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Family structure diversity: Views from rural community leaders and implications for youth engagement

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ABSTRACT

As family structures continue to evolve, understanding how communities perceive these changes and influences on youth engagement is important. This study examined community leaders' perceptions of rural youth engagement as influenced by family structural changes. Fifteen rural community leaders were interviewed, and data were analyzed thematically. Three major themes emerged: *familial influence on youth development*, *parents' beliefs on structurally diverse homes*, and *community as a resource for youth engagement*. Findings suggest that community leaders (a) perceived families as the primary influence in youth development (b) endorsed the view that non-nuclear families are broken, and (c) felt youth emerging from these family types are less motivated to engage in community life than their counterparts from nuclear family households. Community leaders predominantly assumed that family structure diversity was the strongest determinant of youth engagement within their community, without accounting for qualitative differences in resources provided to match youth interest.

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A large body of research has grown over the past few decades that investigates the impact of diverse family structures on youth outcomes. The consensus is that when negative impacts have been found for youth coming from non-nuclear family households, these findings are largely attributable to other correlates of family structure variation rather than being due to family structure per se.

Negative family structure stereotypes are also pervasive in the United States and elsewhere, and further serve to reinforce a deficit view of non-nuclear families and the youth who are raised in them (Bernardi & Boertien, 2017). Ostensibly, therapists, educators, and social service professionals receive training in how to work with and engage diverse audiences (Guion, Chattaraj, & Lytle, 2004; Towle et al., 2010). Research on the family structure stereotypes, however, indicates that negative views persist among both pre-service trainees (Christine Schultz & Leslie, 2004) and seasoned professionals.

The current project arose as part of an ongoing study of community leadership and participation in health-promoting activities in rural communities. During data collection, it

became increasingly clear that the issue of youth engagement in their communities was a leading concern for the participants in the study. Over the years, numerous efforts have been targeted at identifying factors that influence youth engagement. Factors such as high rates of poverty, living in resource-limited areas and complexities of familial relations have been identified as contributing to youth disengagement (Brown, Manning, & Stykes, 2015; Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2012; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015), and are also correlates of some non-nuclear family structures (Hadfield, Amos, Ungar, Gosselin, & Ganong, 2018). Youth engagement is used here to refer to the participation of young people (ages 16 to 24 years) in responsible activities that impact themselves and others. These activities, which include family, school, training, or work participation, are necessary for progression into adulthood and involvement in community life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Disengagement is often framed as an individual problem and consequently results in a loss of focus on the structures, processes, or settings in which young people interact and spend time (Burns, Collin, Blanchard, De-Freitas, & Lloyd, 2008). These lost opportunities, coupled with anticipated youth population growth, have reignited research interests in identifying pathways and mitigating factors that have contributed to youth increased disengagement.

Pathways that tend toward disengagement among youth are not only constantly evolving but context-specific as well. McMillan, McIsaac, and Janssen (2016) found that youth participation in sporting activities was associated with the type of family structure these youths emerged from, with youth from non-nuclear families being less likely than those from nuclear families to participate in sporting activities; and this effect was mediated by socioeconomic status (McMillan et al., 2016). It would appear that while the role of family is recognized in youth health and development, changes to family structure can have negative effects on youth community participation outcomes. Thus, as more diverse forms of families emerge, there is a need to understand what characteristics of the family are pertinent to youth development and engagement, and how these characteristics can change with the emergence of varying family structures.

Family structural changes

Historically, several factors including rural-urban migration, the great recession, lower fertility rates, marrying at older ages and influx of women into professional employment have contributed to the emergence of new and more structurally diverse and complex family types such as step-parent, single-parent, cohabiting, blended, same-sex, and “living apart together” families (Cherlin, Cumberworth, Morgan, & Wimer, 2013; Morin, 2011; OECD, 2011b). These family structures that deviate from “traditional” structures, involving a marriage between the biological parents of a child, have generally been defined as non-intact families (Bernardi & Boertien, 2017). About half the children in America are born into these family structures (Livingston, 2014), and this trend is likely to remain stable or increase.

