Facilitating civic engagement among rural youth: A role for social workers.

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10   Facilitating Civic Engagement Among Rural Youth: *A Role for Social Workers*

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Civic engagement commonly refers to individuals' involvement and connections with their local communities and with the broader society at large. It is defined by community-focused helping behaviors, organized prosocial activities, involvement in the social or political sphere, and related knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs (McBride, 2008; McBride, Sherraden, & Pritzker, 2006; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010). In terms of knowledge and skills, civic engagement may entail familiarity with local organizations or the ability to identify local community and political leaders. Attitudes indicative of civic engagement might include efficacy, the belief that one can make a difference through his or her actions, or some degree of trust in local organizations or officials. Behaviors related to community involvement and public benefit are wide-ranging, including providing informal help to neighbors, volunteering, donating funds or goods to charitable organizations, communicating with public officials, and voting in local, state, or national elections.

Research has focused on the civic activities and civic development of youth, in part, because identity development, including the development of a civic identity, is a key task of early and middle adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Sherrod, 2006; Youniss & Yates, 1997). How youth connect with their communities can have both long-lasting effects on how they understand and act relative to the broader society (Flanagan, 2003; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997) and short-term effects,

including reductions in problem behavior and illicit substance use (Duncan, Duncan, Strycker, & Chaumeton, 2002; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003).

However, those who are socially or economically disadvantaged and those who lack time, civic resources, such as civic skills or access to civic opportunities, or money are particularly unlikely to participate in civic affairs (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), leaving them outside the sphere of civic influence and potentially exacerbating the experiences and effects of disadvantage. Research has consistently found strong associations between adolescent volunteering and civic activity and the economic status of the neighborhoods in which they reside (Verba et al., 1995). Adolescents from higher socioeconomic status families tend to be more involved civically (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998), including volunteering and club membership. Low levels of civic participation among disadvantaged populations may result in the "unequal engagement of minority groups with misunderstood political needs, or worse, silenced political voices" (Schur, Shields, & Schriner, 2003, p. 120). Unequal civic participation raises significant social justice concerns about whose voices, interests, and needs are heard by people in power (Levinson, 2010).

Research also suggests that where children and adolescents live may substantially affect how they connect with and become involved with their communities (Ginsberg, 2005; Lay, 2003, 2006). Local civic and community institutions exist within a specific geographic and demographic context, and these contextual elements may serve to either facilitate or inhibit youth involvement (Levinson, 2010). Although civic activity can be national or even global in nature, a large percentage of youth civic activity takes place close to home, through local community organizations. Constraints that some rural communities face, such as high unemployment, low educational attainment, poverty, and the longer distance and time needed to travel to connect with community organizations or institutions, may limit civic engagement among youth in rural areas. For rural youth, however, the character of social relations and social interactions may make rural areas the "best environments for political [and presumably civic] learning" (Lay, 2006), in ways that differ substantially from urban and suburban areas (Elder & Conger, 2000), shaping the civic and political identity of rural youth in a distinctly rural manner.

Social workers have an important role to play in helping facilitate rural youth civic development. Social workers are uniquely situated to serve as a bridge between rural youth and civic opportunities, due to their front-line experience and broad awareness of community resources. The following section outlines why developing civic engagement is integral to the social work profession. Literature is

then presented on the current state of knowledge about rural youth civic engagement, including facilitators and challenges to engagement. A brief case study of rural youth engagement and examination of the civic behaviors of youth in a rural Appalachian town with little agricultural activity are also discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of program models that social workers can implement to facilitate civic development among youth in rural areas.

Social Work and Civic Engagement

"A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on well-being in a social context and the well-being of society" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1999).

With regard to young people, social workers often focus on their care, whereas it is much less common to focus on empowering youth to connect with and serve their community (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006). Yet, a commitment to promoting civic and community participation among vulnerable populations is central to the profession. Social work's civic mission is integrated into the Ethical Principles laid out within the NASW Code of Ethics, which call on social workers to "pursue social change," not just on behalf of vulnerable populations, but also "with" them. Social workers are expected to "strengthen relationships among people," helping to develop interpersonal relationships that benefit not only individuals, but also organizations and communities. Furthermore, social workers are expected to ensure "meaningful participation in decision making for all people," by supporting vulnerable populations to become meaningfully involved in community and organizational decision making (NASW, 1999).

