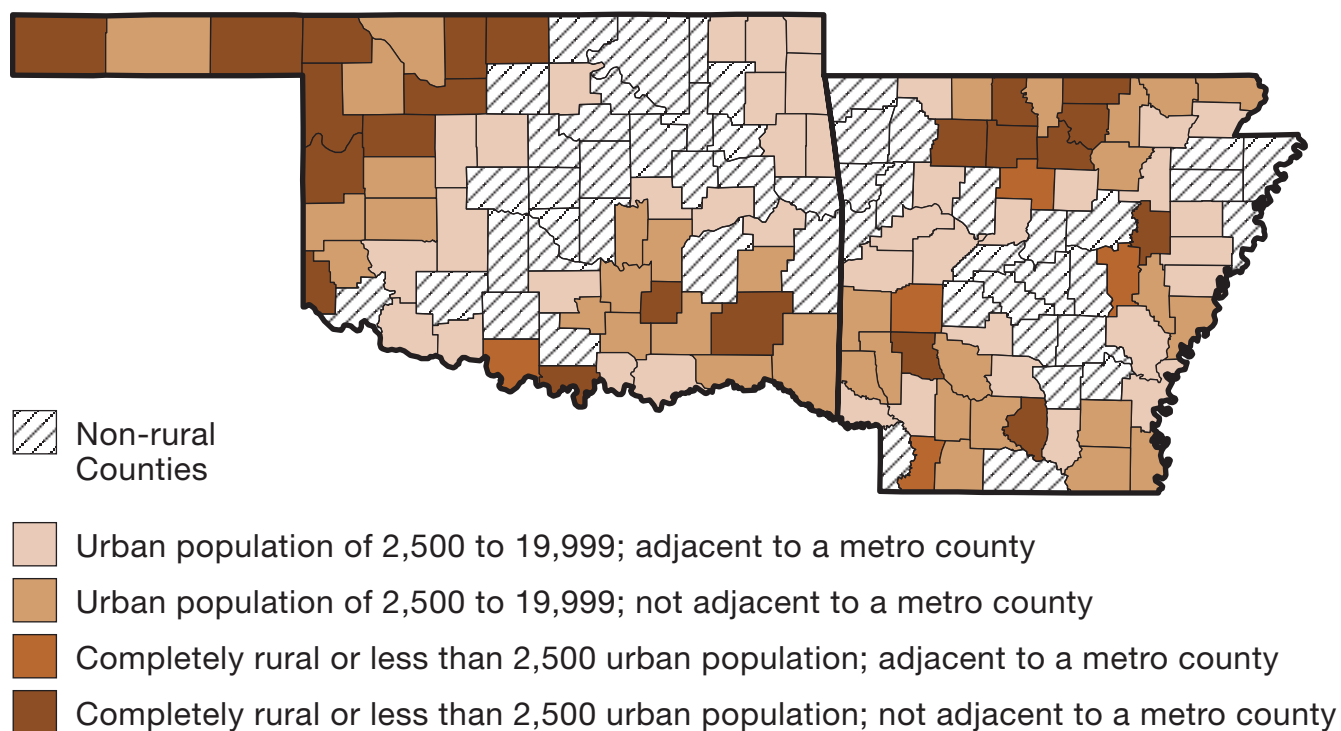
Rural, as used in this analysis, includes Oklahoma and Arkansas counties with less than twenty thousand (20,000) residents living in its cities or towns. Rural counties are those with codes numbering 6 through 9 on the Continuum, with 9 being the most rural.

Non-rural, as used in this analysis, includes Oklahoma and Arkansas counties in metropolitan areas or with urban populations of twenty thousand (20,000) or more. Non-rural counties are those with codes numbering 1 through 5 on the Continuum, with 1 being the most urban. References throughout *Rural Kids Count* to “rural” include fifty (50) of Oklahoma’s seventy-seven (77) counties and fifty-one (51) of the seventy-five (75) counties in Arkansas. See following map for designation of rural counties in Oklahoma and Arkansas.

