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Factors limiting SGM youths' involvement in nonmetropolitan SGM community organizations

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ABSTRACT

Sexual and gender minority (SGM) youths face risks due to growing up with stigmatized identities. SGM organizations minimize these risks by reducing isolation, promoting positive identity development, and providing access to supportive resources. However, nonmetropolitan SGM youths may have high risks with low access to SGM organizations. Little research has been conducted on nonmetropolitan SGM organizations. This study utilized in-depth interviews and open-ended survey items to explore the factors limiting SGM youths' involvement in nonmetropolitan SGM organizations. Findings revealed three factors limiting involvement: accessibility, utility, and stigma. Implications for future research and practice with SGM youths are discussed.

Sexual and gender minority (SGM) youths live in a society that marginalizes their identities, increasing their risk of victimization and poor well-being (Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013). Nonmetropolitan SGM youths face comparable or greater risks as do urban SGM youths (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012; Poon & Saewyc, 2009). The community represents a potential source of stigma or support that has received growing attention in recent years (Woodford, Kulick, Paceley, & Hong, 2015; Gray, 2009; Oswald, Cuthbertson, Lazarevic, & Goldberg, 2010). SGM organizations are one potential source of community support for SGM youths; yet, little scholarly attention has been paid to these organizations. SGM organizations in nonmetropolitan communities may operate more informally than urban SGM organizations (Oswald & Culton, 2003). To promote the well-being of nonmetropolitan SGM youths, we must understand the role that these formal and informal organizations play in their lives. Therefore, this study sought to understand SGM youths' perceptions of the factors limiting their involvement in nonmetropolitan SGM organizations. Understanding what limits their involvement can provide

important implications for SGM organizations to reach a greater number of SGM youths to reduce their risk and promote well-being.

SGM youth risks

As adolescents, many of the risks SGM youths face are normative (Steinberg & Morris, 2001); however, SGM youths are at increased risk over their heterosexual and cisgender peers due to the societal stigma against SGM individuals. Specifically, SGM youths face greater victimization in their schools (Birkett, Russell, & Corliss, 2014), homes, and communities (Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler, & Johnson, 2004) than non-SGM youths. This victimization may result in depressive symptoms (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013), suicidal ideation and attempts (Robinson & Espelage, 2011), and physical health problems such as substance use (Goldbach, Tanner-Smith, Bagwell, & Dunlap, 2014), risky sexual behavior (Kann et al., 2011), and eating disorders or weight concerns (Austin, Nelson, Birkett, Calzo, & Everett, 2013; Calzo, Austin, & Micali, 2018).

Nonmetropolitan communities and SGM youths

Nonmetropolitan communities represent complex contexts for SGM youths. For the purposes of this study, nonmetropolitan is defined as cities or towns situated in counties with populations less than 250,000. This definition encompasses both traditionally rural communities and small to mid-size towns classified as small metropolitan but not adjacent to major metropolitan areas (National Center for Health Statistics [NCHS], 2014). This definition is consistent with research on nonmetropolitan SGM adults and families (see Oswald et al., 2010).

The risks that SGM youths face may be exacerbated in nonmetropolitan communities. For example, compared to urban SGM youths, nonmetropolitan SGM youths report overhearing more homophobic language at school (in a nationally representative survey; Palmer et al., 2012), experiencing greater amounts of victimization (in regionally representative and convenience sample surveys; Poon & Saewyc, 2009; Rickard & Yancey, 2018), and having less access to supportive SGM resources (in convenience sample surveys and interviews; Rickard & Yancey, 2018; Yarbrough, 2004). Sizable, regionally representative surveys have also found that nonmetropolitan sexual minority youths (SMY), particularly males, report more suicidal thoughts than urban SMY (Poon & Saewyc, 2009). SMY in nonmetropolitan communities also report trying more types of drugs and engaging in binge drinking more often than urban SMY (Poon & Saewyc, 2009).

