

Participation in Structured Youth Programs

Why Ethnic Minority Urban Youth Choose to Participate—or Not to Participate

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This study examines the cultural and contextual factors that influence the decisions of underrepresented urban youth, who identify themselves as Black/African American, Latino, Arab, or Chaldean, to participate in youth programs. Although youth programs are increasingly recognized for their positive influences, little is known about the factors that influence a young person's decision to participate. Using the concept systems method, participants engaged in "brainstorming sessions" that led to more in-depth discussions about why youth participate in youth programs. Overall, youth emphasized how youth programs help young people stay off the streets, learn new skills, avoid boredom, and provide opportunities for fun and enjoyable activities. The perceived barriers preventing young people from participating differed between genders and ethnicities and included barriers related to personal decisions, peer influence, and parental restrictions.

Keywords: *youth programs; minority youth; urban youth; participation*

Many studies have documented that youth participation in out-of-school programs can contribute to a variety of positive developmental outcomes such as life skill development and identity development (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Bridges, Margie, & Zaff, 2001; Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 1999; Hair, Jager, & Garrett, 2001; Larson, 2000; Redd, Cochran, Hair, & Moore, 2002; Schinke, Cole, & Poulin, 2000; Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003). The release of the report by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine's Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth further underscores the value of youth involvement in programs that foster various personal and social assets needed by adolescents to develop into healthy contributing members of society (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). One of the major recommendations from Eccles and Gootman (2002) is that programs must be made available to all youth. However, youth workers and researchers have noted that ethnic minority youth—particularly those living in economically distressed communities—do not participate equally in youth programs (Brown & Evans, 2002; Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999; Duffett & Johnson, 2004). For example, studies have found lower rates of involvement in activities by youth living in urban, low-income communities (Bocarro, 2002; Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1992; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005) compared to youth living in middle- and upper-income communities within urban areas and surrounding suburbs. Given the current demographics of many American urban areas, it is increasingly more important to better understand how youth from underrepresented groups can become more fully engaged in youth programs.

The challenges and risks associated with low-income urban settings (e.g., high rates of unemployment, crime, violence, and lack of access to affordable housing and health services) contribute to the particular need that young people living in these environments have for structured youth programs (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1992; Schinke et al., 2000). Such factors, unfortunately, also function as persistent barriers to participation in youth programs for ethnic minority youth (Villarruel, Montero-Sieburth, Dunbar, & Outlay, 2005).

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Youth Participation

There is limited research documenting the reasons why youth in general (and more specifically, ethnic minority youth, both within and across ethnic and socioeconomic groups) choose to participate or not to participate in youth programs (Weiss et al., 2005). Some studies have viewed participation as a dependent variable and have thus been able to reveal individual, peer, and family factors that are linked to adolescents' participation in after-school activities. Although not examining adolescents' decisions directly, these studies are nevertheless informative. For example, Davalos and colleagues (1999) found higher levels of acculturation to predict involvement in school-based extracurricular activities. Other factors found to be associated with participation in community- or school-based activities include parent endorsement and modeling of activity involvement (Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000) and having friends who endorsed the activity (Huebner & Mancini, 2003).

Gender has also been found to predict patterns of activity participation. Girls have been found to prefer social (Passmore & French, 2001), prosocial, and performance activities (i.e., dance and band) as well as school involvement activities (i.e., student government and pep club; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Males are more likely to report participation in sports (Davalos et al., 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Another gender-related finding concerns constraints on activity participation: Girls are more likely to report constraints such as self-consciousness, shyness, and the need for approval from friends (Raymore, Godbey, & Crawford, 1994).

In their study of urban African American youth who attended activities at the YMCA or Boys & Girls Clubs, Gambone and Arbreton (1997) reported that youth most frequently identified "fun" as the motivation for their participation. They further found that girls who participated in Girls, Inc. more frequently cited the opportunity to learn concepts and skills and to interact with caring adults as the main motivations for their participation. Passmore and French (2001) found, in their Australian sample, that the most important criteria for activities in leisure time were that they are freely chosen and enjoyable. In an evaluation of Boys & Girls Club programs in large cities in the Southwest, young people, the majority of whom were African American or Latino and living below poverty levels, reported a sense of safety and belonging, the acquisition of positive behaviors (e.g., "staying out of trouble" and "getting along with others"), and the development of competence and self-esteem most frequently as reasons for participating (Carruthers & Busser, 2000).

