

NORTON COUNTY

REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEM ASSESSMENT

July 2022



Developed by



Norton Regional
HEALTH FOUNDATION

NCH NORTON
COUNTY HOSPITAL

Funded by



Prepared by



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Live Well Norton and the Norton Regional Health Foundation at Norton County Hospital are grateful to the consultants at New Venture Advisors for conducting this assessment, and for the funding provided by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas Pathways to a Healthy Kansas grant.

This food system assessment was supported and informed by many community members and partners. In particular, we would like to thank the following community members who agreed to be interviewed or to participate in community roundtable discussions about the Norton County food system:

Brenda Dole
Food Service Director, Norton County Hospital

Chance McKinney
Producer, NWKS Cattle Co.

Corene Smith
Sunshine Learning Center and Moms 4 Kids civic organization

Donna Eastman Liddle
President and CEO, Norton Area Chamber of Commerce and Travel and Tourism

Eden Nickel Davis
Community Member

Georgia Briery
Volunteer, Trinity Episcopal Church – God’s Pantry

Hazel Peterson
NCF Warden, Kansas Department of Corrections

Janelle VanKooten
SNAP-ED Regional Specialist, KSU Research & Extension

Jill Edgett
Producer, Jill’s Microgreens

Karen Griffiths
Partner, Sebelius and Griffiths LLP, Live Well Norton Coalition Member, Norton Kids Cafe Committee Member

Kim Chambers
Food Service Director, Norton Community Schools

Mary Byler
Head Cook, Norton Community Schools

McKenzie Linner
Sunshine Learning Center and Moms 4 Kids civic organization

Rich Risewick
President, Jamboree Foods

Scott Sproul
President/CEO, Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center, Inc.

Tracy Brooks Zaffuto
Community Member



CONTENTS

Introduction	4
LOCAL REGION	5
Key Trends	9
AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE	10
Key Trends	12
Community Perspectives	13
FOOD ACCESS AND FOOD INSECURITY	14
Key Trends	20
Community Perspectives	21
LOCAL FOODS AND BUSINESS LANDSCAPE	22
Key Trends	26
Community Perspectives	27
FOOD WASTE	28
Key Trends	29
Community Perspectives	30

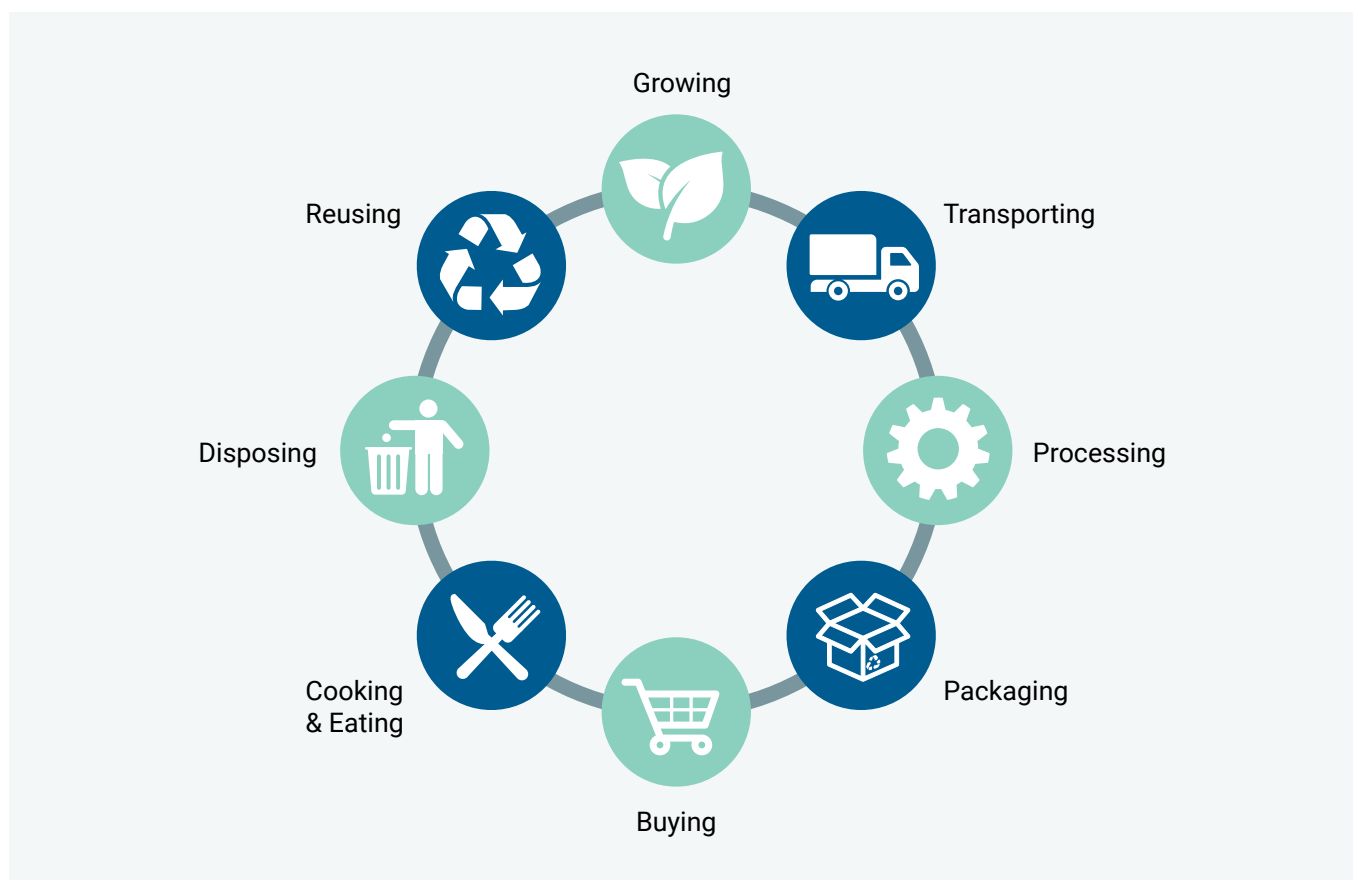
INTRODUCTION

This food system assessment provides insights into the current food system in Norton County, Kansas, and the surrounding region.

The “food system” is the process food follows as it moves from the farm to your table. This process includes farmers, manufacturers and processors, distributors, and all residents as consumers. It also includes the inputs and outputs of each step—right down to the food waste we generate. The journey our food takes through the food system is influenced by ecosystems, research, education, funding, our culture, and our policies.

Live Well Norton and the Norton Regional Health Foundation at Norton County Hospital commissioned this assessment to improve the Norton County and regional food system by understanding the current barriers and potential opportunities that exist.

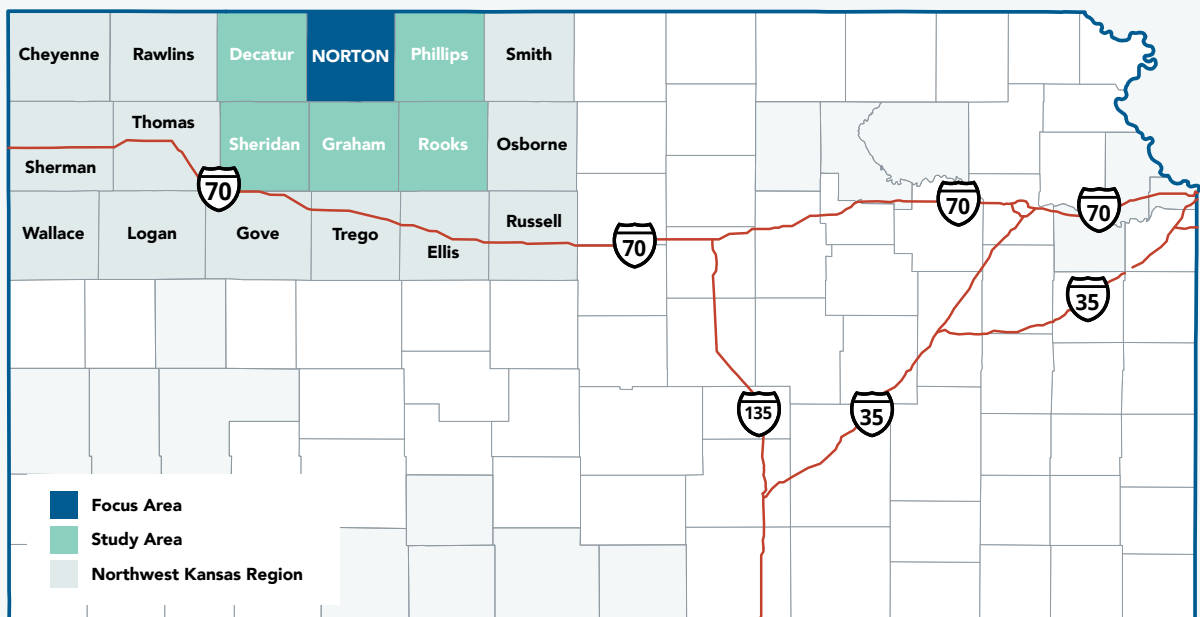
This report includes secondary data from national and local datasets along with primary data from interviews and community roundtable discussions. The data informed both this report and the complementary [Northwest Kansas Food System Map](#).



