

Out-of-School Time Matters: Activity Involvement and Positive Development among Coos County Youth

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Background

Youth in the United States spend about 50 percent of their waking hours in out-of-school free time pursuits.¹ How they spend this time may facilitate positive development and growth experiences or place them at risk for negative outcomes. Youth who are engaged in constructive pursuits, such as extracurricular activities, volunteering, or sports during their free time, are more likely to develop initiative, better understand themselves in relation to others, experience optimism toward the future, and develop skills and competencies that promote a successful transition to adulthood.² On the other hand, youth who report unconstructive time use, such as “hanging out” and high levels of boredom during their free time, are at an increased risk for substance use, delinquency, and school dropout.³

Understanding free time use and its associated outcomes among youth may be particularly important in rural communities facing economic hardship. Evidence suggests that youth in these communities have higher numbers of unoccupied hours in their daily lives and that rural communities may have fewer resources available to provide the infrastructure (for example, transportation and location) or the funding needed to support positive youth activities.⁴ Despite concerns about rural school dropout, unemployment, and poverty,⁵ research on free time activities among youth has so far focused mainly on those who live in urban or suburban settings. As part of an ongoing survey at the Carsey Institute, we are fortunate to have access to current survey data regarding self-reported free time use among youth in Coos County, New Hampshire, a rural county where residents have faced increased poverty and unemployment and where the loss of good manufacturing jobs in the pulp and paper industry have raised concerns about

Key Findings

- Coos County youth report participating in an average of five and a half out-of-school free time activities over twelve months. There were important differences between girls and boys; girls reported participation in an average of 6.3 activities, while boys reported participation in an average of only 4.9 activities. In addition, considerably more boys fell into the “low-involvement” group compared to girls (38 percent versus 19 percent).
- Coos County youth who were the most involved in positive activities during their out-of-school time reported higher grades, a more positive attitude towards school, a stronger sense of belonging at school, and more positive expectations for the future than both their moderately and least involved peers.
- Coos County youth who were least involved in out-of-school activities looked strikingly different from their more involved peers. This highlights a potential risk for the fairly large number of Coos County youth, particularly boys, who have little involvement in out-of-school activities.

the long-term availability of opportunities for youth.⁶ This data will allow us to address the research gap by examining patterns among rural youth.

How Involved are Coos County Youth in Constructive Out-of-School Activities?

Students were asked whether they participated in sixteen different free-time activities,⁷ in the past twelve months. Students reported participating in an average of five-and-a-half activities. Because studies have found that gender may impact opportunities to participate and the choices that youth make about participation,⁸ we looked at experiences separately for boys and girls. There were significant sex differences, with boys participating in an average of just under five activities ($M = 4.9$) and girls participating in over six ($M = 6.3$). In order to describe patterns of activity involvement, we separated the youth into three groups (low, me-

dium, and high involvement) based on the number of these out-of-school activities in which each youth was involved. The three groups were low, defined as fewer than three activities (28 percent of youth included); medium, defined as between three to six activities (36 percent of youth); and high, defined as being involved in more than seven activities (36 percent of youth).

Following up on gender differences, we also found that a considerably larger proportion of boys were in the low-involvement group (38 percent) compared to girls (19 percent) and that significantly more girls were in the high-involvement group (43 percent) compared to boys (29 percent: see Figure 1). These findings are consistent with previous research, suggesting that adolescent girls participate in both more activities overall and in a wider range of out-of-school activities.