Other studies with Latino youth have revealed similar themes, including programs that provided a safe place and caring relationships with program staff (Borden, Perkins, Carleton-Hug, Stone, & Keith, 2006; Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000). Latino, African American, and other youth interviewed at a teen center in Texas indicated that they participate because a teen center is a fun, safe place that provides something to do, including opportunities for social interactions with peers, an escape from home, and a chance to learn healthy behaviors and to achieve improved academic performance (Baker & Hultsman, 1998). The same study asked youth to explain reasons why teens did *not* participate in programs at the teen center. One of the most frequently mentioned explanations for why youth did not attend programs was that they perceived the center to be “boring.” Another reason cited for nonparticipation was that some youth might be involved in drugs and alcohol, which could keep them from participating (Baker & Hultsman, 1998). Finally, research has also documented the constraints of participation fees as a major barrier for ethnic minority youth to participate in youth programs. Specifically, for example, in a national survey of 1,003 parents, only 39% of minority parents reported being able to afford out-of-school activities compared to 62% of White parents (Duffett & Johnson, 2004).

Thus, there have been only a few studies to consider the perceptions of youth regarding what factors motivate participation in youth programs and what factors function as barriers to participation. There have been even fewer studies that have examined the opinions of urban youth from various ethnic backgrounds (Weiss et al., 2005). Moreover, as the above literature review highlights, most participation studies have been conducted with youth that are in national organizations (e.g., YMCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters) as opposed to grassroots community organizations (e.g., Chicago’s West Town program). The current study involved urban youth who identified themselves as Black/African American, Latino, Arab, or Chaldean.¹ The participants reported that they are actively involved in some form of structured out-of-school program for youth within a grassroots community organization. They also addressed why they choose to be involved in the program. Finally, these youth were also asked to provide the researchers with ideas about why other young people in their neighborhoods and schools chose not to participate in community-based programs.

Study Description

This article reports the findings from a study using qualitative and quantitative methods to examine urban, ethnic minority youth² participation in

youth programs. We are defining *youth* as children and adolescents aged 9 to 19 and *youth programs* as structured out-of-school experiences within a youth-serving organization. In this article, we discuss the results of the data collected in a series of brainstorming sessions conducted using an adaptation of concept mapping analysis within the concept systems methodology (Trochim, 1989).³ Concept mapping is a structured methodology that initially involves brainstorming, sorting, and ranking of ideas to develop a conceptual framework for understanding a given question or a set of questions around a topic of interest.

Method

Selection of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

Two metropolitan areas in Michigan were selected for this study because these areas had youth representing the largest ethnic and/or ancestral identities. The two largest ethnic populations in Michigan are Black/African American and Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Arabs, the third largest and fastest-growing ethnic group in the state of Michigan, were included because southeastern Michigan is home to the largest population of Arab descents in the United States (Aswad, 2001) and offered a unique opportunity to examine cross-cultural differences among three racial and ethnic populations.

After the target ethnicities were identified, members of the research team identified ethnic-oriented CBOs that provided neighborhood-based after-school programs for youth in their catchments. Separate organizations that focus on reaching Black/African American, Latino, and Arab descent and Chaldean youth were contacted in both urban sites. A total of nine community-based organizations were identified. These organizations could be classified as "grassroots youth development organizations" because they are each fundamentally independent of other organizations and institutions (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1992). Each CBO also originated in the community it served, although their geographic areas of influence have, in some cases, expanded to larger regions. In addition to receiving a report summarizing the study, each CBO received a monetary donation based on the number of youth involved in the study. Youth participants, in addition to assent and parental consent for their participation, were invited to eat pizza and were presented a small gift (pencils and notebooks) as a token of appreciation for participation in this study. Some of the CBOs have developed specific youth programming curricula based on youth development principles,

whereas others offer less-structured youth programs. Eight of the nine CBOs also offered drop-in services for youth during the school year and summer.

Youth Participants

Study participants were young people between the ages of 9 and 19 who participated in organized youth programming with structured activities and identified their ethnicity as African American, Latino, Arab, or Chaldean. CBOs conducted programming for specific ethnic groups across a range of ages. Age groupings are presented in Table 1 as a way to summarize the data; they do not represent specific programming by age. Thirty-three females (median age = 14) and 44 males (median age = 13) participated (see Table 1). More than half of the youth reported that they attended youth programs at the participating CBO at least three times a week.

Procedures

Prior to meeting with the young people, parental consent forms and an accompanying explanatory letter (in English and a second language: Spanish or Arabic) were sent home with each youth for signature. Low parental response rates resulted in small sample sizes, particularly in the case of Arab and Chaldean females. At the beginning of each meeting, the researchers asked each of the young people to affirm his or her intent to take part in the research project. They explained that the youth's ideas would be recorded but that anonymity would be protected.

