

Cowley County Food System Assessment

A Path to Healthy & Equitable Access



December 2025



KANSAS STATE
UNIVERSITY

Extension
Cowley County

The purpose of this assessment is to provide a comprehensive overview of the food system in Cowley County, Kansas. This document is a collaborative effort between **RISE Cowley, K-State Extension, Legacy Regional Community Foundation**, and other community partners to assess and improve local food systems. It is designed to serve as a resource for stakeholders working to enhance food security, nutrition, and community health through collective action.

This project is part of the food access focus of the 2024-2025 Rural Champion project from the Kansas Department of Commerce's Office of Rural Prosperity. Special thanks to Amy Jo McWhirt, 2024-2025 Rural Champion, for her work on this project.

Learn more about our key partners

RISE Cowley is Cowley County's health coalition. RISE Cowley promotes healthy lifestyles by collaborating to raise awareness and encourage involvement for residents of Cowley County, Kansas. RISE Raising Awareness, Improving Health, Supporting Collaboration, and Energizing Communities. Learn more at risecowley.org.

Kansas State University Extension-Cowley County provides community education and research-based resources. Learn more at cowley.k-state.edu.

Legacy Regional Community Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit philanthropic organization. The foundation manages assets over \$17.6 million stewarding 258 active funds. Learn more at legacyregionalfoundation.org.

Food insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service as:

“Food-insecure households are uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, at some time during the year, enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food: 13.5 percent (18.0 million) of U.S. households were food insecure at some time during 2023.

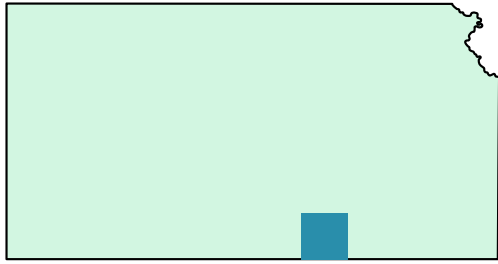
Food-insecure households include those with low food security and very low food security.”

Source: ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics



Image: Canva.com

Cowley County, Kansas: Local Food System and Population Overview



Kansas map with Cowley County highlighted

Cowley County, located in south-central Kansas, encompasses a mix of urban and rural communities.

Cowley County's population is 34,539, with **Arkansas City (population 11,637)** and **Winfield (population 11,530)** serving as the primary population centers (2020 Census).

According to the 2024 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) by William Newton Hospital, food insecurity remains a pressing issue in the county, affecting access to sufficient, affordable, and nutritious food.

Rural Data Explorer from the Rural Health Information Hub indicates that **63.9% of Cowley County has low access to healthy food (2019)**.

Grocery access is concentrated in Winfield and Arkansas City, where Walmart and Dillons serve as major food retailers. Residents in smaller townships such as Atlanta, Burden, Cambridge, Dexter, and Rock must travel between 15-30 miles to reach these stores with limited or no public transportation options.

