

WELLBEING IN ELLENSBURG: A REPORT ON COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

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College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Community & Natural Resources Institute
UtahStateUniversity.



S.J. & Jessie E. Quinney
College of Natural Resources
UtahStateUniversity



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This report focuses on community wellbeing perspectives in Ellensburg as part of a larger project on community resilience. Ellensburg community leaders from government, business, and civic sectors were interviewed along with general community members, for a total of 39 interviews, including 8 in Spanish. This qualitative research is not a systematic survey of community members. It illuminates key issues and deeper relationships in a community and can guide future research and planning efforts. The report that follows summarizes themes and perspectives we gathered during these Ellensburg interviews.

WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO WELLBEING IN ELLENSBURG?

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Ellensburg's connection to the local natural environment and natural resources is a crucial source of wellbeing for many people who live there. This relationship is characterized by people in different ways, as some discuss access to **outdoor recreation**, some talk about the importance of **agriculture**, and others talk about the importance of Ellensburg's **clean air, water, and sunshine**.

"..the outdoor opportunities are what I pursue. I spent all day yesterday fishing... And so just things to do that are outside, that is a big one. And the weather is huge for this location, just geographically. It's good for my spirits."

"Well, for me, the fact that I can walk anywhere I want to go... Wellbeing means that there's green spaces, nature parks, places I can be outdoors and enjoy nature. This city has all of that."

SMALL TOWN FEEL

Many people made reference to the **small town feel** and **community connectedness** that they experience in Ellensburg as a source of wellbeing for themselves and the community. Many community members especially appreciate running into people they know in town and having a sense of familiarity with others. People also highlight the support system within the town and a willingness to support each other in times of need.

"For me, honestly, it's that I can drop something in the grocery store and it will find its way back to me. I can bump into someone in the street, not know them and find out their life story in the next 20 minutes while we wait in line."

"Very laid back and your neighbors take care of your neighbors. When the neighbor's cows get out, everybody's out there helping round up the cows. That kind of mentality."

SAFETY

Several community members brought up the relative **safety** of the community and interview participants frequently characterized Ellensburg as a **good place to have a family**.

“I would describe Ellensburg as a quiet, community-focused place. Safe, kind, and collaborative...I think a word or a phrase that comes up frequently is ‘a good place to raise kids.’”

“I like how welcomed you feel. The safety, the resources you have, and having everything within reach.”

CWU

Wellbeing is furthered by the presence of Central Washington University, as CWU presents many **employment** and **cultural engagement opportunities**, while also attracting a **diverse student population**.

“I think that the university adds to that wellbeing with a cultural scene that is available to us that isn't available in some other communities.”

“I would describe [Ellensburg] as a small town, but it's a college town...There's a lot going on, there's a little more diversity than other small towns.”

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Between FISH food bank, APOYO food bank, Habitat for Humanity, HopeSource, and other **community-focused aid organizations**, there is much work being done in the **food and housing security** space to provide assistance to those in need. Many people cited the services provided by these groups as vital to the future of the community, and many interview participants shared a sense of gratitude for their presence in the Ellensburg community.

“[FISH does] a lot of great work in supplying food to underserved communities and homeless communities. So that I think is a really, really great resource in town and I know it gets a lot of support. So they're doing great stuff. I know there are a lot of churches in the area as well, that may have something to do with food drives or food banks.”

“I will say that the nonprofit organizations here in the community...are helping us develop those areas with smaller homes and different kinds of homes. Habitat has a project now which, they're still single-family homes but they're three bedrooms, modest, affordable for people who are on modest salary, low income, if they can qualify. And they're building 18 single family homes in a community kind of arrangement, which is a good project. HopeSource has built a very large multi-family facility in the last 10 years. That project's probably been in place about five years now.”

“The idea was to create a multicultural center where everyone was welcomed. And [APOYO] would offer adult [language] classes... It's mainly to assist families in any way possible to create comfort, to create security, to create peace. So that's where we are right now. Food is also available through APOYO.”

AGRICULTURE

Local **agriculture** is important to many Ellensburg community members who participated in our research. Interviewees discussed the contribution of agriculture to the local economy, Ellensburg's community identity, and future development throughout Central Washington. The **Ellensburg Rodeo** is also an important community event for many people, and represents these connections to agricultural histories for some residents.

"Ellensburg has worked hard to maintain that [connection to agriculture] and support farmers and country-type things. You know, [the] rodeo and all that. So yeah [...] I think there's still a strong connection there. I'm not inside that at all nor am I Mr. Political so I don't see a lot of that, but they've really tried hard to maintain that and support our famers here for sure."

