

Some found the closeness stifling. *"[You] can't do anything without someone knowing, where in the city there is anonymity in numbers."* *"Sometimes people know too much about everyone's life. Everyone has an opinion about your child's life."* Rural has a culture of its own. Newcomers sometimes found it difficult to be accepted, even after a long period of time. *"If you are not from here and your grandparents are not from here, you will always be an outsider — I have been here 20 years — and am still considered an outsider. It puts the 'kibash' on self-esteem in a community."* One woman lived in the community *"almost 11 years and they are just now getting to the point where they will talk to her."*

The isolation of rural areas was something some residents hated. *"[You] feel like you are yelling into the wind and that no one is listening. [Out here] we do feel isolated. You have to watch [another state's] news to find out scores of games played [here]. 'There is nothing here to look forward to.'"*

While many families are committed to remaining in the rural areas, it is not without cost. *"It's just a lot of strict budgeting. We have to really prioritize. Sometimes you have to let things go. You have to realize what is more important."* *"It's hard and we are working at it, but it will be okay."* *"When you add it all up, the sum of things is more positive than negative ..."*

Community Leadership

The perception that residents have about their community leaders creates an atmosphere of distrust which poses a substantial barrier to the ability of people in rural communities to work together. Some worried that their leaders were corrupt, having more interest in making money than in helping the community.

"I mean if the leaders would act like leaders, instead of trying to make money for themselves, I think it would be a better community." Others thought it was difficult to receive equal treatment in the local legal system *"... because, like the cops know the judges ..."* Many felt their leaders were allotted special treatment. *"We have*



"Leadership?
There is no
leadership in
the rural
communities."

outstanding community leaders who are doing [drugs] or getting their children out of the trouble that they are in.”

Poor residents felt they were taken advantage of when local government established new services. *“They add stuff to your bill for a golf course. I’m not going to go play golf, so why should I have to have something added to something I can*

barely afford — to go somewhere I know I’m not going?” The reality that public-private funding, rather than community surcharges, paid for the golf course does little to change the perception of residents whose families live in poverty and deal constantly with serious economic problems.

Churches - Faith

Faith is strong in rural areas, especially in Oklahoma where more than two-thirds of residents regularly attend or belong to a specific church. Church is an integral part of rural Oklahoma and Arkansas. For most residents church helps them endure difficult circumstances. Some get spiritual help. *“Our faith is what is getting us through the hard times — just one day at a time — one day at a time.”* Some get physical help. *“When we first got here, we didn’t have food and First Baptist helped me and my children. They did a good job.”*

For adults, rural churches are the local source of community emergency assistance. *“Some of the churches have food and*

clothing—some churches, not all of them. And some will help with a little gas money to get them to the doctors or something like that.” For youth, rural churches are a place to go. *“After the football game everybody goes [to the Fifth Quarter at church] to eat. They usually have something special going on.”* Churches provide some of the only youth activities in rural communities.

For some, rural churches have power, requiring attendance for those wanting *“to be politically correct.”* They find it *“kind of frightening because [faith] figures into politics quite strongly. You know, even with your school elections, it’s all very, very interwoven.”* Many feel that the “pressure

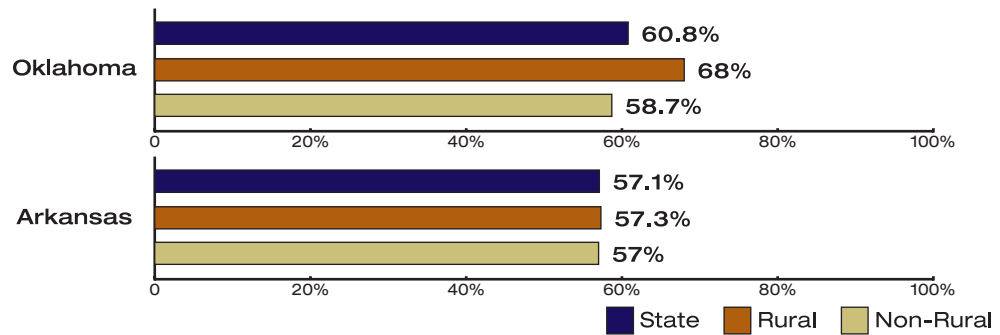
“There are lots of churches here and I would say that, as an area, it’s a pretty religious area. I would say the predominant stem of religion would be from the Assembly of God to Pentecostal. They would be kind of the energetic faiths.”





