

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

North 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 north central Minnesota.

THE INTERVIEWS

Four members of the Extension team interviewed 27 representatives from diverse organizations in the region about issues they see facing the families they serve. For the purposes of this environmental scan, the north central region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Hubbard, Cass, Wadena, Crow Wing, Todd, and Morrison.



In an effort to hear as many community viewpoints as possible, interviews were conducted with organizations that represented different sectors (private, government, or nonprofit), locations, and types of families in the region. In the north central region, interviewees represented youth and family service agencies, health organizations, educational institutions, employment agencies, and private businesses. The organizations interviewed serve all types of families, including families with young and school-aged children, college students, and older adults. Some organizations interviewed focused on the region’s elderly and others worked with Ojibwe 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 north 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 climate and culture facing families at the time the interviews were conducted.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR ISSUES AFFECTING FAMILIES IN NORTH CENTRAL MINNESOTA?

Families in the region are experiencing significant health and health care challenges. Interviewees commonly discussed families’ poor nutrition and barriers to healthy eating. They noted the need to educate families on healthy cooking and eating habits. Many discussed barriers to healthy eating, such as poverty and societal issues, that go beyond families’ lack of education. For example, because processed food is less expensive and has a longer shelf-life, it is more economical for low-income families despite its poor nutritional value. One interviewee said that some families she works with do not have kitchens in their homes, preventing them from preparing meals using fresh ingredients. Another noted the impact of advertising and marketing of unhealthy foods, especially to children. On a positive note, many discussed the increase of community gardens, programs teaching families how to garden, and small farms that provide for the local community. These efforts have helped mitigate some of the nutrition and health concerns for families in the region but even more needs to be done.

Interviewees also discussed health care issues families face in the region. Families must overcome a variety of barriers to access health care, especially the high cost of insurance and deductibles for health services. Many needed health services, like dental care and treatment of addiction/substance abuse, are lacking in the region. Interviewees said that some families, particularly those in the American Indian community, face more health care challenges than others.

Many families are struggling with substance abuse. Interviewees discussed how alcohol and drug use jeopardizes individual long-term health, employment, and family relationships, overburdens community resources and threatens community safety. They described the effects of substance abuse on parenting. They noted the detrimental effects of parental substance abuse on children's prenatal, developmental, and mental health.

Substance abuse was viewed as a family and community-level issue, rather than a problem that only affects individuals. Interviewees were concerned about the persistence of substance abuse among and effect between generations of families. Interviewees highlighted cases where grandparents or other extended family members were raising children due to parents' substance abuse. They said that this pattern is particularly pronounced in the American Indian community. While the older generations' willingness to care for grandchildren and other young relatives reflects the strength of family culture and relationships, interviewees felt that this situation creates stress to non-parental caregivers. They noted a lack of chemical dependency services in the region, adding that many of the offered services focus on individuals rather than families – these types of services rarely solve the family-level problems.

Families are also being impacted by the economy. The depressed national economy and weak regional economy have led to high levels of poverty in the region. Interviewees said that many families have both low incomes and low education levels. Employment was among the main challenges facing families. Interviewees said that few jobs are available in the region and it is difficult to attract businesses to the area. Not only are jobs scarce, but some individuals face additional barriers finding employment due to mental and behavioral health issues, including substance abuse and criminal backgrounds. Interviewees said there is little assistance for people with this background. Poverty and economic difficulties contribute to health, parenting, and other family issues as well.

Interviewees voiced concern about the availability of and access to social services in the community. There is an increased demand for services, such as affordable housing and health care. Because the region includes a large rural area with a low population, they felt fewer services are available in the region than elsewhere in the state. Interviewees noted that families' lack of transportation creates another barrier and exacerbates the effects of the limited services. As mentioned earlier, families need more education on staying healthy. Several interviewees noted that families would also benefit from more financial management education to help them make informed decisions about money. Several interviewees also voiced frustration at the lack of continuity in services. For example, programming may be popular for a few years and then drop out of favor and lose funding in the midst of implementation.

“When you have a family and one person goes to treatment, then the other people are still having that problem, or they’re looking at what do they do with their children when they’re in treatment. So there’s not like a family treatment option. It’s looked at like ‘all of us are sick but only she gets to go’...She gets to be sober and learn the tools that she learned there but the kids don’t know how to deal with her as a sober person now. There’s different rules and different things that she’s trying and it’s like the things that we did to maintain don’t work anymore. So it affects the family relationship between the parent and the child.”

- American Indian Community Leader

“[Our] county, to begin with, has a lot of poverty in it — high rates of poverty. And so I think that when things like that happen nationwide, counties that are already in trouble are hit harder and it takes a lot longer to recover.”

- Social Service Provider

Interviewees said that culture fills some of the social service gaps for the American Indian community. As mentioned earlier, close extended families in the American Indian community provide resources like extended family members raising children. Some families in the community address the issues of poverty and homelessness by sharing their homes with extended family or other families. While these cultural strengths temper some of the negative effects of poverty, interviewees stressed that more community-based services are still needed. They also noted that tight family structures can also impede an individual's growth. For example, individuals and families may feel inclined to move to a different area for greater opportunities for employment and social services but feel pressure from their larger family to stay in the American Indian community.

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

Parenting

- Interviewees were concerned about the lack of parental involvement in children's education.
- Parents need more education on child development and appropriate discipline techniques.
- More should be done to connect parents to the short- and long-term family planning resources that are available in the region.

Housing

- Homelessness and a lack of affordable housing are big issues in the region.
- Many families share housing to meet this need, with some structures housing multiple families.
- Housing problems are interconnected with other issues, including unemployment, poverty, and insufficient youth development opportunities.

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

The themes that emerged in the north central Minnesota region cover a broad range of issues affecting families. The issues related to health, substance abuse, the economy, parenting, and housing reflect the national and political culture, as well as reveal issues unique to their communities. While the perspectives of 27 interviewed individuals fall short of representing the entire north central Minnesota region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and underlying culture of the region.

Despite the challenges facing families, interviewees expressed pride in many aspects of their region and cited a number of community strengths in addressing needs. They highlighted their history of collaborating as a big strength. Many cooperative efforts in the region help ensure services are provided consistently and efficiently. Interviewees also offered examples of situations where private companies or individuals reached out to provide needed services to the larger community. They noted the resilience of families in the region. Many readily adapt and are able to maintain self-sufficiency despite the challenges and negative influences they face.

Interviewees discussed the importance of focusing on “systemic change” rather than a “band-aid approach” to solving families' problems. There needs to be a more organized, holistic approach to addressing families' needs. Problems

need to be addressed through a three-pronged approach: prevention, education, and building families' capacity. By building on the strengths that already exist in the communities throughout the region, organizations and families can work together to meet families' needs and help them thrive into the future.

MORE INFORMATION

The environmental scan in north central Minnesota was conducted by Lori Hendrickson, Betsy Johnson, Jill May, and Jo Musich, 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 north central Minnesota environmental scan report, contact Jill May (mayxx011@umn.edu; 218-828-2342).

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