

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

West Central Regional Report

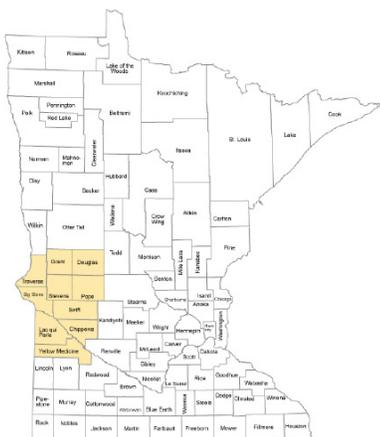
BACKGROUND

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 west central Minnesota.

THE INTERVIEWS

Two members of the Extension team interviewed 30 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 west central region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Traverse, Grant, Douglas, Stevens, Pope, Big Stone, Swift, Lac Qui Parle, Chippewa, and Yellow Medicine.

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 west central region, interviewees represented educational institutions, faith-based organizations, government agencies, services for the elderly, rural development agencies, agriculture-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. Two 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 west 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 climate and culture facing families at the time the interviews were conducted.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR ISSUES AFFECTING FAMILIES IN WEST CENTRAL MINNESOTA? **Families have been changing in terms of their structure, activities, and values.**

Many interviewees discussed families' changing lifestyles. They showed concern that families' lives were increasingly busy, which stemmed from a number of factors. Parents' work lives (with both parents working and/or working longer hours), youth activities, and cultural shifts all led to more fast-paced lives and less time for families to spend together. Technology, the media, and consumerism were also seen as contributors to this shift in family life. The effect of television, computers, and other forms of technology – such as cell phones and text messaging – on family relationships was commonly cited in discussions about changing families. These technological influences can facilitate communication, but can also hinder it by reducing face-to-face communication among family members and interpersonal family

time. Interviewees noted an increase in technologically-based entertainment encroaching on traditional family activities, such as family dinners. Technology also encourages a culture of instant gratification, which negatively affects the way families communicate and interact. The large amount of travel required in rural communities also reduces the amount of time family members spend together.

Interviewees also expressed concern about issues that can arise in the prevalence of nontraditional family forms, including single, divorced, step, and un-married parents. They were especially concerned about the impact of divorce on children and the effects of shared parental custody. Strain in parental relationships, including divorce and single parenthood, exacerbates issues related to family time and the pace of family life. Several interviewees also discussed the trend of grandparents raising kids. One interviewee offered this as an example of strong family relationships, while others noted that grandparents must take care of their grandchildren due to the parents' inability to do so.

“And I really think that’s one of our downfalls, it’s just too busy. You don’t have the family time, you don’t have the meals together...and I think the internet, way too much time on it, texting – you don’t have the conversations.”

Changes have been taking place in the community. Some interviewees discussed changes in community values, especially related to the role that churches play in the lives of families. Several mentioned drops in church attendance and the reduced influence of the church in the community. These comments were often made in the context of issues about family life and relationships, especially marital relationships. Many discussions focused on the shrinking size of communities, particularly the loss of young residents and businesses. While a few interviewees noted the return of some members to the community to raise their children, they also said many young adults leave rural communities to pursue opportunities in other areas, like employment or education. These discussions were often linked to the aging populations in many of these communities. Interviewees also discussed problems related to businesses in their communities. Several noted increases in business closings and the difficulties experienced by local businesses (i.e., competing with businesses in other towns or large chain stores). The rural nature of these communities in the west central region exacerbates the issues – there are large distances between towns and families' lives involve a great deal of travel. Interviewees also discussed the closing or consolidating of schools and the impact this has on family life and the community as a whole.

