

SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT AMONG NONMETROPOLITAN GENDER AND  
SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work  
with a minor in Gender and Women's Studies  
in the Graduate College of the  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015

Urbana, Illinois

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## ABSTRACT

Gender and sexual minority (GSM) youth are growing up in a society that stigmatizes and marginalizes their identities, placing them at increased risk of victimization, physical and mental health problems, and educational disparities compared to heterosexual and cisgender youth. Rural GSM youth are at equal or greater risk for these negative outcomes than urban GSM youth. In spite of their risks, positive youth development (PYD) theory contends that all youth have the potential to thrive when their strengths are aligned with positive resources in their environment. Research aimed at reducing risk and promoting well-being for GSM youth has focused on urban youth in school settings; few studies have examined the role of communities, GSM community centers, and social supports in increasing or reducing risk among GSM youth living in varying community sizes. Additionally, although empirical evidence exists in support of PYD, this theory has rarely been used with GSM youth.

The purpose of this study was to a) address the gaps in the literature on GSM youth and PYD by attending to the ways in which communities impact the provision of social and community support; and b) enhance understanding of the ways in which GSM youth living in rural, small, and mid-size communities get their needs for support met. A mixed methods design involved concurrent data collection from four sources. 1) Online surveys measuring perceived community climate, social support, and GSM community resources were administered to 14-18 year old GSM youth in Illinois (N=338). 2) A community climate protocol involved analyzing public data to measure community climate objectively at the county and municipal levels; public data were aggregated and merged with surveys by participant zip code. 3) In-depth interviews assessing youth's perceptions of their communities, community climate, social support, and community GSM resources were conducted with 14-18 year old GSM youth in Central and

Southern Illinois (n=34). 4) Participant observations were conducted with a GSM community center youth program (n=20 hours). Quantitative data were analyzed using bivariate, ANOVA, and logistic regression analyses. Qualitative data were analyzed using grounded theory methods. Qualitative and quantitative data were integrated using the mixed methods analytic strategies of data comparison and typology development.

Findings from this study illustrated complexities around the role of the community in increasing or reducing risk. Survey and climate analyses revealed that community climate and community size were significantly associated with the availability of GSM community-based resources, such that more supportive climates and larger communities had more resources. Community climate and size were not associated with utilization or unmet needs for GSM resources. Climate was also related to perceived social support among GSM adults and non-GSM peers; however, community size was not. Qualitative and mixed method analyses led to the development of an emergent model of support seeking among GSM youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities. This model illustrates the importance of the community context for GSM youth. The community interacted with GSM youth's needs for and potential sources of support, barriers and facilitators to support, benefits and drawbacks of support, and unmet needs. These findings suggest the need for a revised model of PYD that represents the experiences of GSM youth in small communities.

The findings from this study have the potential to advance GSM youth and PYD research by attending to the role of communities, community climate, GSM community centers, and other sources of support for GSM youth in nonmetropolitan communities. Additionally, they serve to disrupt the narrative surrounding rural communities as inherently hostile toward GSM people. Implications for research, theory, policy, and practice are discussed.

*To all the small town youth who feel they have no voice, this is for you.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to many individuals for their support throughout my doctoral studies and writing this dissertation. My dissertation committee was amazing. I am so thankful to Janet Liechty and Ramona Oswald for their mentoring and guidance as my dissertation co-chairs. This dissertation would not be what it is without their faith in me as a scholar and their ongoing feedback to help make it better. I so appreciate their willingness to work together and chair my dissertation as a team. Jennifer Greene provided guidance to help make this a quality mixed methods study. Benjamin Lough encouraged me to think deeper about the nuances in the data. Shelley Craig agreed to sit on my committee from over 600 miles away. Having her on my committee as another scholar researching GSM youth was so important and meaningful to me. I appreciate all of them individually and collectively.

To the youth who took time to share their stories with me—I could never say ‘thank you’ enough. Their willingness to open up and share their experiences and ideas with me means so much.