Researchers conducted 11 structured brainstorming sessions with youth participants, in which each youth participated in a session with other youth of the same gender, ethnic background, and age range (e.g., 9 to 12, 13 to 15, and 16 to 19). The participants were in community-based programs in two geographically distinct areas of the state, hence, the repetition of groups. For example, one Latina group was from the southwestern region of Michigan and one was from the southeastern region. Each session lasted about an hour and was audiotaped for transcription. A research team member acted as facilitator to direct the discussion, and a second member took written notes. The facilitators followed a written script to ensure that the study was consistently introduced across each group and that the main target questions were phrased identically.

The two target questions were previously piloted with a group of adolescents who assisted in the final wording. The questions were specifically

Table 1
Description of Study Participants

Ethnic Identity and Gender	Age 9 to 12	Age 13 to 15	Age 16 to 19	Total
Black/African American males	2	11	3	16
Black/African American females	9	9	1	19
Latinos	3	3	2	8
Latinas	0	3	3	6
Arab males	4	3	3	10
Arab females	1	3	1	5
Chaldean males	8	2	0	10
Chaldean females	2	1	0	3
Total	29	35	13	77

phrased to elicit both first- and third-person accounts to encourage young people to share their comments without embarrassment in front of their peers. The young people were asked to share the reasons that have motivated or inhibited their own participation as well as reasons that they perceive might motivate or inhibit other youth: For example, “One of the reasons young people take part in youth programs is [blank]” and “One of the reasons other young people are NOT involved in youth programs is [blank].” The pilot group also recommended that participants be given the opportunity to write down on paper any responses that they did not feel comfortable sharing aloud in the group.

The facilitator’s script included suggested prompt questions to help guide discussion. However, beyond the introduction and target questions, facilitators were advised to be flexible with the script to create a less formal setting that would encourage an open discussion among the youth participants. Researchers met separately with groups of males and females so that the participants, especially the ones in the teen years, would feel more comfortable sharing their opinions in a same-gender group. This factor was particularly salient for respecting the cultural gender roles that are socially preferable within Arab and Chaldean communities. The decision to conduct gender specific groups was supported by the literature and also by the youth professionals employed at the CBOs, who expressed that gender separation might yield critical information that might help them target outreach efforts to engage more youth from their local communities. Although organizing the groups in this manner was the recommendation of the community-based youth professionals, this left the study with a less than desirable *N* for

investigating group differences.⁴ Nevertheless, examining these differences in a preliminary manner can provide initial data and direction for future research, albeit limited.

An initial ice-breaker activity was conducted to focus attention on the types of youth programs available to young people in their community, and the remainder of each meeting was conducted as a directed brainstorming session as outlined by Trochim (1989). Specifically, this “brainstorming focus” was designed to encourage participants to list as many responses as possible without critiquing or discussing. Unlike a focus group, the main purpose of these discussions was garnering ideas as opposed to providing detailed discussion about the ideas. In the discussions about the reasons for participation, the researchers prompted participants to think not only of themselves but also of other youth, such as, “Think about your friends—why do they participate in youth programs?” In discussions about the reasons for nonparticipation, young people were asked to think of reasons that had prevented them personally from participating in youth programs in the past as well as reasons that they believed were currently inhibiting their peers from participating. Youth responses were written on large sheets of paper and posted for the entire group to see. As each verbal brainstorming session drew to a close, each youth was offered the opportunity to share written responses that were passed to the group facilitator and not read publicly in the session. These prompt questions encouraged more ideas from the participants about the main two issues of other reasons why they participate and other reasons why some youth do not participate. More appropriate prompts for younger participants were employed by the researchers. In addition, the same prompt was asked three times to promote a more comprehensive list of ideas. The technique of using age-appropriate prompts and asking all the youth the same questions several times in several ways provided equal footing in that the younger youth spoke as frequently as their older peers. Thus, the methodology ensured that all youth, regardless of age, were able to contribute to the study. When facilitating a brainstorming session with this age group, there was a need to use a round-robin style of participant comments.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included a categorical analysis to help reduce data to more manageable themes (Rich & Ginsburg, 1999). Analysis began by reviewing the large flip-chart pages, all written notes recorded by the research team during and immediately after each youth meeting and the written responses

from participants. These first two sources were cross-checked by listening to all of the audiotapes to transcribe direct quotations from the youth. Identity-concealing labels for participants were used to conserve anonymity, so only gender, ethnicity, and study site are indicated.⁵

A total of 344 statements were recorded expressing reasons why young people participate in youth programs and 353 statements expressing reasons why young people do not participate. These numbers reflect a great deal of duplication because many of the statements were shared by young people in multiple groups and often repeated by several members of the same group. One member of the research team sorted all of the youth-generated statements into general themes and concepts. Statements expressing reasons for participation were sorted separately from those reporting barriers to participation. None of the statements were double coded; however, three were discussed with two members of the research team before placing them in a category. Twenty-one distinct topic categories emerged from all of the statements expressing reasons for participation in youth programs as shared by the youth either verbally or in writing (see Table 2). Twenty-one distinct categories emerged from all of the statements describing reasons why some youth do not participate (see Table 3). For further analysis of themes and trends, statements were sorted both by topic heading and by CBO.

