

What Does Food Insecurity Look Like in Rural Kansas?


Convergence
Partnership

PolicyLink

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PolicyLink serves as the program director for the Convergence Partnership, helping to develop and implement the plans and actions necessary to ensure that all people can live in healthy communities of opportunity.

In 2018 the Convergence Partnership provided grants to seven organizations to advocate for solutions that create equitable changes for diverse communities across the country. These profiles include stories that capture the experiences and impacts of this work from the perspectives of the community members, grassroots and community organizations, and funder partners involved.

PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by **Lifting Up What Works**®.

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Introduction

In 1990, Kansas had the 12th best health outcomes in the nation, according to the first annual America's Health Rankings by the United Health Foundation, using a composite index of metrics focused on health behaviors, environments, policies, and care. Since then, with a few slight ups and downs, that ranking has fallen steadily. [The state's 2019 ranking was 29th.](#)

Meanwhile, the [state's population](#) is growing at a much slower rate than the nation's as a whole—33.4 percent growth in Kansas versus 80.2 percent growth in the US between 1960 and 2016. Most of the growth is occurring in cities, and the racial generation gap is increasing with a predominantly White senior population and growing racial diversity among younger Kansans. Indeed, the non-Hispanic White population decreased

by 0.3 percent during the years 2000 to 2016, while the population of people of color increased by 52.5 percent over the same period. The short version of this story is that Kansas is growing slowly, mostly in cities, and is becoming more racially diverse, with the rate of Latinx Kansans growing the fastest.

The Kansas Health Foundation has consistently explored ways to reverse the state's worsening health outcomes, including through its Healthy Communities Initiative. The Foundation applied an equity lens to its third and most recent round of funding for the initiative, looking at the structural factors that lead to health inequities. However, the initiative had not necessarily focused strongly on connecting equity to local food systems and food access. Funding from the Convergence Partnership allowed the Foundation to support five of its current Healthy Communities coalition partners to build relationships with and engage residents around food issues and equity in rural, frontier, and urban communities (three stories are included below, sharing the work from a frontier community in northwest Kansas and the rural towns of Arma and Arlington).

"We were moving our Healthy Communities Initiative from 'working for' to 'working with' to 'resident-led,'" says Jeff Usher, a senior program officer at the Foundation. To that end, the Foundation hired community liaisons in each of the initiative's sites, who then engaged residents. The Foundation distributed grant money—including Convergence Partnership funds—to each of the sites to spend as they saw fit. In each community, residents worked with the Foundation's coalition partners to make decisions on projects to strengthen community relationships and improve local food systems and health equity.

Addressing Racial Injustice Around Kansas

As the demographics change across Kansas, Usher notes how important it is to create the right conditions for conversations between poor Whites and poor people of color in rural Kansas. Race is a more prominent factor of daily life in northwest Kansas, where the Latinx community is larger and residents are more racially diverse than in many other parts of the state. But in some other towns, the inequities do not break down neatly along lines of race. Arma is about 96 percent White, and the demographics are similar in Arlington.

"Racial equity hasn't come up a lot in Arlington," says Jackson Swearer, a health equity specialist for the Reno County government "because it is overwhelmingly White." In fact, many White residents in the area do not believe that racial discrimination even exists. And that makes conversations about race fraught. The main category of diversity in Arlington is not racial but religious; the area has a large Amish-Mennonite population, which happens to have a tradition of growing and cooking food. Few in that community consider themselves food-insecure.

At one statewide convening, the Foundation brought together their Healthy Communities Initiative grantees from both urban and rural sites. Many of the people of color and urban residents in attendance took part in a session on racial equity; many of the rural White folks took part in other sessions. Urban residents said systemic racism was a top issue, while rural residents were more likely to say that keeping the electricity on was a bigger challenge.

Usher reflected on the need to act based on the learnings from this process that clearly highlighted the gap in shared understanding between Kansans of color and White Kansans—both about the persistence of racial inequities and the impact that these inequities ultimately have on all Kansans. That might mean issuing requests for proposals that deal explicitly with race, helping White people learn more about racism, or working with community partners to lay the groundwork for more difficult conversations.

