



Spotlight

Life in Northwest Arkansas

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An Overview

Life in Northwest Arkansas is a snapshot summary depicting the quality of life in the four counties in Northwest Arkansas over time. Abstracted from a larger report, this quality of life summary is the result of an important ongoing collaboration between the University of Arkansas' Community and Family Institute, United Way of Northwest Arkansas, and the Northwest Arkansas Community Foundation.

Benton, Carroll, Madison, and Washington Counties comprise the Northwest Arkansas region:

Demographics

- Nearly 450,000 residents
- Over 3,000 square miles
- Over 100 persons per square mile
- Nearly 36 years of age (Median for population)

Trends Overtime

Northwest Arkansas is undergoing significant change and not every resident is impacted by it equally. The following are some emerging NWA regional trends:

Northwest Arkansas is growing...

- ▶ Racial diversity in Benton and Washington Counties is approaching the average for the state of Arkansas
- ▶ The number of children living in poverty increased since 1990
- ▶ Median home values increased since 1990 with the regional average now higher than the state average
- ▶ The number of single parent families increased since 1990
- ▶ Per student spending increased steadily since 1990
- ▶ Infant mortality rates declined since 1980, though Washington and Benton counties recently registered slight increases in those rates
- ▶ Violent crime rates increased since the late 1970's
- ▶ The percent of elderly persons working increased significantly since 1990
- ▶ Prior to 2006, the percent of persons working driving to work alone steadily increased since 1980
- ▶ The percent of persons self-employed in the arts increased since 2002

A Village of 100

If Northwest Arkansas was comprised of only 100 residents there would be...

- 8 people of color
- 33 families impoverished
- 35 households w/kids
- 14 elderly
- 34 persons with only a high school degree
- 66 persons who voted in the 2004 election
- 75 people who drove to work alone
- less than one violent crime reported
- less than one cardiovascular death

Income and Poverty in NWA

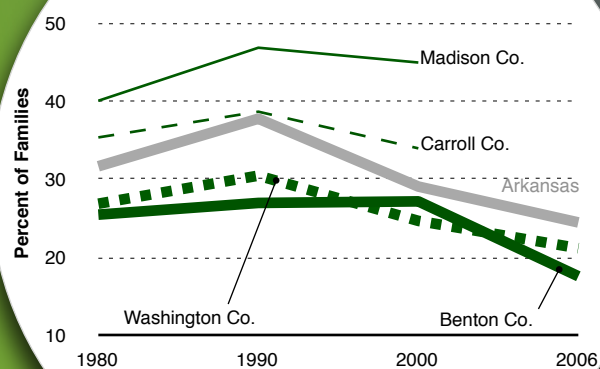
For the most part since 1980, Northwest Arkansas counties have benefitted from an economic boom, but there are recent signs that not everyone has enjoyed those benefits.

- ★ Benton County's 2006 unemployment rate more than doubled since 2000. Washington County's rate declined by a similar amount since peaking in 2000.
- ★ Since 1980, all Northwest Arkansas counties except for Madison, had lower percentages of people living in poverty than the state.
- ★ Washington and Benton Counties experienced sharp increases in the percentage of families living in poverty between 2000-2006.
- ★ Living hourly wage estimates necessary to meet the minimum monthly expenses for a family of three in Northwest Arkansas were, on average, \$13.50 per hour.
- ★ A living wage required to meet monthly minimum expenses for a family of three was highest in Madison County and that average was higher than the state.



- ★ Since 1990, the number of families living at or below the 200% poverty line (families earning a living wage) in Arkansas decreased.
- ★ In 2000, Madison and Carroll Counties had a greater proportion of families living at or below the 200% poverty line compared to the rest of Northwest Arkansas and the state.
- ★ By 2006, Benton and Washington County had less than one-fifth of its families living at or below the 200% poverty line.

