

**Social Capital in Kansas:
The Wichita Case Study**

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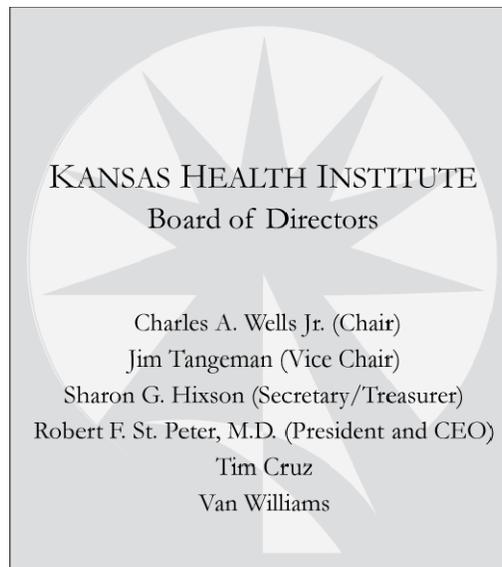
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SOCIAL CAPITAL IN KANSAS: THE WICHITA CASE STUDY

Wichita, the most populous city in Kansas with a population of 350,000, is located in the South-Central area of the state. However, since Wichita is divided into smaller, self-contained neighborhoods, it manages to retain the feel of a smaller community.

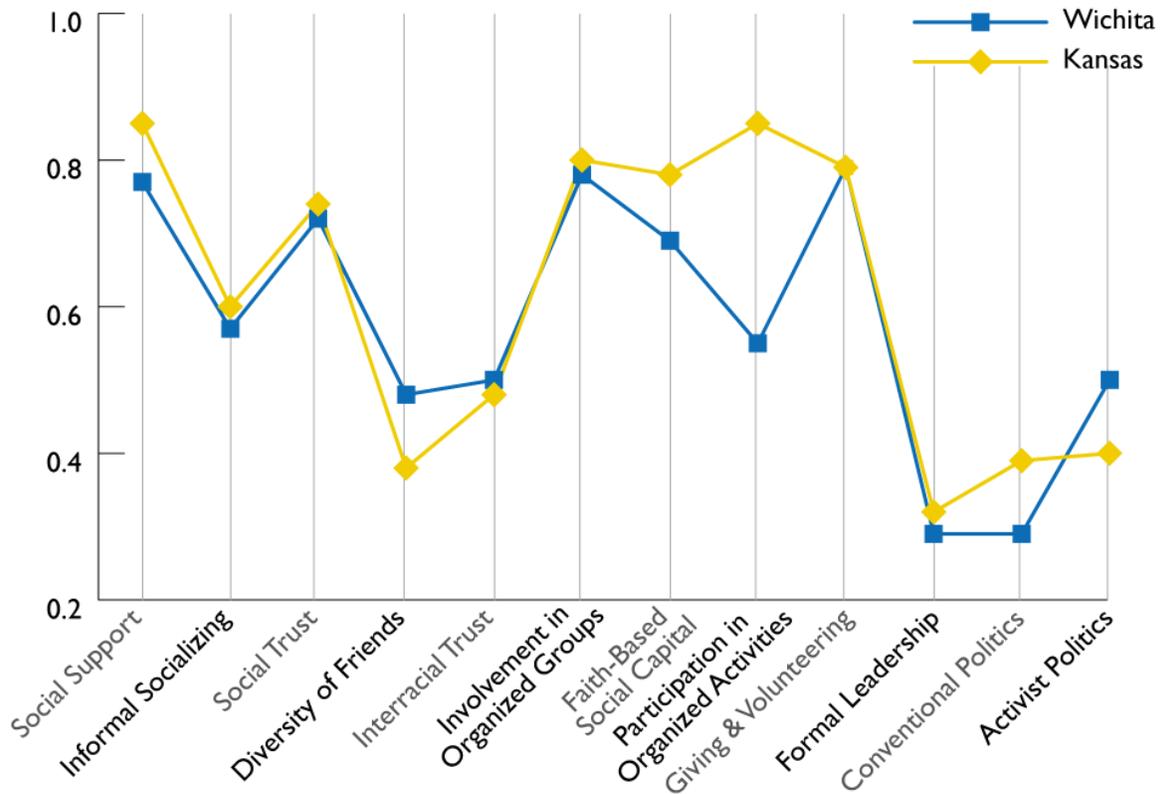
This report will first explain the meaning and importance of social capital and then discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Wichita's social capital profile, including how social capital relates to health in Wichita. A commentary will outline suggestions about how to best address social capital-related challenges in Wichita, and the report will close with a series of reflective questions for community leaders aimed at providing them with ideas for strengthening community involvement.