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF COOS COUNTY YOUTH IN THE THREE ACTIVITY INVOLVEMENT GROUPS

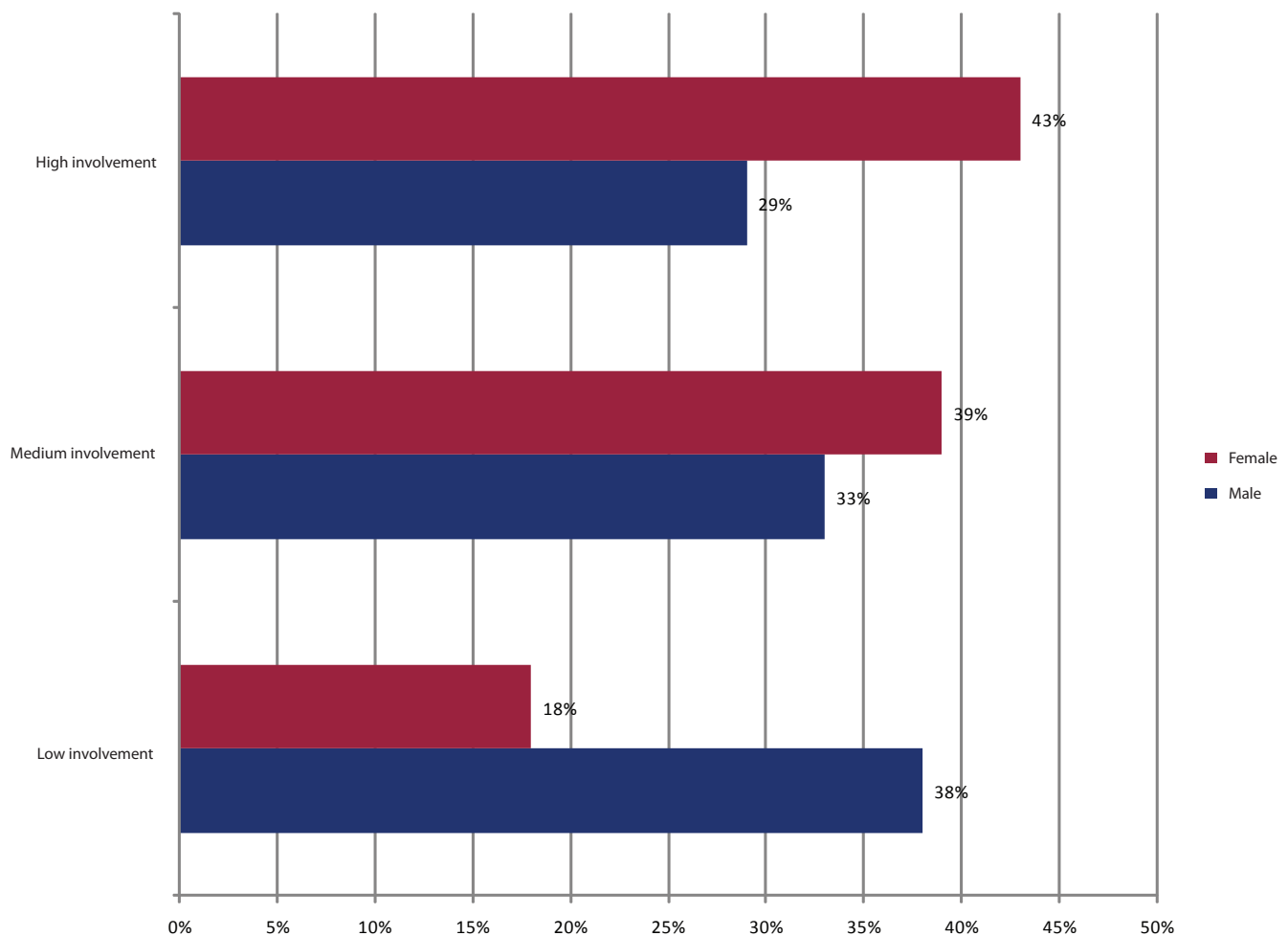
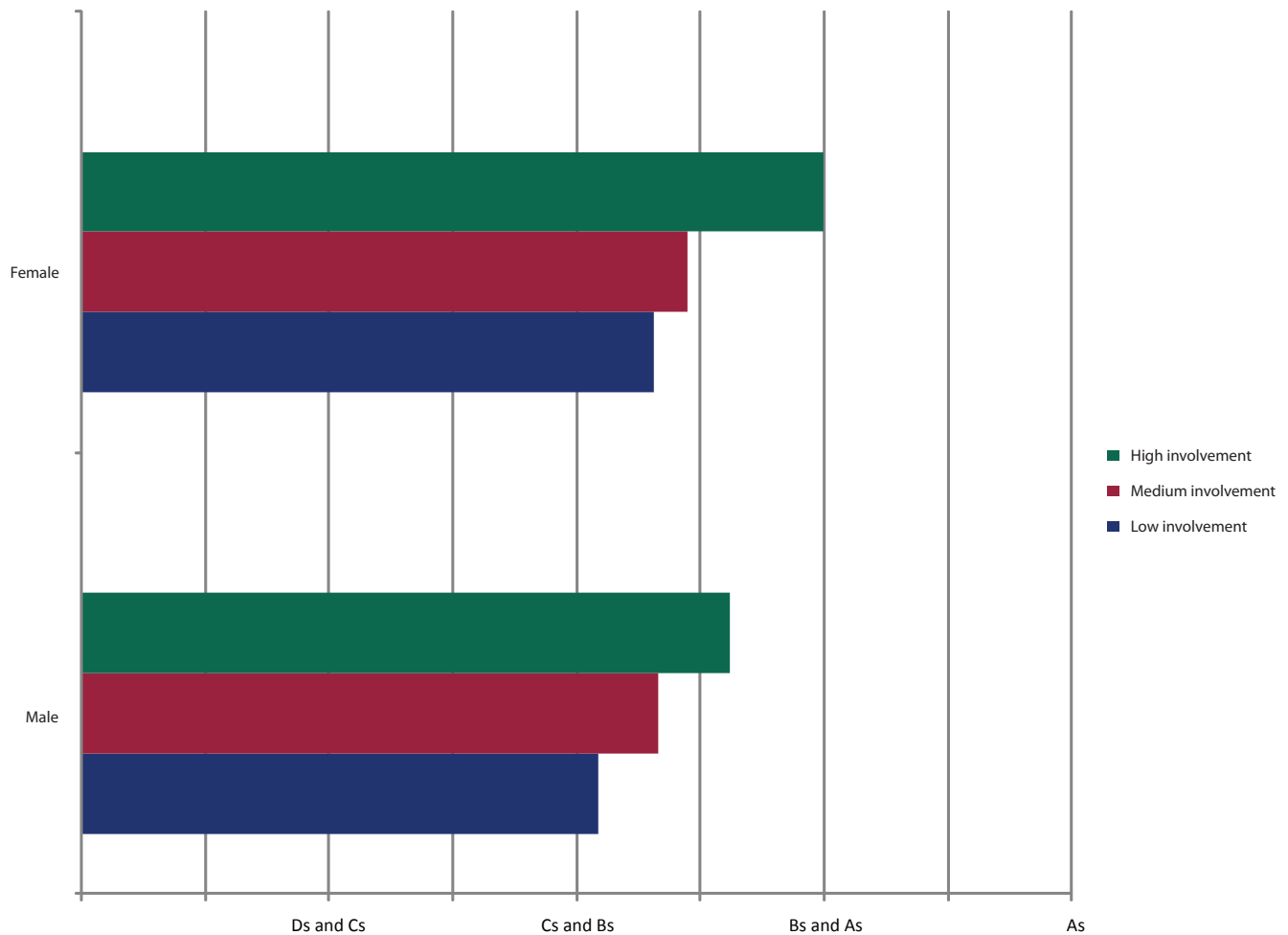