Figure 1
Families At or Below 200% Poverty Level:
1980-2006



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

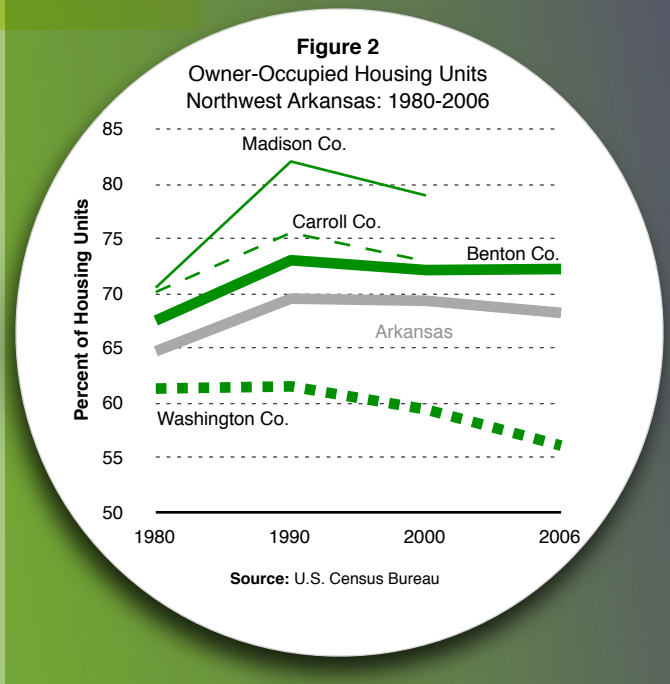
Housing and Homelessness in NWA

The Northwest Arkansas housing market has experienced considerable growth and change in housing stock, pricing, and affordability since the 1990's.

- ★ The percent of multi-family dwellings has increased in both Benton and Washington Counties since 1980.
- ★ Through much of the 1980's and 1990's, the second most abundant type of dwelling unit available in Madison and Carroll Counties were mobile homes.
- ★ From 1990 to 2006, the percentage of owner-occupied housing declined throughout much of Northwest Arkansas.
- ★ Minimum wage workers in Benton, Madison, and Washington Counties pay nearly \$300.00 more a year in fair market rent than the average renter in Arkansas paying for a two-bedroom apartment.
- ★ With increasing median home values throughout much of the region, Washington and Benton County median home values are on average, \$60,000 more than the state.
- ★ On any given night, nearly 1,200 children and adults are without their own home in Washington and Benton counties.



- ★ The percentage of owner-occupied units in Northwest Arkansas increased significantly in the 1980's as suburbanization was beginning to take hold in the region.
- ★ From 1990 to 2006, the percentage of owner-occupied housing declined slightly throughout Northwest Arkansas.
- ★ By 2006, Washington County had the smallest percentage of owner-occupied housing in the region (55%).



Families and Households in NWA

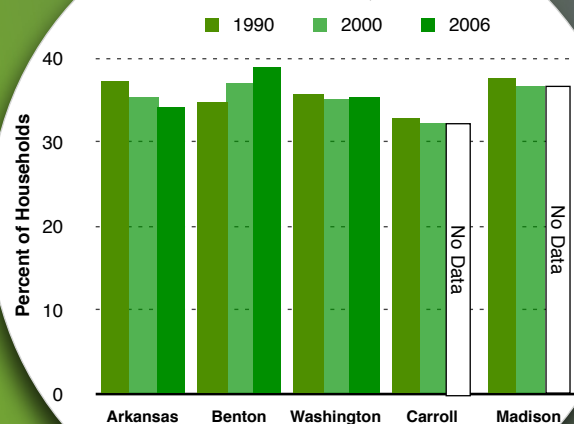
Family and household composition has changed in the region since 1980, however, those changes appear not to mirror the changes taking place in the state as a whole.

- ★ Benton and Washington Counties have average family sizes greater than the state.
- ★ Much of the Northwest Arkansas region has experienced a steady growth in the percentage of single-parent families since 1990.
- ★ Since 2001, the percentage of children living in poverty throughout Northwest Arkansas declined; Madison County had more children living in poverty than the state average in 2004.
- ★ The number of families receiving Transitional Employment Assistance (TEA) is greatest in Benton and Washington Counties.
- ★ After a 5 percent drop between 1990 and 2000, the percent of households with elderly persons in Washington County increased by 2006.
- ★ Northwest Arkansas has not experienced a similar growth pattern in elderly households compared to the state.



- ★ The percentage of households with children under 18 in the state of Arkansas has slowly declined over the last several decades.
- ★ In Northwest Arkansas, only Benton County has experienced significant growth in the number of households with children under the age of 18.
- ★ Relative to other counties in the Northern part of the state, the Northwest Arkansas region had a higher percentage of children living in households in 2000.