The fact that individuals who are disadvantaged socially or economically are less likely to be civically engaged than their peers should be an important concern for social workers, who possess an ethical obligation to empower disadvantaged persons. Social workers must identify ways to empower willing and interested individuals and strengthen access to civic engagement opportunities (McBride, 2008). Organizing and engaging vulnerable populations in strengthening societal well-being has been an important role for social workers throughout the profession's history (McBride, 2008). Jane Addams and her fellow Settlement House movement reformers exemplified this commitment, as they organized neighborhood residents to improve their communities through social change efforts.

More recently, this commitment has been reflected within social work's empowerment perspective, particularly from a macro definition of empowerment "as

the process of increasing collective political power" (Gutiérrez, 1990, p. 149–150). Empowerment emphasizes the capacity and rights of individuals to be active participants in affecting the decisions and policies that affect them (Staples, 1990). Individuals who lack access—or perceive a lack of access—to institutions in their communities may experience powerlessness, which they then internalize as feelings of helplessness and alienation (Parsons, 1991). When we empower youth and adults to become involved in their communities and to affect community structures, we enable them to develop and utilize tools that enable them to regain a sense of control and self-esteem and to strengthen their own well-being. We equip them with the knowledge and skills to improve their communities and to help bring about social justice both locally and more broadly.

Youth Civic Engagement in a Rural Context

Rural Youth Civic Involvement

Much adolescent civic involvement research has focused on the civic and community behavior of poor youth living in urban contexts (Hart & Atkins, 2002; Hart & Fegley, 1995), whereas substantially less research has examined rural youth involvement (Bobek, Zaff, Li, & Lerner, 2009; Elder & Conger, 2000; King, Elder, & Whitbeck, 1997). One seminal study used a qualitative methodology to explore multiple dimensions of the lives of rural Iowa youth in grades 7–12 (Elder & Conger, 2000). This study focused primarily on the positive benefits of farming for youth, including close work with positive parental role models and other adults who echo principles and standards for behavior taught at home, due to the homogeneous nature of the communities under study. The authors theorized that the consistency of these value-laden messages helps protect these youth from problem behavior. They also documented rural youth organized activity involvement in religious groups and community groups or clubs, such as 4-H, Boy/Girl Scouts, and extracurricular activities. Organized activities enabled youth to come together with community members, to meaningfully contribute, and to develop wider social contacts important for rural youth who may be geographically isolated from community institutions. Organized activity involvement is positively and longitudinally associated with youth academic performance (Elder & Conger, 2000).

In a more recent study, Ludden (2009) also examined the civic involvement of youth residing in a Midwestern agricultural community. A central goal of this study was to examine whether distinct categories of organized activity and civic

involvement were associated with a variety of indicators of psychological well-being. One-half of the eighth and ninth grade adolescents in the study indicated involvement in at least one community, school, or religious activity. Most commonly, 32% of the sample indicated involvement in a religious activity, with Future Farmers of America (FFA) the most popular school group and 4-H the most popular community civic activity. Similar to Elder and Conger's (2000) findings, Ludden (2009) found that adolescents who participated in religious activities engaged in less problem behavior and obtained higher grades than uninvolved youth, whereas adolescents who engaged in community-based and school-based civic activities reported more academic engagement.

A key limitation of existing research on rural youth civic behavior is the lack of a consistent or formal definition of *rural*. Individuals living in rural areas may vary in how close/far they are from major cities and small towns, which may offer youth greater civic opportunities. Rural youth civic research has focused solely on agricultural communities, which may differ from other rural areas where farming is less prevalent. Research tells us little about what spurs youth involvement in rural communities, where the economy is instead focused on coal mining, textiles, or other industries. In rural areas of Appalachia, for example, coal mining is a primary source of employment, potentially providing youth with different civic opportunities than agriculturally centered communities.

Facilitators of Rural Civic Engagement

Although there is a scarcity of research examining rural youth's civic behavior, the small extant literature points to some consistent findings about what aspects of rural life may facilitate civic engagement. A key community asset is the presence and involvement of supportive adults working beside the youth. When adults are involved with youth, providing role models of civic and community citizenship, as well as directly assisting children's involvement by providing transportation to events, youth membership in multiple civic and community groups is promoted (Elder & Conger, 2000). This form of social capital—being supported by and connected with adults—is critical for high-quality youth engagement.