LOCAL REGION

Norton County is located in northwest Kansas. As of the 2020 census, the county population was 5,459. The largest city and county seat is Norton.

While Norton County was the focus of this food system assessment, the county is heavily influenced by its neighboring counties (Decatur, Sheridan, Graham, Rooks, and Phillips) and is also an integral part of the larger 18-county region of northwest Kansas.



Demographics such as income, race and ethnicity, employment, and neighborhood conditions impact people's access to healthy food options and their overall health. The following demographics were collected for the six-county study region:

Table 1. Demographics across the six-county study region

	Norton Co	Decatur Co	Sheridan Co	Graham Co	Rooks Co	Phillips Co	Kansas State
Total population (2020)	5,459	2,764	2,447	2,415	4,919	4,981	2,913,804
% change since 2010	-3.7%	-6.7%	-4.3%	-7.0%	-5.1%	-11.7%	3.0%
White alone	93.5%	96.5%	97.1%	90.7%	96.1%	96.5%	86.3%
Black	3.6%	1.2%	0.8%	3.9%	0.8%	0.4%	6.1%
Latinx	5.5%	3.3%	5.7%	3.9%	2.4%	3.3%	12.2%
Asian	0.7%	0.2%	0.4%	1.7%	0.8%	1.0%	3.2%
2+ races	1.8%	1.6%	1.1%	2.9%	1.6%	1.4%	3.1%
Foreign-born	2.2%	3.0%	2.6%	1.7%	0.7%	1.8%	7.1%
Median age (2020)	43.5	51.4	46.9	49.4	44.1	45.3	36.0

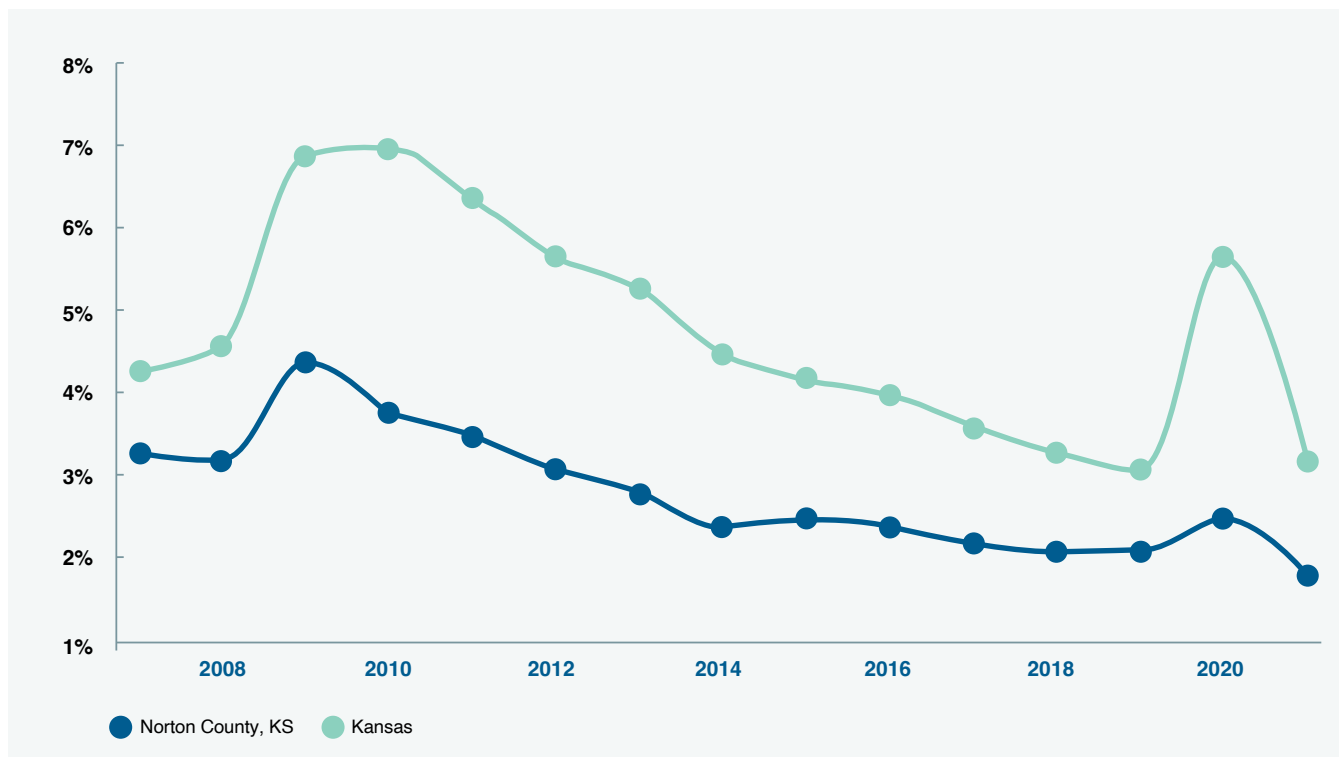
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts, 2015–19 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221>.

Table 2. Selected demographic indicators across the six-county study region

	Norton Co	Decatur Co	Sheridan Co	Graham Co	Rooks Co	Phillips Co	Kansas State
Median household income (\$)	49,038	48,125	62,885	46,375	49,415	50,093	59,597
Poverty rate	11.6%	13.2%	11.8%	11.8%	10.5%	11.0%	10.6%
% population in workforce	53.4%	59.7%	68.4%	60.9%	62.3%	62.9%	66.7%
Unemployment rate (2020)	2.0%	2.8%	1.6%	4.0%	3.1%	2.4%	4.7%
Unemployment rate (2021)	2.0%	3.2%	2.0%	2.8%	2.9%	2.8%	3.9%
Bachelor's degree or higher	18.8%	22.5%	22.0%	24.7%	23.1%	21.8%	33.4%

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts, 2015–19 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221>; Labor Market Information Services, "Kansas Labor Force & Unemployment Rates by County," last updated March 25, 2022, <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/kdol/viz/KansasLaborForceUnemploymentRatesbyCounty/KansasLaborForceUnemploymentRates>.

Figure 1. Historical unemployment rate in Norton County (2008 to present)



Source: MySidewalk, "Pathways Social Determinants of Health: Food," <https://reports.mysidewalk.com/4605d32773>

County health rankings are an indicator commonly used to measure the health of the population in a county. The county health rankings take multiple factors into account, and access to food and food insecurity are factored into these rankings.

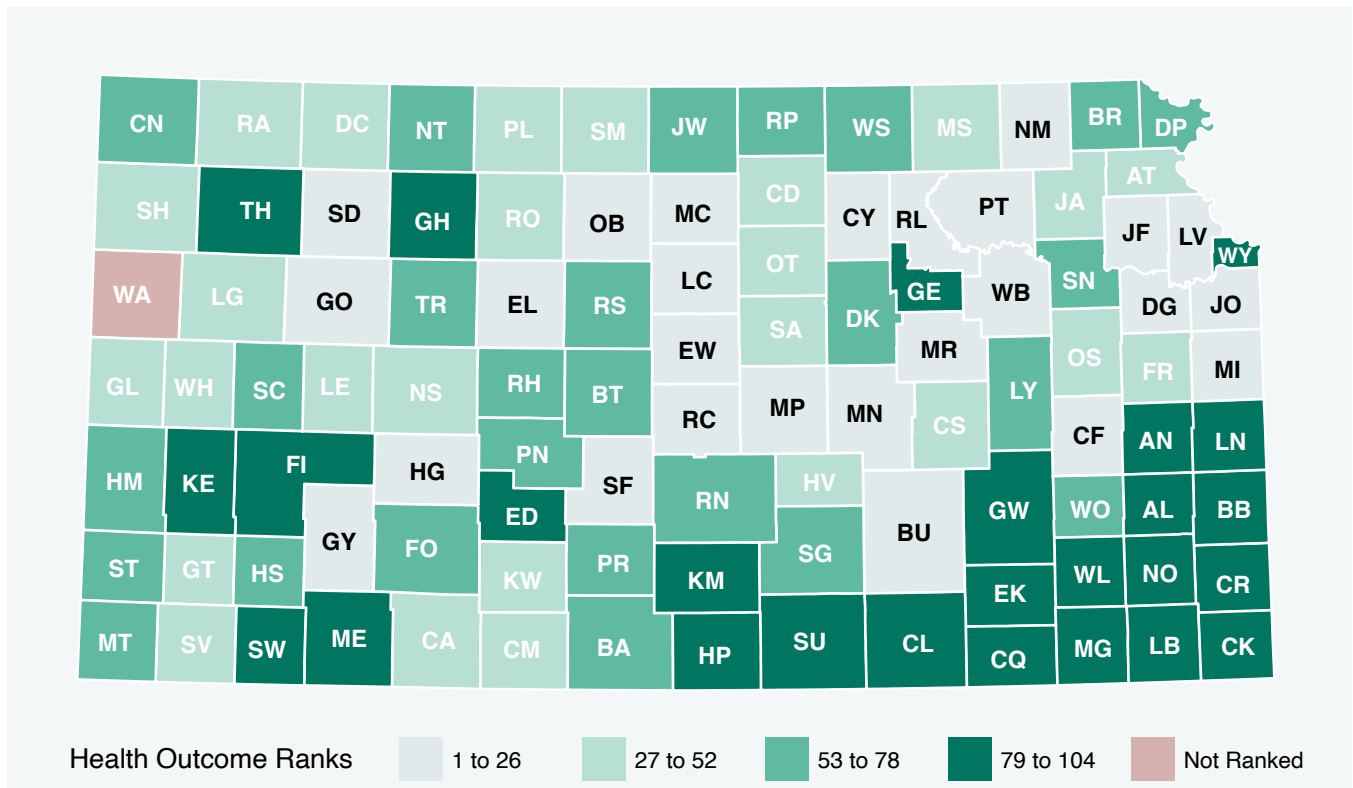
- *Health outcomes* represent how healthy counties are. The healthiest county in the state is ranked number 1. The ranks are based on two types of measures: how long people live and how healthy people feel while alive.
- *Health factors* represent what influences the health of a county. They are an estimate of future health. The ranks are based on four types of measures: health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic, and physical environment factors. Counties are grouped as follows: 0–25% (least healthy); 25–50% (lower middle range); 50–75% (higher middle range); 75–100% (healthiest).