Religious Participation

Percent of Adherents (member of or attending church)



to participate in religion, whether you want to or not, often is high.”

Mostly, rural churches are *“something to lean on.”* People in rural Oklahoma and Arkansas

depend on their churches to *“somehow reach ... families and kids in families who are not being raised right and get their life on the right path ... ”*

Recreation and Entertainment

“Kids need activities.” Research documents that enriched childhoods have a positive effect on a person’s later health and achievements as adults. Mental and physical activities help children discover and enhance their strengths and talents. Enriched childhoods are full of opportunities for positive interactions with adults and other children.

“There is nothing for our young people to do.” Everyone voiced concern over the lack of entertainment, cultural and recreational opportunities for youth in rural communities. Typical comments were, *“I think that's the bad thing about the rural area ... there is not a whole lot for the kids to do other than just kind of hang out on the streets and run up and down the road.”*

Most understood that *“There are very few things for children to do after school hours ...only what they can figure out on their own to do.”* Youth were very vocal about the lack of entertainment opportunities and the lack of transportation needed to get to activities in other communities. *“There is no movie theater, skating rink, drive-in food place; [there is] no bus, train, or public transportation.”*

The phenomenon of “Friday Night Lights” illustrates a focus on football in small communities and the predominance of school sports as the primary youth and family activity in rural areas. Often there are not enough youth participating in a sport to field a team. One youth lamented, *“There is stuff like*

summer baseball ... [but] usually they don't have enough to make a team." Most of the time if a young person is not good at sports or interested in sports they are left out. *"Sometimes I think they kind of get shuffled to the side ... "* Many of the families could not afford the expense of uniforms and trips to games, so that opportunity was not one available to their children.

Sports are typically supplemented only with church programs and outdoor recreation. *"If you are not into outdoor sports and the lakes and hunting and fishing and hiking and the natural scheme of things, then you are probably really, really limited."* None of the more varied and youth-friendly places and events commonly experienced by youth in other parts of Oklahoma and Arkansas are available. YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, skating rinks, movie theaters, museums and cultural events are noticeably absent in most rural communities. Key informants understood that, for the youth, it was *"... hard to date — no place to go, except ballgames — no theater — no skating rink — no [food] drive-ins — some restaurants, but they close at 10:00 p.m. Kids end up dragging*

main and getting bored." Recreational businesses that tried to become established in rural areas failed because the low-income families residing there could not afford the cost. *"Nobody could afford to go to the skating rink any more. Nobody could afford to go and pay for putt-putt golf. Nobody went, so therefore the business had to shut down."* People who arrange community activities frequently missed opportunities to engage the youth by bringing in *"something they did back in their day ... [failing to notice that] it has become a new world."* Youth in American Indian communities with strong cultural traditions and activities sometimes had opportunities not available to youth in other rural areas. They could participate in tribal, inter-generational activities. *"People attend pow-wows ... all ages. A lot of youth like to do the dancing."*

Parents and policy-makers alike fretted over ways to keep rural youth positively engaged in fulfilling activities. *"It's hard keeping kids busy so they're not out doing what you don't want them to be doing."* Most felt that teen idleness resulting from no entertainment, recreation and cultural activities led to risky behaviors, such as

"Nothing here at all — just like a ghost town — you just live until you die. If you drove through [this town] you'd think a tornado came through."



sexual activity, crime, substance abuse and other activities having long-term negative consequences. *“Teen pregnancy [is a problem] ... mainly ... because [the youth] are bored.” “Nothing [for kids to do]! That’s why all these kids are breaking into houses. They have nothing to do but throw rocks at people’s houses. They hang around at the café — on drugs and alcohol*

and involved in sexual activity.” “The thing is there is nothing for [young people] to do. All you’ve got out there is the drugs, the alcohol and the pimps.” Key informants discussed the challenges of *“trying to keep [the youth] entertained, occupied and out of trouble.”*