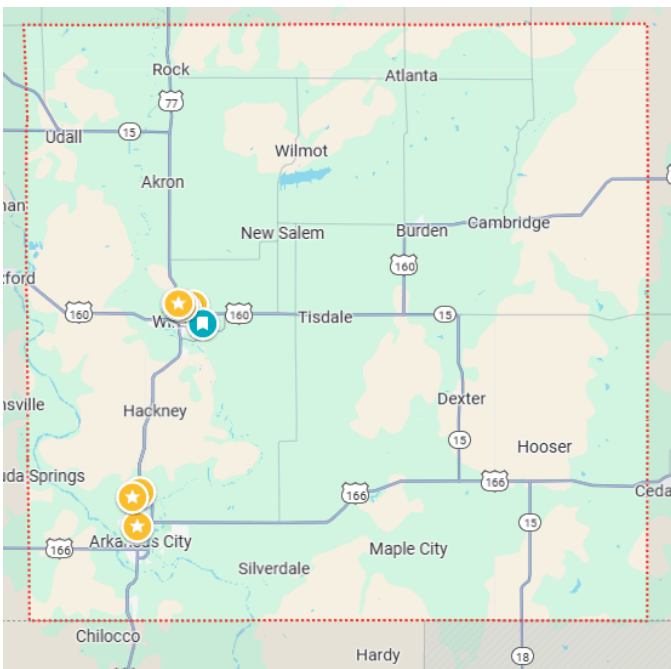


Image: Google Map of Cowley County, KS

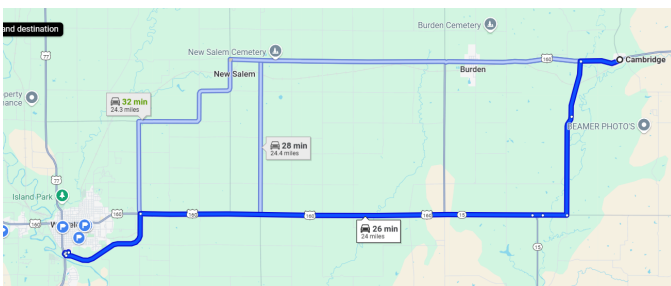


Image: Google Map of Cambridge to Winfield, KS (25 miles to grocery center)

SNAP is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Food Program (formerly known as food stamps).



1,823 Cowley County households receive Food Assistance

2,036 adults + 1,721 children = 3,757 total persons

Source: June 2025 Kansas Department for Children and Families Caseload Report

The SNAP-Ed Nutrition Program was nationally defunded on September 20, 2025. Cowley County’s SNAP-Ed program was administered by K-State Research and Extension. Cowley County was served by Sarah McAlister, Southeast Area SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educator, who delivered educational programs in Butler, Chautauqua, Cowley, Elk, Greenwood , and Sumner counties.

In 2023, according to the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), **12% of Kansas households were financially insecure**. Yet this measure failed to account for an additional 26% of households that were also experiencing financial hardship. These households are **ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed** – with income above the FPL, but not enough to afford basic expenses in the county where they live. Between ALICE households and those living in poverty, an estimated 38% of households in Kansas were below the ALICE Threshold in 2023.

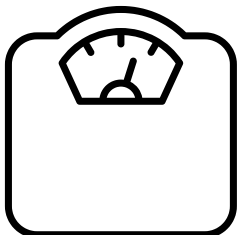
Total Cowley County households	13,339
Poverty houtholds	1,909
ALICE households	3,861
Above Alice Threshold	7,569
% Below ALICE Threshold	43%



Cowley County’s poverty rate is 15.2% but with ALICE households that percentage increases to 43% of households in need.

Source: unitedforalice.org/introducing-ALICE/kansas

Health Challenges:

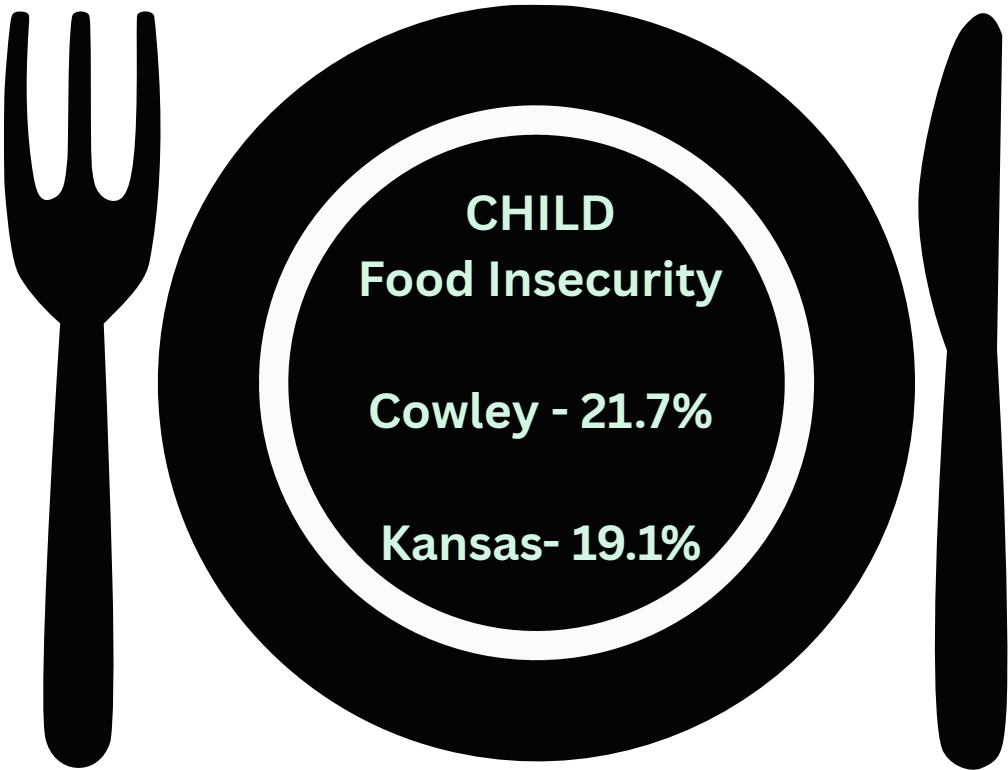
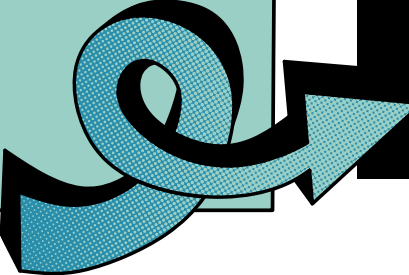
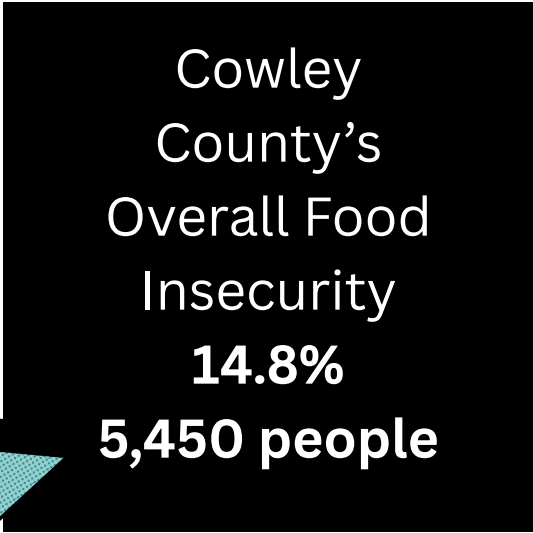
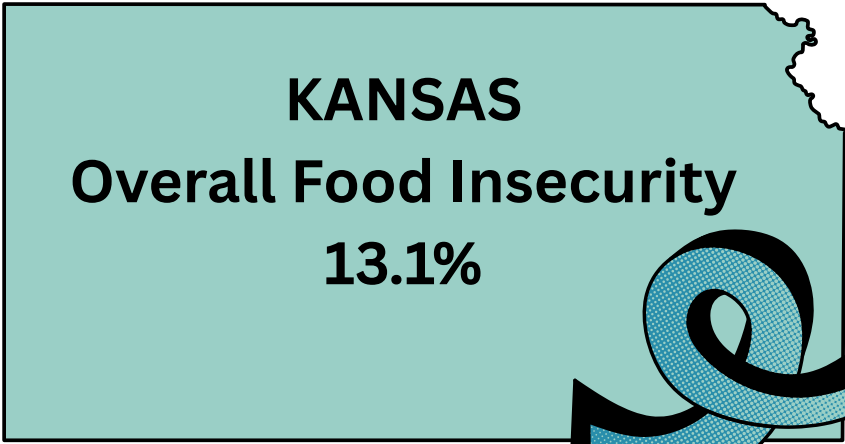


Obesity and Physical Inactivity

Cowley County’s adult obesity rate is 44%, notably higher than the national average of 34%.

