

# WELLBEING IN YAKIMA: A REPORT ON COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

July 2024



College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
Community & Natural Resources Institute  
Utah State University.



S.J. & Jessie E. Quinney  
College of Natural Resources  
Utah State University



INTERMOUNTAIN WEST  
TRANSFORMATION  
NETWORK  
Funded by NSF Grant #2115169

This report is from a project called the NSF-funded Intermountain West Transformation Network (TN) that focuses on community resilience in the Intermountain West. Researchers from Utah State University conducted interviews in Kittitas and Yakima Counties to understand factors affecting community wellbeing. Local leaders from government, business, and civic sectors were interviewed along with general community members, with a total of 31 interviews conducted. The report that follows summarizes themes and perspectives we gathered during the Yakima interviews. We look forward to incorporating feedback from community members as we finalize our project reporting.

## WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO WELLBEING IN YAKIMA?

### STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY

People mentioned that Yakima is a ***small, close-knit community***, but they still get many of the advantages that come with living in larger city.

“I would say that Yakima is a larger city with 95,000 people that has a very small town feel to it, the environment and inviting people in.”

“I would describe Yakima as a decent sized city that feels like a small town in many ways. That it's really beautiful, we have a lot of access to outdoor recreation activities here[...] agriculture is one of the driving forces of the local economy. And so, there is a lot of agriculture and working lands surrounding the city.”

### CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

For the minority-majority Latino/a/e population (used interchangeably in most interviews with Hispanic, and composed mostly of Mexican ethnic identities), ***access to traditional goods and a Spanish speaking community*** represents an important aspect of wellbeing.

“Something that has helped me, is that there are many places where people speak Spanish [and] English. That has helped me, like in school.”

“I think just our culture, specifically with Hispanic or Latino families, you know, we're creating a lot of small businesses[...] in Yakima and it's making it a lot more homey, and something that you can relate to.”

“And I think it's very important to have[...] several places where we can find food, especially with the variety of cultures we have in Yakima, it's really nice to have food that is close to every one's culture. And I feel there is such a high Hispanic community in Yakima, that it's very, very important that, at least in the main grocery stores, there is Latin food, there is Hispanic food so that we feel closer to home.”

## NATURE

Yakima's ***weather, sunshine, and access to outdoor opportunities*** were important for many people.

"I think the weather. I mean, we have great weather here. And so being able to participate in outdoor activities. And, even in the winter there's things to do so, we're not very far from White Pass if people want to ski and do those types of things. And then we're close to the rivers and nature trails, there's a lot of hiking and things so a lot of outdoor recreation activity that people can utilize here."

"I love the weather here. It took me a while to get acclimated to snow and ice every winter because I came from California, [to] learn to tolerate that well. I love the summertime here, it's my favorite time, I like it 90 to 100 degrees, which is what we're having now. So that contributes to my wellbeing during the summertime, and hopefully carries over during the rest of the year."

## AGRICULTURAL IDENTITY

Yakima's ***agriculture*** is important for the community's economic wellbeing as well as people's identification with the place they live, many take pride in Yakima being the "breadbasket" of the Northwest.

"And, it's an agricultural community, which has a lot of benefits, because you can get fresh something almost any time of the year."

"You know, we're kind of the breadbasket of America. I mean, just growing things in general, I think somebody told me the other day that, I mean, it's not necessarily you know, food, but hops. I think we grow like 90% or 80% of the hops for the entire world or something like that."



## COMMUNITY PRIDE

Many people expressed ***pride in their community*** and invested in seeing Yakima thrive, whether they grew up in town or are newcomers.

"I think that there's enough community members and business members and electives coming together to — that actually... are noticing and want to make these changes. Because that's going to be beneficial instead of just, 'oh, let's do a beautification project,' throw a bunch of money at it, hope it works and then not follow through. So, I really think that these people who are involving themselves in our community, I think there's hope we should be able to see some changes in the next couple of years."