While the phenomenon of continued changes to family structures is not new, still, ramifications of these changes have continued to evolve, especially as more complex family structures, like multiple stepfamilies, emerge (Brown et al., 2015). Childhood experiences of changes in family structure and function are dynamic, and the stage of life in which a child experiences these changes can be a determinant of developmental and community involvement outcomes (Cavanagh, 2008; Yabiku, Axinn, & Thornton, 1999). Similarly, underlying factors and disruptions that may lead to changes in family structure can undermine parent-youth

relationships (Cavanagh, 2008). While some schools of thought emphasize the significance of family functioning as a better predictor of youth development outcomes over structure (Stewart, 2006), others suggest that family structure is as influential as its functioning (Brown et al., 2015). According to Mackay (2005), as families transition through various structures, youth within these families begin to feel more distant from opportunities to build meaningful and lasting relationships within their families. These changes have implications for family members and communities. For instance, research shows that children from single-parent families and blended families experience higher disconnection and increased poverty than their counterparts from intact families (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015; Hetherington, 2003). In most cases, disconnectedness extends into teenage and adult years (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2012; Burns et al., 2008; Freistadt & Strohschein, 2013; Mackay, 2005), putting these young people at higher risk of being less involved in education, training, employment, or community life in general compared to their counterparts from intact families.

Family structural changes and youth engagement in a rural context

In response to these changes in family structure, there is growing interest to understand the impact these trends may have on structured human interrelationships in a society (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Recent research has focused on the long-term implications of family instability (deterioration of family ties, financial stresses, emotional distress, and poor parental attitudes) on social connectedness (Cherlin et al., 2013; Mooney, Oliver, & Smith, 2009). Family structures are changing in rural communities at a rate that has since stabilized in metropolitan areas, with key differences being that youth in rural communities often marry and/or bear children at younger ages than their urban counterparts; factors which exacerbate poverty (O'Hare, 2009). With the emergence of more structurally diverse families, there is a need to discern the implications for youth, particularly those in rural resource-limited settings (Curtin, Ventura, & Martinez, 2014; OECD, 2011a).

Although research and interventions have focused on understanding and mitigating the growing trend of youth disengagement, little has been done to look at upstream factors (such as family structural changes) contributing to youth disconnectedness in rural communities. This paper reports on a secondary finding on the perceived effects of family structural changes on youth engagement. It specifically aims at reporting community leaders' perceptions of (a) family roles in youth engagement, (b) barriers to the inclusion of youth from non-intact families in community activities, (c) the extent to which changing family structures impact youth engagement, and (d) community-based interventions necessary to promote youth engagement.

Method

This study explored community leaders' perspectives on community leadership and youth engagement. Community members are experts in their communities who can provide useful insights into the challenges they face and their potential solutions. The researchers utilized an inductive process to qualitatively explore community leaders' thoughts on youth engagement in depth. Data were processed using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Conventional content analysis can be used to describe the content of the interviews (manifest content) and also to interpret the findings (latent

content) (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Patton, 2015). The advantage of conventional content analysis is that the manifest and latent content are analyzed without imposing preconceived theoretical perspectives (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This allows for a critical perspective to draw meaning from community leaders' views of family structure diversity and its perceived influences on engaging youth in their community.

Research site

The study was conducted in a rural county in northern Missouri as part of an ongoing study of community leadership and participation in health-promoting activities conducted at sites in South Africa and the Midwestern United States. Demographic characteristics of the county of interest to the present study are presented in Table 1. Its population is small, older, and racially homogenous (mostly white); it consists of a greater proportion of married individuals and fewer who are college educated; and its families have lower income than the surrounding state and nation (United States Census Bureau, 2017). The two main municipalities in the county have populations of 1,054 (Community A) and 318 (Community B) (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Resources within the county include two elementary, middle, and high schools (one of each in Communities A and B); a health department, courthouse, senior center, hog industry, a Dollar General store, indoor swimming, and outdoor pool (all in Community A); a park and walking trail (in Community B); and churches and restaurants.

Sampling and data collection

Following ethical approval from the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board, qualitative data were obtained by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 community leaders in the county, specifically from Communities A and B. To be included in the study, participants had to be 18 years or older and have resided in the community for

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the county, Missouri, and United States.

