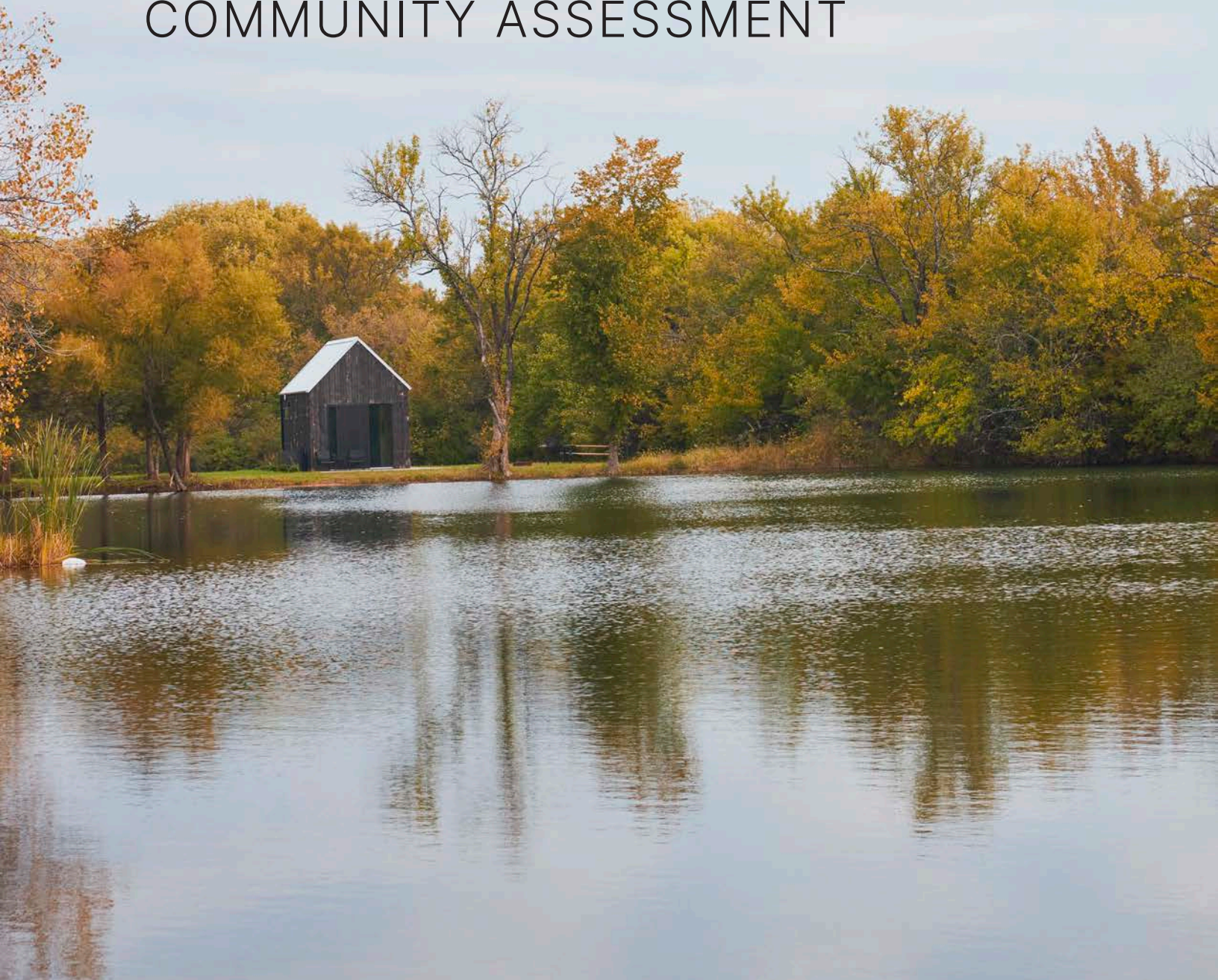


# allen county, kansas

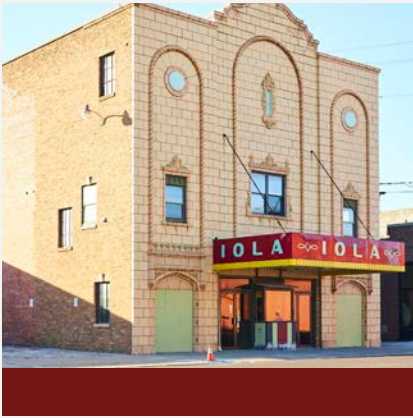
COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT



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OVERVIEW





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# overview

In October 2020 the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development (RD) launched the Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC) to provide technical assistance and planning support to foster placemaking and spur economic development in rural communities. USDA RD selected five technical assistance providers from across the country to assist identified communities with preserving cultural and historic structures, enhancing capacity for broadband access, and supporting the development of transportation, housing and recreational spaces, among other things.

In collaboration with USDA RD, [Atlas Community Studios](#) and [McClure](#) partnered to launch the [Midwest Placemaking Innovation Accelerator](#) to develop placemaking action plans and provide implementation technical assistance to three rural communities, including: [Allen County, Kansas](#), [Atchison, Kansas](#), and [Sheffield, Iowa](#).

**The project team is implementing the strategic process in four phases between January 2021 - September 2022:**

## 01.

**Visioning & Public Input:** Host visioning sessions for the steering committee and public, facilitate focus groups and one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders, and solicit feedback via online survey(s).

## 02.

**Community Assessment:** Compile and analyze quantitative and qualitative data, determine emerging themes, identify potential project concepts, and assess the viability of priority projects/initiatives.

## 03.

**Placemaking Action Plan:** Define priority projects/initiatives, identify key partners, determine programming, estimate capital and short-term operating costs, and curate a list of public and private funding sources to consider for implementation.



continued on the next page >



## 04.

### **Implementation Technical Assistance:**

Prioritize projects/initiatives, identify fundraising coordinator(s), build cross-sector partnerships, identify implementation committee members, determine viable funding opportunities to implement priority projects/initiatives, and establish a timeline to execute.

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The overall goals of the placemaking process are economic and social development, increased population and tourism, and improvement to quality of life standards.

Allen County's placemaking action plan focuses on three key priorities:

- Housing
- Economic Development
- Key Building Revitalization ("Thrive Annex Building")

The final deliverable for Allen County is a designed PDF including all information gathered, the full action plan with next steps for implementation, and appendices with additional resources for each priority area. Additionally, Allen County will receive an abbreviated version of the PDF in the form of a custom website with a unique domain to highlight significant components of the placemaking action plan for consumption by the broader public.



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# about atlas community studios

Atlas Community Studios was founded by a small, diverse group of creative problem-solvers and entrepreneurs looking for the opportunity to advance the economic prosperity of small and rural communities across the country. With decades of combined experience spanning both the public and private sectors, the Atlas team specializes in strategic planning, economic development, and creative placemaking. Atlas helps communities plan for development and growth through collaborative strategic planning and simple-to-execute, realistic strategies. The Atlas team's portfolio of work includes more than 47 action-oriented plans in rural communities across 19 states and one Canadian province, including a town as small as 80 people and a state with nearly 3 million residents.

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## about mcclure

McClure is a civil engineering company with the mission to make lives better. And we achieve this by thinking like owners. We do whatever it takes to get your job from concept to completion. We help clients navigate opportunities like funding and building public support for a project. Always adding value and imagining what's possible. Our engineering and planning expertise includes transportation, aviation, structures, water, wastewater, stormwater management, land development, landscape architecture, construction observation, administration, surveying, and community development. Since 1956, McClure has grown to a firm of nearly 200 professionals in ten offices located in Ankeny, Carroll, Clive (headquarters), North Liberty, Fort Dodge, Carroll, and Sioux City, Iowa; North Kansas City, Macon, and Columbia, Missouri; and Lenexa, Kansas. McClure has 60 Registered Professional Engineers, 12 Registered Land Surveyors, one Registered Landscape Architect, four LEED Accredited Professionals, one Certified Envision Sustainability Professional, and one AICP Certified Planner.

INTRODUCTION





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# introduction

The Allen County Placemaking Action Plan process includes a holistic analysis of key trends, opportunities, and challenges the county faces to achieve a prosperous economic and social future. Quantitative research is combined with comprehensive stakeholder outreach to ensure that Allen County's strategic priorities reflect the county's vision and goals.

# planning & technical assistance process

## **STEERING COMMITTEE**

- Thrive Allen County assembled a project steering committee comprised of 16 individuals with backgrounds ranging from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.
- The steering committee is convened quarterly for meetings to assist with oversight of the placemaking process and to ensure the development of the action plan is community-centered and in alignment with countywide priorities.
- The Atlas/McClure team convened the steering committee for its first official meeting in March 2021 to provide an overview of the RPIC initiative and the scope of work for the placemaking process before facilitating a visioning session to solicit input about the region's assets, challenges, and opportunities related to housing and economic development.
- During the Atlas/McClure team's first site visit in July 2021, the steering committee was convened for its second meeting to discuss emerging themes stemming from the public visioning sessions, public input meeting, and focus groups.
- During the Atlas/McClure team's second site visit in October 2021, the steering committee was convened for its third meeting to discuss project updates. Additionally, the Atlas/McClure team hosted a public information meeting and facilitated topical/ stakeholder-specific focus groups to generate more specific input related to the plan's three key priorities.

## **PUBLIC INPUT**

- The Atlas/McClure team facilitated two open-invitation public visioning sessions via Zoom in April and May 2021.
- The Atlas/McClure team also facilitated an open-invitation public information meeting during their first site visit to solicit additional input from local residents and stakeholders who were unable to participate in the virtual visioning sessions.
- An online community survey was released in July 2021 and generated 104 responses.

## **FOCUS GROUPS**

- In July 2021, the Atlas/McClure team facilitated six focus groups with an emphasis on topics such as housing, economic development, workforce training and education, cultural amenities, entrepreneurship, and revitalization of the Thrive Annex Building.
- Participants in the economic development focus group also provided feedback via an online survey to identify the region's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.
- Overall, more than 60 individuals participated in the focus group meetings.

## **COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT**

- The community assessment report features high-level quantitative trends for Allen County compared to three peer counties (Anderson, Bourbon, and Neosho), the state of Kansas, and the United States.
- The report also incorporates key themes from the stakeholder input conducted to date to determine assets and challenges related to housing, economic development, and quality of life amenities.
- In addition to the quantitative data and stakeholder input analysis, the Atlas/McClure team conducted topical research to contextualize the key trends and issues affecting Allen County, which ultimately informed the strategic opportunities and priority project concepts in the placemaking action plan.

## **PLACEMAKING ACTION PLAN**

- Based on the community assessment report, the placemaking action plan presents a new vision statement to guide Allen County's future economic trajectory and strategic priorities.
- The placemaking action plan also makes strategic recommendations for priority projects and provides a resource roadmap to help advance them from ideation to reality.



## existing reports & studies

The following reports and studies helped inform the findings of the Community Assessment and will be considered for incorporation into the placemaking action plan as necessary:

- [Southeast Kansas Regional Planning Commission](#) (SEKRPC) Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy - Draft (2021)
- Allen County Development Opportunity Profile (2019)
- SEKRPC Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (2019)
- SEKRPC Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (2014)
- [City of Iola Comprehensive Plan \(2014\)](#)
- [City of Iola Comprehensive Plan \(2005\)](#)

### **DATA SOURCES**

The community assessment report utilizes a variety of data indicators to examine Allen County's competitiveness as a place to live, work, and do business. The Atlas/McClure team sourced data primarily from the U.S. Census Bureau and other public sources including the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA). Additionally, parcel data was provided by Allen County Appraiser via R&S Digital, a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) service provider.

## **CENSUS ESTIMATES**

The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationwide survey that collects and produces information on social, economic, housing, and demographic characteristics for communities throughout the United States. While the survey is annual, data indicators for communities with fewer than 65,000 residents are typically provided as five-year averages in order to increase statistical reliability and reduce margins of error. The tradeoff is that ACS 5-Year Estimates are less current. For instance, 5-Year Estimates from the 2019 ACS are derived from 60 months of data collected between 2015 and 2019. Because Allen County has a population of fewer than 65,000 residents, this assessment exclusively uses 5-Year Estimates for ACS data indicators.

## **COMPARISON GEOGRAPHIES**

Allen County, Kansas is the primary geographic unit of analysis in this report. However, to provide additional context, data indicators for Allen County are benchmarked against the United States, the State of Kansas, and three comparison counties: Anderson County, Bourbon County, and Neosho County, Kansas. Comparison areas were chosen by the Atlas/McClure team, and are intended to provide context and perspective on Allen County trends but will not influence the determination of strategic priorities or project/initiative concepts.

## **LOCATION QUOTIENTS**

A key concept utilized in the data analysis section of this report is Location Quotients (LQ). They are used to determine the relative concentration of an economic sector or occupation in Allen County versus the nation as a whole. They are essentially a shorthand used to convey whether the community has a local advantage or disadvantage for a particular segment of the economy or an occupation.

- An LQ of 1.0 indicates that the local and national concentrations are the same.
- An LQ above 1.0 means that the community has a competitive advantage over the United States.
  - In other words, there are more individuals working in this sector than the average community nationwide.
- An LQ below 1.0 means that the community is underserved for that employment sector versus the national average.
  - In other words, there are fewer individuals working in the community versus the United States. This implies that some of these jobs are being sourced from outside the local economy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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# executive summary

The Allen County Placemaking Action Plan process includes a holistic analysis of key trends, opportunities, and challenges the county faces to achieve a prosperous economic and social future. Quantitative research combines with comprehensive stakeholder outreach to ensure that Allen County's strategic priorities reflect the county's vision.



## KEY TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

The following key trends and challenges emerged from the quantitative and qualitative research conducted for this Community Assessment.

