



Photo by Paige Olson

Food Insecurity in SEK Negatively Impacts Voter Engagement

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Kansas 
Appleseed



All eligible Kansans should be able to vote without obstruction. That is the foundation of a healthy democracy. Still, vulnerable populations are facing an increasing number of voter suppression laws. Those same populations are also facing daily economic barriers that affect their ability to fully exercise their political power. Local and state elected officials make policy decisions about many safety net programs that help Kansans overcome those daily economic barriers, such as food insecurity. When policymakers continually make decisions that limit access to support programs and the polls, they are disenfranchising Kansans.

Kansans who are most affected by constant funding cuts and administrative hurdles to support programs are not heard at the same rates as their more financially secure neighbors. Barriers such as getting time off work, transportation issues, illnesses, and other practical hurdles limit their ability to get to the polls. Further, low-income voters are frequently disillusioned or apathetic because candidates and officials are ignoring their needs and the issues that matter to them. Hunger is a policy decision, and has far-reaching effects on civic engagement. We can see those effects in Southeast Kansas, where voter turnout and poverty are frequently the lowest in the state.

Kansas Appleseed is no stranger to the Southeast Kansas region. We have worked in the nine Southeast Kansas counties (Allen, Bourbon, Cherokee, Crawford, Labette, Montgomery, Neosho, Wilson, and Woodson) for the past six years and have seen firsthand how barriers and undue hardships impact Southeast Kansans who may be facing food insecurity. Our integrated voter engagement advocate, Paige Olson, was born and raised in Southeast Kansas and continues to proudly call it home. Before joining Kansas Appleseed, Paige helped establish a soup kitchen in Allen County that then became a model for another soup kitchen in Woodson County. Southeast Kansans are stepping up to increase food access, but soup kitchens and food pantries aren't enough. Policy change is needed and voting is one way the people of SEK can use their power for increased food access in their communities.

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In SEK, poverty and lack of adequate food access is a voting barrier for many:

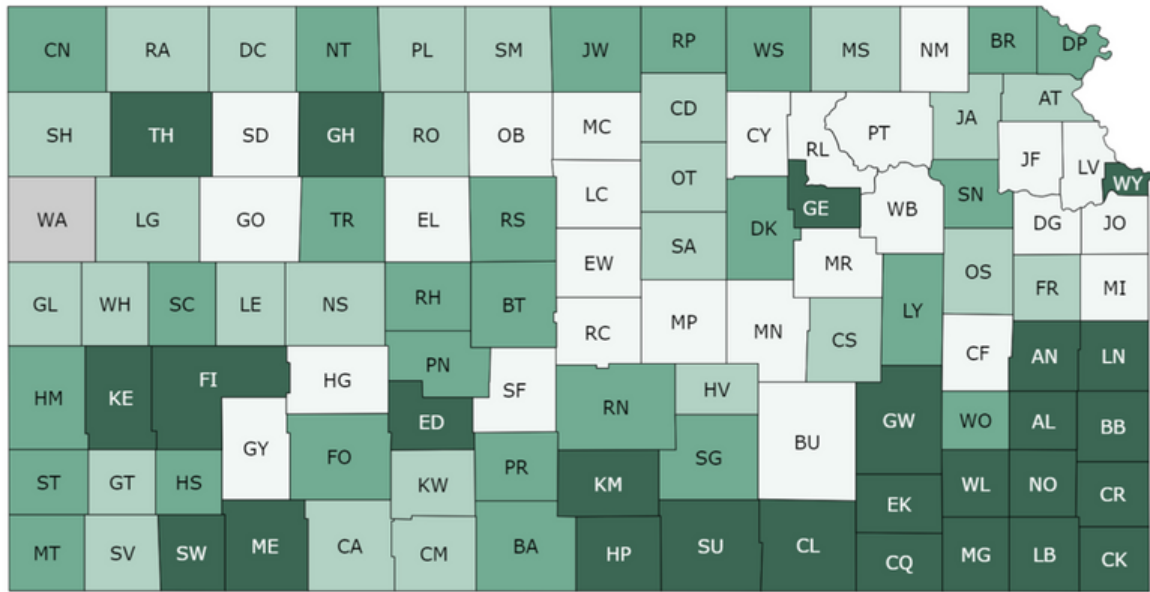
- Across the last two gubernatorial elections (2018, 2022), the counties in Southeast Kansas have consistently ranked in the bottom quarter of the state for both food insecurity and voter turnout.
- Across the Southeast Kansas counties, voter turnout averages 5 to 7% lower than state averages in the same elections. Some SEK counties have close to a 25% lower turnout rate at times.
- Voter turnout rates in Southeast Kansas did improve between 2018 and 2022, but they still are below state averages, and mainly in the lower percentiles of the state.
- These same counties are the most food insecure counties in the state, with all at the bottom of the state for adequate food security.
- These same counties are the most impoverished in the state, with all at the bottom of the state for poverty rates.

