

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Racial and ethnic minorities in Kansas are disadvantaged. The data reveal pervasive disparities in healthcare, in education, in employment, in housing – the interwoven list goes on and on.

The Kansas Turning Point project, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Kansas Health Foundation, provided an opportunity for discussions of minority health and disparities with community residents and leaders across the state. We heard from African Americans in Wichita, concerned about diabetic relatives with no health insurance. We talked with Asians and Latinos in Garden City about the challenges of communicating with health professionals who only speak English. We listened as Native Americans in Kansas City expressed their personal hopelessness and their despair over children turning to alcohol and drugs.

The data collected by KHI and others reveal that each minority group in Kansas has a unique profile of health and disease. Our state results resemble national findings on racial and ethnic health disparities, and identify distinct problems that must be addressed, including:

- Kansas Native Americans die sooner than others from diabetes and report higher rates of risk behaviors that lead to injury and death
- Kansas African Americans have higher infant mortality, die sooner than others from cancer and diabetes, and often die from avoidable causes, such as homicide
- Kansas Asians and Pacific Islanders may be reluctant to submit to certain health screening tests and are, therefore, at risk for late detection of some diseases
- Kansas Latinos have the lowest rate of seeking early prenatal care and have the lowest educational attainment rates, a known predictor for poor health outcomes later in life

The problems of minority health disparities in Kansas are an echo of what is happening nationally. Although there have been initiatives throughout federal agencies and in many states, and support from national philanthropies, little improvement has been detected over the past 10 years since minority health disparities became a focus of attention.

One goal for the *Racial and Ethnic Minority Health Disparities in Kansas: A Data and Chartbook* was to organize data for use by communities seeking local change. Many times, the community leaders we spoke with lamented their inability to access available data on populations of color in their areas. They wanted to fully understand their community's health needs, rather than operate from stereotypes and assumptions.

A second goal was to identify issues that affect our ability to measure and monitor health disparities across the state for policymakers. As important as the data are, it's also important that many data are missing. For example, we do not know the major causes of hospitalization for Native Americans, Asians or Pacific Islanders, or the cancer statistics for Hispanics/Latinos. If our state wants to ensure the health of all citizens, these missing

data make the job for public health, medical and social services much tougher. How can we be surprised that disparities exist when we cannot accomplish the prerequisite monitoring necessary to serve the health of the public effectively?

As alarming as these disparities are, they can be addressed. The prescription is action:

1. Encourage better and more consistent data
2. Monitor health conditions
3. Develop minority-targeted health programs
4. Improve the workforce
5. Establish an office of minority health
6. Build accountability
7. Support communities

Why take action now? Kansas has a window of opportunity to establish minority health as a priority, knowing that our population demographics will continue to change dramatically. Why take action at all? Certainly, there are health system financial benefits for eliminating disparities, but the need for action goes far beyond that. Disparity is a quality-of-life issue. No matter what our race or ethnicity, disparities impact our schools, our jobs, our neighbors and our communities. Minority health needs speak out in this report. It is time for all of us to give it the attention it deserve.