Parental Involvement

The adult focus group participants were emphatic about the importance of being involved in all aspects of the lives of their children. Parents living in poverty expressed a strong desire to participate in their child’s education. They wanted both to give and receive more information — especially in matters relating to problems or questions about their children. They valued parental involvement in both the school and the community, and wanted even more. *“There needs to be more parental involvement in the school system. ... one day a month ... one day a year even.”* Parental involvement was described as an important part of the educational process and part of each community’s safety net and support system. Without

parental involvement *“parents can’t tell what’s going on inside the school ...” “So when parents get up [to the school] and find out what’s going on and make others aware of it, that helps.”*

Not unexpected, the young people in their focus group did not even mention parental involvement. Key informants, on the other hand, joined with the parents in the focus groups to advocate for *“... more parent involvement in schools - more parent responsibility.”* They wanted parental influence to be exerted over the youth, especially from the fathers. *“[Fathers] don’t take responsibility for keeping their families together or being a good role model.”*



“But if the teachers expect parents to listen, we expect the teachers to also hear.”

	Births to Teens (ages 15-19)	Disconnected Teens (ages 16-19)	Drug Abuse Arrests (under age 18)
Oklahoma	7,302 57.6 per 1,000 teens	19,758 9.3%	1,766 198.4 per 100,000 children
Rural counties	1,778 62.3 per 1,000 teens	4,752 9.8%	261 132.4 per 100,000 children
Non-rural counties	5,524 56.2 per 1,000 teens	15,006 9.1%	1,505 217.1 per 100,000 children
Arkansas	5,683 59.9 per 1,000 teens	15,985 10.2%	875 128.7 per 100,000 children
Rural counties	2,009 62.3 per 1,000 teens	5,810 10.8%	177 75.9 per 100,000 children
Non-rural counties	3,674 58.7 per 1,000 teens	10,175 9.9%	698 156.2 per 100,000 children

Social Concerns

Focus group participants were not always in accord. Some felt that problems youth had in rural communities were just as bad as they were in their state's large cities. *"I think it's just as bad in a small town as it is a big town when it comes to teen pregnancy and drugs."* Some thought things were better in rural areas. *"Smaller. We still have drive-by shootings at schools, but they are not reported. Still stabbings, alcohol, drugs--we still have these, but on a smaller scale."* *"There is a lot more crime*

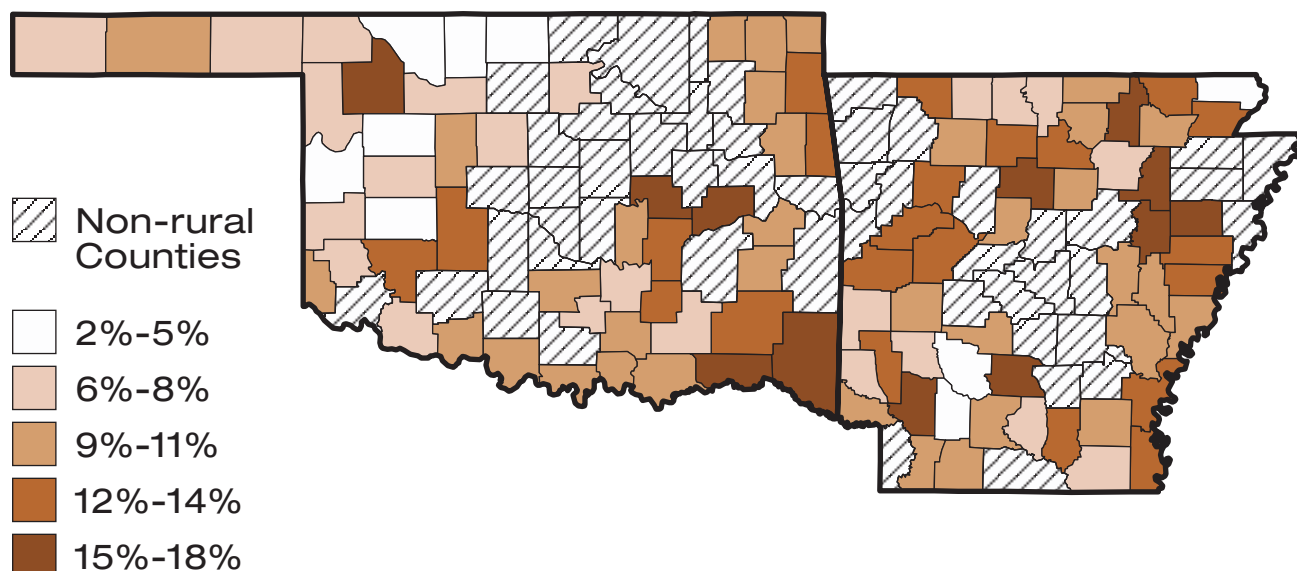
in the city." *"Gangs, drugs [are] more severe in [the] city, although some of the kids were putting alcohol in water bottles when the weather was hot and taking them to school."* Some thought problems were worse. *"Probably the teen pregnancy is higher around here than actually in a bigger city."*