- 01.** The cost to build new housing continues to outpace the wages for a majority of local residents and commuting workforce
- 02.** Housing stock is aging and deteriorating which has created a countywide shortage
- 03.** Job opportunities are available, but the labor pool is unable to meet employer demand
- 04.** Some skills training and post-secondary education is available in Allen County, but the region lacks a cohesive workforce development ecosystem
- 05.** Balancing community priorities with regional economic development efforts is improving but still challenging
- 06.** Recreational amenities and cultural institutions are a unique draw to Allen County

## **FUTURE VISION**

The purpose of Allen County's vision statement is to inform and shape future investment, policies, programs, and planning efforts to ensure the will of its residents is represented in the decision-making process. Based on the responses received during the stakeholder input phase, the Atlas/MEC team suggests Allen County consider adopting the following vision statement:

***Allen County is a collaborative regional leader delivering essential services and innovative programs to its citizens and businesses so they can grow and thrive.***

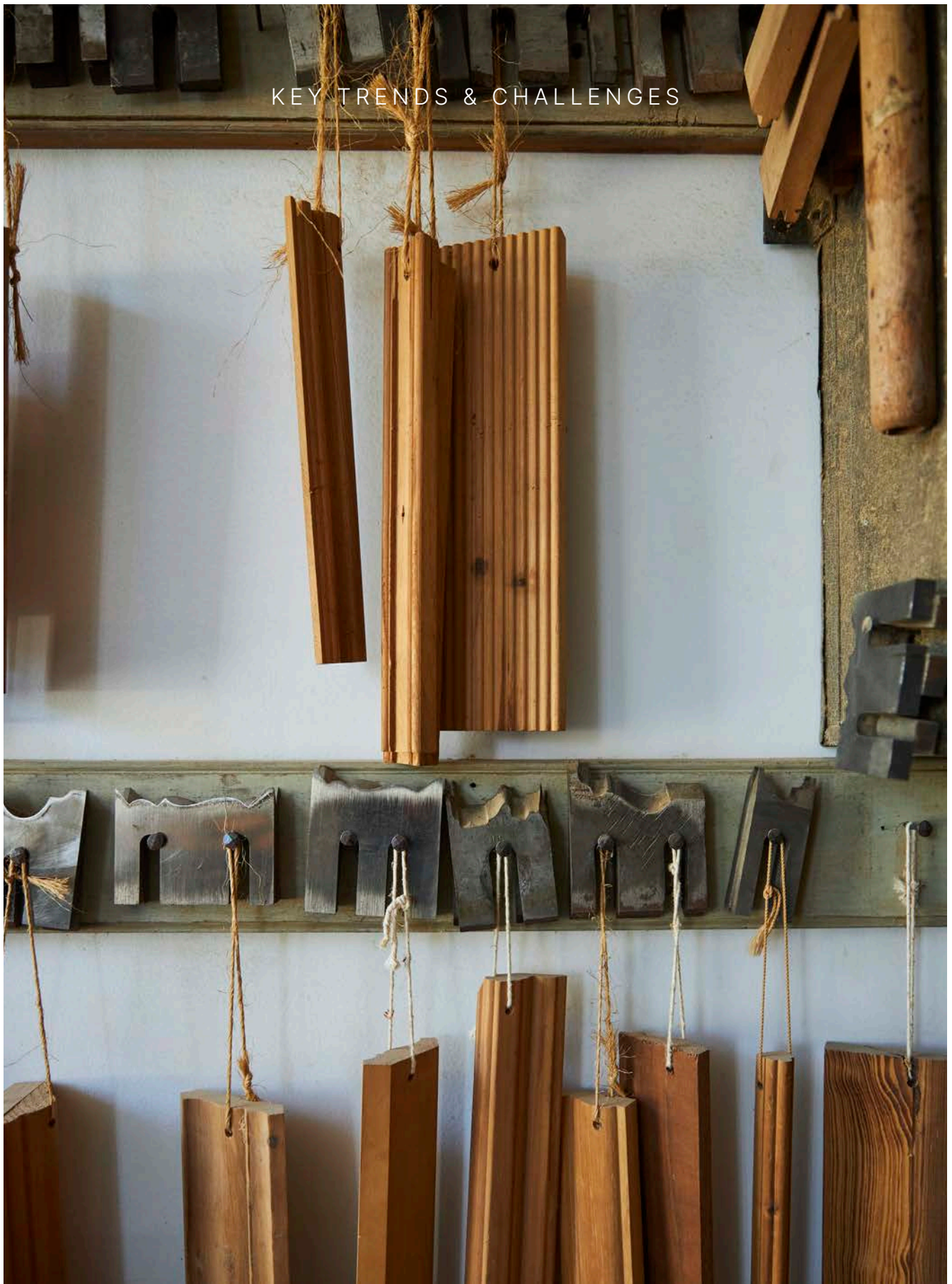
## **STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY AREAS**

Several potential strategic opportunity areas emerged from quantitative research and stakeholder feedback. Underlying these opportunity areas and potential projects/initiatives should be a commitment to a progressive, innovative, and sustainable future Allen County residents desire.

Strategic opportunities include:

- ✓ Pursue a multi-pronged approach for **housing** development
- ✓ Cultivate a regional **workforce development** ecosystem
- ✓ Expand county-wide **economic development** efforts
- ✓ Transform the **Thrive Annex Building** into a multi-use facility

KEY TRENDS & CHALLENGES



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# key trends & challenges

The following key trends and challenges emerged from the quantitative and qualitative research conducted for this Community Assessment.

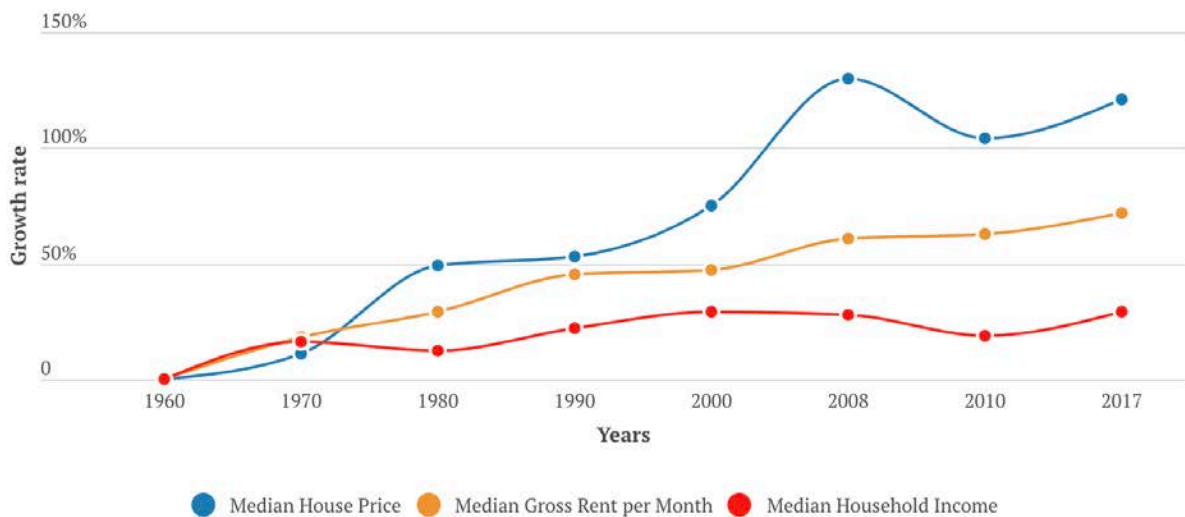


# 01. THE COST TO BUILD NEW HOUSING CONTINUES TO OUTPACE THE WAGES FOR A MAJORITY OF LOCAL RESIDENTS AND COMMUTING WORKFORCE

This statement was true prior to the COVID-19 pandemic hitting our shores and is even worse today. There are a number of contributing factors to the growing cost of construction including material prices, infrastructure buildout, the price/availability of land, and labor shortages. While land costs may be more affordable in Allen County, all other factors are difficult to overcome when wages aren't keeping up with these costs.

Since 1960, median home prices increased 121% nationwide, but median household income only increased 29%. Renters are also struggling with the median gross rent increasing by 72%, more than twice the growth seen by adjusted incomes, making renting costlier than ever and saving for a future home difficult if not impossible.

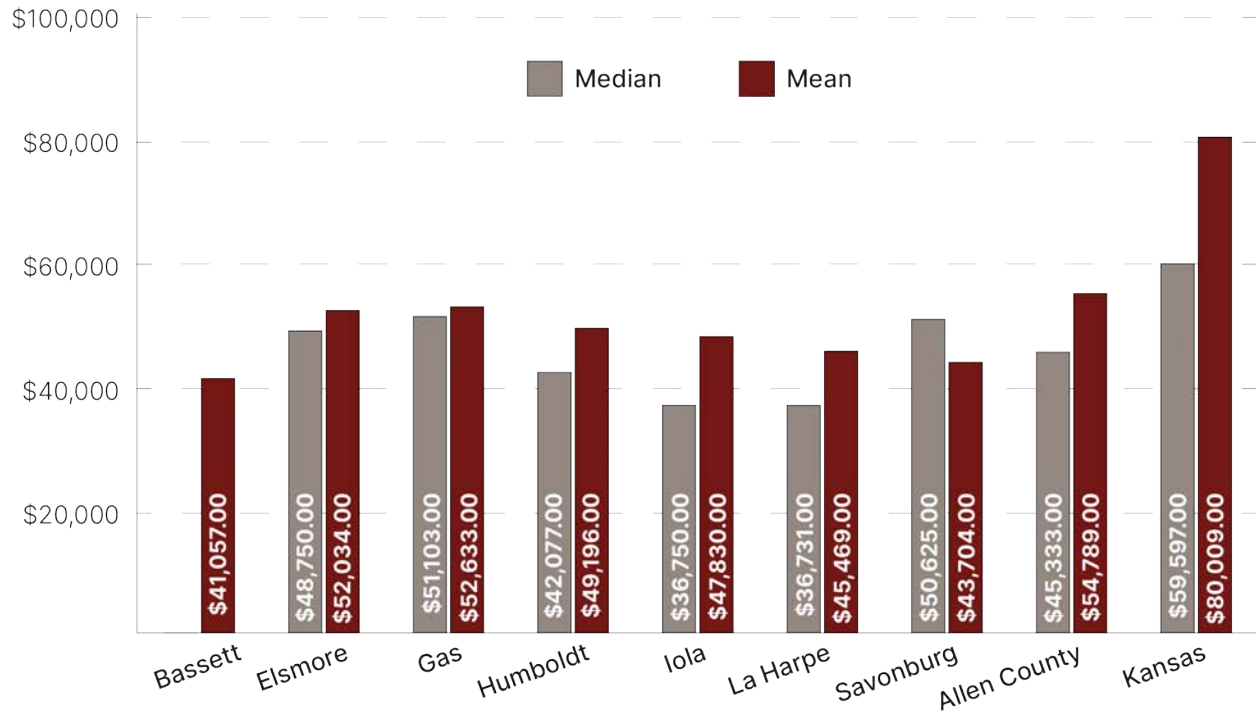
**FIGURE 1** | GROWTH RATE OF MEDIAN HOME PRICES V. MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOMES V. MEDIAN RENTS NATIONWIDE



Note: All of the values are indexed to 1960. Chart only includes data for depicted years.

Source: 1960-2000 Decennial Censuses and 2008, 2010 and 2017 American Community Surveys

**FIGURE 2 | HOUSEHOLD INCOME - MEDIAN & MEAN**



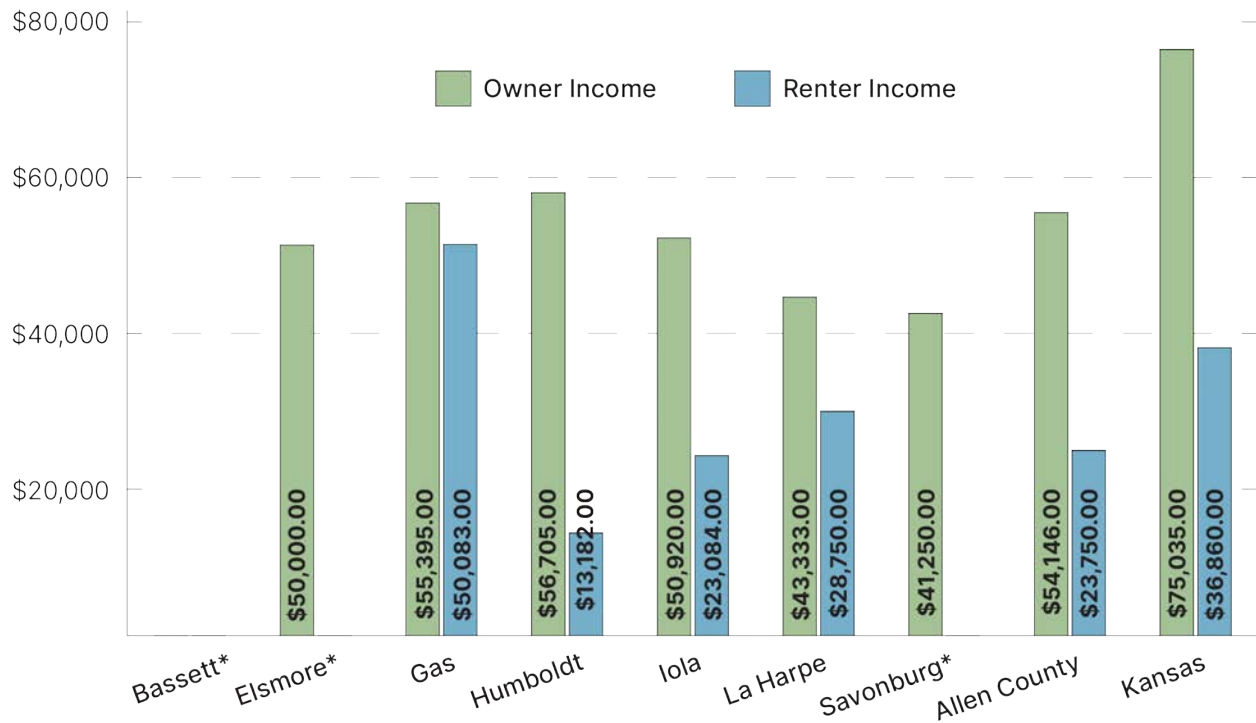
Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey (2015-2019)

Compare these figures to the most recent Census data for Median Household Income which is a standard metric to determine what a typical household could afford for housing and other goods. Allen County’s overall median household income of \$45,333 or 31.5% less than what is experienced at a statewide level. La Harpe and lola are shown to have the lowest median household incomes – \$36,731 and \$36750, respectively - while Gas is shown to have the highest median household income, \$51,103.

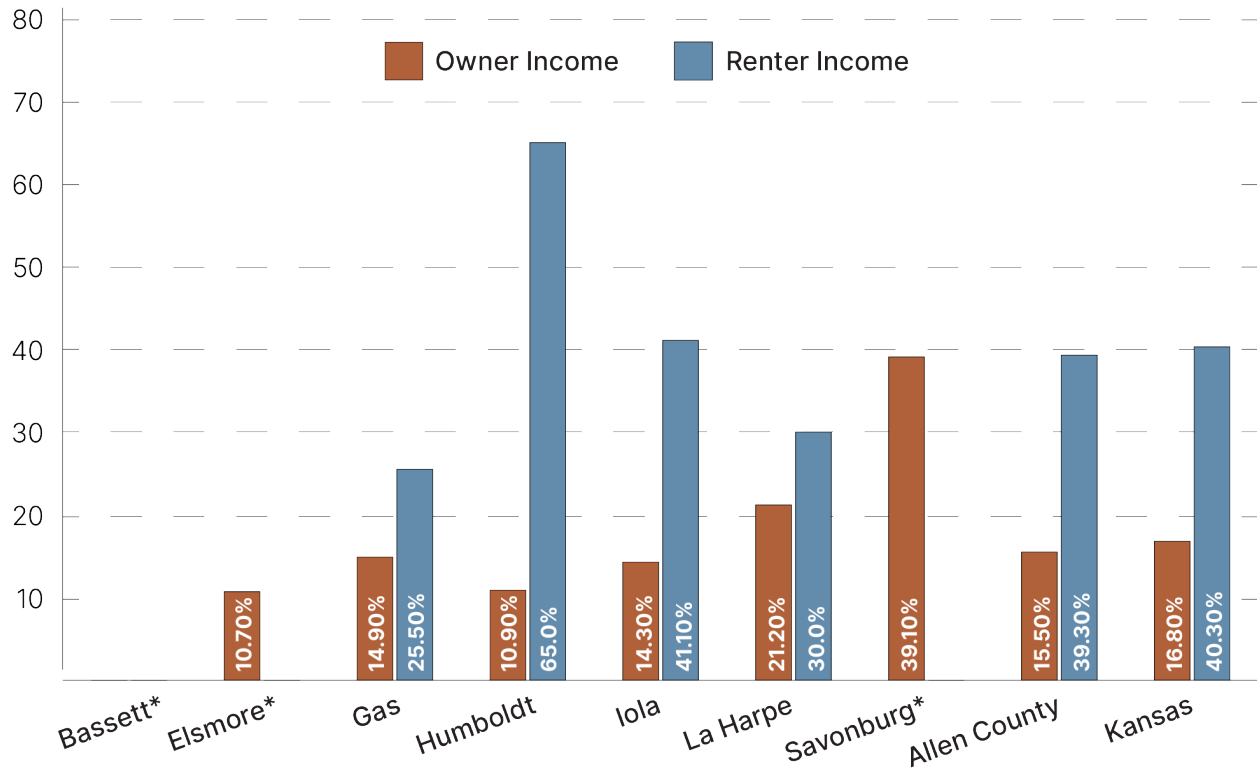
The chart also includes the mean or average household income which helps to highlight the level of income disparity in a community. If the mean household income is greater than the median household income, this means that there is significant income disproportionately concentrated in the wealthiest households. The larger the gap between the mean and median, the larger the disparity. For this reason, the median income provides a more accurate estimate of the income available to the majority of households since its value is not affected by the high-income households.