	County	Missouri	US
Total population	3,702	6,059,651	318,558,162
Median age (years)	43.9	38.3	37.7
Percent ages 15–24	12.3%	13.7%	13.8%
Race: White (alone), percent	97.1%	82.5%	73.3%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race), percent	1.3%	3.9%	17.3%
Educational attainment – population age 25+			
Less than high school	11.1%	10.8%	12.7%
High school or equivalent	47.5%	30.9%	27.3%
Some college or greater	41.4%	58.3%	59.9%
Employment, past 12 months – population age 16+			
Full-time, year-round	42.8%	42.8%	42.0%
Part-time or part-year	20.6%	23.8%	23.9%
Did not work	36.6%	33.3%	34.1%
Poverty status (individuals)			
Below poverty	14.6%	15.3%	15.1%
Below 185% poverty	37.3%	31.7%	30.9%
Family structure			
Married couples	82.3%	74.6%	73.2%
Female householder, no husband present	13.6%	18.6%	19.5%
Median household income	\$ 51,893	\$ 62,285	\$ 67,871

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012–2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

3 years or more. Participants were purposively selected for the broader study to provide perspectives on community leadership involvement and participation in health-promoting activities. Selection of participants was informed by their prior experience and knowledge working/interacting with youth. Participants included: library officer (1), school officials (3), pastors (2), entrepreneurs (2), insurance agent (1), Health Department Director (1), EMS Director (1), Commissioner (1), Senior Center Administrator (1), Sheriff (1) and Retired School Superintendent (1). Thirteen of the participants resided in the community for at least 15 years. All were currently gainfully employed, White, and native speakers of English (although two also spoke another language). All but one, a widow, were currently married. All were age 30 or older, and eleven were over 50 years of age. Participants were approximately equally distributed by gender (eight female, seven male) and educational attainment; five were high school graduates, three with some college, and the rest had college or graduate degrees.

Interview frame and process

Interview questions were formulated in a two-step process and were sensitive to participants' contextual settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The first stage involved the compilation of interview questions in line with the research problem, method, and the literature review. In step two, community members were involved in discussions of the interview material to ensure understanding of the interview instrument and cultural acceptance. Prior to interview commencement, participants were informed of the study goals, benefits, and potential risks associated with participation, and they gave their written consent. All interviews were conducted and recorded by one researcher at places mutually agreed upon with participants. The researcher asked open-ended questions to explore participants' perceptions and experiences around the research topic. Examples of follow-up questions used for youth engagement include: What do you think are some of the challenges young people face in this community? What are the challenges people face around dealing with young people in this community? What can be done to help them? Questioning continued until saturation was reached (i.e. interviews provided no new information on the topic of interest). Interviews were audio-taped and lasted between 25 and 45 min each (mean = 30 min).

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by an experienced transcriptionist, and the researchers used content analysis to analyze interview data. All authors compared five transcriptions to audio recording to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. Prior to coding, the authors read all interview transcripts together several times to familiarize themselves with the content of the data and search for patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Data analysis and thematic coding were carried out independently on five interview scripts by two authors. Notes were exchanged and compared, and emerging codes were agreed on and subsequently classified into themes (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013). One author then coded all other interviews using Nvivo 11 software. All data were coded under 13 broad themes some of which included the role of family, family

disengagement, community support, and changing family norms. Independently coded materials were compared to discover and make distinctions between and within themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Throughout the coding process, authors met regularly to discuss and/or modify emergent themes until further coding was no longer feasible (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Through this process, the authors analyzed community leaders' perceptions of their community and numerous themes focusing on family-centered factors contributing to youth disengagement emerged.

Results

Following data analysis, three main themes emerged from community leaders' views of how non-intact family structures contributed to youth disengagement. First, they expressed the view that *family is the primary influence on youth development*. They felt that *parents create difficulty for youth in structurally diverse homes*, at least in part because they endorsed a belief that structurally diverse families are broken. Finally, they envisioned *community solutions to engage youth*.

Family is the primary influence on youth development

Understanding the conceptualizations of family and their roles from the viewpoint of community leaders provides context-specific insights into community expectations. By exploring these perceptions, the researchers found that community leaders viewed the family as an institution that provides social support, role modeling and mentorship, and the first-line educator about community.