I must also thank the funding organizations that helped make this dissertation possible. The Williams Institute funded the larger research project of which this dissertation was a part. The University of Illinois Undergraduate Research Program provided funding for a BSW student to work on this research with me. I also received a dissertation travel award from the University of Illinois Graduate College. My thanks also go to the Acorn Equality Fund for supporting me in the form of scholarships all five years in the doctoral program and to the University of Illinois YMCA for providing me with a Bailey Fellowship during my final year in the doctoral program. This dissertation was possible because of these financial supports.

I am also thankful to the countless faculty and colleagues who have provided me with support and mentoring. Chi-Fang Wu has been mentoring me as a scholar since my MSW

studies. She and Steve Anderson pushed me toward doctoral studies and I am so grateful for their confidence in me. There are no words to describe how grateful I am for Jan Carter-Black's wisdom, mentoring, and support. Tamara Fuller has been more than my supervisor and mentor, but has become my friend. I am so thankful for our shared interests and her sense of humor. I appreciate Sandra Kopels mentorship, asking me the hard questions about my research, and taking me out to lunch. Min Zhan was a constant source of reassurance and support throughout my time in the doctoral program. I've learned a ton about being a good researcher from both Ted Cross and Jesse Helton. To the faculty in the School of Social Work who taught my classes, provided advice and mentoring, and supported my progress, thank you. And, of course, Dean Wynne Korr always supported me in my endeavors, be it my scholarship or community engagement. I am also grateful to faculty outside my department, particularly Karen Flynn and Cris Mayo who helped expand my knowledge on gender and women's studies and how that fit with my scholarship.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge several support staff within the School of Social Work. I don't know that I ever would have figured out all the intricacies of working within a university system if it weren't for Amy Hiles! Jaime Waymouth, Donna Jenó-Amici, and Cheryl Street were always there to answer my questions.

I can't imagine having gotten through the doctoral program without the support of my friends and colleagues both at my university and beyond. Deirdre Lanesskog, thank you for being my person-the one that I could go to with anything. Abigail Williams and Meng-Jung Lee, I'm so glad we were all in the same cohort and bonded through the first year together. Samantha Hack, Jill Schreiber, and Hui Huang, thank you for your guidance as advanced doctoral students. Emily Lux, Lenore Matthew, Carrie Bosch, Jaclyn Saltzman and all the other current and former

doctoral students at the School of Social Work, thanks for your friendship. Elizabeth Holman, Jeremy Robinett, Shawn Mendez, and Dina Izenstark, I appreciate our seminar conversations so much and I am grateful for your thoughtful feedback on my writing. Lance Keene, Amanda Hwu, and Hortencia Arizpe, I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to work with you on my research. You truly made a remarkable difference in the quality of my work. Megan Gandy and Ginny Winter, I'm so happy that I met both of you at social work conferences so we could become fast friends. Your support and friendship means a lot to me.

Thank you to my friends for their support over the last five years. Cicily White, my best friend, thank you for your patience these last few years. Cara Bailey, Kerri and Arie True-Funk, and Mel Thomas, your love and laughter are always appreciated. Maggie Thomas, thank you for being there when I needed an editor who was also a friend. Kevin Bowersox-Johnson, thank you for having a truly inspirational idea six years ago so that we could start a community center together that would change my life forever. Thanks to my family for being supportive when I said I wanted to keep going to school.

Finally, thank you to my wife, Peggy Pacey, for your love, patience, understanding, and faith in my ability to create change through research and teaching. You have been a constant throughout this process and I can't imagine having gone through this program without you. Thank you for being there now and always.

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## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Adolescence has historically been characterized as a time of “storm and stress”, a developmental period filled with risk (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Gender and sexual minority (GSM) youth (see Appendix A for definitions) are growing up in a society that stigmatizes and marginalizes their gender or sexual identities, placing them at greater risk of victimization (D’Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler, & Johnson, 2004), mental health problems (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013; Robinson & Espelage, 2011), physical health problems (Austin et al., 2004b; D’Augelli et al., 2002; Maguen & Armistead, 2000), and educational disparities (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009) over their non-GSM peers. GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan communities face at least comparable (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012), if not greater risks (Poon & Saewyc, 2009) than urban GSM youth. Nonmetropolitan communities may increase these risks for GSM youth due to isolation and lack of resources (Yarbrough, 2003) or act as protective factors by enabling close relationships with other GSM people (Cody & Welch, 1997; Leedy & Connolly, 2008; Oswald & Culton, 2003). Understanding the role of the community in increasing or reducing risk is essential to ending marginalization and promoting well-being of GSM youth.