When comparing these household incomes by tenure there is a stark difference between the high earning owner-occupied households and the low-wage rental households. In many cases, owner-occupied households earn twice as much income than renter-occupied households. In Humboldt, for instance, the median renter-occupied household income is \$13,182 versus the owner-occupied household income of \$56,705. Gas is the exception with the owner and renter-occupied median household incomes on par with one another.

**FIGURE 3 |** MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOMES BY TENURE



**FIGURE 4 | PERCENT COST BURDENED BY TENURE**



These differences are also highlighted by the number of households classified as “cost burdened”. The definition of a cost burdened household is allocating 30% or more of your overall income towards housing related expenses (i.e. rent or mortgage and utilities). The US Census data shows that a total of 15.5% of owner-occupied households in Allen County are cost burdened while the total of renter-occupied households equals 39.3%. These county figures align with the figures seen statewide, however, communities like Humboldt, Savonburg, and La Harpe are experiencing higher rates than others. These disparities factor heavily into what residents can afford and what home builders are willing to invest to build new units.



According to Forbes, **the current average cost to build a new 2,000 square foot home in the state of Kansas is estimated at \$207,120** or \$104 per square foot. Once you add financing/closing costs (2% - 5%), realtor fees (up to 6%) and the builders return (~10%), the final sale price could be as low as \$244,000 and up to \$250,000. If a buyer chooses to purchase this \$244,000 home and make a 5 percent down payment (typically the minimum amount allowable), he or she would need to have a minimum of \$12,200 in cash plus up to \$6,100 for closing costs. The remaining mortgage balance would be \$231,800. A mortgage with the dynamics listed below would cost the Allen County buyer \$1,606 in total monthly outlays.

Estimated monthly payment (PITI\*): \$1,606 (30-year fixed loan at 3.25% w/ 5% down payment)

- \$1,009 - Principal & Interest
- \$377 - Property Taxes (calculated for Allen County property taxes)
- \$100 - Homeowners Insurance
- \$120 - PMI insurance (if down payment is less than 20%)

\*PITI - Monthly payment including principal, interest, homeowner's insurance and property taxes.  
 Source: [Fannie Mae Homebuying Financial Calculator](#); tax levy data via Allen County Appraisers Office

**GROSS INCOME REQUIRED TO BE ABLE TO AFFORD TOTAL HOUSING COSTS (PITI)**



Let's compare the scenario for a new construction home to the most recent home sales data for Allen County. The average sale price of homes sold in Allen County over the last 12-month period - October 2020 through October 2021 - was \$102,293. However, the most recent three-month average has increased to

\$112,000 due to limited availability. A home at this price in Allen County would require a minimum 5% cash down payment which is an investment of \$5,600 with up to \$2,800 for closing costs. The remaining mortgage balance would be \$106,400. A mortgage with the dynamics listed below would cost the Allen County buyer \$941 in total monthly outlays.

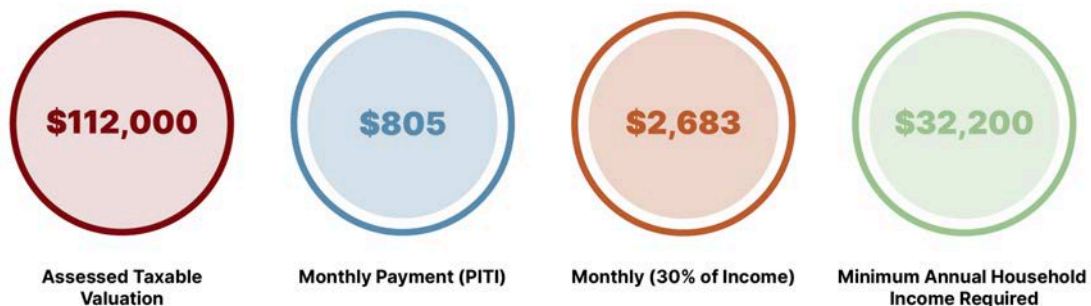
Estimated monthly payment (PITI\*): \$805 (30-year fixed loan at 3.25% with 5% down payment)

- \$463 - Principal & Interest
- \$217 - Property Taxes (calculated for Allen County property taxes)
- \$70 - Homeowners Insurance
- \$55 - PMI insurance (if down payment is less than 20%)

\*PITI - Monthly payment including principal, interest, homeowner's insurance and property taxes.

Source: [Fannie Mae Homebuying Financial Calculator](#); tax levy data via Allen County Appraisers Office

#### GROSS INCOME REQUIRED TO BE ABLE TO AFFORD TOTAL HOUSING COSTS (PITI)



Based on both mean and median household incomes, the average Allen County household would be able to afford an existing house, but the challenge stakeholders reported is that these homes simply do not come onto the market in enough volume to satisfy demand. And while a majority of households may be able to afford the monthly mortgage expenses, the down payment and closing requirements are prohibitive. And should one get into one of the more affordable housing options, many of these existing homes require renovation work or else do not have the features and amenities to meet the needs of buyers.

## 02. HOUSING STOCK IS AGING AND DETERIORATING WHICH HAS CREATED A COUNTYWIDE SHORTAGE



The inability for households to afford new housing is directly related to the aging housing stock and the creation of blighted properties. Derelict or abandoned housing was identified multiple times as a top issue by participants from the input sessions and survey responses. Blight can be defined as properties that are vacant, abandoned, boarded up, dilapidated, or poorly maintained. Besides being an eyesore for neighbors, blighted properties directly impact a community's sense of pride, lower a visitor's impression of the community, potentially contribute to increased crime rates, and decrease surrounding property values.

Even though they contribute little to no property taxes, blighted properties still require equivalent city maintenance costs as other structures, including waste cleanup, pest control, police, and fire. The report, "Understanding the True Costs of Abandoned Properties: How Maintenance Can Make a Difference," estimates that each blighted

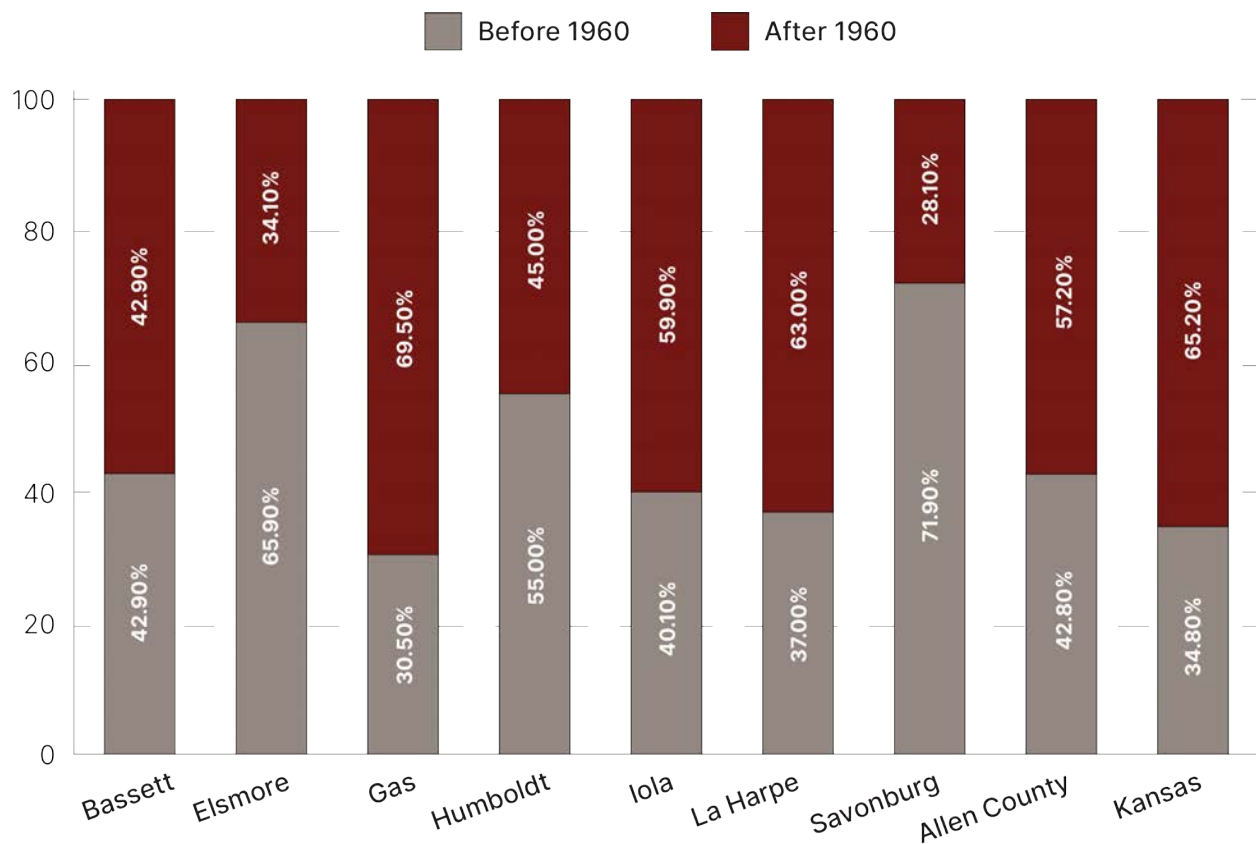
property costs roughly \$155,000 in its first year due.

While not all older homes are in poor condition, many have electrical, plumbing and mechanical systems that do not meet current building code standards. This may result in less energy-efficient heating and plumbing systems which increases the utility costs to the homeowner. Older houses may also be too small or poorly laid out to fit the needs of today's housing market which impact the ability of communities in Allen County to attract new residents.

For instance, many older homes have a single bathroom to serve an entire family while most people expect at least two bathrooms in their house.

According to the ACS, Allen County has an existing housing stock total of 6,318 units. Nearly 43% of the existing housing stock was built prior to 1960 compared to 34.8% at the statewide figure. Many communities in Allen County mirror this share of older homes while Savonburg, (71.9%), Elsmore (65.9%), and Humboldt (55%) are a much higher share of their homes in this category.

**FIGURE 5 | AGE OF HOUSING STOCK**





Older housing stock can also be considered as an asset to create more affordable housing options. Existing housing inherently has a lower cost of entry than a newly constructed home. However, improvements may be necessary to make these properties appealing to buyers. Those with the means can take out renovation loans to make the improvements themselves. Investors and contractors have also seized the opportunity to purchase a portion of the aging housing stock to make necessary repairs and open them up as rental units which has aided the workforce housing segment of the market. The flip side of the coin, investors can purchase these available units as soon as they hit the market or even prior to being made available publicly which hinders the ability of some individuals who are seeking the opportunity to access homeownership and make Allen County home long term.

Both homeowners and rental property investors can take advantage of existing incentives such as the Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP). The NRP is intended to promote revitalization and development by focusing rehabilitation, conservation, and redevelopment within a designated area by offering property tax

rebates to owners who complete certain improvements or renovations of property. The City of Iola's NRP program is eligible to homeowners who invest a minimum of \$5,000 on their improvement. Property tax rebates are generated over a 10-year period on a sliding scale as shown in the schedule below:

- Year 1 - 100% rebate on increase in appraised valuation
- Year 2 - 100 % rebate on increase in appraised valuation
- Year 3 - 100 % rebate on increase in appraised valuation
- Year 4 - 100% rebate on increase in appraised valuation
- Year 5 - 100% rebate on increase in appraised valuation
- Year 6 - 100% rebate on increase in appraised valuation
- Year 7 - 80% rebate on increase in appraised valuation
- Year 8 - 60% rebate on increase in appraised valuation
- Year 9 - 40% rebate on increase in appraised valuation
- Year 10 - 20% rebate on increase in appraised valuation

Based on a 10-year sliding scale, the homeowner who purchased the new home for \$244,000 could receive an

*continued on the next page >*

annual rebate of nearly \$4,500 for the first six years, \$3,600 in year seven, \$2,700 in year eight, \$1,800 in year nine and \$900 in year ten. The total rebate for the 10-year period totals nearly \$36,000<sup>[CS1]</sup>. This type of rebate is helpful to attract buyers although one of the top challenges for Allen County is the attraction of developers to build these homes.

Renovations on an existing home can also produce a sizable rebate for a homeowner. For instance, building out a new addition with bathroom remodel could increase the home's value by \$50,000 – from \$150,000 to \$200,000. The homeowner would receive a tax abate of nearly \$1,100 for the first six years down to \$230 in year ten for a total rebate of \$9,280. However, if a homeowner completes the minimum improvements of \$5,000, he or she would only receive a maximum annual tax rebate of \$115 during the 10-year period with a total of less than \$1,000 over the entire period.

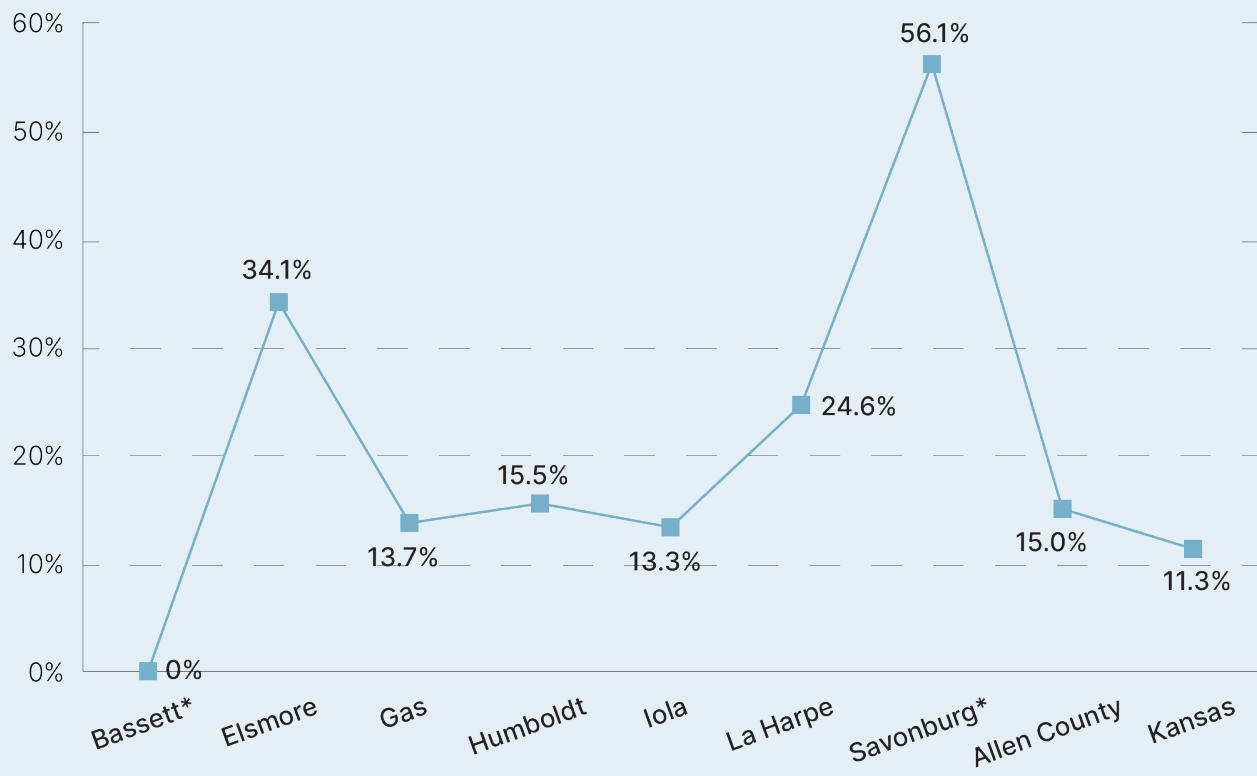
One of the primary challenges of addressing blighted property is clearing and transferring the title to a new owner. Some property owners'

investment strategy is to purchase property at a low cost and hold it for a handful of years until opportunity strikes allowing them to make a strong return on their investment. During this holding period they are responsible for upkeep such as mowing and making sure the property is not a danger to the public. In some cases, these investors are willing to sell their property to support new housing but others continue to hold onto the property in hopes of a future payday.