Organized opportunities to involve youth in their communities may also facilitate civic development in a distinctly rural way. One example is 4-H, a positive youth development organization administered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which focuses on developing citizenship, leadership, and life skills through experiential learning. Although 4-H is available to suburban and urban youth, it is most

popular among rural youth. Historically, 4-H has had a substantial agricultural learning focus, although it also integrates learning through science, engineering, and technology. The opportunity to develop community connections and relationships, while honing skills specific to a rural lifestyle, may make 4-H participation an ideal activity for facilitating a rural civic identity in agricultural areas (Elder & Conger, 2000). 4-H participation has been consistently linked to multiple aspects of positive youth development. A large, longitudinal study found 4-H involvement to be associated with decreased problem behaviors and increased character development (Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009; Lerner, Von Eye, Lerner, & Lewin-Bizan, 2009), as well as with outcomes specific to adult civic participation, such as increased civic participation, adult social connection, and beliefs about civic duty (Bobek et al., 2009). In-school civic engagement opportunities focused on agriculture, such as Future Farmers for America, also reflect a distinctly rural type of extracurricular involvement. Such activities may be less prevalent in rural areas, where agriculture plays a more minor role, such as in coal mining communities in rural West Virginia. Although 4-H is available in such communities, far less is known about other organizations and activities that may facilitate youth civic engagement. Other institutions, such as schools, may take on larger roles, as they often provide a centralized location for extracurricular and civic activities for students from a wide area, further fostering connections to the broader community. Community churches continue to serve as powerful organizational forces in the lives of individuals in rural communities, and individuals in rural settings are more likely to report regular church attendance than individuals in urban settings (Chalfant & Heller, 1991). Thus, organized religious activity is a key community asset through which rural youth connect with a broader community (King et al., 1997). Religious youth groups provide rural youth with a significant way to spend time with like-minded peers, and youth who are actively engaged in religious activity are less prone to engage in problem behavior (Bryk, Lee, & Hollard, 1993). Adolescent religious involvement has been theorized to facilitate the development of additional forms of community and even political involvement in adulthood (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999), meaning the preponderance of rural youth involvement in religious groups may have both short- and long-term effects on their civic development.

Challenges to Rural Civic Engagement

Several characteristics of rural settings serve to facilitate youth civic involvement; however, several potential challenges also exist. The dramatic economic

change, stemming from the Farm Crisis of the 1980s that rural America has undergone for approximately 35 years, has significantly increased the prevalence of individuals living in poverty (Conger, 1997). This was exacerbated by the economic downturn during the early 21st century. Furthermore, the downturn has been linked directly to increased rural adolescent and young adult substance use (Lambert, Gale, & Hartley, 2008); if youth are lured away from community groups by more deviant peers, civic involvement may be effected. Additionally, a lack of job opportunities in economically depressed rural areas has led many rural young people to move to cities, leading to an "aging rural America." Young adults who do remain in their rural community may be less educated and less civically-involved than their peers who leave, reducing the availability of positive civic role models for rural adolescents (Johnson, 2006).

Although these authors endorse the value of diverse civic experiences for youth, the sparse and spread out population of rural areas means rural adolescents may have to travel long distances to reach more populated towns or urban areas with varied civic opportunities. Such travel may be especially difficult for teenagers, who have limited means and access to transportation, especially among the increasing number of rural teens living in poverty. The availability of diverse civic engagement opportunities may also be limited to a small number of community groups or service activities, as rural areas may not be able to support multiple civic organizations. 4-H groups and churches provide strong civic opportunities; however, it is highly likely that these groups are fairly homogenous both in their demographic characteristics (socioeconomic status, ethnicity), as well as in the shared values of group members. This stands in contrast to the importance of "heterogeneous engagement" in a range of activities stressed by civic theorists (Flanagan, Gill, & Gallay, 2005). Participation in a variety of groups and organizations exposes adolescents to diverse political and moral vantages considered key for the development of civic attributes, such as social trust and democratic values (Flanagan, 2004).