In reality, everyone had part of it correct. On average, birth rates to teens ages fifteen through nineteen are higher in

"You've got three generations. You've got the first generation that's still alive that are making whisky, that kind of thing. Then went to ... marijuana and now it's methamphetamine and there is megabucks being made there I'm told."



Disconnected Youth



Source: U.S.Census 2000 Summary File (SF3), Table PCT38

rural Oklahoma and Arkansas than in other areas of those states. Rural youth are arrested for possessing, manufacturing or selling drugs at a substantially lower rate than non-rural youth. Rural and non-rural Oklahoma and Arkansas communities find a similar rate of their

young people experiencing difficulties moving from adolescence to adulthood. More than ten thousand rural Oklahoma and Arkansas teens ages sixteen through nineteen are disconnected — meaning not attending school or working.

Substance Abuse

Arrests of youth for possessing, manufacturing or selling controlled substances are higher in Oklahoma than in Arkansas.

As measured by these arrests, juvenile drug abuse in both states is an urban problem. A substantially higher proportion of youth under the age of 18 are arrested for drug offenses in non-rural Oklahoma communities than are arrested in rural Oklahoma communities. Arrest rates of Arkansas youth are more than twice as high in non-rural counties. Very few of the rural drug arrests in either

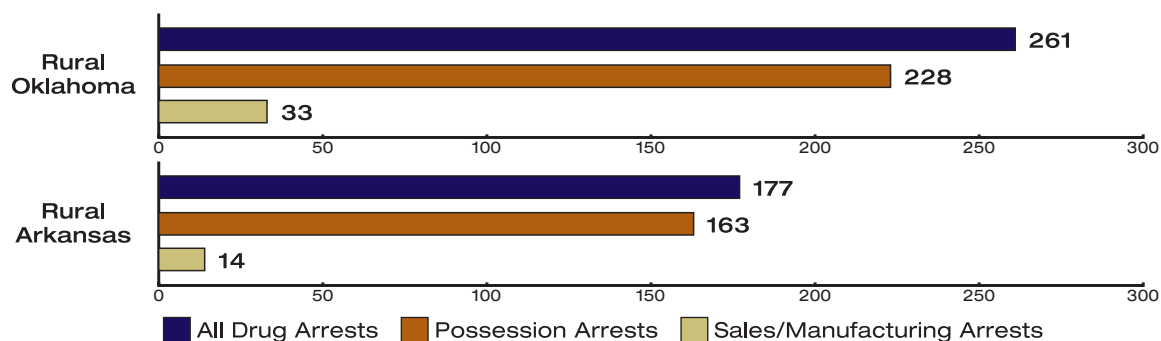
state were for sales or manufacture of controlled substances.