In particular, families have been affected by the economic issues facing the community and the national economic climate. Interviewees talked about the effect of the economy on the agricultural sector; individual farms and farmers have been hurt by the weak national economy. Several discussed specific challenges faced by small farmers, noting that smaller farms are being consolidated and larger farms are overwhelming smaller farms. Interviewees also noted that many small farms do not provide adequate income for families. One or more family members often need to find jobs, in addition to farming, to supplement income and/or obtain benefits. Like their counterparts in rural towns, young people raised on farms often leave home after high school to pursue education or jobs elsewhere. One interviewee from an agricultural organization also noted that the increased use of technology requires less labor on farms, which in turn results in loss of farm jobs.

Lack of jobs was another issue facing families in west central Minnesota. As noted earlier, interviewees talked about the need for people to find employment outside their communities due to a lack of jobs. Naturally, this contributes to the loss of population and business in these communities. Families often move for work, but even when they continue to live in one community and work in another, they are more likely to shop and spend time outside of their home community. Older workers also delay retirement to

“A business can’t even survive. Every time you do something, you’re driving away from town, because you go to your kid’s ball games or you go to parent teacher conferences...Our needs are covered usually on the way home from work, that’s why there’s not grocery stores in [small towns].”

maintain the income or benefits provided by their jobs. Several interviewees mentioned older farmers renting their land to earn additional income. Unemployment was not only an issue in itself, but contributed to other issues in the region. Interviewees from higher education organizations said a growing number of adults who had lost their jobs are returning to school, increasing the demand for those services. Likewise, unemployment boosted the need for social services.

Interviewees also discussed the interaction between the economy and family lifestyles. They noted poor financial management, debt, and credit issues. Families are unable to maintain their lifestyles in difficult economic times, leading to higher debt and increased financial stress on families. These financial management issues were also attributed to families’ changing lifestyles in general and a cultural

shift. As noted, families spend more time engaged in activities like watching television, using the computer, and playing video games, which require high-cost equipment and use large amounts of energy. Technological advances also create frequently updated products that promote frequent additional purchases.

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

Aging

- The aging population in the region requires the community to respond to a wide range of needs, including health care and social opportunities.
- Aging adults face unique economic issues, including retirement decisions, maintaining their standard of living, and financial security after retirement.
- Aging farmers affect the agricultural sector and community as a whole.

Education

- Higher education institutions see increased enrollment by dislocated workers.
- Technology is playing a larger role in education.
- Schools are closely tied to the community. They are a source of community pride and are an economic and cultural indicator of the community’s well-being.
- Several institutions invest in improving education for the American Indian community in the region. This includes offering education on American Indian history and culture, as well as making efforts to ensure success for American Indians students.

Health and Health Care

- Families in west central Minnesota face a variety of health issues, including unhealthy eating habits, lack of nutritional foods, substance abuse, high stress, and mental health issues.
- Many families face barriers in accessing health care. The high cost of health insurance for both individuals and businesses was a large factor in these barriers.

INTEGRATING AND STRENGTHENING THE REGION

The themes that emerged in the west central Minnesota interviews represent a wide range of issues affecting families in changing rural communities. Whether it was an issue faced by individual families (i.e., moving out of the community for greater opportunities) or a community-wide issue like adjusting to the new economic conditions, they represent the short- and long-term trends affecting the future of these communities. While many of these trends pose challenges, the conversations with our interviewees demonstrate that individuals in community-based organizations are invested in the well-being of the communities' families. They are committed to helping them meet these challenges and grow.

While the perspectives of 30 interviewed individuals fall short of representing the entire west central Minnesota region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and underlying culture of the region. The discussions that took place during this environmental scan show pride in the community and concern for trends that threaten family and community well-being. The interviews offer insights into the underlying trends that strain families and the community as a whole as well as the resilience and dedication by families and organizations to stay strong during this time of change.

MORE INFORMATION

The environmental scan in west central Minnesota was conducted by Connie Burns and Sara Croymans, 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 west central Minnesota environmental scan report, contact Sara Croymans (croym001@umn.edu; 1-888-241-4532).

Revised March 2012