FIGURE 2: AVERAGE SELF-REPORTED GRADES BY LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT

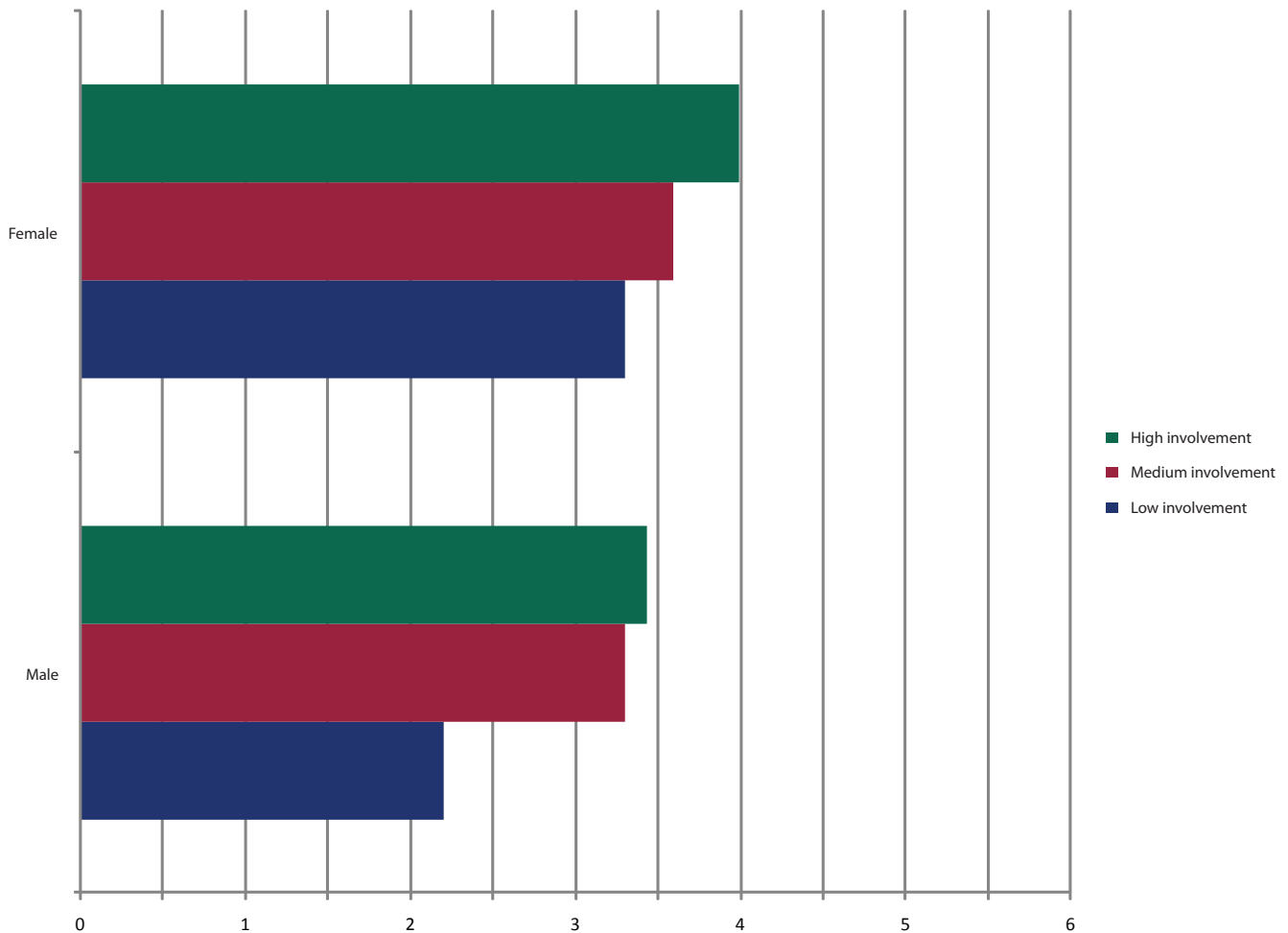


Level of Involvement and Educational Outcomes

Next we wanted to understand the relationship between activity involvement and the self-reported academic performance of Coos County youth. Students who were highly involved in out-of-school activities reported grades in the A and B range, while youth who participated in the least number of out-of-school activities reported grades in the B and C range. This pattern of findings was similar for boys and girls (see Figure 2).

We were also interested in links between activity involvement and students' attitudes towards school. Youth who were involved in the greatest number of out-of-school activities reported enjoying school more than those with little involvement. This pattern of findings was also similar for boys and girls (see Figure 3). Youth who reported engagement in the least number of out-of-school activities also felt a limited sense of belonging at school in comparison to more involved youth. Taken together, these findings suggest a strong link between how youth spend their time out-of-school and their academic performance, attitudes, and experiences.

FIGURE 3: ATTITUDE TOWARDS SCHOOL BY LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT (RANGE 0=LEAST POSITIVE TO 6=MOST POSITIVE)



Level of Involvement and Future Expectations

How adolescents view their futures plays a critical role in their motivation, behavior, and preparation for adulthood, but we know fairly little about what factors and experiences influence their future expectations. Using previous Carsey Institute data on Coos County youths' reports about expectations of graduating from high school, getting a full-time job right after high school, and graduating from college, we

found consistent evidence that students who are least involved in out-of-school activities also have more limited expectations for their futures than their more involved peers. The patterns were similar for boys and girls (see Figures 4, 5, and 6), with boys in the low-involvement group standing out as being the least likely to expect to graduate from high school and college and most likely to expect to get a full-time job immediately following high school graduation.