Regardless, focus group participants and key informants in both Oklahoma and Arkansas were adamant in their perception that community members, especially youth, were seriously embroiled in the use of methamphetamines and marijuana and the misuse of alcohol. *"I have seen an explosion of methamphetamine."* *"We have a lot of people who deal drugs in town."* Rural residents expressed fear. *"I live in the community where we've got good people, caring people and then we've got dope dealers, crack heads, and you are*



Rural Arrests for Controlled Substances

Under Age 18



scared. Key informants expressed surprise. *“I never thought we’d see that in this area but it’s happening and there’s no use dismissing it.”* They struggled to explain the drug use. *“I don’t know if it’s from not being educated on what it will do to a person or not, but we seem to have a lot of drug problems.”* *“We have quite a few people on welfare who have stayed ... to traffic drugs.”* *“It may be linked to the economy.”* Rural youth acknowledged that their *“[drug use is] a little bit bigger than most people think it is.”* Some adults admitted to significant alcoholism, along with drug use, among adults. *“Adults, middle age on down, are on alcohol/drugs.”* Some acknowledged alcohol problems among all ages, then added *“but you don’t hear about it much.”* Rural youth, themselves, went further and targeted alcohol as being more of a problem — for all ages — than did the adults. Some key informants did not see youth drinking problems. *“I think that the fact that we are a dry county is real good, you know. It really helps with teenagers to keep [alcohol] away from them ...”* Others did, noting *“a lot of alcoholism in both youth and adults.”*

Arrest data may not reflect recent law enforcement concern and activity related to the manufacture of methamphetamine

drugs. Known as the “crack cocaine of the new generation,” Oklahoma law enforcement agents see this drug’s explosion in popularity as a result of its ability to be easily and cheaply produced. Oklahoma law enforcement agencies shut down only ten methamphetamine labs in 1994, but found and stopped production in 1,235 labs in 2003. One in four (27.9%) of the 2003 Oklahoma methamphetamine labs was in rural counties, slightly more than would be expected based on population. Oklahoma has been propelled to first in the nation in methamphetamine production and use per capita. The current version of methamphetamine is one of the most powerful, addictive and damaging drugs available. Oklahoma law enforcement agencies report that neighboring Arkansas methamphetamine data parallels that of Oklahoma.

Many rural residents felt that the very nature of rural areas invites substance abuse. One key informant believed their community’s drug problem may have been greater than in non-rural areas *“because you take all of our woods and all*





the places out here, the population is not very heavy, so deviant behavior can go for a long time before somebody notices it.”

Another explained that the “isolation ... decreases chances of getting caught — being in the rural areas — miles from the nearest neighbor.” Rural isolation hampers law enforcement efforts. “If the police get tough on it on one end of the county, [drug dealers] run to the other or they’ll jump into another county. I mean they network, and they are spread out. They are isolated, and what a better place to [deal drugs] than in this county.” Farms in rural areas provide ingredients used to manufacture methamphetamines. One police chief noted that professionals from other states were “drawing fertilizer from farmers’ tanks.”

“If law enforcement would be more responsive, it would help.”

Rural residents despaired of receiving help from local law enforcement. “It’s a small community and we have a whole bunch of police officers and sheriff officers, but nobody sees none of it. I see it. I am on my porch, and I can see these dope smokers and these crack smokers and the dealers.”

There were few community resources available to counteract the effects of drug use or alcohol abuse. “Kids from good churchgoing, strong families go out of town for treatment.”

Residents unable to travel for help find little. Rural key informants pointed out that there was “no rehab, except AA.”

Race and Class Prejudice

Unlike states in other regions undertaking similar rural studies, Oklahoma and Arkansas participants of all ages often spoke of bias in their communities and a distrust of law enforcement. “Police officers raise the Rebel flag on Martin Luther King Day.” “[This is the] most prejudiced place I have ever seen — gender-biased, racial, etc.” It is common for rural Oklahomans and Arkansans to be treated differently because of their race or economic status. “... I don’t like the school because

it is a prejudice school, a prejudice town, and I don’t raise [my children] that way.” Some biases have become less overt over time, others have not. “Racial issues are more undercover now. Class issues—that will always be.” “It’s like if you are from [this county], like we don’t wear shoes.” Key informants acknowledged that “Racial biases do exist here. There is a strong ‘you and us’ mentality, which not only exists between Whites and Hispanics, but the perceived rich and poor within the races.”

