

Afterword:

Where Do We Go From Here?

Given what we now know about the extent and nature of Northwest Arkansas' growth, where do we go from here? What steps can be taken to tackle the challenges facing the region? How can Northwest Arkansas residents best take advantage of the unique opportunities provided by the region's growth?

Throughout the report, we've shown how existing data sources can be used to describe, in broad terms, the nature of the changes taking place in Northwest Arkansas. What these data cannot tell us, however, is how the people of Northwest Arkansas actually experience these changes. In order to develop a truly comprehensive, contextual understanding of life in Northwest Arkansas, steps should be taken to measure in much greater detail the texture of residents "lived" experiences. Researchers should begin to document both residents' personal experiences with the transformations taking place, as well as how they interpret and make sense of these experiences. Existing data seem inadequate for such a task. Original data collections, primarily in the form of citizen surveys, would be the optimal methodological approach. The development of new region-wide data collection strategies is one way for stakeholders to learn more about the issues that are important to them.

In addition, the report purposely avoided discussion of second and third-order questions. However, to better understand the complexities of the social infrastructure of the region, these more complicated questions need to be asked and answered. For example, rather than simply describing the prevalence of poverty, more advanced analyses would capture how poverty is differentially distributed among sub-populations (e.g. race, ethnicity, class, gender). More fine-grained analyses of this sort would allow policymakers to be more focused in their decisions about resources and programming.

Formally, the Northwest Arkansas Community Indicators project must be poised and ready to update information as the 2010 U.S. Census becomes available. A long-term commitment to improving this report is vital to the sustainability of the larger project and the benchmarking of the region's progress toward achieving some set of carefully articulated goals for improving the region's quality-of-life.

In addition to collecting new information (primary or secondary), local non-profits, governmental agencies, businesses, and other stakeholders need to begin to strategize how to respond to the challenges in the report. One example of what can be done in response to the changing social environment has been the development of the Diversity and Inclusion Program. Implemented through the Jones Center for Families and funded by the Walton Family Foundation. The primary goal of the Diversity and Inclusion Program is to initiate dialogue between the many diverse constituencies in Northwest Arkansas and encourage the development of cross-cultural relationships. Like many regions around the country, Northwest Arkansas is changing and that change is going to have significant implications for neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and local governments. Forward thinking in the development of new and innovative programs that are sensitive to the nature of this change will be necessary to improve cross-cultural dialogue and ultimately, the quality-of-life in the region.

Like all growing regions around the country, Northwest Arkansas needs to develop more affordable housing, while at the same time, maintaining a healthy mix of housing stock that matches the demands of an increasingly diverse population. Local governments, planners and developers continue to search for the right mix of housing stock as they develop new communities with designated mix-commercial and retail zones. These mixed-use zones have become popular around the country and the new planned Ruskin

Heights development on the eastern edge of Fayetteville provides a promising new alternative to housing ownership and retail development.

As this report shows, an unfortunate reality is that even in the best of economic times, some people get left behind. Prosperity, even when widely distributed, does not reach everyone. For example, while many homeowners have benefitted greatly as this region's growth drove up housing prices earlier in this decade, those high housing prices severely restricted the amount of affordable housing stock for those at the lower end of the economic ladder. In 2007, a comprehensive point-in-time census of the homeless, followed by a needs assessment of Washington and Benton County homeless, provided important baseline data for local government, service providers, and non-profit agencies, while confirming what was earlier expected. The data were designed to give providers both a better understanding of **how many** persons they serve but also their **specific needs**. It is critical that local government and service providers use this comprehensive data to develop more effective strategic plans for their organizations, but that the Northwest Arkansas Housing Coalition continue to use this data and any additional data collected to help implement and monitor a 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness in the Northwest Arkansas region. In addition, Northwest Arkansas needs to continue its bi-annual point-in-time census. This census provides critical information for providers and necessary data for the Continuum of Care in the region. Finally, as the legislature begins to look at the problem of affordable housing and homelessness more carefully in the upcoming session, issues related to comprehensive, reliable, and consistent data collection around the state will need to be discussed.

