

Children and Families in Rural Kansas

Gap Analysis Executive Summary



Introduction

There is a critical need to spotlight the circumstances affecting the development of a robust early childhood education system in rural and frontier regions of Kansas. Counties classified as densely-settled rural, rural, and frontier make up 85% of the state (Kansas Department of Health and Environment [KDHE], 2012) and are home to an estimated 36% of the Kansas population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). Rural communities offer distinct benefits and challenges to families of young children and the professionals and organizations that serve them. In recent years, the early childhood community has focused a great deal of creativity, innovation, and collaboration on developing novel approaches to supporting rural family life that the entire state can learn from.

On behalf of the Kansas Children's Cabinet, the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research conducted a gap analysis on the needs of rural children and families in Kansas, aiming to support collaboration to better meet those needs. This document summarizes findings and implications. To read the full report, visit the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund website, under [Resources](#).

Key Findings

Families who live in rural areas often do so by choice: they appreciate the lifestyle and the sense of community in these parts of the state. However, there can be unintended tradeoffs for those benefits. Most early childhood challenges Kansas faces are intensified in rural communities, which are often underserved not just in terms of early childhood care and education, but also health care and support for basic needs. This lack of capacity too often results in families not getting what they need when they need it and can lead to negative education, economic, and health outcomes that are often avoidable with timely intervention.

The challenges rural communities face in supporting families with young children are interrelated and compounding:

- **Geographic distance** is a persistent theme in any discussion of the barriers facing rural families. Families may have to travel great distances to access needed resources and services, and public transportation is limited. This may discourage people from accessing services, sometimes until they experience a crisis, or increase their out-of-pocket costs to do so. It also puts an additional strain on organizations and providers to provide transportation or bring services to families.
- Rural communities also endure ongoing **workforce issues**, which contribute to provider turnover, facility and program closures, and limited or no access for families. Compensation is a key barrier to successful recruitment and retention, and there are workforce shortages in many professions, including teaching, early childhood care and education, health care, and substance use disorder (SUD) services. Workforce challenges have ripple effects, creating barriers to recruiting and retaining working parents across sectors in rural areas.

- Rural child care is much more **dependent on home-based providers**, making it more fragile in the context of an aging population and a migration trend to more densely populated regions. In communities that rely solely on home-based child care, losing one provider can significantly disrupt child care capacity for the area. Replacing that capacity is not just a matter of hiring a new person; it is reliant on a person starting a new home-based business.
- Rural communities have distinctive **norms and traditions** that shape the experience of family life. Many who live in these areas value the sense of community pride and the ethos of care for one another. People also often report feeling they have less privacy and are subjected to more social scrutiny than they would in more populous areas. This creates a barrier to seeking help, especially for any stigmatized issue such as help to meet basic needs, parenting challenges, SUD, and mental health.

The good news is that community leaders in every part of the state are engaged in finding creative new solutions to meet their local needs, which others can learn from and adapt.

Implications

This analysis suggests several opportunities to improve outcomes for families with young children in rural communities.

- **Pursue multiple strategies for overcoming distance barriers.** Expansion of public transportation would help address barriers caused by geographic distance, as would targeted funding for organizations that provide transportation to services. Expanding broadband access to rural communities and strategic use of telehealth are also important for getting rural families the services they need when they need them.
- **Continue and expand investments in early childhood, targeting rural areas and focusing some of these investments on increasing wages for early childhood and other service providers.** Multiple recent statewide investments in child care have shown a positive impact on child care capacity, directly through an increase in licensed capacity and indirectly through workforce support and sustained engagement of nontraditional collaborators, including area employers. Investing in early childhood benefits children, families, and local communities, and Kansas is generating forward momentum in this area. However, the potential for budget cuts and reduced funding threatens recent progress in rural communities and may lead to instability.
- **Build awareness of stigma into service provision.** Rural communities have begun to recognize the importance of destigmatizing help-seeking through public awareness. It is also helpful to embed stigmatized services, such as mental health and SUD services, within existing trusted organizations, which may offer families needed interventions earlier and avoid harmful long-term outcomes.
- **Support community-led solutions.** Rural families and service providers consistently emphasize that their communities are distinct both in their challenges and in the resources they bring to bear. There is no one approach to meeting rural early childhood needs. For this reason, the most effective state-level interventions are those that work with local families and communities to understand early childhood needs and help equip them to respond, as evidenced by the success of recent approaches expanding the availability of child care and other services such as the Child Care Capacity Accelerator, Child Care Innovation Communities, and the Capital Project Funds grants.

Focusing on the needs of rural communities is a key entry point to addressing Kansas's system-level challenges in supporting families with young children. There is enormous potential to address these challenges effectively, and doing so will benefit all Kansans.