A Case Study of Adolescent Civic Involvement in a Rural Mining Community

This section addresses a key limitation of rural civic engagement research, by examining the civic behaviors and influences on one group of rural youth attending school in a rural Applachian town characterized by coal mining as a primary source of employment. The town was specifically chosen, due to its rural location, at least

1 hour by car (60 miles) from a city of at least 25,000 people and more than 4 hours by car from a city with a population of at least 200,000. The schools draw students from across the county; thus, the sample of 284 students from a middle-school (n=101, Mean age=12.16, SD=1.12) and high-school (n=183, mean age=15.94, SD =1.22) all live in a small, "rural" community, with some students living in more secluded areas surrounding the town. All students at the middle school and one-half of the students at the high school were recruited; however, participants were those students who returned parent permission forms (21% of the middle school and 48% of eligible high school students).

Demographically, 58% of the sample is female. Similar to other rural Appalachian communities, 92% are White; however, how adolescents engage civically may differ in rural communities with a different racial and ethnic makeup. According to school report card data, 39.3% of the middle-school students and nearly 27.9% of the high-school students are eligible for free lunch, suggesting a moderate level of poverty in this sample. Nearly one-half of the sample reported that their parents have a high school degree or less (mothers=45%, fathers=45.5%), approximately 30% of parents have a college degree (mothers=30.1%, fathers=27.4%), and a small portion of parents have graduate degrees (mothers=14.4%, fathers=10.1%). Remaining participants reported "don't know or unsure" for their parents' education (mothers=10.6%, fathers=17%).

To understand how these rural adolescents are civically engaged, we measured their current civic activity involvement, using the Youth Civic Behavior Questionnaire (Metzger & Smetana, 2009), a 25-item Likert scale adapted from measures used in previous research (Eccles et al., 2003; Smetana & Metzger, 2005; Youniss et al., 1997). The items represented current involvement in five categories, including four community service activities (e.g., volunteer to help poor, sick, or disabled people in your community), four community group activities (e.g., take part in a community group or club, such as Boy/Girl Scouts or YMCA), six school or community political activities (e.g., take part in a political rally or protest), four school involvement/extracurricular activities (e.g., take part in a school art, music, or drama group), and three religious activities (e.g., attend religious services). Four additional items, based on previous research and tailored specifically to a rural sample, were added and analyzed separately, including an item assessing involvement with 4-H and an item assessing working to "help your neighbors out on projects at their home/farm for no pay." Adolescents were asked to both rate their level of involvement over an average month from 1 (never) to 5 (very often) and report

the total number of hours they participate in each activity on a monthly basis. The subscales all had adequate internal reliability (α =.69–.92).

Findings suggest that youth are most highly engaged in religious activities. Only 25% of adolescents in the case study reported that they "never" attend church, consistent with previous research, which has found that churches play an important role in rural community organization. Adolescents are also actively engaged in school involvement/extracurricular activities; such involvement has consistently been linked with a host of positive developmental outcomes, including increased voting in young adulthood (Eccles et al., 2003). For instance, 45% of adolescents reported participating in a school sports team "quite often" or "very often." In contrast to school activity involvement, only 7% reported participating in a community group activity "quite often" or "very often." The sprawling population of rural areas may make consistent community group involvement difficult for rural youth, whereas schools and religious institutions may provide a more centralized way for rural adolescents to become involved.

Although previous research has pointed to high levels of 4-H involvement among rural youth, the current study found much lower levels of participation. Seventy-nine percent of the youth stated that they "never" participate, and only 7% reported they are involved with 4-H "quite often" or "very often." This low level of involvement could stem from the unique coal-mining dependent economic structure of the mountainous Appalachian region from which the current data were taken. 4-H's primary focus on agricultural skills may not be as relevant to youth in rural areas where farming is less common. This finding highlights the importance of considering specific dimensions of different types of rural areas and how they may promote or thwart adolescent civic engagement.

In terms of involvement directly tied to the broader community or political activities, many of the youth in the sample are involved in community service in some form. Only 11% of youth stated they "never" participate in community service. Youth are even more involved in service close to home, as 95% of the youth reported some engagement in activities aimed at helping family, extended family, or neighbors. In contrast, much fewer of the adolescents in this sample engage in political activities, with 33% of the adolescents having reported "quite often" or "very often" knowing what is going on in the news or about political events, and just 7% reported participating in an organization focused around a political or social cause. Adolescents, regardless of community, tend to be less engaged in political activities than adults, but this level of political involvement is significantly

lower than that of suburban adolescents (Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Similar to ar-
guments by sociologists that individuals in marginalized groups tend to view civic
commitments in terms of service to their community, rather than to broader civic
and political institutions (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002), these data suggest that rural
youth may feel isolated and disconnected from national political issues and, in-
stead, may focus their civic energy on helping their own neighbors and families.