Table 3. County health rankings across six-county study region

	Norton Co	Decatur Co	Sheridan Co	Graham Co	Rooks Co	Phillips Co
*Health Outcomes (out of 105 KS counties)	#75	#30	#17	#93	#33	#40
*Health factors	#41	#49	#11	#62	#27	#24

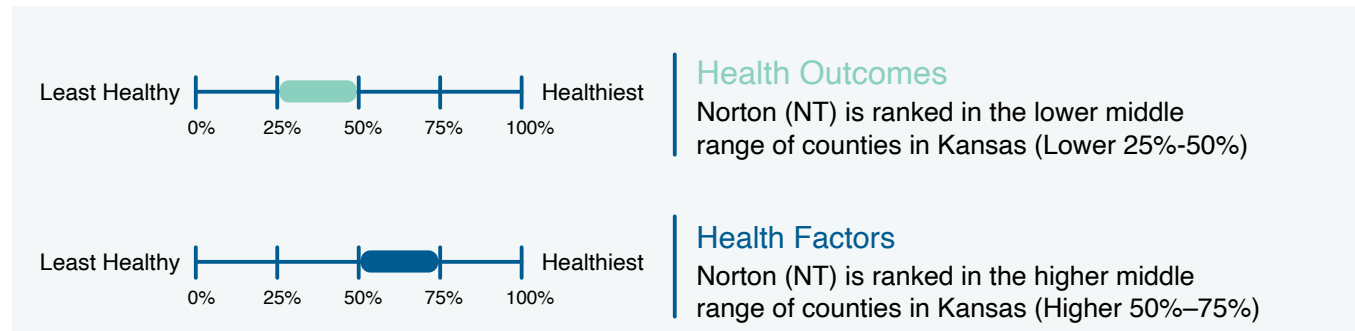
Source: County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, Kansas, 2021, <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/kansas/2022/overview>.

Figure 2. County health rankings for Kansas (2022)



Source: County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, Kansas, 2021, <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/kansas/2022/overview>.

Figure 3. Health outcomes and health factors in Norton County



Source: County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, Kansas, 2021, <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/kansas/2022/overview>.

Key Trends

- Population in the six counties, as well as in all of northwest Kansas, is decreasing, while the state of Kansas as a whole has grown over the past ten years.
- Unemployment rates in Norton County are very low (2%) and lower than the state average of 3.2% as of September 2021. Both the county and the state have rebounded from the previous year, in which they were still reeling from the effects of the global pandemic.
- The average annual household income in the six study counties is lower by approximately \$10,000 compared to the state average (\$59,597), with the exception of Sheridan County (\$62,885). Compared to the state average (10.6%), poverty rates are slightly higher in five of the six counties (11.0–13.2%); the exception is Rooks County (10.5%).
- All six counties have overall lower educational attainment than the state average.
- Health outcomes vary widely across the six-county region, with Graham County ranked as the least healthy (93/105) and Sheridan County ranked as the most healthy (15/105).

AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE

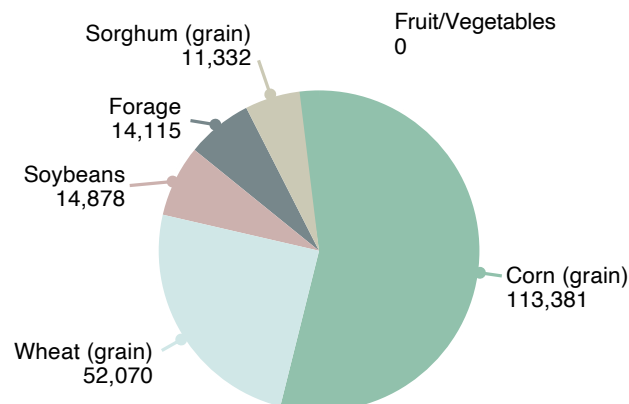
Farms and farmers are the backbone of our local food system; they are the producers who grow and raise the food we eat. In Norton and surrounding counties, agriculture is a major contributor to the local economy and shapes the rural landscape.

Table 4. Farm characteristics across the six-county study region

	Norton Co	Decatur Co	Sheridan Co	Graham Co	Rooks Co	Phillips Co
Farm operations in 2017 (% change since 2012)	328 (-11%)	270 (-8%)	318 (-17%)	429 (+<0.5%)	412 (-6%)	415 (-6%)
Acres in production (% change since 2012)	494,960 (-1%)	420,032 (-9%)	512,108 (-9%)	470,466 (-3%)	558,649 (+1%)	497,363 (+<0.5%)
Average farm size (acres) (% change since 2012)	1,509 (10%)	1,556 (-1.0%)	1,610 (10%)	1,097 (-2%)	1,356 (8%)	1,198 (7%)
Total farm sales (\$)	494,960,000	233,431,000	348,852,000	58,205,000	76,605,000	107,607,000
# of crop farms	219	199	264	217	262	303
Crop sales (\$)	61,637,000	47,276,000	88,556,000	44,509,000	49,140,000	58,668,000
# of livestock farms	171	135	165	151	187	237
Livestock sales (\$)	81,615,000	186,155,000	260,297,000	13,696,000	27,465,000	48,939,000
Farm organically	0%	1%	<0.5%	0%	0%	0%
Sell direct to consumer	1%	2%	1%	0%	1%	1%
Average income per farm (\$)	91,908	54,294	87,608	29,108	22,408	54,100

Source: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, Census of Agriculture, 2017, www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus.

Figure 4. Top crop farm production (by acres) for Norton County



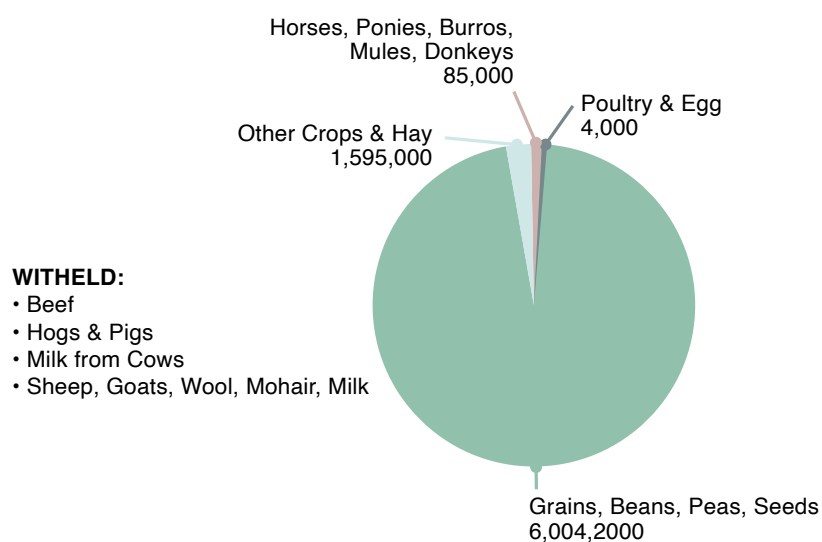
Source: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, Census of Agriculture, 2017, www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus.

Table 5. Top agricultural products sold (by market value)

Agricultural Product	Norton Co	Decatur Co	Sheridan Co	Graham Co	Rooks Co	Phillips Co
Grains, beans, peas, seeds	\$60,042,000	\$44,378,000	\$87,551,000	\$41,453,000	\$46,524,000	\$56,224,000
Other crops & hay	\$1,595,000	\$2,898,000	Withheld	\$3,008,000	\$2,611,000	Withheld
Beef	Withheld	\$185,857,000	\$259,158,000	\$12,939,000	\$27,412,000	\$33,320,000
Hogs & pigs	Withheld	Withheld	Withheld	Withheld	\$19,000	\$15,039,000
Milk from cows	\$0	Withheld	\$1,112,000	\$0	\$0	Withheld
Horses, ponies, burros, mules, donkeys	\$85,000	\$24,000	\$0	\$0	\$6,000	\$198,000
Sheep, goats, wool, mohair, milk	\$0	\$7,000	\$17,000	\$20,000	\$25,000	\$120,000
Poultry & eggs	\$4,000	\$3,000	Withheld	\$2,000	Withheld	\$9,000

Source: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, Census of Agriculture, 2017, www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus.