FIGURE 4: EXPECTATIONS TO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL BY LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT (RANGE 0=VERY UNLIKELY TO 6=VERY LIKELY)

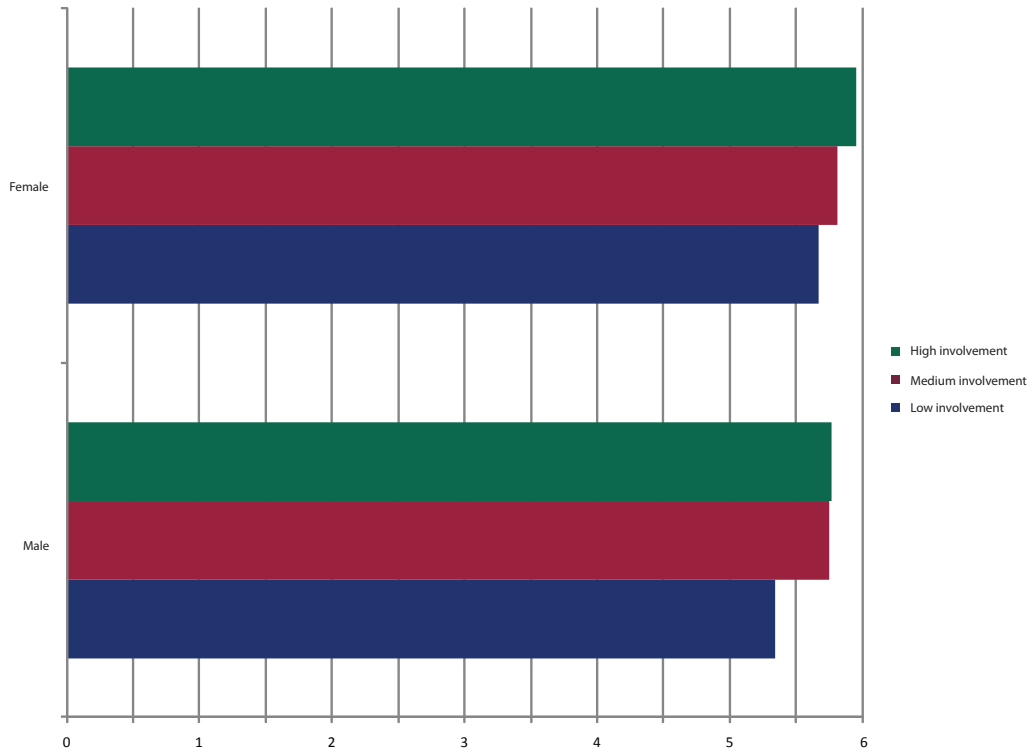


FIGURE 5: EXPECTATIONS TO GRADUATE FROM COLLEGE BY LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT (RANGE 0=VERY UNLIKELY TO 6=VERY LIKELY)

