SENTINEL COMMUNITIES INSIGHTS

Spotlight on COVID-19

Finney County, Kansas

July 2020
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Photos: Annabel Clark for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
As the nation confronts the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the legacy of racial inequities that the disease highlights, it is an opportunity to review how diverse communities across the United States are planning for, mitigating, and recovering from the pandemic’s effects. Here, we take a deeper look at Finney County, Kan., exploring the impact of and the county’s response to COVID-19 based on information available through early June 2020.

Community Overview

Finney County is a rural county located in Southwest Kansas. Just over one-fifth (21.7%) of residents are foreign born, with a growth in immigrant and refugee populations over the past few decades. Within Garden City, the largest city in the county, over three-quarters of public school students are racial or ethnic minorities and 69 percent of children qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program.

For several decades, Finney County’s economy has been driven by the meatpacking industry. While the industry is still a large employer in the region, plant closures in 2000 and a large fire at a Tyson plant in 2019 affected thousands of jobs.

The state of Kansas has not yet expanded Medicaid, but a bipartisan bill was introduced in January 2020 to institute Medicaid expansion. If it passes, expansion would go into effect in January 2021. The state also offers the MediKan health program for adults with disabilities who do not qualify for Medicaid.

Access to health care and insurance is a particular challenge for Finney County residents who are not U.S. citizens. Over one-third (37%) of those residents lack health insurance. One-third (36%) of Finney County residents are overweight or obese and 20 percent report being in fair or poor health. The county also has high sexually transmitted infection rates and teen birth rates. Finney County is a Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-designated health care provider shortage area for primary care.

About Finney County

**Population:** 36,467
**American Indian:** 1.3%*
**Asian:** 4.5%
**Black:** 4.1%
**Hawaiian, Pacific Islander:** 0.1%
**Hispanic or Latino:** 50.5%
**White, not Hispanic:** 40.4%
**Two or more races:** 1.6%
**High school graduate:** 70.9%
**Median income:** $56,573
**Age 65 and older:** 11.0%
**Persons in poverty:** 13.2%
**Uninsured:** 16.1%

* Percentages of population by race/ethnicity may add to more than 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.
COVID-19’s Community Impact

Kansas had about 10,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of the end of May.\textsuperscript{15} About 14 percent of the state’s cases were in Finney County due in large part to an outbreak at a Tyson meat processing plant, Finney County’s largest employer.\textsuperscript{16,17}

Unemployment increased from 2.1 percent in February to 5.9 percent in April.\textsuperscript{18} Though meatpacking plants did remain open throughout stay-at-home restrictions, many employees were not able to work due to the virus.\textsuperscript{19}

Although many businesses did not close, the economic impacts of the pandemic were felt across the county. For example:

- The Finney County Economic Development Corporation reported that contractors working in neighboring counties have been reluctant to bring workers from Finney County into their communities due to concerns over the higher case rate.

- Businesses in Garden City have reported that consumers are shopping elsewhere to avoid Finney County, creating further challenges for the economy.\textsuperscript{20}

In addition to employment, public transportation has been impacted as City Link public transit routes were suspended in late March. In a community with very limited transportation options prior to the pandemic, this has created additional barriers for residents, although some on demand transportation services have been available.\textsuperscript{21}

COVID-19 in Finney County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total cases: 1,538</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cases per 100,000: 4,218</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of state’s cases: 13.9%</td>
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As of June 13, 2020

The Community Response to COVID-19

On March 17, the state of Kansas began to restrict mass gatherings. A stay-at-home order went into effect on March 30. Unlike most other states, businesses and nonessential services were not ordered to close, with the exception of bars and indoor event spaces. The state recommended that licensed child care (centers, preschools, day care homes, and school-age programs) continue, but acknowledged that “local public health officers may implement more restrictive guidance.”

Finney County did not elect to implement any additional restrictions. On May 4, Kansas began a phased re-opening process, allowing for gatherings of less than 10 individuals and opening libraries. On May 22, restrictions were lifted further to allow indoor leisure spaces, casinos, community centers, and organized sports to reopen and resume.