Prior research has not examined whether diversity in demographic variables,
such as degree of "ruralness" or socioeconomic status, influences youth civic en-
gagement. In the current study, 65% of the participants reported living in a town
of any size, with the remaining 35% living up to 40 miles from the small rural
town in which they go to school. Thus, even within this rural sample, youth vary
in their degree of "ruralness." Our findings suggest that living further from a town
may be associated with lower levels of community group involvement and higher
chances of 4-H involvement. This finding points to the importance of examining
heterogeneity within the rural contexts, when considering rural youth civic en-
gagement. Although rural areas may provide youth with limited opportunities for
civic engagement, the lengthy travel distances for youth living in the most secluded
areas of rural districts may make participation in civic groups even more inacces-
sible. For these more isolated youth, 4-H is a source of civic activity, consistent
with previous research on rural youth.

Socioeconomic status may also be a relevant factor in understanding rural ado-
lescent civic behaviors. In the current study, wealthier students, as measured by
higher parental education, are more involved in community group, political, and
community service activities, but not religious, school involvement/extracurricu-
lar activities, or 4-H activities. Although involvement in many extracurricular, civic,
and community activities may be more difficult for poorer rural youth to access,
perhaps due to time and transportation demands, rural institutions, such as
churches and schools, appear more accessible and offer opportunities for engage-
ment, regardless of socioeconomic status. Although the current case study utilized
concurrent, self-reported data and may not be generalizable to other nonagricul-
tural rural settings, the findings do point to potential processes underlying civic in-
volvement in a sample of rural youth.

Facilitating Rural Youth Civic Engagement

Although this case study suggests broad rural adolescent involvement in some
forms of civic activity, it also points to possible key gaps in civic involvement, both

in terms of involvement type, such as political activity, and in terms of the sub-populations involved, with poorer and more "rural" youth engaging at lower rates. How can social workers act to expand civic participation across all groups of rural youth and empower them to become more meaningful community participants? Research suggests that civic engagement increases when individuals are specifically presented with opportunities to become involved or are directly asked to participate (McBride, 2008; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). School and community-based social workers in rural communities are well-situated to build on civic development models implemented across the United States to provide youth with specific opportunities to participate in civic activities that can help expand their civic involvement. Four program models that may be well-suited to a rural setting are subsequently discussed: community service, service-learning, participatory action research, and youth participation in community development and governance.

Community Service

Supporting opportunities for youth to engage in community service is the most common program model to build youth's engagement with their communities. Through community service programs, youth are connected with opportunities to volunteer, typically within their local communities. Currently, community service opportunities are offered by over two-thirds of U.S. public schools (mostly high schools), although less than one-half of the students in these schools participate in service (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2004; Spring, Grimm, & Dietz, 2008). A higher percentage of rural schools arrange community service opportunities than their urban or suburban counterparts (Spring et al., 2008). However, low-income youth participate in community service opportunities at substantially lower rates than other groups of youth. For instance, higher-income schools provide more community service opportunities (61%) than schools serving primarily low-income families (54%; Spring et al., 2008).

Structured community service opportunities can be designed and facilitated by social workers working within both school and community-based settings. Given the active involvement in religious activities indicated in the case study, religious institutions may offer a particularly important venue for community service opportunities (Ludden, 2010). Community groups or clubs, such as 4-H and Boy/Girl Scouts, are well-tailored to implement community service opportunities; however, it is equally important to identify activities that can engage rural youth who may

not be involved with these organizations, as with the 79% of students in this case study who reported never participating in 4-H. Depending on the context, community service programs may be voluntary, offered to youth expressing interest in community involvement, or mandatory, such as when schools require students to complete a specified number of hours of service for a specific class or for graduation. Metz and Youniss (2005) indicate that mandatory and voluntary community service may be equally effective in strengthening students' attitudes towards civic engagement.