Figure 5. Top agricultural products sold in Norton County (by market value), 2017



Source: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, Census of Agriculture, 2017, www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus.

Producer characteristics (six-county averages):

# of producers 600 ± 95	% of producers (farming is primary occupation) 51% ± 9%
# of new and beginning farmers 127 ± 34	Average farmer age (years) 57 ± 3
% of farmers by age group (<35) = 9% (35-64) = 54% (>65) = 37%	

Key Trends

- Between 2012 and 2017, the number of farms decreased in five of the six counties in the selected foodshed (range -6% to -17%); the exception was Graham County (+>0.5%). The number of acres in production decreased as well (range -1% to -9%), except for Rooks County (+1%) and Phillips County (+0.5%).
- Most of the farming operations are livestock and commodity grain crop operations. Production of fruit and vegetables is minimal across the region.
- The annual net farm income varies widely among the six counties. Norton and Sheridan are the highest at approximately \$90,000; Rooks and Graham are lowest at approximately \$22,000 and \$29,000, respectively. Decatur County and Phillips County are on par with the state average of \$49,291. The state average is above the national average of \$43,053.
- Almost no farms are USDA certified organic.
- Across the region, 1–2% of farms are selling direct to consumer. The majority of producers are selling into global markets.

Community Perspectives

In the spring of 2022, New Venture Advisors conducted interviews and roundtable discussions with food system stakeholders. We heard from farmers, grocers, food service staff, economic development professionals, funders, food pantry volunteers, and people experiencing food insecurity. They shared their perspectives on both the challenges and opportunities that currently exist in the regional food system.

Some of the main themes that emerged from our conversations about **food production**:



Challenges

Producing fruits and vegetables in Northwest Kansas is challenging. Climate, a short growing season, wind, and lack of access to water constrain producers' abilities to grow these crops.

Lack of access to labor is a challenge for growers who want to expand their operations.

There are few producers in the region selling produce and meats direct-to-consumer. There are only a handful of vendors selling at the farmers market, and the supply doesn't meet the demand for their products. Vendors sell out quickly.

Current producers struggle with marketing their products and scaling up their operations.

The farmers market currently does not accept SNAP benefits, and does not participate in the statewide Double Up Food Bucks Program.

COVID caused significant disruptions in meat processing. The situation has improved, but it's still a serious vulnerability in the food system.

The community garden may be inaccessible to some community members due to its outside-of-town location and cost.



Opportunities

With access to capital and innovation, there are options for producers to grow food under cover (i.e., hoophouses, greenhouses, indoor growing systems, etc.) to buffer impacts of climate.

Opportunities exist to connect regional producers with laborers with agricultural visas.

Recruiting additional vendors to the market can help increase the supply. One recommendation was to expand the definition of "local" at the market to a wider geography to bring in new products (i.e., CO peaches).

Accepting SNAP could expand the number of farmers market shoppers to include low-income families.

The community could offer free or low-cost garden plots at the community garden to improve accessibility.

A partnership could be developed with FFA and a greenhouse at the high school to teach fruit and vegetable production and provide plant starts to the community.

The Norton Correctional Facility farm has 10 acres under cultivation in a variety of vegetable crops. Last year, they grew 50,000 lbs. of produce, and are adding an apple orchard in 2022. They could become a significant source of fresh produce for community partners and retailers.

FOOD ACCESS AND FOOD INSECURITY

Access to healthy food options is essential to healthy eating habits, which are, in turn, essential to good health. Food access considers consumers' ability to physically get to places where healthy foods are available for purchase, the affordability of healthy food options, and the availability of assistance to ensure consumers have the means to purchase healthy food. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted food access throughout northwest Kansas and the nation, which was likely a factor in the increase in food insecurity.

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is "a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life."

Table 6. Food insecurity (FI) metrics for the six-county study region

Metric	Norton Co	Decatur Co	Sheridan Co	Graham Co	Rooks Co	Phillips Co	Kansas State
Population	5,459	2,764	2,447	2,415	4,919	4,981	2,913,804
2019 overall FI rate (%)	11.0	14.6	9.4	11.5	11.2	11.4	12.1
2019 child FI rate (%)	17.5	21.8	12.8	18.2	15.7	18.4	17.1
2021 projected overall FI rate (%)	11.9	15.1	9.8	12.5	12.0	12.3	13.1
2021 projected child FI rate (%)	18.7	22.3	13.1	19.9	16.7	19.7	18.6
Projected % change overall FI (2019-2021)	9.9	13.6	8.4	10.3	10.1	10.3	11.0
Projected % change child FI (2019-2021)	16.4	20.78	11.8	17.1	14.6	17.3	16.0

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts, 2015–19 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221>; Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap Project, "Food Insecurity in the United States before COVID-19," <https://map.feedingamerica.org/>; Feeding America, "State-by-State Resource: The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity," feedingamericaaction.org/resources/state-by-state-resource-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/.

Norton County Food Insecurity Data:

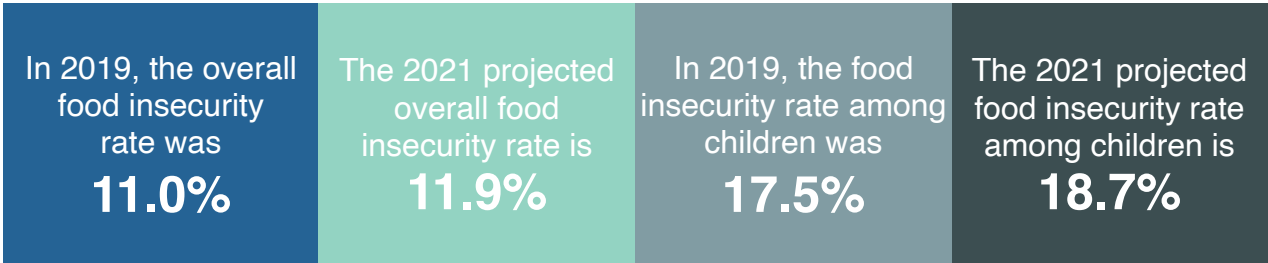
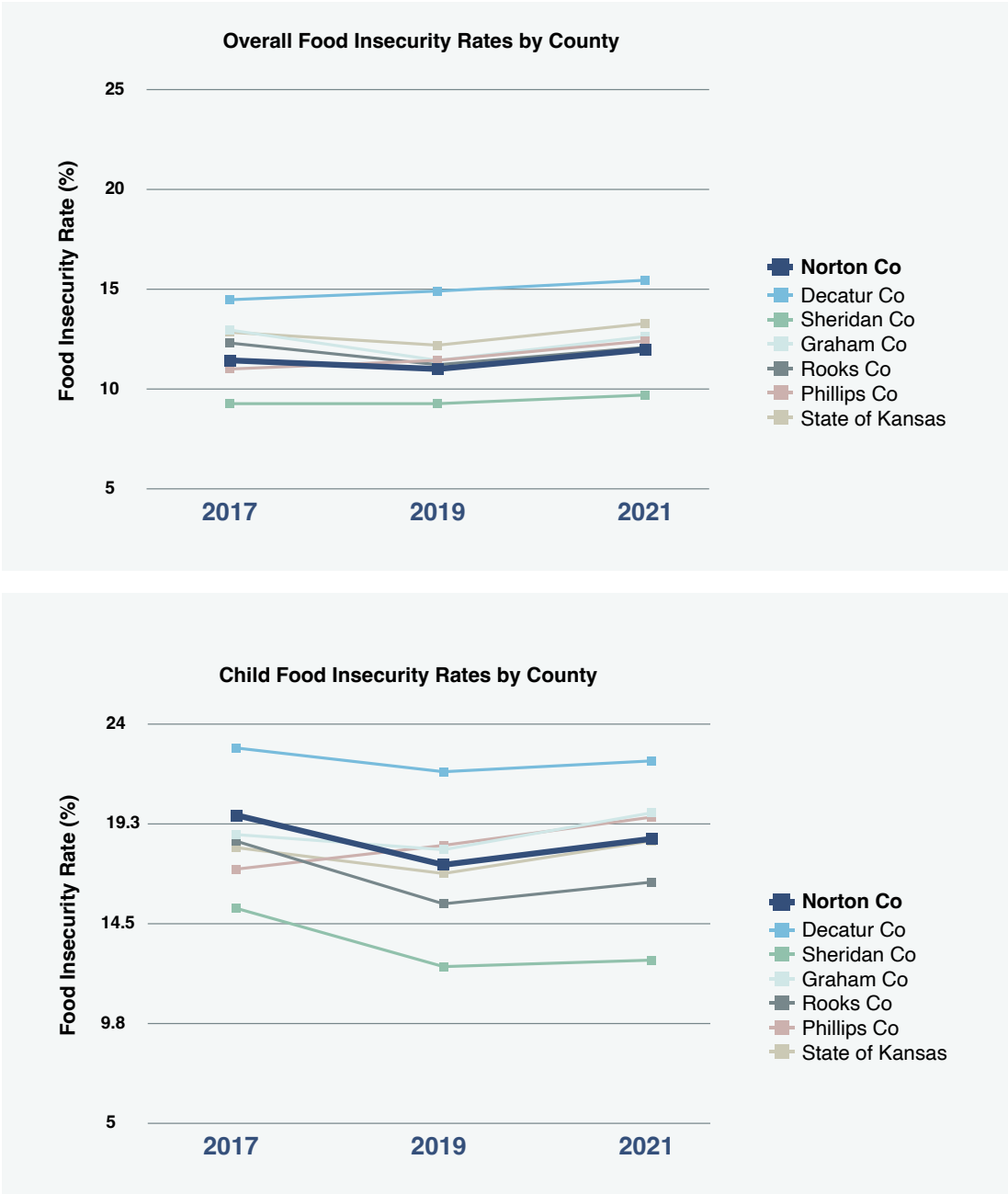


Figure 6. Food insecurity rates in the six-county region (2017–21)



Note: 2021 rates are presented as projected rates.