Despite the risks that nonmetropolitan SGM youths face, there is also research showing the strengths and positive aspects of growing up in a nonmetropolitan community. For example, some research indicates that nonmetropolitan SGM individuals, such as one purposive sample of survey respondents (Leedy & Connolly, 2008), report close connections to other SGM people, which may serve as a protective factor against the risks they face. In an extended ethnographic study, Gray (2009) discovered that SGM youths in rural areas found pathways to well-being in different, but not inferior, ways than urban youths. Thus, nonmetropolitan communities are multifaceted; the extant research is insufficient to understand the complexity of such communities' impacts on SGM youths and their access to support. However, it is clear that SGM youths in nonmetropolitan communities need support related to their SGM identities. One type of support that may be particularly relevant in nonmetropolitan communities is SGM organizations.

SGM organizations

SGM organizations are a means of support for SGM youths who may not have access to school-based supports or who prefer to maintain privacy about their SGM identity in school. The majority of SGM community centers (90%) provide programs for SGM youths, including outreach and education, support groups, social/recreational groups, health/wellness services, drop-in hours, and leadership development (Centerlink & LGBT Movement Advancement Project, 2016). In nonmetropolitan communities, these organizations may exist as informal groups within non-SGM organizations (Oswald & Culton, 2003), making them more difficult to access for research purposes than formal SGM organizations. Indeed, no literature was located that examined the use of SGM organizations among SGM youths in nonmetropolitan communities; however, Gray (2009) discusses SGM youths' use of informal groups and meet-ups, as well as online communities, for support in rural communities.

Some existing research on SGM organizations illustrates the variety of possible roles such organizations may serve in promoting well-being for SGM youths. Two modestly sized ($N = 17$ and $N = 12$) qualitative interview studies found that SGM youths sought support from an SGM organization in order to access supportive adults because they were not getting support for their SGM identities at home (Nesmith, Burton, & Cosgrove, 1999; Romijnders et al., 2017). Relatedly, in another qualitative study, which triangulated survey, focus group, and community mapping techniques, SGM youths of color ($N = 29$) indicated that the SGM organization was a space that felt like home and in which youths could build community (Garamel,

Walker, Rivera, & Golub, 2014). Nesmith and colleagues (1999) reported that the youths in their exploratory, qualitative interview study ($N = 17$) identified the SGM organization as their primary place of support. The SGM community organization may also directly impact the well-being of SGM youths. Craig, McInroy, Austin, Smith, and Engle (2012) evaluated the impact of a "strengths-based case management" program on the self-esteem and self-efficacy of SGM youth in a major metropolitan city. The program provided individualized case management services to SGM youths in the community ($N = 162$). Quantitative analysis of established psycho-metric measures indicated that participants' self-esteem and self-efficacy increased significantly from pretest to posttest. Romijnders and colleagues (2017) qualitatively examined the impact of an SGM organization, specifically the role of social ties, among SGM youths ($N = 12$). They found that SGM youths expressed feeling a sense of belonging, increased confidence, and increased self-esteem as a result of their participation in the program.

This small but growing body of research suggests that SGM organizations may be important sources of support for SGM youths. As is evident, little attention has been paid to the role of SGM organizations in SGM youths' lives, particularly in nonmetropolitan areas. Thus, SGM organizations represent an understudied, but potentially important, supportive resource for SGM youths. None of the extant research has explored nonmetropolitan SGM youths' involvement in SGM organizations. Understanding the factors that inhibit involvement is critical to increasing access to support, minimizing risk, and promoting well-being.

Involvement in SGM organizations

Several studies have examined the associations with, motivations for, and barriers to involvement in SGM community organizations, primarily among SGM adults. O'Donnell and colleagues (2002) found in a large, purposive survey ($N = 465$) that SGM adults who were more "out" about their SGM status were more involved in SGM organizations. In a quantitative analysis of a large, convenience sample of survey respondents ($N = 426$), Paceley, Keene, and Lough (2015) identified three factors associated with increased likelihood for SGM adults to be involved in a nonmetropolitan SGM organization: feeling attached to one's community, connectedness to the local SGM community, and having experienced anti-SGM victimization by a stranger. In a series of studies drawing on rich qualitative data from participant observations, interviews, and focus groups, Author and colleagues (2015) identified six factors motivating adult participants to be involved in a nonmetropolitan SGM community organization: access to support, strengthening a local SGM community, giving back to the

