

What is “rural”?

North Dakota is seeing declines in its number of children as well as the aging of its general population.² Nonetheless, the success of every family with children is important to the success of the entire state. The experiences of rural families reflect challenges that need to be examined separately from urban families.

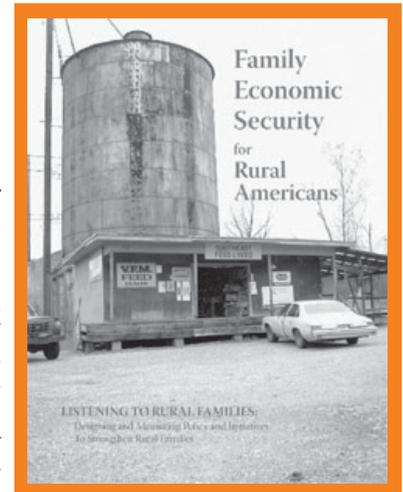
It is important to define rural so researchers, policy makers, and service providers can have a common point-of-reference. However, a variety of approaches to designating an area’s status exist, from population-based “urban/rural” definitions to county-based “metro/nonmetro” definitions. Sometimes the terms “rural” and “nonmetro” are used interchangeably, though they are not truly synonymous. A discussion of the complexity of defining “rural,” the most common definitions, and North Dakota maps can be viewed on the North Dakota State Data Center website at www.ndsu.edu/sdc/data/ruralurbanmetro.htm.

Not quite half of North Dakota’s population lives in rural areas (44.1%). However, the population is completely rural for 39 of North Dakota’s 53 counties. The population is not considered 100% urban in any of the counties.³

More than half (55.8%) of the state’s residents live in the 49 counties designated as nonmetro. Burleigh, Cass, Grand Forks, and Morton counties are designated as metro.^{3 4}

Building Economic Security for Rural Families

Family economic security may be the single most important thing we can do for the well-being of our children. Unfortunately, programs and initiatives that work in urban neighborhoods do not always work for rural communities. The goal of *Family Economic Security for Rural Americans*, a recent study funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, was to look through the eyes of rural families and gain understanding of the unique hardships they face. Families from rural North Dakota and 12 other states (see Figure 1) were interviewed to give perspectives on the unique challenges facing rural families.¹



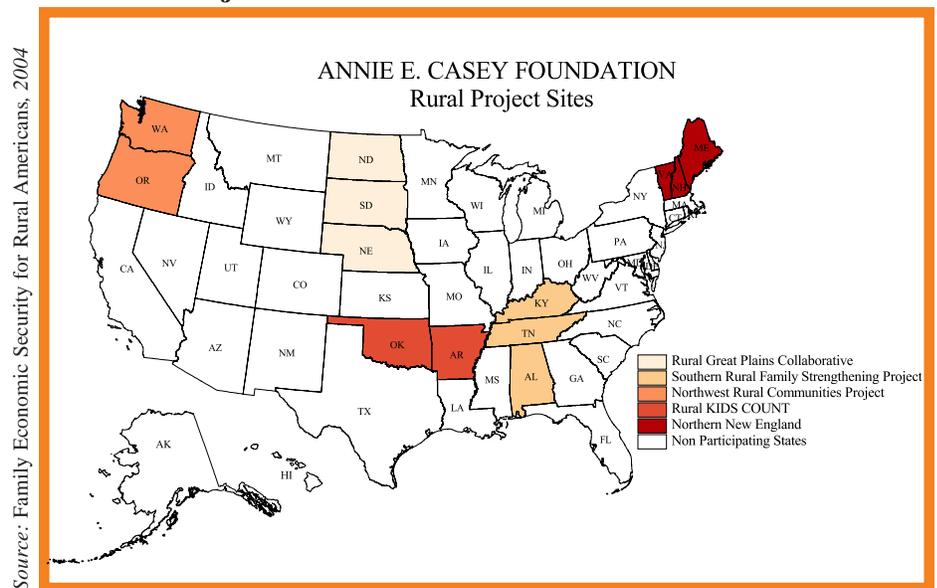
It’s about family success.

Overall, life in rural areas tends to reflect isolation, a small population base, and significant travel time to population centers. The study’s discussion questions were designed to help families identify the benefits and challenges of living in rural communities by examining their responses to these three aspects of life:¹

- Social Networks (e.g., churches, schools and recreation)
- Services and Supports (e.g., health care, child care, shopping)
- Economic Opportunities (e.g., jobs, wages, cost of living)

The complete report and other resources relating to strengthening rural families are available at www.ndkidscount.org/rural/ruralissues.htm.