Specific types of community service activities vary widely but often address local social, educational, or environmental issues. For example, youth may volunteer to serve food regularly to community members in poverty or spend time with elderly nursing home residents. Older youth may tutor younger students at the county elementary school, or youth may help clean up local rivers or parks. Although some community service programs recruit students to help with minor administrative tasks or to serve in a role, such as hall monitor at school, research suggests that students benefit most when they find their service meaningful. Meaningful service activities that address local community needs or enable direct client contact help youth gain more positive views of their communities and a stronger belief in their ability to affect the communities (Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003; Nesbit & Brudney, 2010; Reinders & Youniss, 2006). They also become more likely to engage in continued volunteer activity and seek out community involvement in other ways (Lakin & Mahoney, 2006; Melchior, 1999; Melchior & Bailis, 2002; Metz & Youniss, 2003, 2005; Perry & Katula, 2001).

Effective community service programs also enable youth to have an active and participatory "voice" in making choices about the type of service in which they engage and planning how that service is structured (Lakin & Mahoney, 2006; Mitra, 2009). Designing service opportunities that take place over a longer period of time, requiring a degree of commitment, helps youth develop connections with their community and a desire for continued participation (Denault & Poulin, 2009; Lakin & Mahoney, 2006).

Service-learning.

Like community service programs, service-learning enables youth to engage in volunteerism. However, in service-learning programs, the service is typically planned and structured in a more intentional manner. The service youth provide is directly linked to educational content, based on an explicit connection between

the service and what the youth are being taught. A key component of service-learning programs is systematic reflection by youth on their service experience. This reflection can be in writing, such as through essays on the youths' service experiences, or verbally in a group setting, or both. By connecting volunteer activity to a curriculum, service-learning provides youth with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and to better understand the larger societal factors that may have contributed to the social problem they are addressing.

In social work education, when we think of service-learning, field instruction often comes to mind. Despite substantial similarities between the two, as social work students engage in providing service as a key component of their curricula, some scholars argue that field instruction should be clearly differentiated from service-learning for three primary reasons. First, the knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn in field instruction are determined primarily by curricula and student interests, whereas the knowledge and skills students learn through service-learning are expected to be determined by the needs of the community (Lemieux & Allen, 2007). Second, service-learning participants are expected to engage in service as community members, not as agency employees or service providers (Phillips, 2007). Finally, service-learning requires critical reflection to a greater degree than may commonly be seen in field instruction (Phillips, 2007). These differences—roles determined by the needs of the community, serving as a community member, and critical reflection on the service—may be welcome in social work field instruction, but are essential to effective service-learning.

Service-learning is offered by slightly under one-fourth of public schools in the United States (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2004; Spring et al., 2008). Approximately 35% of secondary schools, 25% of middle schools, and 20% of elementary schools offer service-learning activities. At schools with service-learning, 36% of students, on average, and 32% of teachers are involved, resulting in about 10% of U.S. K–12 public school students participating in service-learning opportunities (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2004; Spring et al., 2008). A smaller percentage of rural schools (22%) offer service-learning, compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (CNCS, 2006; Nesbit & Brudney, 2010; Spring et al., 2008). Furthermore, more higher-income schools (27%) offer service-learning programs and activities, as compared to 20% of low-income schools. Just 31% of disadvantaged youth reported participation in either school-based community service or service-learning (CNCS, 2007).

Although more than one-half of elementary school principals believe their students are too young for service-learning (Spring et al., 2008), social workers can

play a crucial role in creating and facilitating developmentally appropriate service-learning opportunities both for younger children and for adolescents. By working with teachers to identify, develop, and sustain relationships with community organizations and business partners, social workers can help facilitate such service-learning activities as collecting recyclable materials and counting them as part of a math lesson, creating audio recordings of children's books for blind children as part of a reading or language arts lesson, or teaching community members about an important local environmental issue as part of a science lesson. In one rural Texas community, for example, a creative service-learning model engages high school students learning about youth development in service-learning through teaching and mentoring fifth grade students. The fifth grade students, in turn, integrate these lessons into a year-long environmental service-learning project to create community awareness about the integral nature of playa lakes to community sustainability.