USDA RURAL-URBAN CONTINUUM CODES, 2003

Code	Description	USDA Classification
Rural for <i>Rural Kids Count</i> analysis:		
9	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro county	Non-metro County
8	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro county	Non-metro County
7	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro county	Non-metro County
6	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro county	Non-metro County
Non-rural for <i>Rural Kids Count</i> analysis:		
5	Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro county	Non-metro County
4	Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro county	Non-metro County
3	Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population	Metro County
2	Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population	Metro County
1	Counties of metro areas of 1 million population or more	Metro County

2003 Rurality Index



Source: USDA Economic Research Service

collecting information

Quantitative Data

the Statistics from Rural Oklahoma and Arkansas

During October and November 2003, *Rural Kids Count* conducted seven (7) focus groups, spoke with thirty-nine (39) key informants and visited residents in

seven (7) rural communities in Oklahoma and Arkansas. The sites chosen were ethnically diverse rural counties with high rates of child and family poverty.

Focus Groups

Of the four focus groups held in Oklahoma, three were designed for adults and one for youth. The three focus groups in Arkansas included all adult participants. Local university Cooperative Extension Service staff, county health administrators, health service providers, social service providers, non-profit youth program staff and VISTA volunteers, as well as representatives from state health initiatives, helped identify low income residents in each community who were invited to participate in a focus group discussion. Existing groups that were already organized for some other purpose were avoided to better ensure that the

communication dynamics among the participants would not be pre-established. Each focus group included residents living at or below 185% of the poverty level, representing an income of about \$27,000 for a family of three in 2003. Most participants fell far below that income level.

Meeting space, child care and food was provided, in most cases, by the local con-

tacts. All focus group participants were offered a small stipend: \$30.00 to the Oklahoma participants in the three adult focus groups; \$20.00, plus food certificates and other gift items, to the Oklahoma participants in the youth focus group; and \$40.00 to the Arkansas focus group participants.

Seventy-five community residents attended one of seven focus groups, forty-eight Oklahomans and twenty-seven Arkansans. The smallest meeting involved eight participants and the largest, eighteen. Each focus group session lasted approximately two and one-half hours, including time to eat and get acquainted. To help each community address common concerns, as well as raise unique issues, focus group discussions were facilitated with prepared questions. Throughout *Rural Kids Count*, quotations set aside in “gold italic text with quotation marks” are attributed to a participant of an Oklahoma or Arkansas focus group.

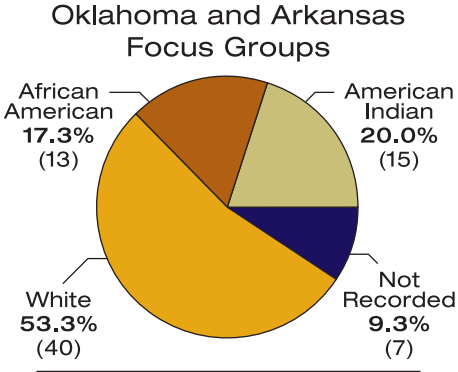
Focus group participants ranged in age from thirteen to sixty-eight years, with an average age of just over thirty (30.5)



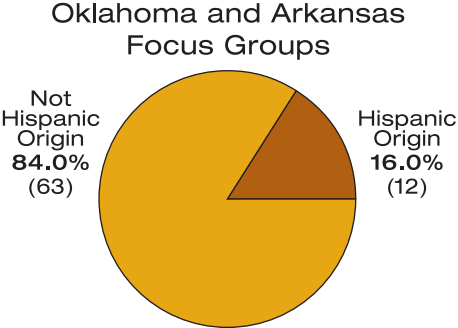
among the participants in the adult focus groups and of fifteen (14.9) among the youth-only focus group participants. Over half (58.1%) of the participants in the adult-only focus groups were currently married. The youth-only focus group members were exclusively never married teenagers, with no children of their own. All but five participants in the two states had children, with all focus group participants combined raising 147 children in their rural communities. Non-White participants (37.3%) were well represented in both Oklahoma and Arkansas focus groups, as were people of Hispanic origin (16.0%). In Oklahoma the largest proportion of non-White participants was American Indian (29.2%), in Arkansas, African American (48.1%). Focus group participants were predominantly female (76.0%).