Attending to the needs of marginalized groups is a core tenet of the social work code of ethics [National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 2008]. It is essential for researchers and practitioners to address marginalization and victimization toward GSM youth, as well as their associated risks for mental and physical health problems and educational disparities. The primary context in which interventions have been tested and implemented has been schools

(Allen, Hammack, & Himes, 2012). For example, Szalacha (2003) found that schools can reduce risk and act as a protective factor when they have GSM-inclusive policies, gay-straight alliances (or gender and sexuality alliances; GSAs), and access to GSM-supportive adults. Some research has attended to the role of social support among peers and adults for GSM youth, although rarely in nonmetropolitan communities. Additionally, community-based GSM organizations represent a potential site of intervention warranting further study. This study aimed to a) enhance understanding of how GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties (see Appendix A) seek support within their communities, including how community-level factors impact their support options, and b) advance research on the protective factors for GSM youth.

### **Background**

Many of the risks of adolescence are normative, such as depressed mood, delinquency (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995), alcohol and drug use (Steinberg & Morris, 2001), and conflicts with parents or guardians (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Due to the marginalization and stigma of GSM identities, GSM youth are at increased risk for depression (Burton et al., 2013), suicidal ideation and attempts (Robinson & Espelage, 2011), substance use (D'Augelli et al., 2002), risky sexual behavior (Maguen & Armistead, 2000), eating disorders (Austin et al., 2004b), and educational disparities (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009) over their non-GSM peers. Research on the experiences of GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan communities is conflicting and limited. Nonmetropolitan GSM youth experience the same, or greater, risks as urban GSM youth, but may have fewer GSM resources from which to access support (Yarbrough, 2003).

Research on GSM youth's risks has been critical for understanding the impact of social inequality on GSM youth. Scholars on adolescence, however, have begun to move away from

describing adolescence solely as a risk-filled developmental period and are moving more toward describing adolescence as a developmental stage encompassing both risk and protective factors. This has led scholars and practitioners working with and for GSM youth to engage with policy and practice interventions to promote the well-being of GSM youth. Although schools have been studied at length by GSM youth researchers, less attention has been paid to the other contexts in which youth are situated, such as their communities or social networks. These contexts represent potential sites of intervention to promote well-being, yet little research has examined their role in increasing or reducing risk.

### **Nonmetropolitan Community Context**

The community represents one potential site of intervention. Many GSM youth are growing up in nonmetropolitan communities, yet there is limited research on their experiences. Research on youth in these smaller communities suggests that their risks may be exacerbated because of isolation and lack of resources (Yarbrough, 2003); alternatively, in smaller communities, GSM individuals report close connections to other GSM people (Cody & Welch, 1997; Leedy & Connolly, 2008; Oswald & Culton, 2003). Nonmetropolitan communities represent complex contexts in which many GSM youth are growing up, yet we know little about how the community impacts their risks of victimization or associated mental and physical health outcomes or educational disparities.

For GSM youth, the nonmetropolitan community context may include the size of their community, the climate toward GSM people, and the availability and utility of community-based GSM organizations. Research comparing the experiences of nonmetropolitan and urban GSM youth has primarily examined their differences based on community size. This research is limited in two primary ways. First, it assumes the size of the community is the key community feature of

importance. Second, it has primarily examined the most rural of communities, rather than attending to community size across a continuum encompassing small, medium, and large towns or cities. This leaves a large gap in the knowledge about how communities impact GSM youth. It may be that GSM youth living in mid-size communities, often classified as urban, have very different experiences than both rural and urban GSM youth.