The lack of food security is part of larger social determinants of health. Data from 2022 shows that SEK ranks at the bottom of the state for health outcomes. For the same year, this correlates with lower voter rates in the region as well.

Voting is central to democracy, but in the United States, there are numerous obstacles for citizens to carry out this duty. Economic factors are among those. Research shows that health and poverty depress voter turnout. Therefore, strong social support programs are necessary to ensure all Kansans, regardless of their economic standing, are enfranchised and have equitable opportunities to have their voices heard.

The path to a stronger Kansas is to ensure all Kansans can exercise their power and have their voices heard.

Yet, Kansas legislators continuously vote for stricter access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other safety net programs making it even more difficult for those who are low-income to access food. It's not just food access that legislators continue to restrict, they are also adding more barriers to voting by introducing and enforcing voter suppression laws such as strict ID requirements to vote. The path to a stronger Kansas is to ensure all Kansans can exercise their power and have their voices heard, especially on issues and programs that affect their well-being. Eliminating voter suppression and supporting those who are food insecure benefits all Kansans.

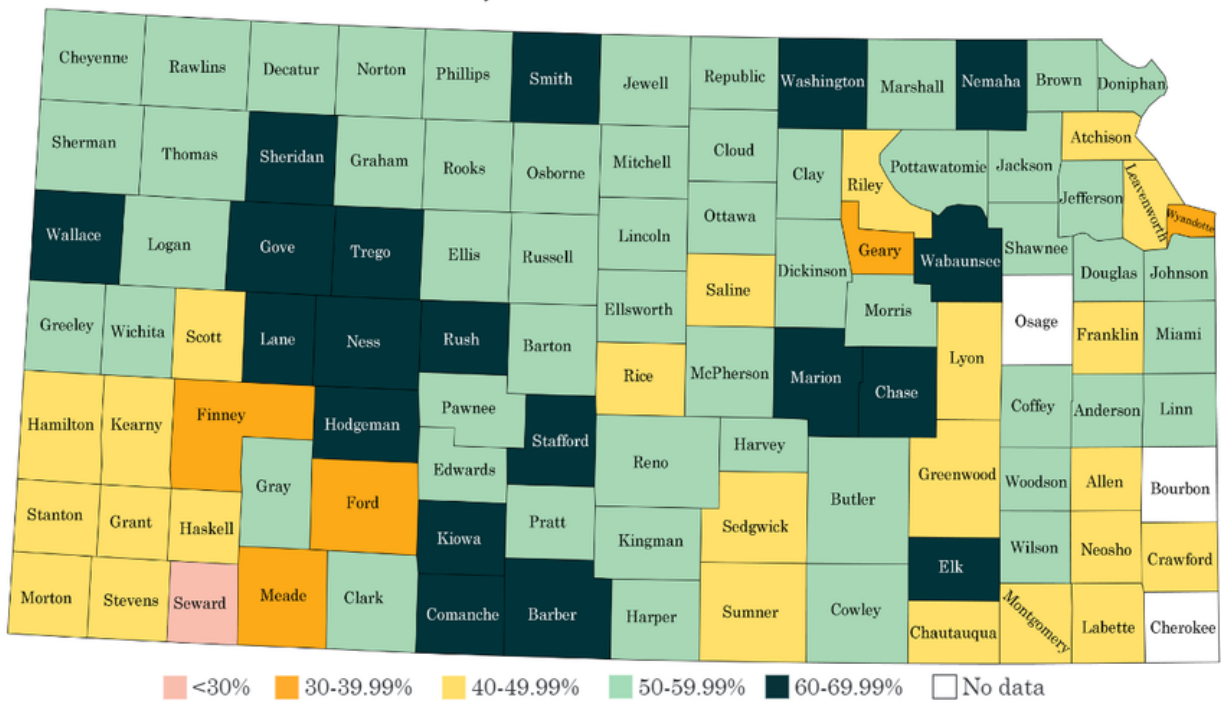


Health Outcome Ranks 1 to 26 27 to 52 53 to 78 79 to 104



Source: County Health Rankings and Roadmaps. "Kansas Data and Resources." 2023. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/kansas/data-and-resources>