The youth brought a valuable perspective to the information collected about rural communities. Comments and concerns from those attending the youth-only focus group were similar to many raised by the adult focus group participants. The youth,

Race of Participants



Hispanic Origin of Participants



however, added different perspectives and new dimensions to the adult comments. The results indicate that rural young people are extremely knowledgeable about the communities in which they live. Youth passionately expressed their opinions about what should take place in order for rural conditions to improve. *Rural Kids Count* encourages future studies to include youth-only focus groups.

Key Informant Interviews

One-on-one interviews were conducted in rural Oklahoma and Arkansas towns with those considered to be knowledgeable

about their community. These “key informant” interviews were conducted in each of the counties where focus groups were



COUNTIES for FOCUS GROUPS & KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Living below 185% of poverty **Racial characteristics and *Hispanic* origin**

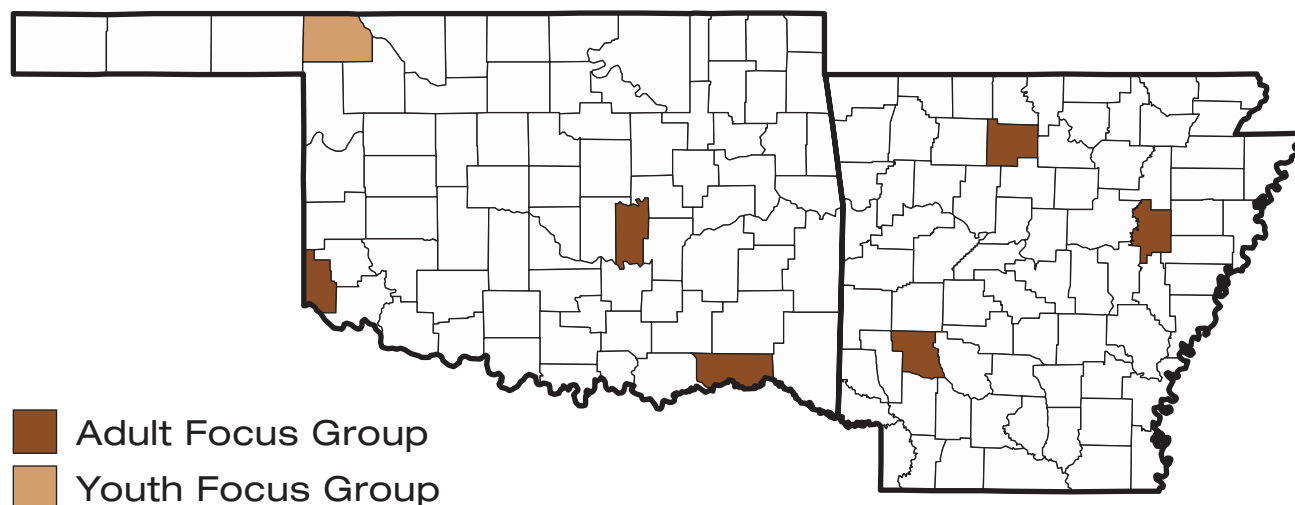
OKLAHOMA

Choctaw Co.	Adults	49.2%	White (68.1%), African American (10.4%), American Indian (15.3%), Other race or races (6.3%); <i>Hispanic</i> Origin (1.6%)
Harmon Co.	Adults	53.1%	White (73.0%), African American (10.2%), American Indian (0.5%), Other race or races (16.3%); <i>Hispanic</i> Origin (22.1%)
Seminole Co.	Adults	47.3%	White (70.6%), African American (5.8%), American Indian (16.9%), Other race or races (6.7%); <i>Hispanic</i> Origin (2.3%)
Harper Co.	Youth	31.0%	White (95.6%), African American (0.0%), American Indian (0.9%), Other race or races (3.5%); <i>Hispanic</i> Origin (5.5%)