The larger issue is once a blighted home goes into extended periods of disrepair, the structure becomes financially difficult to justify a full renovation and it is demolished resulting in a vacant lot. A common scenario for this situation is an elderly family member goes into a nursing facility or passes away and the property is put into a trust among multiple owners. This group owners may or may not be local and are unsure what to do with the home. The property then sits shuttered for years with deferred maintenance such as fixing leaks in the roof or broken windows allowing wildlife and the elements to take over.

The US Census shows Allen County has a vacant housing stock of 946 units accounting for 15.0% of all housing units, slightly higher than the statewide figure of 11.3%. lola has the highest share of vacant units with 372 vacant or underutilized properties accounting for 13.3% of the community's housing total. Smaller communities like Savonburg and Elsmore have few total vacant units, but a higher share of vacant units – 56.1% and 34.1% respectively. All incorporated cities in Allen County account for 665 total vacant units with the remaining 281 vacant units located outside these city boundaries and in the rural countryside.

Community	Number of vacant housing units
Bassett*	0
Elsmore	15
Gas	34
Humboldt	142
lola	372
La Harpe	70
Savonburg	32
Allen County	946
Kansas	144,070





The parcel data provided by the Allen County Appraiser was studied to highlight redevelopment opportunities throughout the county. The data notes a total of 1,148 vacant lots including all land use types – residential, commercial, and industrial. This accounts for 889 acres of land or less than 0.3% of the total land mass in Allen County. Of those vacant lots, 967 parcels or 84.2% are located within incorporated areas, similar to what the Census figures reported. Siting any new residential development within a designated flood zone is prohibited, eliminating 205 parcels totaling 161 acres across the county primarily within Lola and, to a lesser extent, Humboldt.



### **03. JOB OPPORTUNITIES ARE AVAILABLE, BUT THE LABOR POOL IS UNABLE TO MEET EMPLOYER DEMAND**

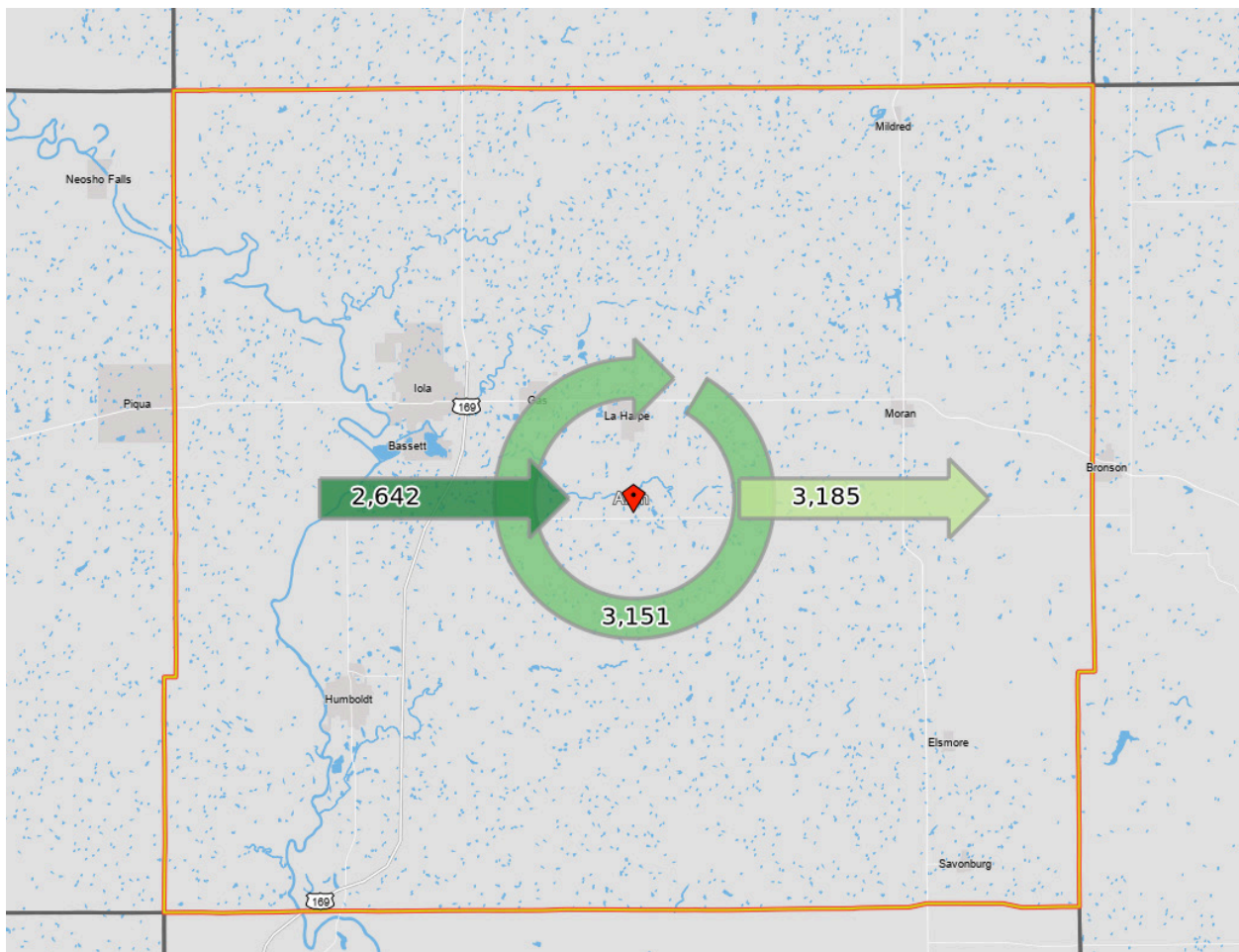


The most essential asset for sustained economic development in any community is the availability of a skilled workforce. In today's talent-based economy, businesses are unable to startup, relocate, or expand without a sufficient supply of workers that have the skills and credentials they need to fill available jobs. Partially as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and technological advances, today's workforce is highly mobile enabling more and more people the discretion to live and work where they choose. Given these new flexibilities for broader segments of the labor pool nationwide, communities must consider how they will be able to attract and retain a talented workforce that supports new and existing industries in their respective regions. Although workforce retention is contingent upon a number of factors, a community's economic competitiveness is often dependent on its quality of place and quality of life characteristics such as housing, education, healthcare, broadband connectivity, recreational amenities, and more.

As evidenced by labor shed trends across the country, many companies employ workers from outside their specific geographic boundaries. Generally, large companies will attract their workers from a drive time radius of anywhere between 30 minutes and two hours depending on the type of job and size of the community in which they are based. However, it is not only in the best interest of businesses to ensure employees can live close to their workplace if desired, but also to the city's and county's benefit that it can count on these workers as tax-paying residents who also frequent local businesses.

## INFLOW-OUTFLOW ANALYSIS

According to the U.S. Census On the Map tool, employers in Allen County draw most of their talent from within the county (3,151 or 54.4%) but also bring in 2,642 workers (45.6%) that live outside the county. In addition to those employed in Allen County, there are also 3,185 people who live within the county but are employed outside the county. Although a company's talent pool is not necessarily limited to the location of their office or plant, regions like Allen County need to position themselves so that they can increase their area's workforce capacity to the extent that they can continue to support existing industries and hopefully attract more to do business there.



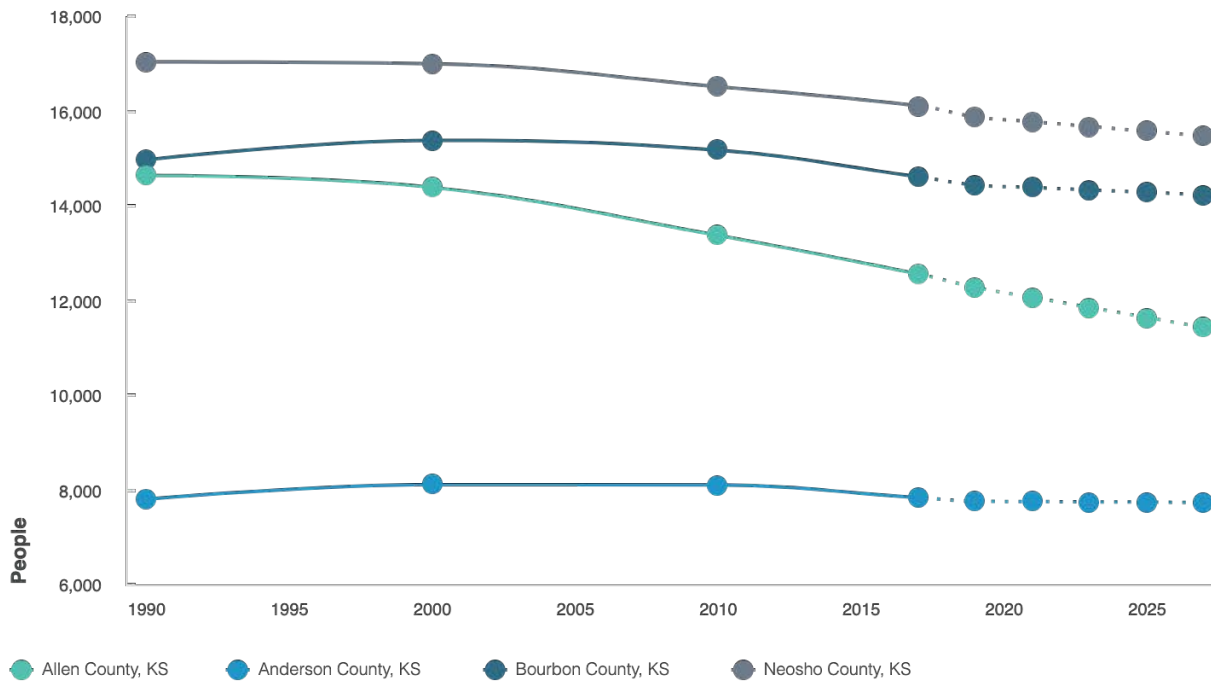
## SWOT ANALYSIS

As a result of an exercise conducted with the economic development focus group to determine Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT), participating stakeholders said there are “plentiful job opportunities” in Allen County but there are a “lack of skilled workers to fill available jobs” and “workforce recruitment from outside the county is difficult due to [the] scarcity of housing stock”. One stakeholder said Allen County’s greatest threat was its “declining population” and “brain drain” especially of professional, entrepreneurial, and educated individuals. Another said the county will continue to lose existing industries due to the skilled labor shortage which is a challenge exacerbated by the growing number of “workers nearing retirement age with a limited number of replacements to fill their jobs”.

## POPULATION CHANGE (2010-2019)

A more accurate indication of current and future workforce capacity is to analyze existing conditions and past trends. Unfortunately, Allen County has lost 6.49% of its population since 2010 which is significantly more than its peer counties. Allen County also trails the population growth trends in the state and nation.

**Total Population**



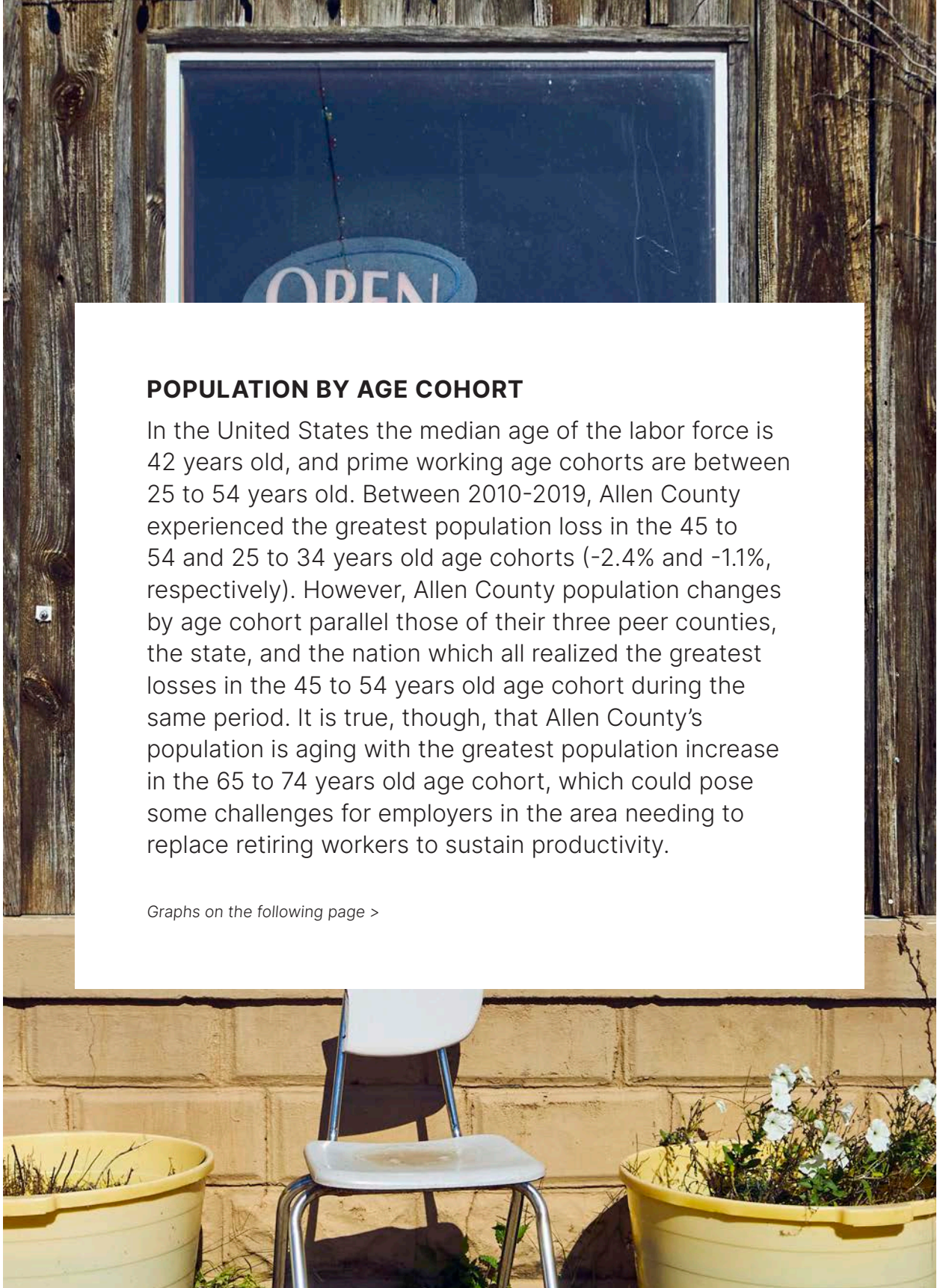
Sources: US Census Bureau; US Census Bureau ACS 5-year

ALLEN COUNTY  
HAS LOST

**6.49%**

OF ITS POPULATION  
SINCE 2010.