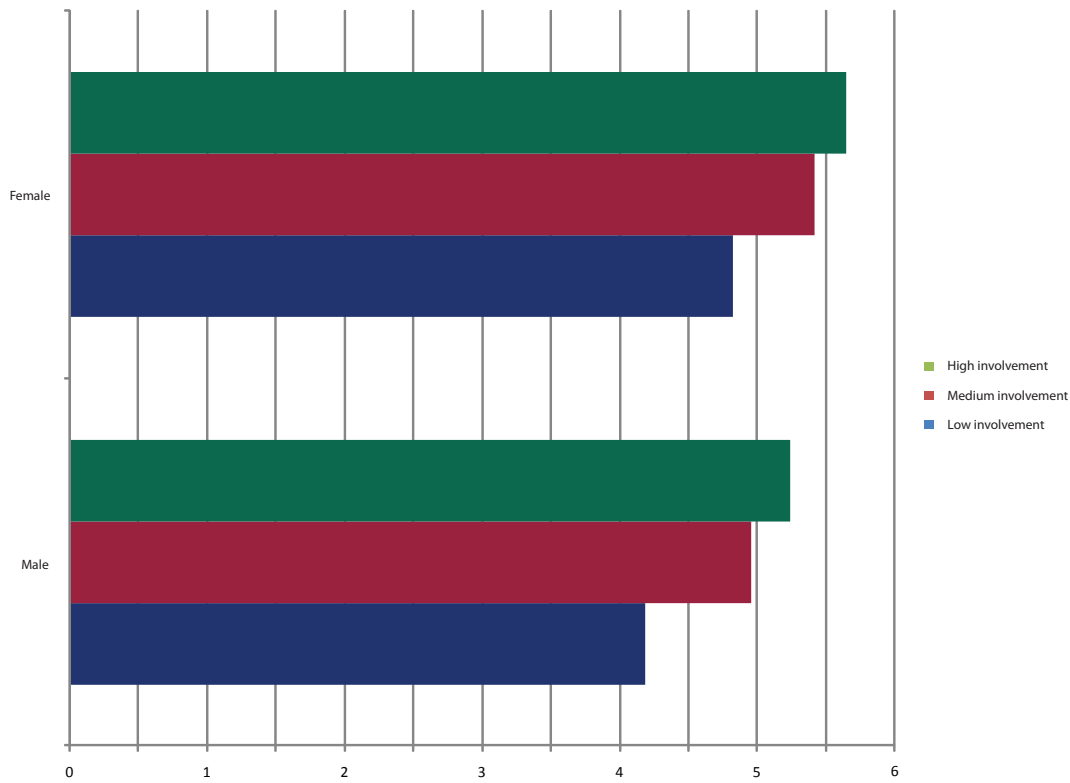
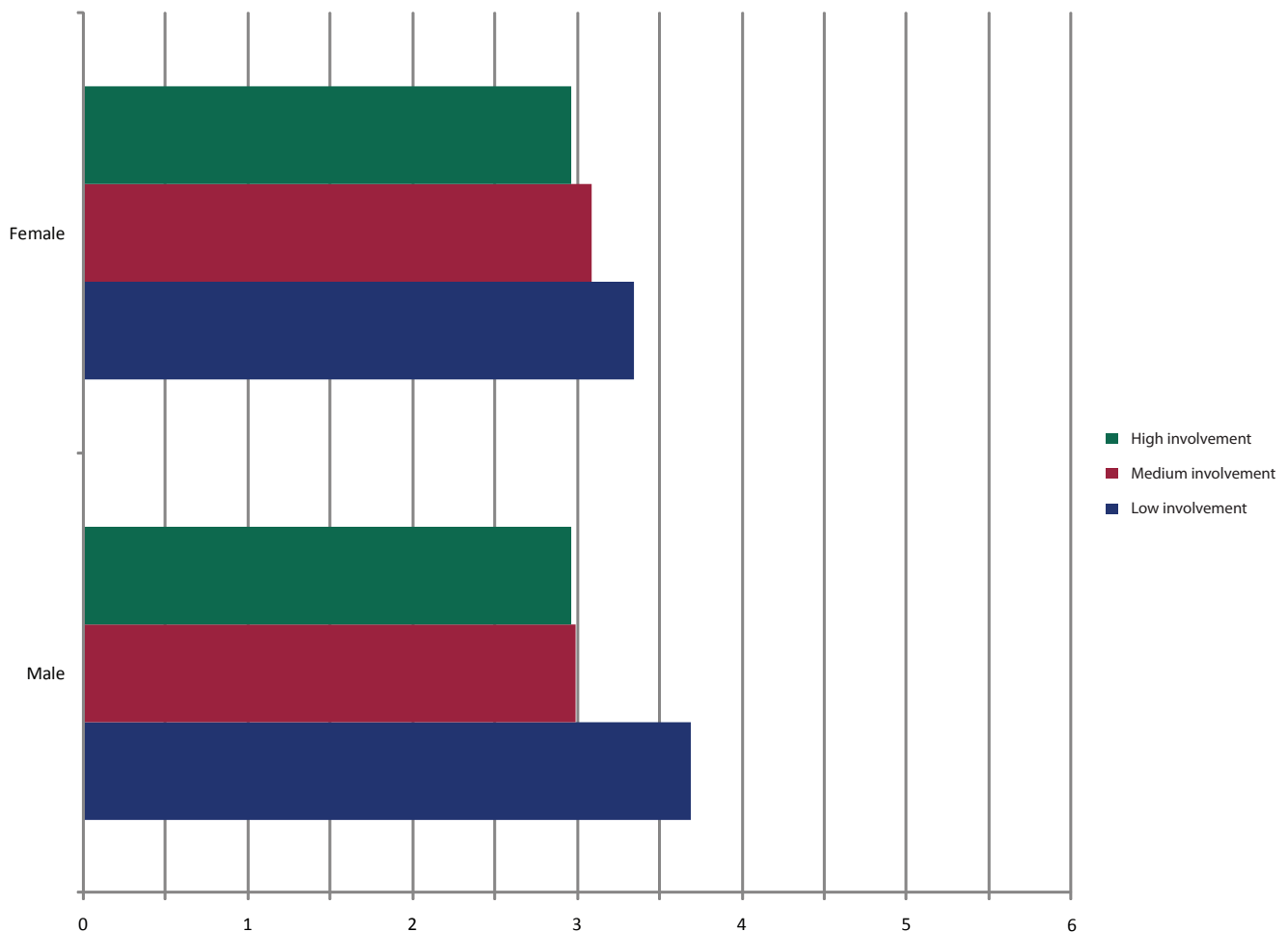