ARKANSAS

Pike Co.	Adults	39.7%	White (92.7%), African American (3.8%), American Indian (0.5%), Other race or races (2.9%); <i>Hispanic</i> Origin (3.2%)
Searcy Co.	Adults	50.3%	White (97.6%), African American (0.0%), American Indian (0.5%), Other race or races (2.0%); <i>Hispanic</i> Origin (0.6%)
Woodruff Co.	Adults	50.5%	White (68.0%), African American (30.7%), American Indian (0.1%), Other race or races (1.2%); <i>Hispanic</i> Origin (0.6%)

Focus Groups



Source: Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families and Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy

held, typically on the day of or the day after the focus group met. A later telephone conversation was arranged when necessary to conduct an interview. Providing insight from a stakeholder perspective, this data contrasts the responses and priorities of policy-makers with those of Oklahoma and Arkansas rural residents dependent upon those policies. Most key informants demonstrated a keen awareness of community issues, typically taking the initiative to express both the benefits and the challenges of rural life. Throughout *Rural Kids Count*, quotations set aside in “*brown italic text with quotation marks*” are attributed to an Oklahoma or Arkansas key informant.

A total of thirty-nine (39) key informant interviews were completed, twenty-seven (27) in Oklahoma and twelve (12) in Arkansas. Oklahomans and Arkansans contributing their

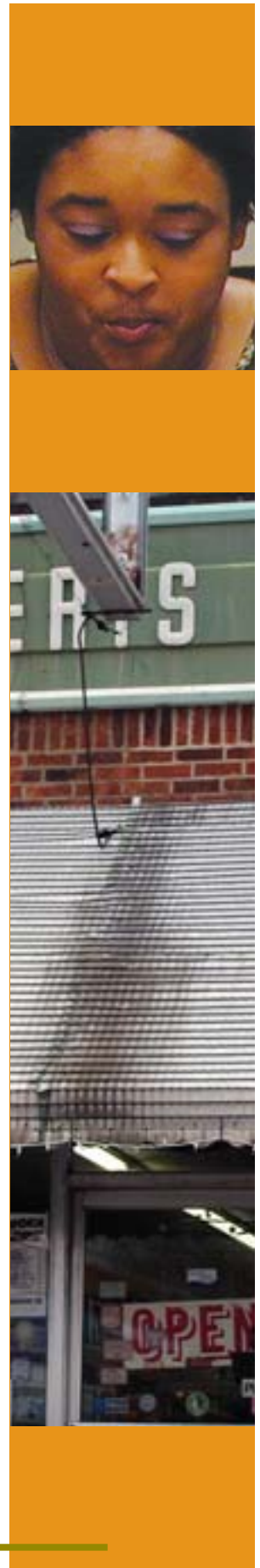
Field Analysis

Additional visits were made to the homes of two mothers living in extreme poverty in a rural Oklahoma community. Both were American Indians in their forties, with a total of eleven children between them. While comprising a small portion of the information gathered for *Rural Kids Count*, the perspec-

perspectives included health professionals, school personnel, business owners and state legislators. Oklahoma added bankers, law enforcement personnel, ministers and service providers. Arkansas also interviewed service agency executives, judges and mayors.

Contrasting dramatically to the racial composition of both the focus group participants and the community-at-large, key informants were almost all White. In those interviews where the key informant did not specify their race, a racial classification may have been designated by the interviewer based upon appearances or knowledge gained elsewhere. One (2.6%) of the key informants interviewed was of Hispanic origin. Also, unlike the focus group participants, key informants were predominantly male (61.5%).

tives garnered were important and insightful. The personal visits enabled a robust communication with impoverished rural residents who took advantage of the opportunity to speak as individuals, rather than in a group, from the familiarity of their own homes. *Rural Kids Count* encourages future studies



to continue and expand this type of field analysis. As one key informant put it, “*The road runs both ways — why don't you come here?*”

Throughout *Rural Kids Count*, quotations set aside in “*green italic text with quotation marks*” are attributed to one of these two women.