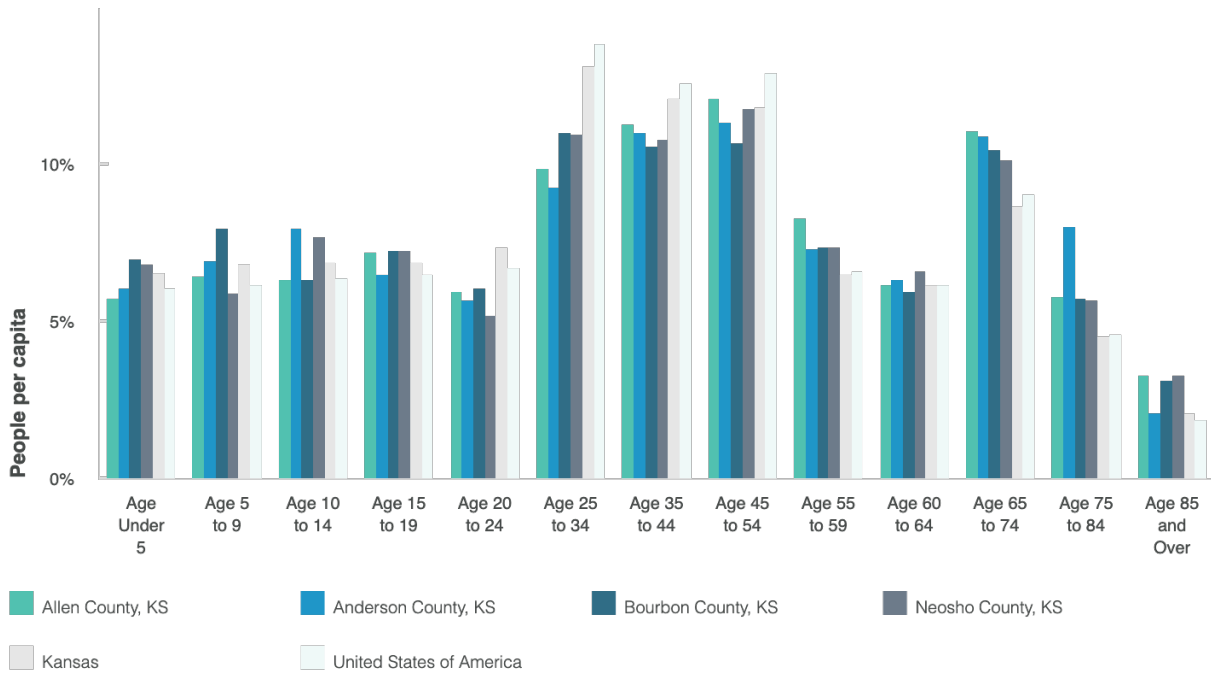


### **POPULATION BY AGE COHORT**

In the United States the median age of the labor force is 42 years old, and prime working age cohorts are between 25 to 54 years old. Between 2010-2019, Allen County experienced the greatest population loss in the 45 to 54 and 25 to 34 years old age cohorts (-2.4% and -1.1%, respectively). However, Allen County population changes by age cohort parallel those of their three peer counties, the state, and the nation which all realized the greatest losses in the 45 to 54 years old age cohort during the same period. It is true, though, that Allen County's population is aging with the greatest population increase in the 65 to 74 years old age cohort, which could pose some challenges for employers in the area needing to replace retiring workers to sustain productivity.

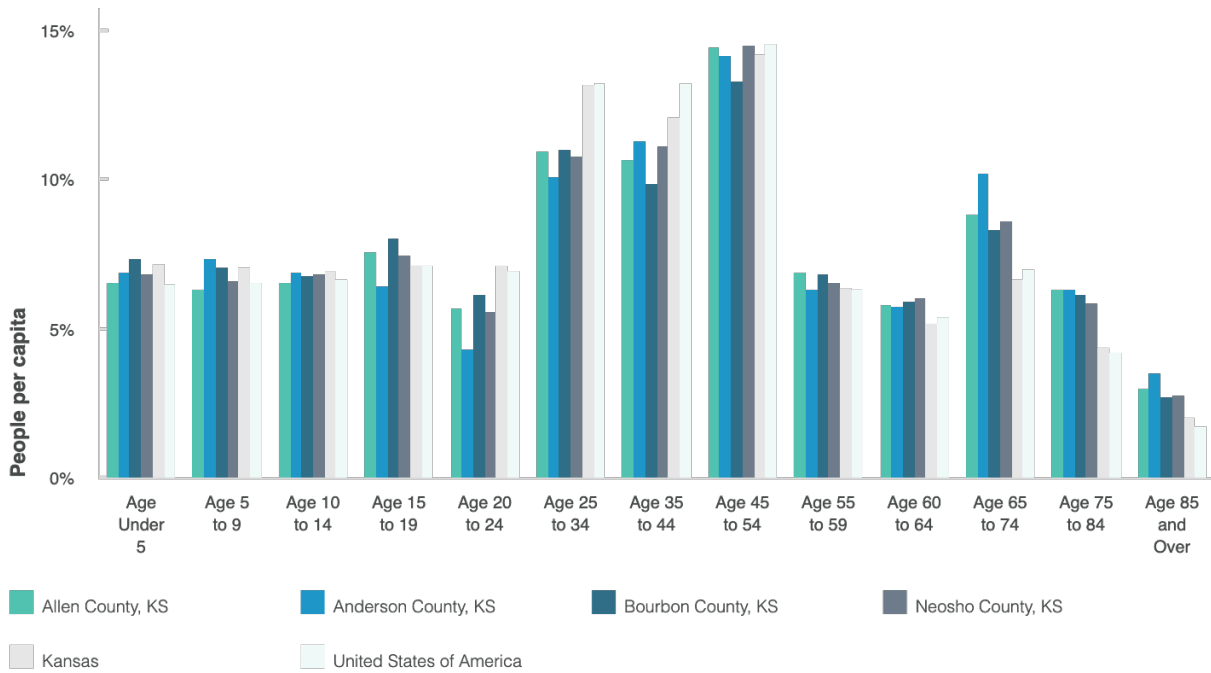
*Graphs on the following page >*

### Total Population by Age (2015-2019)



Sources: US Census Bureau ACS 5-year 2015-2019

### Total Population by Age (2010)



Sources: US Census Bureau 2010

**EMPLOYED**

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), employment is defined as “having worked at least one hour as a paid employee during the survey week of reference” which includes persons on vacation or extended leaves of absence. In comparison to its three peer counties, Allen County has the highest number of employed individuals as of November 2021.

<b>Employment</b>	<b>People</b>
Allen County, KS	6,504
Anderson County, KS	4,521
Bourbon County, KS	6,366
Neosho County, KS	5,852

Sources: BLS LAUS November 2021

**UNEMPLOYED**

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), a person is classified as unemployed if they “had no employment during the survey week of reference, were available to work, and had made efforts to find employment in the four weeks prior to the survey. In comparison to its three peer counties, Allen County has the second lowest number of unemployed individuals, only behind Anderson County, as of November 2021.

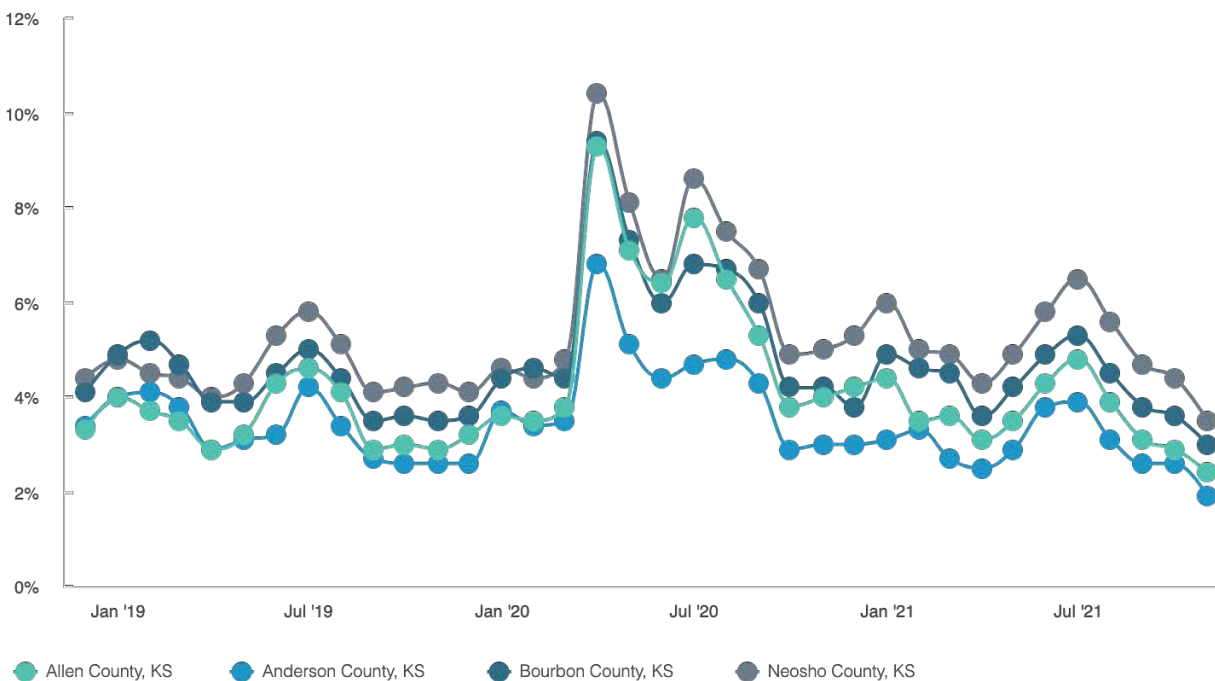
<b>Unemployment</b>	<b>People</b>
Allen County, KS	160
Anderson County, KS	87
Bourbon County, KS	200
Neosho County, KS	213

Sources: BLS LAUS November 2021

## UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the unemployment rate is defined as “the number unemployed as a percent of the total labor force.” As of July 2021, Allen County’s unemployment rate is 2.4% which falls far below its peak of 9.3% in April 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anderson County is the only peer county with a lower unemployment rate (1.9%) in July 2021 than Allen County. In general, Allen County and its three peer counties have followed the same unemployment rate trend since January 2019.

**Unemployment Rate**



Sources: BLS LAUS November 2021

## LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the labor force participation rate is defined as “the percentage of the civilian noninstitutional population

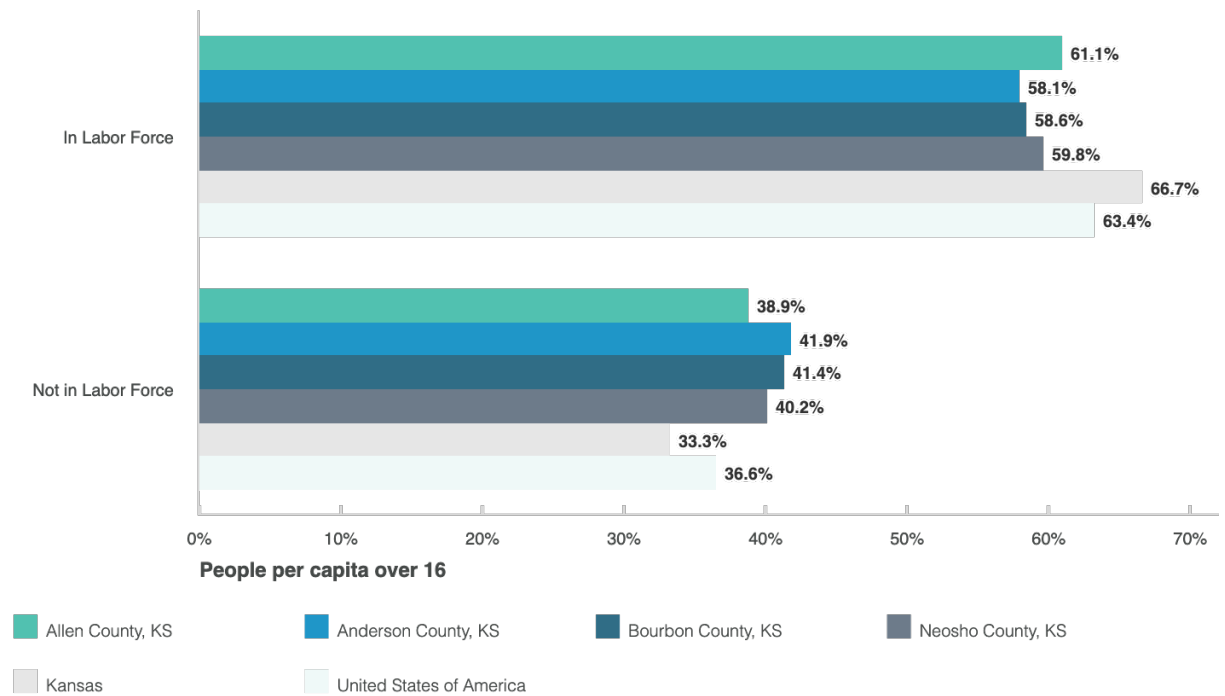
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16 years and older that is working or actively looking for work”. It is an important labor market measure because it represents the relative amount of labor resources available for the production of goods and services. In comparison to its three peer counties, Allen County has the highest labor force participation rate with 61.1% of its population (16 years and older) either working or actively looking for work. However, Allen County’s labor force participation rate falls below the state (66.7%) and the nation (63.4%) which demonstrates some inefficiencies in the regional labor market.

**Participation in Labor Force (2015-2019)**



Sources: US Census Bureau ACS 5-year 2015-2019



**NUMBER OF JOBS**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) program, the total number of jobs available in Allen County was 6,047 as of 2019. Although this number is significantly higher compared to Anderson County (2,112), both Bourbon County (6,263) and Neosho County (6,228) offer a higher number of jobs in their regions, respectively.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 6,242 individuals residing in Allen County were employed in 2019. However, the number of jobs available in Allen County during the same time period was less than that figure which means Allen County would be considered a net exporter of jobs.

**Number of Jobs**

Allen County, KS	6,047
Anderson County, KS	2,112
Bourbon County, KS	6,263
Neosho County, KS	6,228

Sources: LODES Version 7.5 2019

## NUMBER OF JOBS BY INDUSTRY SECTOR

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) program, the largest industry sectors in Allen County by number of jobs are manufacturing (1,869), educational services (1,111), retail trade (555), and health care and social assistance (551).

