

What Explains Recent Increases in Poverty in Larimer County and Fort Collins?

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What Explains Recent Increases in Poverty in Larimer County and Fort Collins?

Executive Summary

In August 2007 the *Coloradoan* reported dramatic poverty increases in Fort Collins between 1999 and 2006. Using Census Bureau data, the paper reported that 19.8 percent of the city's population lived below the poverty line in 2006. By comparison, the city's 1999 poverty rate was 14 percent. Children were similarly impacted, with nearly 1-in-5 living below the poverty line in 2006, up from 8.9 percent in 1999. While poverty trends in the rest of Larimer County are not as startling, it is undeniable that many households across the region are struggling.

Despite increased attention, many don't fully understand the community's poverty dynamics. Some of this is due to a spotty grasp of the depth and breadth of the poverty problem. And some is due simply to denial.

The issue is further complicated in that little is known about the causes underlying increased poverty. As a result, local policymakers, non-profits, churches and human service organizations typically rely on anecdotal evidence in designing poverty alleviation programs. While anecdotes certainly help, they may not capture poverty's true dynamics, as anecdotes are typically formed by what people see and experience in their own daily workings.

Our goal in this project is to examine poverty from a variety of detached angles to improve our understanding of the region's poverty workings. This report is part of the comprehensive *Pathways Past Poverty* effort designed to educate and empower citizens, public institutions and human service agencies about the nature, extent, causes and solutions of poverty in Fort Collins and Larimer County.

Our study shows the relative importance of a variety of factors that drive both household poverty and changes in regional poverty. Due to the complex nature of poverty, there is no single solution that will eradicate, or even dramatically reduce it in Larimer County and Fort Collins. Further complicating the issue is the fact that the dynamics of child poverty differ from those of adult poverty--these are two unique problems that require unique solutions.

This report summarizes a two step process. First we provide a comprehensive picture of local poverty trends, emphasizing the nature and extent of poverty on various socioeconomic groups (e.g., age, gender, education). We then take a multi-faceted approach to better understand the root causes of increasing poverty, using statistical models and focus group methods to examine how social and economic forces influence individual and household poverty.

What is the Data Telling Us about Poverty Trends and Causes?

Our work draws on data collected by the US Census Bureau in both the 2000 decennial census and the more recent American Community Surveys. We analyzed this data in a

variety of ways, including basic descriptive statistics and more complex statistical models. In the report we offer a series of summary findings from this analysis. They include:

Individual level analysis

- The primary age groups witnessing increased poverty between 1999 and 2006 were school aged children and adults between the ages of 25 and 65.
- In 2006 more than 3-in-4 impoverished children in Fort Collins lived in single parent households. The child poverty rate in single parent households is nearly 50 percent.
- A high school diploma is an important pathway past poverty. For adults 25+ years of age poverty rates are highest for those with less than a high school degree, but a third of impoverished adults have “some college or an associate’s degree.” In the context of current economic conditions our findings suggest that individuals with a high school education or less are the most vulnerable to falling into poverty.
- Unemployment rates are highest for those without a high school degree. Wages increase tremendously with education.
- While poverty rates in Spanish speaking households are not much different than those for English-only speaking households, children aged 5-17 in Spanish speaking households are much more likely to live in poverty. The impact of language barriers are particularly strong for individuals living in linguistically isolated households. Kids in linguistically isolated households are 50 percent more likely to live in poverty.
- Between 1999 and 2006, there was a 42 percent increase in the number of non US citizens in Fort Collins, and the poverty rate for non-citizens increased by more than 6 percentage points. Because we do not have data on legal status of non citizens, we can not determine what effect, if any, illegal immigration has on poverty in Larimer County.
- Disabled individuals in Fort Collins are much more likely to live in poverty. More than one in four impoverished individuals in Fort Collins has some type of disability.
- Households where at least one adult is employed full-time are much less likely to be impoverished. Between 1999 and 2006, the percentage of households having at least one member employed full time declined from 73 percent to 66 percent.

Regional analysis

- Regional economic development, as measured by wage and employment growth, can reduce poverty, but it takes dramatic growth to make large differences.

- Regions where a higher percentage of individuals have finished high school or college tend to have lower poverty rates. Base line education rates, however, have little effect on *changing* poverty.

Focus Groups Provide Context to Our Statistical Models

To supplement our statistical models we conducted a series of focus groups to check the depth and range of respondents' perceptions and to identify various aspects of hardship, exclusion, financial stress, and emotional and family strain. We enlisted help from committed social service staff who were invaluable in recruiting their organizations' clients and staff.

We interviewed a diverse mix of nonprofit social service staff, homeless young men and women, formerly foster youth (older than 18), survivors of domestic violence, single mothers, single women, pregnant women in their late teens, single men, and Spanish-speaking mothers and grandmothers. Considering their participation in programs offered by the various organizations that helped recruit them, all respondents in our non-staff interviews could be considered low-income.

In total we met with fifty-two respondents, convened in ten audio-recorded groups at venues in Loveland and Fort Collins. Instead of documenting respondents' demographic characteristics, our main goal was to learn about what respondents perceive to be the determinants of poverty in the county. These qualitative group interviews enhance the study's statistical portion because they lend greater nuance to our understanding of respondents' realities. Overall, the analysis shows that socioeconomic disadvantage affects diverse segments of Larimer County's population. More specifically this study points to seven prevailing themes about local poverty, and the full report discusses these.

In summary, respondents from all groups identified inadequate income and low wages as significant obstacles to getting ahead. A related concern was that the low wages attached to part time and service sector employment are often "high enough" so as to push a person's income above the eligibility thresholds for certain social services. Additionally, the difficulty of finding full time employment was a key concern for many respondents, and they linked this challenge with what they identified as ways to overcome it—namely obtaining education and gaining relevant work experience. Respondents consistently referred to the county's highly educated workforce, and they linked this fact with the challenges that even well educated people may encounter when trying to find "good" jobs.

Participants discussed credentialed and informal education as crucial factors in improving people's lives. Some staff respondents focused on "poor parenting," highlighting parents' responsibility for their children's education. Mostly though, respondents thought an effective way to address poverty is to encourage the broader community—not just parents on their own—to provide learning opportunities for people of all ages.

Several groups voiced a concern about the rise in single parenthood and teenage parenthood. However, there was little consensus on the perceived causes and consequences of single- and teenage parenthood. Some staff respondents indicated a belief that single parenthood causes family poverty. Other participants avoided making causal assumptions and instead more

generally raised single- and teenage parenthood as factors that complicate the poverty question.

Spanish-speaking respondents mentioned several obstacles they face, ranging from stress associated with kin living faraway to blatant examples of everyday racism and hiring discrimination. Instances of observed racial bias and reported discrimination are quite common in the US generally, so this finding was notable but unsurprising. Like all other groups in this study, our Spanish-speaking respondents also discussed the difficulty they and others they know have had in finding local affordable housing and high-paying full time employment.

Respondents also expressed a general but strong desire for the community to better understand the varied situations that cause people to struggle financially and emotionally. Respondents only vaguely defined what they meant by “the community,” yet still we thought it notable that they pointed to the need for greater overall community awareness of poverty-related issues.

Finally, respondents in several groups expressed their frustration with certain assistance programs, particularly with regard to eligibility requirements. The term “integration” best captures respondents’ thoughts on what should be done to improve local social service provision. When asked what they thought about beneficial community actions, many respondents urged the development of a “one-stop-shop” mode of social services and program provision, indicating a more general call for systemic change in local social service administration.

What Explains Recent Increases in Poverty in Larimer County and Fort Collins?

Introduction

In August 2007 the *Coloradoan* reported dramatic poverty increases in Fort Collins between 1999 and 2006. Using data provided by the Census Bureau's *American Community Survey*, the paper reported that 19.8 percent of the city's population lived below the poverty line in 2006. By comparison, the Census Bureau pegged the city's 1999 poverty rate at 14 percent. Children were similarly impacted, with nearly 20 percent below the poverty line in 2006, up from 8.9 percent in 1999.

While poverty trends in the rest of Larimer County are not as startling, it is undeniable that many households across the region are struggling. In the county outside of Fort Collins the Census Bureau reported the 2006 poverty rate was 6.7 percent, substantially below both the US and state rates (13.3 percent and 12.0 percent, respectively).

Despite increased attention, the poverty challenges facing Fort Collins and Larimer County are still not well understood by the community. Some of this is due to a lack of information on the pervasiveness of the problem and the lack of understanding of the day-to-day realities facing low income families. And some is due to denial that the "Choice City" is not creating resources and opportunities sufficient to help all of its residents.

Further complicating the issue is that little is known about the causes underlying increased poverty. As a result, local policymakers, non-profits, churches and human service organizations typically rely on anecdotal evidence in designing poverty alleviation programs. While anecdotes certainly help, they may not capture poverty's true dynamics, as anecdotes are typically formed by what people see and experience in their own daily workings.

Our goal in this project is to examine poverty from a variety of detached angles to improve our understanding of the region's poverty workings. This report is part of the comprehensive *Pathways Past Poverty* effort designed to educate and empower citizens, public institutions and human service agencies about the nature, extent, causes and solutions of poverty in Fort Collins and Larimer County.

In meeting our goal we proceed in two steps. First we provide a comprehensive picture of local poverty trends, emphasizing the nature and extent of poverty on various socioeconomic groups (e.g., age, gender, education). This will help our audiences better understand the both the pervasiveness and nuances of the problem.

The second step is to better understand the root causes of increasing poverty. We approach this challenge in two ways. First we use statistical models to examine how social and economic forces influence individual and household poverty. For example, we look at the extent to which economic growth can reduce poverty and the effects of economic restructuring (i.e. movement to a service based economy). Recognizing that poverty's causes are not entirely economic, we will examine how social factors such as family structure, age,

education also influence poverty outcomes. Such understanding is critical as it informs the policy options and programs that are most likely to effectively reduce local poverty.

Our next approach reports on a series of focus group interviews with various segments of low income residents. Focus groups allowed us to check the depth and range of respondents' perceptions and to identify various aspects of hardship, exclusion, financial stress, and emotional and family strain. We enlisted help from committed social service staff who were invaluable in recruiting their organizations' clients and staff. Our sample included a diverse mix of nonprofit social service staff, homeless young men and women, formerly foster youth (older than 18), survivors of domestic violence, single mothers, single women, pregnant women in their late teens, single men, and Spanish-speaking mothers and grandmothers. These qualitative group interviews enhance the study's statistical portion because they lend greater nuance to our understanding of respondents' realities. Overall, the focus group analysis shows that socioeconomic disadvantage affects diverse segments of Larimer County's population.

In this report we uncover a lot of what we think are the causes of increased poverty in the region. One of our central findings is not at all surprising—a full time job is almost certainly a pathway out of poverty.

The real challenge, however, is moving impoverished individuals into full time employment. There are a number of important barriers and constraints that make this a substantial undertaking.