Community climate, the community-level support for or hostility toward GSM individuals, has received empirical attention in recent years, although rarely in nonmetropolitan communities. A hostile community climate is associated with increased suicide attempts (Hatzenbuehler, 2011) and substance use (Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012) among GSM youth. It is important to understand the role of community climate in increasing risk or protective factors. Whereas the size of a community tends to be a static variable, it may be that researchers and practitioners can intervene at the community-level to improve a community's climate toward GSM individuals. Developing a better understanding of the role of community climate in the risks GSM youth face and their ability to access support is essential.

The role of community-based GSM organizations is also under-studied. Although over 200 GSM community centers exist in the United States (Centerlink and the Movement Advancement Project [MAP], 2014), they have received little empirical attention. In nonmetropolitan communities, GSM organizations may exist as informal groups within non-GSM organizations (Oswald & Culton, 2003), thus making them even more difficult to access for research purposes than formal non-profit GSM community centers. Despite the lack of attention to community-based GSM organizations, the research that does exist illustrates that GSM youth report needing and utilizing GSM resources in their communities (Davis, Saltzburg, & Locke, 2010; Gamarel, Walker, Rivera, & Golub, 2014; Nesmith, Burton, & Cosgrove, 1999).

## **Social Network Context**

The role of social support for GSM youth has received more empirical attention than the role of their communities, although this research has also rarely examined GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan communities. Social support includes the perceived quality of support received from an individual's social network, as well as a sense of belonging and feeling valued in one's social world (Detrie & Lease, 2007). GSM youth tend to report less social support than non-GSM youth (Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010); they report the most support from other GSM peers (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002). Although research on social support and well-being among GSM youth is sparse, research on lesbian adults has found an association between feeling a sense of belonging with the lesbian community and decreased depression (McLaren, 2009). Given that nonmetropolitan GSM youth are growing up in communities with fewer numbers of people and resources than urban GSM youth, social networks may be an important source of support. Perceived social support from GSM and non-GSM friends has been examined; little attention, however, has been paid to social support in nonmetropolitan communities. Additionally, few studies have examined social support from peers and adults (GSM and non-GSM) within the same study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework suitable for studying GSM youth's risks and protective factors within their communities is positive youth development (PYD) theory. PYD emphasizes that all youth have the potential to achieve positive development, be healthy, and become successful, if their individual strengths are aligned with positive resources in their environment (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011b). PYD offers a framework that promotes a



balance between reducing risk and emphasizing strengths and protective factors (Benson, Scales, Syvertsen, 2011). Extensive empirical evidence exists as support for PYD (Lerner et al., 2011b), yet there has been almost no PYD research specifically with GSM youth, let alone GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan communities. Therefore, while PYD theory is an appropriate theoretical framework for this study given its focus on risk and protective factors, enhancing well-being, and attention to context, its relevance to nonmetropolitan GSM youth is unknown.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Several gaps in the literature exist pertaining to GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan communities, as well as within PYD theory. First, there has been a stark lack of attention to the geographical diversity of communities in which GSM youth are living. Even when community size is examined, it has primarily been a comparison of the most rural and most urban cities, leaving mid-size towns understudied. Additionally, research studying the differing experiences of GSM youth by community type has failed to examine factors beyond size such as community climate and GSM organizations. This leads to another gap in the literature: we lack an understanding of the relationship between community-level factors and the provision of support and resources for GSM youth. Research has established that GSM youth are at risk and that supportive people and policies can mitigate this risk, but we currently do not know what GSM youth in nonmetropolitan communities perceive as their needs for support and the ways in which they go about accessing support within their communities. Although PYD offers an opportunity to study GSM youth within their community contexts, attending to both risks and protective factors, a major limitation is that it has rarely been used with GSM youth. Additionally, as will be discussed in the next chapter, PYD measures may not account for the varied experiences of GSM youth.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to redress gaps in the literature on GSM youth by examining the support seeking processes of GSM youth living in small communities, including their needs for, availability, and utilization of social support and community-based GSM organizations, and how their community contexts impacted these factors. To account for additional gaps in the literature, community size was examined across a continuum and the findings from this study were compared with existing literature on PYD to determine potential adaptations for use with GSM youth populations. Thus, a major goal of this study was to contribute to social work policy and practice by determining how best to support GSM youth within their communities.