Table 7. Selected food access indicators

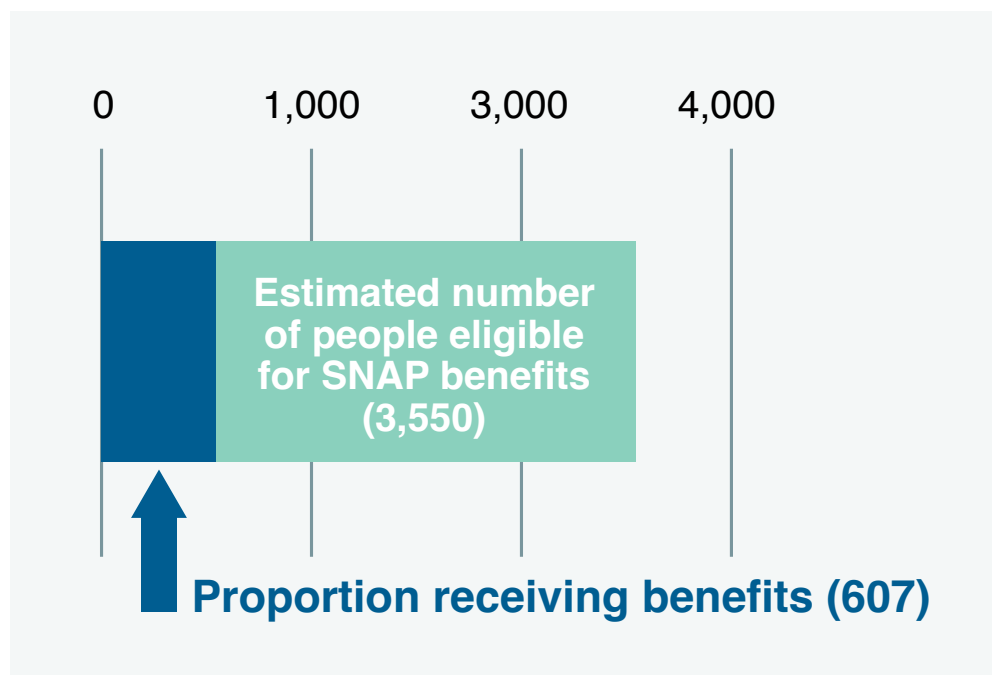
Metric	Norton Co	Decatur Co	Sheridan Co	Graham Co	Rooks Co	Phillips Co	Kansas State
2020 % free/reduced school lunch (% change from 2010)	47.2% (-5.9)	48.1% (5.8)	35.6% (21.4)	57.1% (36.6)	49.6% (8.8)	42.0% (-6.5)	47.1% (3.0)
Estimated % of total population eligible for SNAP (# of people below 125% of poverty level)	15.7% (715)	19.0% (527)	14.4% (356)	19.2% (472)	14.4% (700)	15.0% (780)	16.3% (459,414)
% of households receiving SNAP benefits (# of households)	6.2% (114)	5.1% (74)	3.9% (44)	7.3% (87)	5.5% (119)	7.3% (169)	7.5% (85,146)

Sources: The Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center, 2020, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/1277-free-and-reduced-lunch#detailed/2/any/false/2048,574,1729,871,870,573,869,36,868,867/any/2761>; U.S. Census Bureau, S1701 Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months and S2201 Food Stamps/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), 2015–19 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates, <https://data.census.gov>.

The Region's SNAP “Gap”

The SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) “Gap” is the gap between eligible residents and actual SNAP participants. The “gap” in the region is 2,943 people eligible for SNAP but not currently participating in the program.

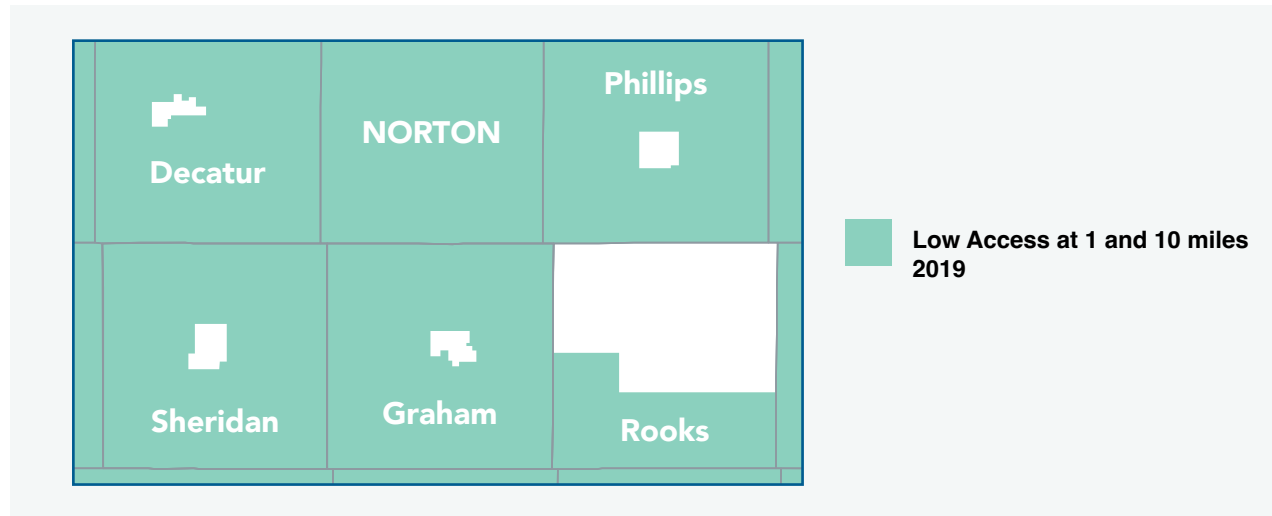
Note: SNAP eligibility depends on income (130% of the federal poverty level) and household size as well as other conditions; however, not all data are available for the estimate. Instead, individuals living in households at or below 125% of the federal poverty level was used to best approximate SNAP eligibility.



Low Food Access Areas

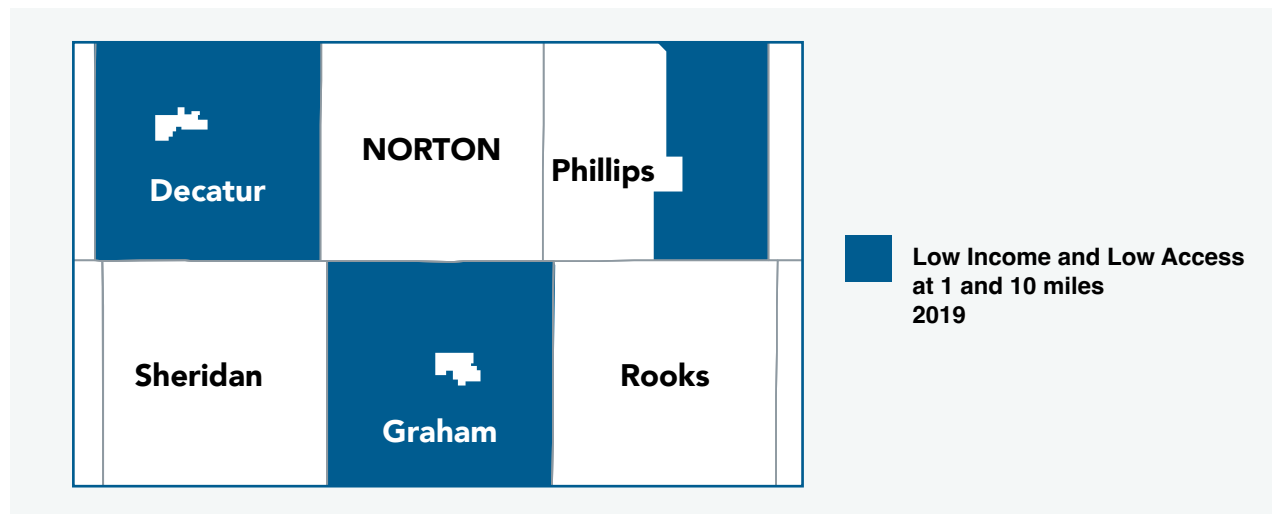
Low food access is measured using distance from the nearest supermarket or grocery store; one mile measures food access in urban settings, and ten miles measures access in rural settings. The following maps (figures 7 and 8) show the low food access areas (green) and the low food access areas that fall within low-income areas (blue) in the six-county study region.

