

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Northwest 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 northwest Minnesota.

THE INTERVIEWS

Two members of the Extension team interviewed 17 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 northwest region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Kittson, Roseau, Lake of the Woods, Marshall, Pennington, Red Lake, Polk, and Clearwater.

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 northwest region, interviewees represented social service agencies, health organizations, educational institutions, law enforcement agencies, faith-based organizations, 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. Many organizations interviewed work specifically with 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 northwest 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 NORTHWEST MINNESOTA?

The economy impacts the lives of families in their communities. Interviewees discussed the difficulty for individuals to find employment and attributed this to both individual and societal causes. Several noted the inadequacy of available jobs in their communities. Besides having fewer jobs available, there is often a lack of diversity in the type of work offered. Interviewees often attributed this to the small size of communities. Others commented that individuals in their communities had difficulty finding jobs because of their low education or skill levels, including job search skills.

The economy also affects other areas of community life. The cost of transportation and lack of public transportation makes it difficult for some to get to work. The economy also affects family relationships and youth. Some youth are not be

able to participate in programs and activities due to high fees and transportation costs. Families are also faced with caring for aging parents and other relatives due to the high cost of outside care. Economic issues impact health as well. Several interviewees said the high cost of doctor visits and prescriptions keeps families from seeking and/or receiving appropriate medical care. They were especially concerned with the effect this has on youth and elderly family members. Many interviewees personally knew of families whose children sometimes go without medical care due to cost. Health care issues are often exacerbated by jobs without any health benefits or with health plans that require high deductibles or travel to specified health care providers. Interviewees also noted that economic hardship often leads to stress in family relationships overall. This stress often causes additional health issues, such as substance abuse, and can lead to additional issues in the community, like crime.

“All of this that I’m talking about is kind of going back to the problem: the economic problem that we have right now. Right now that is a national and global thing, but in our region, there [is] always a high percentage of people under economic stress. And we can see that stress in the children; we can see that in the parents. And it would just be nice if young families were given some more coping skills for dealing with the kind of stress that they’re going through.”

- Social Services Provider

Families are experiencing health issues in general beyond those influenced directly by the economy. Several interviewees cited drug use as one of their main concerns for families in their communities. They noted that drug use, including the addiction to and use of pain killers, prescription drugs, and alcohol, leads to both individual and community-level consequences. It can prevent individuals from becoming self-sufficient and can lead to crime like physical abuse and theft. Interviewees voiced concerns about drug use in youth specifically. Unhealthy lifestyles were another big health concern, especially poor nutrition and the lack of exercise. These problems often lead to other issues, including obesity and diabetes. Again, there was a strong concern for these health issues in youth. Interviewees noted the responsibility of parents to ensure their children’s healthy eating and exercise habits, but recognized uncontrollable external and societal influences. Some noted that when parents work long hours, children are left alone, making it more likely that they will eat unhealthy foods. Interviewees also discussed the high cost of healthy foods, which makes them unappealing or unattainable for many families. In summary, families are faced with the difficult balance between individual choices and societal influences in regards to their health.

The role of values is changing for families. Issues related to values – as seen in relationships, traditions, spirituality, and religion – reflect changing family structures. Interviewees discussed the prevalence of nontraditional family forms, especially single, teen, and divorced parents, noting the strain a fragmented family structure puts on family relationships. They showed particular concern for the declining strength of marriages, increased divorce rates, and lack of family planning. One interviewee voiced concerns about families where children are born into short-lived relationships in which parents do not adequately plan for raising a family. Interviewees also expressed worry about families spending less time together and the decreased importance of family activities. They cited parents’ work lives as a big part of the problem. When both parents work, they have less time to spend with their families and their children, in turn, spend much of their time with peers or caretakers (i.e., child care providers). Some discussed a generational difference in family values, particularly related to the traditional family structure, time spent with family, and raising children.

Several interviewees also focused on the changing values of youths. As noted, some focused on generational differences in family values, and several interviewees were concerned about drug use by youths in their communities. Underlying these conversations was concern for deeper issues related to spirituality and worldview. Conversations about youth spirituality went beyond concerns about specific values and traditions to include personal spirituality, a connection to one’s own soul, and general countenance and treatment of others. Some interviewees went beyond concerns; they saw spirituality and religion as a way to address issues in youth and

families. One religious leader who was interviewed, for example, discussed the church's role in providing youth programs and connecting youth to the community.

A COMMUNITY-ORIENTED APPROACH

The themes that emerged in northwest Minnesota cover a broad range of issues affecting families. The economic, health, and values issues discussed by interviewees impact families as well as their communities. The emerging themes reflect the national and political context, as well as reveal issues unique to the region. Overall, interviewees in northwest Minnesota revealed a strong sense of community and value of their communities. Many noted the positive aspects of their communities as well as their personal reasons for living in the region. They also expressed a strong desire to contribute to and help improve their communities, both in a personal and professional capacity. In discussing their work, many interviewees discussed ways for their organization to address the community's needs and benefit the community as a whole. They also cited the importance of community outreach. Additionally, interviewees noted the strength of individual organizations, networks of organizations, and partnerships in the

community. For example, one interviewee from a food shelf discussed how its relationship with local businesses benefited the community in addition to the individual organizations involved.

"We depend on the openness of the community and local businesses also...because if they don't have these families coming in and doing business in their places, then they might have to close because of the lack of income coming into them. It is important to support this food shelf because then these families are able to have some extra money and go and spend it there. So it's a cycle."

- Social Services Provider

While the perspectives of 17 interviewed individuals falls far short of representing the entire northwest region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and culture of the underlying region. Concerns about the economy, health, and values cut across individual families, organizations, and social sectors, as does a strong sense of community and dedication to a community-oriented approach to solving problems. The interviews offer insights into the underlying trends that strain families and the community as a whole, as well as the community resources available to help families. Community organizations dedication to using existing resources and creating new ones is an asset to the community and helps provide a means to combat the larger societal issues at hand.

"If we start touching on religion, all of the religions, any one of them, Christianity, all the religions, [the students at our school] are very curious. It's like a whole new thing for them. They kind of knew it was there, but did not know it was a real thing anymore, or that it was accessible to them. It's like they don't even know their own soul...They really are so disconnected from...an organized religion, but even what's more disturbing than that is that they're disconnected from their own soul."

- Educational Service Provider

MORE INFORMATION

The environmental scan in northwest Minnesota was conducted by Jennifer Garbow and DeeAnn Leines, 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 northwest Minnesota environmental scan report, contact DeeAnn Leines (leine001@umn.edu; 218-281-8699).

Revised March 2012