This study utilized a mixed methods design to enhance understanding of this complex, understudied topic. Integrating findings from surveys, community-level public data, interviews, and participant observations allowed for deeper, more complex, findings and inferences than would have been possible using a single method (Greene, 2007). Additionally, grounded theory methodology guided qualitative data collection and analysis, thus allowing for attention to process and theory development (Hood, 2007).

## **Significance**

This research has the potential to contribute to the literature in the following ways:

- Expand the use of positive youth development theory to diverse populations
- Promote examination of communities across a geographic continuum
- Examine protective factors within GSM youth's ecologies
- Disrupt the narrative about rural communities as "bad" for GSM individuals

- Attend to the strengths of nonmetropolitan communities and GSM individuals within their communities

By addressing the current gaps in knowledge pertaining to GSM youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities, this study provides implications for social work practice and policy as well as future research and theory on reducing marginalization and promoting well-being among GSM youth.

### **Overview**

Future chapters provide greater detail of this study and its relevance. Chapter Two provides an in-depth discussion of the literature on GSM youth, the community context, and positive youth development as a theoretical framework. Limitations and gaps in the literature are discussed. Chapter Three describes the mixed methods design used in the research study, a description of participants, and ethical considerations. Chapter Four provides quantitative results pertaining to the first research question. Chapter Five illustrates the mixed methods findings of the second research question, including a model of support seeking among GSM youth. Chapter Six integrates the findings from the first two research questions with positive youth development and literature on GSM youth to answer the third research question and determine potential adaptations to positive youth development for use with this population. Finally, Chapter Seven provides a discussion of the emergent theory and key findings; implications for research, theory, policy, and practice; and an evaluation of the research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter first summarizes the empirical literature on the risks GSM youth face, GSM youth in nonmetropolitan communities, and the role of community climate on the well-being of GSM youth. The limitations and gaps in this literature are discussed. Second, positive youth development is put forth as a theoretical framework suitable for studying GSM youth within their communities. This discussion includes a critical analysis of positive youth development, its potential contributions to GSM youth research, and current limitations. Next, empirical literature on potential sources of support aimed at promoting positive development among GSM youth is summarized. The chapter ends with a summary of the goals and purpose of the current study, including research questions and hypotheses.

### **GSM Youth Risks**

As adolescents, many of the risks GSM youth face are normative (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). GSM youth, however, are at increased risk over their heterosexual and cisgender peers due to growing up in a society that stigmatizes and marginalizes their identities. GSM youth are more likely to be victimized in their schools (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Poteat, Aragon, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011, 2012), homes, and communities (Whitbeck et al., 2004) than non-GSM youth. Although studies examining the experiences of rural GSM youth are sparse, they suggest that GSM youth growing up in rural settings overhear more homophobic language at school than GSM youth in urban areas (Palmer et al., 2012) and may be at even greater risk of victimization.

Victimization may take a toll on GSM youth, increasing their likelihood of mental and physical health problems and educational disparities. Victimization is associated with an increase

in depressive symptoms among GSM youth (Burton et al., 2013), and rural GSM youth report greater affective distress than rural heterosexual and cisgender youth (Cohn & Leake, 2012). GSM youth are also more likely to consider and attempt suicide than their non-GSM peers (Robinson & Espelage, 2011), and rural sexual minority youth (SMY) (males, in particular) tend to report more suicidal thoughts than urban (male) SMY (Poon & Saewyc, 2009).