community, affirming their SGM identity, supporting an SGM organization, and making a connection between their SGM identity and their profession. Furthermore, Paceley, Keene, and Lough (2016) also identified SGM adults' barriers to involvement in SGM organizations. Barriers originated within the individual (concealment of SGM identity, personality characteristics such as shyness), organization (lack of diversity in programming, conflictual group dynamics, lack of awareness of programs, workplace/school climate), and community (rurality and hostile climate). Although these studies suggest possible barriers to SGM youth involvement, the experiences of youths may be different from those of adults, given their dependence on parents or guardians, inability to transport themselves, and potentially earlier stage of SGM identity development. One study was located that examined SGM youths' perceptions of their service needs and experiences (Wagaman, 2014). The findings, drawn from qualitative interviews with 15 youths, indicated that several barriers to involvement in SGM organizations existed, including feeling excluded at SGM organizations and SGM service staff making assumptions about youths.

This collection of research suggests that understanding the experiences of nonmetropolitan SGM youths and how they access support in their communities is critical. Understanding the role that SGM organizations play in small towns, particularly the factors that may limit involvement by SGM youths, can help us create and sustain programs to reduce risk and promote well-being. Therefore, this study examined SGM youths' perceptions of the factors limiting their involvement in SGM organizations in nonmetropolitan communities.

Methods

This study utilized qualitative methods based in grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), including in-depth interviews and open-ended survey items.

In-depth interview

Interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of the factors that limit their involvement in SGM organizations (defined broadly as both formal and informal organizations). The first author conducted all interviews. Due to her dual involvement as a volunteer at an SGM community organization in one town within the study region, it was important to engage in bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2012) to minimize researcher bias and power. Participants were informed of the researcher's dual role and assured that their involvement in the study would remain confidential.

In addition, participants were assured that their involvement in the organization would not be affected by their decision to participate in the study. The researcher also wrote memos about the data collection and analysis process in order to document and analyze potential bias and preconceived ideas.

Interviews were audio recorded, lasted an average of an hour, and took place at SGM organizations, libraries, coffee shops, or participants' homes. They were guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit information and stories about participants' identity and demographics, their community, and community support and resources. Questions pertinent to these analyses included "Are there places in your community where people who are LGBTQ can go and be safe?"; "What resources do you have in your community that can help meet your needs as an LGBTQ youth?"; and "Tell me about the resources you have/haven't used." Consistent with grounded theory strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), as categories emerged in the data, the researcher modified the interview guide to include additional questions on emerging categories. Participants were provided a $25 gift card for participation.

Online survey

An online survey was designed to reach a larger sample of youths. Survey items included demographics, established measures, and open-ended questions about participants' perceptions of their communities and local SGM organizations; only the open-ended items were utilized in these analyses. Sample questions included "What keeps you from participating in LGBTQ organizations in or near your community?" and "Are there resources you do not have access to that you would use if available?" Participants entered a drawing to win one of 10 $20 retail gift cards. All interview participants also completed the survey.

Sampling and recruitment

SGM youths between the ages of 14 and 18 living in counties with populations less than 250,000 in one Midwestern state were eligible to participate. Individual town sizes ranged from populations of 3,000 to 120,000; none were adjacent to major metropolitan areas. This range of towns, therefore, included traditionally rural communities, as well as communities considered small metropolitan by the NCHS (2014). Including a range of community sizes between rural and midsize towns allows for the consideration of community size on a continuum rather than as a strict binary of urban and rural. This is important because the current research base comparing urban

and rural communities tends to miss smaller towns that are classified as metropolitan, yet are not adjacent to major metropolitan communities. This definition of nonmetropolitan is consistent with research on nonmetropolitan SGM adults (e.g., Oswald et al., 2010).