"Our biggest crop is hay, this timothy hay, which brings in, I couldn't tell you right now, but a few years ago it was 40 million a year into the valley because a lot of it was exported to Asia."

"But the backbone is a lot of community involvement, involvement as far as volunteers coming out and, you know, painting the barns or leading the 4-H groups or you know, helping coordinate the different aspects of the rodeo, and that trickles down to a large number of events that happen throughout the county and throughout the year."



WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN ELLENSBURG CONCERNED ABOUT?

LOSS OF SMALL TOWN FEEL

There is a fear that Ellensburg may be at risk of losing its **“small town” atmosphere** that many believe is a key contributor to **quality of life**. This concern highlights the importance of maintaining spaces for gathering and interaction among residents to foster positive relationships that make Ellensburg unique.

“I know that people like living here because they feel like it’s a strong community and there’s a fear of change that as more people come, that will be lost. But with more people coming here it makes an ability to stay, to have opportunities even harder.”

“As the community urbanizes like it never has before, there’s going to be a sense of loss within the population that we’re losing something.”

HEALTHCARE

Healthcare availability was cited as a potential area for improvement. Those interviewed mentioned that Ellensburg does not have adequate care options for all in the community, particularly specialty care and mental health treatment.

“The number one thing [people are dependent on other places for] would be for specialist services for health. We don’t have a lot of specialists at all. And so, there’s a lot of people who go to Issaquah and to Seattle for medical services.”

“We don’t have consistent or good health care. We certainly don’t have mental health services, as I would like to see in a community. ... That’s concerning to me ... we don’t have these other things to give them the quality of life that I think is important.”

POPULATION GROWTH AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Interviewees described challenges with **population growth and housing**. They worry about **affordable housing** options for students and full-time residents, and whether the community has enough housing. The cost of housing was cited a stressor in an already expensive community, with **rising cost of living** being a detriment to wellbeing. Some expressed concern over **development sprawl**, particularly as a threat to land that could otherwise be used for recreation or agriculture.

“Kittitas County is one of the most expensive counties in Washington. Our housing prices are up there with some of the highest in the state and our income ratio is among the lowest in the state. So, there’s a lot of gaps here. People either work at the university, the hospital, the school district, or they’re in service level jobs and not making much money at all. I have often compared the rent to income ratio as similar to ... Manhattan.”

“One of the biggest problems we have in the city is housing... We’re just now beginning to see some signs that builders and developers are recognizing the need for smaller housing and multi-family housing. That gets the price down where it’s a little more affordable for middle income people which I think comprise a pretty large population of that demographic change that we’ve seen in the Hispanic community, particularly. People come here to work at Central and they cannot afford to buy a house because they don’t have the savings for a down payment. So, you’re talking about a younger demographic of people who are starting families, starting careers, that kind of thing. And the houses that we have on the market are \$400,000 and above and they’re single family and they just keep building these kinds of homes. And people that buy those are moving into the community from the west side and from other parts around the Northwest. So, for the person who’s low income coming here, it’s really hard to find a place to live. And once they’ve found a place to live, they’re going to be cost burdened because they’re paying way more than 30% of their monthly income just to have a place to live. So that’s a huge problem for us right now.”

WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN ELLENSBURG CONCERNED ABOUT?

FLOODING

Some participants discussed **flooding** as an environmental challenge in Ellensburg. When there is a lot of snow in the winter, warm temperatures can melt **snowpack** rapidly causing spring flooding.

“We’re having some flooding issues. ... We get late snow in the season and really warm temperatures for the last few days and our water systems are full and it’s like for once in a long time, the irrigation districts are working with our city staff because we’re like we can’t take any more water. It’s like streets are flooding and stuff and they’re backing off and making adjustments.”

“We have so many creeks and rivers and creeks that run through town. ... We’re always getting flooding and I think that is from increased temperature up in the mountains. We’re not able to hold that water...”

DROUGHT & AGRICULTURE

Concerns were expressed about **water supply** and a lack of diversity in the major crops grown nearby.

“With hay, ... it puts food on the table, but it’s not necessarily food that was grown here. We don’t have the amount of food grown ... like we used to.”

“So, that water goes all the way through Kittitas County and all the way to growers out in the Yakima in an irrigation canal. ... Our hay growers were then told, ‘oh, actually, we’re only gonna be able to provide like 71% of your water rights this year.’ And so, for them, that means they will not get a third cutting of hay because they will be out of water by the time that they would normally be watering that field for the third cutting of hay which is a loss of like \$50,000 for this hay grower. So, ... the drought condition ... is dramatic and ... impacting ... farmers.”

