

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Central Regional Report

BACKGROUND

In 2010, the Extension Center for Family Development of the University of Minnesota launched a project to learn more about the current and future issues affecting families in Minnesota. During this environmental scan project, Community-level interviews were conducted in 11 different regions of the state. This report summarizes the community-level interviews conducted in southeast Minnesota.

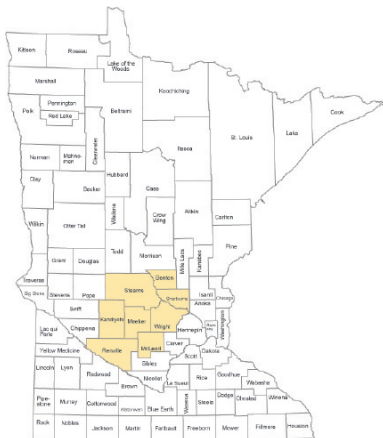
THE INTERVIEWS

Three members of the Extension team interviewed 26 representatives from diverse organizations in the region about the issues they see facing the families they serve. For the purposes of this environmental scan, the central region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Benton, Stearns, Sherburne, Kandiyohi, Meeker, Wright, Renville, and McLeod.

In an effort to hear as many community viewpoints as possible, interviews were conducted with organizations whom represented different sectors (private, government, or nonprofit), locations, and types of families in the region. In the central region, interviewees represented social service agencies, educational institutions, employment agencies, multicultural services agencies, and private businesses. The organizations interviewed

served all types of families, including families with young and/or school-aged children, college students, and/or older adults. Some of the organizations work with specific populations, such as adults with disabilities, immigrants, or victims of domestic violence.

Although this small group of community representatives cannot speak for the full diversity of the region, they provide important knowledge and insights into the lives of families in central Minnesota. While many interviewees focused on issues specific to their organization, distinct themes emerged during the interviews that cut across the individual sectors, locations, and focus areas of the different organizations. These themes help paint a picture of the regional culture and environment facing families at the time the interviews were conducted.



WHAT ARE THE MAJOR ISSUES AFFECTING FAMILIES IN CENTRAL MINNESOTA?

The national economy has impacted families in the region. Jobs and financial security were a focus in many of the interviews. Interviewees cited job loss as a key concern for many families. Some area employers had cut positions, making full-time jobs difficult to find, while others had cut hours. Interviewees said both situations often resulted in a loss of benefits for affected families. Job loss issues were particularly exacerbated for the region's more vulnerable populations: immigrants, low-income families, adults with disabilities, and job seekers with criminal backgrounds. Interviewees discussed the effect job loss has had on financial decisions and the need for social services. Many personally knew of families who had to make difficult decisions about how to spend their money; some families are forced to cut necessities like car or health

insurance. Interviewees also talked about the impact this has had on area businesses – families have been buying fewer or less expensive products.

Interviewees discussed a variety of social services in higher demand due to job loss and financial instability, including many of the services they offer in their own organizations. Decreased funding for general assistance and other social services, as well as restrictive eligibility guidelines, often creates additional barriers for families seeking services. Interviewed organizations offering multiple services often named food shelves [discussed below] and housing services as the most urgently needed services. Interviewees also noted increased rates of homelessness in their communities and a greater demand for homeless shelters and transitional housing. Families in the region need more permanent housing services, such as Section 8 vouchers, rental or mortgage assistance, and utility assistance. Access to health care was another concern connected to employment. Interviewees cited a growing number of families who are uninsured or use Medical Assistance or Minnesota Care. Even employed people with medical insurance in the region experienced hardships because of the higher cost of deductibles and premiums.

“I think some of the stigma for coming to a food shelf has been lifted because so many people now know someone who has had to come to a food shelf. That stigma used to be ‘they’re just lazy, they’re just on welfare’ – you know...looking at people for that. So I think that that really has probably helped, and that might be one thing that we see as we go forward – that it won’t be quite looked upon so awful to come to a food shelf.”

- Social Services Provider

Families are feeling the effects of health issues. Nutrition

was one of the most commonly cited issues for organizations that offer multiple services. Access to healthy food and nutrition education were the main areas of focus during these conversations. Several interviewees talked about the increased and changing use of food shelves. More families in the region were using food shelves. Some interviewees talked about a movement away from the food shelves’ mission of providing short-term emergency food assistance toward its use as a regular food supply; more families rely on the food shelves as a regular food source than in the past. Interviewees talked about food perceptions and a need for nutrition or cooking education. They also discussed the connections between youth nutrition, activity, and obesity.