Participants were recruited via professional referral, flyers posted in SGM and non-SGM spaces (such as libraries, schools, coffee shops, and SGM organizations), and social media advertisements (primarily Facebook). SGM community organizations in the region were provided with a summary of findings and implications. Participants self-selected to participate in the study; no interested youths who met eligibility requirements were turned away. Due to the inherent risk involved in asking SGM youths to obtain parental permission to participate in the study (Taylor, 2008), the university ethics board granted a waiver of parental consent. Interview participants provided verbal assent/consent; survey participants clicked a link confirming their consent to participate. Interview participants completed both the interview and the survey; however, to avoid duplication, these analyses only utilized data from the interviews and the survey-only participants.

Participants

A total of 193 youths participated in the study. Survey participants ($N = 193$) were between 14 and 18 years old ($M = 16.4$); 78.2% White, 5.1% Black, 4.1% Hispanic/Latino, 1.0% Asian, and 11.9% multiracial; 58% female, 21.2% male, 17.1% transgender, 3.6% gender questioning; and 29.5% bisexual, 21.2% pansexual, 13.5% gay, 11.4% lesbian, 5.2% queer, 11.9% questioning, and 5.7% other. Interview participants ($N = 34$) were between 14 and 18 years old ($M = 16$) and identified their race/ethnicity as 56% White, 9% Black, 3% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 26.5% multiracial; gender as 53% female, 26% male, 15% transgender, and 6% gender questioning; and sexual orientation as 29% bisexual, 29% pansexual, 15% gay, 9% lesbian, 9% queer, 9% questioning, and 5.7% other. There were no significant differences between survey-only and interview-plus-survey participants on demographic variables with the exception of race: significantly more interview participants identified as people of color than did survey-only participants ($\chi^2(1) = 7.92$, $p = .005$). Pseudonyms are used for interview participants.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using grounded theory analytic strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to identify patterns and categories in the data. Analysis began simultaneously with data collection to engage in constant

comparison of data (Hood, 2007). Coding of interview statements and open-ended survey items took place through an iterative process involving three stages: open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During open coding, data were categorized into discrete parts to develop a coding scheme. Axial coding involved defining the properties and dimensions of categories and making connections between categories and subcategories. Selective coding involved refining the categories and ensuring their validity with the data.

Data quality

Several measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the findings and overall data quality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Multiple coders were used to code data and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. A small sub-set ($N = 5$) of participants engaged in member checking; the researcher met with participants to share preliminary findings and solicit feedback about their validity. Finally, peer debriefing was used to discuss emerging findings with disinterested peers. Collegial feedback allowed for additional rounds of coding and analysis.

Findings

The findings revealed three categories of factors limiting SGM youths' involvement in nonmetropolitan SGM organizations: accessibility, utility, and stigma.

Accessibility

Accessibility related to whether an SGM organization existed or youths could access an existing one. Specific factors included distance, lack of information, and conflict with parents.

Distance

Some participants indicated that while they would utilize an SGM organization if one were available, there were none within driving distance. Hazel (age 17) described how she "heard there's places in [nearby town] but for someone who doesn't have a car, that's hard." Jack (18) was able to access an SGM organization in a neighboring town but still recognized the distance created a barrier: "I love (going), but I don't love the gas it takes… there's been a couple of times that we couldn't go because we had no money." One survey participant (17) commented that SGM organizations were "too far away." It is not surprising that distance was a factor limiting

involvement in nonmetropolitan SGM organizations. However, it is important to note that the distance barrier could be overcome in the presence of supportive parents. Sam (18) stated: "Well, with my mom, of course, she's very supportive … before I had my own car, she would drive me to the center." In addition, this finding suggests that although SGM organizations may exist within a county, and thus deemed "available" to SGM youths, they may not be accessible to youths outside of the primary service area, thus creating a barrier to receiving support. Distance was a barrier for both youths in midsize towns and small, rural towns, although it was discussed more often by youths in smaller towns.

