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Health of Eastern Humboldt Youth

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Impacts of Marginalization Health of Eastern Humboldt Youth

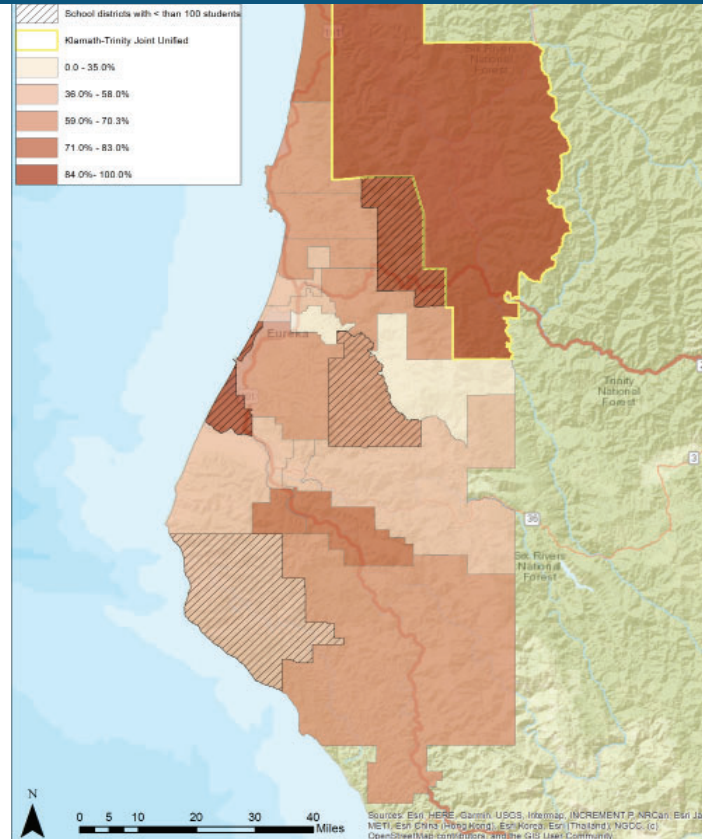
Isadora Sharon

Eastern Humboldt is in the rural, upper reaches of northwest California, located about 40 miles east of Humboldt State University. Eastern Humboldt comprises the Hoopa Valley Reservation, part of the Yurok Reservation (Weitchpec), Orleans (Panamint), and the town of Willow Creek. Both its beauty and challenges characterize eastern Humboldt.

Before white pioneers laid claim to the land, eastern Humboldt was tended for generations by the Hupa, Tsnungwe, Karuk and Yurok people. The current Native American population within the county borders, like other parts of California and the nation, has experienced generational trauma due to genocide, broken treaties, removal from their lands, forced family separations, and intentional efforts to exterminate their tribes. The town of Willow Creek popped up during the Gold Rush era. The lumber and logging industry kept the economy prosperous until the 1980s. The economic, social, and health costs of deindustrialization in eastern Humboldt the past few decades are significant, generational, long-lasting, and wide-ranging.

The remote and rural geography of eastern Humboldt presents a unique perspective on the health and wellbeing of children, youth development, and educational success in low-income communities. Eastern Humboldt is underserved by state, federal, and local governments. The isolation and marginalization of the region are critical issues.

Childhood poverty is disproportionately high compared to the rest of Humboldt County and the state of California (see map at right). Almost all the students (89%) enrolled in the Klamath-Trinity Joint Unified school district, according to a 2018-19 report by the California Department of Education, are socioeconomically disadvantaged and food insecure. Eastern Humboldt has been designated a food desert by the US Department of Agriculture. Children growing up in food deserts are at risk of obesity due to a scarcity



Poor Kids: Percentage of students living in poverty within the school districts of Humboldt County (map by author).

of affordable healthy foods, malnutrition, and the dependency on cheap but highly processed foods. The Klamath-Trinity Joint Unified school district has the highest rates of childhood obesity and food insecurity in the county. According to the 2018 California Healthy Kids Survey, 67.2% of fifth graders, 65.3% seventh graders, and 55% ninth graders are obese or overweight.

Educational attainment is crucial to improving population health. Eastern Humboldt youth are less likely to attend a four-year university. In 2019, according to estimates by the US Census Bureau, 83% of high school graduates could not enroll in a community college or a university. From 2016 to 2020, as reported by the California Department of Education, a minimal number of high school graduates ranging from 0-11% met

the course requirements to transfer to a University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU). Additionally, the California Public Utilities Commission acknowledges that all of eastern Humboldt remains unconnected to wireline broadband services. Residents often depend on expensive and limited satellite-mobile internet providers.

Marginalization exacerbates the mental health crisis among American youth due to a lack of access to broadband, transportation, economic opportunities, recreation centers, and mental health support services. In 2015, the Yurok Tribe declared a state of emergency due to a cluster of suicides among young adults residing in Weitchpec. From 2015 to 2017, as reported by Indian Country Today, the suicide rate on the Yurok reservation rose to nearly 14 times the national average.

Across the nation, the experiences shaping children's lives are diverse. While many children can receive resources and opportunities to learn and develop the skills needed to succeed, far too many families living in marginalized communities struggle to provide the childhoods that all kids deserve. Eastern Humboldt does not have the resources, services, and infrastructure for every young resident to grow up healthy and succeed. In addition, the analysis of aggregate data and secondary sources point to a community more vulnerable than others to societal changes, such as adverse experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Dream Quest

Mentoring Youth in Eastern Humboldt

Jackeline Pedroza

A 40-mile drive east from HSU takes you to what appears to be paradise: eastern Humboldt County. Where lush green forests encompass a vast landscape. Where the Trinity River's tranquil, chilly waters provide a constant lifestream. And where tourists trickle into Willow Creek, renowned for its Bigfoot sightings, for the inland summer heat as an antidote to cool coastline.

Eastern Humboldt attracted the *Los Angeles Times* in 2017 and the *New York Times* a year later. Neither paper remarked on the region's natural beauty, instead reporting on a youth suicide epidemic and a plethora of other acute social ills hidden behind this corner of the redwood curtain.

A troubled paradise, especially for its youth. What are the roots of such troubles?

Last fall, amid the pandemic, I sojourned to eastern Humboldt to speak with members of Dream Quest, a youth-serving organization, to seek some answers. Our conversations centered on barriers local youth confront in attaining education and finding regional career pathways. Some recurring challenges



Footloose: Breakdancing is among the long list of youth activities offered at Dream Quest (photo courtesy of Trish Oakes).

identified by Dream Quest youth mentors were the unavailability of reliable transportation, limited employment opportunities, and economic hardships.

"Transportation is absolutely huge," according to one transitional youth mentor at Dream Quest. "Let's say you're a youth service provider in Eureka and you have a kid who needs a driver's license. No big deal, you make an appointment and you're able to take them to