Figure 3
Households: One or More Persons
Less Than 18 Years Old, 1990-2006



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

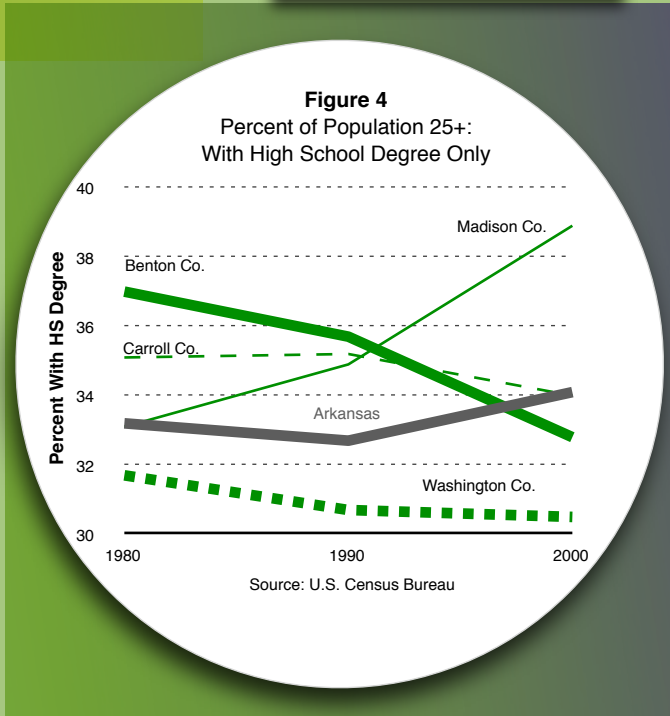
Education in NWA

The contours of education in Northwest Arkansas continue to shift. School districts have made great strides in the last several decades. How well they respond to these changes will be important to monitor closely in the next decade.

- ★ In the past three years, reading and math proficiency among Northwest Arkansas 4th graders has been as high or higher than the state average.
- ★ Madison County had the highest percentage of 8th graders scoring at or above the Basic proficiency level in the last few years compared to other Northwest Arkansas counties.
- ★ Northwest Arkansas county high school AP enrollments were lower than the state and United States average.
- ★ In 2004, Washington County was the only county in the region with ACT composite scores higher than the national average.
- ★ The percentage of residents with less than a high school degree has decreased significantly in the state and NWA region over the last 25 years.
- ★ Since 2000, 6-year graduation rates have been steadily increasing at the University of Arkansas.



- ★ There has been a downturn in the percent of the population 25 years of age and over earning only a high school degree in most of the Northwest Arkansas counties since 1980.
- ★ With the presence of the University of Arkansas, more residents are being drawn into Washington county with significantly more years of education.
- ★ Only Madison County is lagging behind the state average of 34 percent with almost 39 percent of the population having only a high school education.



Health in NWA

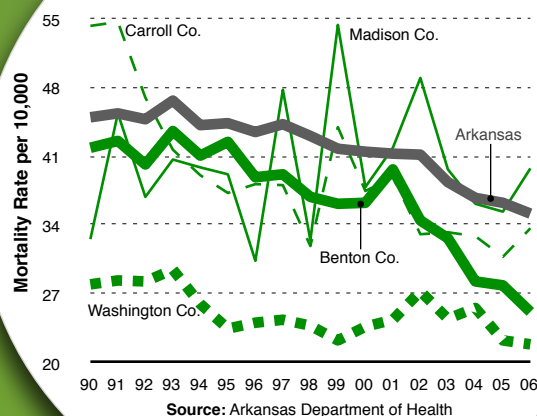
While Arkansas is often ranked as one of the unhealthiest states in the country, Northwest Arkansas residents have generally been healthier than the state on average, but preventative indicators suggest certain health risks need careful monitoring.

- ★ Except for Washington County, the remaining NWA counties had higher rates of women not receiving prenatal care compared to the rest of the state.
- ★ Infant mortality rates in Benton and Washington Counties have increased between 2000-2003.
- ★ By 2007, Washington County had the lowest immunization percentage in the Northwest Arkansas region with only 53 percent of children 2-3 properly immunized.
- ★ Madison and Carroll Counties have registered significant increases since 2000 in their age-adjusted diabetes mortality rates.
- ★ By 2006, Carroll and Washington Counties had over 20 percent of their populations medically uninsured which was higher than the state average.



- ★ Cardiovascular disease mortality rates have been declining in the state since 1990.
- ★ By 2006, only Madison County had a higher cardiovascular disease mortality rate compared to the state average.
- ★ Benton County mirrored the state decline in cardiovascular disease mortality rates and has experienced the largest decline in the last 15 years among the Northwest Arkansas counties.
- ★ By 2006, Washington County had the lowest cardiovascular disease rate in Northwest Arkansas; Madison County had the highest mortality rate in the region.

