

# REPAIRING THE KANSAS SAFETY NET

A comprehensive report on meeting  
the basic needs of Kansas families



# REPAIRING THE KANSAS SAFETY NET: ENSURING FAMILIES CAN MAKE ENDS MEET

Even after the Great Recession's end, too many Kansans can't provide for their basic needs.

Despite a historically high level of need, Kansas serves fewer families in state-administered safety net programs, like TANF.

This suggests that children's and families' needs are going unmet.

Kansas should ensure families in need can participate in assistance programs so all children get the chance to succeed in life.

## The Kansas safety net should support the basic needs of struggling Kansas families.

Policy changes enacted by the Kansas Legislature in recent years have prevented struggling Kansas families from accessing the safety net. Government programs can – and should – help Kansas families undergoing hard times meet their basic needs and get back on their feet. This includes critical programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Child Care Assistance program.

Investing in our youngest, poorest Kansans prepares them to overcome challenges, grow up healthy, and flourish as adults. Research shows that just \$3,000 in additional annual income for a poor family correlates with a 17 percent boost in earnings when children grow up.<sup>1</sup> Children in families with additional income also do better in school and work more hours as adults. Furthermore, helping families afford basic necessities allows them to find jobs or work at jobs that don't pay enough to meet basic needs and support their families.

To work well, safety net programs must be accessible to the families who need them. That means families who earn very little money — and Kansans who struggle to find work — must be able to qualify for and participate in the programs designed to help people make ends meet. Recently enacted Kansas legislation undermines this goal. Shortened time limits for receiving cash assistance, sweeping cross-program sanctions, and inflexible employment requirements prevent families in need of a hand up from utilizing safety net programs. Reducing enrollment in safety net programs weakens Kansans' ability to meet their families' basic needs during tough times, driving them deeper into poverty. Kansas policymakers should revisit decisions to restrict families' ability to participate in safety net programs that offer pathways out of poverty.

### WHAT IS TANF?

- » The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, or TANF, is a safety net program designed to alleviate hardship for poor families.
- » The federal government provides funding to states for TANF through block grants. States receive significant flexibility on how to distribute those dollars.
- » Direct cash assistance to families is a core component of TANF, but **Kansas allocates less than \$1 of every \$6 of its TANF block grant on cash assistance for families.**



### WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN TANF?

- » Only Kansas families with very low incomes are eligible to participate in the TANF cash assistance program.
- » **Only families with children can qualify for TANF cash assistance.**

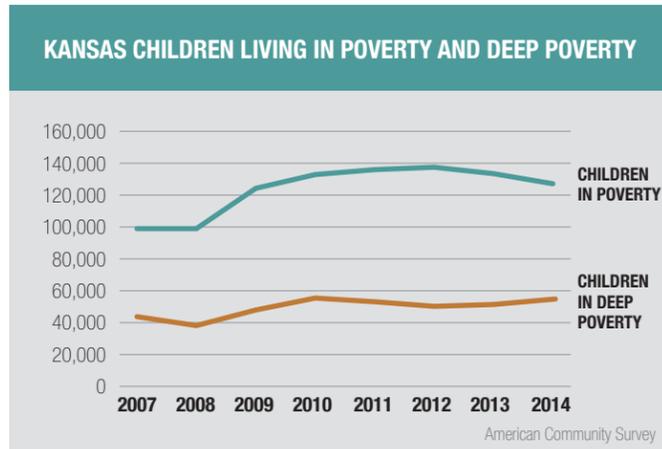
## Too many Kansas children and families are in need.

Several indicators show the nation's recovery from the Great Recession is not reaching struggling Kansans.

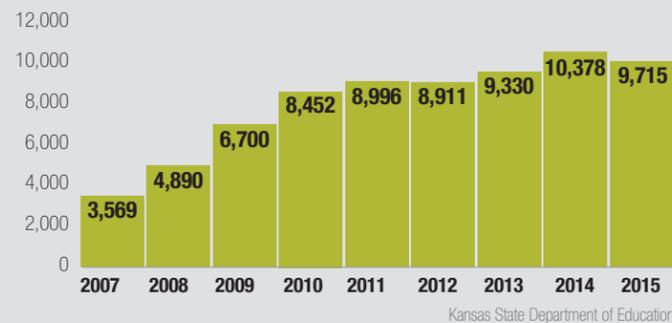
### INCREASED CHILDHOOD POVERTY

The federal poverty rate measures families whose wages fall under a certain threshold of income (\$20,090 per year for a family of three). The number of Kansas children living in poor families continues to linger far above pre-recession levels. Since 2007, the Kansas childhood poverty rate increased 20 percent.