Although less common, service-learning programs may also take place in a community-based setting (Bailis, 2003; Durlak et al., 2007). For example, a national teen pregnancy prevention program model, Teen Outreach Program, incorporates service-learning in both school and community-based settings throughout the country; in this case, the service is linked to educational content about leadership, community involvement, and reduction of risk behaviors (Allen & Philliber, 2001; Capaldi, 2009). For agricultural communities, a service-learning program outside a classroom might include providing and reflecting on agricultural support to struggling farmers, while simultaneously learning about agricultural science through a Future Farmers of America or 4-H group. Youth in other rural communities might work with a county museum to collect and present artifacts of the community's history, while simultaneously learning about local history.

When high-quality service-learning is implemented, service-learning has important effects on youth's civic engagement (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Eyler & Giles, 1997; McKay, 2010; Melchior & Bailis, 2002; Moore & Sandholtz, 1999; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Nesbit & Brudney, 2010) . Unfortunately, many programs termed "service-learning" are not of high quality and, instead, have minimal service requirements, are tenuously connected to classroom learning, or lack substantive reflection on the youth's service (Eyler, 2002; Moore & Sandholtz, 1999; Nesbit & Brudney, 2010). Such programs have been found unlikely to substantially affect youth civic development. Based on research evidence, social workers should strive to facilitate high quality service-learning that meets the following standards:

■ Meaningful Service: Service-learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.

■ Link to Curriculum: Service-learning is intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.

■ Reflection: Service-learning incorporates multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society.

■ Diversity: Service-learning promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.

■ Youth Voice: Service-learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.

■ Partnerships: Service-learning partnerships are collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs.

■ Progress Monitoring: Service-learning engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals and uses results for improvement and sustainability.

■ Duration and Intensity: Service-learning has sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes. (Billig & Weah, 2008)

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) enables youth to conduct their own community research, develop and present their own community change proposals, and participate in community action related to the proposals. Deriving, in large part, from Pablo Freire's work, participants are taught to question and analyze what they learn through the research process, to develop critical consciousness, and to challenge oppression in society (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010). PAR models have traditionally been used to empower people around the globe and are increasingly used with marginalized youth (Gant et al., 2009; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wang, 2006). They also offer potential for youth in rural communities, particularly given the prevalence of supportive partnerships between

rural youth and adults (Elder & Conger, 2000; Spatig, Gaines, MacDowell, & Sias, 2009), and may be well-suited for implementation by community-based or religious organizations, or even school-based extracurricular activities.

Likely due to the intense commitment required of youth and adult facilitators, PAR programs are much less common than community service and service-learning models. In PAR, youth become researchers. They make decisions about the research process and how the findings will be interpreted and used to strengthen their communities. Despite the extensive involvement required, this model has been initiated worldwide in multiple programs with children and youth as young as 8 years old, researching and designing community change projects in rural and urban communities alike (Chawla, 1997; Driskell, Bannerjee, & Chawla, 2001; Hussain, 2010).

One model of PAR increasingly implemented with youth in community organizations or school settings is "photovoice" (Wang, 2006; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Youth research and assess their community through photography, as part of a structured curriculum (Gant et al., 2009). Participants are guided through a process of critical reflection and then put the photographs together in an exhibit for policy-makers and other influential community members, in an effort to influence policy. For example, photographs exhibiting poverty in town or of shuttered businesses, side-by-side with photographs of a church picnic, can spur youth to reflect and develop creative recommendations on how to strengthen community institutions to better meet the needs of their poor or unemployed neighbors.

Such PAR models can bring youth and adults together, both in conducting research and working side by side to strengthen their communities. Although empirical research on the effects of PAR models on youth civic engagement is scant, case studies suggest that PAR promotes community participation and youth empowerment, as well as positively affects for the community under study (Chawla, 1997; Driskell et al., 2001; Strack et al., 2004; Wang, 2006; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

Youth Participation in Community Development and Governance

Social workers may also design, implement, or facilitate programs that enable rural youth to play a role in community decision-making. Typically, societal institutions offer youth few opportunities to participate in making community decisions (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Mitra, 2009); however, enabling youth to make real decisions that affect their communities may simultaneously enhance the civic development of youth

and the community contexts in which they live. Social workers can identify ways that youth can directly engage in community development projects that affect their lives in an immediate way (Lakin & Mahoney, 2006; O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002). For example, youth could be integrated into decision-making around creating youth employment opportunities, developing a town playground and basketball court, or disseminating small grants for community change projects (O'Donoghue, 2006).