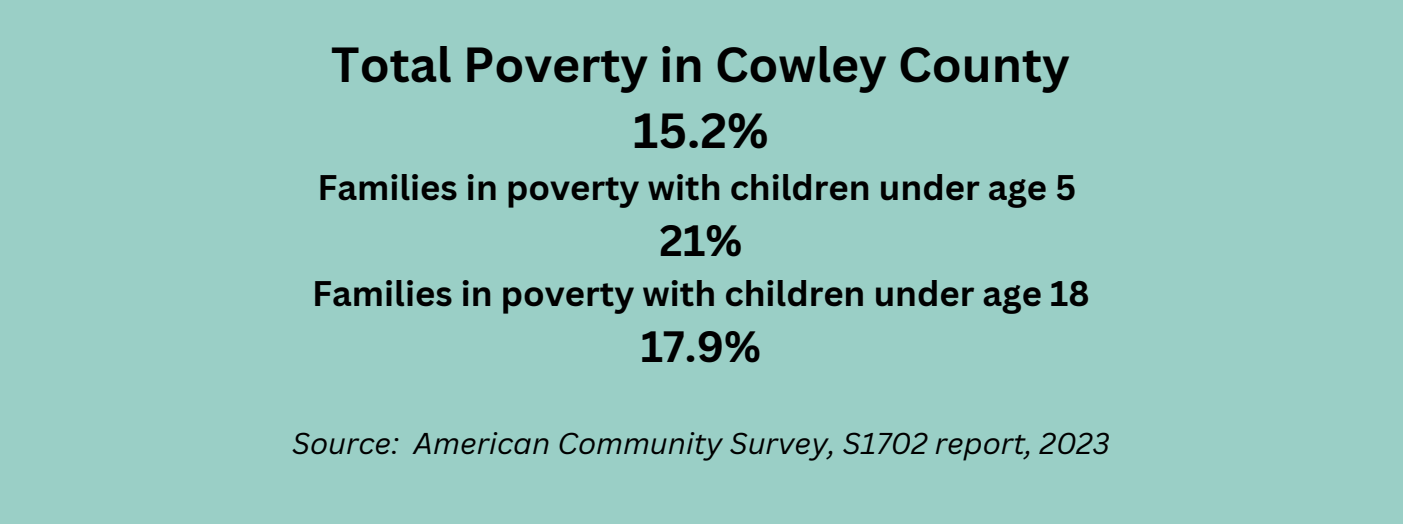
Additionally, 30% of adults report physical inactivity.

Source: countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/kansas?year=2024



**1 in 5 Cowley
kids are food
insecure**
which includes
**Latino youth
23%**
**Black youth
29%**

Source: Feeding America, 2022



Understanding the Local Food System

A food system encompasses all processes involved in feeding a community, from food production to consumption and recovery. A sustainable and resilient food system ensures that food is grown, processed, distributed, accessed, consumed, and recovered efficiently while supporting local economies and public health.

Cowley County, Kansas, faces challenges and opportunities within its food system, including food insecurity, rural food access limitations, and community-led initiatives aimed at improving local food sustainability.

This assessment examines the local food system through six key stages:

Production – How and where food is grown or raised in Cowley County.

Processing – Methods and facilities for turning raw agricultural products into consumable goods.

Distribution – How food moves from producers to retailers, institutions, and consumers.

Access – Availability and affordability of food, including barriers and solutions.

Consumption – How food is purchased, prepared, and eaten within the community.

Recovery – Efforts to minimize food waste and redirect surplus food to those in need.



By analyzing each stage, this assessment provides insights into Cowley County's food security landscape, identifies gaps in the system, and offers strategies for strengthening local food resilience.

Producers in the Cowley County Food System

Cowley County's food system consists of large-scale agricultural operations, small farms, and direct-to-consumer producers. Local wheat, corn, and soybeans are exported, but there is a growing effort to strengthen local food networks to enhance food security and economic stability.

Website directories of local producers

- FromtheLandofKansas.com
- ShopKansasFarms.com
- BorderQueenHarvestHub.com

Farmers' Markets (May-September)

- Arkansas City Farm & Art Market – Tuesdays, Wilson Park, Arkansas City.
- Walnut Valley Farmers Market – Saturdays, Island Park, Winfield.

(Eligible vendors accept SNAP-EBT and Double Up Food Bucks.)

- La Hacienda South LLC, Arkansas City, offers a pop-up Farmers Market site on the first, third, and fourth Saturdays. A swap meet is held on the second Saturday.

Institutional Food Production

- Winfield Correctional Facility Garden Club
 - Started in 2022, provides fresh produce to food pantries and community organizations.
 - \$7,500 from Hunger Free Kansas grant funded expansion with a greenhouse, shelving, row covers, and refrigeration.



Challenges in Local Food Production

Lack of Public Community Gardens

Previous efforts discontinued due to land access issues.

No Mobile Grocery Stores

Discontinued due to high operational costs, low customer turnout, and funding challenges.

Limited Processing Infrastructure

Cowley County 4-H Food Stand at Winfield Fairgrounds piloting an incubator kitchen in 2025.

Low Farmers' Market Participation

Awareness and accessibility issues.

Barriers to Local Distribution

Local farms export commodity products through co-ops. Speciality produce production is limited..