● Allen County, KS    
 ● Anderson County, KS    
 ● Bourbon County, KS    
 ● Neosho County, KS

### Accommodation & Food Service



### Finance & Insurance



### Administrative Support & Waste Management



### Health Care & Social Assistance



### Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, Hunting



### Information



### Arts, Entertainment & Recreation



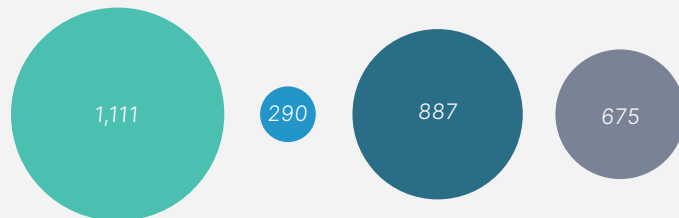
### Management



### Construction

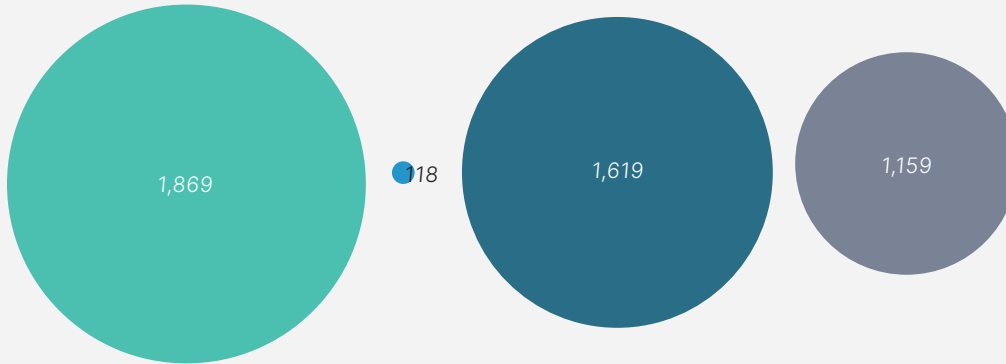


### Educational Services

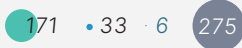


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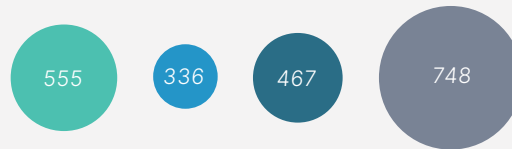
**Manufacturing**



**Mining, Oil & Gas**



**Retail Trade**



**Other Services**



**Transportation & Warehousing**



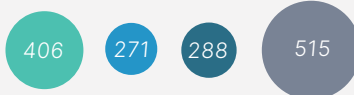
**Professional, Technology & Science**



**Utilities**



**Public Administration**



**Wholesale Trade**



**Real Estate**





## EMPLOYMENT INDUSTRY BY HOME LOCATION

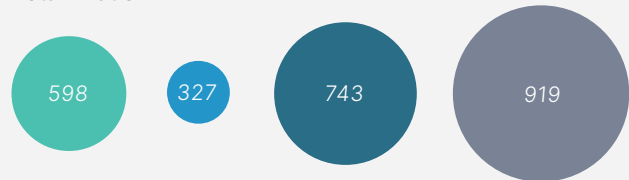
According to the U.S. Census Bureau, employment industry by home location “represents the count of civilian employed people age 16 and over by thirteen employment industries” in a specific geography. In the American Community Survey (ACS) for 2015-2019, Allen County had 1,244 individuals employed in the manufacturing industry yet the previous data indicator demonstrated 1,869 manufacturing jobs available in the county. All things being equal, Allen County likely has a skills gap shortage in the manufacturing industry by 625 (+/- ) unfilled jobs.

● Allen County, KS    ● Anderson County, KS    ● Bourbon County, KS    ● Neosho County, KS

### Agriculture, Fishing & Mining



### Retail Trade



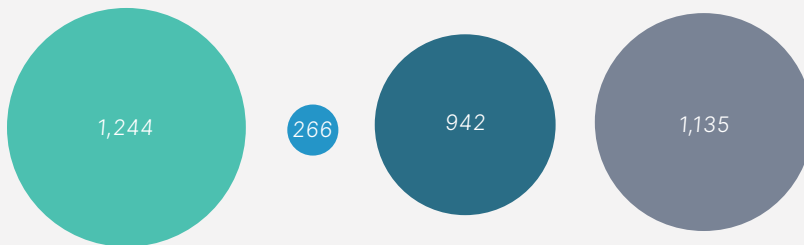
### Construction



### Transportation



### Manufacturing



### Wholesale Trade

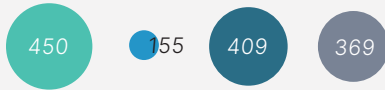


### Information



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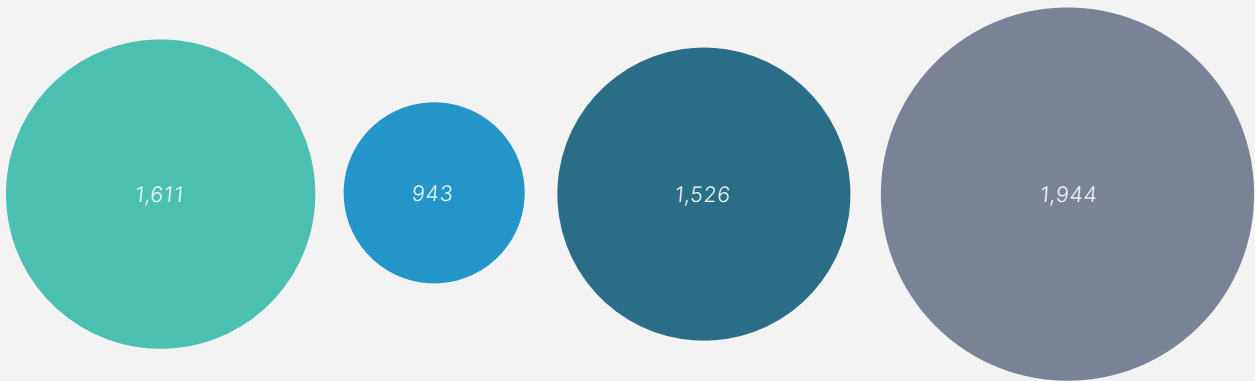
**Finance & Insurance**



**Scientific & Professional**



**Education & Health Care**



**Arts, Food & Entertainment**



**Public Administration**



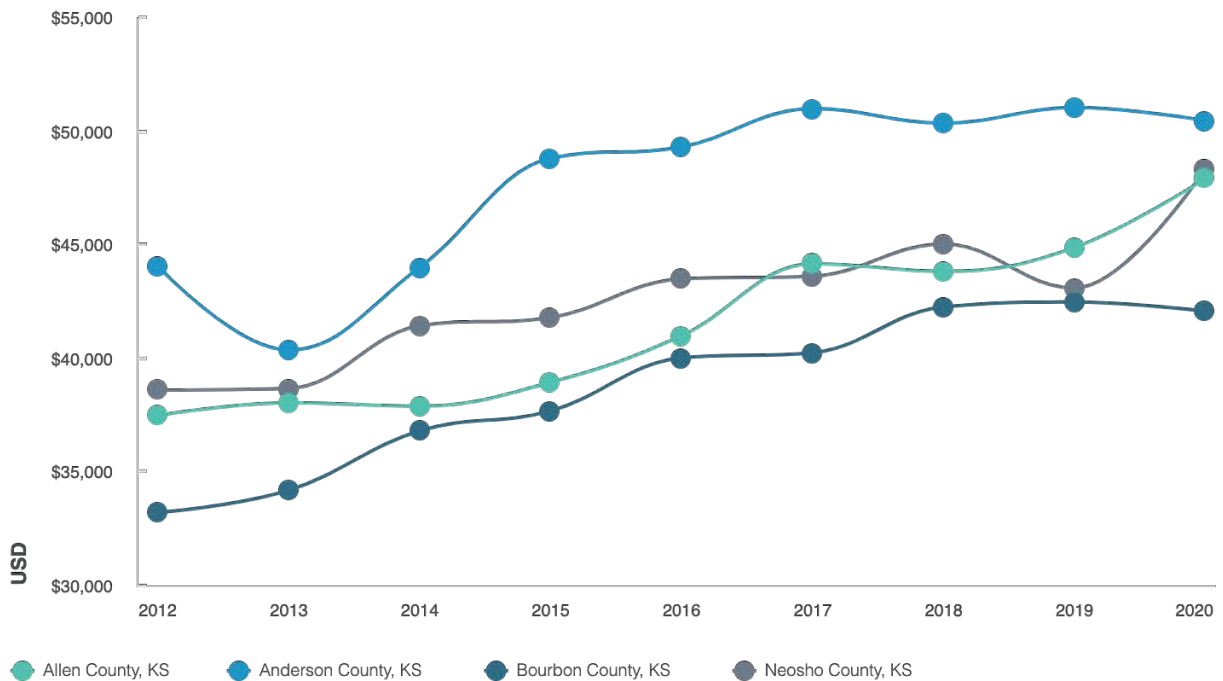
**Other Services**



## AVERAGE ANNUAL WAGES BY INDUSTRY

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the average annual wage in the manufacturing industry sector in Allen County has increased from \$37,476 in 2012 to \$47,908 in 2020. Although Allen County's average annual wage in the manufacturing sector is higher than Bourbon County's (\$42,063), local employers are offering less than the employers in both Anderson (\$50,451) and Neosho (\$50,451) counties which means Allen County could be losing local workers to employers located in neighboring counties.

**Average Annual Wages - Manufacturing**



Sources: BLS QCEW

THE AVERAGE ANNUAL  
WAGE IN THE  
MANUFACTURING  
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IN 2020.



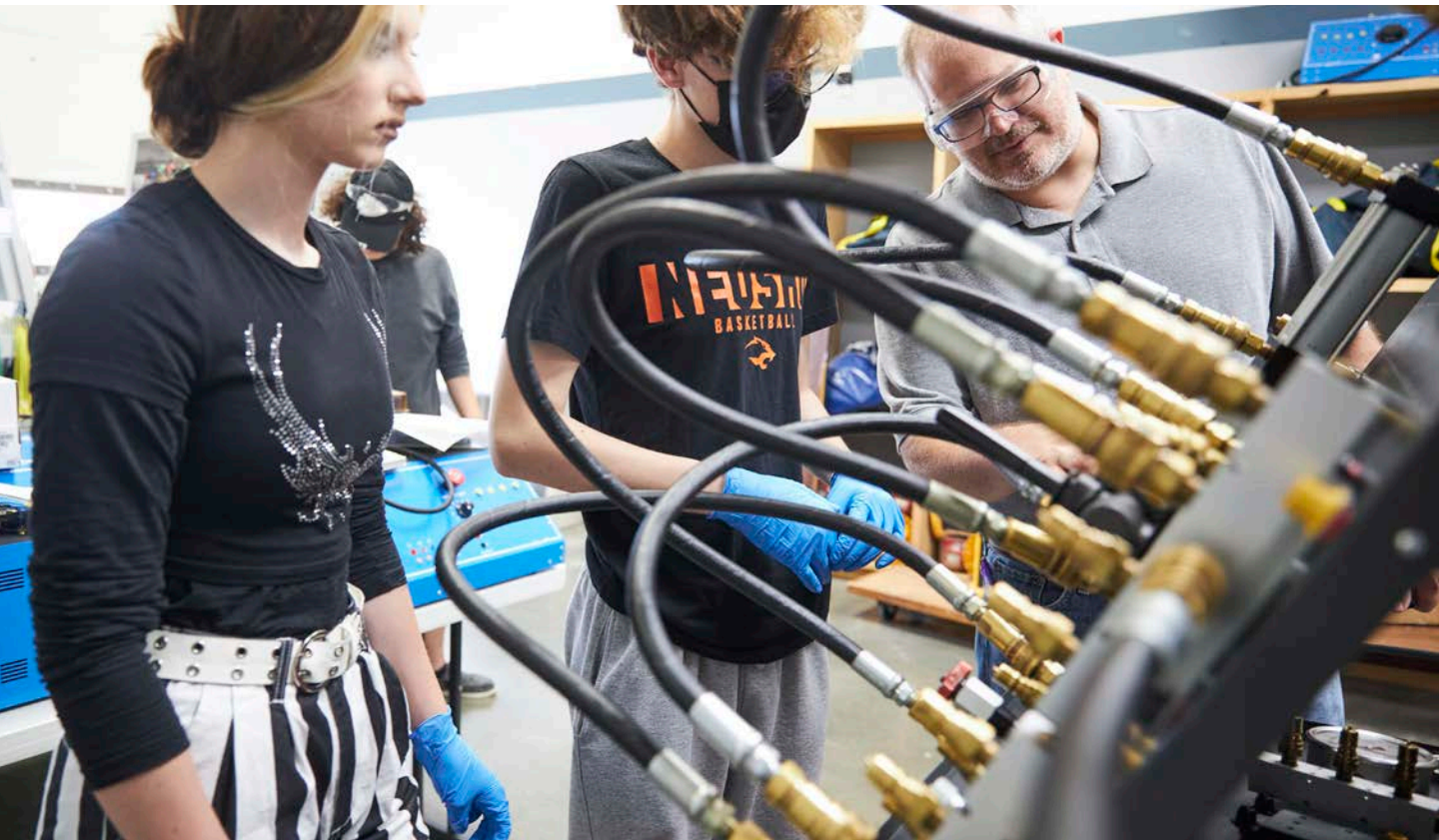
## 04. SOME SKILLS TRAINING AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IS AVAILABLE IN ALLEN COUNTY, BUT **THE REGION LACKS A COHESIVE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ECOSYSTEM**

When asked what Allen County's top priorities for economic development should be, 62% of survey respondents said "Workforce development". This sentiment was echoed during a focus group with major employers in Allen County because they have continually struggled to attract and retain skilled workers. Due to their collective need for workers, local companies are hiring most individuals who show up to an interview on time whether they have the technical skills or not to do the job. This trend results in lower productivity when companies are constantly having to train new hires, which is only exacerbated by relatively high turnover rates. Another critical element to the workforce development challenges being faced by Allen County is the lack of soft skills demonstrated by a portion of the labor pool. Local employers expressed how difficult it is to find individuals with both the hard and soft skills they need to qualify for the jobs available

– in many circumstances, they are interviewing job seekers that possess either technical skills or soft skills, but rarely both.

Currently, there are hundreds of jobs in Allen County that are going unfilled, partially due to the inability of the labor market to meet employer demand, but there are more systemic issues affecting local economic development. Generally, workforce talent will gravitate towards communities with high quality of life and well-paying jobs. If there are higher paying jobs elsewhere, appropriate housing, and more amenities in neighboring counties, it will be difficult for Allen County employers to attract and retain talent. However, there is a major opportunity for the K-12 system, training providers, and institutions of higher education to cultivate a workforce development ecosystem that meets the needs of employers, job seekers, incumbent workers, and dislocated workers in Allen County.





During a meeting with Allen Community College (ACC), the Atlas/McClure team discovered the college has focused most of its efforts on expanding its online programs. From their perspective, its campus is primarily a “transfer credits college” as the majority of enrolled students want to pursue their Bachelor’s Degree elsewhere. Another common sentiment shared by the college is that even when ACC does train students for careers that exist in Allen County they choose to leave anyway. However, what was even more evident was the lack of collaboration between employers, higher education, K-12, and wrap-around service partners who could collectively better meet the needs of job seekers, workers, industry, and local economic development efforts. So while skills training, higher education, and jobs exist in Allen County, key stakeholders operate in silos which is a common challenge in both rural and urban settings.

By understanding the economic and workforce development challenges in the county, key stakeholders can leverage each other’s strengths and pool resources to resolve these issues, but this is highly unlikely if these partners continue to operate individually.

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## **EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (25 YEARS AND OLDER)**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) for 2015-2019, 33.1% of individuals ages 25 years and older graduated with a high school diploma, 28.4% have taken some college courses but do not have a degree, 10.1% graduated with an Associates Degree, and 12.8% graduated with a Bachelor’s Degree. Overall, the state has a more educated population with 42.1% having graduated with either an Associates Degree, Bachelor’s Degree, or Graduate Degree. In comparison to its three peer counties, Allen County is positioned similarly when it comes to educational attainment.

