Organized Activity Involvement and Problem Behavior Among Rural Youth: The Importance of Activity Type and Context

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Abstract

For adolescents, participation in organized community, school, and religious activities has been associated with a host of positive developmental outcomes (Eccles et al., 2003; Metzger et al., 2009). However, less research has examined organized activity involvement among rural youth. The current study examines associations between school, religious and community involvement, and problem behavior for youth living both inside and outside of a rural town (population = 7,000). After controlling for parental education and teen age, religious involvement was associated with lower levels of delinquency across genders and location, as well as higher GPA's for boys, but not girls. For boys living outside of town, 4-H involvement was associated with more minor delinquency while school clubs was associated with less major delinquency. For boys living inside rural towns, school clubs was associated with higher academic performance. Findings highlight the importance of context when examining the impact organized activities have on rural youth.

Background

- Adolescents who participate in organized community, school, and religious activities engage in less delinquent behavior, use fewer illicit substances, and earn higher grades in school (Eccles et al., 2003; Metzger et al., 2009).
- Variability in gender
- Specific organized activities are associated with positive and negative developmental outcomes. For instance:
  - Sports/athletics has been linked with increased alcohol consumption (Eccles & Barber, 1994).
  - Involvement with religious groups has been associated with increased pro-social behavior (tends to vary as a function of gender) (Eccles et al., 2003).
- Due to limited access and activities unique to rural settings, involvement may be particularly important for rural youth.
- Variability within rural context:
  - Religious involvement in farm youth vs. non-farm youth (King, Elkins, & Whithbeck, 1997).
  - Research has yet to examine how other forms of rural context, such as living inside versus outside of a rural town, impact the association between organized activity involvement and delinquency.

Study Questions

- Do the associations between organized activity involvement and delinquency vary as a function of rural context?
- Are these associations moderated by adolescent gender?

Method

Participants

- 462 adolescents from a rural Appalachian community.
- Residence location: 66% of adolescents reported living in town. On average, participants lived 7 miles from the center of town (M = 7.05, SD = 7.63).
- Mean age = 15.25, SD = 2.07
- 54.3% girls

- Students reported their parents’ highest level of education:
  - Education Level
  - Mother (Female Guardian) 3.7% 6.2%
  - Father (Male Guardian)
  - Completed 8th Grade 43.4% 44.3%
  - High School 30.3% 25.1%
  - College 13.1% 10.0%
  - Don’t know or Unsure 9.6% 14.4%

- In analyses, SES = mean of mother/father education level.

### Measures

- **Organized activity involvement:** Adolescents reported how often they engaged in organized activities in an average month from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often) (α = .87):
  1. School Sports (1 item)
  2. Community Sports (1 item)
  3. School Clubs (3 items)
  4. Community Clubs (3 items)
  5. Religious Activities (3 items)
  6. 4-H Sponsoring Activities
  7. Volunteering (4 items)

- **Delinquency and Illicit Substance Use:** Adolescents reported how often they engaged in three categories of problem behavior in the past 30 days from 1 (Never) to 4 (Often):
  1. Minor Delinquent Behavior (4 items; α = .68)
  2. Major Delinquent Acts (4 items; α = .62)
  3. Illicit Substance Use (5 items; α = .83)

Results

- Regression analyses controlling for parental education and teen age indicated associations between activity involvement, problem behaviors, and GPA differed for youth living inside and outside of town.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minor Delinquency</th>
<th>Major Delinquency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td>R² F Change Beta</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>Religious Activities</td>
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<td>.003 .34**</td>
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<td>Volunteering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.12* -.16*</td>
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