Bias interferes with employment. One focus group participant of color explained, *“I was working at this one particular job and this person who owns this job is way up—a very classy lady. Butthis woman told me if you and me were going up the ladder, you still couldn’t reach my standard. That hurt me, and I never did go work for that lady any more.”* Bias interferes with daily life. One White focus group participant recounted a recent event, *“The lady behind the counter [at a gas station] hurried and shut and locked the doors—she was so afraid when a black truck driver pulled in to get gas. She called the cops.”* Another described the time when, *“... a black woman come in to the Dollar Store and they would not sell anything to her.”* Bias interferes with education. Another focus group participant of color pointed out that their community was *“... the headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan. ... I was treated different than the other kids in my class.”*

Many White residents found their community’s attitudes and reputation unsettling. *“I hate that about living around here.”* *“You don’t say you are from [this town] or you are associated with being racist—and that’s a bad thing about living in this area.”* Key informants believed that

bias was an adult problem. *“Most racial problems come from parents.”* Overall, rural residents held to their belief that children hold the key to closing the gaps in their communities. *“It doesn’t matter what color you are—no matter what race you are—children show a lot of love.”*

Some racial differences are new to some communities. *“See, we had no minorities in this area up here until the Latinos started moving in.”* New challenges are created. *“... but it has created some problems ... I think the language barrier and them adjusting to our area and [us] adjusting to [them].”* Leaders in some communities are reaching out *“... to bring them into the fold so that they feel welcome — more than they have in the past. Maybe they have felt kind of isolated and we are trying to break ... down ... the barrier.”* Efforts include *“The police chief and ... [others]... going there and trying to get to know them, meet them, and know what’s going on; ... community meetings with the Hispanic community; ... go over and talk with [some of the leaders in the community] about some of their concerns; probably not as much as we should, we have started making in-roads.”*

Teen Pregnancy

Teen pregnancy and too early parenting have serious costs and consequences for everyone involved. The high rates of poverty and low educational attainment found in rural areas will be difficult to improve until rural communities reduce the rate of births to women and girls under the age of twenty. Compared to

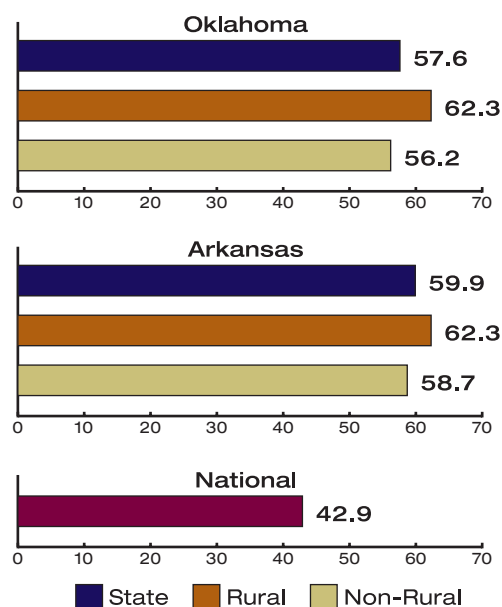
women who delay child birth until at least twenty, teen mothers are less likely to complete high school and more likely to live in poverty. Teen birth rates in rural Oklahoma and Arkansas far exceed national rates.



Becoming a parent at a very young age was understood to be a complex issue. For teenagers who have babies, rates of school completion drop and rates of poverty increase. Many of their babies are born premature, have low birth weights and face early childhood problems. Teen births affect the future of multiple generations, and impacts the economy of everyone. Experts believe it is important to involve teens themselves in reducing the high rates of teen pregnancy. That presents a difficult challenge in rural communities where youth focus group participants were not as open about teen pregnancy issues as their adult counterparts. Adults knew that *“a lot of young people ... get pregnant and have babies and keep babies.”* Key informants tracked the issue in their community. *“We have been*

Teen Birth Rate

Per 1,000 Female Teens Ages 15-19



Number One in [the state] for teenage pregnancy.”

Education

Rural residents in Oklahoma and Arkansas have substantially less formal education than non-rural residents. A smaller percent of rural Oklahomans and Arkansans finish high school than do in other parts of those states. The best edu-

cated places in Oklahoma and Arkansas, as measured by the percent of population having a college degree, are the non-rural counties. Of the twenty-six counties in Oklahoma and Arkansas where less than ten percent of the population has a bach-



“Get down there and look at these schools and see for yourself. Walk around the high school. It looks like it’s been there for hundreds of years. The books, it looks like my daddy read them.”