Quantitative Data the Statistics from Rural Oklahoma and Arkansas

The quantitative data included in *Rural Kids Count* was selected to profile rural residents and to enhance the responses received from the focus group participants and key informants. Many of the topics which were discussed were not easily measured. For example, no data sets were available to quantify the benefits of living in a rural community or the value of support from family, friends and churches. It was often difficult to accurately enumerate services or recreational opportunities (or the lack of these) because data was not collected or maintained in a uniform format.

To be included in *Rural Kids Count*, relatively comparable data needed to be available at the county level for both Oklahoma and Arkansas. Wherever possible, the quantitative indicators for Oklahoma and Arkansas presented data for each state as a whole, for the combined rural counties and for the rest of the state. (See Attachment 1: *Quantitative Data - Numbers & Rates*, for a complete list of and sources for the quantitative data presented in *Rural Kids Count*.)

emerging themes

Analysis of the qualitative information received from the rural residents, as presented in the following pages of *Rural Kids Count*, is based upon how much each focus group and key informant discussed a particular issue (as measured by the amount of text dedicated to a topic on the verbatim transcript) and the subjective impressions of the facilitators and interviewers who witnessed the intensity of the

comments and the demeanor of the participants during the discussions.

Based upon the amount of text, topics of importance among the adult focus group participants in Oklahoma and Arkansas were *social concerns* (substance abuse, teen pregnancy, class and racial prejudice), *health care* and *education*. Key informants focused first on *education*, then added *quality of life issues* and *employment* to round out their main interests. The youth focus group prioritized *entertainment and recreation issues*,



then chose *education* and *social concerns*. (See Attachment 2: *Emerging Themes from Focus Groups and Key Informants* displaying precise rankings based on the amount of text attributed to each topic.) While a strict count of the text used to discuss a given topic measures its level of importance to the focus group participants, it does not designate a topic as a “concern.” Much of the text was positive in nature, without expressions of concern. Some explained the joys of rural life. Others extolled the benefits of small schools.

Based upon the subjective impressions of the facilitators and interviewers, rural residents appeared most concerned about economic issues. Substantial and serious discussions centered around jobs and wages, residents’ inability to afford health care or medical insurance, local businesses failing, the high cost of utilities and so on. Such comments were spread among the various topics, which resulted in economics being addressed through a wide variety of issues, thus obscuring the overall intensity and scope of the residents’ economic concerns.

Quantitative data is used throughout *Rural Kids Count* to underscore and expand on the themes emerging from the focus groups and key informants. The extraordinary comments made

by residents in rural Oklahoma and Arkansas and the related quantitative data are arranged into the following categories with additional titles and sub-titles added for the purposes of organization and discussion in *Rural Kids Count*:

Economics of Rural Life

Employment

Retail Services

Transportation

Housing

Rural Society

Quality of Life

Community Leadership

Churches – Faith

Recreation and Entertainment

Parental Involvement

Social Concerns

- Substance Abuse
- Race and Class Prejudice
- Teen Pregnancy

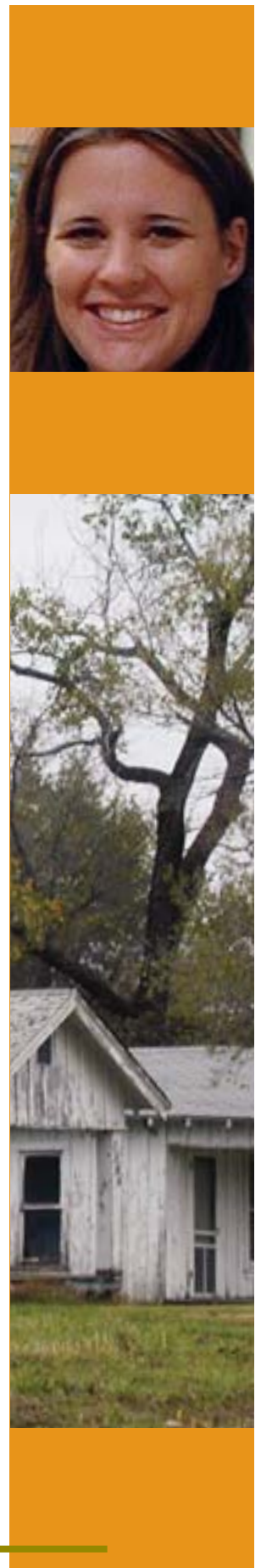
Education

Services and Supports

Child Care

Medical and Health

Community Services



profiles of rural residents of Oklahoma and Arkansas

Population and Age

Rural areas are home to more than one-fifth (22.4%) of the population in Oklahoma and more than one-third (35.1%) of the population in Arkansas. Almost three hundred thousand (281,448) children reside in rural Oklahoma and Arkansas. A disproportionately high percentage of the population in the rural counties in both states is older. One young person commented, *"... you've got the kids who are graduating and moving out to college, but nobody's coming back. And all you're left with is the older crowd that's been there all their lives."*

Workers generate income and pay taxes which support a community's infrastructure. Successful economies require a balance between people who work and their dependents. One measure of this balance is the "dependency ratio," a count of how many non-working people (counted as those under age fifteen, and those sixty-five years and over) there are for every 100 working-age people (fifteen to sixty-five years of age). Evaluated in this fashion, there are fewer workers to support the dependents in Oklahoma and Arkansas rural communities than are in other areas of those states.

During the last decade (1990 to 2000) the population in Oklahoma (up 9.7%) grew

more slowly than the nation as a whole (up 13.2%), while the population in Arkansas (up 13.7%) increased at about the same rate. Rural areas in both states saw significantly less growth than their non-rural counterparts. *"Rural America is changing. It is getting tougher. Everything is drying up."* More than one-third (35.6%) of the rural counties in Oklahoma and Arkansas lost population during the last decade (1990 to 2000). Four times fewer (7.8%) non-rural counties experienced a decline in population during the same period. The worst impacted rural counties in Oklahoma were Roger Mills (down 17.1%), Dewey (down 14.6%), Harmon (down 13.4%), Harper (down 12.3%) and Tillman (down 10.6%). Rural counties losing the most population in Arkansas were Lafayette (down 11.2%) and Chicot (down 10.2%). Since *Census 2000*, rural Oklahoma and Arkansas counties have continued to lose population.

Some stay only because they can't afford to leave. One impoverished mother explained, *"The only reason why I am still here is ... [you] have to have money to move."* Many young people in rural Oklahoma and Arkansas plan their lives around leaving. *"I'm planning on getting out, and getting a fairly decent job, like probably, I don't know, in the city or something."* Whole communities are being abandoned by both people and businesses.



“People are moving away more now and many houses are for sale.” “Downtown storefronts are empty.” Policy-makers worry about the long term implications. “What we are doing now is not working. Rural counties in Oklahoma are losing population. Oklahoma has lost seats — congressional seats.” “... rural communities are worth saving. They are the backbone of the nation — a lifestyle ... that we [can’t] afford to lose.”

Rural communities are relatively stable, with residents moving into different homes in the same town about half as often as do non-rural residents.

People relocating into rural Oklahoma and Arkansas communities are less likely than their non-rural counterparts to move from another country or state and more likely to move from somewhere else within the same state. Moves from town to town within rural counties occur more frequently than do moves from town to town within non-rural counties.



	Population, 1990-2000 # change	Child Population (0-18)	Senior Population (65+)	Dependency Ratio (# of dependents per 100 workers)
Oklahoma	3,450,654 100.0% up 9.7%	890,264 100.0%	455,700 100.0%	52.6
Rural counties	774,378 22.4% up 6.2%	197,078 22.1%	125,429 27.5%	58.5
Non-rural counties	2,676,276 77.6% up 10.8%	693,186 77.9%	330,271 72.5%	50.9
Arkansas	2,673,400 100.0% up 13.7%	680,058 100.0%	374,729 100.0%	53.9
Rural counties	937,707 35.1% up 7.9%	233,153 34.3%	156,019 41.6%	58.7
Non-rural counties	1,735,693 64.9% up 17.1%	446,906 65.7%	218,710 58.4%	51.1