

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

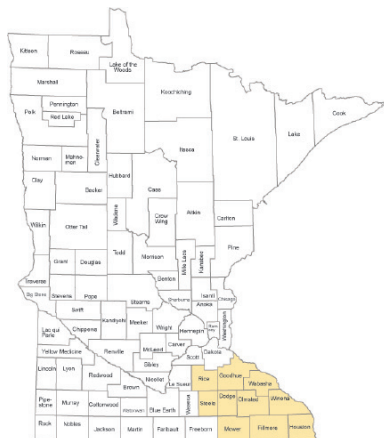
Southeast Regional Report

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 southeast Minnesota.

THE INTERVIEWS

Three members of the Extension team interviewed 27 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 southeast region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Rice, Goodhue, Wabasha, Steele, Dodge, Olmsted, Winona, Mower, Fillmore, and Houston.



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 southeast region, interviewees represented social service agencies, educational institutions, agricultural-based organizations, health organizations, housing agencies, senior services 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 work with immigrants and refugees, and several specifically target this 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 southeast 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 SOUTHEAST MINNESOTA?

Immigrant families face unique challenges. While many interviewees work directly with immigrant populations, even those who do not note the issues faced by immigrants in the region. Immigrant families in southeast Minnesota represent a wide variety of countries and cultures, including Latin America, the Caribbean, East Africa, southeast Asia, central Europe, and the Middle East. Interviewees talked about issues faced by cultural subgroups within these groups. Immigrant families face issues with adjustment, cultural barriers, and a disconnect between the culture of immigrants' countries of origin and the United States. Immigrant families experience the added pressures of adjusting to their new country's norms related to family dynamics, education, work, and living in the community.

Parenting, family structure and family relationships are issues for many families.

In relation to immigrant families, immigration itself has a huge impact on families. A geographic divide is created between emigrating family members and relatives remaining in their country of origin. Immigrant families in the United States often send money to support relatives back home, which can create financial stress. Interviewees also noted that physical separation immigrant families experience can also cause emotional stress. Youth who emigrate at a young age or are born in the U.S. to immigrant parents are often isolated from family members as well as their cultural heritage. These youth live between cultures, which can cause stress in family relationships and their own identity. Some interviewees noted situations where men immigrate to the United States alone and leave their families behind. This often results in isolation from their communities, which can lead to behavioral issues such as drug use and gambling. Women who emigrate with their families can also experience isolation as they struggle to find employment, learn English, and access needed services.

“Parents sticking to their cultural beliefs and children being raised between two cultures – that’s a big one. They struggle with their kids because they want to have slumber parties, they want to go to sleepovers, and they want to go out with friends. It’s very hard to be between two cultures because you want to convince your parents of certain things, but they don’t believe in that.”

- Health Services Provider

Interviewees expressed concerns about parenting and parent-child relationships for both immigrant and non-immigrant families. Several noted a need for more formal parent-education classes and resources to assist parents. Several interviewees cited a need to improve parents’ ability to supervise and manage their children. Parents’ busy schedules, lack of control, and even carelessness contribute to inappropriate or irresponsible youth behavior and problems, like drug use and gang violence. Interviewees also discussed parent’s lack of supervision over their children’s use of media and technology. Several voiced concern that parents are not aware of what their children can (and do) access through the Internet, video games, television, and other media sources. They stressed that parents need to have more conversations with their children about this topic. Two interviewees talked about the “warped reality” that is created for families by unrealistic images and stories in the media. Interviewees discussed how media and technology can hinder relationship building and communication skills in families.

Immigrant families face unique cultural acclimation challenges with respect to parenting and family

relationships. Immigrant parents are challenged to find unique ways to teach cultural practices and values to their children. Interviewees noted issues that arise when a family comes from a culture where physical punishment is accepted; this can create legal issues for the family, and moral and ethical considerations for the service providers.

Issues affecting the women in families came up in several conversations. Immigrant families who come from traditionally male-dominated cultures have an increased risk for domestic violence and women’s isolation. This can create legal consequences for families and can also affect women’s mental health and ability to succeed in the U.S. Domestic violence, however, was not unique to the

immigrant population. Interviewees noted its effect on women’s health, housing, and the well-being of youth in families from every cultural background. They also cited the negative role media and technology can play on the perceptions of women and girls, which in turn affects relationships.