Figure 1. States Participating in the Rural Collaboratives Research Project



Source: Family Economic Security for Rural Americans, 2004

Economic Conditions

According to the 2004 federal poverty guidelines, a family of three must make less than \$15,670 to be considered in poverty.⁸ In North Dakota, an estimated 13.8% of children were living in poverty in 2002 (national average was 16.7%), ranging from a low of 7.1% in Sargent County to a high of 34.0% in Rolette County.⁹ Based on Census 2000 figures, higher proportions of children in rural, reservation, and nonmetro areas are in poverty (see Figure 2).³

However, the concept of “living wage” can provide a better understanding of what it takes for a family to meet “minimum monthly costs.”¹⁰ A living wage factors in costs for things like housing, food, and transportation but not costs like entertainment or gifts.

The estimated cost of living for an employed single mother with two children in North Dakota is \$647/week or \$33,660/year (circa 2000). This translates into a take-home wage of \$16.18 an hour. Minimum wage is well below this figure, at \$5.15 an hour.¹⁰

The average wage per job in North Dakota was \$27,393 in 2003; however, the average wage was \$25,317 in non-metropolitan parts of the state and \$29,133 in metropolitan parts. North Dakota’s average wage was 26% behind the national average of \$37,130 in 2003 (\$27,082 nonmetro and \$38,769 metro) and was fourth lowest of all states.¹¹

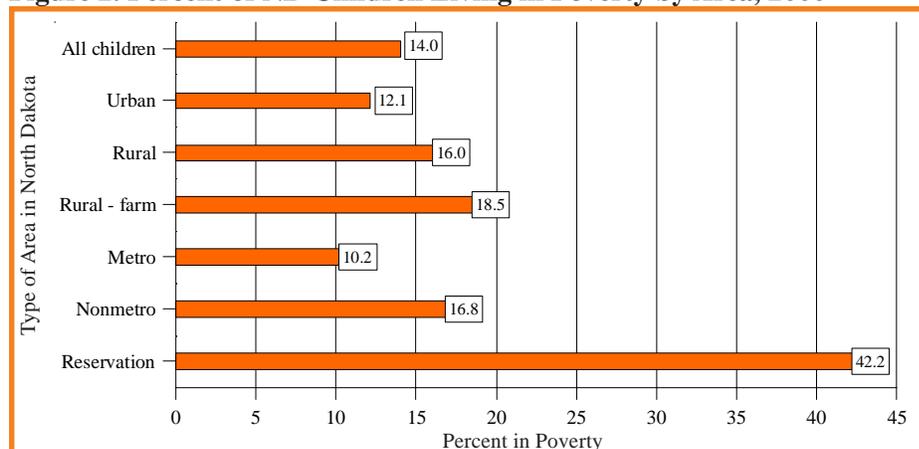
North Dakota’s unemployment rate was low at 3.4% in 2004.¹² However, this masks the problem of needing to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. In 2003, North Dakota had the highest proportion of multiple job holders at 9.7% (national average was 5.3%).¹³ For many families, dual incomes are also a financial necessity. In 2000, North Dakota had the highest percentage of children younger than 6 living with two parents of which both parents were in the labor force at 70.9% (national average was 53.2%).³

Employment and Cost of Living Dynamics

In North Dakota and other rural areas of the nation, there is a shortage of employment opportunities offering wages that can adequately support families with children. The unemployment rate in rural areas is often lower than urban areas. Also, more of the jobs are part-time or temporary and are less likely to pay benefits. This phenomenon is referred to as “underemployment” and includes nearly 20% of workers in rural America.⁵

Cost of living is often cited as a balancing force for low wages in the state. The cost of living index compares the costs of everyday items between cities, with a national average of 100.0. Despite wages well below national averages, the cost of living index for larger cities in North Dakota has remained at or slightly below the national average (since 2000, it has ranged from 93.5 to 100.4).⁶ Many other cities in the United States with a comparable cost of living index have much higher wages. The problem is compounded for rural North Dakota, where transportation, utilities, and health care costs are often higher. Despite lower average annual expenditures for rural residents, their expenditures are a higher proportion of their overall income than is the case for urban residents.⁷

Figure 2. Percent of ND Children Living in Poverty by Area, 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000

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