Figure 7. Low food access areas within the six-county region



Source: USDA Economic Research Service. ESRI. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/>

Figure 8. Low food access areas that correspond with low-income areas within the six-county region

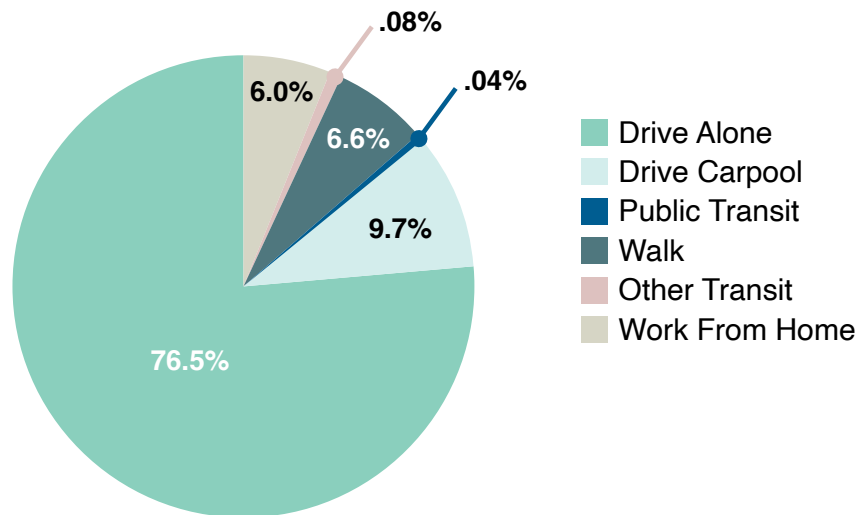


Source: USDA Economic Research Service. ESRI. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/>

Transportation

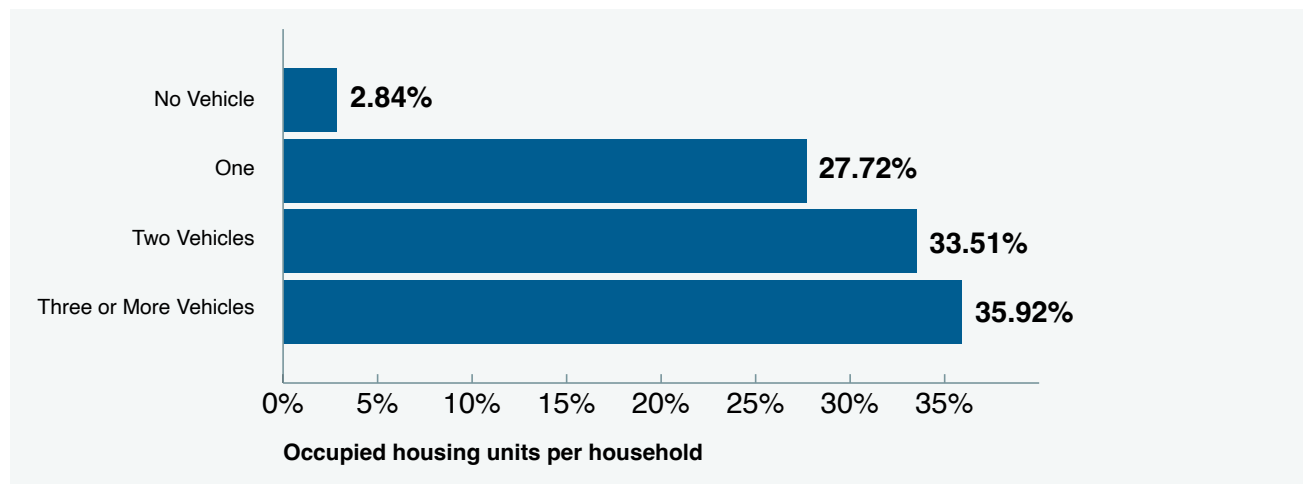
For many, access to resources, including healthy foods, is difficult without a car. In Norton and surrounding counties, passenger vehicles are the primary modes of transportation, and households without access to a personal vehicle may be significantly restricted in their ability to obtain healthy foods.

Figure 9. Commute means of transportation



Source: MySidewalk, "Pathways Social Determinants of Health: Food," <https://reports.mysidewalk.com/4605d32773#c-552381>.

Figure 10. Number of vehicles available by % of total housing units, Norton County



Source: MySidewalk, "Pathways Social Determinants of Health: Food," <https://reports.mysidewalk.com/4605d32773>.

Table 8. Food access assistance in the six-county study area

Type of Assistance	Name	Address	City	State	Zip Code	County
TEFAP site	City of Jennings	121 S Kansas	Jennings	KS	67643	Decatur
TEFAP site	City of Norcatur	301 E Ossipee	Norcatur	KS	67653	Decatur
TEFAP site	Golden Age Center	102 S Elk Center	Oberlin	KS	67749	Decatur
TEFAP site	Graham Co Community Center	700 W Main St	Hill City	KS	67642	Graham
TEFAP site	Morland Methodist Church at the Firehouse	102 W Main St	Morland	KS	67650	Graham
TEFAP site	Community Room	510 Washington St	Nicodemus	KS	67625	Graham
TEFAP site	St. Anthony Church	St Anthony Dr	Morland	KS	67650	Graham
TEFAP site	Heartland Worship - Logan	205 W Main	Logan	KS	67646	Phillips
TEFAP site	Heartland Worship - Long Island	350 Washington	Long Island	KS	67647	Phillips
TEFAP site	Heartland Worship - Phillipsburg	1310 State St	Phillipsburg	KS	67661	Phillips
TEFAP site	Knights of Columbus	204 N Irving St	Plainville	KS	67633	Rooks
TEFAP site	Town Hall	500 Main St	Palco	KS	67657	Rooks
TEFAP site	VFW Post	314 Main St	Stockton	KS	67669	Rooks
TEFAP site	Sheridan Courthouse	925 9th St	Hoxie	KS	67740	Sheridan
TEFAP site	Selden Community Center	110 Nebraska Ave	Selden	KS	67757	Sheridan
Food pantry	Decatur Food Pantry - United Church of Oberlin	109 N Griffith Ave	Oberlin	KS	67749	Decatur
Food pantry	Golden Age Center	105 W Maple St	Oberlin	KS	67749	Decatur
Food pantry	Clayton UMC	709 Kansas Ave	Clayton	KS	67629	Norton
Food pantry	Oberlin United Methodist Church	102 N Cass Ave	Oberlin	KS	67749	Norton
Food pantry	Community Room	510 N Washington St	Bogue	KS	67663	Rooks
Food pantry	Main Saint Christian Church	601 Main St	Stockton	KS	67669	Rooks
Food pantry	Stockton Senior Center	201 S Walnut St	Stockton	KS	67669	Rooks
Food pantry	Plainville Senior Center	108 S Jefferson St	Plainville	KS	67663	Rooks
Food pantry	Green Room	405 Main St	Palco	KS	67657	Rooks
Food pantry	United Methodist Church	1002 Madison St S	Plainville	KS	67663	Rooks
Food pantry	Phillips CO Ministerial All - United Methodist Church	593 3rd St	Phillipsburg	KS	67661	Phillips
Food pantry	First Presbyterian Church	901 3rd St	Phillipsburg	KS	67661	Phillips
Food pantry	Trinity Episcopal Church God's Pantry	102 E Waverly St	Norton	KS	67654	Norton
Food pantry	Norton Senior Center	208 W Main St	Norton	KS	67654	Norton
Food pantry	Lenora Senior Center	170 S Main St	Norton	KS	67645	Norton
Food pantry	Clayton UMC	18113 Road W15 LN	Norton	KS	67629	Norton
Meals on Wheels	HOMESTEAD Nutrition Project	510 W 29Th St Ste B	Hays	KS	67601	Ellis
Kids Meal Program	Norton Kids' Cafe - First United Methodist Church	805 W Wilberforce St	Norton	KS	67654	Norton

Sources: The Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center, 2020, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/1277-free-and-reduced-lunch#detailed/2/any/false/2048,574,1729,871,870,573,869,36,868,867/any/2761>; U.S. Census Bureau, S1701 Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months and S2201 Food Stamps/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), 2015–19 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates, <https://data.census.gov>.

Key Trends

- Decatur County consistently has the highest rates of overall and child food insecurity, whereas Sheridan County consistently has the lowest rates in the region.
- Food insecurity rates appeared relatively stable or decreasing between 2017 and 2019 across the study region, while food insecurity spiked in 2021, most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Projected percent change in food insecurity among children between 2019 and 2021 are all increasing and vary considerably in the study region. Norton, Graham, Rooks, and Phillips counties are similar to the projected rate of change at the state level (+16%), whereas Decatur County is most vulnerable (projected increase of 20%) and Sheridan County is more resilient (projected increase of 11%).
- Household enrollment in SNAP across the six-county area range from 3.9% to 7.3%, which are lower than the state average of Kansas (8.0%).
- A significant “SNAP Gap” exists in the region, with an estimated 3,550 residents who would qualify for SNAP based upon their income, but only 607 households are actually enrolled in the food assistance program.
- Available and accessible healthy foods remain a challenge in the study area, with all six counties containing a low-access census tract. Three of the census tracts qualify as both low access and low income, which means that residents in these regions lack both financial and geographic access to food.
- Lack of public transit in the region means that residents are dependent upon personal passenger vehicles to access healthy food, and not all households have access to a vehicle.