Processing in Cowley County's Food System

Processing facilities in Cowley County are limited, affecting the ability of local farmers and small food businesses to transform raw agricultural products into market-ready goods.

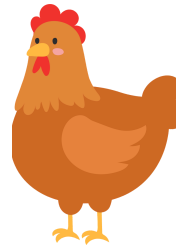
Existing Processing Facilities

Meat Processing:

- Burden Meats (Burden, KS)
- Creekstone Farms (Arkansas City, KS)
- Feasters Deer Processing (Winfield, KS) – Wild game processing

FEDD (Families Eating Donated Deer) - is a partnership between Feaster's Deer Processing, First United Methodist Church, and Cowley County 4-H. Visiting hunters can donate their harvest. Funds are raised to pay for processing and the meat is donated to local food pantries.

Current Gap: There are no public licensed incubator kitchens available in Cowley County.



Commercial Kitchen Spaces:

4-H Food Stand (Winfield, KS) – Recently approved for a 2025 Incubator Kitchen Pilot Program, which will provide licensed commercial kitchen space for small food producers.

Recent Developments

In 2024 & 2025, Cowley County 4-H coordinated a Market Broiler Production Contest, engaging 45 youth from 23 families to raise meat bird chicks from rearing to processing (Cowley County 4-H, 2025).

By addressing these challenges and leveraging new initiatives, Cowley County can strengthen its local food economy, support small producers, create economic impact and improve food security.

Key Challenges

- Limited Access to Licensed Processing Facilities: Small producers struggle to find affordable, licensed facilities for processing their products (Cowley County 4-H, 2025).
- Lack of Specialized Equipment: Without essential tools like freeze dryers, local producers face barriers in expanding their product offerings (Kansas Department of Agriculture, 2025).
- Regulatory Hurdles: Complex food safety regulations make it difficult for small businesses to scale (Kansas Health Institute, 2024).

Opportunities for Improvement

- Expand the Incubator Kitchen Initiative: Develop affordable shared use kitchens with training programs for small food businesses.
- Support On-Farm & Mobile Processing: Encourage investment in mobile meat processing equipment.
- Advocate for Policy Adjustments: Work with state and local officials to streamline licensing processes for small-scale food processors and revise local zoning codes to permit backyard chickens outside of 4-H participation, supporting household-level food production.



2024-2025 Cowley County, Kansas Food Table Summary

Town	SNAP- Authorized Retailers	Grocery Stores	Restaurants	Other Food Resources	Food Processing
Atlanta	None	None	None	None	None
Arkansas City	15 SNAP retailers (grocery, convenience)	Dillons, Walmart SC, Aldi, Dollar General, La Hacienda South	10+	Angels in the Attic; Manna Ministry; Cowley College Student Food Pantry	Creekstone Farms
Burden	Pump It	None	Ma's Café	Joseph's Storehouse	Burden Meats
Cambridge	None	None	None	None	None
Dexter	None	None	Grouse Valley Grill	Sunflower Outreach (commodities)	None
Rock	None	None	Route 77 Café	Pantry via Winfield	None
Udall	Dollar General; Pump It	Dollar General	None	Udall Senior Center; United Methodist Church	None
Winfield	12 SNAP retailers (grocery, convenience, seasonal)	Dillons, Walmart, Braum's, Aldi, Dollar General	10+	Winfield Food Pantry; First UMC; Grace UMC; Sheila's Giving Closet & Pantry	Feaster's Deer Processing

Source: Amy Jo McWhirt, Rural Champion, analysis of local conditions, 2025..



Winfield Food Price Comparison SNAP-Authorized Locations

Egg prices observed Dec 2024–Feb 2025

Store	Fresh Fruit	Fresh Vegetables	Bread (\$)	Milk (\$/gal)	*Eggs (\$/dozen unless noted)
Braum's	Yes	Yes	1.99	4.69	5.89 (Dec); 9.29 (Feb 28)
Casey's	No	No	3.99	5.99	5.99 (Dec)
Conoco Jumpstart	No	No	—	—	—
Dillons	Yes	Yes	1.79	3.49	3.49 (Dec); 4.99 (Feb 14); 5.99 (Mar 12)
Dollar General	Canned	Canned	1.5	4.1	6.50 (Feb 14)
Jumpstart	No	Canned	—	—	—
Khao Kham Market	Some	Some	—	—	—
Pump It	No	No	—	—	—
Valero Foodmart	Bananas	Some	2.99	6.99	5.99 (Dec)
Walnut Valley Meats	No	No	—	—	—
Walmart	Yes	Yes	1.42	4	3.91 (18-ct, Dec); 5.46 (Feb 14); 5.97 (Mar 12)

*Prices reflect spot checks during the listed period.