Interviewees were concerned about families’ mental health, particularly in the form of stress due to job loss and financial concerns. They discussed the unique challenges for individuals with mental health issues or disabilities. Decreased access to services, due to a combination of reduced funding and increased demand, had an especially detrimental impact on this population. Interviewees noted that those with mental health issues or disabilities in the region face high rates of homelessness and unemployment or underemployment.

“When families garden together, they can grow together too. It’s important for us to be able to facilitate some of that growth, too, and I think then when communities (church communities) are starting to see that and starting to see how that builds communication and builds relationships, more and more families will want to get involved in that.”

- Agricultural-sector Representative

Family relationships and youth-specific issues are also areas of concern.

Interviewees discussed the importance of families spending time together and, in particular, parents spending time with their children. They noted the negative impact changes like divorce or overly stressed parents can have on children. Interviewees saw a need for programs that allow both adult and youth participation, address critical service or educational needs, and strengthen family relationships. Additionally, interviewees discussed service needs for youth specifically. Youth in the region need more educational opportunities, more services to promote healthy eating, and more homework assistance programs. The issue of teen pregnancy was also mentioned several times by interviewees.

Interviewees discussed the intergenerational tensions immigrant families face. They noted the stress that is created when children deviate from their parents' traditional culture, whether it be related to language (children want to speak English vs. their native language), or to other cultural matters. Interviewees described how generational discrepancies can impact children's education; when immigrant parents are not able to help their children with homework and/or do not understand the educational system in the United States, their children have a harder time in school. They also noted a lack of professional role models for immigrant youth in the community, which may discourage immigrants' educational ambitions.

"I think what needs to happen is you've got business community, you've got church, and you've got government, and until those three can start coming together and, within that, systems change needs to happen on a legislative level – both nationally, I believe, and statewide."

- Social Services Provider

The role of immigrants is changing in the community. Interviewees discussed the challenges immigrants face as well as the hostility they receive from some parts of the community. Immigrants face practical adjustment challenges, such as understanding the language and culture. Interviewees were concerned that some community members do not consider immigrants to be fully part of the community and that immigrants often do not consider themselves to be fully tied to the community. Interviewees often noted racism in the community and the need to build cultural understanding and educate all residents about the immigrants. Youth from immigrant families are subject to particular stress; they do not feel that they belong to their parents' culture, yet they don't fit in closely in the community either. This creates a fragmented identity for these youth. On the other hand, interviewees noted positive aspects of immigrants' presence in the community, such as increased diversity and more customers for local businesses. They also recognized efforts have been made to help better integrate the community.

CONNECTING TO BUILD A STRONGER REGION

The themes that emerged in the central Minnesota region cover a broad range of issues affecting families. The issues related to the economy, health, family relationships and youth, and the role of immigrants reflect the national and political culture, as well as reveal issues unique to their communities. While the perspectives of 26 interviewed individuals fall short of representing the entire central Minnesota region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and underlying culture of the region.

Many interviewees stressed the role collaboration and growth could play in ensuring a vibrant and healthy community. Organizations we interviewed hoped to expand their own organization to offer even more services and serve larger populations within the community. Organizations saw needs and felt it was the community's responsibility – including the responsibility of organizations like their's – to meet the needs. Several interviewees mentioned the importance of building coalitions among different organizations and sectors, including nonprofit, government, faith-based, and private. They also discussed the need to improve and/or expand infrastructure and business, particularly in the neglected downtown areas. In summary, while the interviews of this environmental scan offer insight into the underlying issues that strain families, they also highlight the resources available in the community to help support them. By strengthening these resources and the relationships that exist in between individuals, families, and organizations in the region, the community can work together to help combat the larger issues at hand.

MORE INFORMATION

The environmental scan in central Minnesota was conducted by Mary Caskey, Cindy Petersen, and Patricia Stoppa, Extension Educators with the University of Minnesota. University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development staff members — Ali Shurilla, Jon Fu, and Heather Lee — assisted in the development of this report. For more information on the environmental scans, visit www.extension.umn.edu/family/environmental-scan/. For more information about the central Minnesota environmental scan report, contact Mary Caskey (caske002@umn.edu; 1-888-241-4590).

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