- The likelihood of full time employment is positively related to education. People with less than a high school degree are much more likely to end up in poverty.
- The number of individuals with full time jobs has declined substantially since 1999. New job creation can have significant effects in reducing poverty.
- People with disabilities are much more likely to live in poverty. Mental and physical disabilities have strong negative effects on full time employment.
- Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the kids living in poverty live in single parent households in Fort Collins. In 2006 nearly 1-in-2 kids in single parent households lived in poverty. Single parents are less likely to work full-time.
- While Hispanic origin households have similar poverty rates to white households, kids in linguistically isolated households (where no one 14+ years of age speaks English well) are 50 percent more likely to live in poverty.
- The poverty rate is significantly higher for families where the household head is not a US citizen. Full time employment is very difficult to attain for non-citizens.

It is important to point out that we don't make any specific recommendations in this document. Instead, we provide this information to the *Pathways Past Poverty* initiative to use as a basis for setting their long-term strategic initiatives.

The Face of Poverty in Larimer County and Fort Collins

This study was originally motivated by Census Bureau data collected in the *American Community Survey* (ACS) and released in August 2007 that showed a dramatic increase in local poverty, especially in Fort Collins. According to the Census data Fort Collins had an estimated 25,603 residents living in poverty in 2006, a 62 percent increase from the 2000 Census. By comparison, Fort Collins' population increased by about 15 percent over this time period. According to the Census Bureau, Fort Collins' poverty rate in 2006 stood at 19.8 percent; it was 14.0 percent in 1999. By current definition, a family of four is in poverty if their annual income is less than \$21,200. The poverty income threshold varies by family size (See Box).

Perhaps most troubling is that Census Bureau data indicated 5,159 Fort Collins children under the age of 18 lived in poverty in 2006, representing 19.2 percent of the city's childhood population. This was an increase of 2,943 kids from 1999; the 2000 Census showed 8.9 percent of the childhood population lived in poverty. For Larimer County outside of Fort Collins the Census Bureau estimated 2,932 children (8.2 percent) less than 18 years of age lived in poverty in 2006.

Since the 2007 data were released the Census Bureau issued updated poverty data in August 2008. One important result was lower poverty rates for Fort Collins and Larimer County than were reported the year prior. But the data still showed that the city's poverty rate was 15.0 percent, a small increase since the 2000 Census. If one looks at the three year average for the period 2005-2007, Fort Collins' average annual poverty rate was 17.5 percent over this time frame.

The three year average for all of Larimer County was 12.6 percent, up from 9.2 percent in 1999. In Table 1 we provide a basic snapshot of 3-year poverty trends in Fort Collins, Larimer County, Colorado and the United States.

Much of the analysis in the remainder of this report is based on data collected in 2006 and released in 2007. Although the Census Bureau recently released data from 2007, it was not made available in time for our analysis. While there certainly will be differences between 2006 and 2007, we suspect few dramatic changes, and believe our general findings remain relevant today.

2008 Federal Poverty Guidelines	
Persons in Family or Household	48 Contiguous States and D.C.
1	\$10,400
2	14,000
3	17,600
4	21,200
5	24,800
6	28,400
7	32,000
8	35,600
For each additional person, add	3,600

Table 1. Geographic comparison of poverty rates for select demographic characteristics: 3 year average (2005-07)

	United States	Colorado	Larimer County	Fort Collins
Population for whom poverty status is determined	13.2%	11.7%	12.6%	17.5%
AGE				
Under 18 years	18.3%	15.4%	12.5%	13.9%
Related children under 18 years	17.9%	15.0%	12.0%	12.0%
18 to 64 years	11.8%	10.7%	13.4%	19.7%
65 years and over	9.8%	8.5%	7.4%	7.2%
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT				
Population 25 years and over	10.1%	8.8%	8.0%	9.9%
Less than high school graduate	23.5%	23.5%	24.6%	28.8%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	11.3%	10.7%	10.4%	14.0%
Some college, associate's degree	7.7%	7.8%	7.8%	10.8%
Bachelor's degree or higher	3.6%	3.6%	4.5%	5.9%
EMPLOYMENT STATUS				
Civilian labor force 16 years and over	7.6%	7.3%	9.8%	14.7%
Employed	6.1%	6.2%	8.5%	13.0%
Unemployed	28.5%	26.5%	31.8%	40.0%
WORK EXPERIENCE				
Population 16 years and over	11.7%	10.5%	12.5%	18.3%
Worked full-time, year-round in the past 12 months	2.4%	2.4%	2.4%	2.5%
Worked part-time or part-year in the past 12 months	15.0%	14.3%	20.7%	29.8%
Did not work	21.1%	19.9%	16.9%	23.1%

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Poverty by Age

We begin our analysis by considering how poverty breaks down across age groups. The most troubling finding is the significant increase in child poverty rates. In 2006, children under the age of 18 accounted for 20 percent of all Fort Collins residents living in poverty, and for Larimer County overall children were 23 percent of all people in poverty. Although the county's under 18 age cohort population only increased by about 1 percent between 1999 and 2006, the number of children in poverty increased by 54 percent.

Breaking down the 2006 data, we see that the poverty rate for Fort Collins children under 5 years of age was 13.8 percent, and for children between 5 and 18 the rate was 21.7 percent. By comparison, these respective rates were 11.8 and 7.7 percent in 1999.

Looking at only Fort Collins, the estimated number of children below the age of 18 living in poverty increased by 2,943 between 1999 and 2006, with 2,591 of these individuals between the ages of 5 and 18. *Thus, the most substantial increase in child poverty between 1999 and 2006 was in school aged kids in Fort Collins.*

We turn now to the adult population. Given the large presence of Colorado State University, any study of local poverty needs to consider the impact of college students. Data from 2006 shows about 49 percent of the 18-24 year old age cohort lives below the poverty line. Over all, this cohort makes up nearly 47 percent of all impoverished individuals in Fort Collins. Clearly, the presence of a large university has significant effects on poverty rates.

It is reasonable to expect that CSU's recent efforts to increase enrollment may have had the effect of increasing poverty, and to some extent they have. According to the Census Bureau data the number of 18-24 year olds in Fort Collins was estimated to increase by about 2,800 people. The data shows that the number of individuals in this cohort living in poverty increased by 2,518.

While the main poverty story lies in the college aged cohort, it is important to note that the increase in the 18-24 year old poverty population accounts for only about 30 percent of the total change in Fort Collins poverty (2,518/9,768). This indicates that increased poverty is not simply college-related.

Considering only the population 25+ years of age, we see that the Fort Collins poverty rate in 2006 was 10.9 percent. While this is fairly low, this marks a substantial increase from the 6.3 percent poverty rate for 25+ years of age individuals in 1999. Over all, while the estimated population aged 25+ increased by 11,922 between 1999 and 2006, the number of people living in poverty in this cohort increased by 4,307. This represents about 44 percent of the increase in the total number of people living in poverty.

Looking at a finer slice of the data suggests increased adult poverty is a working age phenomenon. Nearly all of the change in poverty of the 25+ population was in adults less than 65 years old. Given that Social Security is designed to keep older people out of poverty, this is not a surprise.

Summary finding 1: The primary age groups witnessing increased poverty between 1999 and 2006 were school aged children and adults between the ages of 25 and 65.

Poverty by family marital status

The increase in child poverty deserves special attention. It is well recognized that single parents are more likely to struggle financially and this is true in Fort Collins. *Census Bureau data from 2006 indicates that 76.7 percent of all related children living in poverty in the city live in families with no spouse present.*

The data shows that 2,349 Fort Collins children in female headed households without a husband present lived in poverty in 2006. This represents 48 percent of all related children households living in poverty, and a child poverty rate of 46.1 percent for these household types.

What is less recognized is that related children in male headed households without a spouse present also have very high poverty rates. Data from 2006 indicate that 1,396 children under

age 18 in such households live in poverty, a 47.0 percent poverty rate for these household types.

One issue that deserves more research is to better understand the reasons why there has been a dramatic increase in single parent households. In 1999, Census data show Fort Collins had 1,315 children under the age of 18 living in single parent households. According to the 2006 data, this increased to 3,745.

Summary finding 2: In 2006 more than 3-in-4 impoverished children in Fort Collins lived in single parent households. The child poverty rate in single parent households is nearly 50 percent.

Poverty by Education

Previous studies show that increased education reduces the likelihood an individual will be poverty. In this section we focus on the population 25+years of age, which, as noted above, had a 10.9 percent poverty rate in Fort Collins in 2006, and is most likely not to currently be in school. According to the Census Bureau, this was 8,504 people.

Over all, data from 2006 suggests that poverty disproportionately impacts individuals who did not graduate from high school and do not have an equivalency degree—in 2006 an estimated 1,404 Fort Collins residents in this age category lived in poverty, a poverty rate of 27.1 percent for those without a high school degree or its equivalent. The Fort Collins poverty rate for those with no schooling beyond high school (including equivalency) was estimated at 11.4 percent. For Larimer County over all, the poverty rate was 21.2 percent for individuals without a high school degree and 8.2 percent for those with a high school degree only.

Although poverty disproportionately impacts those with less education, the majority of impoverished adults in Fort Collins in 2006 had education beyond a high school degree. In particular, the Census Bureau estimated 2,817 impoverished individuals had “some college or associate’s degree” and 2,688 individuals had a bachelor’s degree or higher. It is likely that the high number of impoverished individuals with a bachelor’s degree or higher to some extent captures graduate students at CSU.

We indicate below that full time employment leads to lower poverty rates. Education is also strongly related to the likelihood of having a job. In 2006 the unemployment rate for people with at least a bachelor’s degree stood at 2.2 percent in Fort Collins. For people with some college or an associate’s degree the unemployment rate was 6.7 percent, while it was 6.3 percent for individuals with a high school degree only.

For those without a high school degree the unemployment rate was a staggering 16.1 percent in Fort Collins and 12.3 percent and 6.1 percent for the rest of Larimer County. The high unemployment rate for those without a high school degree in Fort Collins marked a substantial increase from 2000. This suggests that the weakening job market has reduced opportunities for the most vulnerable populations.

Additional outside data enforces the importance of education on economic well being. According to the 2007 Current Population Survey for Colorado, the average annual earnings for a worker with less than a high education were \$19,788. Earnings for those with a high school degree only averaged \$36,498 and were \$41,106 for those with an associate's degree or some college. Per worker earnings averaged a whopping \$75,596 per year for individuals with at least a bachelor's degree.

Summary finding 3: Poverty rates are highest for adults 25+ years of age with less than a high school degree, but a third of impoverished adults have “some college or an associate’s degree.” Unemployment rates are highest for those without a high school degree. Wages increase tremendously with education.

Poverty status by language spoken at home

Previous research shows that poverty rates are higher for households where English is not the primary language spoken at home. This is not true in Fort Collins. The city poverty rate was 19.6 percent for 5+ year old individuals (which includes adults) where the primary language spoken at home is English. By comparison, it was 15.0 percent for 5+ year old individuals in households where Spanish was the primary at home spoken language.

Poverty rates for children aged 5-17 were higher, however, in languages where Spanish was the primary language spoken at home than they were in English only households. Specifically, the poverty rate for this age cohort was 28.1 percent for Spanish speaking households compared to 18.3 percent for English only speaking households.

This problem is particularly felt in *linguistically isolated* households. These are households in which either no person age 14+ speaks only English at home, or no person age 14+ who speaks a language other than English at home speaks English “Very well.” Overall, the child poverty rate in these households in Fort Collins was 40.6 percent in 2006.