FIGURE 6: EXPECTATIONS TO GET A FULL-TIME JOB RIGHT AFTER HIGH SCHOOL BY LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT (RANGE 0=VERY UNLIKELY TO 6=VERY LIKELY)



Conclusion

There is mounting evidence that youths' free time choices and experiences have the potential for either contributing to or limiting positive development. Our results show that youth in rural Coos County who are most involved in activities during their out-of-school time also report higher grades, a more positive attitude towards school, a stronger sense of belonging at school, and more positive expectations for the future than both their moderately and least involved peers. The Coos County youth who were the least involved in out-of-school activities look strikingly different from their more involved peers. These youth report lower grades, a fairly negative attitude towards school, less sense of belonging at school, and less optimistic views of their future. These results highlight the potential risks for the fairly large percentage of Coos County youth (28 percent) who reported very little involvement in constructive out-of-school activities.

Our pattern of findings was similar for boys and girls, but the associations between level of involvement and outcomes related to education and future expectations were often stronger for boys. This suggests that boys' out-of-school activities may have an even greater impact on their development. These findings may also suggest that there are factors not accounted for in this brief that may influence boys' level of activity involvement and their educational experiences and future expectations. These factors could include things like gender socialization, parental expectations, and boys' perceptions of opportunities available in their school and community. Although more research is needed to understand these associations, it is concerning that almost 40 percent of boys in Coos County report little to no out-of-school activity involvement. These uninvolved boys are not only missing out on growth-enhancing opportunities in constructive activities but may also be placed at a greater risk for negative outcomes.

Taken together, our findings suggest that one effective approach to increasing youths' academic performance, commitment to education, and future expectations may be to target adolescents' out-of-school time use. More work is needed to understand how youth are spending their out-of-school time; the reasons why youth get involved in, stay in, or drop out of activities; and how families, schools, and communities facilitate or constrain constructive activity participation, particularly in rural communities. Although more research is needed, we are building evidence to suggest the need for policies and programs that increase the number of constructive activities available to youth in Coos County; reduce potential barriers to participation like transportation and cost; communicate the value of out-of-school activity participation to community officials, parents, and youth; and help youth structure their free time in healthier ways. Also, given the findings presented in this brief, it may be important for communities, schools, and families to be aware of gender differences in activity involvement and work toward equalizing participation among boys and girls in Coos County.

Panel Study of Coos County Youth

Carsey Institute researchers have begun an initiative to collect and analyze data tracking the attitudes and experiences of Coos County youth from 2008 through 2018. To begin this study, baseline survey data were collected from 78 percent of all seventh and eleventh graders attending public school in the county. During school hours, the students completed a thirty-five page questionnaire designed to gather information about their family, educational, and occupational experiences and aspirations, as well as their demographic characteristics, well-being, social relationships, and perceptions of school and community. The results described in this brief are based on the first wave of data collected from 651 students that were fairly evenly divided by grade (48 percent were seventh graders, 52 percent were eleventh graders) and sex (50 percent female). For this brief, we combined data from the seventh- and eleventh-grade cohorts. The majority of the students in the sample were Caucasian (93 percent), reflecting the demographic characteristics of this region.

