

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

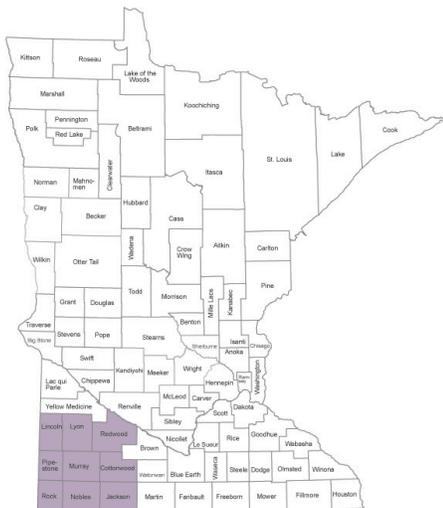
Southwest Regional Report

BACKGROUND

In 2010, the Extension Center for Family Development at 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 southwest Minnesota.

THE INTERVIEWS

Three members of the Extension team interviewed 24 representatives from diverse organizations in the region about issues they see facing the families they serve. For the purposes of this environmental scan, the southwest region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Lincoln, Lyon, Redwood, Pipestone, Murray, Cottonwood, Rock, Nobles, and Jackson.



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 southwest region, interviewees represented human services organizations, educational institutions, faith-based organizations, housing agencies, government 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. Two organizations focused specifically on serving rural and farm 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 southwest 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 SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA?

The nature of families' structure and values are changing. Interviewees voiced concern about the movement away from a traditional family structure. They noted an increase in divorced, single, and stepparent families. Many described situations where extended family members, especially grandparents, are raising children. Some interviewees discussed these changes in the context of values (e.g., valuing a nuclear household), rather than discussing issues that arise when families move away from a more traditional family structure.

Interviewees expressed concern that youth were not learning important skills from their families. Youth need more training on practical life skills, such as cooking and managing money. Immigrant families in particular face

unique challenges in this area. One interviewee noted that parents who had lived in refugee camps sometimes lacked important domestic skills they could teach their children. Interviewees also described situations where children's cultural competencies surpass their parents' and the problems that can ensue. For example, if the child is the only family member that knows how to speak English or how to drive, the family's power dynamics is out of balance which can strain family relationships.

Interviewees also expressed concern about the increased pace of families' lives. They noted that youth involvement in multiple activities causes stress in individual family members, as well as in the family as a whole. Many cited high stress levels in youth and adults stemming from busy schedules and reduced "family time." Interviewees described the importance of families taking adequate time to foster the relationships that are so critical to healthy families.

"[Families need to] spend more time together. A lot of kids come in here and say, 'I wish I could spend more time with my [mom or dad].'"

- Educational Service Provider

The economy has had a big impact on families' lives. Interviewees discussed the effect of job loss and insufficient income on families. They noted that while there are still many jobs available in the region, many have low pay which requires family members to hold multiple jobs to make ends meet. Even with the additional income from working multiple jobs, many families still face significant financial burdens that affect their health and ability to fulfill basic needs like housing, food, and clothing. Many interviewees noted that housing availability, adequacy, and affordability compounded the financial challenges families face. Interviewees also described the stress, depression, and anxiety many families experience due to the economy and the strain economy and health issues can put on family relationships.

"[There is] a lot more stress — stress in their relationships too. Husbands and wives trying to make ends meet; trying to figure out the pressure of trying to get a job when there aren't a lot of jobs out there to get."

- Social Services Provider

Interviewees discussed families' increased need for social services, such as health care assistance, housing assistance, child care assistance, loan assistance, and nutritional resources (e.g., food shelves, community dinners, etc.). Many families have been accessing food shelves, thrift stores, and subsidized services for the first time due to income or job loss. Interviewees noted that the aging population also faced an increased need for services, especially appropriate and affordable housing and health care services. Some were concerned about the increasing need for services, given the funding cuts many program have experienced. They were also concerned that policies and regulations sometimes create unnecessary barriers to families accessing needed services and organizations in providing needed services to families.

Health and the health care system are issues for many families in the region.

Interviewees were concerned about families' current health-related behaviors (e.g., children not walking to school) and said more needs to be done to promote healthy behavior. Interviewees stressed the role of families in fostering healthy life practices, such as getting regular exercise and eating nutritional foods, in children. Interviewees voiced concern about families' stress and mental health. As mentioned, families' stress was often attributed to economic issues. Difficulties with finances, finding employment, as well as busy scheduled stemming from working multiple jobs, all lead to stress, depression, and anxiety in families. This stress can in turn have a negative impact on family relationships. Interviewees discussed the connection between economic issues and high stress levels with increased substance abuse.

"The biggest problem in rural Minnesota is just the fractured nature of service providers themselves. It's a full-time job just to make sure that the service providers are there, they're providing the service, and then finding money for them."

- Service Provider

Interviewees were particularly concerned about the fragmentation and inadequacy of health services, especially related to mental health, substance

abuse prevention and rehabilitation services, services for aging adults, and services for low-income populations. They said that in the southwest region, health services are divided among different organizations and overseen by various policies. This often leaves gaps in offered services and creates inefficiencies in access and distribution of services. Interviewees also noted that inadequate health insurance coverage often aggravates the issue.

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

Technology

- Technology resources allow families to more efficiently access needed resources and information.
- Technology can be utilized to improve business practices, which allows organizations to better meet families' needs.
- There is often a disconnect between parents' and children's understanding of technology. Whereas parents are not aware of what their children can (and do) access through technology, children do not fully understand what it means to use technology responsibly and they don't understand the costs associated with technology.

Farm Families

- The stability and well-being of the southwest region is firmly tied to farm families and the agriculture sector.
- Issues of family, business, and the community are tightly interwoven for farm families. For example, a farm family's economic strain might affect their family relationship, which in turn affects their family business and the community that relies on that family business thriving.

BUILDING A STRONGER REGION

The themes that emerged in the southwest Minnesota region cover a broad range of issues affecting families. The issues related to families' changing structure and values, the economy, health and health care system, technology, and farm families reflect the national and political culture, as well as reveal issues unique to their communities. While 24 interviews fall short of representing the entire southwest Minnesota region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and underlying culture of the region.

Interviewees described the supportive and welcoming nature of the southwest region communities, particularly to those that are new in the community. For example, some interviewees discussed the communities' efforts to support immigrant and refugee families, particularly in the areas of health care and housing. They noted the importance of having cultural sensitivity and providing culturally-appropriate services to immigrants and refugees, and said that there is a strong sense of community support for providing services to aid adjustment.

"It's our responsibility to be an impact on the community. We see part of our mission here as helping the community to see — more fully — what our community looks like."

- Faith Leader

Many interviewees said that by individuals and organizations working together, the community will become stronger. For example, several discussed the movement of people into and out of the community and how they can work together to attract new residents, retain existing community members, and value returning community members (e.g., retirees, returning college graduates, etc.). Interviewees cited the high rate of volunteerism as evidence of strong community support and relationships that already exist in the region. Rather than attempting to address families' issues in a fragmented way, service providers and organizations can work with families to strengthen relationships,

which in turn can strengthen the community as a whole and help families better meet their needs and thrive in the community.

MORE INFORMATION

The environmental scan in southwest Minnesota was conducted by Shirley Anderson-Porisch, Colleen Gengler, and Mary Schroeder, 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 southwest Minnesota environmental scan report, contact Mary Schroeder (hedin007@umn.edu; 1-888-241-3261).

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