"I feel that there is a growing population of youth. I just think about it so much because I'm so old. When I first started teaching, those students have now graduated high school, and so many of them went off to college and then came back and I see a lot of them now taking leadership roles within the community. And I think, because I worked in kind of a more impoverished area[...] these are the children of farmworkers who now have college degrees. And so, I think they're really invested in the community and I think they are creating, I think they are lending a voice that has been somewhat neglected. And so, I do think that is going to create more and more positive change here in Yakima."

## FAMILY CONNECTIONS

For the Latino/a/e community, an important source of pride are ***family-oriented recreational facilities*** offered by Yakima.

"I would say kind of an aquatic center that's going to open[...] in the next couple of years. It's been hinted that it's going to open and it's basically [...] a waterpark, but it's a surfing waterpark. So, people are gonna be able to surf and get surfing lessons and stuff like that. So, it's kind of like a big deal in Yakima."

"I would think, entertainment, whether it's restaurants, you know, we have a very diverse food scenery here, as well as you know, we grow all these hops, and so breweries, wineries, as well now are in Yakima County. So, we have a really well [sic] foundation when it comes to entertainment. Whether it's[...] food, drinks, as well as recreational, that I think is really strong"





# WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN YAKIMA CONCERNED ABOUT?

A number of participants expressed **concerns about safety** related to substance abuse, gang-related violence, and the unhoused population.

"There is a vast amount of crime and poverty here. So those are the types of things you know, with quality of life and, and things like that. We definitely have a really big challenge with that. So that, you know that accounts for a lot of the negative things[...] that are here in town; gang activities, and then our[...] opioid crisis that is all over, the epidemic that's been going around."

"Sometimes they concentrate around parks that are close to schools or daycare centers which is very scary also because we can[...] see during daylight that there is an exchange of drugs or other issues that homeless have brought to the city. So if that keeps growing that can be very concerning for the city."

"There isn't that much peace like there used to be. It's turning into other places, where people start being scared of going out because you don't know in which moment they are going to start the shootings, in which moment the gangs will meet up."

"In terms of homelessness, I know it's a problem in general, like around every single city. But I would say in Yakima, um, some people[...] would say that Yakima is kind of like a bad town."

Some participants expressed concern about the local police force's **capacity to address safety-related issues**.

"Well that we need more security since there is a shortage of cops, and when something happens the cops take a long time to come. There isn't a lot, a lot of security you could say, because of the shortage of cops."

"I know that[...] our police force[...] has been down and we've never really been 100% capacity with the police force."





Some participants mentioned ***lack of healthcare*** as a threat to wellbeing in Yakima, specifically in terms of scarcity and accessibility.

"One other thing that [I've noticed] now that I've become a mom is the lack of medical providers in the area. Having to travel over to the "West Side" [Bellevue-Seattle area], you know any kind of, well, several types of specialists for my son, we've had to travel twice to Yakima and then even Ellensburg. The waitlist in Yakima for an ENT specialist was five months and for Ellensburg I got in a week and a half later. So it was better to drive 30 minutes to Ellensburg[...] the quality of life because the medical or the lack of medical staff can be pretty bad."

"I feel like when COVID came, we got a drop in physicians in general so it kind of created this big waitlist on who can see a doctor[...] So there was a waitlist, then people were losing their primary care doctors and seeing multiple doctors and there was just a disconnect from their wellbeing[...] I know that in mental health you know, no one's turned away in our agencies, but there is a really big waitlist for a really long time."

"There's a whole group in WSU working with suicide prevention. And they have the stats of how everything's becoming worse in terms of that wellbeing or feeling stress due to higher cost, debt."

Most participants spoke about how local industry ***benefits from the temporary agricultural workers***. However, a few Latino/a/e participants mentioned concerns over the increase of temporary workers from Latin America in terms of jobs and vulnerability.