GSM youth are also at increased risk of physical health problems such as substance use, including alcohol use and binge drinking, marijuana and other drug use (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Resnick et al., 1997), and tobacco use (Austin et al., 2004a); risky sexual behaviors, including early sexual activity, engaging in unsafe sexual contact, and lack of HIV-testing (Maguen & Armistead, 2000; Resnick et al., 1997; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2006); and eating disorders or weight concerns such as binge eating, bulimia (Austin et al., 2004b), and obesity (Austin et al., 2004b; Austin et al., 2009). These physical health risks are correlated with mental health symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Remafedi, 2007; Rosario et al., 2006). Poon and Saewyc (2009) compared urban and rural SMY and found that rural SMY generally reported trying more types of drugs and engaged in more binge drinking than urban SMY.

GSM youth are also at increased risk of educational disparities when compared with non-GSM youth. They tend to experience their schools less positively (Birkett et al., 2009), report more truancy and skipping school (Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2014; Birkett et al., 2009; Birkett, Russell, & Corliss, 2014; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011; Russell, Everett, Rosario, & Birkett, 2014), and have lower grades (Aragon et al., 2014; Birkett et al., 2014) than non-GSM youth. These disparities are often associated with feeling unsafe or experiencing victimization (Birkett et al., 2014; Button, O'Connell, & Gealt, 2012). Button et al. (2012) found that SMY were four times more likely than heterosexual youth to miss school due

to feeling unsafe. In addition to academic performance and attendance, Aragon et al. (2014) found that GSM youth reported lower future orientation toward education than non-GSM youth; for example, they were less likely to expect to finish high school and go to college. A report from the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) on the school experiences of rural GSM youth found no significant differences in educational outcomes between rural and urban GSM youth, suggesting these inconsistencies in the literature warrant further exploration (Palmer et al., 2012).

This collection of research indicates that GSM youth are at increased risk of victimization and negative outcomes over their heterosexual and cisgender peers and that rural GSM youth may be at increased risk over urban GSM youth, although this research is limited and sometimes inconclusive. To better understand the context in which nonmetropolitan GSM youth are growing up, the following section examines the limited research on rural communities, the role of community climate, and GSM youth within these communities.

### **Nonmetropolitan GSM Youth**

The common narrative around rural communities and GSM individuals paints a picture of the “oppressed gay” and the “homophobic heterosexual” (Gray, 2007; Kazyak, 2011; Oswald & Culton, 2003; Wienke & Hill, 2013). This narrative equates rural with hostility and urban with accepting and assumes that as GSM youth grow up, they aim to escape rural life and run off to big cities (Weston, 1995). Some research does support this narrative, suggesting that GSM individuals in rural areas experience isolation (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Cody & Welch, 1997; D’Augelli & Hart, 1987), hostile social climates and stigma (Oswald & Culton, 2003; Swank, Fahs, & Frost, 2013), and teachers with negative attitudes toward sexual minority identities (O’Connell, Atlas, Saunders, & Philbrick, 2010). This research also suggests that GSM adults in

nonmetropolitan areas have difficulties accessing GSM-identified individuals or resources (Cody & Welch, 1997; Leedy & Connolly, 2008; Oswald & Culton, 2003). Research on the experiences of rural GSM youth, specifically, is limited and has focused primarily on individual experiences and access to resources. Yarbrough (2003) found that young gay men in rural East Texas reported negative experiences related to their sexual identity and very little resources with which to access support.

Other research, however, disrupts this narrative by examining the lived experiences of nonmetropolitan GSM individuals, including the good and bad aspects of their communities (e.g. Cody & Welch, 1997; Gray, 2007; Kazyak, 2011; Oswald & Culton, 2003). This research suggests that rural communities are more complex than the traditional narrative indicates. A focus on familiarity, small town values, and close-knit ties represents important aspects of living in a rural community (Kazyak, 2011; Oswald & Culton, 2003). For example, Kazyak's (2011) interview participants described aspects of their character as more important to community members than their sexuality, such as their ties to the community or how good a person they are perceived to be. Because of the lower number of GSM individuals in smaller communities, GSM adults living in those communities tend to report close connections to GSM friends and the GSM community (Cody & Welch, 1997; Leedy & Connolly, 2008; Oswald & Culton, 2003). Wienke and Hill (2013) empirically tested the idea that rural gays and lesbians were "worse off" than urban gays and lesbians because of living in hostile or isolated rural communities. They measured whether rural gays and lesbians were significantly different from urban gays and lesbians on measures of perceived happiness, health, and work satisfaction. Their findings were contrary to the typically negative narrative. Rural gays and lesbians reported significantly more happiness and greater health than urban gays and lesbians.