Family is the primary influence

Community leaders viewed families as providing a support structure necessary for well-rounded child and youth development. Their assertions alluded that experiences gained within the family served as a foothold for youth to develop behavioral skills necessary for transition to an engaged adulthood.

Whether you're talking health, behavior or anything, I think what is supported in the home takes first priority because they see that every day. We can give them the information, whether it's through the schools, whether it's through churches or anything, on a whole variety of issues but if everything at home nullifies that it's pretty hard for a young person to really get a handle on. (Claire – COPMO26)

Participants felt that the family was a social "powerhouse" fundamental to youth development. Participants emphasized that youth tend to imbibe values either taught or exemplified by their parents – whether positive or negative – and this could shape the extent to which youth would engage in community activities. Most participants viewed the family as the citadel of role modeling and mentorship. The following respondent described their own experiences, as well as her efforts to influence her own children:

So I guess your love of the community comes from where you grow up, how you, at a young age if your family's involved in things. I've always preached to my kids, "I don't care where you

live or what you do, if you're in the city or in the country, you are gonna be active in your community." (Ellen – COPMO22)

Other respondents felt that, within families, parents were responsible for instilling discipline and a sense of community that nurture participation in community activities.

A lot of us parents required our children to work, especially during the summer if they weren't involved in athletics then they took on responsibilities of mowing yards or just helping the neighbors or whatever it may be. My son mowed yards when he quit playing baseball. There's nothing wrong with a good push mower and a lot of exercise comes from it. It promotes health, and responsibility, too. (Ruth Ann – COPMO 24)

What these examples also demonstrate is how community leaders contrasted their own experiences with their perceptions of parental expectations regarding the youth they were trying to engage.

Negative youth choices are due to parental influences

Respondents felt that parents played an important role in youth's appreciation and development of self-reliance. Participants perceived youth who made poor decisions as being negatively influenced by their family values, parents' poor choices, role modeling, and leadership skills.

The group that are drinking a lot (*alcohol abuse*), the ones I see, it's kind of a family tradition. Whereas, the ones I see that don't really drink and carry on, are more active in church and school activities. (Victoria – COPMO23)

Other participants blamed parents for "spoiling" their children and not encouraging them to grow their personal agency by utilizing resources provided by the community. Emphasizing the need for family support in youth development, one participant said, "... kids are so technologically bound now that if it's (participating in community activities) not organized it's hard to expect them to get out if their parents don't encourage them" (Ellen – COPMO22). This suggests that youth that did not feel supported by their families are more inclined to disengage from activities that could have individual and societal health and well-being benefits. It further suggests, however, that there may be a disconnect between how youth engagement opportunities are operationalized and the ways in which youth have the time, interest, and capacity in doing them.

Parents create difficulty for youth in structurally diverse homes

Community leaders were concerned about youth disengagement within their community, and they felt that youth from non-intact families were particularly challenging to engage. Some specific challenges they were faced with emphasized a lack of support at the family level, conspicuous absence of parents from the home and conflicting messages from parents.

Lack of familial support

Keeping youth engaged within this community posed a challenge and participants largely felt that continuous changes in family structures were fundamental to this trend. Recognizing this as a barrier to youth engagement, one participant said, "it's not like

you have a mom and dad and your brothers and sisters all through life now. There's so many blended families now, which brings a whole new, problem to the table" (Kathryn – COPMO19). Several remarks were made concerning changing family structures and the consequent effects on youth's inability to form supportive cohesive relationships necessary for successful participation in community life.

If you're gonna get a higher education you need family support, it's just in so many cases we don't have that and it seems like children that grow up and see all of this and they see basically the hopelessness of the adults in relationships and, marriage, drugs, you name it, they just grow up with no hope, seem like a lot of them do. (Robert – COPMO21)

Loss of parental figures and inadequate role modeling

Many participants presumed the absence of parental figures such as mother, father, or both created a vacuum in providing adequate role modeling. As a result, they viewed youth as lacking the parental push necessary to drive youth participation in community engagement activities; a trend which respondents felt was due mainly to changing family structures.