FOOD SECURITY

Community members expressed concern about **food security** and the rapidly rising **cost of healthy food**.

“Y también me preocupa que todo está muy caro. El acceso a la comida es muy difícil si necesitas trabajar mucho para poder tener acceso, para tener buena comida en tu mesa, en tu casa, porque los precios están altísimos en la comida. Por ejemplo, siempre recomiendan comer saludable, comer comida buena, como muchas verduras, pollo, pescado, todo eso, pero todo eso es demasiado caro. Entonces, a mucha gente se la hace más fácil y más rápido y más barato. Gasstan menos yendo, por ejemplo, al Taco Bell o McDonald’s porque es más barata la comida. Y comprarla y cocinarla es muy, muy costoso. Eso es una cosa preocupante también, el precio de las comidas básicas para llevar a nuestros hogares. Por eso ahora mismo aquí en APOYO tenemos mucha gente que está viniendo a agarrar comida y aquí también batallamos mucho también nosotros para tener la comida para darle a las personas.”
= “*And it also worries me that everything is very expensive. Access to food is very difficult and you need to work hard to have access, to have good food on your table, because food prices are very high. For example, they always recommend eating healthy, eating good food, like lots of vegetables, chicken, fish, but all of that is way too expensive. So, a lot of people find it easier and faster and cheaper, they spend less going to Taco Bell or McDonald’s, because it’s cheaper food. And buying it and cooking it is very, very expensive. That is something worrisome too, the cost of basic foods to take to our homes. That is why here in APOYO we have a lot of people that are coming to get food and we also fight a lot to have food to give to people.*”

“I still think the Farmer’s Market is priced out of most people’s budget. Unless you’re pretty well off, it’s really impossible to get access to organic, locally grown stuff. And even like, locally grown beef is like \$22 a pound the last time I inquired about it and I was like ‘No, thanks.’”

WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN ELLENSBURG CONCERNED ABOUT?

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Not all interviewees were focused on the loss of small town feel in Ellensburg. To the contrary, some cited **conservatism** as a barrier for growth and inclusion.

“Pero también hay muchos jóvenes que no hacen prácticamente nada y eso es muy triste. Pero bueno, el caso es de que pues. ... Aquí, pues la verdad es un pueblo muy calmado y es muy conservador. No hay gente así, pues que esté todo ahí como comunicando o diciendo, haciendo cosas. Entonces es una ciudad, es un pueblo muy conservador.” = *“There’s also many young people who do practically nothing and that is very sad. Well, the truth is that it is a very calm and conservative town. There are no people like that, there are no people who are out there communicating or saying, doing things. So it is a city - it is a very conservative town.”*

“In 2020, there was a BLM [Black Lives Matter] event. ... I was part of the group that was demonstrating outside the courthouse with the sign. Very peaceful, very quiet. ... I was shocked, actually to see that some of the resistance was coming from the elderly. I was very, I was shocked. I mean there were people, ladies and men in their upper 70s ... come by and scream out all kinds of crazy, nasty things to us and threatened to shoot us, threaten to kill us if we didn’t move. ... Even though that’s gradually disappearing, we still have a segment of that type of sentiment in town, resistance change. So that’s discouraging. It’s kind of negative. But again, I think it’s very optimistic. I think it’s slowly disappearing.”



WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN ELLENSBURG CONCERNED ABOUT?

DIVISIONS IN THE COMMUNITY

Interviewees representing the growing Latine community expressed worry about **divisions in the community**. They described the Latine community as not feeling a **sense of belonging** within the overall population. Some recognized that this has been improving over time and as more Latine move to the area, but it is still a pressing issue. They cited language barriers, fear of **discrimination**, and lack of confidence in navigating predominantly white spaces, institutions, and events. These issues were identified as barriers to feeling welcomed in the community and establishing a sense of belonging. A few Latine participants mentioned racial discrimination and division as threats to the wellbeing of the community. Some members of the Latine community also spoke about a **lack of cohesion** within their community.