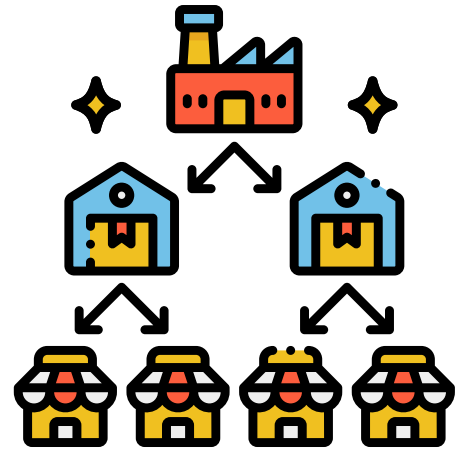
Source: Amy Jo McWhirt, Rural Champion, analysis of local conditions, Dec 1, 2024 - March 12, 2025..



Food Distribution in Cowley County, Kansas

Grocery Stores and Delivery Services

- Dillons (Kroger): Located in both Winfield and Arkansas City, Dillons offers online shopping with same-day delivery options. Customers can place orders through their website or app, with delivery availability varying based on location.
- Walmart: Walmart Supercenters in Winfield and Arkansas City provide grocery pickup and delivery services. However, delivery to rural areas may be limited.
- Instacart: This third-party service partners with retailers like Dillons to provide grocery delivery in Winfield and Arkansas City. Coverage in rural Cowley County may be restricted.



Food Distribution Sites – Cowley County

Angels in the Attic (Arkansas City)

Monthly food distribution by appointment
109 S Summit St, Arkansas City | 620-446-5272

Joseph's Storehouse (Burden)

Food pantry and state-provided groceries
424 Main St, Burden | 620-438-2497, MWF, 9 am - 4 pm

Manna Ministry – First Baptist Church (Arkansas City)

Monthly food assistance
220 E Central Ave, Arkansas City | 620-442-3510
Thurs 9–10 am; 3rd Sat 9 am–12 pm

Sheila's Giving Closet & Pantry (Winfield)

Food and basic household items
904 Alexander St, Winfield | 620-222-1788
2nd & 4th Tues 4:30–6:30 pm; 4th Thurs 4:30–5:30 pm;
or appointment

Udall United Methodist Church (Udall)

Food pantry and grocery distribution
305 S Church St, Udall | 620-441-2858
2nd Sat monthly

Winfield Food Pantry (Winfield)

Food pantry, M-F, 8:30 - 11 am
314 College St, Winfield | 620-221-7298

Commodities Food Distribution is a local description for TEFAP, Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program.

Local volunteers coordinate distribution sites for eligible households up to 6 times per year (Kansas Department for Children and Families).



Consume: Food Access in Cowley County, Kansas

In Cowley County, “consume” refers to how residents' access, afford, prepare, and eat food. This includes community-driven efforts, service availability, individual barriers, and systemic inequities. Input from local leaders, pantry coordinators, residents, and food access partners reveals both the urgency of current needs and the promising momentum underway.

Current Landscape: Limited Access in Rural Areas

Small towns such as Dexter, Burden and Rock report limited to no access to full grocery options. Residents often travel to Winfield or Ark City for essentials, and neighbors frequently help transport elderly or low-income individuals who lack vehicles. Convenience stores provide limited staples but not fresh, nutritious options.

Transportation is a Consistent Barrier

The Cowley County Council on Aging provides low-cost rides, but its weekday-only schedule and limited capacity make access to food sources and farmers markets difficult for many, particularly on weekends and during the peak growing season.

Food Pantries are Lifelines

Pantries are creatively and effectively serving residents:

- Angels in the Attic (Ark City) distributes TEFAP and offers pantry boxes for both housed and unhoused clients.
- Dexter Outreach maintains a 24/7 Blessing Box and a pantry by appointment, with plans to expand weekly access.
- Joseph's Storehouse in Burden serves eastern Cowley County.
- Winfield Food Pantry served nearly 8,000 people in 2024 – doubling in three years – and provides grocery vouchers in addition to food boxes.

