RWJF Culture of Health
Sentinel Community Snapshot:

Finney County, Kansas
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction

   - Immigration Trends Driven by the Meatpacking Industry
   - Poverty and Educational Attainment Within the Working Class
   - Barriers to Health

4. Boosting Community Vitality through Better Health

   - Strengthening Local Safety Nets
   - Creating Space for Immigrants and Refugees
   - Connecting Residents to Resources

4. Addressing Economic and Social Inequities

---

**About This Report**

The Sentinel Communities project, conducted by RTI International in collaboration with the RAND Corporation, is sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The project will monitor activities in each of 30 diverse communities around the country for at least 5 years. This Snapshot is the first in a series of planned reports about this Sentinel Community. Using data compiled in early 2016, it provides an initial overview of the community’s history, challenges, and approaches to building a Culture of Health. Visit cultureofhealth.org to see the full list of communities and links to other reports and information about the project.
Introduction

Finney County, located in southwestern Kansas, is a rural county with a population of 37,099. Garden City, the county seat, is home to more than 73% of the county’s residents and is a major center for beef processing. The beef industry has been a prime driver of Garden City’s economy since the town’s founding in 1879. The development of new irrigation techniques and new food sources for cattle in the mid-20th century expanded the industry in southwestern Kansas, including Finney County. The first meatpacking plant was built in Garden City in 1964 but was significantly expanded in 1983. A second plant opened in Finney County in 1980.

The local meatpacking industry has attracted a diverse population to the area. In 1980, white residents made up 84% of the county’s population, but by 2010, Finney County had become a racially and ethnically diverse community with a sizable immigrant population. In fact, foreign-born persons now comprise 21% of county residents. The influx of Hispanic, Asian, and African immigrants to work in Finney County’s meatpacking industry has shaped the area’s cultural mix. The county has embraced these new arrivals, and anti-immigrant sentiment is not a feature of community life. Signs at local public schools are printed in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese, and stores and restaurants reflect the backgrounds of the county’s residents. Students enrolled in Garden City public schools come from countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, and Myanmar.

Hispanic (48%) and white (45%) residents make up the majority of Finney County’s population. Nearly 4% of residents are Asian, and
2% are black. Most Finney County adults are employed, but they have higher rates of poverty and lower educational attainment than residents of Kansas and the rest of the nation. Finney County’s residents also experience limited health care access and insurance coverage. In response to demographic changes in Finney County, several organizations are implementing initiatives to help immigrants better use available health care and social services, such as English language classes. Other local initiatives help to connect county residents to local health and social services and seek to improve the health and well-being of the county’s young children. Finally, Finney County has received funding from the Kansas Health Foundation and Garden City to improve its built environment.

IMMIGRATION TRENDS DRIVEN BY THE MEATPACKING INDUSTRY

Finney County’s meatpacking industry grew rapidly after the December 1980 opening of what was then the largest meatpacking plant in the world. Meatpacking is often low-wage, dangerous work, contributing to high turnover rates. Because the work is challenging but requires limited English language skills, many meatpacking plant employees are immigrants from Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. As a result of immigration, Finney County’s foreign-born population has grown substantially since 1980 (Figure 1), beginning with the arrival of Vietnamese and Lao immigrants in Garden City. More Vietnamese immigrants, many of whom were refugees, arrived later that decade.

This original group eventually left the meatpacking industry to pursue economic opportunities elsewhere. To find new workers, local meatpacking plants began to recruit Hispanic immigrants. In the 1990s, one company even received federal approval to open a recruitment office in Mexico and to provide for workers’ transportation to the United States. This effort likely contributed to an increase in Finney County’s Hispanic population—from 15% in 1980 to 48% during the 2010-2014 period (Figure 2).

When a fire caused one of the two plants to shut down in 2000, the local meatpacking industry suffered 2,300 job losses. As a result, the county’s unemployment rate increased from approximately 3% in December 2000 to nearly 9% in March 2001. Despite promised financial incentives from policy makers, the plant’s owners decided not to reopen the damaged plant. After the fire, many workers were unable to find new jobs and moved away, resulting in a decline in the county’s overall population. Approximately 3,500 fewer people live in Finney County now than in 2000. Because many of the workers were immigrants, the plant’s closure possibly contributed to the drop in Finney County’s foreign-born population between 2000 and 2010 (Figure 1).

