

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

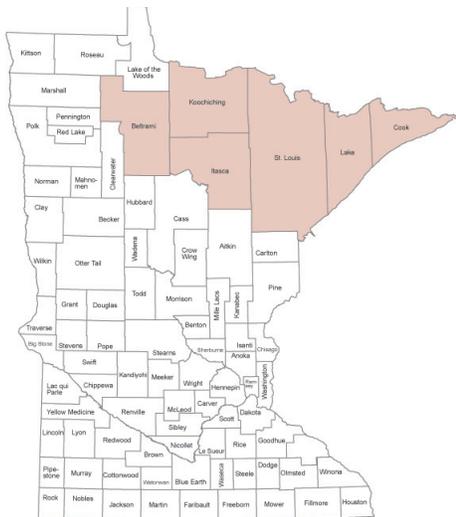
Northeast Regional Report

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 northeast Minnesota.

THE INTERVIEWS

Four members of the Extension team interviewed 20 representatives from diverse organizations in the region about issues they see facing the families they serve. For the purposes of this environmental scan, the northeast region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Beltrami, Koochiching, Itasca, St. Louis, Lake, and Cook.



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 northeast region, interviewees represented social service agencies, faith-based organizations, educational institutions, government 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. Two organizations interviewed worked specifically with the region’s elderly and another two focused on the region’s American Indian population.

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 northeast 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 NORTHEAST MINNESOTA?

Families have been affected by the increasing role of technology in their lives.

While some interviewees mentioned technology, especially online technology, as a valuable communication tool, others felt that technology also had negative consequences. Many discussed the growth of cell phone and texting in family communication and cited situations where it has replaced traditional face-to-face interactions between parents and children. Interviewees noted that communication and social interaction is qualitatively different than if technology is not utilized.

Interviewees described the role technological devices have played in youth entertainment. For example, in

the past youth would play in the park or go fishing whereas now they are more likely to be engaged with the Internet, video games, television, or cell phones. Given that outdoor recreation is a large part of the northeast region's economy, this shift towards more technologically based entertainment was concerning to some interviewees. On the other hand, interviewees described how older adults in the region would benefit from increased access to computers as well as education on technology use.

The economy has negatively impacted families in the region. Interviewees discussed the need for jobs that offer adequate pay and benefits, particularly health insurance. The mining and timber industries play a significant role in the northeast region; interviewees noted how unions in these industries can help secure good paying jobs with benefits. Many families must work multiple jobs in order to generate sufficient income and/or benefits. Interviewees noted increases in the number of older adults who work beyond the traditional retirement age in order to maintain their income and benefits. Several knew of individuals who chose to take a low-paying job or stay in a job that was not a good fit career-wise just to secure benefits for their family. They said that the high cost of health care and the difficulty in covering health insurance not only hurts families; it also negatively affects businesses and communities. Lastly, interviewees described the generational differences between the younger and older workers; younger workers feel more entitled to high pay and benefits and demand more from their employers.

Families need more education on financial management and more social services to keep them out of poverty. Interviewees said that many families, particularly young adults, do not adequately prepare for financial stability and do not recognize the danger of taking on too much debt. While families need improved access to essential services, the social services support system often does not meet the needs of working families. Interviewees said individuals sometimes need to decide if they should be underemployed or if they should quit their job to receive public assistance. Some families would prefer to work but do not do so because more of their needs are met through public assistance than through their low-paying, no-benefits jobs. Interviewees also felt that more senior resources were needed in the region, including appropriate senior housing and community venues where older adults could socialize. It was noted that even if senior resources were available, many would still hesitate asking for help when needed.

“Northern Minnesota is a very special place...It’s a great place to live, [but] a rural community anywhere has its challenges. The word ‘vulnerable’ has expanded in our society today. People that weren’t vulnerable 24 months ago are extremely vulnerable now.”

- Business Representative

“When I was a kid, we used to get four or five guys together and go out and play baseball, and now the kids sit in the house and play computer games. The social interaction is missing. You changed the rules as you went. If you only had three guys playing baseball you had different rules than if you had 10 playing baseball; and you made those on the spur of the moment. Everybody agreed, and that was the new rule. And nowadays the kids are all in organized sports. You don’t have a street ball game anymore. It’s down at the park and it’s coaches and umpires, so it’s a different ballgame - no pun intended.”

- Business Owner

Youth education is an important issue in the northeast region.

Interviewees in general believed that K-12 education was very important but they were dissatisfied with the current educational system. Several offered suggestions to improve student achievement in their region’s schools. Ideas included creating an incentive system for teachers, increasing the emphasis placed on academics rather than on sports, maintaining arts and elective programs, and placing more importance on core subjects. Interviewees discussed reasons why some students were not succeeding in the current school system, citing teacher quality, parental involvement, and low or unrealistic expectations placed on students as issues. They were concerned about the low graduation rate for students in their region.

Interviewees discussed issues related to higher education. They described how the high cost of college and other post-secondary schools affects both students and communities. Some students are opting out of more prestigious schools, in favor of lower cost community colleges, while many are unable to attend at all due to cost. For those who do attend college, interviewees were concerned that the high cost increases students' debt loads and hurts their overall financial well-being after college. It was noted that in an era of international competition in the marketplace, having an educated workforce is very important and more needs to be done to ensure higher education is reasonably attainable.

Interviewees also voiced concern for out-of-school youth development. They noted an increase in structured activities for youth and also a rise in parental involvement in youth activities. Interviewees felt that this, in addition to the over-reliance on technologically-based entertainment that was discussed earlier, hindered youth's interpersonal communication skills, social skills, creativity, decision-making skills, and physical health. Many said that more needs to be done to address the poor nutrition, lack of exercise, and high rates of obesity of the region's youth.

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

Family Structure

- Family structure is changing in the region. There is an increase in the number of single-parent and step-parent households.
- Divorces and multiple marriages/relationships often complicate parent-child relationships. It is important for children to have consistent parental involvement in their lives.

Family Values

- Some are concerned about the movement away from organized religion. Families would benefit from education on how to maintain traditional values.

"Family values are slipping...I think in order to raise productive individuals, there needs to be some back to the basics and teaching of family values."

- Community Services Provider

BUILDING A STRONGER REGION

The themes that emerged in the northeast Minnesota region cover a broad range of issues affecting families. The issues related to technology, the economy, youth education, family structure, and family values reflect the national and political culture, as well as reveal issues unique to their communities. While the perspectives of 20 interviewed individuals fall short of representing the entire northeast Minnesota region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and underlying culture of the region.

In response to these concerns, interviewees cited ways for the communities in the region to work together to address these issues. They discussed the importance of the community in teaching values and carrying on traditions. This could help relieve some of the tensions that exist between the younger and older generations. Interviewees said that more could be done to teach values through youth programs and to offer community-based activities (church, county fair, etc.) that encourage families to participate together. Many also discussed the need for the community to provide more resources and services that address the economic and parenting issues in the region. Interviewees felt that 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 northeast 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 northeast Minnesota environmental scan report, contact Lori Hendrickson (lhend@umn.edu; 218-327-5961).

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