SOCIAL CAPITAL: A COMMUNITY RESOURCE

Social capital is a measure of the social connectedness among individuals and groups within a community. Social capital is beneficial to communities because it helps to create trusting relationships (bonding capital), increases the likelihood that organizations and institutions will collaborate and partner for change (bridging capital) and strengthens ties between community members and representatives of formal institutions such as law enforcement, business, health care and legislative bodies (linking capital).

The social capital profile of Wichita (Figure 1) illustrates the kinds of social connectedness (i.e., social support, organizational involvement and giving and volunteering) that are strongest in Wichita. The profile also illustrates areas of social capital that are low, including participation in formal leadership and conventional politics. Interviews with a variety of stakeholders in the Wichita area provided ground-level perspectives about these community challenges.

Figure 1. Wichita's Social Capital Indicators Relative to the State Average



Note: Scores here are adjusted to fit on a scale where one indicates the highest score among cities studied and zero indicates the lowest comparative score.

LOCAL RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL FORMATION

In the Kansas social capital study, *Assessing Social Capital in Kansas: Findings from Quantitative and Qualitative Studies*¹, Wichita residents commented that the county government demonstrated great leadership, even though the political climate in the area was thought to be overly competitive. Furthermore, the governmental substations also received considerable praise, as they were said to allow residents to interact with elected officials and police agencies more easily.

While participation in conventional politics, measured by voting behavior and general interest in politics, was below the state average for Wichita residents, participation in activist politics, measured by political meeting attendance and other behaviors such as signing a petition, was relatively high. In terms of conventional politics, interviewees described a number of barriers to

voting such as not understanding how to find polling places, lack of transportation and hindrances to personal mobility. However, in terms of activist politics, residents in Wichita were characterized as being enthusiastic about initiatives especially when (1) the activism advocated for ‘family values’ and (2) petitioners lobbied door-to-door, actively seeking out resident participation. Using door-to-door campaign drives to make voters feel personally valued could have a positive effect on engagement in conventional politics throughout the city.

Charitable giving is also a major strength of Wichita. The Kansas social capital study found that residents not only gave generously to both religious and non-religious causes, but they also split their donations between local and national causes.

One of the most unique assets of the Wichita community is the organizational involvement of young people in town. Unlike most of the other cities studied, adolescent apathy was not a consistent theme in the city. Even though the rate of charitable giving is fairly low among youth and young adults, these age groups show exceptional levels of involvement in sporting leagues. Residents also mentioned that children regularly volunteered around the holidays at the food pantry and other social service organizations.

Wichita has a diverse population and it scored highly on the Kansas social capital study’s measures of interracial trust and diverse friendships. However interviewees cited a latent feeling of prejudice that seemed to pervade the area and mentioned concerns of intolerance, racism and segregation, among other issues.

LOCAL BARRIERS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL FORMATION

Although survey findings indicate that levels of interracial trust in Wichita did not differ much from the Kansas average, the interviews revealed more intricacies about interracial relations in the community. Respondents of color spoke about how racially homogenous many of the city’s social and cultural events could seem. They further indicated that seeing few racially similar attendees at these functions frequently made them feel like outsiders. In addition to city events, some of the respondents of color indicated that the city itself was not welcome to individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This finding is supported by the results of a 2005

survey administered by Wichita State University's Center for Economic Development. Among a number of other issues, respondents to that survey reported feeling that not everyone benefited from equal educational or professional opportunities and that racism was a barrier to social and professional advancement.