54,000 Kansas children live in families earning **less than half** of the poverty line (just \$10,045 per year for a family of three). Eight percent of Kansas children live in homes falling below this "deep poverty" threshold – a 33 percent increase since 2007.<sup>4</sup>



### NUMBER OF HOMELESS SCHOOLCHILDREN

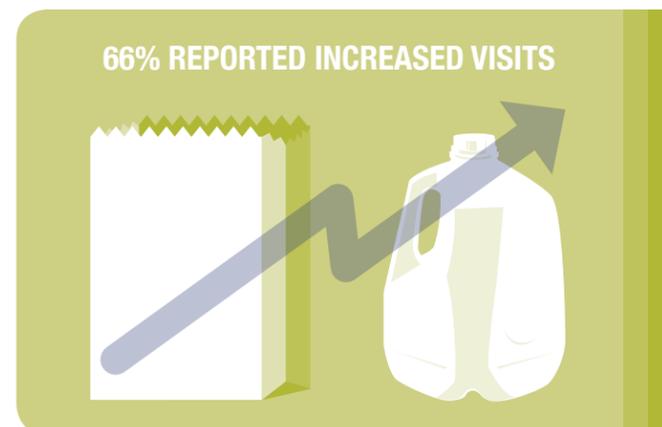


### INCREASED CHILDHOOD HOMELESSNESS

Safety net programs should help families meet their basic needs so that they can avoid becoming homeless. **Many more Kansas public school students are homeless than before the recession.** Since 2007, the number of homeless schoolchildren reported by school districts has more than doubled.

### INCREASED NEED FOR FOOD PANTRIES

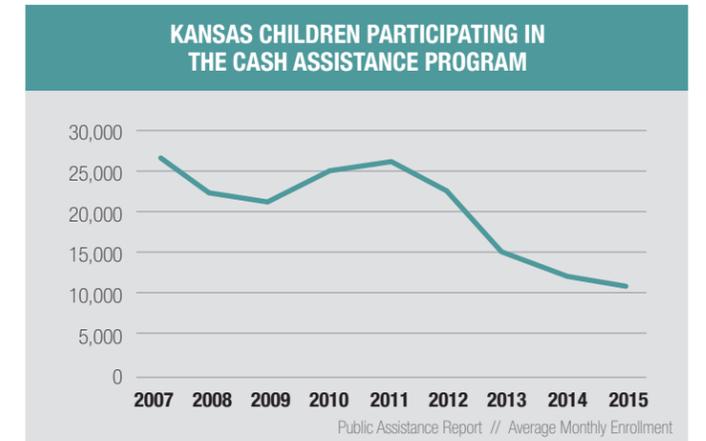
Kansas food pantries report that more families seek help feeding their families. A 2014 survey of the Kansas Food Bank and its partner agencies found that two-thirds of the 277 surveyed agencies reported that they saw more clients visit their food pantry over the past year, compared to just 4.2 percent that reported a decrease in the volume of clients.<sup>2</sup>



## The state-administered safety net serves too few needy families.

### CASH ASSISTANCE IS REACHING FEWER KANSAS FAMILIES

As more Kansans are having difficulty meeting their basic needs, the state safety net should step in to catch families experiencing hardship. Instead, there has been a marked decline in the number of children in families receiving cash assistance. In 2007 – prior to the great recession – 26,633 Kansas children were in families that received cash assistance. By 2015, the number of Kansas families' incomes indicating that they were struggling to make ends meet had grown – but the number of Kansas children receiving cash assistance had dropped by more than half, to 11,038.

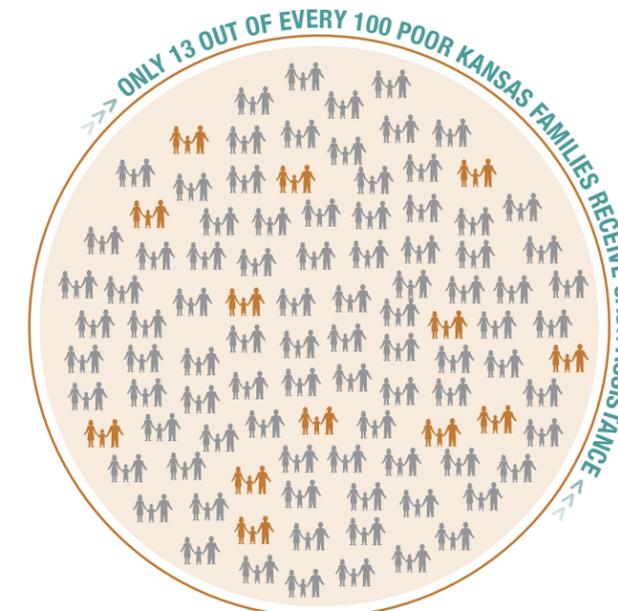


This decline in enrollment **does not** imply that more families are achieving financial stability. Comparing the number of families struggling to make ends meet to the number of families participating in the cash assistance program indicates that the cash assistance safety net is reaching fewer and fewer struggling Kansas families. **In 2014, the cash assistance program served just 13 out of every 100 Kansas families with incomes below the federal poverty level.**