Results

The topics presented below were those that were mentioned the most frequently by the participants in the group, as evidenced by the comments transcribed from the audiotapes, observer notes, and written comments by the youth. However, simply because a topic was voiced by multiple members of a group does not necessarily mean that the youths attribute great importance to that topic. Elements of group dynamics could certainly contribute to which topics are discussed openly in a group setting of youth as well as how vigorously they are discussed.

Similar to the research protocol for focus groups suggesting that researchers conduct a series of focus groups to the point of "saturation," where no new ideas emerge (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), this study asked the same questions to groups of youth of different ethnicities to explore the breadth of reasons perceived by underrepresented urban youth as moderating their decisions to participate or not participate in youth programs.

The categories of reasons why youth participate in youth programs are listed by ethnic group and by gender in Table 2. Ethnicity was a category

Table 2
Reasons Why Young People Participate in Youth Programs and Activities

Broad Categories Mentioned While Brainstorming	Females				Males			
	BA	L	AA	C	BA	L	AA	C
To avoid the streets, dangerous influences	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
To learn new things	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
To avoid boredom	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Because it's fun	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
To learn life skills	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
To be with friends	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
To get help with schoolwork	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
To feel accepted	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
For the activities	X	X		X	X	X	X	
To get away from home	X	X	X		X	X	X	
To meet new friends	X		X	X	X	X	X	
To be involved in something positive	X	X	X		X	X	X	
To learn career skills	X	X			X	X	X	X
For counseling and help with problems	X	X	X		X			X
For the challenge	X		X		X	X		
To help with stress and coping		X	X			X		X
To make money		X			X	X		
Because you like the staff	X		X		X			
To be in a safe place	X	X			X			
For the food	X				X			
Because an adult makes you attend					X			

Note: An "X" in the cell indicates that this topic was mentioned at least once during a brainstorming session with youth. BA = Black/African American; L = Latino; AA = Arab; C = Chaldean.

because participants were from ethnic-specific community CBOs, and given the important gender differences found in the literature, we thought it important to examine gender, albeit limited and preliminary. Because this study sought to identify cross-cultural differences and similarities of relatively highly engaged youth, frequency counts were less of interest in this qualitative study. The categories of the reasons why some youth do not participate in youth programs and activities are listed in Table 3. An "X" in a cell indicates that a statement coded to that category was mentioned at least once during a brainstorming session with youth of that ethnic identity. The following paragraphs describe the topic areas that were mentioned across all ethnic groups as well as themes that were more specific to one gender or certain ethnicities. The quotations included in the following section were

Table 3
Reasons Why Young People Do Not Participate in Youth Programs and Activities

Broad Categories Mentioned While Brainstorming	Females				Males			
	BA	L	AA	C	BA	L	AA	C
Too busy/don't have time	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Have other interests	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Negative opinions of youth center	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Parents/guardians won't allow it	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
No transportation	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Prefer risky behaviors	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Negative opinions of others/peer pressure	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Not interested in activities at program	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Don't like rules of behavior at center	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Lazy		X	X		X	X	X	
Shy or uncomfortable	X	X	X		X	X		
Not allowed by courts or program staff	X	X		X	X	X		
Not enough money		X			X	X		X
Body image reasons	X	X	X			X		
Health reasons		X				X	X	
Safety issues	X	X		X				
Psychological reasons		X			X	X		
Don't like staff	X				X	X		
Don't like some people at program	X	X				X		
Lack information	X	X			X	X		
Language barrier		X				X		

Note: An "X" in the cell indicates that this topic was mentioned at least once during a brainstorming session with youth. BA = Black/African American; L = Latino; AA = Arab; C = Chaldean.

selected to represent the breadth of statements by youth expressing a particular concept. All quotes are presented with authentic word choice and contractions, as recorded from the audio transcripts or copied directly from the comments written by the participants during the brainstorming sessions.

Reasons Why Youth Participate

As expected, the data revealed both common and distinct response in regards to participation between genders and across ethnic groups. The common themes will be presented first, followed by examples of distinct responses.