Asking Big Questions in Small Towns

Many of the towns and counties in northwest Kansas are small. Thomas County has a population of just under 8,000 and comprises various small towns and cities. Thomas County has almost three times the population of Cheyenne County, which is home to 2,726 residents. Northwest Kansas has a substantial Latinx community, mostly Mexican, with a pocket of Colombians in nearby Sherman County, as well as representation of some other nationalities.

“So why were all the families we’re working with White?” That was the question Travis Rickford, executive director of LiveWell Northwest Kansas, asked himself when reviewing his organization’s programs in recent years. He knew of the Latinx population and knew that some of them could benefit from his group’s health initiatives. But LiveWell had not done outreach to Latinx residents or intentional relationship building between Latinx and White residents.

With support from the Convergence Partnership through the Kansas Health Foundation, Rickford’s group looked deeper into the problem. The language barrier was a big challenge; many local Latinx people who could use LiveWell’s services did not speak fluent English, and LiveWell did not do outreach in Spanish. Some Latinx residents were undocumented and did not trust organizations they were not personally connected to. And, many Latinx workers were itinerant, in seasonal or unstable positions on farms or at dairies. Rickford could not help but notice the injustice—people working in the agricultural industry to provide others with food were experiencing some of the most extreme structural barriers to healthy food access and quality health care themselves.

With a better understanding of the population, LiveWell started doing more targeted relationship building. “It started organically,” Rickford recalls. LiveWell had started a community garden in Colby, the county seat in Thomas County, and one of the volunteers was Gracie Garcia, a Kansan whose family had immigrated from Mexico. Garcia engaged with Spanish-speaking residents, and, in time, discovered the community’s desire for a Latinx food market. The first step toward meeting this need was purchasing a freezer, and planning for a market is now in progress.

About an hour’s drive from Thomas County is Cheyenne County, where LiveWell partnered with the county health department to do outreach to the Latinx community there. For the first time, both organizations brought White and Latinx

residents together to form a food-purchasing collective to help expand access to healthy, affordable foods—this was the first step toward creating a farmers’ market that the community had called for.

An increasing number of Mexican and other Latinx people are getting involved in LiveWell Northwest Kansas. LiveWell is building relationships, one at a time, that have proved to be the key to greater involvement from Latinx residents. It is painstaking work, says Rickford, not least of all because of the traveling time between towns, which is at least 30 minutes, if not more.

A Boomtown Gone Bust Builds a Community Back Up

A mining boom in the early 1900s in southeast Kansas brought a flood of Eastern European immigrants to the area. Like many other towns in the area, that boom was how Arma got started. A century ago, it was a boomtown, with a population of maybe 3,000 or 4,000. Zinc and coal were big, and most of the state's coal came from the southeast.

Things have changed since then. The mining industry collapsed, and the area became known as one of the largest pockets of systemic, generational poverty in the entire state. The median income in Arma is almost 30 percent lower than it is statewide. And, the population has dropped to about 1,400 people, 96 percent of whom are White.

Arma is not so much a one-stoplight town as it is a one-blinking-light town. It has a school with about 500 kids from Arma and other nearby towns, some churches, a few nice parks, and a library that is often called “the living room of the community.” The only restaurant in town closed down not long ago. A Dollar General store opened up in 2017, and the store sells some processed food, but it is not a proper grocery store. Even then, the store is on the other side of a two-lane highway from the main part of town, and it is dangerous for seniors or others with mobility problems to cross the highway to shop.

Arma is a lovely little town, but it does not have much in the way of food. For that, you have to go to Pittsburg, population 20,000, which is 10 miles down the road. That is also where you have to go for a hospital, a food pantry, or a place where someone will help you sign up for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

“I wasn't all that familiar with terms like ‘social determinants of health,’” says Matt O'Malley, community liaison at Live Well Crawford County, which includes both Pittsburg and Arma. “It's easier to get my head around it when I use words like ‘unfair barriers to health.’ This condition you're facing, it's unfair—and that's inequity.”

