

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

East Central Regional Report

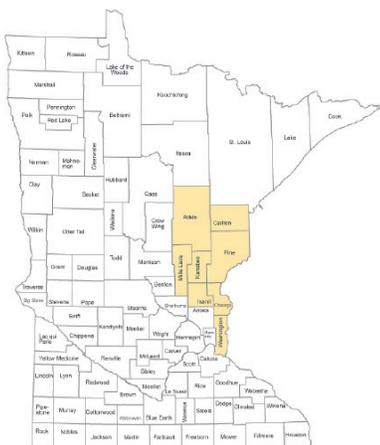
BACKGROUND

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 east central 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 east central region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Aitkin, Carlton, Pine, Mille Lacs, Kanabec, Isanti, Chisago, and Washington.

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 east central region, interviewees represented social service agencies, educational institutions, employment agencies, health organizations, senior 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 families of incarcerated individuals or homeless individuals and families.



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 east 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 EAST CENTRAL MINNESOTA? Families are facing challenges related to parenting and family relationships.

Many discussions centered on the effects that parents' behaviors and lifestyles have on children and youth. Several examples were given of how parents' negative choices, such as substance abuse or criminal activity and incarceration, affected their children. Interviewees emphasized how important it is for parents to address their children's needs and insure their healthy development. They noted an increase in non-traditional family structures and discussed the effects family structure has on youth. Interviewees discussed the complications that arise when parents are unmarried, especially the effects on custody, father involvement, and child support payments. While interviewees noted the role of parental choice and responsibility has on behavior, many described the impacts that the intergenerational cycles of poverty, drug abuse, and incarceration has on families.

Poverty, in particular, has a profound effect on parenting and family relationships. Interviewees cited intergenerational poverty as an important potential contributor to difficulties in parenting. As one social services representative noted, “Many of the folks [we serve] were not parented in a way that’s going to help them be good parents themselves.” Interviewees highlighted the practical difficulties that economic hardship creates for parents. They described the high levels of stress families in poverty face and the effect this can have on their family. Unstable housing (frequent moves or homelessness), trouble paying bills, and lack of food and transportation affect all members of a family. When parents need to work multiple jobs, their stress levels are further increased and their family relationships often suffer. For example, interviewees described how parents’ busy schedules reduce the amount of time families can spend together and hinders family communication. If older children are required to provide child care for younger siblings because of their parents’ busy schedules, they will have less time to participate in youth programs or extracurricular activities. Poverty can also hinder children’s education. Interviewees noted the importance of parental involvement in education, but recognized the difficulty parents face. Busy schedules, as well as parents’ limited educational backgrounds, can be barriers to them being fully engaged in their children’s education.

“We have the expectation that their kids be in school regularly and that they show up at parent teacher conferences, and all of those things that are probably really difficult for them to do. If you’re worrying about where you’re going to lay your head that night, it’s hard to get worked up about whether you did the flash cards, or signed the sheet”

- Employment Services Provider

The economy is negatively affecting families in the region. Interviewees discussed the long term effects the economy has had on families. They cited high levels of stress as one of the a main concerns for families. Several discussed families’ need for more financial and lifestyle management skills. They said families in the region need more education on budgeting, financial planning, and debt management. They also need training to improve job-hunting skills, such as how to be competitive in a job interview.

Many discussions focused on regionally specific economic issues, including issues related to employment.

“All of these things I think kind of come together and give them a difficult arrangement. It’s hard to go to work when the school is calling you, or you didn’t have water this morning...all those things together, all of them just pile up.”

- Employment Services Provider

Interviewees noted high levels of unemployment and high competition for jobs in the region. They expressed concern that families have been moving out of their communities to seek better employment opportunities elsewhere. Several interviewees discussed the need for people to hold multiple jobs in order to support themselves and their families. In addition to employment issues, low-income families are also challenged by transportation and housing. The lack of public transportation or reliable private transportation, as well as long driving distances in the predominantly rural region, make it difficult for families to get to work and access services such as child care. Interviewees said the lack of reliable transportation particularly hurts low-income families, who are more likely to work in jobs with little flexibility. Low-income families are also more likely to work non-traditional hours, when public transportation or the ability to car pool is limited. Interviewees noted the large number of families who commute long distances to work,

often to the Twin Cities metro area. Regarding housing, interviewees discussed a wide range of issues, including homelessness, foreclosures, difficulty getting financing to purchase a home, as well as the lack of affordable housing, crisis shelters, and transitional housing.

Poverty was another issue cited during many of these conversations. As noted, interviewees talked about the difficulties of long-term and intergenerational poverty in families. In addition to effecting youth development and education, intergenerational poverty could hinder youth’s acquisition of life skills, such as financial management

and healthy eating. Interviewees also noted the growing number of families who come from higher income backgrounds who are now in poverty. These families face unique challenges, including learning how to budget on a much lower income than they're used to, locating needed services, and navigating the social services system. Interviewees discussed that access to services has increased among low-income families, as has the use of fee waivers and scholarships for those services. They described the challenges families face because of the restrictive requirements of government programs. Many who need services do not qualify.

In addition to the major issues outlines above, interviewees discussed these additional themes:

Health

- Mental health is a big issue for families. They are experiencing high levels of stress and many have issues with substance abuse. Mental health issues can create additional problems, including incarceration and homelessness.
- Mental health resources for adults and children are lacking in the community.
- Families also have health-related lifestyle issues, including poor nutrition and limited access to healthy foods. Interviewees noted the importance of making nutritious foods both attractive and convenient for low-income families.

Youth Development

- Youth programs and extracurricular activities are very important for healthy youth development. Participation in these programs can help minimize the effects of poverty, and curb drug use, pregnancy, and criminal activity among youth.
- The youth who would most benefit from youth programs and extracurricular activities are often not able to participate because of the issues facing their family. When parents' need to work multiple jobs and/or have transportation issues, their children are often unable to participate. Many families cannot afford the costs of these programs and activities, despite the benefits that they bring.

"It's so critically important. If we work with kids we have to work with the family. If the family doesn't change, the kids don't change."

- Youth Services Provider

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES IN THE REGION

The themes that emerged in the east central Minnesota region cover a broad range of issues affecting families. The issues related to family relationships and parenting, the economy, health, and youth development 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 east central Minnesota region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and underlying culture of the region.

Many interviewees emphasized the interconnectedness of the family unit, noting that factors affecting one family member affect the family as a whole and can even have consequences for multiple generations. Families need to be treated as a whole, with resources and services being offered to both parents and youth, in order to deal with the issues at hand. While addressing these large scale issues seems daunting, interviewees discussed ways and resources to address these issues at the community level, often starting within their own organization. While several existing programs and services have begun to address these issues, more such programs and services are needed in the region. Interviewees stressed that the community needs to work together to provide even more education and resources for parents and youth, as well as more services for specific populations like incarcerated fathers. Families are key in youth development; more public investment

needs to be made in this population. Families in the region also need more mental health services. In summary, the issues facing families in the east central region are complex and they will require the community to collaborate together to develop comprehensive solutions. By strengthening the resources that exist and building even more partnerships and resources, the community can work together to help combat the larger issues at hand.

MORE INFORMATION

The environmental scan in east central Minnesota was conducted by Trina Barno, Becky Hagen-Jokela, and Minnell Tralle, 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 east central Minnesota environmental report, contact Becky Hagen-Jokela (hagen022@umn.edu; 1-888-241-0724).

Revised March 2012