In describing reasons why youth participate in youth programs, four themes emerged in each of the brainstorming sessions. These themes

included: (a) to keep young people off the streets, (b) to learn new skills, (c) to avoid boredom, and (d) to provide opportunities for fun, enjoyable activities. Statements related to these themes were generally the first reasons cited in the brainstorming sessions.

Staying off the streets. Comments related to this theme emphasized the perception of protection and or avoidance of dangerous situations. One participant stated, for example, “because you don’t want to be involved in street activities, because the streets don’t do anything but get you locked up” (M/BA/GR).⁵ Similarly, another female participant expressed, “Programs will teach us how not to get in trouble” (F/L/D), and a male participant suggested that participation in programs could also help youth get out of trouble, saying, “You can turn your life around . . . like if you’re starting to do bad, and if you join an activity, you never know, you might start from brand new” (M/AA/D).

To learn new skills. Regardless of gender or ethnicity, participants reported acquisition and mastery of life skills as important deterrents for participation. The types of skills identified by participants included to (a) “learn . . . like about diseases, conflict resolution” (F/BA/GR); (b) learn English; (c) learn about other cultures; (d) learn intercultural communication skills, or “speak right, how to talk to other people” (F/AA/D); and (f) learn job interview skills.

Avoid boredom. In each of the groups, the young people explained that one of the reasons for participation in youth programs was because “there’s nothing to do at home,” and the programs “give you something to do after school” (F/BA/GR).

Opportunities for fun and enjoyable activities. The common expression, “It’s fun,” was echoed across groups. The types of activities described as “fun” included (a) games, (b) sports, (c) spending time with friends, and (d) “lots of activities” (M/L/D).

What follows are statements that reflect unique themes that emerged within ethnic and/or gender groups. Themes that were important to African American females, for example, included the opportunities to (a) “prove that you can do something when someone said you can’t” (F/BA/D); (b) “talk to people about women things, or about your friends at school, or if you are thinking bad things about yourself” (F/BA/D); (c) form meaningful relationships with adults (e.g., “We like to be around Mr. X and Mr. Y—that’s why we come to the programs” (F/BA/GR). African American males, on the

other hand, conveyed the importance of participation as a means to foster their individuation. Comments included (a) “getting out of your house, away from your parents, away from your chores, and to get away from your brothers and sisters” (M/BA/D); (b) “so you don’t have to listen to your mom all day” (M/BA/GR) [the field notes indicate several of the other males in the group nodded and voiced approval]; (c) the opportunity to be involved in something positive; (d) being respected “so we can be looked up to by the little kids” (M/BA/GR); and (e) gaining self-confidence.

Unique themes expressed by Latinas included (a) chances to learn about cultures, (b) chances to learn about careers, (c) to be involved in the community (e.g., “to do something positive, to help become a better world or a better person” (F/L/GR), (d) acceptance by peers, (e) acceptance by program staff, and (f) “because they want to be part of something” (F/L/GR). Conversely, Latinos identified (a) involvement in sports, (b) a means to get out of the house (e.g., “people don’t want to stay home—[this] gives them something to do” (M/L/D); and (c) finding a job.

Unique themes that emerged for Arab females centered on the themes of personal development and connection to their community and global world. Specifically, participants conveyed that program participation can (a) “help make you outgoing and friendly to other people” (F/AA/D), (b) make “you feel more connected to others . . . to the world” (F/AA/D), (c) do something positive for the community, and (d) promote cultural education (e.g., “they teach you about other cultures and religion” [F/AA/D]). In contrast, Arab males emphasized academic benefits of participation in these programs. For example, as a group they explained that “after-school programs teach you how to do stuff so you get better at it, and they do it in fun ways” (M/AA/D).

Additional reasons expressed by Chaldean females centered on cultural adaptation in the United States. Specific benefits of program participation included: (a) homework assistance, (b) English literacy, and, (c) peer networking (e.g., Chaldean males also recognized the importance of homework assistance). Moreover, they also recognized that these programs offered general a safe environment where other forms of assistance could be accessed (e.g., “If you need help with something, not only schoolwork, but like drugs, or if a girl likes you, and you can talk to somebody here, like another girl or an adult, and they’ll tell you what to do” [M/C/D]).

Reasons Why Youth Do Not Participate

As expected, the data revealed both common and distinct responses in regards to nonparticipation between genders and across ethnic groups. The

common themes will be presented first, followed by examples of distinct responses.

Although four common themes emerged as to why peers might not participate in youth programs, the discussion across groups was more variable than the prior discussion on why young people chose to participate in youth programs. In some instances, only the label (e.g., too busy and they don't have time) was conveyed. The four general themes that emerged in each of the brainstorming sessions included (a) being too busy or lacking the time, (b) having other interests, (c) having negative opinions of the youth center, and (d) lacking parental permission.