“Para ellos, si no se sienten bienvenidos y si no saben el idioma o si no sienten que el lugar les prohíba, les prohíbe la persona que los traduzca o la manera de cómo comunicarse, no van a acercarse. Porque ellos piensan que no son bienvenidos, que los van a discriminar por no hablar el inglés y que si no saben inglés no pueden comunicarse, no pueden acercarse. ... Ellos piensan que no pueden ser escuchados.” = *“For them, if they don’t feel welcomed and if they don’t know the language or if they don’t feel that the place prohibits it, prohibits a person to translate or the way to communicate, they won’t get near. Because they think they aren’t welcomed, that they will be discriminated because they don’t speak English and that if they don’t know English they cannot communicate, they can’t get near. ... They think that they cannot be heard.”*

“Me parece que están como divididos en dos entre la parte Americana y la parte extranjera, en general. ... No quiero decir que no, pero no se sienten cómodos, no pertenecen ... he tenido oportunidad de conversar con viarias personas y es su percepción.” = *“Well, I think it’s divided into two, between the American part and the foreigner part, in general. ... I don’t want to say they don’t, but they don’t feel comfortable, they don’t belong. ... I’ve had the opportunity to converse with a variety of people and that’s their perception.”*

“Haz de cuenta que personas se burlan cuando no hablas inglés y esto se me hace como parte del racismo. Vas a la calle y te miran mal. Mucha gente blanca, hay mucha gente que es muy buena persona, o sea, hay de todo.” = *“So, people make fun of you when you don’t speak English and that seems to me to be part of racism. You go to the street and they look at you badly. Many white people, there are many people who are very good people, I mean, there is everything.”*

“Es una muestra de la separación de la conciencia, no? De la gente latina y la gente blanca” = *“It’s a sign of the separation of consciousness, no? Of the Latino people and the white people. I’m always fighting with white people.”*

“No sé is debo mencionar esto, pero aquí en este pueblo ha habido mucho racism. Entonces, candyhay mucho racism, uno vive tranquilo.” = *“I don’t know if I should mention this, but here in this town there has been a lot of racism. So, when there is a lot of racism, one lives quietly.”*

“[Me preocupa] que dentro de la misma comunidad, dentro del mismo grupo, en este caso de los extranjeros o hispanos, pues también se discriminan ellos. ... Tú no eres de ese grupo, de tal país, pues igual hablas español por decir, ¿no? ‘Pero no, pues no eres de este grupo porque nosotros tenemos este tiempo. Nosotros sabemos. Nos ha costado.’” = *“[It worries me] that within the same community, within the same group, in this case the foreigners or Hispanics, they also discriminate between each other. You’re not from this group, from such country, but you also speak Spanish, let’s say, no? ‘Well, you’re not from this group because we have been here this long. We know. it has cost us.”*

LOOKING TO ELLENSBURG'S FUTURE, WHAT ARE PEOPLE EXCITED ABOUT?

OPPORTUNITIES FROM GROWTH

While some have concerns about the impacts of growth in Ellensburg, some also believe that growth could provide exciting opportunities moving forward. Several participants discussed new business opportunities and an expanding local economy, while others discussed enthusiasm for new infrastructure development and more community events.

"I'm excited if they get that fieldhouse ... I played sports and softball and I've been to tournaments and stuff and I think if our city puts in and anybody just invested in like, a good sports complex out that way. It would draw so many people here, jobs, hotel, you know, all those things that go with people coming."

"I think what excites me the most is the growth that's happening, both in terms of size, and also these other ideas that are being brought in."

"We may be currently sleepy, but there are signs of growth. The university, you know, is continuing to expand, just the footprint of Ellensburg is growing, we had to add a new elementary school because our population continues to expand. So that, that's exciting ... but still within all that keeping that small town feel, so far, so good, I guess."

YOUTH

A number of participants mentioned seeing **new generations** of Ellensburg residents coming of age and having an impact on their community. Many people made reference to Ellensburg's youth as exciting, and investment in young people as important for the town's future.

"I'm excited because of the youth. I think the youth have got a good handle on things, generally speaking. The majority of the kids, from what I see and hear from them, they are pushing back in ways that I think are appropriate."

"We've got a good school district. I think our kids get a good education, which is important to wellbeing."

"And [the interviewee's grandchildren] have been fine. They have a wonderful school... [Interviewee's granddaughter] is too busy, almost. But she is heavily involved in city soccer. And travel soccer and all the kids are all on teams. And she's [leadership position in her school], and this and that. So they've had sports they do. They had some little track things that they ordered the city organized for kids. They have a cross country skiing group that's just informal here. I mean, there's not a big pressure at all. And then one of the kids plays basketball. And they can take dance lessons. The art gallery, one art place has classes for kids as well as adults."



BRIDGING GAPS

Participants mentions that continued conversations around **diversity**, **equity**, and **inclusion** in Ellensburg and efforts to **bridge gaps** between groups with different perspectives were positive trajectories.

