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Assessing Community Needs and Concerns in Iron County

Meagan Johnston, Lendel Narine

Abstract

Utah State University Extension conducted a needs assessment to identify priority needs in Iron County. The needs assessment employed a three-phase approach involving interviews, surveys, and data analysis. Results revealed top priority issues, including youth mental health, preparing youth for successful careers, and employment opportunities. The findings will guide Extension programming in addressing community needs effectively.

Introduction

Utah State University (USU) Extension provides research-based programs and resources to improve the lives of individuals, families, and communities throughout Utah (USU Extension, 2024). For the Home and Community department within USU Extension to provide educational programming to improve the lives of Iron County residents, a needs assessment was conducted to determine the priority needs as determined by community members. A needs assessment helps prioritize community needs and allocate resources (Narine et al., 2021). USU Extension will use the data from this assessment - Iron County to (1) prioritize needs specific to Iron County as identified by residents, (2) advocate for funding, grants, and resources to meet those needs, and (3) direct USU Extension programming to meet and address priority issues. Prioritizing community needs helps ensure Extension programs are relevant and targeted (Narine et al., 2021).

Response

The application of a 3 phase needs assessment plan, as established by Witkin and Altschuld (1995), was used to determine priority needs. In the first phase, pre-assessment, data was gathered from interviews with community stakeholders. The effective implementation of a needs assessment amplifies a diverse set of voices within the organization or community, providing a vital link between the varied needs of people within the community (Altschuld & Watkins, 2014). These interviews aimed to gather data about the pressing issues facing Iron County residents and determine high-priority needs within the community.

During the second phase, assessment, a survey was conducted using the high-priority issues identified in Phase 1. The survey was distributed to community members through social media, local newspapers, community partners, and flyers, offering every resident the opportunity to contribute their perspective.

Survey participants answered questions regarding how much effort USU Extension should put into these issues. Participants also answered questions regarding what format they prefer to access USU Extension educational programs and receive USU Extension information. In the third phase, post-assessment, data were analyzed using non-parametric statistics to determine the top priority issues affecting Iron County residents.

Target Audience

Interviews were conducted with community stakeholders such as healthcare professionals, business owners, county and city officials, educators, non-profit organizations, and government agencies. Stakeholders represented a diverse array of individuals spanning different ages, cultures, and geographic regions in Iron County.

The data for the Qualtrics survey were collected from 151 ($n = 151$) residents of Iron County, with a majority (over 60%) residing in the Cedar City area. Among the participants, the majority were female (65%) and identified as white (93%). In terms of educational attainment, most respondents held a bachelor's degree (41%), followed by those with a master's degree (21%), and individuals who had completed some college but did not attain a degree (21%).

Results

Table 1 summarizes individuals' responses to the question, "How much effort do you think USU Extension should spend on these issues and topics?" Most respondents indicated that USU Extension should place *very high* effort on youth mental health (38%). In addition, many respondents thought Extension should place *high* efforts on preparing youth for successful careers (46%), youth leadership (44%), parenting skills (39%), housing affordability (32%), employment opportunities (44%), workforce development (42%), personal and family financial management (40%), and strengthening family relationships (35%).