“One of the toughest for the Latinos is the machismo, which is still very much present ... Part of the problem is that [domestic violence] doesn’t get reported, because a lot of times the woman feels helpless – they have children, at least the husband is bringing an income, at least they have a home – so you know, tough luck. I’m gonna have to just tough it up a little bit, because I’m doing this for the good of my children.”

- Latino Services Provider

Education is an issue for many families. Immigrant families face unique barriers to youth excelling in and completing school. Many immigrant and refugee parents have low education levels and come from countries that undervalue education, which makes them less likely to be involved and supportive in their children's education. Interviewees attributed these problems to cultural barriers – the inability to speak English, for example – and to a lack of understanding of the U.S. educational system. Interviewees noted that many immigrant parents did not understand the importance of early childhood education, completing high school, or getting involved in their children's education. Cultural barriers also affect youth themselves. Insufficient language skills and support from their parents regarding their progress in school hinders their education. Interviewees described how many immigrant youth, especially Latinos, face uncertainty about their future, which can lead them to drop out of high school or fail grades (requiring them to stay in high school beyond the traditional four years). Similar concerns about lack of parental involvement in non-immigrant students' education were also expressed. Alternatively, interviewees cited problems created by parents who are too involved and controlling in their children's academic and extracurricular activities. The pressure to excel in school and participate in multiple extracurricular activities causes stress for students, and parental control can impede students' confidence in their ability to make decisions.

Families are impacted by the economy. Interviewees discussed job loss, the difficulty in finding jobs, as well as the quality of jobs available in the region. Many of the jobs that are available are low-paying and don't offer benefits. These issues are exacerbated for immigrant families. Immigrants and refugees face even more barriers to finding jobs and are more likely to have inadequate employment. Several interviewees voiced concern that some employers were exploiting workers by recruiting them from abroad and then providing them little support or services to help them succeed when they arrive in the community.

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

Health

- Substance abuse, gambling, and domestic violence were large concerns, especially for immigrant families.
- They noted that signs of stress, anxiety, and depression were found in several groups, including immigrants, youth, women, seniors, and veterans.
- Many families experience mental and emotional health obstacles in connection to the poor economy.
- Access to affordable health care was cited as an issue facing all types of families.

Aging

- When families are adjusting to the needs of aging family members it affects the dynamics of their family relationships.
- Older adults face both physical and mental health issues that stem from adjusting to growing older.
- Older adults who are members of the baby boom generation have unique needs and cultural attitudes that must be taken into account when designing services for this group.
- There is a need to improve respect for and understanding of older adults by other groups in the community.

Policy

- Interviewees said policy changes should focus on systemic and structural changes in the areas of immigration, work/family balance, and the environment.
- Changes in immigration law and other policies are critical to helping the community meet challenges posed by the immigrant population.

INTEGRATING AND STRENGTHENING THE REGION

The themes that emerged in the southeast Minnesota region cover a broad range of issues affecting families. The issues related to immigrant families; parenting, family structure, and family relationships; education; the economy; health; aging; and policy 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 southeast Minnesota region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and underlying culture of the region.

Throughout the conversations, interviewees discussed the community's role in providing services, supporting people in need, and fostering relationships among different groups. They noted the importance of improving the availability and access to services, as well as the role of services as an avenue for providing more connection in the community. Interviewees generally praised their communities for providing support through charity, funding, and volunteering efforts. They noted that more work needs to be done to reduce physical barriers in communities, such as ensuring that facilities used for key services are located near users, improving the public transportation systems, and improving the number and variety of jobs in the region so families would not need to commute such long distances to work.

Interviewees emphasized the need to strengthen relationships within the community as a whole. Several were concerned about discrimination toward immigrants and felt a need to educate the community about these groups. Interviewees also discussed the role of elders could play in the community; they cited the need for more respect for and understanding of this group. Above all, interviewees noted the importance of fostering respect among individuals and groups in the community. In summary, interviewees emphasized that by working together to improve services, access to services, and mutual respect within the community, they would be able to help combat the issues facing families in the region.

“How do we respond as a region instead of as individual communities... I think that's a whole new way of thinking. We've never thought about can we share street sweepers [or] fire departments?”

- Local Government Representative

MORE INFORMATION

The environmental scan in southeast Minnesota was conducted by Kay Lovett, Kathleen Olson, and Phyllis Onstad, Extension Educators with the University of Minnesota. University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development staff members – Ali Shurilla, Mary Marczak, 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 southeast Minnesota environmental scan report, contact Kay Lovett (klovett@umn.edu; 1-888-241-4536).

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