Summary finding 4: While poverty rates in Spanish speaking households are not much different than those for English-only speaking households, children aged 5-17 in Spanish speaking households are much more likely to live in poverty. The impact of language barriers are particularly strong for individuals living in linguistically isolated households.

Citizenship

Over the past several years significant media attention has been given to immigration, especially illegal immigration. One common belief is that illegal immigrants are more likely to have lower incomes, hence may be more likely to live in poverty. Unfortunately, we have no ability to determine the validity of this claim, as the *Census Bureau does not collect information about the legal status of non US citizens.*

The data does, however, allow us to compare poverty rates of US citizens and non-citizens. In 2006 Census data reports that that Fort Collins was home to 5,733 people who were not a citizen of the US, a 1,677 increase from 1999. In 2006, the poverty rate for non-citizens was estimated at 35.8 percent, an increase from the 29.5 percent rate in 1999.

Summary finding 5: Between 1999 and 2006, there was a 42 percent increase in the number of non US citizens in Fort Collins, and the poverty rate for non-citizens increased by more than 6 percentage points. Because we do not have data on legal status of non citizens, we can not determine what effect, if any, illegal immigration has on poverty in Larimer County.

Disability

Previous research indicates people with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty, and this is true locally. In 2006, the Census Bureau estimates that 13,346 people in Fort Collins 5+ years of age have some disability, representing about 11.1 percent of the city's 5+ year old population. According to the Census data, 4,149 people in this age group living in poverty in Fort Collins have some type of disability. The poverty rate for individuals with a disability is 31.1 percent. Disabled individuals represent more than one in four (28.3 percent) of the total poverty population.

Turning to the working age population, in 2006 the Census Bureau estimated that Fort Collins was home to 95,726 people between the ages of 16 and 64. Of this, the Census Bureau estimates that 5,388 (5.6 percent) have an "employment disability" that negatively affects their ability to work. Of this group, it is estimated that 2,740 (50.8 percent) live in poverty.

Summary finding 6: Disabled individuals in Fort Collins are much more likely to live in poverty. More than one in four impoverished individuals in Fort Collins has some type of disability.

Work Experience

The notion of "working poor" is an important part of any discussion about poverty. The fundamental concern is that individuals remain in poverty despite being employed. The data supporting this notion is mixed. On one hand Census data from 2006 show that the Fort Collins poverty rate for individuals 16+ years of age who are employed full time is only 3.1 percent. And for Larimer County residents, the poverty rate for full time employees is only 2.4 percent. This suggests that full time workers are highly unlikely to be in poverty, regardless of the wage that their job pays.

People employed part-time, however, are not as likely to avoid poverty. The Larimer County poverty rate was estimated at 9.0 percent for people 16+ years of age who were employed in 2006.

The fact that poverty rates are so low for full time workers is not surprising, given the definition of poverty. An individual who works 2,000 hours per year at \$10 per hour would earn \$20,000, an income nearly sufficient to put a family of four above the poverty level. For households with two earners, each making \$8 per hour, a \$20,000 annual income could be achieved by one full time worker (earning \$16,000 per year) and a second worker employed ¼ time.

An important part of the above analysis, however, is that at least one household member is assumed to be employed full time. In reality, this is a strong assumption. In Fort Collins in 1999, 73 percent of households where the head was 25+ years of age had at least one full-time worker. In 2006, this rate stood at 66 percent.

Summary Finding 7: Households where at least one adult is employed full-time are much less likely to be impoverished. Between 1999 and 2006, the percentage of households having at least one member employed full time declined from 73 percent to 66 percent.

Understanding the Most Important Factors Influencing Household Poverty: A Statistical Model

While the preceding discussion provides a good overview of the general factor associated with poverty, it does not fully explain the local poverty story. In particular, the analysis does not fully assess the *relative* importance of these and other factors in explaining household poverty. In this section we use household level data from both the 2000 Census and the 2006 American Community Surveys to more fully develop our portrait of impoverished individuals and households in Fort Collins and Larimer County.

Our data is drawn from what the Census Bureau calls the Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS). The PUMS files contain records for a subsample of Census data. PUMS files are composed of individual records containing information collected on persons and households. The unit of observation is the individual, which can be aggregated to the household level. The responses of each person to the different census questions are recorded in separate variables. In essence, PUMS data are the individual responses to Census questions. Because we have individual observations, PUMS data provides researchers with substantially more flexibility in understanding issues such as poverty than is possible by looking at aggregate summary data, such as we analyzed above.

Our approach is to develop statistical models of individual and household demographic factors that might affect poverty status. The outcome we are trying to explain (the *dependent variable*) is whether or not an individual is in poverty. We consider six models over all, three for Fort Collins and three for the rest of Larimer County. The 3 models we consider for each area are factors influencing: overall individual poverty, poverty for families with kids less than 18, and individuals in households where the household head is at least 25 years old (this allows us to account for the college student effect).

From the Census data we are able to define a series of explanatory (or *independent*) variables that might be important, as shown by previous research and our own interviews with individuals and social service agencies. We describe these independent variables next.

- *College student:* This variable captures whether or not the household head is a college student.
- *Disability:* We use this to see if the presence of a household member with a disability significantly affects the likelihood a household is in poverty.

- *Age of household head*: This allows us to examine if the age of the household head affects the likelihood of household poverty.
- *Education*: The highest level of education level attained by any adult household member. We examine three categories, *relative to not finishing high school or an equivalent degree*.
 - *High school diploma only*
 - *Some college/ associate's degree*
 - *At least a 4-year degree*
- *Race*: This variable lets us to compare household poverty rates of African American and 'other race' headed households to those of white households.
- *Hispanic*: A household is considered Hispanic if the household head is of Hispanic origin. While imperfect, it gives some insight into potential differences in household poverty across racial groups.
- *Linguistic isolation*: These are households in which either no person age 14+ speaks only English at home, or no person age 14+ who speaks a language other than English at home speaks English "Very well."
- *Citizenship*: This variable captures differences in the likelihood a household is in poverty conditioned on whether or not the household is headed by a US citizen.
- *Single parent*: This variable allows us to compare differences in poverty rates between households with a married couple and those with single parents.
- *Year*: This variable lets us determine if there are important differences outside of those discussed above between household poverty rates in 1999 and 2006. These factors could account for different economic climates, but it may be some other factor.

Over all, our results from the household data are consistent with the broad trends described above. What our analysis in this section allows us to do is look at how the various household characteristics individually affect the likelihood of poverty, *controlling for other effects*. For example, the above analysis shows that full time employment status reduces the likelihood of poverty. And it also shows that single parent families are more likely to be in poverty. However, the analysis above does not allow us to see which effect is relatively more important. Our work in this section is designed to uncover the most important factors.

The statistical findings are presented in Table 2. The basic interpretation of these estimates is how a one unit change in an independent variable affects the likelihood (or probability) that an individual being in poverty, *given that all other characteristics are the same as the "typical" household*.

Fort Collins results: all residents

An example can clarify the interpretation. Looking at the first column of results—all Fort Collins residents, we see that someone with a *college degree* is 9.9 percent less likely to be in poverty than someone with less than a high school degree (or its equivalency), *all else equal*. This relationship became even stronger in 2006. The variable *Highest ed: BA+*year* shows that a college education further reduced the likelihood of poverty relative to someone with less

than a high school degree by 2.9 percentage points. This is strong evidence that education is particularly important for keeping people out of poverty in slower economic times.

Disability status is also important in Fort Collins. For each additional adult household member who is disabled (either physically or mentally), the likelihood an individual in that household is in poverty increases by 7 percent.

Another important finding is that individuals in households where the *head is not a US citizen* are 14 percent more likely to live in poverty.

Current economic conditions, which are proxied by the *Year* variable also matter. For some reason—which we think is a different economic climate--2006 was different enough from 2000 that individuals overall were 6 percent more likely to be in poverty than in 1999.

The variable *Household head in college* controls for the high likelihood that college students will be in poverty.

Interestingly, the *Hispanic origin* variable is *negative*, suggesting that all else equal, people of Hispanic origin are less likely to live in poverty.

Fort Collins: households with kids less than 18 years old

In this model we limit our analysis to families with kids. One again, the results indicate the importance of education. There are, however, other variables that merit special attention.

First, children in *African American* and *Other Race* households are each about 15 percent more likely to live in poverty than white children.

Interestingly, we see once again that kids of *Hispanic origin* are less likely to live in poverty, *all else equal*. However, our results do show that *Linguistic Isolation* had dramatic effects on poverty status, with kids in such households 50 percent more likely to live in poverty, all else equal. Another striking result is the *single parent* coefficient. All else equal, kids in single parent households are 14 percent more likely to live in poverty.

Summary finding 8: In Fort Collins, the likelihood of poverty substantially decreases as education increases. Individuals of Hispanic Origin are less likely to live in poverty. However, individuals in linguistically isolated households and households headed by non US citizens are more likely to be impoverished. This is especially true for the children in these households.

Larimer County (excluding Fort Collins)

As we note above, Larimer County poverty rates outside of Fort Collins are significantly less than those of the US or the state. Thus, our model has a more difficult time explaining why county residents outside of Fort Collins are in poverty. And overall, we do find some of the same correlates for people living outside the city that we find in Fort Collins, such as education and a changed economic landscape.

Table 2. Estimated relationship between the likelihood an individual is in poverty and select household demographic characteristics: 2006

	Fort Collins			Larimer County (excluding Fort Collins)		
	All residents	Families with Kids < 18	All HH 25+ years	All residents	Families with Kids < 18	All HH 25+ years
Household head in college	20.9% *	9.3% *	15.0% *	-1.3% *	-3.1% *	-0.8% *
Number of disabled adults	7.0% *	8.0% *	4.9% *	0.0%	-0.6% *	-0.1%
Age of household head	-0.1% *	0.0%	0.0% *	0.0% *	0.0% *	0.1% *
Highest ed: high school	-6.6% *	-3.7% *	-3.5% *	0.9% *	8.6% *	0.4%
Highest ed: assoc/some col	-4.7% *	-3.5% *	-2.9% *	0.5%	5.1% *	0.3%
Highest ed: BA+	-9.9% *	-7.6% *	-5.3% *	-1.9% *	-0.4%	-1.8% *
Highest ed: high school*year	0.4%	-5.4% *	-1.7% *	-4.0% *	-5.5% *	-3.5% *
Highest ed: assoc/some col*year	-1.7% *	-0.2%	-1.1% *	-3.4% *	-5.7% *	-3.1% *
Highest ed: BA+*year	-2.9% *	-7.5% *	-2.0% *	-5.0% *	-5.7% *	-4.9% *
African American	-0.5%	15.4% *	-0.9%	2.3% *	1.9%	3.4% *
Other race	3.8% *	15.6% *	3.2% *	-3.3% *	-2.5% *	-4.1% *
Hispanic origin	-1.2% *	-5.0% *	0.1%	10.5% *	5.2% *	12.5% *
Linguistically isolated	7.2% *	50.9% *	6.7% *	-3.5% *	n/a	-3.9% *
Household head not a US citizen	11.7% *	12.7% *	13.5% *	6.8% *	26.3% *	6.6% *
Single parent household	7.8% *	14.3% *	8.2% *	5.2% *	7.6% *	4.6% *
Year	6.7% *	9.7% *	5.1% *	6.7% *	16.9% *	6.5% *

A * indicates that the estimated relationship is statistically different than zero.

