

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)

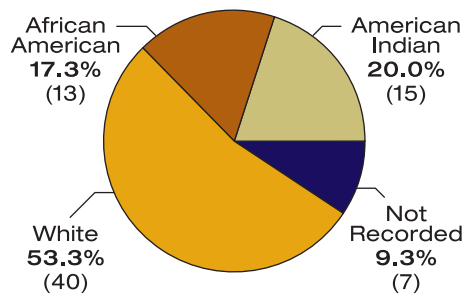


among the participants in the adult focus groups and of fifteen (14.9) among the youth-only focus group participants. Over half (58.1%) of the participants in the adult-only focus groups were currently married. The youth-only focus group members were exclusively never married teenagers, with no children 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,

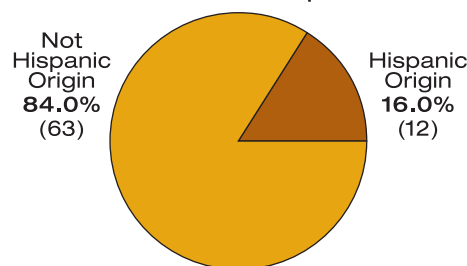
Race of Participants

Oklahoma and Arkansas Focus Groups



Hispanic Origin of Participants

Oklahoma and Arkansas Focus Groups



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

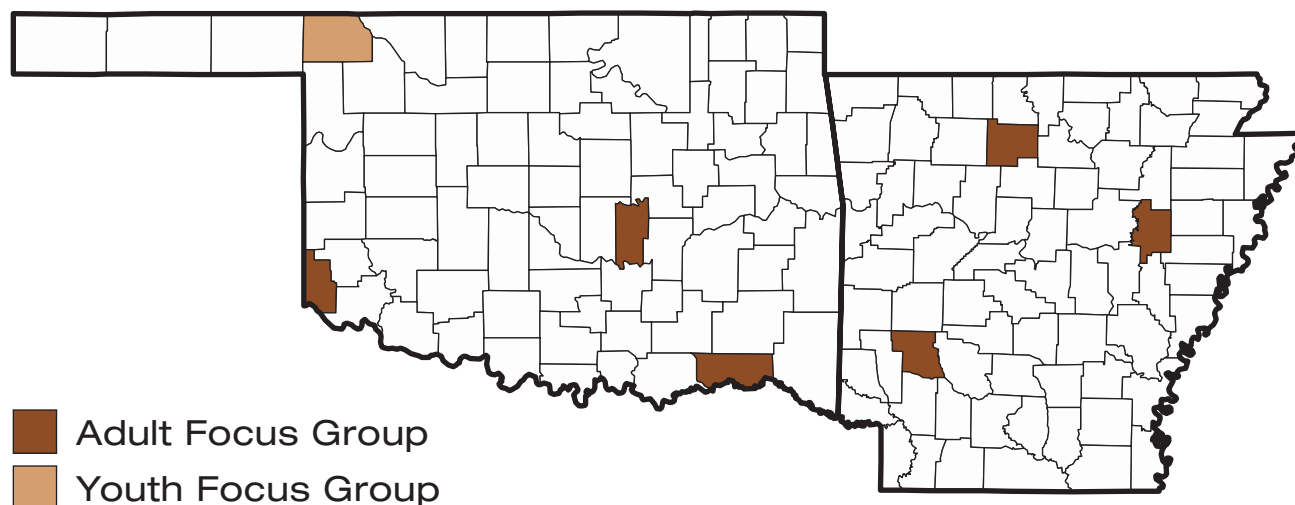
OKLAHOMA

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|--------------|--------|-------|--|
| 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

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%).

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-

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