Lack of information

Participants also indicated a barrier to participation was lack of information about existing SGM organizations. They described how an SGM organization was in their town, but they did not have access to information about it to know whether to attend or not. Clementine (15) stated that a barrier for her was not "knowing about it. I would have never found this (place) on my own." Lizzy (16) indicated that she knew the SGM organization had "different kinds of groups and meetings. I didn't know when they were. I didn't know what times they were, where it was, how do I know if I'm eligible?" Oliver (17) utilized an SGM center in his small town but stated that attendance had been low because it "is not incredibly well-known or advertised." Dani (14) shared that she thought "there should be more ways to find out about places like this because you always have to be specifically looking for stuff … it makes me feel like an outsider because … I can't just find them." Thus, even when SGM organizations were present in a community, their lack of advertising or marketing to SGM youths sometimes prevented SGM youths from being able to access the support they offered.

Conflict with parents

Finally, SGM youths indicated they sometimes could not access SGM organizations because of their parents' unwillingness to allow them to participate. Dani (14) shared how she wanted to attend youth group meetings at an SGM organization in her town: "I was really, really wanting to go to it, but then when I asked my mom, she's … like 'haha, you're funny' … I've never been able to get that kind of help because my mom [is] really mean about stuff like that." Amber (15) stated that because her "parents have always been against it, I've never been allowed to go to any of those things." Some youths were not out to their parents about their SGM identity, and this presented an accessibility issue. Chloe (15) lived in a very

small town but knew of SGM organizations in a town 40 minutes away. She said, "They have clubs and groups of gay people in [neighboring town] … [I] probably [couldn't go] until I told my parents." Adele (14) stated, "It's harder to reach out and get [that support] without coming into some problem, like explaining to my family what I'm doing…. Even just being in GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance] in middle school was World War III to my dad." A survey participant (16) indicated they could not participate in community-based SGM groups because of their parent's disapproval. Thus, accessibility was limited when SGM youths could not get to an SGM organization because they were either not out to their parents or their parents were not supportive of SGM issues.

Utility

The second category of factors limiting involvement was utility—whether youths felt the organization could meet their needs. Specific factors included a lack of congruence between what SGM youths needed and what was offered and interpersonal conflict within the organization.

Congruence

Congruence was discussed as a match between what type of SGM organization or group was available and what SGM youths felt they needed. Some youths discussed wanting to utilize an SGM organization to meet other SGM youths and have fun. Dani (14) stated that she wished "there was a place we could go to have fun, to talk and stuff." However, SGM organizations were primarily perceived as providing structured support groups. Hughes (17) explained: "Personally, I don't need it. If I did I would go to the [SGM organization] … I know that's there, it's just … I saw it as a resource where people went to for help … not just going in general." Will (16) discussed using his local SGM organization and how it did not fit what he wanted: "[The SGM organization] has a youth group …. It felt more like a support group to me, because we got in a circle and had to say something good that happened to us this week …." Oliver (17) said a barrier to him using the SGM organization was "maybe sometimes a lack of concrete activities planned. If there was a special night that people are interested in, I could talk to more people. Maybe getting outside the building, doing stuff. Have a barbecue or potlucks." Transgender youths indicated there was a lack of transgender-specific programming. Chloe (15) said she needed "just a place where people who are openly [transgender] can just go and hang out." When SGM youths did not see a match between their perceived need and program offerings, this was a barrier.

Interpersonal conflict

The other utility factor limiting involvement related to conflict within an SGM organization. Youths described having access to these supports but avoiding utilizing them because of conflict with former dating partners or other peers. Morris (18) discussed wanting to use the SGM center earlier in his adolescence: "After I came out, it was always like, 'well, I just stopped talking to this person. I know that they go there, so I'm not gonna go there, 'cause that's just gonna be awkward.'" Joey (14) discussed how he used the SGM organization, but "one time my ex went [there]… then I thought 'well, if you're gonna start going then I'm not gonna go anymore.'" Some participants described not using SGM organizations because of "rude people" or "the community in the area is so small, there were often problems with drama," or feeling a lack of congruence with how other SGM people expressed their SGM identity. Interpersonal conflict as a barrier to participation may be even more pronounced in nonmetropolitan towns where the SGM community is already small.