Figure 5
Mortality Rates, Major Cardiovascular Diseases:
1990-2006



Source: Arkansas Department of Health

Public Safety in NWA

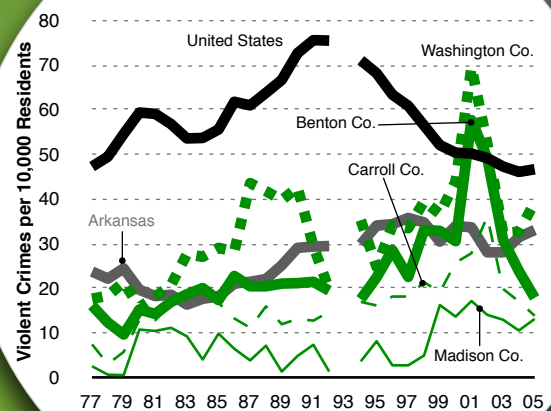
Despite all the changes taking place in the region, Northwest Arkansas is generally safer than most places though recent shifts in some crime indicators suggest change may be on the horizon.

- ★ Overall, Northwest Arkansas has experienced a slight increase in the volume of serious crime since 1977.
- ★ Arrest rates for illegal drug possession have increased steadily between 1999-2005, particularly in Benton and Washington Counties.
- ★ After peaking in the 1990's, juvenile arrest rates have fallen dramatically in Northwest Arkansas counties.
- ★ Based on a recent study done in the Washington County jail, data reveal more than 80 percent of arrestees report binge drinking at least once in their lifetime and nearly two-thirds report binge drinking at least once in the last twelve months prior to their arrest.
- ★ Washington County has the highest police to citizen ratio among the Northwest Arkansas counties.
- ★ The majority of fire protection throughout the Northwest Arkansas counties is volunteer or mostly volunteer.



- ★ Whereas the violent crime rate for the United States as a whole has been declining since 1991, Northwest Arkansas experienced a steady increase in the volume of violent crime, since 1977.
- ★ Between 2001-2003, the violent crime rate of Northwest Arkansas exceeded the national average.
- ★ Violent crime rates in Washington County have been somewhat higher than the other three NWA counties over time. Notably, this violent crime gap between Washington County on the one hand, and Benton, Carroll, and Madison Counties on the other.

Figure 6
Violent Crime Rates, 1977-2005

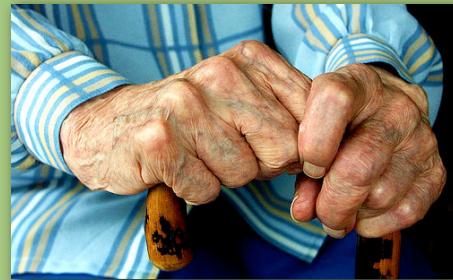


Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation
Note: 1993 Crime Data Unavailable at time of writing.

Aging and the Elderly in NWA

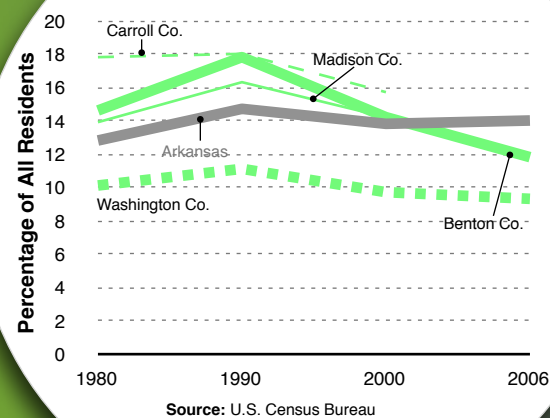
The recent economic shifts and changes may be having an important effect on the senior citizen population in Northwest Arkansas--further evidence that growth and change doesn't impact everyone or every place equally.

- ★ The percentage of elderly residents living alone has changed little over the last 25 years in Northwest Arkansas.
- ★ There has been a dramatic upturn in the percentage of elderly persons working in Northwest Arkansas counties since 1990.
- ★ Since 1980, the percentage of elderly living in poverty has declined substantially both in the state and Northwest Arkansas counties.
- ★ Since 2000, the percent change in elderly receiving food stamps in Northwest Arkansas counties has fluctuated some but with no clear pattern. Some counties have seen an increase while others a decrease in food stamp recipients.
- ★ Both Benton and Washington Counties increased in the number of Medicaid and Medicare eligible residents since 2004.
- ★ Nursing home residency rates increased in all of the Northwest Arkansas counties between 1990-2000, except for Benton.