"Most of them work in the fields and in the summer the owners hire the temporary workers. They pay them – I am not sure if they get paid more, but they go back after the season. For some local people it is difficult to find work during that time, because the owners bring workers from other countries such as Mexico."

"They really come here to work hard no matter what conditions[...] They become a very vulnerable community in the farm industry[...] they want a lot of hours and the examples that we have of people that had heat strokes last year, they were mostly from the H-2A program because they are not educated in the things that we face here. In Mexico, there's a lot of heat, but a lot of moisture, too. So there's very different conditions. They come here to Washington, they feel very cold. You see them working with like these hoodies and their covered. But the education on safety, for example, is very limited because in Mexico - and this will relate also to many countries in South America, including Chile - is not as strong as it is in the US[...] so they come with that culture of "Yeah, never mind, I can get in the ladder. And I don't need training for these. I don't need to wear the safety glasses or this or that." And so they're very exposed to be harmed during the farming processes. But also of course they have less power to protect themselves because they are obliged to one grower and they want to come back. So you know, it puts them in a very delicate situation."

A number of Latino/a/e participants mentioned ***“lack of diversity”*** as a concern in the city of Yakima.

“So there's not a lot of diversity. I guess the diversity is, it's mostly Hispanic and then I guess white, some[...] So not, not real diverse[...] When I come to work, I typically only see one or two different races. And so I mean, people might call that diverse but I don't. I like to see a little bit of everything. So you know, you can, you know, interact and know different people's cultures and learn from them.”

“But in terms of diversity, I would say there's not really much diversity except for there's a high Latino population of people as well as Caucasian people. So I would say that but in schools, definitely, I would say it's more like 70% Hispanic Latino people.”

“I think it would be nice to have more Latin food. That's, that's something that I have, I feel that we are lacking[...] Not Mexican food, Latin food. Because Mexican, there are plenty of Mexican restaurants.”

Some participants mentioned being concerned about the ***rising cost of living*** which they perceive as a result of a growing population.

“They come from many places, many cultures, many cities, many countries, you can see an increase of people in the city[...] The prices have risen, in the houses, in the food, in lots of places, in gas.”

“Housing for example has become a very, very competitive market. There are not many houses like, the[...] population in Yakima is growing so much that it can't, housing can't keep up with that growth. So, that has made the prices of houses more expensive, not as accessible for first time home buyers. For example, just in a few years[...] salaries have not changed as significantly as the prices of houses.”



Several participants described and/or expressed concern over Yakima's *division into 'east-side' and 'west-side'*.

"I live like in an area where more low-income people live compared to the other side of the city. Where there is [sic] more like big and super pretty houses. And there is [sic] lots of stores to go buy food, but there is a store I really like, its called Rosers, but its all the way over there. Like where they live in those big pretty houses, its further up. So, I barely go there, and there they sell[...] healthier food. And here where I live lower down there is no store like that one[...] But there are lots of stores to go buy vegetables and basic things that are needed in the house."

"There is a lot of a certain type of people here. I would say a lot of Hispanic, Latino people live in Yakima, and within that, there is also lots of kind of contrast[...] there's lots of other people who are[...] well off in certain areas, and it's noticeable throughout the city[...] like when you're hitting those nice areas and when you're kind of leaving areas with poverty[...] you're going to see certain types of people"

"Anywhere you go in town, if it's east-side, west-side[...] you'll know it. You'll be affected because if you do business anywhere in town, I mean, you see it. So it's not like you can insulate yourself if you live on the west side[...] I grew up in poverty myself and my parents worked in warehouses. But I do get a lot of the, the west side versus the east side, but that's why I made sure that I was going to work my tail off so I'm not going to raise my children in the environment that they're going to be seeing all of this stuff every day. So I had to get two jobs, my husband had to get two jobs, we moved[...] to the west side so we could[...] afford a good community to raise our kids and they can ride their bikes without, you know, seeing all of this."