Relief to Finney County residents was provided by the state through:

- An executive order to temporarily prohibit evictions and foreclosures in cases where the financial hardship is caused directly or indirectly by the COVID-19 outbreak.
- The state also delayed the deadline to file taxes, and the WIC program remained in operation without physical presence required, ensuring that beneficiaries could continue receiving benefits.

Within Finney County, the health department established a hotline for residents and included a number of COVID-19-related resources on its website in both English and Spanish. The website also has an easy-to-find translate button to further ensure widespread communication about testing, community resources, and volunteer activities. The county jail has taken precautions to limit spread, has made plans in case an inmate becomes infected, and has released a few low-risk inmates.

Collaborative COVID-19 response efforts were formed between Finney County’s government and other regional government agencies. For example:

- The Finney County Health Department worked with local and regional agencies to prepare a community-wide plan early in the pandemic for the management of any COVID-19 occurrence in Finney County or the surrounding region.
- Kansas’s 105 counties also have mutual aid agreements where county fire or emergency medical service departments can assist other county emergency response departments in need of backup. This has been particularly important for rural areas as they address the urgent health needs of residents.
The public school system has supported children and families affected by school closures in a number of ways:

- Garden City Public Schools leveraged a $23,000 grant from the Kansas Health Foundation to distribute smart phones to create Wi-Fi hotspots to over 250 students who did not have access to the internet at home.\(^{32}\)

- Schools provided free meals throughout the school closure period.\(^{33}\)

- To help address concerns related to the digital divide and lack of access to technology statewide, public broadcasting service (PBS) aired “Learning Across Kansas,” a program that included education lessons by local teachers.\(^{34}\)

The meatpacking industry also responded to COVID-19, in part due to pressure from the unions for better health protections inside the plants. Extra sanitation shifts and social distancing efforts have been implemented,\(^{19}\) and in mid-April, Tyson plants required face coverings for all employees.\(^{35}\)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Finney County was home to a few cross-sector collaborative efforts to improve resident health. LiveWell Finney County, for example, was created to respond to pressing community health needs and consists of stakeholders from a wide range of public, private, and nonprofit sectors. In May, LiveWell worked with St. Catherine’s Hospital to distribute supplies like hand sanitizer, masks, gloves, and informational handouts to community members in need. Otherwise, the engagement of the collaborative in addressing the pandemic within Finney County has been limited.\(^{36}\)
The Role of Health Equity

The county posts case-related information on its website but does not provide case information disaggregated by race or ethnicity, only age. Most confirmed cases have been among individuals between the ages of 20 and 34, with an infection rate about 1.5 times higher than people ages 45 to 54, who also had high rates of infection.\(^\text{28}\)

Efforts to promote health equity were limited before the pandemic. A select few local initiatives (e.g., LiveWell and New Hope Together) had been working to address lack of health care, basic needs, and chronic health conditions among underserved populations. This included connecting residents to resources and addressing needs of immigrants, such as offering language services.

In the wake of COVID-19, the Finney County Health Department has offered resources in English and Spanish,\(^\text{37}\) though little is known about Spanish-speaking residents’ access to testing and treatment.

Some COVID-19 response activities may also serve to address inequities outside of the pandemic, such as union efforts to improve working conditions in meatpacking plants. Because meatpacking is the major industry in Finney County—and employs many immigrants in low-wage and dangerous jobs—improving health and economic outcomes could have a disproportionate impact in reducing inequities. However, given that no information is available on the disparate impact of COVID-19 by subgroup in Finney County, health equity-related effects of COVID-19 are difficult to disentangle.

What’s Next

In future reports, we will examine how changes in meatpacking industry policies in response to COVID-19 may mitigate health disparities among Finney County’s population, and how the collaborative government response between Finney County’s government and other regional government agencies has helped to address the health and economic challenges, particularly for more vulnerable residents.
References