Community Perspectives

Some of the main themes that emerged from our conversations about **food insecurity and access to healthy food** in Norton County and the wider region:



Challenges

The ever-increasing cost of food makes it difficult for families to afford healthy food.

The KS sales tax at 6.5% makes it more expensive for families to shop locally.

Food insecurity seems to be increasing as evidenced by increased sign-ups for the Angel Tree and Holiday Food Basket program. (Sign-ups jumped from 138 in 2020 to 171 in 2021).

SNAP is currently not accepted at the Norton Farmers' Market, which excludes many low-income families from shopping there.

Community members feel that the selection and quality of local produce is lacking in the area, and the fresh food distributed through the pantry is minimal.

Healthy food is less convenient than fast food. One interviewee shared how hard it is to spend \$30 at the grocery store to make a healthy meal when \$10 at Sonic would feed this person's family.

God's Pantry in Norton has extremely limited hours (only on Sundays from 3–4 pm).

There is a perceived lack of knowledge of how to prepare healthy food on a budget.



Opportunities

SNAP/WIC: There is interest in making it easier for families to sign up for food assistance programs (potentially at a public building like the library or courthouse — to have a local contact to help with the application).

Making the community garden more accessible (location change and/or free plot rental) may help food insecure families grow their own food.

Local food pantries could explore offering additional days/hours to their operations — making it easier for families to access.

The “Simply Produce” program (which provides a basket of affordable fresh produce) could offer additional pickup locations in the area. The current pickup location is in Oberlin, which may provide a transportation barrier for some.

A community commercial kitchen could provide space for cooking classes to help families learn how to prepare healthy food on a budget.

Community members could benefit from a directory of all of the food access locations in the region — DCF office, pantries, etc.

LOCAL FOODS AND BUSINESS LANDSCAPE

The existing landscape of food infrastructure and retail outlets can signal the maturity of the local food system. Understanding what exists can help identify gaps in the system and show where there are potential market opportunities for local producers and entrepreneurs.

Table 9. Local food infrastructure within various categories across the six-county foodshed

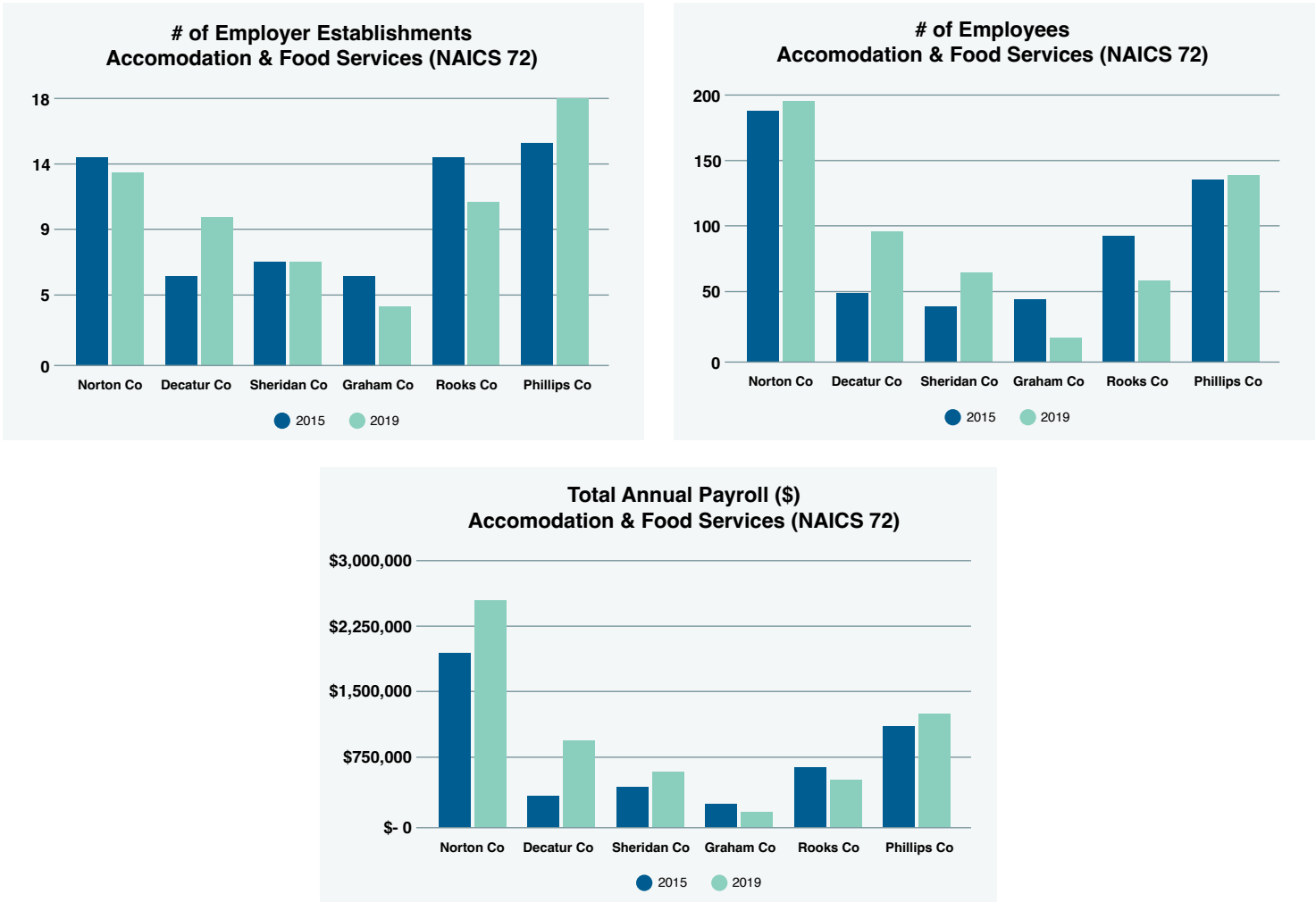
Food infrastructure category	Norton Co	Decatur Co	Sheridan Co	Graham Co	Rooks Co	Phillips Co
County population	5,459	2,764	2,447	2,415	4,919	4,981
Farmers markets	1	1	1	0	0	1
Community supported agriculture (CSA)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Restaurants	10	6	4	7	11	16
Grocers	1	1	2	1	2	2
Farm to school	1	0	0	0	0	2
Food Pantries	6	2	0	0	6	2

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts, 2015–19 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221>.

Note: The food infrastructure categories listed above are mapped in the [Northwest Kansas Food System Map](#).

Food System Employment

Figure 11. Trends between 2015-2019 *The Accommodation and Food Services Sector (72)* of the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) comprises establishments immediate consumption (i.e. restaurants, bars, hotels, etc.) providing customers with lodging and/or preparing meals, snacks, and beverages for immediate consumption. The following graphs show NAICS 72 trends for (a) number of employer establishments, (b) number of employees, and (c) total annual payroll.



Source: Economic Research Service (ERS), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food Access Research Atlas, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/>.

Training and Workforce Programming

Kansas State Research and Extension Twin Creeks: Norton, Graham, Sheridan, Decatur

- Women in Agriculture Farm and Ranch Risk Management Series: Four-part risk management series designed to help Kansas farmers and ranchers navigate uncertainty. Topics covered include determining costs of production, utilizing crop insurance, crop marketing plans, and government farm programs
- Global Food System Program - Calving School: Participants see different calving difficulties and get hands-on practice managing them.
- Youth Agriculture Programs
- Ag and Natural Resources Programs - Wheat Pre-Plant School

Kansas State Research and Extension: Phillips Rooks District

- Crop Scouting School
- Corn Marketing Workshop
- Sheep School
- Women in Agriculture Farm and Ranch Risk Management Series
- Cattle Conversations
- Women Managing the Farm
- Kansas Local Foods Resources: [Value Added Business Development Program](#)

Small Business and Entrepreneurial Support

- Norton City/County Economic Development is available to assist entrepreneurs in developing a business plan.
- [Kansas Small Business Development Center](#), located at Fort Hays State University, is a great resource for entrepreneurs.
- [NW Kansas Economic Innovation Center](#) offers economic and entrepreneurial assistance to the region.

Consumer Food Spending and Local Demand

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Economic Survey County Business Patterns, the percentage of consumer food dollars spent on foods prepared away from home is similar across the six-county study area (36-38%) but lower compared to the state of Kansas (40%) (information from data.census.gov).

The Marketsizer® reports there is unmet demand for local dairy, meat, poultry/eggs, and fruit/vegetable products in the six-county foodshed.