Despite these efforts, pantries report rising demand, rising costs, and limited access to fresh produce.

Building Toward Resilience: Current and Upcoming Initiatives

Significant investments are now aligning to address “consume” needs through infrastructure, education, and empowerment:

- *\$25,000 Rural Champion grant supporting food pantry equipment upgrades in Burden, Dexter, and Ark City, enhancing storage, transport, and outreach capacity.
- *School Orchards are being considered for rural school districts, integrated with curriculum and wellness goals.
- * Incubator Kitchens will launch to support food entrepreneurs, food preservation, and access to shared equipment.
- *\$165,000 in new funding is coming to RISE Cowley through the Food Secure Communities Initiative (\$55k/year for 3 years) to address root causes of food insecurity.
- *K-State Research and Extension hosted two Food Fellows positions (stipend of \$5,600) to assist with food projects during the summer 2025.
- *Winfield Public Library's new “The Patio” will feature gardening and food access programs in collaboration with K-State Extension and Master Gardeners serving the nearby housing and senior center.

SNAP Enrollment Is Underutilized

Local leaders note that Cowley County is under-enrolled in SNAP, which directly affects funding for food programs.

Volunteers in Burden and Ark City assist residents with applications, but outreach needs to expand to increase enrollment and awareness.



Recovery: Waste Reduction and Food Reuse in Cowley County

The Recovery stage of Cowley County’s food system focuses on diverting food and organic waste from landfills through composting, recycling, and food rescue. These efforts help protect the environment, reduce greenhouse gases, and redirect resources back into the community.

Composting and Organic Waste Management

City of Winfield Compost Facility

Located at 320 Broad St., this site accepts grass clippings, leaves, and limbs (under 6 inches in diameter). Open April–October (Tues/Thurs 12–6pm, Sat 9 am–3pm), it offers a sustainable solution for yard waste.

Arkansas City F Street Compost Site

Located at the south end of F Street, this site takes limbs and compostable yard waste (Mon–Thurs 8 am–1 pm, Sat 8 am–4 pm).

Vermicomposting with Extension Master Gardeners (EMG)

Local Extension Master Gardeners promote vermicomposting—composting with worms—to turn food scraps into nutrient-rich garden soil



Food Rescue and Recovery

Pantry Partnerships and Donation Programs

Local pantries receive venison from FEDD (Families Eating Donated Deer) and perishable items from local stores. Cowley College ACES volunteers packaged 20,000 shelf-stable meals for area pantries.

Freeze Drying for Preservation

A Freeze Dryer was purchased with grant funds and is housed at the 4-H Food Stand at the Winfield fairgrounds. It will be used to preserve surplus produce, including donations from the Winfield Correctional Facility Garden Club

Kansas State Extension Food Recovery Resources

KSE offers toolkits to help communities start gleaning or food rescue programs.

Recycling and Community Reuse

Community Recycling Drop-Off (Strother Field)

Though there’s no curbside pickup, residents can use the drop-off site at 7th Ave. & D St. on Fridays and Saturdays from 8am–12pm to recycle cardboard, plastics, and aluminum.

Neighborhood Cleanup Program (Winfield)

Weekly roll-off containers (April–October, Saturdays 8–11am) allow residents to dispose of bulky items and prevent illegal dumping.

Boy Scouts Can Collection

Local Boy Scouts collect aluminum cans from donation bins to raise funds for the Cowley County Humane Society, demonstrating community-based circular reuse and youth engagement in recovery efforts.



Free & Reduced Lunch Rates Cowley County Schools

40-49%	50-59%
KEY	60-69%
	70-79%

Why Data Matters

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) can help school districts offer universal free meals to students.

Schools that fail to collect Free/Reduced Lunch forms may appear ineligible for Community Eligibility Program, even when need is high. The threshold percentage is 40%, but local districts need to calculate if reimbursement rates make the program feasible (Hunger Free Kansas, 2023).

All public schools in Cowley County have 40% or higher Free/Reduced Lunch rate, making them eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

CEP allows eligible schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students without collecting meal applications, reducing stigma and administrative burden (USDA Food & Nutrition Service, 2023).

