

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

South Central Regional Report

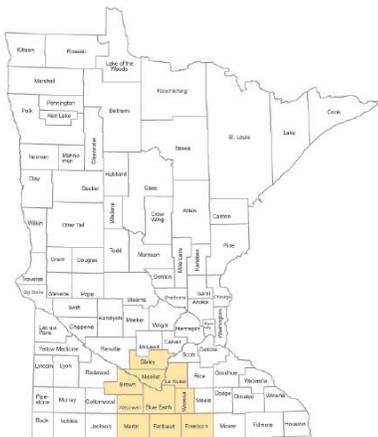
BACKGROUND

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 south central Minnesota.

THE INTERVIEWS

Three members of the Extension team interviewed 25 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 south central region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Sibley, Nicollet, Brown, Le Sueur, Watonwan, Blue Earth, Waseca, Martin, Faribault, and Freeborn.

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 south central region, interviewees represented social service agencies, educational institutions, agriculture-based organizations, health organizations, employment and financial services agencies, housing agencies, community action 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. Almost all organizations interviewed work with the region's immigrant and refugee population; several specifically targeted these groups.



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 south 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 SOUTH CENTRAL MINNESOTA? **Families who are immigrants or refugees face unique challenges and barriers.**

Interviewees discussed immigrants, refugees, and other issues related to diversity in relation to nearly every topic, including the economy, employment, health and the health care system, and families and the community. Interviewees highlighted immigrants' difficulty with language and cultural acclimation, as well as their low income status. In the south central region, refugees from Somalia and Sudan, and Latino immigrants from Mexico and Central and South America are the most prominent. Some service agencies expressed challenges about serving some Latino immigrant families because of their eligibility to the programs.

The economy is a major issue for families, especially in relation to the availability and adequacy of jobs.

Many interviewees talked about the difficulty people have in finding work when jobs are scarce and competition is high for the relatively few positions available. Unemployment is higher than usual, and those who are employed often work for low wages and inadequate benefits, or they are underemployed and not working full-time hours which also reduces wages and benefits. Besides noting the societal effects of a depressed economy and resulting employment problems, interviewees discussed the direct impact of these conditions on families' lives. Families who face unemployment or inadequate employment typically struggle financially. Without enough income, families have trouble meeting basic needs, such as food, clothing, and utilities. Being unemployed or underemployed can also affect families' eligibility for services. When public assistance programs require a certain level of employment or income level, families who need services do not always qualify. Interviewees noted that underemployment also leads to stress in families; parents often need to work multiple jobs to receive sufficient income.

“Jobs – that’s just a huge issue that we’re seeing with people – meaningful, self-sustaining work. When you’re looking at a single mother with likely two or three children, a minimum-wage job with no benefits is not going to help them be self-sustaining.”

- Social Services Provider

Interviewees said immigrant families face additional barriers to finding adequate employment. Immigrants are more likely to be work in jobs with inadequate pay and benefits, often because they lack training and qualifications for high-paying jobs. Interviewees noted many immigrants lack high school or post-secondary education, as well as English-language skills needed for many jobs. Even if an immigrant has college education or professional training from their home country, their degree and other credentials are often not recognized in the United States. Besides the usual problems associated with a low income, interviewees said immigrants' financial problems are further magnified by their unfamiliarity with the U.S. financial system.

“If your basic needs are not being met, how can you take care of your expectations at your job? How can you raise strong kids? How can you take care of yourself? If your mental health and your physical health is not in good shape and you can't afford to get the kind of help you need, we're going to have higher crime, we're gonna have higher homelessness, higher binge drinking, higher drug and alcohol addiction. All of those things go up when you don't have your basic needs met.”

- Business Representative

Health and the health care system are areas of concern for families.

Interviewees mentioned specific health issues such as basic healthy lifestyle practices, mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Several noted stress stemming from the poor economy was at the root of some of the mental health issues, as well as the substance abuse.

In particular, accessibility to health care services was an issue for many families in the region. Many jobs do not offer health insurance, and many families are not eligible for public benefits, such as Medical Assistance or Minnesota Care. Several interviewees commented on the inadequacy of insurance coverage, noting that it is not uncommon for insurance to not cover needed services or require travel to facilities far from families' homes. Limited access to healthy foods and exercise also leads to health issues – interviewees attributed this in part to the economy as well.