There is little debate among experts about the importance of education in determining the future trajectory of our country. How we get there, what we do, and what we focus on remains the center of much debate among parents, teachers, administrators and policy-makers. Many school districts throughout the Northwest Arkansas region are already carefully using the volumes of data they have access to in order to plot their future. The challenge is to provide resources and

expertise to those school districts with fiscal limits, lack of experience, and a challenging, high-risk student populations. For many communities, the greatest resource to leverage in their schools are their parents. This resource is often underutilized and with volumes of research showing how important it can be both to the student and school's success, every effort should be made to develop strategies for reaching out to parents, grandparents, and families to include them in the educational experience. The healthiest schools are those that find ways to embrace the community ethos while taking full advantage of an often untapped source of human and social capital.

How healthy is Northwest Arkansas is partially addressed in this report. However, we need finer grained analyses of the health and health behaviors of the region's general population, as well as more detailed information on specific subgroups that experience elevated levels of health risk and difficulties accessing health care, (e.g Hispanic and Marshallese). In addition to collecting comprehensive physical and mental health data, the current medical infrastructure is beginning to show signs of fatigue as the uninsured and underinsured population in Northwest Arkansas continues to expand. With that expansion comes specific challenges in health care delivery. These challenges are going to demand that the more rural counties begin to look more carefully at health care delivery and access among the more disadvantaged groups in these counties.

A number of ongoing health initiatives represent important steps toward developing a comprehensive region-wide health strategy to address these population shifts. The Hometown Health Care program, the task force addressing gaps in services to the Marshallese, and numerous outreach service programs delivered by county health departments, schools districts, health care providers are just a few examples. Special attention needs to be directed toward the problems of childhood obesity, diabetes, asthma and other chronic health conditions that put the region's future generation at risk.

While it is easy to fall into the habit of calling for more data, when it comes to issues of public

safety, the need for more detailed information is clear. At present, the only crime data routinely collected in the region is compiled by local police departments for the Uniform Crime Report. The problem with these data, is that less than half of all crimes are ever reported to police. Thus, any picture of the crime problem in the region relies solely on police data which is bound to be inaccurate. On a national level, the problem of under-reporting crime has been addressed with the National Crime Victimization Survey, which surveys a representative sample of approximately 135,000 persons age 12 and over to collect information on the frequency, characteristics, and consequences of criminal victimization each year. A similar, though much more modest effort, should be initiated in Northwest Arkansas.

In addition to more detailed data collection efforts aimed at detailing the extent and characteristics of crime, efforts should also be made to develop a more comprehensive picture of the region's institutional capacity to respond to public safety threats. In particular, members of the public and policymakers alike may benefit from a much more detailed picture of the composition and capabilities of government and private sector organizations whose task it is to provide public safety services.

Like many of the chapters in this report the reader may be left wanting more. More data at the county level, more data comparable across the region, more data that allows Northwest Arkansans to know how they compare to other places around the state and the country. The information reported also shows that growth is beginning to have a significant environmental impact. This certainly isn't a new finding but it is something that requires careful monitoring. Assessing environmental quality by using objective data that reports water and air quality, toxic releases, etc., is important, but there needs to be more attention paid to behaviors. What are people doing to lessen their ecological footprint on the region? Primary data collection that examines the behaviors and attitudes of Northwest Arkansas residents regarding littering, dumping, recycling, driving patterns and habits, use of public transportation, and traffic congestion could be very useful to programmatic

development and region-wide efforts to minimize environmental impacts.

Finally, like many growing regions, Northwest Arkansas has started to recognize the need to intensify the conversation regarding the access to and development of public transportation. As the data in this report reflects, the majority of people are driving to work and driving to work alone. That trend coupled with the linear rate at which the number of cars are being registered each year is already having an impact on the region's roads and highways. The Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission, the Northwest Arkansas Council, the University of Arkansas Community Design Center, and the Northwest Arkansas Regional Mobility Authority have all played an important role in both helping to articulate the regional transportation issues as well as developing innovative solutions. Continued dialogue addressing both the need and the solutions are going to be important in the next several decades as Northwest Arkansas looks to fund changes and updates to hard and soft infrastructure. Support from local foundations and funders to address these varied needs has been extremely important to the region's progress. Schools, local service providers, communities, and citizens have benefitted greatly from this unmatched level of generosity and concern for the region that we believe will continue to spotlight Northwest Arkansas as a special place to live.