Table 10. Estimates for unmet demand for locally produced food

Food infrastructure category	Norton Co	Decatur Co	Sheridan Co	Graham Co	Rooks Co	Phillips Co
DAIRY						
Local quotient	0%	0%	407%	0%	0%	0%
Local demand	\$520,000	\$330,000	\$270,000	\$290,000	\$540,000	\$590,000
Local food supply	**	**	\$1,100,000	**	**	**
Unmet market for local food	\$520,000	\$330,000	*	\$290,000	\$540,000	\$590,000
MEAT						
Local quotient	0%	35100%	61370%	2819%	2819%	5183%
Local demand	\$480,000	\$310,000	\$240,000	\$260,000	\$500,000	\$540,000
Local food supply	**	\$110,000,000	\$150,000,000	\$7,500,000	\$16,000,000	\$28,000,000
Unmet market for local food	\$480,000	*	*	*	*	*
POULTRY & EGGS						
Local quotient	1%	2%	0%	1%	0%	3%
Local demand	\$170,000	\$110,000	\$86,000	\$94,000	\$180,000	\$190,000
Local food supply	\$2,200	\$1,600	**	\$1,100	**	\$4,900
Unmet market for local food	\$170,000	\$110,000	\$86,000	\$93,000	\$180,000	\$190,000
FRUITS & VEGETABLES						
Local quotient	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	
Local demand	\$1,300,000	\$830,000	\$660,000	\$720,000	\$1,400,000	\$1,500,000
Local food supply	**	**	**	**	**	**
Unmet market for local food	\$1,300,000	\$830,000	\$660,000	\$720,000	\$1,400,000	\$1,500,000

Local quotient is the percentage of category food sales produced within the area. A result of greater than 100% indicates that local demand could be met entirely with local production if it were directed to these markets through a local food system.

Local food demand is the approximate value of category wholesale sales that could come from local sources if supply were available.

Local food supply is the approximate value of category wholesale sales produced within the area based on the county-level.

* In this instance, local demand could be fully met with local supply if it were directed to these markets through a robust local food system.

** Your search returned a result of zero either because there is no production in the geography you selected, or because USDA NASS has withheld information to avoid disclosing data for individual farms.

Sources: Consumer expenditures per household (2021), retrieved from <https://cbb.census.gov/raef/>; source data from <https://doc.arcgis.com/en/esri-demographics/data/consumer-spending.htm>.

Note: Estimates were created using New Venture Advisors, LLC, Local Food Marketsizer® Tool, <https://toolsite.newventureadvisors.net/marketsizer/v2.0/method>.

Key Trends

- The Norton County and regional food system lacks much of the infrastructure needed for a mature local food system. In particular, there is a lack of aggregation, co-packing, and shared kitchen space in the Norton County area that could help local farmers and entrepreneurs scale up their production. One nearby asset is the food hub located in Atwood, Kansas (about 60 miles west of Norton).
- There are minimal farm-to-school efforts in the study region. Farm-to-school remains an untapped avenue for the purchasing of locally produced food.
- Significant unmet demand exists for locally produced food. The Marketsizer® results show an abundance of meat in the local market, but much of this is sold out of the region.
- The percentage of consumer food dollars spent on foods prepared away from home is similar across the six-county study area (36–38%), but lower compared to the state of Kansas (40%).
- The hospitality industry is growing in Decatur County in particular.
- Opportunities exist for job training and business development, though these could be expanded to better support local food system businesses.

Community Perspectives

Some of the main themes that emerged from our conversations about **food businesses** in Norton County and the surrounding region:



Challenges

Generally, restaurants, grocery stores, and institutions (i.e., schools and hospitals) do not offer much locally produced food. It is often more time-consuming for them to contract with individual producers rather than just buying direct from large food distribution companies.

Lack of supply is also a key issue: Most regional producers aren't big enough to provide the volumes needed to sell to a grocery store or institution.

Small rural grocery stores in Northwest Kansas struggle to access product, as distributors prioritize deliveries to larger metro areas. The supply chain disruptions due to COVID-19 have only made this worse. This fuels a perception among community members that their local grocery store "doesn't offer a good selection."

Grocery stores in McCook, Kearney, and Hays offer lower prices than local grocery stores, which attracts shoppers out of town. Also, grocery stores in Nebraska do not charge sales tax on food, where in Kansas state sales tax is set at 6.5%.

Farm-to-School food purchasing hasn't been supported in the region by school administrations. Adding additional programming into food service hasn't been a top priority in the recent past.

There are few restaurants to serve the region.



Opportunities

Opportunities exist for job training for inmates who are training on the Correctional Facility Farm. Approximately 20 inmates work on the farm during the growing season, and are learning skills in greenhouse propagation, transplanting, and harvesting produce.

The Correctional Facility also bakes their own bread and provides product for the community (i.e., Thanksgiving dinner rolls). This could be expanded and represents a potential partnership to sell to food businesses in the region.

The hospital kitchen has the capacity to process fresh produce and currently makes food from scratch. Therefore, adding locally sourced produce would not strain existing capacity. Renovations to the kitchen could enable more local food sourcing, and also could allow the kitchen to open to the community, which could provide daily meals to community members.

USD 211 is interested in Farm-to-School and would like to follow the model of Logan County who is having success sourcing local beef.

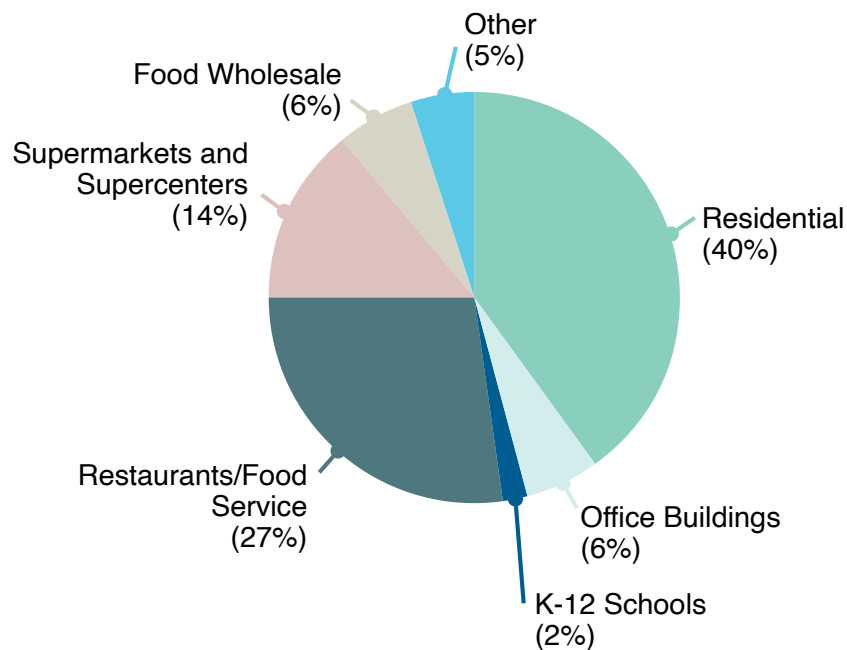
FOOD WASTE

While local food waste data for northwest Kansas was not available, national studies suggest that up to 40% of all food produced is wasted. Loss occurs at each step in the food system. Examples include unharvested crops in fields; unsold food from retail stores; and uneaten prepared food or kitchen trimmings from restaurants, cafeterias, and households.

While approximately 40% of food waste occurs from the industrial sector, the largest volumes of food waste occur at the consumer or household level.

Environmental, social, and economic costs rise when the food we produce ends up in landfills.

Figure 12. Percentage distribution of wasted food generation (excluding industrial sector)



Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "2018 Wasted Food Report," November 2020, https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2020-11/documents/2018_wasted_food_report-11-9-20_final_.pdf.



Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Sustainable Management of Food," last updated September 17, 2021, <https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/food-recovery-hierarchy>.

Key Trends

- The average household wastes 338 pounds of food per year.
- Consumer confusion about "date labeling" on packaged foods, such as "use by" or "best by," contributes to food waste.
- Retailers want to sell foods in abundance, which can lead to over-purchasing and large portion sizes at restaurants.
- The EPA's Food Recovery Hierarchy prioritizes source reduction and feeding people excess food before composting.

Community Perspectives

Some of the main themes that emerged from our conversations about **food waste** in Norton County and the surrounding region:



Challenges

Local grocery stores currently throw excess/wasted food into the dumpster. There is no system in place to collect this food.

Most institutional kitchens and restaurants currently do not compost food waste.

There is a lack of knowledge/awareness about how to compost your own personal food waste. People may be interested, but there aren't resources to support them learning how to compost.



Opportunities

An opportunity exists to capture this food and redistribute it through the pantry network to families in need. Federal Good Samaritan Food Act legislation protects these businesses from liability should donated food cause health problems for a recipient.

The kitchen staff at Norton County Hospital provide all kitchen scraps to a local chicken farmer. This is a model that could be emulated by other institutional kitchens.

In some communities in Kansas, KSU Research & Extension staff provide food waste education classes and resources for composting.

Connect with us!

Website

ntcohosp.com

Facebook

facebook.com/nortoncountyhosp

facebook.com/livewellnorton

Contacts

Katie Allen Wagner

Foundation Executive Director, Norton County Hospital

kallen@ntcohosp.com

Caryl Hale

Grant Coordinator, Norton County Hospital

chale@ntcohosp.com