THE CARSEY INSTITUTE COOS YOUTH STUDY

The Carsey Institute is conducting a panel study of Coos County youth that will provide data about the attitudes and experiences of the county's youth as they approach young adulthood and face the decision to remain in their community, seek opportunities elsewhere, or leave for an education and then return. By following the entire populations of two age groups over a ten-year period, we will help North Country leaders gain a better understanding of young people's decision making.

RESEARCH TEAM

CESAR REBELLON is a faculty fellow at the Carsey Institute and an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. His primary research interests focus on family and peer correlates of juvenile crime and delinquency, with a particular emphasis on the manner in which delinquency may yield reinforcing social rewards among adolescents.

ERIN HILEY SHARP is a Carsey Institute faculty fellow and assistant professor in the Department of Family Studies at the University of New Hampshire. Her research interests include activity involvement as a context for adolescent development; parental, family, and broader contextual influences on adolescent development; and prevention research and theory from a positive youth development perspective.

NENA STRACUZZI is an assistant research professor at the Carsey Institute. Her research focuses on vulnerable youth and families.

CORINNA JENKINS TUCKER is a faculty fellow at the Carsey Institute and an associate professor in the Department of Family Studies at the University of New Hampshire. Her primary research interests focus on adolescents' family relationships.

HEATHER TURNER is a senior fellow at the Carsey Institute and a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. Her research concentrates on social stress processes and mental health.

KAREN VAN GUNDY is a faculty fellow at the Carsey Institute and an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. Her work investigates the mechanisms by which life circumstances and social statuses influence variations in health, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.

Endnotes

1. R. W. Larson and S. Verma, "How Children and Adolescents Spend Time across the World: Work, Play, and Developmental Opportunities," *Psychological Bulletin*, 125 (1999): 701–736.
2. J. D. Coatsworth et al., "Self-Defining Activities, Expressive Identity, and Adolescent Wellness," *Applied Developmental Science*, 10 (2006): 157–170; D. M. Hansen, R. W. Larson, and J. B. Dworkin, "What Adolescents Learn in Organized Youth Activities: A Survey of Self-Reported Developmental Experiences," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 13 (2003): 25–55; J. P. Hunter and M. Csikszentmihalyi, "The Positive Psychology of Interested Adolescents," *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 32 (2003): 27–35; L. L. Caldwell, "Recreation and Youth Development," in P. A. Witt and L. L. Caldwell, *Recreation and Youth Development* (State College, PA: Venture Publishing, 2005), 169–191.
3. D. W. Osgood, A. L. Anderson, and J. N. Shaffer, "Unstructured Leisure in the After-School Hours," in J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, and J. S. Eccles, eds., *Organized Activities as Contexts of Development: Extracurricular Activities, After-School and Community Programs* (Mahmah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005), 45–64; E. H. Sharp et al., "Predicting Substance Use Behavior Among South African Adolescents: The Role of Free Time Experiences." (Manuscript submitted for publication, 2009).
4. R. W. Larson and S. Verma, "How Children and Adolescents Spend Time Across the World: Work, Play, and Developmental Opportunities.," D. M. Casey, M. N. Ripke, and A. C. Huston, "Activity Participation and the Well-Being of Children and Adolescents in the Context of Welfare Reform," in J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, and J. S. Eccles, eds., *Organized Activities as Contexts of Development: Extracurricular Activities, After-School and Community Programs* (Mahmah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005), 65–84.
5. A. Churilla, "Urban and Rural Children Experience Similar Rates of Low-Income and Poverty," Issue Brief No. 2 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2008).
6. C. R. Colocousis, "The State of Coos County: Local Perspectives on Community and Change," Issue Brief No. 7 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2008).
7. Activity choices were (1) sports; (2) student government; (3) band, choir, or music lessons; (4) drama, theater, dance; (5) art; (6) academic club; (7) community service club; (8) 4-H or scouts; (9) volunteer work; (10) church group; (11) honor society; (12) school yearbook or newspaper; (13) hobby club; (14) community events; (15) outdoor activities; and (16) community center events.
8. S. McHale et al., "Links Between Sex-Typed Activities in Middle Childhood and Gender Development in Early Adolescence," *Developmental Psychology*, 40 (2004): 868–881; E. H. Sharp, et al., "Gender Differences in the Self-Defining Activities and Identity Experiences of Adolescents and Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescence*, 30 (2007): 251–269.

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