District	2024-2025 percentages
462- Central of Burden	K-6: 53.1%
	7-12: 48.9%
463 - Udall	K-5: 53.1%
	6-8: 48.5%
	9-12: 46.9%
465 - Winfield	Country View: 49.1%
	Irving: 72.6%
	Lowell: 58.4%
	Whittier: 54.4%
	6-8: 59.9%
	9-12: 51.2%
470 - Arkansas City	Adams: 75.8%
	C-4: 43.9%
	Frances Willard: 77.3%
	IXL: 73.7%
	Jefferson: 72.4%
	Roosevelt: 74%
	7-8: 60.5%
	9-12: 51%
471- Dexter	K-8: 55.3%
	9-12: 41.4%

Source: datacentral.ksde.gov/report_gen.aspx

HEALTH COUNTS in Cowley County

HealthCounts in Cowley County was a countywide effort to gather input from residents about health and wellness for the Community Health Needs Assessment (2024).

Food and Nutrition was identified as one of the top four priorities for the Community Health Improvement Plan.

Source: <https://www.wnhcares.org/about/community-health-needs-assessment>



CHIP
PRIORITY:

Food & Nutrition



GOAL 1: Promote nutrition and wellness through school based initiatives

Objective 1.1 Increase consumption of healthy foods by youth (specifically fruits and vegetables)

Strategy 1: Implement healthy food experiences in schools



GOAL 2: Promote nutrition and wellness in healthcare settings

Objective 2.1 Increase the number of healthcare settings using “Food is Medicine practices

Strategy 1: Explore policy options within health care environments

Strategy 2: Expand systems to promote patient knowledge about, access to and consumption of healthy foods

Strategy 3: Connect hospital and clinic patients with locally-grown food.



GOAL 3: Support and expand local food systems: specifically, production, distribution and recovery

Objective 3.1 Increase the number and variety of opportunities related to local food production.

Strategy 1: Conduct a Local Food System Assessment to provide baseline data for CHNA/CHIP implementation

Strategy 2: Support systems and environments that produce locally grown food.

Objective 3.2 Increase number and variety of opportunities related to food recovery

Strategy 1: Promote systems and environments that influence food recovery.

Objective 3.3 Support local food pantries

Strategy 1: Strengthen existing food pantries by supporting policy and program changes for healthy options.



GOAL 4: Expand education and resource coordination related to food and nutrition in the community

Objective 4.1 Increase awareness of food and nutrition resources and use of safety-net resources

Strategy 1: Promote use of RISE Cowley Resource Directory

Strategy 2: Provide assistance for people to apply for SNAP and Sun Bucks

The Community Health Improvement Plan combined with the Food System Assessment will be used as a road map for food and nutrition efforts.



Cowley County was one of 14 Kansas communities in the second cohort of Rural Champions.

Developed by the Kansas Department of Commerce's Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP), in collaboration with the Kansas Sampler Foundation (KSF) and the Patterson Family Foundation, this program addresses critical public needs in rural communities and builds capacity moving forward.

The Rural Champions program is designed to create a network of grassroots individuals who possess the necessary tools to resolve critical community needs in a quick and effective manner.

Amy Jo McWhirt focused on food access and partnered with communities to distribute **\$25,000 in grants to support food access.**

Learn more at kansas.commerce.gov/orp/ruralchampions



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Partners Supporting This Assessment:

Kansas Department of Commerce – Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP)

The Office of Rural Prosperity supports community-led approaches to addressing local challenges in rural Kansas. Through the Rural Champions program, ORP invests in local leadership and practical solutions that respond directly to community-identified needs, including food access and system coordination.

RISE Cowley

RISE Cowley is Cowley County’s health coalition, focused on improving community well-being through collaboration and systems-based planning. RISE Cowley serves as a coordinating partner for food access, transportation, education, and health initiatives, helping align efforts across organizations and funding streams.

Legacy Regional Community Foundation

Legacy Regional Community Foundation provides grant management, fiscal stewardship, and long-term capacity support for community initiatives in Cowley County and the surrounding region. Legacy supports coordinated investments that strengthen local systems and sustain impact over time.

Kansas State University Extension – Cowley County

K-State Extension provides research-based education and technical assistance related to food production, preservation, nutrition, and community-scale food systems. Extension staff and volunteers support practical skill-building and infrastructure that help translate food access strategies into everyday use.