The existence of race-related issues was particularly apparent in the social trust measures among Hispanic residents. When separated from the rest of the Wichita sample, Hispanic respondents reported relatively low levels of interracial and social trust even when compared to African-Americans and Asian-Americans. According to interviews with residents, these low levels of trust may be a result of the debates surrounding immigration in Wichita and some residents' views that Hispanic immigrants do not donate generously to local churches, deplete social service resources and unfairly drain educational money away from white students. Interviewees also mentioned that many white residents have chosen to move away from integrated neighborhoods and into suburban enclaves where neither they nor their children experience diversity as frequently.

In addition to the tensions felt by members of racial and ethnic minorities, Wichita interviewees also noted instances when residents have been discriminated against based on sexual orientation. One respondent described a culture of public intolerance when it came to gay relationships. She went so far as to express a fear that certain parts of the city and certain public situations actually jeopardized her physical well-being when out with her partner. As a result, she and her partner openly acknowledged their relationship only in "designated" locations they knew to be accepting to same-sex couples and not physically threatening.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Relating this all back to health in Wichita, it is important to note the kinds of health obstacles Wichita faces². Although residents display excellent health choices regarding seatbelt use, binge drinking and secondhand smoke exposure, there are still numerous improvements to be made. Measures such as violent crime, sexually transmitted disease infection rates, high school dropout rates, teen pregnancy and the number of single parent households suggest a need for the community to establish a city infrastructure that supports positive youth development.

Table 1. Leading Health Indicator Assets and Challenges of Sedgwick County

Health Indicator	Sedgwick	Kansas
Assets:		
Housing with Increased Lead Risk (%)	21.0	28.3
No Dentist Visit in Past Year (%)	24.5	28.6
Not Always Wearing Seatbelt (%)	26.1	30.4
Secondhand Smoking (%)	23.1	26.6
Nitrate and Coliform Levels in Water (%)	1.6	3.1
No Health Insurance (%)	10.9	12.4
Binge Drinking (%)	12.6	14.2
Challenges:		
Violent Crime (per 100,000)	591.1	222.9
Sexually Transmitted Disease (per 100,000)	578.0	363.6
High School Non-Graduation Rate (%)	17.6	10.9
Single Parent Households (%)	27.5	24.4
Divorce Rate (%)	5.6	3.2
Cigarette Smoking (%)	22.8	20.4
Children in Poverty (%)	16.7	15.2
Respiratory Hazard Index (%)	2.3	1.5
Commuting to Work by Driving Alone (%)	84.8	81.5
Did Not Receive Needed Health Care (%)	10.8	9.8
Teen Birth (%)	11.4	10.0
Smoking During Pregnancy (%)	16.8	15.1

Despite these challenges, residents seem genuinely interested in making their city a better place to live and elected officials have proven their commitment to serving constituents. Community leaders can use the information and suggestions included here to improve the future of Wichita.

QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS

- Knowing both Wichita’s assets and challenges, what are the next steps for creating change?
- Can the information in this report aid existing initiatives in your community?
- Who else should receive a copy of this report?

- Are there any important questions that, as a community leader, you would like to address?

These questions are not meant to uncover one best answer, nor do they require a single brilliant solution. Instead, they are intended to motivate and guide willing individuals who believe in the strengths of their communities and acknowledge that change is possible.

¹ Easterling, D., Foy, C. G., Fothergil, K., Leonard, L., & Holtgrave, D. R. (2007). *Assessing Social Capital in Kansas: Findings from Quantitative and Qualitative Studies*. Retrieved from <http://www.khi.org/documents/2007/nov/12/report-assessing-social-capital-kansas-findings-qu/>

² Pezzino, G. (2009). *Kansas County Health Rankings 2009*. Topeka, KS: Kansas Health Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.khi.org/news/2009/may/07/kansas-county-health-rankings-2009/?research>

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