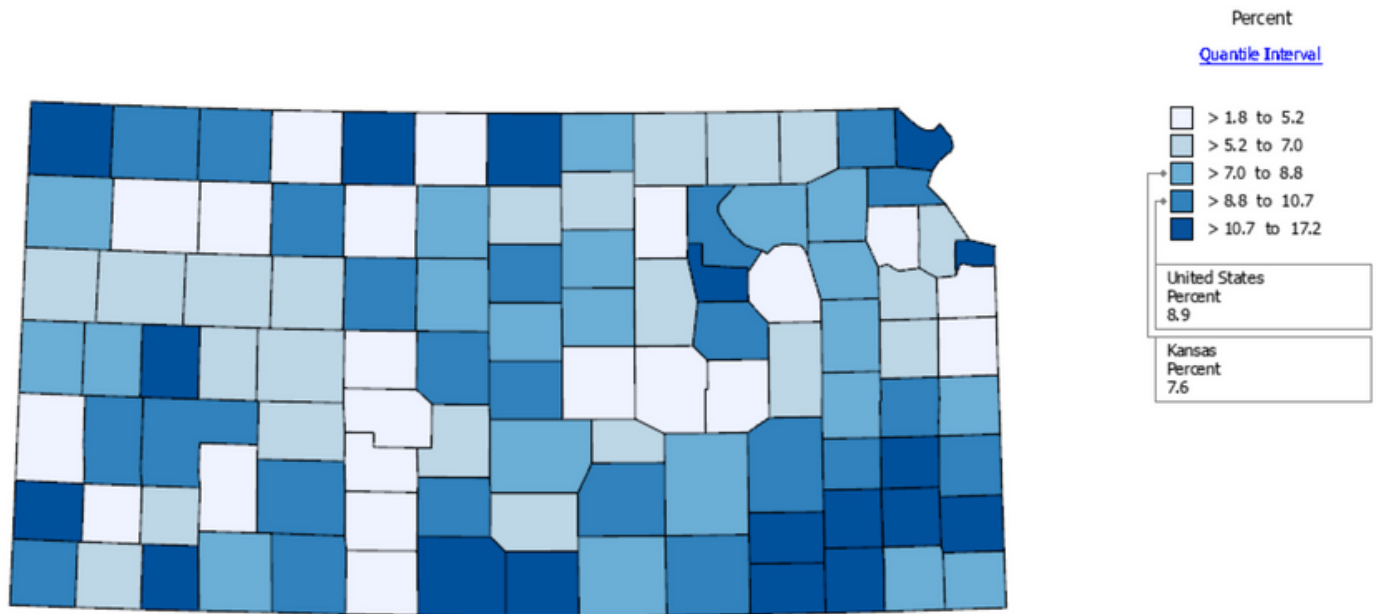
VOTER TURNOUT BY COUNTY, 2022 GENERAL ELECTION



Source: Kansas ACLU. "All Democracy is (Still) Local." 2023. Page 5. <https://www.aclukansas.org/en/publications/all-democracy-still-local>

Poverty (Families below poverty) for Kansas by County

All Races (includes Hispanic/Latino), Both Sexes, All Ages, 2017-2021



Source: HDPulse. "An Ecosystem of Minority Health and Health Disparities Resources. Kansas." National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities. 2023. <https://hdpulse.nimhd.nih.gov/>

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Sources:

A note on data: We are comparing 2021 poverty and food insecurity to 2022 voter turnout because they are the most recently available data. However, historically, poverty and food insecurity numbers in the region are relatively consistent. We are confident that the correlation between the data when compared to voter turnout is a good indication of the impact of health, poverty, and food insecurity on voting turnout for 2022.

A note on above maps: Maps showing voter turnout, poverty, health outcomes, and health factors (including food insecurity) by county best highlight the relationship in SEK between voter turnout and access to food.

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