What follows are statements that reflect unique themes that emerged within ethnic and/or gender groups. Themes that were important to African American females, for example, included (a) the perception that programs were boring, (b) "they think it's for little kids" (F/BA/GR), (c) lack of peers in the program (e.g., "I don't go no more because none of my friends go there" [F/BA/GR]), and (d) peer opinions (e.g., "it's not all right to come—you might get teased" [F/BA/D]). Peer opinions were also a dominant reason expressed by African American males. As one participant stated, "they feel that if they come here they gonna lose cool points with their boys" (M/BA/GR). Ridicule for participation was yet another theme; for example, "their friends call 'em stuff because they want to do something that's positive instead of negative" (M/BA/D) or chastising those who chose to participate for not engaging in risky behaviors as in "they're getting drunk," "hanging out with their boys," and "selling drugs." Finally, African American males voiced dissatisfaction with the adult facilitators of youth programs, as follows:

The way people run [the program] . . . like certain programs, people run it like they ain't never done nothing wrong in their lives, like they just perfect . . . and them be the best programs. They don't talk about nothing that's interesting or that you can relate to. (M/BA/GR)

Latinas commented that familial responsibilities took precedence over program participation. The Latinas that participated in these brainstorming sessions expressed parental concern for their safety in mixed-gender environments. Example of responses included (a) "fathers are strict because they don't like their daughters to be around boys" (F/L/D), (b) "parents treat girls differently than boys . . . like I can't go out on the front porch because there are boys out there" (F/L/D), and (c) parents insisted that an older sibling accompany her if she wanted to leave the house, a requirement that she found both inconvenient and embarrassing. Peer acceptance was also a key theme expressed by the Latinas, "they're frightened that people won't accept

them for who they are . . . like people won't like them, or they're gonna be alone for the activities because nobody picked them" (F/L/D).

Latino males verbalized that their peers might be less likely to participate in youth programs as they may be involved in "doing drugs," "getting high," and "busy with their girlfriends" (M/L/D). Latinos were the only group to mention the lack of information regarding programs as well as the expense of participation. Finally, the issue of personal image emerged as an issue of concern for Latinos: "They're embarrassed . . . too fat or too skinny" (M/L/D).

Arab females identified lack of self-esteem or confidence as a possible barrier to participation: "They think they can't do it . . . that it's hard" (F/AA/D). Peer ridicule was also identified as a potential barrier to participation. Although Arab females also expressed the lack of parental permission as a barrier for participation, cultural mores were more often the reason for lack of parental permission. For example, one participant explained that Arab females are not permitted to participate in co-ed swimming. Other parents will not allow their daughters to go out at night. One participant provided additional insight into cultural challenges as exemplified in the following written comment: "I want to mention something—that my best friend wants to work, but her brother will beat her and send her back to her country."

Arab males expressed that barriers to participation come from parental priorities of work or study. "I joined the football team, but my dad made me quit because I had to work . . . my dad tells me school is more important than work, and work is more important than sports. So if my grades are bad, dad tells me I need to do my school work" (M/AA/D). Peer ridicule is also a factor for Arab males.

Unique to Chaldean females was the issue of safety. Participants conveyed that they didn't think attending such programs was safe because "bad people are outside the building" (F/C/D). Similar to Latina and Arab females, Chaldean females expressed that their parents were concerned about their interactions with boys. Chaldean males, on the other hand, conveyed that their parents were more concerned about something bad happening to their sons if they participated in these youth programs. In addition, Chaldean males expressed that their peers were more likely to be involved in organized sports.

Discussion

According to this study, the reasons that motivate or inhibit ethnic urban youth participation in community-based programs are numerous and complex. The sheer volume of statements generated in the brainstorming sessions

(more than 300) attests to the diversity of reasons that may affect decisions regarding participation. As seen in the results, ethnic urban youth participate in youth programs for a number of reasons and not simply for immediate gratification and enjoyment. We believe it is this fact that may help families, schools, and community-based program staff broaden their offerings with more input from youth about what they want in a program.