Stigma

The final category, stigma, acted as a factor limiting involvement when SGM youths were prevented from participating because of their fears that stigma in their community or larger society would result in victimization or discrimination. Stigma was different from accessibility because youths had access to supports but were hesitant to use them because of the stigma surrounding SGM identities in society. Sasuke (16) explained: "There's a stigma. Even if you're straight, if you go there, you don't want—I wouldn't want people to think I'm gay." Morris (18) explained: "Initially, when I first came out, it was just like 'Well, what if somebody sees me there? Then what?'" Societal stigma toward SGM people often intersected with whether youths were out about their SGM identity to create a barrier to involvement. Quinn (15) explained how "… if you're not completely open with everybody, just hiding the fact that you're coming to a place like this…" is difficult. Travis (14) discussed stigma toward SGM identities and how he felt increased visibility of SGM people could counteract this stigma:

> I think the most important thing is if queer people are visible. If you grow up in some place and you feel like you're the only one, or you feel like you're a very small minority, and you can't access other mentors, you can't access other peers, you don't have any role models, I think that can be very damaging.

Thus, stigma toward SGM individuals in the local community, as well as larger society, sometimes prevented youths from accessing support.

Discussion

This study explored SGM youths' perceptions of the factors limiting their involvement in nonmetropolitan SGM organizations. Findings revealed three categories of factors: accessibility of SGM organizations, utility of SGM organizations, and societal stigma toward SGM people. It is clear that SGM youths may need SGM-specific supports to positively develop their SGM identities (Wagaman, 2014). Although school-based supports can promote well-being among SGM youths (Higa et al., 2014), some youths may attend schools without these supports or prefer to utilize supports outside school. Formal and informal SGM organizations, therefore, represent an important source of support for SGM youths. The factors identified by the youths in this study that inhibited their involvement in SGM organizations represent a step toward understanding the role of SGM organizations as supportive resources for nonmetropolitan SGM youths. This study contributes to the literature on SGM youths and social work practice in communities by highlighting areas of potential intervention to increase the accessibility of support from nonmetropolitan SGM organizations. This study also extends the important work conducted on rural SGM youths (Gray, 2009) and SGM adults and families in rural communities (Oswald & Culton, 2003).

Factors limiting involvement in nonmetropolitan SGM organizations

The factors limiting involvement identified by youths in this study may exacerbate their risks by limiting participation in a resource aimed to support youths' growth and development. These factors are somewhat different from those described in a recent study about an urban SGM organization. Specifically, participants in Wagaman's (2014) study described feeling excluded at SGM organizations. It may be that community size affected why the youths in the current study did not identify exclusion as a barrier. In an urban setting, there are likely more youth participants and staff or volunteers involved in a group, potentially increasing the risk of youths feeling excluded. Within the SGM organizations in this study, often only a few youths attended groups at a given time. Despite this difference between the two studies, Wagaman's (2014) participants also identified transportation and geographic access as barriers to participating in SGM organizations, similar to the youths in this study. In addition, some of the current study's findings echo those of Paceley et al. (2016) on barriers to SGM adult participation in nonmetropolitan SGM organizations, including interpersonal conflict within organizations, lack of awareness of programs, and a hostile community climate.

Accessibility was the most discussed barrier to utilizing SGM community organizations in this study. This was primarily because only three formal SGM organizations were available in the sampled region, requiring many youths to travel to access support. Sometimes formal and informal SGM organizations were available, but access was limited because of unaccepting parents, lack of transportation, cost of gas to travel to a nearby community, or a lack of information about when and where youth groups met. This is consistent with Higa and colleagues' (2014) study that found that youths in rural areas reported a lack of SGM organizations, and, even in places where SGM organizations existed, youths reported access issues, especially when organizations relied on volunteers to operate youth groups. Although this finding was relevant for youths across community sizes in this study, it was discussed much more among the most rural youths. It is not surprising that accessibility, primarily distance, was a factor limiting involvement for the youths in this study given that they lived in rural communities and smaller towns; however, that does not diminish its importance. It was clear that distance was an issue not just for the most rurally isolated youths but also for youths who were located within the "service area" of an SGM organization. This is essential information for leaders of SGM organizations to understand in order to increase accessibility of their programs.