[W]hen I was a kid, and I think that my leadership and wanting to take care of things in the community came from my father, and I think that he was probably my first role model because he was very active in the community ... but it seems like now we don't have any men that are very active. Men have just taken a backseat ... fewer and fewer men are taking (*community*) leadership roles. (Faith – COPMO25)

Even though several factors have contributed to the increased absence of parents from the home over the years, participants attributed declining youth engagement in their community to family structure diversity.

Conflicting messages from parents

Respondents suggested that changes to family structures disintegrated the synergistic communication process between families, schools, and the community. These conflicting messages from parents which contradicted community values, left youth – especially those from non-intact families – feeling confused and less likely to participate in any responsible community activities.

We do have a lot of people who are content to wait to be asked to participate, and then we have some parents who, might send their kids but they themselves, are not big supporters of it (*community engagement activities*). (John – COPMO33)

While many respondents emphasized the negative impact structural diversification in families has on youth outcomes, some participants accentuated the need to maintain a structure that fundamentally promotes positive youth development.

sometimes you have parents that are really good if they're divorced and work together and others. Then you've got Mom that's putting down the dad, they're saying this in front of the kids and, it's just sad what they (*kids*) go home to. (Kathryn – COPMO19)

Belief that structurally diverse families are broken

Participants felt that the transition to adulthood is more tumultuous for youth from non-intact families within their community. Much of this was explained by a fundamental *belief that structurally diverse families are broken*. Participants suggested that there were many negative effects related to instability in marital relationships. Respondents felt that youth's non-committal attitudes toward community activities were a result of the lack of commitment and failed promises broken families represented. They explained that youth that lacked familial support structures barely participated in activities, endured social stigma, had lopsided values, and engaged in self-destructive behavior.

The challenges, mostly of young people is broken families ... the biggest problem is broken families and, people that are married and remarried and so on, and whether we realize it or not as a society we're really hurting our youth by making [marriage and divorce] so flippant in the community. I know there's a lot of people that just live together and, if you just live with somebody and you don't commit to the relationship that means you're going jump ship someday without any strings attached, and so it's, fearful for children to be raised up in this kind of atmosphere. (Robert – COPMO21)

Although youth ability to commit to an activity is an attribute that can foster engagement, this participant assumes that living together with a significant other does not require commitment which, in turn, "causes" a lack of commitment in youth.

Logistics are complicated

Several participants described difficulties they had in engaging youth who came from structurally diverse families. Changes in living conditions made it more difficult for schools to keep track of child-parent living arrangements. One respondent described her observations, and this inconsistency negatively affected parent-school collaborative efforts.

I can't imagine what the percentage would be if you would look into a classroom of how many kids actually had two-parent families. I bet it would be very low, and that's so sad because, I see it from having the kids in class, like with preschool, but you just see, well, I'm with Mom this week, or I'm with Dad this week, and I just can't imagine. I know kids are resilient but that's hard on kids. (Kathryn – COPMO19)

Although diverse family structures can make it more difficult to engage parents because the logistics are more complicated, it is an assumption that youth have difficulty coping.

Broken families create stigma and bullying

Some respondents alluded to the propensity for youth from broken homes to be bullied by their peers. Youth who underwent this type of alienation were more at risk of taking out their frustrations by engaging in activities that were harmful to their overall social well-being.

Kids from the blended families and from broken homes ... get a lot of disrespect from the other kids around, especially in school. In the last couple of years, we've had a terrible situation with cell phones and cameras, the kids have lowered themselves to taking pictures of themselves, whether they be naked or whatever, and putting it out over the internet, and that's a bad problem for me. It's hard to combat. Then when you discuss this with their parents, their parents say "Oh, we can't do anything about that". (Barbra – COPMO30)

This event did not appear to pertain to family structure, although the community leader chose to portray it this way. It was difficult to know whether the respondent was blaming the kids whose pictures were taken, those who were taking the pictures, or both; nonetheless, blame was attributed to “blended families and broken homes.”

Engaging in destructive behavior

The issue of destructive behavior surfaced as a community concern and was connected to family deficit challenges. Destructive behaviors occurred when young people engaged in activities that were detrimental to their own health or were harmful to the community, such as alcoholism, substance abuse, and vandalism.