### **Educational Attainment - Less than 9th Grade**

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Allen County, KS	2.7%
Anderson County, KS	4.4%
Bourbon County, KS	2.9%
Neosho County, KS	2.8%
Kansas	3.6%

### **Educational Attainment - 9th to 12th Grade, No Diploma**

---

Allen County, KS	5.4%
Anderson County, KS	4.6%
Bourbon County, KS	5.8%
Neosho County, KS	6.4%
Kansas	5.5%

### **Educational Attainment - High School Degree**

---

Allen County, KS	33.1%
Anderson County, KS	42%
Bourbon County, KS	31.5%
Neosho County, KS	32.5%
Kansas	25.9%

*continued on the next page >*

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**Educational Attainment - Some College No Degree**

---

Allen County, KS	28.4%
Anderson County, KS	24.3%
Bourbon County, KS	27.5%
Neosho County, KS	28.1%
Kansas	23%

**Educational Attainment - Associates Degree**

---

Allen County, KS	10.1%
Anderson County, KS	6.6%
Bourbon County, KS	10.7%
Neosho County, KS	12%
Kansas	8.7%

**Educational Attainment - Bachelor's Degree**

---

Allen County, KS	12.8%
Anderson County, KS	10.4%
Bourbon County, KS	14.8%
Neosho County, KS	9.7%
Kansas	21.1%

**Educational Attainment - Graduate Degree**

---

Allen County, KS	7.5%
Anderson County, KS	7.6%
Bourbon County, KS	6.9%
Neosho County, KS	8.4%
Kansas	12.3%

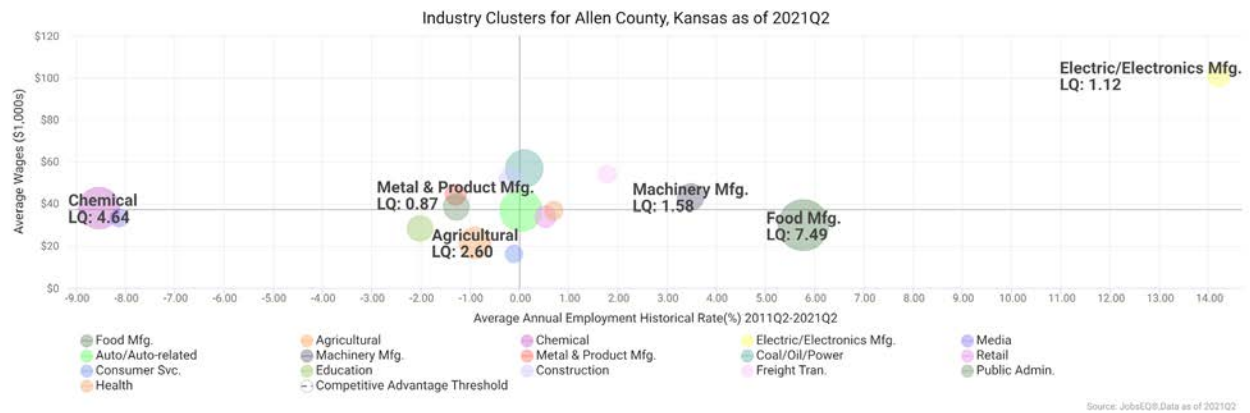
Sources: US Census Bureau ACS 5-year 2015-2019



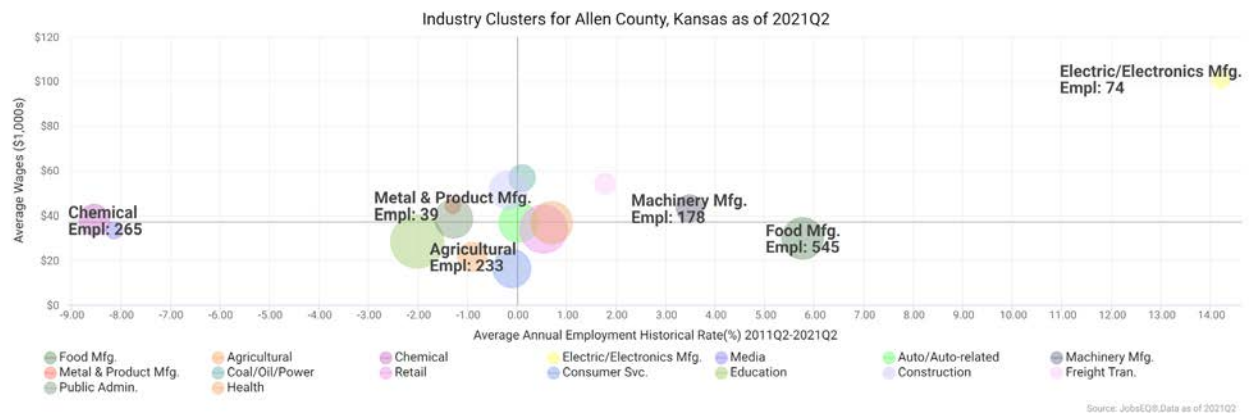


## INDUSTRY CLUSTERS - HISTORICAL

According to JobsEQ, industry clusters can form and grow because of a region's competitive advantage - resources such as location, trained labor, and education systems. If a regional industry group has a location quotient of 1.25 or higher, it is considered to possess a competitive advantage in that industry.



Industry Clusters by LQ - Historical



Industry Clusters by Employment - Historical



During the past 10 years, the industry clusters that have had the greatest impact on Allen County’s economy are the following:

<b>Industry</b>	<b>LQ</b>	<b>Avg. Employment</b>	<b>Avg. Wages</b>	<b>Growth Rate</b>
Food Manufacturing	7.49	545	\$29,848	5.77%
Auto/Auto-related	4.77	485	\$36,924	0.03%
Chemical	4.64	265	\$38,034	(8.54%)
Coal/Oil/Power	3.75	185	\$56,722	0.10%
Agricultural	2.60	233	\$21,496	(0.90%)
Machinery Manufacturing	1.58	178	\$43,202	3.48%
Education	1.57	959	\$28,453	(2.02%)
Public Administration	1.49	442	\$38,572	(1.29%)

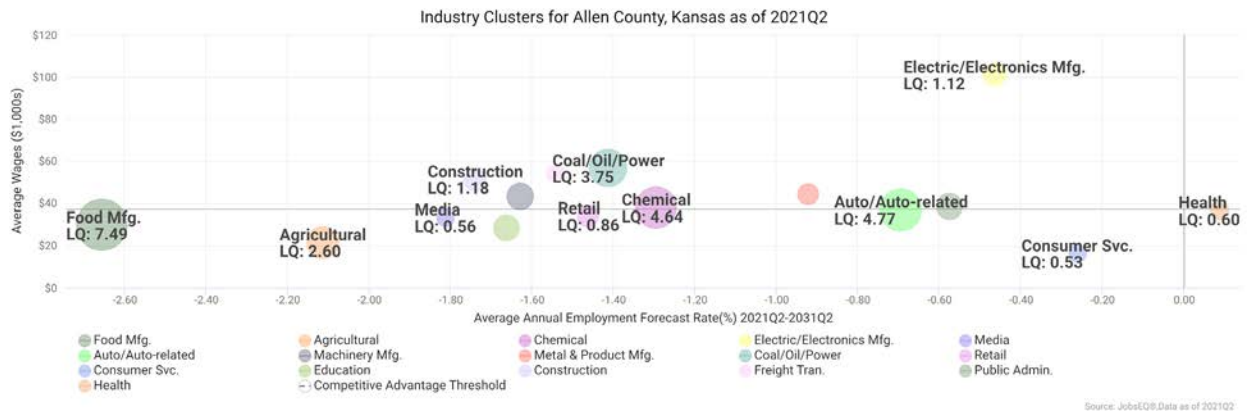
Historical trends indicate the industry clusters in Allen County with the highest average wages are coal/oil/power (\$56,722) and machinery manufacturing (\$43,202). Although the LQ is not considered statistically significant, electric/electronics manufacturing boasts the highest average wage (\$101,159) and growth rate (14.22%). However, this cluster only employs 74 people on average which is substantially lower than other clusters included in the analysis.

Additionally, the four industry clusters (from the list above) that have realized an increase in jobs during the same time period are food manufacturing, machinery manufacturing, coal/oil/power, and auto/auto-related.

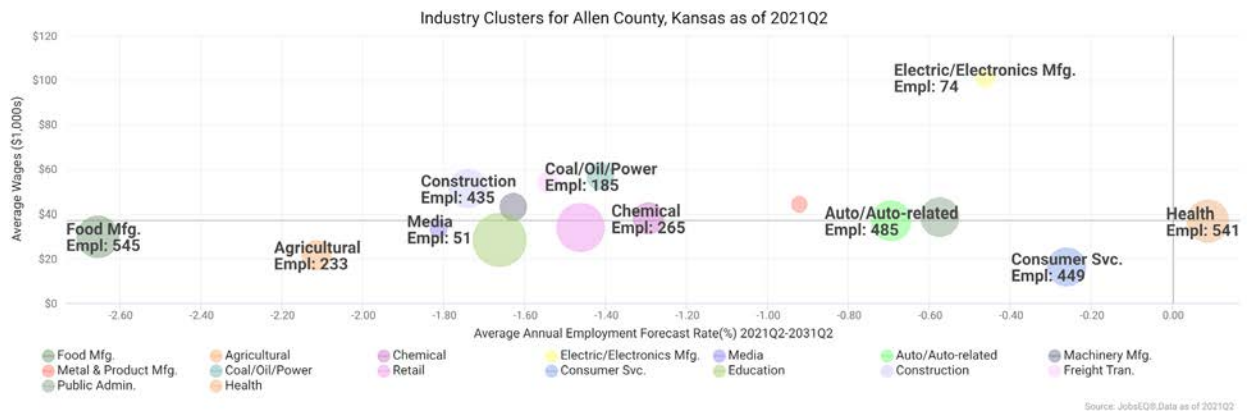
The three industry clusters in Allen County that have experienced the most significant growth rate over the past 10 years include electric/electronics manufacturing (14.22%), food manufacturing (5.77%), and machinery manufacturing (3.48%).

## INDUSTRY CLUSTERS - FORECAST

Looking ahead, JobsEQ baseline data indicates only one industry cluster in Allen County will add jobs in the future, health, which is anticipated to realize a 0.09% growth rate.



### Industry Clusters by LQ - Forecast



### Industry Clusters by Employment - Forecast

continued on the next page >



However, upon further inspection, JobsEQ data incorporating COVID-19 impacts indicates there will be three industry clusters that will add jobs in the future including:

<b>Industry</b>	<b>LQ</b>	<b>Avg. Employment</b>	<b>Avg. Wages</b>	<b>Growth Rate</b>
Auto/Auto-related	4.77	485	\$36,924	0.25%
Health	0.60	541	\$36,782	0.49%
Customer Service	0.53	449	\$16,336	0.96%





**SKILL GAPS**

According to JobsEQ, a skill gap is defined as the difference between the supply and demand for a skill. This can be measured by percentage or a job count (where the job count is relative to occupation demand). Positive gaps are surpluses of a skill and negative gaps represent a shortage of a skill. Skill supply is collected from candidate resume data; demand (openings) is collected from job ads.

According to data as of Q2 - 2021, Allen County is experiencing significant skill gaps in occupations related to merchandising, manufacturing, and mixers.

*chart on the next page >*

## Skill Gaps: Allen County, Kansas

Skill	CANDIDATES	OPENINGS	GAP
	#	#	#
Merchandising	5	17	-12
Manufacturing	23	34	-11
Mixers	1	8	-7
Food Safety	1	5	-4
Rulers	0	4	-3
Spanish	7	10	-3
Hospitality	2	5	-3
Machine Learning	0	3	-2
Business-to-Business (B2B) Sales	1	3	-2
Food Preparation	5	7	-2
Serving	3	2	1
Teaching/Training, School	26	24	1
Teaching/Training, Job	7	5	1
Calculators	6	4	2
Working With Children	6	4	2
Assembly	4	2	2
Personal Computers (PC)	10	8	2
Forklifts	12	9	3
Microsoft Excel	29	26	3
Microsoft Office	30	24	6

Source: JobsEQ®  
 Data as of 2021Q2; openings and candidate sample compiled in January 2021.  
 Note: Figures may not sum due to rounding.

## **AWARD GAPS**

According to JobsEQ, this data indicator demonstrates the difference between the number of awards awarded (which are post-secondary certificates or degrees) and the occupation demand in Allen County. Negative values represent the gap, or shortage, of degrees being awarded in Allen County to meet the demand for these occupations. The positive values represent the surplus of awards meaning that the number of awards awarded are greater than the target range of demand for Allen County.

According to data as of Q2 - 2021, Allen County is experiencing a major shortage of post-secondary certifications or degrees being awarded to meet the demand for certain occupations related to educational instruction and libraries, management, business and financial operations, healthcare practitioners and technical occupations, and architecture and engineering. The award gaps for some of these occupations can be explained by limited post-secondary program offerings in Allen County; however, regardless of the reason for these award gaps, the data clearly indicates Allen County's institutions of higher education cannot meet the current demand for these occupations and should evaluate how their programs can better serve the local workforce and meet this demand.

*chart on the next page >*

Allen County, Kansas, Two-Year Degree or Higher Only

SOC	Occupation	Award Gap	Awards	Target Range	Annual Demand	US Awards Benchmark
25-0000	Educational Instruction and Library Occupations	(28)	4	32 – 48	32	48
11-0000	Management Occupations	(8)	8	16 – 17	16	17
13-0000	Business and Financial Operations Occupations	(8)	2	10 – 16	16	10
29-0000	Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations	(8)	0	8 – 11	8	11
17-0000	Architecture and Engineering Occupations	(6)	0	6 – 7	6	7
19-0000	Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations	(3)	0	3 – 4	3	4
27-0000	Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occupations	(2)	1	4 – 5	4	5
21-0000	Community and Social Service Occupations	(1)	4	5 – 6	5	6
23-0000	Legal Occupations	(1)	0	1 – 1	1	1
31-0000	Healthcare Support Occupations	0	0	0 – 1	1	0
33-0000	Protective Service Occupations	0	0	0 – 0	0	0
39-0000	Personal Care and Service Occupations	0	0	0 – 0	0	0
41-0000	Sales and Related Occupations	0	0	0 – 1	1	0
43-0000	Office and Administrative Support Occupations	0	0	0 – 0	0	0
45-0000	Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations	0	0	0 – 0	0	0
49-0000	Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Occupations	0	0	0 – 0	0	0
53-0000	Transportation and Material Moving Occupations	0	0	0 – 0	0	0
15-0000	Computer and Mathematical Occupations	10	14	4 – 4	4	4
<b>Total - All Occupations</b>		<b>(64)</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>98 – 113</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>113</b>

Source: JobsEQ®  
 Data as of 2021Q2  
 Note: Figures may not sum due to rounding.  
 Data exclude awards from online schools







## 05. BALANCING COMMUNITY PRIORITIES WITH REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS **IS IMPROVING BUT STILL CHALLENGING**

Prior to the formation of Thrive Allen County, several stakeholders described area economic development efforts as disconnected which was only accelerated as a result of neighboring communities competing with each other rather than working together towards a collective vision and regional goals. When asked if economic development in Allen County is moving in a positive direction, 73% of respondents said “I agree”, 18% said “I strongly agree”, and 9% said “I am neutral”. Even still, some stakeholders believe there are too many factions working on the region’s economic development and there hasn’t been enough collaboration between these groups and communities alike.

To gain a better understanding of local and regional economic development efforts, the Atlas/MEC team facilitated a variety of stakeholder input processes to generate a SWOT Analysis for Allen County. The team’s findings are shown on the following pages.

*continued on the next page >*

# Strengths

## STRENGTHS

- Geographic location (“we are in the middle of everywhere”)
- Community-centered leaders and residents
- High quality of life
- Low cost of living
- Strong K-12 schools
- Thrive Allen County (regional connector)
- Plentiful job opportunities
- High growth industries, homegrown businesses
- Recreational amenities (ex. trails system)
- Allen Community College
- Cultural amenities (ex. Bowlus Fine Arts Center)
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Culture of Health Prize 2017 (only county in Kansas)
- Allen County Airport
- NetWork Kansas E-Community program
- Preserved downtown squares with historic buildings
- Available land for residential, industrial, and commercial development
- Healthcare availability (ex. regional hospital)
- Kansas Small Business Development Center is located in Iola (within the Thrive office)
- Community-based nonprofit organizations offer programming and resources to address local needs

# Opportunities

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Business expansion for existing, growing industries
- Site development (“around airport” and “in industrial parks”)
- Downtown revitalization
- Residential development, especially for the workforce and aging population
- Workforce attraction to fill available jobs and provide opportunities for remote workers
- Entrepreneurial development through programming and technical assistance
- Promote low cost of living, high quality of life, and recreational amenities
- Cultivate unique tourism opportunities for nearby urban dwellers and passersby
- Expand public transportation, especially for shift workers
- Build a stronger coalition of existing businesses and industries to support economic development efforts
- Utilize innovative strategies - such as land banks - to strengthen residential, commercial, and industrial development efforts
- Apply for federal and state grants to support priority projects within Allen County (ex. water/sewer, roads, broadband, workforce training, site development, etc.)