“Well, the excitement is the positive changes I just mentioned to you. People are beginning to interact with one another. We have a doctor working in the psychology department here at CWU and he creates social events where people--anyone, can come in and provide input. And his events encourage social interaction.”

“Well, it's exciting to see the things that are happening. Things the city is working on and the projects and development things that are coming through... This whole Regional Council of Governments holds a lot of exciting possibilities for the future of Ellensburg, and the whole county. I see more cultural things happening here in town that, that speak to the needs of some of the minority population that we have for recognition and inclusion. And things are happening in the community. They're things happening from some of the art venues here in town, some of the business owners that are more tuned into the cultural differences and cultural needs.”



DIVERSITY

Members of the Latine community mentioned feeling excited about the prospectus of changing attitudes toward them given the rising number of people from Latin America and other countries. They suggested that this demographic change also brings with it more organizations like APOYO and FISH that are able to address the challenges of this population.

“Pues yo nunca he tenido un problema así personalmente, pero sí he mirado mucho racismo. Pero como que la gente se va adaptando también, como miran que los latinos vienen a trabajar, son muy trabajadores. Aquí la mayoría de compañías, como le digo, cultivan mucho zacate [pasto], aquí en los alrededores. Las compañías de zacate, sus trabajadores son casi todos puros latinos. Entonces, tal vez ha bajado el racismo un poco o no ha bajado, pero tal vez lo aceptan un poco más porque necesitan a la gente para trabajar. Entonces, para mí es como triste, pero a la vez sabemos que poco a poco tienen que irnos aceptando” = *“I think it has been changing a little bit, because well, I don't know if I should mention this, but here in this town there has been a lot of racism. So, when there is a lot of racism, one lives quietly. Well, I have never had a problem like that personally, but I have seen a lot of racism. But people are adapting as well, like they see that Latinos come to work, they are very hard workers. Here most of the companies, as I said, grow a lot of grass, here in the surrounding area. The grass companies, their workers are almost all Latinos. So, maybe the racism has gone down a little bit or it hasn't, but maybe they accept it a little bit more because they need people to work. So, for me it's kind of sad, but at the same time we know that little by little they have to accept us.”*

“Several groups are being created here in Ellensburg mainly for social change. We are, we have become very conscious of those in need. So, we have groups, for instance, we have a group that is, I think they call it the bail, the bail bond, Ellensburg Bail Bond, and that is a group that assists. It's mainly students who, for instance, get in trouble with the law.”

HOW IS ELLENSBURG CONNECTED TO OTHER COMMUNITIES IN THE REGION?

Given the broader scope of this project is working across most of the Yakima River Basin, we asked people how they think Ellensburg is connected to other communities in the area. Some of the perspectives shared illustrate important regional connections to both Yakima and to the Seattle metropolitan area.

Ellensburg's central location in the state means that many travelers pass through the area, providing opportunities for the local economy.

"So there are several highways that go through our area. We have several truckstops, we have several hotels. And not only that, but you have lots of bars, lots of little resorts in the county. We have lots of restaurants that are really highly rated. And for a small town we have a lot to do."

Many people travel to Yakima for goods and services that may not be available in Kittitas County. Latine participants mentioned driving to Yakima to acquire ethnic food and fresh produce as well at more affordable prices.

"I don't just live off of Ellensburg, I revolve around everywhere[...] I love to shop. But I'm not gonna shop in this town. So we don't have any stores. We have one or two boutiques. And that's not what I want to do. So I'm gonna go to Yakima to the mall or even the west side."

"En base a alimentación, sentque un poquito alto los precios, muy caro. Porque pues yo aquí es poca lo que comoro, pues solo sería algo de emergency. Porque lo demás voy a comparar el fin de semana hasta Yakima porque siento que es un poco más accesible" = *"In terms of food, I feel that the prices are a little high, very expensive. Because I buy very little here, so it would only be for emergencies. Because the rest I'm going to buy on the weekend in Yakima, because I feel it's a little more accessible, more affordable."*

It has been a pleasure to get to know Ellensburg through this project. Additional details on the project methods or anything else can be obtained by contacting **Dr. Courtney Flint at Utah State University (435-797-8635 or courtney.flint@usu.edu)**.

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Authors: Alex Theophilus, McKayle Law, Emma Epperson, Dr. Jessica Ulrich-Schad, Rebecca Gustine, Dr. Claudia Méndez Wright, Madison Fjeldsted Thompson, and Dr. Courtney Flint.