**These trends suggest that the Kansas safety net is failing to support families who aren't earning enough money to climb out of poverty.** This should concern Kansas policymakers, because it indicates that **some Kansas families who cannot find work or participate in the cash assistance program may now have no source of income at all.** Families without any income cannot meet basic needs like food, clothing, or shelter. This puts families and children at a very high risk for experiencing further crisis, and makes finding employment more difficult.

### RECENT KANSAS POLICY PREVENTS FAMILIES FROM USING THE SAFETY NET

State policy likely drives the discrepancy between rising need and declining participation in cash assistance programs. TANF cash assistance is a block grant, giving the state significant control over how to use the funds. This means state policies can prevent cash assistance from reaching the families it is intended to help.



Policy changes that narrow the eligibility criteria for families drove a marked decline in cash assistance participation. State estimates show that state policy changes prevented thousands of families from accessing cash assistance in 2015. A new 36-month lifetime limit alone meant 198 families lost cash assistance on January 1, 2016.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that these families stopped participating in the cash assistance program due to state policy changes, not because they successfully found employment. In 2014 (the most recent federal data available) fewer than 10 percent of Kansas cash assistance cases closed because participants found employment, compared to 36 percent of cases closing due to sanctions or failure to comply with administrative policies. Just one in four adults who exited the cash assistance program has a job.<sup>4</sup>

## In 2015 and 2016, the Kansas Legislature created additional barriers to accessing safety net programs.

### The “HOPE Act” legislation makes it more difficult for struggling families to participate in safety net programs.

#### WHAT HAPPENED:

Shortened the amount of time a family can remain eligible for cash assistance. Federal law allows five years of eligibility within a lifetime. Kansas reduced that limit to two years.

Increased work requirements for pregnant women and mothers of infants. Federal law allows a new mother 12 months to care for her infant before she must return to work; the “HOPE Act” cuts that period for new Kansas mothers to two months.

Codified into law cross-program “sanctions,” which revoke an entire family’s eligibility for multiple assistance programs after failure to follow administrative regulations and requirements.

#### WHAT IT MEANS:

Cutting off a family’s cash assistance before they find work means children get left in households that cannot afford necessities like food, diapers, clothing, or money to pay for rent. As a part of implementation, the state plans to alert food pantries and homeless shelters of an expected increase in need.<sup>5</sup>

A newborn child’s first year of life is a critical period for healthy brain development that sets the stage for success down the road. Kansas should do everything possible to ensure that our youngest, poorest children live in households with the resources to meet those infants’ needs.<sup>6</sup>

Sanctions can jeopardize a family’s well being over a minor infraction of administrative policy. Research shows that families who are sanctioned in the cash assistance program are more likely to experience hunger, eviction, homelessness, utility shutoff, or an inability to receive medical care due to cost.<sup>7</sup>

Although it is too early to know the full impact of these changes, they will likely make it even more difficult for families in need to use the safety net to meet their basic needs and get back on their feet. Short term, the legislation may further reduce the number of families with children that access safety net programs. But long term, policymakers have increased the likelihood that today’s poor children will become tomorrow’s poor adults.

## Conclusion: Kansas should change course and make sure that the state safety net reaches families in need.

### REPAIRING THE KANSAS SAFETY NET IS GOOD FOR KIDS AND GOOD FOR KANSAS

Alleviating the hardships associated with the inability to meet children’s basic needs is a smart investment. When young children live in families that struggle financially, they are more likely to face economic challenges as adults, become unmarried teen parents, find it difficult to maintain stable work, and have poor overall health. Research shows that children in families with fewer resources available complete fewer years of school, work and earn less as adults, experience poorer health, and are more likely to use safety net supports.<sup>8</sup> In short, making sure Kansas families who need assistance can get it is good for kids and good for Kansas.