There are some results from our analysis, however, that are worth noting. First, we see that disability status is not nearly as important of a factor as it is in the city. Some of this is probably due to the fact that most services for the disabled are provided in Fort Collins; it is reasonable to expect individuals to live closer to service providers.

The second notable difference between the city and the surrounding area is that Hispanic origin households outside the city are substantially more likely to live in poverty, whereas they were less likely to live in poverty in the city. And the impacts of non-US citizenship are particularly felt in households with kids in the outlying areas.

Understanding Regional Differences in Poverty Rates and Factors Influencing Changes in Regional Poverty Rates over Time

So far this study has looked closely at individual and household poverty in Fort Collins and Larimer County. This has allowed us to develop a fuller understanding of the face of poverty. One shortcoming of this approach, however, is that it does not allow us to understand how *community* poverty rates change over time. In particular, we still have yet to address how changes in the broader economy influence poverty, if at all. This is an important issue as it helps us better understand the extent to which regional economic development policies can alleviate poverty. In this section we address this issue.

We do so by building a statistical model to understand changes in poverty rates between 2000 and 2005 for metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) with less than 500,000 people. Our model considers both economic and demographic factors. Larimer County (Fort Collins-Loveland) is considered its own MSA.

There are four variables we are trying to explain (the dependent variables). The first two are the MSA poverty rates in 2005, considering 1) the entire population, and 2) the child poverty rate. The second two look at 3) changes between 2000 and 2005 in the MSA poverty rate and 4) changes in the children under 18 poverty rate. These are simply calculated as the relevant MSA poverty rate in 2005 minus its respective poverty rate in 2000.

Although we expect poverty rates and changes in poverty rates to have some similar causes, there are reasons to expect some different processes at work in terms of levels versus changes. The following lists the variables we use to examine these four dependent variables.

The explanatory (independent) variables dealing with the economy are:

- *Annual employment growth rate: 2000-05.* This variable allows us to examine if MSAs with faster employment growth see greater reductions in poverty rates.
- *Average annual salary: 2005.* This looks at average earnings per worker in the MSA in 2005. We are interested if higher average wages lead to lower poverty.
- *Average annual salary growth: 2000-05.* This variable examines the extent to which higher wage *growth* reduces poverty rates.

- *Export industry concentration*: Captures the extent to which total employment is concentrated in sectors exporting goods and services from the MSA.
- *Large firms*. The percentage of county employment in businesses with at least 100 employees in 2000. It is argued by some that larger businesses provide “better” jobs.
- *Goods producing employment*: This variable captures the percentage of county private sector employment in goods producing (ie, Agriculture, Construction and Manufacturing) industries in 2000. Some argue that a vibrant goods producing sector can help reduce poverty. We also examine the role of changes in goods producing employment between 2000 and 2005.

The independent variables dealing with demographics are:

- *Research University*. This variable accounts for the presence of a large, research university
- *Education*. These variables look at education attainment rates for adults 25+ years of age in 1999.
 - The percentage of the population with a high school degree or some college but not a 4-year degree.
 - The percentage of the population with at least a 4-year degree.
- *Percent single family households*. The percentage of households that are single parent with kids.
- *Percent 65+ years of age*. The percentage of the population that is 65+ years of age. We expect this to be negatively related to poverty rates, as Social Security should help reduce poverty.
- *Population*. We control for the baseline population to see if MSA size has any effect.

In Table 3 we present the results of our statistical models. In the poverty rate models—Identified by A and B--when a variable effect has a negative sign and a *, it means higher values of the variable are significantly related to lower MSA poverty rates in 2005. In the change in poverty rate models—identified by C and D--a variable with a negative sign and a *, means higher values of the variable are significantly related to reductions in the MSA poverty rate between 2000 and 2005. We recognize that most of our readers may not have a solid grasp of statistical regressions, so our focus will be on describing the most important findings.

Table 3. Statistical results on models looking at factors influencing 2005 MSA poverty rates and changes in MSA poverty rates between 2000 and 2005

	2005 MSA Poverty Rate				2000-05 Change in MSA Poverty Rate			
	All Households		Kids Under 18		All Households		Kids Under 18	
	A		B		C		D	
Intercept	0.79	*	0.68	*	0.05	*	0.00	
Employment Growth Rate: 2000-05	-0.65	*	-0.53	*	-0.24	*	-0.39	*
Average Salary 2005	-0.000003	*	-0.000004	*	n/a		n/a	
Average salary growth rate: 2000-05	n/a		n/a		-0.24	*	-0.35	*
Export industry concentration	0.00		0.02		0.00		0.00	
Large firms	-0.05	*	-0.05		0.01		0.03	*
Change in goods share of total employment	0.00		0.00		-0.01	*	-0.02	*
Goods share of total employment: 2005	-0.13	*	-0.08	*	0.02		0.02	
Research university	0.03	*	0.01		0.02	*	0.01	
Percent high school/some college	-0.49	*	-0.51	*	-0.02		0.02	
Percent at least BA	-0.49	*	-0.57	*	0.01		-0.01	
Percent 65+ years of age	-0.25	*	n/a		-0.07	*	n/a	
Percent single family households	n/a		0.92	*	n/a		0.17	*
Population 2001	n/a		n/a		0.00		0.00	
Population 2005	0.000000		0.000000		n/a		n/a	
Distance from big city	-30.71	*	-29.63	*	-11.76	*	-11.68	*

A * indicates that the estimated relationship is statistically different than zero.

Looking first at the economic variables, we find that regions with faster employment growth between 2000 and 2005 had lower poverty rates in 2005 and saw greater reductions in poverty rates between 2000 and 2005. The relationship, however, is not overwhelmingly strong.

Looking at column C, for example, we see that had the annual employment growth rate in Larimer County been 1 percentage point higher from 2000-05, the county poverty rate would have been 0.24 percentage points lower in 2005. (This assumes Larimer County poverty responds similarly to employment growth as the average MSA.)

Put another way, the county would have had to add about 4,100 additional jobs over this time frame to reduce the number of impoverished residents in 2005 by 610 people. The regression results suggest that significant reductions in poverty rates through wage growth are similarly hard (but not impossible) to come by.

Summary finding 9: Over all, our model suggests that employment and wage growth can reduce poverty, but it takes dramatic growth to make large differences.

Education is the second area we want to highlight. Over all, our results suggest that education has important impacts on current poverty rates, but does not have a significant

impact on changes in poverty rates. Looking at column B, we see that a one percentage point increase in the percentage of the adult population with a high school degree/some college is related to a 0.49 percentage point reduction in overall poverty rates. Applying this finding to Larimer County, we see that if 315 people that once had less than a high school degree would somehow earn a high school diploma or equivalent, then the number of people in poverty in the county would be reduced by about 598.

Summary finding 10: A high school diploma is an important pathway past poverty. Regions where a higher percentage of individuals have finished high school or college tend to have lower poverty rates. Base line education rates, however, have little effect on *changing* poverty.

The final result we want to discuss is the negative relationship between single family households and child poverty. Our results suggest that a one percentage point increase in the number of single family households in an MSA is related to a 0.92 percentage point higher childhood poverty rate. For Fort Collins, this suggests that if the number of single parent households declined by 68, there would be 46 fewer children under the age of 18 in poverty.

How might recent economic trends in Larimer County have affected poverty?

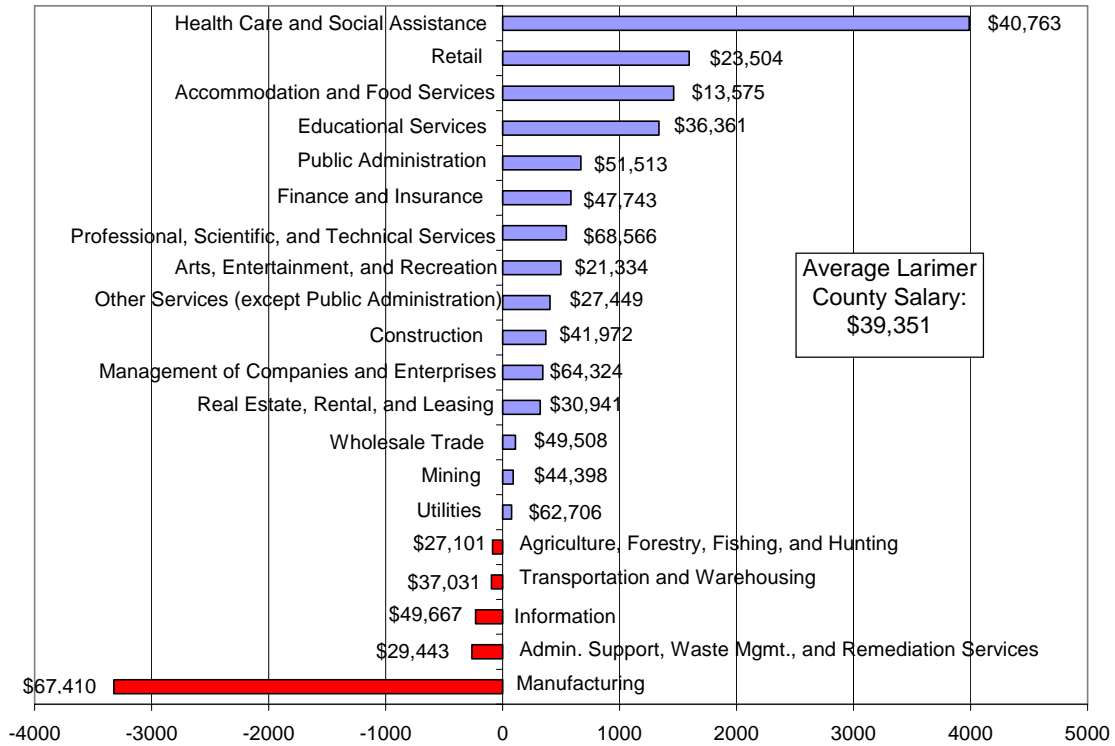
With the above analysis in mind, it is now useful to look at some key economic indicators for northern Colorado that might explain some of the recent increases in poverty. In Chart 1 we show Larimer County employment growth between 2001 and 2007. We also include average earnings per worker in each category.

Over all, we see that Larimer County added 8,398 jobs over this time period. The average county wage in 2007 was \$39,351. When looking at industries that added jobs (plus 12,393 total jobs), average wages were \$36,725. This is substantially below the average wage of \$50,304 in industries that lost jobs (minus 3,995).

The leading growth industry between 2001 and 2007 was Health care and social assistance, which added about 4,000 new jobs and paid an average annual wage of \$40,763 in 2007. It is important to recognize, however, that many of the jobs in this sector require advanced education and training. The same is true for Educational services, the county's fourth leading growth industry since 2001 (plus 1,400 jobs).

The second and third leading employment growth sectors were Retail and Leisure and accommodation. These two sectors pay wages substantially below the county average, but most jobs in these sectors do not require education beyond a high school degree. The county's leading declining industry was Manufacturing, led by the sharp decline of computer chip manufacturing. These losses were especially harmful given that they paid relatively high wages and did not necessarily require advanced degrees.