Interviewees said immigrants face unique barriers in accessing health care. Language barriers often prevent immigrants from accessing appropriate care, and the cost of care can have an especially harmful effect on this population due to lower incomes. Interviewees noted that the medical issues prevalent in low income populations are exacerbated for immigrants. The undocumented population, in particular, is especially vulnerable to barriers created by the health care system. In addition to language, cultural, and financial issues, undocumented immigrants are often hesitant to seek treatment for fear

that their immigration status will be discovered. This fear can also keep them from seeking care for their children, even if their children are U.S. citizens.

Some interviewees discussed health issues that are specifically related to youth, including teen pregnancy, childhood obesity, and inadequate access to youth programs. Youth are particularly affected by the impact of health issues on families, especially the effects of mental health issues like substance use, violence, and stress.

Families are also facing challenges related to family relationships and parenting. As noted, families in the region have been feeling the effects of mental health issues, substance abuse, domestic violence, and stress. Several interviewees noted that substance abuse and domestic violence can have a detrimental effect on family relationships and youth, noting again that the poor economy is at the heart of many of these problems. Interviewees also said the lack of access to child care affected families' health and relationships. Specifically, parents' busy schedules and inability to afford child care often leaves children unattended, which can lead to health and behavioral problems.

Interviewees were also concerned about the quality of parenting. While many discussed a lack of parenting skills, they also said this deficit stemmed from uncontrollable environmental circumstances. There was a sense that "it's not their fault." For example, financial conditions make it difficult for parents to spend time with children or afford adequate child care. If parents have low education levels, it may be difficult for them to help their children with homework. Interviewees felt that these issues could and should be addressed through education and improved access to services.

Families are also affected by their access to services. Interviewees described access to services as both a cause of problems (lack of access) and a remedy (improved access). While a lack of access to services for families causes or exacerbates health and financial issues, increased access to services was frequently offered as a way to address common issues. Interviewees suggested offering more services and education in financial literacy, including information about receiving loans and credit, as a way to help families' financial difficulties.

Education was seen as a particularly important service, especially for the immigrant population. Interviewees said that both adults and children in immigrant families needed more education. As stated previously, adults with a lack of education often have difficulty finding adequate employment. Children are also affected by low education levels in their parents, in part, because they are unable to help them with their homework. Language and cultural barriers also keep immigrant parents from becoming involved in their children's education. Several interviewees noted elevated high school dropout rates among immigrant students. These same issues, as well as high cost, impede many immigrants – as well as non-immigrants – from pursuing higher education. Interviewees discussed the role education plays in family relationships, and parenting issues, both for immigrants and non-immigrants. They also discussed the need to improve the financial assistance available for services, as well as the access to core services like child care or health insurance.

"The shift in demographics with new immigrants coming in, I think, will add a complication – a challenge to communities that are already resource-stressed. So that there needs to be some understanding and education and collaborative work around diversity in all its components."

- Educational Provider

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

Housing

- Families need access to more affordable housing and more Section 8 housing in the region.
- Immigrant families face unique barriers, including poor understanding of the legal requirements of rental agreements and of the U.S. housing system in general. Immigrants also have a hard time finding affordable housing for large families.

Transportation

- Inadequate or non-existent public transportation in south central Minnesota cities makes it difficult for many people to access services and get to work.

PUTTING THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE

The themes that emerged in the south central Minnesota region cover a broad range of issues affecting families. The issues related to immigrants and refugees, the economy, health and the health care system, family relationships and parenting, and access to services reflect the national and political culture, as well as reveal issues unique to their communities. While the perspectives of 25 interviewed individuals fall short of representing the entire south central Minnesota region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and underlying culture of the region.

While the organization representatives noted that many issues are beyond families' control, they did stress that the communities in the region could work together to alleviate or even eliminate many of the issues. A number of interviewees cited the need to educate the entire community about local issues. For example, they felt it was important to educate all residents about issues facing low-income and immigrant populations to create better understanding and combat discrimination. Interviewees also stressed the importance of working together to tackle specific issues. Several business representatives who were interviewed expressed the need for communities to support local businesses and for residents to use their collective creativity to address employment and economic problems. As mentioned earlier, working together to improve access to services could also have a compounded affect in helping many families. In summary, while a number of challenges face families in south central Minnesota, the interviewees are hopeful that the communities could work together to help make improvements for all.

MORE INFORMATION

The environmental scan in south central Minnesota was conducted by Antonio Alba Meraz, Jan Gilman, and Kelly Kunkel, 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 south central Minnesota environmental scan report, contact Kelly Kunkel (kunke003@umn.edu; 1-888-241-3214).

Revised March 2012