# Weaknesses

## WEAKNESSES

- Minimal investment in economic development initiatives (“short term vs. long term vision”)
- Lack of quality, available housing units
- Declining population
- 50-60 miles away from the closest Interstate highway
- Lack of skilled workers to fill available jobs
- Limited public transportation
- Workforce retention is low
- Workforce recruitment from outside the county is difficult due to scarcity of housing stock
- Low wages (i.e. minimum wage)
- Inadequate code enforcement due to limited staff capacity
- Resistance towards racial, ethnic, economic, and social diversity
- Lack of affordable, reliable childcare
- Allen County does not have a county manager which stymies progress
- Allen County, Iola, and nearby communities do not have recently completed comprehensive plans with a cohesive vision for the future
- Allen County, municipal governments do not have structured incentive programs that support economic development and business relocations, expansions
- Allen County, municipal governments are unable to address economic development opportunities efficiently due to archaic bureaucratic processes (ex. public body approval requirements)

# S

# threats

## THREATS

- Declining population especially of professional, entrepreneurial, and educated individuals (“brain drain”)
- Deteriorating public infrastructure and lack of funding to support timely improvements
- Communities within the county compete against each other
- Losing existing industries due to skilled labor shortage and unavailability of housing
- Workers nearing retirement age with a limited number of replacements to fill their jobs
- Low commitment to funding economic development efforts compared to similar communities
- External perceptions from those outside the state and region (ex. lack of diversity, not accepting, etc.)
- Apathetic or negative outlook expressed by some residents creates a ripple effect throughout the county
- NIMBY mindset is persistent when it comes to issues such as affordable housing and progressive government policies

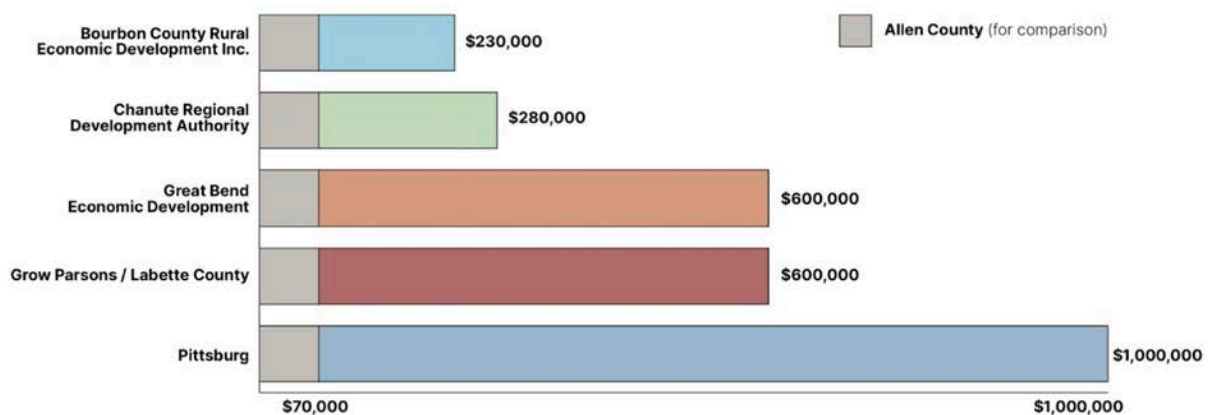
## INVESTING IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Given finite resources and competing priorities, municipal and county governments combat scarcity challenges each year when developing and approving their annual budgets. Generally, local governments allocate the majority of their budgets to building and maintaining public infrastructure (i.e. water systems, sewer systems, roads, etc.), providing essential services (i.e. police, fire, sanitation, etc.), building and maintaining public amenities (i.e. parks and trails, libraries, cemeteries, etc.), and administration (i.e. staff salaries/benefits, insurance, office buildings, equipment, etc.).

For local governments, facilitating effective economic development demands strategic planning and informed decision-making by elected officials so that an appropriate amount of public funding is allocated to worthwhile programs and initiatives that will generate the greatest return on investment - both economically and socially - for the community.

Currently, Allen County's economic development budget is \$70,000 per year which is derived from four key contributors: Allen County (\$20,000), City of Iola (\$20,000), Iola Industries (\$20,000), and City of Humboldt (\$10,000). Given these budgetary constraints, the entire annual budget is allocated towards the salary and benefits of one staff member housed at Thrive Allen County, which makes it more difficult for one person to facilitate these critical activities with no additional funding to leverage in doing so. Alternatively, nearby and/or other communities of similar size set aside much larger budgets for economic development related activities.

**Economic Development Budgets** of Nearby Communities/Organizations





It is not necessary for Allen County to spend the greatest amount on economic development when compared to these communities, but it is crucial that Allen County begins to invest more than it does currently and ensure these funds are being spent on programs and initiatives that generate a greater impact on county residents.

In accordance with best practices, Allen County should consider a multipronged approach to investing in economic development which includes funding for infrastructure (ex. shovel-ready site development), programs and initiatives (ex. workforce training, business incubator, tourism attraction, etc.), education (i.e. awareness- or capacity-building), incentives, and most importantly, operations (ex. dedicated staff or economic development organization).

Economic development funding can be derived from a number of sources, but there should always be commitment from local government to demonstrate buy-in for these efforts. Some common funding strategies include, but are not limited to, the following:

- City and/or county funding
- State funding programs
- Federal funding programs
- Public-private partnerships

By leveraging a variety of public and private funding sources and implementing innovative programs/initiatives, Allen County will be able to improve and expand its current capacity to invest in economic development efforts throughout the region.



## 06. RECREATIONAL AMENITIES AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS ARE A **UNIQUE DRAW** TO ALLEN COUNTY

One stakeholder described Allen County as being “in the middle of everywhere” because the county is less than two hours away from several cities including Kansas City, Lawrence, Wichita, and others. For some of these urban dwellers, Allen County and other rural regions became a unique retreat especially during the pandemic.



One of the questions posed in the community survey related to tourism attractions, recreation, and cultural amenities was the following: “If a friend was visiting from out of town, what is the one thing you’d take them to see or experience in Allen County?” The majority of responses

to this question mentioned the “Bowlus Fine Arts Center”, “trails”, or “town square” (especially in reference to lola and Humboldt). Others mentioned the “museum” or “Elks Lake” (better known as Lehigh Lake), and even still, a minority of responses said “nothing”.



Unfortunately, though, Lehigh Lake is private and cannot be accessed by the public which impedes critical tourism opportunities in Allen County and should be re-designated as a public recreational asset.

As a result of a generous donation by local citizen and banker, Thomas H. Bowlus, the [Bowlus Fine Arts Center](#) opened its doors in 1964 and has become a regionally significant organization and highly sought after venue for touring artists of various backgrounds. Before his passing, the late Mr. Bowlus directed his estate be used to build and equip a fine arts

center with a mission “to broaden the cultural background of area youth and make available to the citizens of the area facilities, programs and entertainments not otherwise available”. Since 1964 the Bowlus has featured thousands of artists and performances. Today, the Bowlus houses classrooms for music, drama and art where local teachers provide daily instruction to several hundred high school students. In addition to the 700+ seat auditorium the building also boasts a 120-seat recital hall, the Mary L. Martin Gallery, several practice rooms, dressing rooms, and faculty and staff offices.

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In 2017 Thrive Allen County helped lead Allen County’s efforts to receive the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s [Culture of Health Prize](#) – the first community in Kansas to achieve this prestigious award. Although it was originally formed to serve as a rural health advocacy organization, Thrive has grown into a full-service nonprofit organization that administers and promotes programs addressing health and wellness, recreation, education, economic development, transportation, and community engagement. Thrive has played a critical role in the development of more than 40 miles of biking, hiking, and walking trails throughout Allen County. This network of trails is diverse and includes rails-to-trails, paved trails, gravel trails, dirt trails, nature trails, mountain bike trails, and fitness trails with more planned for future development. According to Thrive trails are not only used for local recreation but also serve as transportation infrastructure, tourism destinations, and quality-of-life amenities.

Some of the trails within Allen County’s network include:

- [Prairie Spirit Trail](#)
- [Southwind Rail Trail](#)
- [Lehigh Portland Trails](#)
- [Missouri Pacific Recreational Trail](#)







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Beyond Allen County there are also [regional trails](#) in neighboring counties, which has cultivated a destination for cyclists, hikers, runners, and walkers.

Complementary to the trail system, Thrive has also promoted and supported bike-friendly programs including [Allen County Bike Share](#)—a free program that allows people to borrow bikes to explore the streets and trails of communities in Allen County—and bike racks.

According to a 2017 study released by the Outdoor Industry Association, “bicycling participants spend \$83 billion on ‘trip-related’ sales (bicycle tourism), and generate \$97 billion in retail spending. Bicycle recreation spending also contributes to the creation of 848,000 jobs.” These annual figures for the United States have likely increased as a result of the coronavirus pandemic which brought about a dramatic increase in bicycle sales. As of September 2021 the cycling industry continues to realize an increase in sales and delayed supply chains unable to keep up with demand, which experts predict is a trend likely to continue well beyond the pandemic.





Arguably one of the most unique features in Allen County is the downtown square in lola, which is the largest courthouse square in the United States measuring two blocks wide by two blocks long with no division by roads. Surrounding the courthouse square are locally-owned retail stores, boutiques, restaurants and bars, and upper-story apartments. The downtown square is also home to the lola Municipal Bandstand which features performances by the longest continually performing city band in Kansas and one of the oldest in the country. The lola Municipal Band has presented free summertime concerts since 1871, which typically draws up to 300 people of all ages for their performances.





Equally as charming is the town square in Humboldt, which has experienced a revival in recent years with many of its surrounding buildings being revitalized or undergoing renovations. Much of this redevelopment has been attributed to Joe Works, owner of B&W Trailer Hitches, and his family as well as A [Bolder Humboldt](#)—a volunteer-led group of residents focused on improving business incubation, commercial real estate, and overall community development in Humboldt. Centrally, the town square features a park and greenspace, and the surrounding buildings are filled with restaurants and coffee shops, a candy store, a woodworking shop, and upper-story residential units. Soon, the square will also boast a boutique hotel and cocktail bar, and a short drive will lead you to the county's first craft brewery.









One of Humboldt's newest amenities is Base Camp—a 21-acre campground and recreation area which features public gathering spaces, a 3-acre quarry for fishing, and a bike obstacle course. Base Camp opened to the public in the middle of the pandemic and, partially as a result of nearby urban dwellers hoping to escape their small residences for a unique experience, the short-term rental cabins were booked every weekend for the first six months.

During the stakeholder input phase, these recreational and cultural assets were the most prominent but there were also other attractions such as Lehigh Lake, museums, and various festivals mentioned. Building on these assets, Allen County has attempted to focus its efforts on tourism development but several stakeholders described the lack of a clear, shared strategy among neighboring communities resulting in most tourism-related projects being one-off or piecemeal.

FUTURE VISION



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# future vision

A key pillar of the RPIC initiative is that “placemaking contributes to long-term investment and therefore supports a community’s resiliency, social stability, and collective identity”. Establishing a community’s collective identity and its goals for the future is generally articulated through a vision statement. The purpose of Allen County’s vision statement is to inform and shape future investment, policies, programs, and planning efforts to ensure the will of its residents is represented in the decision-making process.



When asked, “How do you hope to describe Allen County 25 years from now,” some respondents used the words “thriving” and “growing” while others used less optimistic descriptors such as “surviving” or “dying”. Below is a word cloud representative of the words used most frequently in responses by survey participants:



Select open-ended responses to the question include:

- “A thriving town full of endless possibilities.”
- “Great place for families with good jobs available, quality affordable housing, great schools and friendly small-town way of life.”
- “A community that helps each other when needed with diversity of people and things to do.”
- “I hope Allen County will continue to grow and prosper and gain back some of the population that has dwindled over the past few years. I hope that our downtown [businesses] are thriving and that our local industries have adequate employment with quality workers.”
- “A progressive, inclusive, community that recognizes each other’s strengths and differences and unites through them. A vibrant community full of hope and promise.”

Other open-ended responses reflected less positive perspectives, but these responses less representative of the whole.



Based on the responses received during the stakeholder input phase—including visioning sessions, public information meetings, focus groups, online surveys, and interviews—the Atlas/MEC team suggests Allen County consider adopting the following vision statement:

***Allen County is a collaborative regional leader delivering essential services and innovative programs to its citizens and businesses so they can grow and thrive.***

The project steering committee should also consider the possibility of revising this statement to ensure the final, adopted vision statement is representative of the collective identity and goals of the county.



STRATEGIC COMMUNITY



- ↗ parking 170ft
- ↓ bike barn 200ft
- ↓ southwind trail 350ft
- ↓ skills course 350ft
- ← cabins 50ft

 Base  
Camp

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# **strategic opportunity areas**



## 01. PURSUE A **MULTI-PRONGED** APPROACH FOR HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

- Establish greater public awareness of local resources
- Establish annual county tax sale versus every three to five years
- Create new programs to support access to homeownership
- Establish land bank to purchase and hold property
- Raze deteriorated units to create opportunity for new construction appropriate to the surrounding neighborhood
- Be open to new technologies or construction methodologies, such as 3D-printing

*continued on the next page >*



## **02. CULTIVATE A REGIONAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ECOSYSTEM**

- Build a coalition of employers, higher education, training providers, K-12, wraparound service providers, and economic development professionals
- Based on employer needs and skill gaps, identify training and programs to address these needs
- Leverage a variety of training and education methods, including dual enrollment programs, apprenticeships, traditional classroom courses, internships, mentorship programs, and more
- Create a robust outreach and recruitment effort to make people aware of local employers, job availability, training and education opportunities connected to these jobs, potential earnings and career advancement, etc.
- Ensure individuals are connected to the training and resources they need to be successful (ex. housing, tuition assistance, transportation, mental health counseling, etc.)
- Create and execute a marketing strategy revolving around success stories about individuals who were trained and employed in Allen County
- Use the coalition to continually assess employer needs and the labor market and evaluate performance measurements
- Apply for federal and state grants to support and expand the workforce development ecosystem

## **03. EXPAND COUNTY-WIDE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS**

- Determine priorities for economic development annually
- Identify strategic partners and determine how they will advance county-wide economic development efforts
- Build and budget for a standard incentive program to support business recruitment and expansion
- Develop a sustainable budget for county-wide economic development
- Identify sources of funding to support the annual budget
- Build an online presence, promote economic development efforts, and celebrate small and big “wins”
- Apply for federal and state grants to support economic development efforts

## 04. TRANSFORM THE **THRIVE ANNEX** BUILDING INTO A MULTI-USE FACILITY

- Restore the Thrive Annex Building to its former glory
- Add the building to the National Register of Historic Places
- Leverage historic tax credits (if applicable) for the building renovation
- On the first floor, offer a multi-use event space to accommodate various programming such as art classes, wine tastings, wedding receptions, birthday parties, etc.
- On the second floor, offer a unique short-term rental option to tourists or locals wanting to experience a relaxing getaway
- Promote the county's cultural and recreational amenities to those who utilize the Thrive Annex Building space
- Sustain the building financially through revenue generated from the short-term rentals and event space