Chart 1. Larimer County employment growth by industry: 2001-2007



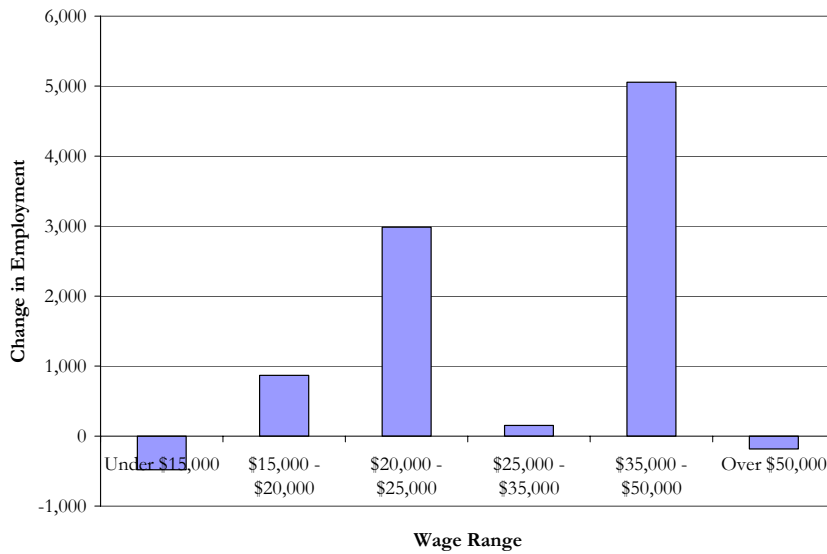
Source: Authors' calculations based on Colorado Department of Labor QCEW

We provide a different way of looking at this data in Chart 2, which shows employment growth by wage category for the period 2001-07. Here we see that the county added more than 5,000 jobs in the \$35,000-\$50,000 category over this time period, accounting for 60 percent of the net new jobs created. Nearly all of the remaining net new jobs created were in sectors that pay between \$15,000 and \$25,000 per year on average.

Job growth was quite slow in the \$25,000-\$35,000 range. This is important, as it captures the sweet spot wage for households looking to meaningfully escape poverty. This is also consistent with the recent underemployment study jointly conducted by the Upstate Economic Development Corporation and the Northern Colorado Economic Development Corporation.

Analyzing the occupation data related to the various industries we see that jobs in the high wage growth industries are heavily skewed toward college educated workers, while the lower wage jobs tend not to require much education beyond high school.

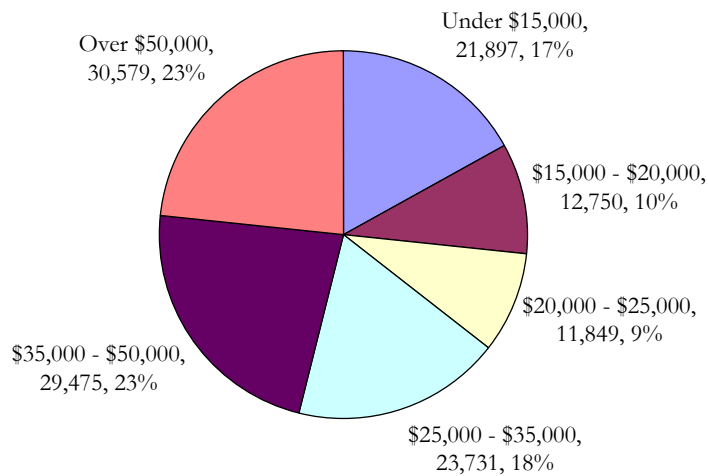
Chart 2. Larimer County employment growth by wage category: 2001-07-



Source: Authors' calculations based on Colorado Department of Labor QCEW

Placing recent job growth in context, with the Larimer County economy, Chart 3 shows that 36 percent of all jobs in the county are in sectors that pay less than \$25,000 per year; 17 percent are in sectors paying less than \$15,000 per year. Most of the jobs in the lower wage categories do not require extensive education.

Chart 3. Share of total employment, by wage category: 2007

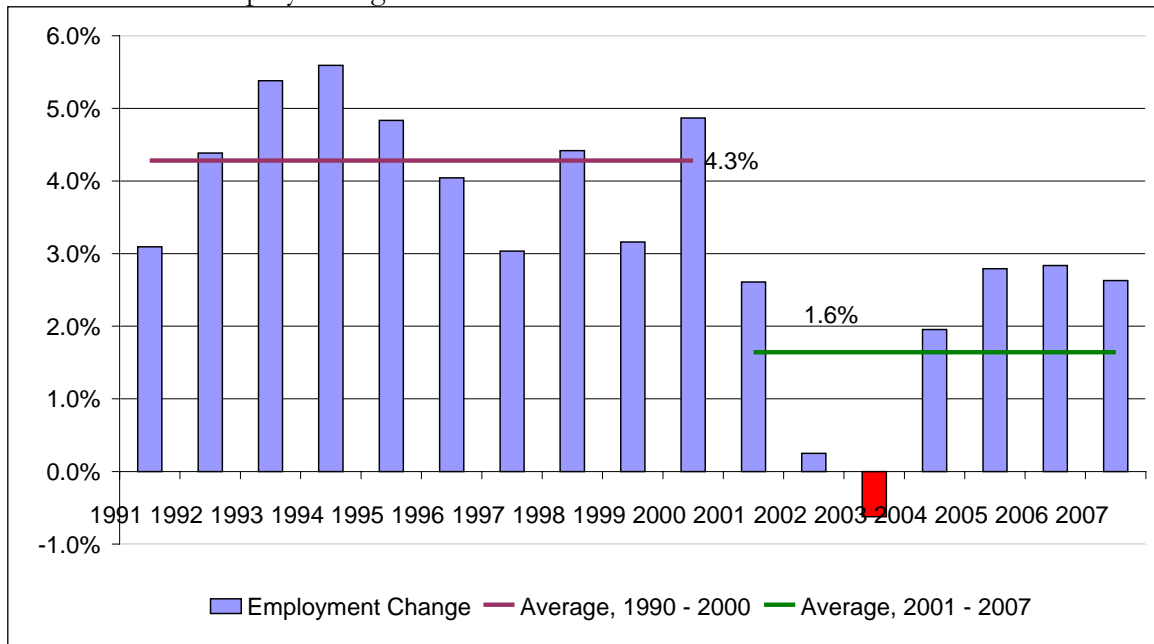


Source: Authors' calculations based on Colorado Department of Labor QCEW

From an economic development perspective one of today’s most pressing concerns is the fact that inflation adjusted wages have not grown significantly in the 2000s in the US. Another data source shows that new worker earnings have been stagnant in Larimer County over the last several years. According to data provided by the Census Bureau’s Local Employment Dynamics study the average earnings for new hires in 2007 was \$24,595. This is an increase of only 5 percent since 2001, *before adjusting for inflation*. By comparison, the average wages of all workers increased by 8 percent over this time frame.

Because our analysis suggests employment growth can reduce poverty, and because the data shows that poverty was significantly higher in 2006 than it was in 1999 it is helpful to compare employment growth in the years preceding our two observations. In Chart 4 we show the long term annual employment growth rates for northern Colorado. Over the period 1991-2000, annual job growth averaged 4.3 percent. Over the period 2001-2007 this declined to 1.6 percent.

Chart 4. Recent employment growth trends in northern Colorado



Source: Authors’ calculations based on Colorado Department of Labor QCEW

Our interpretation of this is that the 1990s and 2000s have been remarkably different economic eras in Larimer County. The 1990s were a period of robust economic growth, driven by the high tech sector. By comparison, the region’s economic performance has been rather pedestrian in the new millennium.

This distinction is critical. Our results are consistent with the notion that the region’s economy in the late 1990s was characterized by an excess demand for labor. In such a situation, essentially everyone who wants to work will be employed. Indeed, the county’s 2000 unemployment rate was an unprecedented 2.5 percent.

When the economy slowed in the 2000s, however, the labor market loosened. In situations where the number of available workers starts to exceed the number of jobs, businesses can initiate different requirements. Initially, these requirements are often based on education. This idea is consistent with the important and substantial differences we observe in poverty by education in 2006.

Summary finding 11: In the context of current economic conditions our findings suggest that individuals with a high school education or less are the most vulnerable to falling into poverty.

Focus Groups Help Put Life Experiences to Our Statistical Models

To complement our statistical analysis we conducted a series of focus group studies to understand the experiences underlying the rise in Larimer County’s poverty rate since 2000. Toward PPP’s effort to illustrate the various “faces of poverty,” we find that socioeconomic disadvantages affect diverse segments of our community in very unique ways.

Our interviews engaged a demographically diverse mix of nonprofit social service staff, homeless youth, formerly foster youth, survivors of domestic violence, single mothers, single women, pregnant women in their late teens, single men, and Spanish-speaking mothers and grandmothers. The focus groups were not designed to statistically represent all county residents’ perspectives on poverty; rather, our goal was simply to listen and to illuminate some of the county’s relatively unheard voices by asking about their perspectives. We also asked about what they think could be done to address poverty at the local level. Our participants’ narratives, necessarily abbreviated in this report, provide a glimpse into local residents’ lives, the struggles they face, and the rich insights that arise through listening to our neighbors.

A Note on “Poverty”

Over the decades many have criticized the federal government’s official definition of poverty as an inaccurate measure that relies too heavily on outdated assumptions. There are many reasons why the official federal poverty definition represents an insufficient yardstick for understanding Larimer County residents’ lives. For the purposes of this focus group report, poverty is not simply a measure of whether one has an officially calculated income that falls above or below a calculated poverty guideline. Rather, poverty is fundamentally about a lack of access to various opportunities that many people take for granted, including sufficient access to food, permanent shelter, a livable income, financial assets, credentialed education, job training, financial assistance and financial literacy, health-related services, quality childcare, useful transportation, and safe places for living and recreation. Perhaps more usefully, poverty refers to a general condition of disadvantage, or a lack of opportunity to participate fully in society due to factors that generate social, cultural, and socioeconomic exclusion—factors that exist at both structural and individual levels.

Research Design

Our purpose in these group discussions was to listen and to ask participants what they perceive to be the main factors shaping people's economic circumstances in Larimer County. Quantitative studies tend to dominate research about poverty because they illustrate observable trends through the use of powerful statistical methods. Our qualitative group interview study, while it does not pretend to represent the perspectives of all county residents, provides a more nuanced understanding of participants' realities that is not self-evident in numeric data.

Recruitment, Collection, and Analysis

Ideally we would have selected our focus group participants randomly from a valid sampling frame, but such a process was outside the scope of this project. Instead, we informally recruited the participants based on an extensive contact list provided to us by a key PPP organizer. Through numerous emails and phone calls, we enlisted help from committed agency and nonprofit staff, each of whom were invaluable in recruiting their organizations' clients and staff.

We recognize that such "purposive" recruitment is a potential source of selection bias in social research. Accordingly, in presenting our findings from these interviews, we do not pretend to generalize to the Larimer County population. We know that our findings represent only the views of our participants and cannot be used to infer anything about the views of the county's larger population. Collaborating with community members costs considerably less than obtaining a statistically valid sampling frame for recruitment, but with our "sample" there is a risk that group composition may be skewed toward certain types of participants and not others (e.g., for budgetary reasons we did not interview anyone from Estes Park or from the more rural parts of Larimer County). Yet after assessing the demographic makeup of our focus groups as noted above, we can simply say that we accomplished our recruitment goal because our participants appeared to have diverse social backgrounds.