Although data were presented for each ethnic group, generalization from comparisons between the ethnic groups is not advised for a variety of reasons. In addition to multiple cultural differences that are beyond the scope of this study, the communities served by the CBOs participating in this study were characterized by notable demographic differences. The school districts in the neighborhoods served by the African American and Latino CBOs in this study report high levels of poverty, as reflected in housing costs. Based on census data, the zip codes where these CBOs existed, and the neighborhoods that they served ranked in the highest 10% of all Michigan school districts for numbers of students receiving free or reduced lunch, accounting for 68% to 89% of enrolled students (for online data for the 1999-2000 school year, go to <http://www.ses.standardandpoors.com/>). These school districts also ranked in the highest 10% for the numbers of students living in single-parent households. Conversely, the CBOs, which serve the Arab and Chaldean populations in this study, were located in higher performing and moderately more affluent school districts. Approximately one third of students in these districts qualified for free or reduced lunch, and compared with the school districts serving African American and Latino communities, there were many more students living in two-parent households.

It is important to recall that the focus of data collection was to generate an expansive list of the reasons contributing to decisions to participate in youth programs. At times during these brainstorming sessions, the youth shouted out their reasons and the researcher rapidly wrote these down on a flip chart, sometimes with very little probing for elaboration. Similarly, for the reasons that were written by the youth themselves and handed to the researcher (to avoid sharing in public), it was impossible to probe for further explanation. Thus, although the list of reasons generated is fairly extensive, it should not be considered exhaustive, and further study could help clarify additional specific reasons for involvement. As an example, in several of the brainstorming sessions, one of the suggested reasons for participation was "to help get a job," but it is unclear what exactly the youth were referring to as a motivation for participation (e.g., job training skills such as interviewing or resume builders such as community service participation).

The ideas that emerged should be considered representative of the youth who took part in the brainstorming sessions. These findings cannot be

extrapolated to explain reasons of participation (or not) for *all* youth of a given ethnicity. However, there is much to be learned by considering the similarities that emerged in discussions across the ethnic groups.

Reasons for Participation

The young people who participated in the study emphasized the value of youth programs for providing a safe place that keeps them off the streets and away from trouble. In every brainstorming session, youth mentioned this as a very important reason. This finding is consistent with previous research concluding that youth programs in urban settings are valuable for a variety of reasons, but foremost among them is because they offer safe and alternative spaces for youth (Halpern et al., 2000; McGlaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Weiss et al., 2005). Halpern and his colleagues elaborate upon this, stating that these safe spaces afford youth an opportunity to be themselves, “to define themselves in ways that were neither gang-affiliated nor completely conformist to the “mainstream” values of the school system” (Halpern et al., 2000, p. 502). In the current study, the fact that “a place to keep off the streets” was one of the first responses in each of the brainstorming sessions attests to the validity given by these urban youth, representing four distinct ethnic groups, to the idea of youth program spaces as sanctuaries. Thus, youth programs need to ensure that their space of operation is safe both within the program and surrounding the programming.

Another notable feature to emerge from the study was the value that the youth place on the learning occurring in youth programs. In each youth meeting, there were discussions of the kinds of things that youth could learn by participating in such programs. For instance, the foreign-born youth mentioned how the programs offered assistance in learning English to help them fit in with United States’ culture. Furthermore, every group mentioned the types of skills that could be learned (e.g., conflict resolution, career skills, self-confidence, and cultural skills). This finding is even more meaningful given that the target question did not ask the youth to describe what they have learned or gained by participation in youth programs. Moreover, a study of inner-city youth in Philadelphia provides additional supportive evidence (Ginsburg et al., 2002). Specifically, more than half of the youth in this study ($N > 1,000$) were African American, and one third of the youth were Latino, and they rated proactive improvements for education and career preparation as two solutions that they believed would most influence their likelihood of achieving a positive future. The responses of the youth in the present study emphasized how much young people value and appreciate the learning opportunities that take place in youth programs.

The implication to practitioners is that most of the activities and events in their program should be addressing a skill objective.

The chance to do something positive, both for themselves and for the community, was also noted by many participants. The young people's comments expressed how much they valued being a role model for the younger children in their neighborhoods. Research has demonstrated how important adult role models can be in the lives of young people (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002; Perkins & Borden, 2003; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000), but the statements made by the youth in the present study demonstrate how young people personally value the opportunity to be role models. In 5 of the 11 brainstorming sessions, the youth expressed how important it was for them to be good examples for younger children. In the meeting with Arab females, they also described how important it was to demonstrate positive behavior for adults. One Arab female described how she had volunteered for a telethon following the aftermath of September 11, 2001, explaining, "It's important to show people that we can do it (help out)—I'm not saying this 'cause we're Arabic or something but to let them know that we are helping too" (F/AA/D). This finding echoes Eccles and Gootman's (2002) call to youth development professionals to build opportunities in youth programs for young people to develop a sense of mattering.