But, there again, the kids didn't have anything to do and there was nobody at home, maybe Mom and Dad were working or something. There wasn't somewhere for them to go and hang out, so they walked the streets or when there's nothing for the kids to do, that's when we get in trouble cause you get three or four of them together and they get silly ideas. (Ellen – COPMO22)

Because parental supervision was not available, youth engaged in behavior that was problematic for the community.

View that youth are less motivated

According to participants, the dwindling of core family values (i.e. the absence of social, emotional and psychological support systems for youth) had translated into a depreciation of youths' value systems. To this end, respondents felt that even when provided with community resources, youth lacked the intrinsic motivation to engage in activities.

[B]ut it seems like a lot of the younger people seem to be entertained rather than want to go out and do (*participate in community activities*). Rather, they would rather go to a concert than learn to play a musical instrument, for instance. (Faith – COPMO25)

Absent from this discussion was the possibility that there may be more current types of activities that would better engage youth.

Community solutions to engage youth

Whilst family breakdown remained a challenge to youth engagement within this community, leaders felt that building a support structure within the schools and the community, in general, could create a safety net that serves to boost youth self-esteem and self-agency.

[H]e's [*Future Farmers of America (FFA)*] a huge part of that community, has a good job, is economically successful, is very happy as a person, and a lot of that happened because of I think the leadership skills and people in the community, that said “Hey, we're not going give up on you. We know that you can go do something great here and we're going keep pushing you towards (*your goal*). (Mark -COPMO31)

Community members further emphasized on the benefits youth had gained from participating in community programs targeting youth, such as FFA and 4-H.

Well, the 4-H program is a wonderful thing. My daughter was in it from the time she was 8 till she graduated high school, and she learned valuable people skills, she learned how to get

along with other children because she was an only child. She learned how to voice her opinion at meetings and interact sociably with everybody else, and she learned good traits as far as public speaking and leadership things ... (Dorcas – COPMO29)

Along these lines, participants felt that in addition to engaging youth in sporting activities more effort should be made to encourage youth to participate in volunteer activities.

[A]nd having kids work a lot of hours of community service so that they understand there are needs within the community and that as a member of that community you should always want to better where you live. (Mark – COPMO31)

In line with this perspective, therefore, some participants felt that youth within this community had sufficient opportunities and resources to keep them engaged, “I feel like there are more opportunities available to us as a community, to our youth to be involved in health programs and activities” (Mark – COPMO31). Other respondents, however, felt it was essential for the community to actively educate parents on the need for youth to participate in community activities and provide information on resources available in order for youth to engage with their local community.

What we (*need*) is that community leader that would be able to go up and say “Mom and Dad, can I sit down and talk to you? You know, your son, there’s something here for him. Would you be interested.” That’s how my son got into Boy Scouts ... and he might center on that, educate himself in it, and make a career out of it. (Robert – COPMO21)

Irrespective of family structure and the resulting instability, the general opinion of participants suggested that youth needed support – parental, school and community – in order to see value in and commit to community participation.

Discussion

This study was born from the recognition of the importance of youth and families as integral parts of community life and by extension, the global economy. Continued disengagement of youth and disconnectedness of family has long-lasting implications related to depreciation in sustainable leadership and health outcomes and overall crippling of the economy (Brown, 2010). This study found that community leaders recognized that parents and families played a key role in helping youth develop traits fundamental to continued engagement such as social skills, leadership traits, community service, etc. This characterization of family roles by community leaders corroborates negative family structure stereotypes and a deficit perspective of non-nuclear families that was uncovered in the literature (Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette, & Gosselin, 2016). Although research has continually shown that children and youth alike emulate traits that their parents’ exhibit and these traits can influence transition to adulthood (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2012; Hetherington, 2003) and involvement in community life, parental influences alone may not sufficiently delineate engagement outcomes for youth from structurally diverse backgrounds without accounting for the qualitative differences within communities.