- ★ In 1980, the percent of persons over 65 in the state of Arkansas was approximately 12 percent. The percentage of persons over 65 living in the state has steadily increased reaching nearly 15 percent in 2006.
- ★ Most of Northwest Arkansas counties had larger percentages of elderly compared to the the state on average during 1980-1990 (except for Washington County).
- ★ By 2000, Madison and Carroll Counties still had slightly larger percentages of elderly than the rest of the NWA region.

Figure 7
Population Age 65 & Over: 1980-2006



Natural Environment in NWA

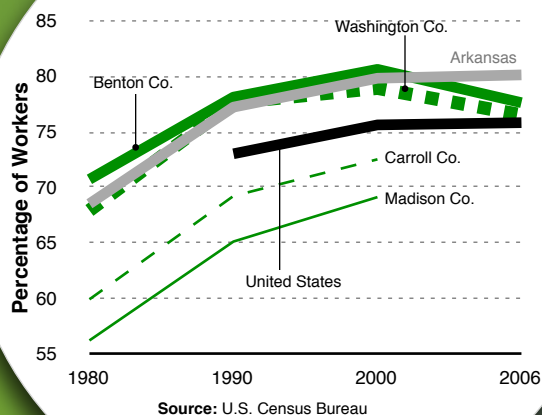
Northwest Arkansas has grown at an alarming rate and that growth has clearly impacted the natural resources and environment in the region. How big our footprint is going to be in the future remains a central question in the regional environmental conversation.

- ★ In 2000, Carroll and Madison Counties were using nearly twice as much off-stream water as the other counties in Northwest Arkansas.
- ★ Since 2000, toxic chemical release volume in Benton County declined along with the volume release amounts in Washington County.
- ★ Washington County reported more air pollution release and hazardous waste activity than any other county in the NWA region.
- ★ 2006 land use data shows that all the Northwest Arkansas counties, except for Benton County, had the majority of their acreage dedicated to forest.
- ★ By 1990, Benton County surpassed Washington County as having more automobiles registered in a given year.



- ★ The shift in the percentage of workers driving alone to work in Northwest Arkansas has mirrored the trend in both Arkansas and the United States.
- ★ The largest percentages of Northwest Arkansas workers driving to work alone were in the most populous counties (Benton and Washington).
- ★ By 2006, all the Northwest Arkansas counties had lower percentages of workers driving to work alone compared to the state average (80%).
- ★ In Madison and Carroll Counties, workers driving to work alone declined by nearly 20 percent over the last 20 years.

Figure 8
Workers Age 16 & Over:
Drive Alone To Work



Civic Engagement & the Arts in NWA

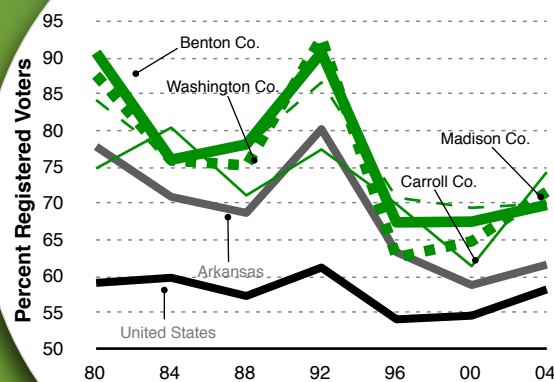
Northwest Arkansas continues to be a leader in the arts, volunteer efforts, charitable work, and other forms of civic engagement.

- ★ In 2007, Northwest Arkansans volunteered in greater percentages than the average citizen in Arkansas or the United States.
- ★ By 2006, all the counties in Northwest Arkansas, except Washington County, had higher percentages of registered voters compared to the United States.
- ★ In 2005, Washington County libraries reported more than one million patrons visiting their facilities.
- ★ In 2005, Washington County exceeded 1.7 million items in circulation which was equal to nearly 3 items per person.
- ★ By 2006, all the Northwest Arkansas counties had a higher rate of self-employment in the arts than the state average.
- ★ With nearly 100 charitable foundations throughout Northwest Arkansas, and over 2.5 billion dollars in assets, those organizations charitably distributed nearly 20 percent of those funds in 2008.



- ★ Since 1980, Arkansas and the Northwest Arkansas counties had higher percentages of registered voters voting in the presidential elections, compared to the rest of the country.
- ★ While national voter participation percentages have fluctuated slightly from one election to the next since 1980, there have been some big swings in voting behaviors in both the state and in Northwest Arkansas counties.
- ★ In the last presidential election in 2004, all of the Northwest Arkansas counties had higher percentage of residents voting than the average in the state and the entire country.

Figure 9
Percent of NWA Registered Voters:
Presidential Elections, 1980-2004



Source: Arkansas Secretary of State

