

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

West Regional Report

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 west Minnesota.

THE INTERVIEWS

Two members of the Extension team interviewed 27 representatives from diverse organizations in the region about issues they see facing the families they serve. For the purposes of this environmental scan, the west region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Norman, Mahanomen, Clay, Becker, Wilkin, and Otter Tail.



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 region, interviewees represented social services agencies, educational institutions, employment agencies, community action organizations, youth service agencies, health organizations, and senior services organizations. The organizations interviewed served all types of families, including families with young and/or school-aged children, college students, and/or older adults.

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 WEST MINNESOTA?

Economic and financial issues are affecting families in the region. Many interviewees focused on issues related to long-term poverty, low-income populations, and the “working poor.” Employment was one of the main ways this issue impacted families, often in the form of unemployment and underemployment. Interviewees said families not only have difficulty finding employment or have lost jobs entirely, but many face reduced hours, reduced benefits, or the need to work multiple jobs. They emphasized the plight of the working poor: many families are working but have income and benefits that are insufficient in supporting themselves and/or their families. Interviewees also discussed additional factors in employment, including workers’ rights and education. Lack of education was cited as a barrier not only to finding a job, but to earning a sufficient income. One interviewee from a social services agency noted that even with a high school diploma or GED, some individuals may earn less than \$10,000 per year. Several interviewees commented on the large gap between high- and low-income families and the invisibility of poverty in the community.

Families have additional service needs due to their financial situation. Interviewees cited child care, housing, nutrition, and health care as some of the main needs for low-income families. Child care, in particular, is directly related to employment. Interviewees noted that most jobs and some public assistance programs require families to have child care, however, child care is not always available due to the transportation and availability. Housing is another need; interviewees discussed families' difficulty in finding affordable housing, the need for safe housing, and the high levels of homelessness in the region. For the aging population, access to appropriate housing in particular was cited as a major need. Some interviewees commented on barriers related to policy design, noting that due to the design of certain public assistance programs, families "can't ever get ahead."

Interviewees discussed access to health care services in relation to financial concerns and employment. Health insurance is frequently tied to employment and many families face barriers accessing health insurance when hit with unemployment or underemployment. Interviewees noted that the lack of insurance and the high cost of care result in many families not seeking the care they need. Several noted the negative impact this can have on children. Some cited mental health and dental care as special areas of concern in the region. Interviewees noted the effect of health and health care access on the ability to find a job. As one person pointed out, individuals who lack dental care or the resources for interview clothing are at a disadvantage in finding work. Financial strain also impacts health in families' everyday lives, especially in nutrition and families' ability to access healthy foods. Interviewees noted the increased need for families to access food shelves. Finally, financial strain increases stress, which can affect families' relationships.

Family relationships face barriers. Interviewees discussed family issues related to parenting and relationships between parents and their children. They noted that stress due to economic instability can lead to domestic violence, child abuse, and substance abuse in both parents and youth. Interviewees discussed the impact of busy schedules of both parents and youth. When parents work multiple jobs, they have less time to spend with their families, which only adds stress to the parent-child relationships.

"I have been very aware of the silence of poverty in this community... When you see homelessness and families and children, it puts a whole new face on poverty and it puts a face on homelessness that you can't forget. And it's deeper and its more real than I think this community understands. And I don't think that it's intentional that they're not seeing it. I think it's just very hidden."

- Social Services Provider

"I think parents really struggle with wanting to meet all the needs that their kids have... They're trying to meet kids' needs in ways that aren't really meeting them – they're buying them the stuff as opposed to giving them the attention and the care that they need. And so we have young people sneaking out the window, running away from home, getting involved in drugs and alcohol because they're connecting with young people that are engaged in those behaviors. And they feel like they need to get into them as well so that they can fit somewhere 'cause they're not fitting in the family."

- Youth Services Provider

Several who work with the youth discussed the effects of underdeveloped family relationships on youth. One youth service provider described situations where parents provided their children with materials goods rather than fostering interpersonal relationships. An educational service provider discussed youth who come to school counselors with personal issues because they don't feel comfortable or aren't able to talk to their parents. Service providers noted that ignoring the importance of the parent-child relationship not only affects children's mental health and behavior; it also leads to more serious problems, such as youth homelessness (i.e., runaways) and criminal activity. Interviewees discussed the need for improved conflict resolution skills in families and cited the negative effects of the media on conflict resolution.

In addition to the major issues outlined above, interviewees discussed this additional theme:

Transportation

- Lack of transportation is a major barrier to accessing child care and other services. It affects families with children as well as older adults.
- Transportation is a major issue for this region because of the rural nature of the communities.
- Transportation particularly affects the aging population. It can lead to isolation and is a barrier to accessing needed services like health care.

WORKING TOGETHER TO BUILD A STRONGER REGION

The themes that emerged in the west Minnesota region cover a broad range of issues affecting families. The issues related to economic and financial issues, family relationships, and transportation reflect the national and political culture, as well as reveal issues unique to their communities. While 27 interviews fall short of representing the entire west Minnesota region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and underlying culture of the region.

Despite the many barriers families face, interviewees noted several existing and potential assets in the community to address the needs of families. They emphasized families using the community as a resource to address their needs. Several discussed creating collaborations among organizations and using organizational networks to identify services, provide services, and avoid duplication of services offered to families. Overall, they discussed the importance of connecting families to the existing community resources. One interviewee discussed a county-wide effort to hold a “fair” to allow families access to a variety of needed services at one time and location.

Interviewees also highlighted the need for a shift in community perception and approaches to address families’ needs. They expressed concern for the perception and treatment of low-income and immigrant families and the influence of the media on the perception of people outside “their group.”

Many voiced concerns about fractured communities – the different communities experience gaps in culture, income, and/or political ideology which often leads to lack of personal relationships between the groups. Interviewees stressed the need for a community-level approach. They suggested strengthening community efforts for social justice issues, especially for immigrants and minorities, and using a community-level approach to address poverty and other family needs. In general, they felt by building more relationships among community members, families would be better equipped to meet their needs and thrive in the community.

“Somehow we’ve skipped over the communities. You have to go to work and sit down and work with certain groups of people... they get to be your social friends and there’s nothing wrong with that. But, when you’re doing a lot of that it takes the time away from doing the same kind of thing with neighbors, and you don’t get to know them very well.”

MORE INFORMATION

The environmental scan in west Minnesota was conducted by Sara Van Offelen and Ellie McCann, 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 west Minnesota environmental scan report, contact Sara Van Offelen (vanof001@umn.edu; 218-236-2007).

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