Crawford is one of the poorest counties in the state. Lack of access to food is a real problem in towns like Arma. The community told O'Malley as much in their responses to a survey he sent out. “Once we knew what the barriers were, we could come up with some creative solutions to overcome them,” he says.

Live Well held a series of meetings; they offered food, because, as O'Malley puts it, “a meeting without food should be an email.” They also offered prizes related to food—cutting boards, gift certificates to the supermarket in Pittsburg, a juicer, a food processor, and the grand prize of a stand mixer. The first meeting attracted 30 residents; word caught on and the next had more than 40, and the third was attended by more than 50. Those are big numbers in such a small town.

The community focused on local food sources. They backed a community garden to grow fresh produce and also strengthen community connections. “Residents figured, if you go to a community garden for food or to volunteer and there's no one there, you're not likely to go back,” O'Malley says. So, the foundation paid local residents, mostly seniors, \$50 to staff the garden on Saturdays and contribute to a sense of community.

That sense of community continued to prove valuable to residents, who took real ownership over the space and remained engaged. They used grant funds to buy two planter benches for the garden, so workers can sit and meetings can be held there. They set up a pantry at the local library, where food grown at the garden would go. They founded the Arma Nutrition Council and bought shirts to make it feel like a team. They held a party at the end of the year to celebrate everyone's work—a nice meal, music, and prizes of cast-iron skillets and other kitchen items.

“The town's solution was not to get people to go to Pittsburg to buy food. All the free tomatoes in the world 10 miles from Arma aren't going to help,” says O'Malley. “We had to make sure that the solutions met the needs of the community.”

The community's next plans are to explore creating a farmers' market, build raised seed beds for folks with physical limitations, and plant fruit trees in the garden—“it takes about five years to start, but then you've got fruit for the next 20 years,” says O'Malley. And, they want to convince the Dollar General store to stock fresh produce.

Half an Hour To Get Food—A Food Desert in a Tiny Town

If you think Arma is small, then try heading over to central Kansas for a visit to Arlington, population 473. Compared to Arma, Arlington is bursting with eateries—two cafes and a farmers’ market. But still, it is a food desert. The next big town is almost a half-hour up the road.

“After a series of small-group meetings, we found three big challenges to food access in Arlington,” says Swearer: “Not enough money for food. No transportation to go get food. And not enough skills to grow and cook their own food.” Other county government agencies and local community groups were addressing the first two problems. So, residents decided to work with Swearer to take on the third.

What they came up with was “Cook Well, Eat Well,” a series of 12 free workshops to prepare freezer-ready meals that participants got to take home. Empowered to spend the remaining grant funds, participants decided to work with organizations around the county to sponsor a series of community dinners, where they would discuss food access and other issues.

“A big benefit of this work has been to build relationships,” says Swearer. “The cooking workshops and the dinners bring together people who might not know each other.” They talk over food, learn about each other, and decide how to work together to make the community better. The project also built relationships between Arlington and people in the county government, based in Hutchinson.

Learning by Doing

“Convergence Partnership funding allowed us to be experimental,” says Usher. The unrestricted nature of the funds meant that local groups could use the support in whatever ways they saw fit, living up to the grassroots nature of the initiative. Local coalition members also praised the unrestricted nature of the funds.

The flexible funding is what allowed these communities in Kansas to achieve what amount to big victories in small places. White and Latinx residents in northwest Kansas are working together for the first time to launch a food collaborative. The people of Arma are banding together to find local solutions to food insecurity for their low-income neighbors. Arlingtonians have launched and are securing additional funding for a community campaign that creates community through cooking workshops and also focuses on improving food distribution to low-income local residents. People from around the state are having difficult conversations about race, even if they sometimes falter. All of them are figuring out what their communities need and using grant funding as a launch pad to create community-driven strategies.

The toughest work in all this may have just been the most valuable, as Usher recalls one participant saying: “Working on policy was so difficult, and we thought there could be nothing harder. But then we found that relationship building was hardest of all.”

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