Social workers can encourage the invitation of youth to take leadership roles in agency or local town boards and councils. Although models of engaging youth in community governance are more common outside of the United States, this is relevant and feasible in communities across the United States as well. Youth positions on town councils, boards of directors, or advisory groups for community organizations can be created (Golombek, 2006). For example, a youth budget council might be responsible for deciding how to use a portion of a town's or county's budget dedicated for children and youth's programming (Cabannes, 2005; Guerra, 2002). Children and youth can be involved in local governance, although the nature of the experiences and responsibilities may need to vary based on their developmental levels (Bartlett, 1999 as cited in Frank, 2006; Golombek, 2006).

Rural social workers can build upon rural community strengths, refocusing already-existing supportive relationships and partnerships between rural youth and adults (Elder & Conger, 2000) to focus on achieving community improvement goals together. In what Zeldin, Camino, and Mook (2005) term "youth/adult partnerships for community change," programs provide youth with opportunities to take on visible and challenging decision-making roles in conjunction with adults to address community issues (Mitra, 2009; Pittman, 2002; Zeldin et al., 2005). It is expected that youth and adults will teach and learn from each other (Camino, 2000; Mitra, 2009), with shared power expected to result in an increased sense of community among youth (Lakin & Mahoney, 2006; Zeldin et al., 2005).

Youth participation roles across these different civic and community engagement models range from consultative to direct involvement in planning and implementing projects (Alparone & Rissotto, 2001). However, youth engagement programs are most effective, when the role of youth participants goes beyond consultation and, instead, includes youth in the "real" decision-making process (Checkoway, 1998; Mitra, 2009). The quality and degree of youth participation is key; accordingly, social workers who seek to expand youth involvement in governance need to pay particular attention to how youth involvement is initiated, how

the process of engaging youth is managed, and how achievements are communicated to participating youth. A risk with this type of program model is that poor mechanisms for ensuring meaningful youth participation may harm more than help youth civic engagement (Checkoway, 2011; Matthews, 2001; Matthews, Limb, & Taylor, 1999); positive effects are most likely to accrue, when participation is both meaningful and authentic and involves partnerships with adults (Mitra, 2009; Nesbit & Brudney, 2010; Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003).

Overall, there is little empirical research on the effects of this type of program model, but case studies indicate that engaging youth in community development and/or governance can strengthen the civic knowledge, skills, social connectedness, and community participation of youth, while also leading to improved organizational capacity and healthier communities (Checkoway, 2005, 2011; Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006; Pittman, 1996; Sherrod, 2006). However, some forms of youth participation in community development and governance are more far-reaching than others, in terms of how many youth may participate. Due to the low numbers of youth that may be involved in any particular board setting, for example, inclusiveness of diverse rural youth may be limited.

Conclusion

Social workers bring a unique commitment and ethical obligation to empowering people, particularly vulnerable populations, and to developing engagement with community and political institutions. Given the growing poverty in rural communities and the outmigration of younger residents from rural areas, rural settings provide an important context for social workers to integrate this commitment into their work, by facilitating programs that promote resident empowerment and a commitment to rural community development.

Much youth civic engagement research has focused on urban or suburban contexts, with little attention to youth in rural settings. As a result, research tells us little about the role that rural environments play in shaping how youth connect with and become involved in their communities. What little research exists suggests that rural youth face substantial challenges to civic engagement, including increased poverty and unemployment, an aging population, the homogeneity of available civic opportunities, and the long distances many rural adolescents must travel to reach civic opportunities. Due to these barriers, youth in rural communities may be less involved in specific types of civic activities, such as political engagement. Poorer rural youth and those that live in more distant, isolated areas

may also be less able to participate in multiple civic activities than wealthier youth or those living more proximate to town.

At the same time, rural communities possess substantial community assets that encourage civic engagement, including the nature of social interactions, supportive adults that provide civic role models, high levels of religious activity, and distinctly rural organized opportunities for youth. These community assets provide a platform for social workers to build upon to overcome the challenges to rural civic participation. Such program models as community service, service-learning, participatory action research, and involvement in community governance can help develop rural youth engagement. Creating and supporting opportunities for civic participation can empower rural youth and support them in developing civic knowledge and skills, potentially leading to life-long habits of civic involvement.

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