Given their participation in programs offered by the various organizations that helped recruit them, all participants in our non-staff focus groups could be considered "low-income." In total we had 52 participants in the 10 focus groups, and we moderated these audio-recorded discussions at venues in Loveland and Fort Collins during July and August of 2008. (For the list of questions asked, see the Appendix—"Interview Protocol.") Discussions ranged from 50 minutes to an hour and a half. Matt Aronson, a sociologist with considerable experience in qualitative research, moderated all group discussions and analyzed all narrative data. In keeping with accepted conventions in social science, this consisted of audio recording and note-taking during each discussion; immediate post-interview debriefs; listening to and roughly transcribing audio files; writing and re-listening to audio files to identify common themes within and across groups; and then vetting the findings through discussions with Martin Shields and PPP's Diversity and Inequality Committee.

Focus Group Summary Findings

Since we recruited participants non-randomly and thus cannot infer from our data to a larger population, we hesitated to present the following findings in any particular order of importance. Nevertheless and for the purposes of illustrating the main points raised during the interviews, we decided to present the themes below in order based on the frequency and intensity of discussion that surrounded each issue. Across the range of focus group conversations, our participants mentioned issues that evoked seven themes:

- 1) Job availability and job quality
- 2) Housing affordability
- 3) The need for an “integrated” mode of social service provision
- 4) Increased focus upon and funding for education and adult financial literacy
- 5) Family structure
- 6) Particular challenges for Hispanic families
- 7) “Community awareness” of the issues faced by people living in poverty

Theme #1: Job Availability and Job Quality

Nearly all respondents thought a main reason for the rise in poverty relates to what it costs to make ends meet. Notably however, when talking about the formidable expenses related to healthcare, childcare, transportation, and food, our respondents consistently situated their discussions with regard to the lack of high-wage jobs. Very often when participants referred to various costs of living such as food, gasoline, transportation, and clothing, they did not locate the crux of the poverty problem with regard to those costs of living *per se*; rather, they couched such comments in terms of inadequate income and inadequate wages that have not kept pace with the rising costs of living. That is, even when the apparent topics seemed to center on childcare or food costs, our respondents most often directly related these expenses to what they perceived to be the greater problem of job availability. Thus we interpreted the problem of job availability, especially access to higher-wage jobs, to be an overriding theme during these “cost of living” discussions. The participants’ comments strongly resonate with the fact of recent structural changes in the local economy, where the greatest job growth has indeed occurred in the service (tertiary) sector, which typically offers low-paying, low-benefit occupations with few prospects for promotion.

Inadequate wages, a theme heard across all of our discussions, seemed to be a very strong concern to our respondents. Problems related to job availability, and especially job quality, resounded most strongly in the following passages:

“It’s so hard to plan for the unexpected when your paycheck barely covers things. There’s just no ‘extra’ left when the costs of childcare and medical are so high. Housing also is just too expensive here...But it’s still true that having a savings is really important and at the same time it’s so hard to do.” (Staff)

“Often times even when you do find a full-time job, you’re just barely getting by. You might not qualify for assistance ‘cause you make just enough to be above the so-called poverty line. So folks who’re working full time are falling through the cracks, they’re trying hard to make it, but they’re not eligible for very many benefits that

could really help them move up the ladder. It seems like low-paying jobs are really dragging people down.” (Participant)

“Background checks and credit checks are totally new to me—six years ago I applied for a low-wage caretaker job, and I didn’t get that job because I had bad credit! The lady assumed that I’d just take advantage of the elderly patients, and she assumed all of that just because I had bad credit. I couldn’t even get a low-paying job because of that!” (Participant)

“There’s always jobs, I mean you can go get a job flipping burgers or at Wal-Mart, but that doesn’t give you a good quality of life. So it’s not that there aren’t enough jobs, it’s more that there aren’t enough *good* jobs.” (Participant)

“Wages are being pushed down, and there are a lot of jobs here, but they’re mostly not very well paying. I can’t live off a Wal-Mart wage, I can’t live off a Taco Bell wage. I can’t even live off the wage they pay me to do childcare center work, there’s just no way. It’s a very simple equation: Things are too expensive and I don’t make enough.” (Participant)

“The jobs that are available, they often just don’t want to hire you full-time because it’s cheaper to hire you part-time, because then they don’t have to give you benefits. Even if you *do* make \$10 an hour, you still can’t make it. Especially if it’s part-time, there’s no way I can make my medical payments and still make rent.” (Participant)

Education and Underemployment

Problems that inhere in well educated local labor markets are known to persist in regions across the United States. Our respondents consistently referred to Larimer County’s relatively well educated workforce, and several respondents linked this fact with what they perceived to be a substantial challenge well-educated people may encounter when trying to find “good” jobs. The following comment illustrates this:

“The competition’s tough right now to get a good-paying job, you’ve got lots of educated people in this area...and you can see it when we put out a job announcement, we get applications from people who’ve got double masters degrees and they’re applying for a job that pays \$30,000 a year.” (Staff)

Education, Underemployment and Labor Market Competition

Our respondents seemed well aware that since 2000 the county has seen a steady rise in low-wage jobs. Ironically, the county’s relatively well educated workforce may make it more difficult for lesser educated workers to compete for the faster-growing *low* wage jobs (service sector jobs). The following comments help to elaborate this issue:

“There are so many people here who’ve got college degrees...And I’m hoping to finish my degree not too long from now, but I have no job experience in my field ‘cause I need to work a crappy job just to make it through community college. So when I go try to find a job in my field, there’s gonna be a lot of people who apply for

that same job who're more experienced and more educated than me. So how can I get a job if the employer's looking for 3 or more years of experience and a bachelor's degree?" (Participant)

"Jobs aren't that hard to come by, but getting a *fulfilling* job is a real challenge here. My parents are just amazed at how much I pay for a two-bedroom apartment, and it's like, employers at Starbucks or wherever don't really have to pay people much more than a handful of dollars and hour." (Staff)

"I think employment's a big issue, because there's all kinds of college students here, and once they get outta college they also have trouble finding good jobs, so then they go and get those low-paying jobs that are really the only jobs that people like me can get...I think it's interesting that we're called the 'Choice City,' but a lot of people don't know about the trouble with finding jobs that pay well." (Staff)

Theme #2: Housing Affordability

With varying degrees of intensity, all groups and nearly all respondents discussed the difficulty they and others they know have had in finding affordable housing. Respondents mentioned several personal issues that played into their ability to find and keep affordable housing such as the unscrupulous behavior of ex-spouses and the debilitating effects of having a criminal record. However, respondents also referenced other difficulties related to everyday living in other spheres of life, such as the frightening prospect of having medical bills that afflict their ability to pay next month's rent. The following comments illustrate some of these issues:

"If you've got a criminal record, it's really hard to rent from a rental agency, so you're either stuck homeless or you gotta sublet, and that makes all the rest of your life harder." (Participant)

"Rent and utilities are like the top things in my budget." (Participant)

"Now they're charging you money to do a credit check in order to get a job and in order to rent a place." (Participant)

"In housing, there are just so many unexpected things that you have to think about that aren't really related to your rent, but that really do influence your ability to pay rent. If I've got big health bills or if my hours get cut at work, then it's really hard to make rent 'cause rent's so high and wages aren't." (Participant)

"My ex-boyfriend totally destroyed my checking account, and I didn't even know about it until he left me. So what am I supposed to do? I'm not gonna be able to rent a place because of something I didn't do. I really wish people would be more understanding." (Participant)

Theme #3: Social Service Integration

In general, participants praised some local nonprofit programs for being very helpful to them, but several respondents expressed their frustration with certain assistance programs. The requirements of certain assistance programs often present substantial barriers, and one participant's comment illustrates such frustration:

“If you're in some programs, you're not even allowed to have resources, like you're simply not allowed to have savings if you want to keep receiving benefits. It's crazy, it makes no sense, it's counterproductive. So once you get to that point of living in poverty, there's almost no way out.” (Participant)

Based on our analysis, the term “integration” best describes a prevailing theme about what respondents think should be done to improve local social service provision. When asked directly about what kinds of community actions they would suggest for the county, many participants urged the development of a “one-stop-shop” mode of social services and program provision. Several respondents' comments illustrate this general call for infrastructural or systemic change in local social service administration:

“We don't need any more programs, what we need is a more holistic or integrated way of doing things. And it's hard to get money for preventive programs...” (Staff)

“I don't think we need better service delivery models. We need a societal change in the way we think. We don't need to be better at identifying, diagnosing, and treating. What we really need is to get better at providing warmth and structure...something I recently read in a book called “Authoritative Communities,” it's really what I believe. There are just so many ways for *lots* of people in our community to be involved, to get involved in providing that warmth and to provide that structure in the lives of people who've gotten off track.” (Staff)

“A lot of our local programs are good but many are really just band-aids, they help families out with this month's gas bill, or next month's rent, but it's really important to look at families' situations with a longer-term view.” (Staff)

“Most of the county welfare programs like TANF are a temporary fix and aren't something that can help you really get out of being poor in the long term. Most people can't stop to just take a breath and realize how many resources there *are* in this area—like there's a thing called Project Self-Sufficiency and I'm really thinking about getting in with that because they're more long-term oriented.” (Participant)

“If all the county's resources were put out there kinda centralized like in a phone book type of thing, then that would be great. It's really a full time job just to know how to get all the different kinds of help.” (Participant)

“I have a lot of families who don't even know where to get help, and it seems even *asking* for help is almost taboo...I mean, I speak English and I'm pretty well educated, but I wouldn't know where to go if I'd just come into town and needed assistance.” (Staff)

“We have 2-1-1, which is a valuable thing, but there’s more to it than just knowing names and addresses and phone numbers. Just knowing about a place to go isn’t enough, a lot of people don’t really know how to start the process of getting assistance...there’s a lot of frustration because people often have no clue where to start. I think it’s safe to presume that a lot of these information services were designed by people who are *not* poor, and so maybe we shouldn’t be surprised that it’s such a difficult thing to get into the whole assistance system.” (Participant)

“I think it’d be good to truly integrate resources that address poverty and programs that address other problems, so that there’s not *just* a single-parent program, or so that there’s not *just* a workforce job-training program...I really think a greater integration of community resources, bringing in outside folks who are at a different standard of living—those in the middle and upper class who’re promoting an arts scholarship or whatever, or those who know other programs that might interest folks who’re struggling and may benefit from those programs—I think that mixing and mingling of classes would be more beneficial than we realize.” (Participant)

Theme #4: Education and Financial Literacy

Participants discussed formal and informal education as crucial factors in helping to improve local well being. Some respondents, particularly staff, focused on what they perceived to be “poor parenting” and urged that much learning happens within the home, thus parents should largely be held responsible for their children’s success in life. Yet for the most part, respondents emphasized that the broader community should provide learning opportunities for people of all ages. Moreover, some respondents sensitized the discussion more explicitly toward issues of social class by saying that some county residents, particularly homeless and foster youth, have never been privileged enough to benefit from stable, educative family environments. The following comments speak to the general importance of obtaining at least some kind of education:

“If you at least can get a two-year degree, even that can bump you up on the wage scale, it’s really important to have a degree. But these days, getting a degree is just way too expensive, and particularly because living expenses are so high—it’s hard to go to CSU or even Front Range or Aims if you’re also trying to hold down a job that has zero benefits.” (Participant)

“I’d say getting an education, whatever kind it is, if it’s general or specialized, college or workforce center or DVR [Division of Vocational Rehabilitation], it’s really important in making it better than where your parents were.” (Participant)

Teen Pregnancy and High School Dropouts

Unsurprisingly, several staff respondents expressed their concern with teenage pregnancy and the high school dropout rate. These staff suggested that local education strategies should concentrate particularly upon these two issues. Though there is only thin social science evidence directly linking early pregnancy with poverty, our respondents still identified

teenage pregnancy as a key issue in understanding poverty. (These were exclusively staff concerns). For example:

“People need to be better educated across the board, from early pregnancy to finances and everything.” (Staff)

“I think one of the most important ways to address the poverty issue is to reduce teen pregnancy and dropouts. And for the dropouts we need to increase the variety of education available, go beyond the main high schools and put more funding toward alternative education and continuing education... And the education needs to be near to where they are living—lots of times the education programs are offered but they require people to travel all over the place just to get to them. That’s just not workable.” (Staff)

Financial Literacy

Some staff respondents perceived that local residents living in poverty lack an adequate working knowledge about managing finances. Although several respondents voiced this as an issue, the following staff comment illustrates the overall theme:

“Many people, adults and kids alike, don’t even know what compound interest is, and so it just proves a point that people are not learning about finances and savings, they’re not learning it in school, and they’re not learning it as adults.” (Staff)

Taking a markedly different approach to the financial literacy issue, some respondents noted how difficult it can be for people to know how to manage something they simply do not possess. The following comment succinctly illustrated such a perspective:

“Yea it’s important to learn about the dangers of credit cards and the potential good things that could come from having a savings account. But on the other hand, what good is an interest rate if you don’t have any money to put into a savings account in the first place? So it’s not *just* about financial awareness, it’s a deeper problem of how it’s so difficult to get ahead in this economy.” (Staff)

“I can’t even say that my checkbook is balanced right now. Why? Because I got so many bills to take care of that it’s not really something I can spend the time in dealing with.” (Participant)

Theme #5: Changes in Family Structure

Respondents in most of the discussion groups voiced their concerns about what they perceive to be a rise in single- and teenage parenthood. As the first quote below indicates, some staff respondents directly implicated single parenthood in “causing” family poverty and its associated challenges. However as the following comments show, most respondents spoke against what they perceived to be the simplistic characterization of single parenthood as a major factor driving the poverty rate—instead of making any causal assumptions about single parenthood and poverty, they simply raised single- and teenage parenthood as a factor that complicates the poverty question.

“I’d say a big part of the poverty issue is the deterioration of the nuclear family. I see so many single-parent families, mostly single moms, and it’s pretty obvious to know why they’re not makin’ it—on the other hand, if you’ve got two parents in the house then you’re gonna have more income and be better able to make it.” (Staff)

“I think single parents are the ones who struggle so much more than others. It’s really hard to make it if you’re all alone and have a kid.” (Participant)

“These days it’s mainly teenagers who’re getting’ pregnant, that’s what it seems to me at least.” (Staff)

“I never thought I’d be a single mom. When I got pregnant, I was totally in love with him [boyfriend] and thought I’d be with him for the rest of my life. And then he left me, so what am I supposed to do?” (Participant)

“When we found out I was pregnant, my boyfriend stayed around for about a month and then he took off...But you know, I can honestly say—I was raised by a single mother and I was happy, ‘cause my dad was a loser and never around, but even though we’re poor my mom tried really hard to make me happy, and I was.” (Participant)

“Oh! It makes me so angry when people say, ‘well if teenagers would just stop having babies, then they wouldn’t be so poor.’ I mean, I was *already* livin’ in poverty, so how can they say it’s my kids that make me poor? Yeah it’s hard for us to get by everyday, but all I want is to have a family. Seriously, all I care about is caring about the ones I love and being cared about...I grew up in poverty and went from one bad foster family to the next, and really all I want in life is to be loved.” (Participant)

Theme #6: Challenges for Hispanic Families

Due to time and budget constraints, we were able to conduct only one Spanish-speaking focus group. This discussion exposed some of the challenges local Hispanic residents may encounter in their lives. When asked the question, “¿que necesitas para ganar una vida adecuada?” (“what does it take to achieve a decent standard of living?”), several of our Spanish-speaking participants responded in strikingly distinct ways when compared with our English-speaking participants. Participants discussed their difficulties, which ranged from the unique stresses associated with having kin live faraway to blatant examples of everyday racism and hiring discrimination. Instances of observed racial bias and reported discrimination are quite common in the US generally, so this finding was notable but unsurprising. Presented here in English, the comments below illustrate how some of Larimer County’s low-income Hispanic families face these particular challenges.

“Living together—living *with* my family, living *with* my children—is what would make for a decent life. It’s very difficult to live apart from my family, especially my children [who are living in Mexico]. (Participant)

“A decent standard of living would mean not having to worry about not having papers [work papers], so I could stop worrying about getting fired from my job. It would mean that I don’t have to worry about failing a job interview just because I don’t speak English well.” (Participant)

“A lot of Hispanic families happen to be really poor compared to other families in this area, and those who are undocumented are afraid of getting jobs that they *could* get, because they’re afraid of the potential consequences.” (Staff)

“I worry a lot about my kids, and I hope they don’t have to grow up facing the discrimination and racism [*discriminacion y racismo*] that I face almost daily. When I’m with my kids shopping at Albertson’s—even though I hold a steady job—all the time I can see people giving us looks just because we’re speaking Spanish...I also want my kids to have the chance to grow up and live without fear [*vivir sin miedo*] of being poor all their lives.” (Participant)

“I went to interview at the Taco Bell-KFC, and I had a hard time speaking English, so the manager said ‘sorry, you probably shouldn’t have applied here, but I’ll consider your application along with all the others.’ And of course I never got a call back from him, he gave the job to someone else...I think discrimination is worse today than it was in the past.” (Participant)

Our Spanish-language discussion evoked several of the major themes evident in our English-speaking groups as discussed above, including the lack of adequate wages, high cost of living, the importance of education and gaining job experience, and the need for job and social service information dissemination. For example:

“Even though Larimer County has a lot of help to offer if you’re in need, it’s still difficult to make it if you don’t have work experience, or if you’re not very educated, or if you don’t have papers...Education and job training are very important things to

have, so if you don't have it then things are hard...I think today it's more difficult to maintain a comfortable life than it was seven or eight years ago. Life is just more difficult, things are more expensive—clothes, food, gas, childcare, it all cost so much.” (Participant)

“We need higher wages! That's one of the ways we could secure a more comfortable life here.” (Participant)

“I would like to see an informational organization that advertises about things like orientation classes, or that distributes a newsletter telling where the jobs are, or just that announces local information in Spanish...so far the Workforce Center has been helpful about these things to me, but more is needed.” (Participant)

Theme #7: “Community Awareness” of Issues Faced by People Living in Poverty

Finally, respondents mentioned a wish that “the community” would better understand the varied situations that cause people to struggle financially and emotionally. Although the concept of “the community” remained rather vague, still we thought it notable that several respondents' comments evoked a theme regarding the need for greater overall community awareness:

“People who rent out places and who hire us for jobs, they need to be more understanding of young people...Like, sometimes young adults, people between like 18 and 25, often don't really know what they're doing. Everyone is not necessarily an adult in knowing how to get good credit, and not every young person has health insurance—I mean, I got kicked off of Medicaid right when I turned eighteen. I also remember the day I turned eighteen, and I mean the *day* I turned eighteen, I got flooded with credit card applications...But I think people, especially landlords, need to be more understanding.” (Participant)

“I was a waitress once, and my mom is still a waitress and she's a single mom. We live in a trailer park, but we're happy. And I think that's something people need to understand, is that just because we don't have money doesn't mean we're miserable—I mean, I had a perfectly happy childhood...It's just hard to make ends meet these days, jobs are pretty much crappy, and people should realize that not everyone can get a decent job.” (Participant)

“I think we need more people knocking on the doors of people who're living in poverty, and maybe handing them a basket of stuff like food, toiletries, diapers, or whatever they need, and just saying ‘someone loves you.’ I really think that action like that can be very powerful.” (Participant)

“We would really hope that people hear about us [a nonprofit organization] when they're younger so they don't wait so long...I was at an event the other night in Loveland and people there were telling me that there are a lot of local folks who're struggling who had no idea that there's anything like this available to them.” (Staff)

“I think we should step it up and build another homeless shelter, ‘cause I don’t think a lot of people realize that there’s a lot of homeless people here...And if we did that [built another homeless shelter], then there are a lot of younger people here in town and in Larimer County who could probably do a better job of running the thing because they know what it’s like because they’ve been there.” (Participant)

“Social workers really need to have a better understanding, or maybe kind of just more empathy, on what it’s like to be living in dire straights like I am...I couldn’t believe it, one time I actually heard my case worker talking shit about me behind my back, about how my situation was because of my own fault—or at least she *thought* she was talking behind my back. And I confronted her and I told her that she made me feel like crap and she didn’t know what she was talking about.” (Participant)

Conclusions

This study shows the relative importance of a variety of factors that drive both household poverty and changes in regional poverty. Due to the complex nature of poverty, there is no single solution that will eradicate, or even dramatically reduce it in Larimer County and Fort Collins. Further complicating the issue is the fact that the dynamics of child poverty differ from those of adult poverty--these are two unique problems that require unique solutions.

Despite the absence of a single cause there are several factors that seem to be most strongly related to poverty. We summarize those here.

Child poverty

In 2006 nearly 1-in-5 children under the age of 18 in Fort Collins lived in poverty. This marked a dramatic increase from 1999, when it was less than 1-in-10. Looking at household level data, we find two strong correlates.

The first is **single parent households**. In 2006 more than 3-in-4 impoverished children in Fort Collins lived in single parent households. Child poverty rates in single parent households are nearly 50 percent. Although additional research is needed on the causes of the rising number of single parent families, especially in Fort Collins, the mechanism between single parent households and poverty is fairly straightforward. In particular, we find that single parent households are less likely to have an adult employed full time. The importance of this is described below.

The second factor strongly related to child poverty is the language spoken at home. Over all, we find that children are substantially more likely to live in poverty if **Spanish is the primary language spoken at home**. One important caveat is that children in households headed by someone of Hispanic origin are no more likely to live in poverty than children in white households. Instead, it is the language spoken at home, with children in linguistically isolated households especially prone to poverty.

Household poverty

The surest pathway out of poverty for households is if at least one household member is employed full time. One important factor affecting the change in poverty has been a decrease in the share of working age households with at least one person employed full time. In 1999 73 percent of Fort Collins households with the household head between the ages of 25 and 65 had at least one member working full time. In 2006 this percentage dropped to 66.5 percent.