# HOW IS YAKIMA CONNECTED TO OTHER COMMUNITIES IN THE REGION?

Given that the broader scope of this project is regional, we asked people how they think Yakima is connected to other communities in the area.

Generally, interviewees emphasized that there are **not particularly strong connections to other places** regionally and that **Yakima is self-sufficient and independent**.

“It’s really disconnected.”

“We’re not connected in a huge way because we have our own services.”

“Especially if you grew up in Yakima, you kind of stick to Yakima. ... You do also have everything you need here.”

“We’re in our own little bowl over here.”

Exceptions to this regional independence focus on **travel, agriculture, healthcare, and business connections**.

“Just one flight in and out of Yakima Airport.” “You go to Pasco or Seattle”

“We are connected, at least in the farming communities.”

“Healthcare is a huge issue here in Yakima. I don’t think we have enough providers. ... You just go to Seattle.”

“As a chamber, we are connected with every other chamber here in Washington. ... That’s a huge help.”



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

LOCAL ECONOMY	DIVERSITY
<p>Many interviewees were excited about <b><i>expanding opportunities</i></b> to locally produced foods and other goods.</p>	<p>Several participants discussed the potential <b><i>benefits of continued diversification</i></b> of the community as the population grows over time.</p>
<p>“We are becoming very well known for our hops, right? We are becoming very well known for our wine, and it is wonderful. Not only that, we're becoming very well known for our food production. We are the fruit basket of the region. All of these things are starting to have interest in the upcoming generations, Millennials, Gen Z's, to eat, drink and have fun down here in the sun. That's all very cool. And it's all very interesting, and I hope that it brings some sort of economic prosperity to Yakima, and then some interest that will help maybe our real estate market grow, get good people here that want to also provide for the community.”</p> <p>“I think there's slowly growing interest here in sourcing local foods too[...] Not just hops but we've got apples, we've got tons of tree fruits that we're known for here. And there's people that grow pretty much everything you can think of here and there's a larger awareness of eating locally, eating less sprayed with chemicals [sic] food and things like that. And I think that's really exciting. We just had a new center that was built for our farmers market so more people can access healthy fresh foods.”</p>	<p>“I'm excited to see the diversity that's going on because a lot of people are leaving the west side and have apparently started migrating over to Yakima. So there's been a new group of diverse individuals that are entering the area.”</p> <p>“I would say this new generation, so the children of immigrants that came here. I've become more involved in my community because I always felt kind of alone in my[...] I guess in my hopes for Yakima. But meeting people and seeing their ideas and you know, people my age or younger opening businesses or, or hosting community events. It's exciting because it gives me hope, for growth and for my own child to have, you know, to see himself in different ways that I didn't growing up.”</p>

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS	CHANGING ATTITUDES
<p>Community members were excited about the <b>increasing number of programs</b> for recreation and community wellbeing.</p>	<p>Members of the Latino/a/e community mentioned feeling excited about the prospectus of <b>changing attitudes</b> toward them given the rising number of fieldworkers of Latin origin. They argued that this demographic change also brings with it more organizations like APOYO and FISH that are able to address the challenges of this population.</p>
<p>"Just improvements that they're doing within the community. We're hoping to start building a pool here, another aquatic center, so that's kind of exciting. They've been raising money to put another pool in. And so that's the excitement right now. Going forward, I think[...] we have a farmers market that was just improved upon; a new, bigger location. So that's always nice[...] As far as the activities that we do, that we have here in town, I think that that's just going to flourish. I mean, we'll just get better and better with any type of outdoors things."</p> <p>"That's interesting to see how it's expanding because it's making people a little more health conscious. So I like that. It's kind of innovating in that way, going towards that."</p>	<p>"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."</p> <p>"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."</p>

It has been a pleasure to get to know Yakima 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](mailto:courtney.flint@usu.edu))**.

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