Finney County’s remaining meatpacking plant, owned by Tyson Fresh Meats, employs more than 3,000 people. It is the largest employer in the county. The majority of workers are Hispanic, many of whom are immigrants. More recently, the plant has hired immigrants and refugees from Myanmar and Somalia as well.

A researcher who has studied Garden City describes the community’s reaction to the growing immigrant population as “quiet accommodation.” In a 2010 news article, Garden City’s public school
superintendent at the time indicated that the community has accepted immigrants because "[d]iversity is not new here. It’s third-, fourth-generation... There’s more of a tendency to embrace rather than reject or deny. It’s what makes the agribusiness economy work. It’s who we are."  

POVERTY AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT WITHIN THE WORKING CLASS

Approximately 71% of the county’s residents are employed, compared with 62% in Kansas. Despite relatively high rates of employment, 17% of Finney County residents live in poverty, compared with 14% in Kansas. Rates of poverty are higher for Hispanic (22%) and black (33%) residents in Finney County than for white (11%) and Asian (8%) residents. In Finney County, 25% of children live in poverty compared to 19% in Kansas. More than half of the county’s public school children (56%) qualify for free lunch, compared with 40% of Kansas public school students. Approximately 13% of households in Finney County receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, compared with 10% of all Kansas households.

County residents report a median household income of $47,994, nearly $4,000 less than the state's median income ($51,909), with black and Hispanic residents earning less than white and Asian residents (Figure 3).

Educational attainment in Finney County is also significantly lower than for the state and the nation, with racial/ethnic disparities mirroring those related to income. Nearly 29% of Finney County residents have less than a high school degree, compared with 10% at the state level and 13% nationally. More than half of black, Asian, and Hispanic residents in Finney County have less than a high school degree (60%, 58%, and 53%, respectively), compared with 9% of white residents. Similarly, only 18% of Finney County’s residents have bachelor’s degrees, compared with 31% of Kansas residents and 29% nationally. More than 28% of white and 22% of Asian residents in Finney County have bachelor’s degrees, but only 9% of black and 6% of Hispanic residents have the same level of educational attainment.

BARRIERS TO HEALTH

Finney County fares worse than Kansas on nearly all health indicators, especially access to health care. More adults in Finney County do not have a health care provider, and more Finney County residents have difficulty accessing care because of cost than do all Kansas residents. Additionally, fewer Finney County residents had a dental checkup during the previous year compared with adults in Kansas (Figure 4).

One explanation for the differences between Finney County and Kansas when it comes to health care access is the county’s lower rate of health insurance coverage. Approximately 17% of Finney County residents are uninsured, compared with 12% of Kansas residents, likely in part because of the county’s substantial number of uninsured immigrants. Compared with 12% of native-born residents, nearly 35% of foreign-born residents (both naturalized citizens and noncitizens) are uninsured. This may be because many non-U.S. citizens do not qualify for insurance or subsidized coverage through the Affordable Care Act’s insurance marketplace.

Another potential explanation is the county’s shortage of primary care providers. The county’s ratio of primary care providers to residents is 1,770:1, compared with 1,330:1 in Kansas. Finney County also has fewer mental health providers (810 residents per provider) compared with Kansas as a whole (550 residents per provider).
Finney County performs worse than Kansas on certain key indicators of health status and health behaviors. Compared with 15% of Kansas residents, 20% of county residents report being in fair or poor health. County residents have a higher obesity rate (35%) than Kansas (30%), but the county’s diabetes rate (11%) is only slightly higher than all of Kansas (10%).

The teen birth rate in Finney County (73 per 1,000 births) is nearly double the state rate (38 per 1,000 births) and more than double the national rate (30 per 1,000 births); however, Finney County’s birth rates resemble those of neighboring counties. Despite the county’s high teen birth rate, the infant mortality rate (between 4 and 8 infant deaths per 1,000 live births) and rate of low-birthweight births (between 7% and 8%) resemble outcomes in the state (7 deaths per 1,000 live births; 7% low-birthweight births).