Further insights from the study suggest that even though rural communities recognize that youth from structurally diverse homes face situation-specific challenges that make it more difficult to engage in activities (such as increased poverty and limited resources); they feel ill-equipped to effectively cater to the core needs of these youth. Elsewhere, we

noted a misalignment between community leaders' and youth's perceptions of community resources. This lack of congruence in perceptions on shared resources impact how youth engage with adults (Majee & Anakwe, 2019). Findings from this study resonate with the familiar adultism orientation to youth, in that younger generations were often maligned as "carriers of risk" instead of "contributors" in their communities (Flanagan, Syvertsen, & Wray-Lake, 2007). Even though developmental psychologists, especially those working with youth civic engagement, argue for a Positive Youth Development approach to youth that sees them as assets to their community, rather than deficits to be fixed (Flanagan et al., 2007; Settersten & Ray, 2010), community leaders' endorsement of this approach was lacking. Consequently, managing disengagement among youth in this community is challenged by weak social support structures targeted toward youth involvement. It is important to note that what community leaders perceived as a problem of family structure diversity may be more attuned to family function. Changes to family structure, in and of itself, may not account for positive or negative youth outcomes without a thorough examination of family function, complexity, and processes (Brown et al., 2015). What was articulated by community leaders as a criticism of family structure diversity appears to be the presenting issue that belies the larger societal struggles that incorporate family structure changes but also changes in gender norms and economic expectations.

Implications for practice

The pervasive theme of this study is that community leaders perceived that youth whose parents were not continuously married were disengaged from their communities. Perhaps a better issue to examine is whether communities are the entities that are disengaged with youth. When programs are no longer effective at engaging a segment of the population, it is easy to attribute that difficulty to members of that target population rather than a self-assessment of current practices and opportunity structures. What is needed are ways of examining the fit between program activities, engagement strategies, and the interests and availability of the target audience. Does this require changes in engagement methods? Is the content relevant to young people? Young people whose families are economically disadvantaged often face barriers to engagement that are based on intangible assets such as time, skills, and an opportunity structure that facilitates engagement (Wright, 2015).

Youth who feel isolated are more likely to confide in their friends and peer groups, and these social connections have been found to be a mitigating factor against loneliness among youth (Korkiamäki, 2014). Research suggests, however, that those living in areas without many resources often felt their communities did not help them to connect with others; a finding attributed to an economic decline in the community and lack of funding to sustain programs (Boyd, Martin, & Edin, 2016). Youth from economically disadvantaged families who live in rural areas may also be reluctant to connect with others because they perceive their circumstances are unique; as a result, they are frequently isolated from the larger community and the resources it can provide them (Majee, Anakwe, & Jooste, 2020).

Inclusion strategies that normalize diversity, including family structure diversity, can help young people feel safe to express their concerns. Thus, professionals in organizations serving youth such as school, churches, community libraries, and recreational centers,

should form community youth groups that can serve as a safety net for youth who feel “left behind” in the family–community transition. These community groups could include opportunities for peer-mentoring among the youth. Parent forums that provide a safe avenue for parents to co-mingle and exchange ideas on managing family ties and relationships (Mooney et al., 2009) can be promoted alongside youth groups. Though youth outcomes vary by family structure, protective factors such as building trusting relationships, peer role modeling, and healthy practices can buffer the effects of these structural changes (Oman et al., 2007) and foster supportive and cohesive relationships (Benoit-Bryan, 2013).

Our study reports on perceptions of community leaders, as such further research into youths’ own perception about factors that contribute to their disengagement should be explored. Youth from diverse families should be involved in research to better understand the pathways that lead to disengagement among them, whether it is actually based on family structure or relationships within the family or an interplay of both. Another weakness is that participants in this study were not recruited to specifically ask about youth family structures – this emerged as a secondary finding. The purposeful sample consisted of community members in leadership position such as church leaders, commissioners, and school administrators since the goal of the broader study was to explore community leaders’ perspectives on community leadership and youth engagement. Future research should sample both community leaders and youth from diverse family structures. Also, because this is an exploratory study, findings are limited in their generalizability.

Conclusion

“Civic engagement is continually being (re)invented by new cohorts of young people.” (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Wayne Osgood, & Briddell, 2011). The results of this study suggest that the community members in this rural sample did not perceive youth in their communities as active participants in civic engagement activities. Although they largely attributed this to changes in predominant family structures, it is not clear whether the engagement opportunities they provided were aligned to the interests of the young people in their communities. Developing collaborative and interdependent relationships between families and communities, schools and churches will strengthen the supportive structures necessary to mediate the potential effects of changing family structures on youth outcomes.

Disclosure statement

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