Utility was also a major barrier discussed by youth participants, occurring when youths wanted to utilize an SGM organization but it did not conform to what they needed or wanted. For example, a lack of congruence between need/want and availability was a barrier particularly for transgender and gender-questioning youths. In their interviews, they described a stark lack of transgender-specific resources in their communities. The lack of transgender resources is reflected in recent research, as well (McGuire & Conover-Williams, 2010). Finally, societal stigma was a barrier identified by the youths in this study. This finding is also reflected in a study of barriers to participation in nonmetropolitan SGM organizations among SGM adults (Paceley 2016). This finding intersected with how out youths were about their SGM identity; stigma concerns were often related to a fear of being outed and then facing subsequent victimization.

Strengths and limitations

This study has both strengths and limitations. As an exploratory study attending to a vulnerable population and an understudied topic, this study is strong in its use of qualitative methods with a relatively large qualitative sample. Exploring the perspectives of SGM youths themselves allowed for greater understanding of the factors limiting their involvement than may have been gathered from other methods, such as closed-ended surveys. The

study was further strengthened by the input of multiple researchers and the insight provided through member checking with youth participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Despite these areas of strength, this study also presents limitations. As is common in SGM research, the sample for this study was self-selected, limiting generalizability. In addition, the qualitative categories for analysis were fully developed, but some classifications warrant further data collection to reach saturation, particularly the stigma factor. Overall, the study produced meaningful knowledge that can increase and strengthen research and practice approaches to the barriers to SGM youths' utilization of SGM community organizations in nonmetropolitan areas.

Implications for practice

These findings have important implications relevant to social work practice in nonmetropolitan communities. By minimizing the barriers to involvement in nonmetropolitan communities, SGM organizations may be able to act as an important supportive resource in the lives of SGM youths, thus decreasing their risks and promoting well-being. Social workers and SGM youth workers could enhance accessibility by providing informational resources about local SGM community organizations to teachers, counselors, and coaches to disseminate to students who may need SGM resources; providing SGM programming in accessible spaces such as schools, affirming religious spaces, or libraries throughout a service area; coordinating carpooling with neutral drop-off sites; and exploring online chat options for SGM youths who cannot access the physical organization. Utility could be enhanced by providing diverse programming that offers both support and social options and by providing services on conflict resolution within group settings. Finally, stigma as a barrier may be reduced by promoting acceptance and tolerance in the community through community education programs and ensuring the confidentiality of group participants.

In many nonmetropolitan communities, is it likely that there will not be SGM-dedicated social services; therefore, there is a critical need for other social service settings, such as mental health centers, public health services, or school counselors, to be SGM-friendly and inclusive. If resources are available, SGM-affirming organizations can benefit from conducting needs assessments to determine the needs of SGM youth sand areas for improvement in their service provision. Individual social workers and organizations unable to conduct local assessments can increase their skills and improve their resources by accessing online SGM resources such as Advocates for Youth and The Trevor Project.

Implications for research

This study also has several implications for research. Future empirical work should attend to the ways in which SGM-specific resources, such as community organizations, impact well-being and positive development. It is also important that future research attend to the geographic continuum in which SGM youths are situated. Comparisons between rural and urban areas leave out SGM youths in midsize towns whose experiences may be unique. Research exploring the particular needs of nonmetropolitan SGM youths, SGM community organizations, and the ways in which social workers can intervene to reduce risks and promote well-being among this population are needed.

Conclusion

This study identified three possible categories of factors limiting involvement in nonmetropolitan SGM organizations among SGM youths. Reducing barriers pertaining to access, lack of fit with youths' needs, and societal stigma may allow SGM youths in nonmetropolitan areas to access support in their communities more readily. Social workers and SGM youth workers must be at the forefront of decreasing barriers to supportive resources and increasing and improving resources for SGM youths in small towns.

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