Table 1

Perceptions towards the effort USU Extension should place on Issue Areas

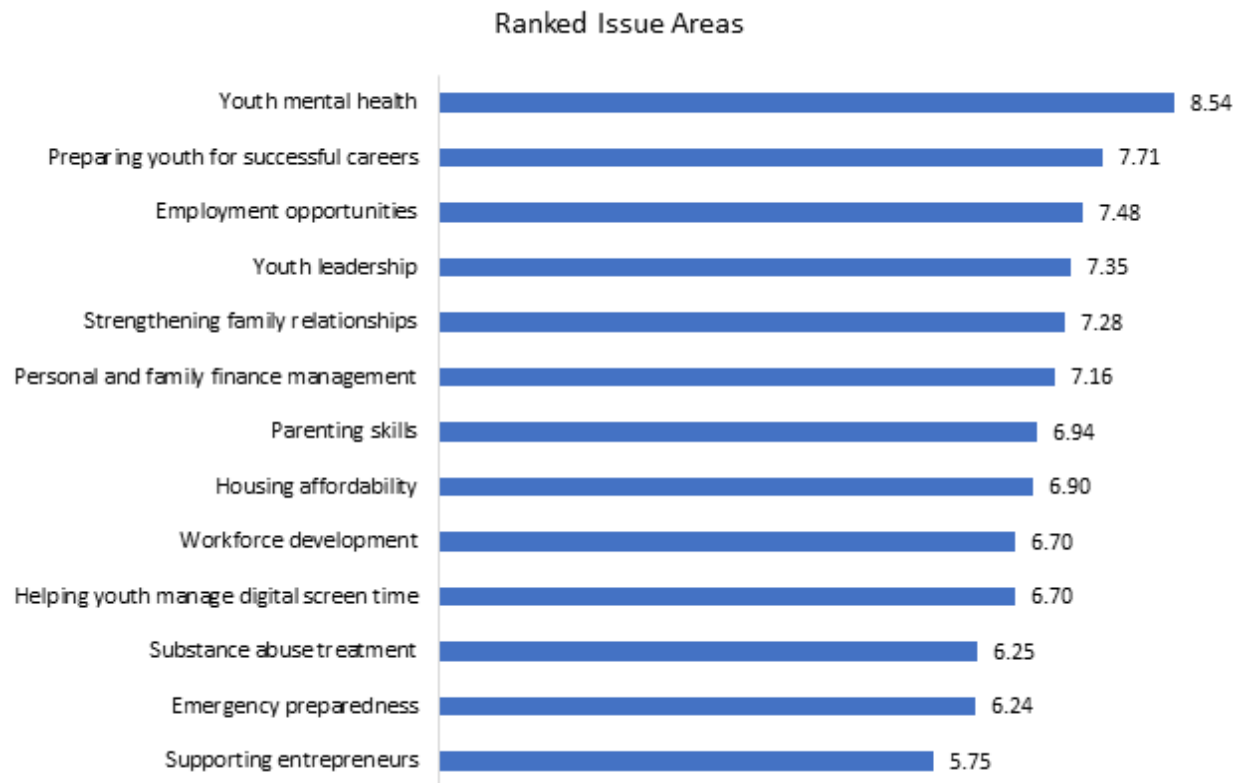
(Unranked) Issue Areas	% ($n = 158$)				
	<i>None</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Very High</i>
Preparing youth for successful careers	0	4	29	46	22
Youth mental health	2	3	22	35	38
Youth leadership	1	5	31	44	20
Helping youth manage digital screen time	2	8	39	32	20
Parenting skills	1	8	33	39	20
Supporting entrepreneurs	1	8	47	34	10
Housing affordability	4	7	31	32	26
Employment opportunities	1	6	26	44	24
Workforce development	1	10	28	42	19
Substance abuse treatment	3	8	39	32	18
Personal and family finance management	1	5	32	40	22
Strengthening family relationships	1	9	28	35	27
Emergency Preparedness	1	7	45	29	19

Figure 2 shows the issue areas ranked by priority. *The Wilcoxon test's Mean Ranks (MR)* were used to rank issues by priority level based on respondents' perceptions. The top five (5) issue

areas by priority were as follows: (1) youth mental health ($MR = 8.54$), (2) preparing youth for successful careers ($MR = 7.71$), (3) employment opportunities ($MR = 7.48$), (4) youth leadership ($MR = 7.35$), and (5) strengthening family relationships ($MR = 7.28$).

Figure 2

Issue Areas ranked by Priority for Extension in Iron County



Respondents were asked to indicate their preferences for attending Extension programs in Iron County. Most respondents (73%) were interested in attending educational programs offered by USU Extension. More than half the sample (59%) stated they prefer to attend a hybrid format that combines in-person and online classes. Lastly, most respondents (61%) prefer to receive information from USU Extension via email.

Public Value

The needs assessment offers a structured approach for examining county-wide issues, serving as a guide for directing educational programming initiatives. Following the assessment conducted by USU Extension - Iron County, it was determined that the most critical needs included supporting youth mental health, preparing youth for successful careers, and employment opportunities within the county. Survey respondents highlighted mental health as an area requiring a significant allocation of resources and attention by USU Extension. A concise summary of the assessment findings was disseminated among local organizations and stakeholders to inform and facilitate collaborative partnerships to address county-wide needs.

Leveraging the insights gained from this assessment, USU Extension plans to develop and implement targeted programs that address the identified high-priority issues. Moving forward, USU Extension - Iron County will concentrate its efforts within its home and community programs on youth mental health promotion, youth development initiatives, employment opportunities for citizens in our rural county, and strengthening family relationships.

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