In a series of statistical models--the results for which are not presented here--we examine the factors that increase the likelihood for full time employment for an individual. Not surprisingly, we find that one of the most important determinants is education, with college graduates the most likely to be employed full time. Interestingly we find that households where a high school diploma is the highest degree held by any member of the household are significantly more likely to have full time employment than households where at least one member has “some college or a two year degree” only.

Disability is one of the most important factors inhibiting full time employment. Data from 2006 indicates that 5,388 (5.6 percent) have an “employment disability” that negatively affects their ability to work. Of this group, it is estimated that 2,740 (50.8 percent) live in poverty.

Although our analysis on childhood poverty indicates that children from households where Spanish is the primary language are more likely to live in poverty, our research shows that these same households are more likely to have an adult employed full time than households where English is the primary language.

The story is the opposite, however, for linguistically isolated households. Here, we find that households who do not speak English are less likely to have a member who works full time.
What factors influence poverty overall?

In addition to analyzing household data, we looked at a broader picture, considering factors that affect MSA level poverty rates and changes in the poverty rate. Our intent here was to identify how employment growth might affect poverty. We did so by examining Larimer County’s performance relative to more than 200 other MSAs across the USA with populations less than 500,000 people.

Many of our findings are consistent with the household data analysis. For example, we see that higher levels of education are, on average, related to lower poverty rates, although education differences seem not to affect changes in poverty rates. Applying our results to Larimer County we see that if 315 people that once had less than a high school degree would somehow earn a high school diploma or equivalent, then the number of people in poverty in the county would be reduced by about 598.

We also find corroborating support that single parent households are more likely to be in poverty. Here our results suggest that if the number of single parent households declined by 68, there would be 46 fewer children under the age of 18 in poverty in Larimer County. *We warn readers not to use these findings as the basis for moral arguments.* There are certainly plenty of legitimate reasons for single parent families, including escape from abusive relationships, incarceration, and a host of others. Instead, we believe that these findings suggest the importance of support systems for such families, especially systems that enable household heads to work full time, the surest way out of poverty.

Our last finding of note is that economic development—in terms of full time employment growth and creation of high wage jobs—can help families escape poverty. One of our pressing concerns is that recent economic restructuring in Larimer County’s economy, particularly the significant loss of manufacturing jobs, has reduced the number of full-time jobs available to local residents, especially those without a college degree.

We are further concerned that relatively good overall economic performance, as measured simply by job creation, has masked some of the real difficulties facing the economy. Over the past 7 years or so, the county has added jobs at a steady rate, but those jobs have often been in sectors that rely on advanced education (such as professional services), or are part-time (such as retail, lodging and food services). This has led to a bifurcation in employment opportunities that significantly rewards education and does not offer a significant number of promising career pathways for individuals without a college degree.

In our view these problems are compounded by a local tax revenue structure that depends heavily on retail sales taxes. We implore local leaders to aggressively pursue economic development opportunities that emphasize individual outcomes as much as revenue streams.

Future Research

This research project provides insight into the factors influencing poverty in Fort Collins and Larimer County. However, it is important to remember that households can still struggle even if they are officially not in poverty. For example, state data indicates the average monthly rent for a 2-bedroom, 1-bath apartment in Fort Collins is more than \$700 per month. On an annual basis, this is more than \$8,000, and represents in excess of 40 percent of a \$20,000 annual income (the poverty level for a family of 4). It is not unusual for annual child care expenses to approach this figure as well. Other important expenses include food, health care, transportation, utilities and clothing. Because of this reality, many argue that the poverty rate does not adequately capture the true economic hardships facing Larimer County families today.

Our research did not explore the families that are living on the brink of poverty, say with annual earnings above poverty but less than \$30,000. Although we expect that our main findings in this study apply to these families as well, we also suspect that these households face some unique challenges. For example, our interviews suggest that workers can be married, employed full time, and have schooling beyond a high school degree, yet still struggle. In these instances economic development in terms of the creation of stable, high wage jobs, is likely a much more important factor in guaranteeing a good standard of living. Future research efforts should look more closely at these particular households.

APPENDIX

Information Sheet for Group Interview (“Focus Group”) *Pathways Past Poverty Project* Larimer County, CO

What are we asking of you?

We want to listen to local residents’ perspectives about what it takes to achieve a decent standard of living in Larimer County. Primarily, we need your time and your insights, so we would like you to contribute to one of our discussions, to be held at what we hope will be a convenient location for you. Each group discussion will last about one hour. For research purposes, we will be audio recording every discussion, but we will never reveal anyone’s identity to anyone, for any reason, so your confidentiality is assured. Matt Aronson, one of our social scientists, would like to have an informal and open-ended discussion with you and a few other participants about topics such as housing, childcare, transportation, education, healthcare, food costs, employment, wages, and family needs. Mainly we’re interested in addressing some of the complexities attached to the following question: “What does it take to achieve a decent standard of living today in Larimer County?”

What is the incentive for you to participate?

In order to thank you for contributing to our research project, each participant in our discussions will receive a \$25 *Visa* spending card.

What is this study about?

In October 2007, the United Way of Larimer County along with the Northern Colorado Economic Development Corporation, Colorado State University’s *Center for Public Deliberation*, and the *Coloradoan* newspaper, started a community-wide task force to look at our community’s resources and to develop a plan of action to address the county’s rising rate of poverty during the past seven years. The first step in being able to do so is to understand what has caused the rise in our county’s poverty rate. Once this is accomplished, we can then help to focus our community’s efforts more effectively. Matt Aronson is leading the part of our study involving focus group interviews with residents and social service providers in Larimer County. Martin Shields, an economist with the Northern Colorado Economic Development Corporation, is leading the statistical part of our study using information from the U.S. Census Bureau.

What will we do with this information?

After we carefully look at the information gathered in this study, by October we will suggest policy and programming options to several segments of the local community. For example, United Way may choose to use our findings as a way to help them make decisions about where to focus their efforts. It’s also possible that Larimer County’s human service providers and agencies, including those in County government, may benefit from our findings as they strive to generate better conditions for local residents.

Información sobre Entrevistas en Grupos
Proyecto *Pathways Past Poverty (Soluciones por Pobreza)*
Larimer County, CO

¿Qué le pedimos?

Queremos oír los perspectivas de ciudadanos locales sobre lo que tiene que hacer para ganar una vida sostenible in Larimer County. Principalmente, necesitamos su tiempo y sus perspectivas, y quisiéramos que participe en un diálogo, que puede pasar en un lugar conveniente para Ud. Cada grupo de discusión durará una hora. Por motivos de la investigación, tendremos una grabación de audio durante cada discusión, pero nunca revelaremos su identidad por ninguna razón, y su confidencialidad es segura. Matt Aronson, un sociologo de la Universidad Estatal de Colorado, quiere tener una discusión informal y de composición abierta con Ud. y con otras personas sobre temas como: el alojamiento, el cuidado de los niños, la transportación, la educación, el seguro médico, los gastos de comida, el empleo, los sueldos, y las necesidades de la familia. Principlamente, queremos contestar la pregunta, “¿Que se necesita para ganar una vida sostenible hoy en Larimer County?” y mejorar nuestra comprensión de este asunto muy complicado.

¿Por qué participa?

Para agradecerle a Ud. por su participación en nuestra investigación, cada persona en nuestro diálogo recibirá una tarjeta de comprar de Visa por \$20.

¿De qué se trata esta investigación?

En octubre 2007, el United Way de Larimer County, con la Northern Colorado Economic Development Corporation (la Corporación del Desarrollo Económico del Norte de Colorado), el *Center for Public Deliberation* de la Universidad Estatal de Colorado, y el periodio *Coloradoan* iniciaron un grupo comunitario para investigar nuestros recursos y para desarrollar un plan de acción para resolver el nivel de pobreza que ha crecido en los últimos siete años. El primer paso para realizar este plan es el mejor conocimiento sobre lo que haya causado la subida de la pobreza en Larimer County. Después de realizar eso, podemos ofrecer un enfoque mas claro de los intentos de nuestra comunidad para coordinarlos mejor. Matt Aronson, un sociologo de la Universidad Estatal de Colorado, es el líder de la parte de nuestra investigación que incluye entrevistas con grupos de ciudadanos y de proveedores de servicios sociales en Larimer County. Martin Shields, un economista de la Universidad Estatal de Colorado y de la Northern Colorado Economic Development Corporation (la Corporación del Desarrollo Económico del Norte de Colorado) es el líder de la parte estadístico de la investigación, usando información general del Departamento del Censo de los Estados Unidos.

¿Que haremos con esta información?

Después de revisar cuidadosamente la información de esta investigación, en octubre seguiremos opciones políticas y programadas a varios sectores de la comunidad local. Por ejemplo, United Way podría usar nuestras conclusiones para ayudarles enfocar su trabajo y sus decisiones. Tambien, es posible que los proveedores y las agencias de Larimer County, incluyendo estos del gobierno del County, beneficiarán de nuestras conclusiones cuando trabajan para mejorar las condiciones para ciudadanos locales.

PPP—Focus Group Guide
INTRODUCTIONS [brief]

Thank you all for being here! It means a lot that you're willing to give your time and energy to talk with us today. I would like to hear about all the things *you* think are most important to achieving a decent standard of living in Larimer County. I'll be asking some questions from my cheat-sheet here, but mainly I'm here to *listen*. Most of my questions are intentionally open-ended, so please speak your mind. Also, in asking all of you the same set of questions, please know that I'm *not* expecting you all to agree on everything—a little disagreement is just fine. Now, I'd like for us to introduce ourselves, so when your time comes, please tell us your first name, where you grew up, and something fun you've done this summer ☺ I'll start us off...

QUESTIONS

1) First I'd like to hear about what you think it means to live comfortably here in Larimer County: That is, what do you think makes for a "decent standard of living" in Larimer County today?

Prompt: In order to have a comfortable life for you and your family, what are the *3 most important* issues in your household? (these could include finances, housing, healthcare, childcare, food, transportation, education, employment, care and support, general happiness & emotional well being, etc.)

[List their suggestions on large flipchart or whiteboard for all R's to see]

2) Do you think there are certain folks in Larimer County who tend to struggle more than others in achieving a decent standard of living? If so, then *why* do you think some segments of the population tend to struggle more than others?

3) Think about *all* the things we've discussed so far. **[Repeat aloud from whiteboard/flipchart...]** Is there one issue that is *most* important to you? You may write it down if you wish. Tell me, why is it so important compared to the other issues?

4) Now I'd like to know your thoughts about the County's economic situation. Since the year 2000, the percent of people living in poverty has risen significantly in Larimer County, especially among families with children. For those of you who've lived here for a few years, think how you would explain this rise in the poverty rate—what's different today compared to 7 or 8 years ago?

4a) Do you think unemployment is a *major* reason for this increase?

4b) In your experience here in Larimer County, what are the biggest barriers to getting a job?

4c) In your experience, what are the biggest barriers to *keeping* a job once you find one?

4d) What is the best potential solution you think could help more people to get a job and keep it?

5) Now, I'd like you to think about your "most important" issue **[from #3]** and how it's connected to achieving a decent standard of living:

Are there any community actions that you think could be effective in improving the situation for local residents? (a "community action" could be: grassroots activism, a public awareness campaign, social services, policies, funding initiatives, organizational changes, etc)

6) What do you think we missed during today's discussion? (Was there anything you thought we would discuss today but didn't?)