**Boosting Community Vitality Through Better Health**

Community leaders and residents recognize the contributions of immigrants in local industry and to the community’s vitality. To respond to gaps in health care access and poor health outcomes across the county, the public school system, nonprofit organizations, and local leaders are implementing initiatives to improve social services and access to health care to Finney County residents, particularly Hispanic immigrants.

**STRENGTHENING LOCAL SAFETY NETS**

Genesis Family Health, formerly known as United Methodist Western Kansas Mexican-American Ministries and established in 1987, is a nonprofit agency that provides a range of services through its network of safety-net clinics and programs in and around Garden City. Genesis Family Health operates two community health centers and one dental clinic that provide preventive and acute care in Garden City. In addition, Genesis has struggled to meet growing demand for its medical services, and the clinic receives between 15 and 20 more visitors than it can treat on a daily basis. The organization also manages social service programs, including food and clothing banks, assistance with immigration documentation, language translation, and targeted health promotion programs, such as diabetes prevention and control.

More than three-quarters of Garden City public school students are racial or ethnic minorities, some of whom are recent immigrants. Almost one-quarter of Garden City students take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The school district offers special classes to help recent immigrants adjust to life in the United States, provides school documents in multiple languages, and offers cafeteria foods that cater to the tastes of the diverse student body. In coordination with the Kansas Food Bank, the district has also distributed food for children to take home on weekends.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC), a global refugee assistance organization with a presence in Garden City, provides social services to immigrants. The IRC in Garden City helps refugees apply for jobs and find housing and connects them with an ESL program at the Garden City Community College. In addition to helping refugees learn English, the College teaches refugees about the U.S. health care system. The Catholic Agency for Migration and Refugee Services helps resettled refugees in Finney County. In addition, Emmaus House, a local shelter and food bank, provides food assistance to many meatpacking industry employees.

**CONNECTING RESIDENTS TO RESOURCES**

The Finney County Community Health Coalition, formed in 2005, intends to reach all Finney County residents, not just immigrants. The coalition brings together stakeholders from the health, social service, and education sectors to connect residents to local resources, including health care services and tobacco prevention and cessation programs.

With funding from the Kansas Health Foundation, the coalition launched LiveWell Finney County, an initiative that aims to improve the built environment to support physical activity. As part of the initiative, Garden City constructed new sidewalks using a grant from the federal Safe Routes to School program.

The Russell Child Development Center (RCDC) is another local initiative that serves a population that is not limited to immigrants. Founded in Finney County in 1965, this nonprofit group provides an array of services to young children and their families in the broader southwestern Kansas region. Through its Tiny-k program, the RCDC provides support—such as social work services, physical therapy, medical services, and transportation—to young children with developmental disabilities and their families. The Tiny-k program served 305 children in Finney County in 2015. The RCDC also provides case management in 13 counties, including Finney County, and participates in a federal program to make healthy food available to children in day care.

Through an Early Childhood Block Grant from the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund, along with additional funding from the United Way, RCDC established the Building Blocks program, which offers classes, coaching, and other supports to parents; parent and child activities focused on literacy; and child development activities.

**Addressing Economic and Social Inequities**

Finney County has dramatically changed over the past four decades because of its growing immigrant population. Today, Hispanic residents make up nearly half of the population and experience significant
economic, social, and health disparities. Although a number of local initiatives aim to link these residents to services, including health care, English classes, and healthy foods, more work is needed to overcome the significant barriers facing immigrants, especially poverty and a lack of health insurance.

Additional surveillance, data, and information gathering will examine how initiatives to support racially diverse residents affect economic and social inequities and, in turn, the health and well-being of many Finney County residents. Ongoing questions include the following:

- What challenges do immigrants in Finney County face in acculturating to life in rural southwestern Kansas?
- To what extent have the efforts to improve health care access been successful in improving health and well-being? What efforts, if any, are underway to increase the supply of health care providers?
- To what extent are the local government and nonprofit organizations addressing the high teenage pregnancy rate in Finney County?
- To what extent are various local initiatives communicating and coordinating their efforts?
- To what extent are local health initiatives tailored to specific racial/ethnic communities?
- How are local initiatives engaging and empowering residents to improve their economic, social, and health outcomes?