Kansas policymakers can strengthen the safety net in the following ways:

- » Repeal policies that prevent families who earn very little money, and Kansans who struggle to find work, from qualifying for programs designed to help people make ends meet. Struggling families should not be removed from the cash assistance program if they need assistance for more than 24 months in their lifetime.
- » Ensure cash assistance serves our youngest Kansans by repealing work requirements that discourage pregnant mothers and mothers with infants from participating in the program. The high cost of infant child care and the unpredictability of scheduling for low-wage jobs makes stringent work requirements especially difficult for the parents of infants. Kansas should lengthen the amount of time that new mothers are exempt from the work requirement after giving birth from two to 12 months.
- » Lift unnecessary barriers to withdrawing cash assistance that prevent Kansans from making out-of-state purchases with cash assistance.
- » Focus federal funds from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families on the core functions of the program – cash assistance, child care assistance, and employment services – so that program participants can successfully obtain jobs that will lift their families out of poverty.

Kansas should work to design a strong safety net that can meet the needs of Kansas families. The safety net should respond to increasing need in the state so children grow up in households with food on the table, a roof over their heads, clothing to wear, and money to pay the heating bill. This kind of system will ensure Kansans can meet their basic needs and children receive the best chance to succeed in life.

### RESEARCH SHOWS SAFETY NET PARTICIPATION IS GOOD FOR KIDS AND FAMILIES.

- » Children who participate in the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** experience improved health and economic self-sufficiency over a lifetime.<sup>9</sup>
- » Children insured by **Medicaid** are much more likely to graduate from high school and complete college, become healthy adults, and achieve economic success.<sup>10</sup>
- » **Child Care Assistance** helps families afford high-quality early education. High-quality early learning improves higher test scores, reduces behavior problems, lowers rates of grade repetition, and improves employment opportunities and earnings for children.<sup>11</sup>



## Endnotes/Citations.

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<sup>1</sup>Greg J. Duncan and Katherine Magnuson, "The Long Reach of Early Childhood Poverty," Pathways Magazine, Stanford University, Winter 2011, [https://web.stanford.edu/group/scspi/\\_media/pdf/pathways/winter\\_2011/PathwaysWinter11\\_Duncan.pdf](https://web.stanford.edu/group/scspi/_media/pdf/pathways/winter_2011/PathwaysWinter11_Duncan.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>"How States Use Federal and State Funds Under the TANF Block Grant," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, October 2015, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/how-states-use-federal-and-state-funds-under-the-tanf-block-grant>

<sup>3</sup>Megan Hart, "Nearly 200 Kansas families receive final cash assistance," Kansas Health Institute News Service, January 2016, <http://www.khi.org/news/article/nearly-200-kansas-families-receive-final-cash-assistance#sthash.SXqQAOBM.dpuf>

<sup>4</sup>Administration for Children and Families, Characteristics and Financial Circumstances of TANF Recipients, Fiscal Year 2014, Tables 43 and 51, [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/tanf\\_characteristics\\_fy2014.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/tanf_characteristics_fy2014.pdf)

<sup>5</sup>Dave Ranney, "Brownback administration issues call for foster families: Some social service workers say welfare restrictions may lead to more children in state system," Kansas Health Institute News Service, May 2015, <http://www.khi.org/news/article/brownback-administration-issues-call-for-foster-families>

<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Lower-Basch and Stephanie Schmit, "TANF and the First Year of Life: Making a Difference at a Pivotal Moment," Center for Law and Social Policy, October 2015, [http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/body/TANF-and-the-First-Year-of-Life\\_Making-a-Difference-at-a-Pivotal-Moment.pdf](http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/body/TANF-and-the-First-Year-of-Life_Making-a-Difference-at-a-Pivotal-Moment.pdf)

<sup>7</sup>Nancy E. Reichman, Julien O. Teitler, and Marah A. Curtis, "TANF Sanctioning and Hardship," The University of Chicago Social Service Review, June 2005, [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/428918?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/428918?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

<sup>8</sup>Duncan and Magnuson, The Annie E. Casey Foundation

<sup>9</sup>Hilary W. Hoynes, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Douglas Almond, "Long Run Impacts of Childhood Access to the Safety Net," National Bureau of Economic Research, November 2012, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18535>

<sup>10</sup>Alisa Chester and Joan Alker, "Medicaid at 50: A Look at the Long-Term Benefits of Childhood Medicaid," Georgetown University Health Policy Institute Center for Children and Families, July 2015, <http://ccf.georgetown.edu/ccf-resources/medicaid-50-look-long-term-benefits-childhood-medicaid/>

<sup>11</sup>"The First Eight Years: Giving Kids a Foundation for Lifetime Success," The Annie E. Casey Foundation, November 2013, <http://www.aecf.org/resources/the-first-eight-years-giving-kids-a-foundation-for-lifetime-success/>

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