Reasons for Not Participating

Several notable themes emerged in the discussion of the reasons why young people do not participate in youth programs. In each brainstorming session, the youth stated that another interest was a major barrier to participation, most frequently described as unstructured activities, such as "hanging out" or "being with friends." These comments often were discussed in tandem with another commonly voiced barriers, which could be categorized as negative opinions of the youth programs (e.g., they are boring). One way to interpret these barriers is to view them as the flip side of the reasons driving participation. If youth programs were developed that contained the elements that youth identified as motivating their participation, including opportunities to learn and the chance to contribute positively to the community, it is possible that more young people would chose to "hang out" at the community-based programs. Another insight into removing programmatic barriers emerged from discussions about the quality of staff. Negative perceptions of the programs, manifested in program avoidance, was, as one African American male said succinctly, "Ain't nobody gonna come . . . if you're saying things everyone has heard before . . . [It] needs to be something you can relate to" (M/BA/GR).

Another barrier to participation related to family restrictions. This topic came up in every youth meeting, but there were notable differences between the genders. Male participants discussed how their parents would not allow them to participate in youth programs, either because the parent placed a priority on working or studying or because the restriction was a form of punishment related to grades or behavior. Female participants said that they were not allowed to participate because they had to do chores or because their parents were afraid to allow them out, both for physical safety reasons as well as for fear of involvement with boys. These restrictions seemed to particularly affect participation by Latinas and Arab females. In their study of Hispanic youth in Chicago's West Town, Halpern et al. (2000) reported similar restrictions on young women's movements and activities largely because of cultural norms in Hispanic families. The Arab females in the present study indicated that familial restrictions could be quite severe, as was poignantly demonstrated in the written comments. This finding has a major implication for youth development professionals; that is, practitioners may want to be proactive in their recruitment efforts and target building relationships and trust with parents to establish a child's permission to participate.

Young women from families who immigrated to the United States within the present generation expressed the barriers enforced by such familial restrictions more frequently. Their comments reflect some of the additional challenges faced by young women who are coming of age in U.S. society in a family structure that maintains expectations and restrictions from another culture. This area of study is worth pursuing specifically as it relates to participation in youth programs and youth development.

In each of the group discussions, it appeared to be much easier for the young people to come up with reasons that may prevent youth from participating in programs as opposed to the reasons that would motivate them to participate. This could partially be explained by the fact that the discussions about the reasons for not participating followed the brainstorming session about reasons for participating; thus, the youth were more accustomed to the procedure. Also, this question was deliberately phrased to query youth about the reasons that had stopped them personally from participating, but it also allowed them to express reasons they believed might be preventing *other youth* from participating. Given that most of the youth responses were phrased in the third person, the researchers could not determine whether the reasons expressed reflect personal experience or speculation. Admittedly, this is a limitation of the study, yet if the question had been phrased to query only for personal reasons (e.g., what are the reasons you personally are/are not participating?), it is unlikely that we would have accumulated the variety of responses that emerged from phrasing the questions the way they were.

Future studies may want explore the barriers experienced and perceived by those young people who are currently *not* participating in youth programs. Other implications of this study that merit further exploration include (a) comparing the youth participation patterns and reasons in terms of community-based CBOs versus national organizations, especially within underrepresented and economically distressed communities; (b) examining whether programs with more structured activities focused on specific types of learning activities and opportunities for mattering are more likely to sustain youth's interest; (c) investigating whether recruiting through parents is more likely to lead to participation of girls who may be more likely not to be permitted to attend; and (d) examining whether having youth workers who are of similar background to the youth influences the likelihood of increased positive relationships for youth participants.

Notes

1. Chaldeans originate from the region that is now Iraq. Chaldeans are Christians, and many have immigrated to the United States. The 2000 census reported 34,484 Chaldeans in Michigan, but estimates from social services agencies suggest that there are between 45,000 and 90,000 living in southeast Michigan (M. Fakhouri, personal communication, June 10, 2002).

2. In this study, the term *ethnic minority youth* refers to African American, Arab, Chaldean, and Latino/Hispanic youth.

3. For detailed information on the concept systems methodology and how it is used to conduct concept mapping, see Trochim (1989).

4. As noted, there is a less than desirable *N* when looking at the gender groups, especially for Chaldean females ($n = 3$). The Chaldean females were quite difficult to recruit for this study because of their lack of participation in these programs and the lack of parental consent for participating in the study. Given these issues, we felt it imperative to examine them as a group if only in an initial way. Our hope is that this initial examination will enable future research to be targeted toward this group especially.

5. The following coding scheme was used to designate participants by gender, racial identity, and metropolitan area: F = female; M = male; AA = Arab; BA = Black/African American; C = Chaldean; L = Latino; D = Detroit metropolitan area; GR = Grand Rapids.

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