In her ethnographic study of rural Kentucky and Central Appalachia, Gray (2007, 2009) examined the lived experiences of GSM youth, specifically their identity development processes within rural contexts. Her findings were contrary to other rural work on gender and sexual minorities that describe rural areas as isolating spaces where individuals have to hide their identities. She argued that, for GSM youth, rural communities differ from urban communities not because of isolation but because of their focus on familiarity, sameness, and lack of access to large numbers of people and resources (Gray, 2009). She suggested that rural GSM youth find pathways to well-being in different, but not inferior, ways to urban GSM youth. Gray's study provides support for studying nonmetropolitan communities as different from, but not inferior to, urban communities.

This collection of research suggests that there may be both benefits and risks to GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan communities. The differences in research studies examining GSM youth's experiences by community size indicate that further attention to the community context, beyond community size, is warranted.

### **Community Climate**

Hostility toward or support for sexual and gender diversity at a community level relates to the climate of a geographic area. Community climate is the "level of community support" for GSM individuals (Oswald, Cuthbertson, Lazarevic, & Goldberg, 2010). Community climate for nonmetropolitan GSM individuals has only been studied in recent years; Oswald et al.'s (2010) study indicated that an objective measure of community climate (using public data) was positively correlated with how hostile or supportive GSM adults perceived their residential communities. Using an adapted version of Oswald et al.'s (2010) objective community climate protocol, Hatzenbuehler (2011) examined the association between positive and negative



community climate and suicide attempts among SMY. He found that SMY living in negative climates were at 20% greater risk of attempting suicide than SMY living in positive climates. Woodford, Pacey, Kulick, and Hong (2015) found that hearing anti-GSM messages in one's community was associated with increased anxiety and stress among young adults. Additionally, Hatzenbuehler et al. (2012) examined the impact of religious climate separate from overall community climate due to the association between religious ideology and social perspectives regarding GSM individuals (Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006). They found that a supportive religious climate was associated with fewer symptoms of alcohol abuse and fewer sexual partners among SMY, after controlling for other risk factors. Understanding the role of community climate in increasing risk or protective factors is important for understanding the nonmetropolitan community beyond its size.

This collection of research on GSM youth risks, nonmetropolitan communities, and community climate has contributed to better understanding GSM youth's contexts and experiences, but it is not without limitations or gaps. The risk-focused nature of this research has failed to attend to protective factors for GSM youth, including their strengths and the strengths of their communities. Additionally, the primary source of intervention with GSM youth has been in schools (Allen et al., 2012); little attention has been paid to interventions at the community-level. Given that GSM youth are at increased risk of victimization and negative outcomes, understanding their community contexts and how they relate to the provision of support and resources is of critical importance. Finally, while some research has examined the differences between GSM youth in urban versus rural communities, it has failed to attend to youth's community contexts across a geographic continuum. The geographic context may differ

drastically between large metropolitan cities, mid-sized towns, and small rural communities, making the need for studies comparing these differences across a continuum apparent.

Some of these limitations and gaps may be addressed through a theoretical framework that attends to both risk and protective factors and situates youth within their ecological contexts. The next section describes positive youth development theory as a framework suitable for studying nonmetropolitan GSM youth within their community contexts.

### **Positive Youth Development**

A developmental systems perspective stresses that all youth have the capacity to change throughout their development, but that in order to reduce risky behaviors among adolescents, we must focus on their strengths rather than solely on their problems (Lerner, 2005; Lerner et al., 2005). Positive youth development theories were created based on these tenets and emphasize that all youth have the potential to achieve positive development, be healthy, and become successful if their individual strengths are aligned with positive resources in their environment (family, schools, communities, peers, etc.) (Lerner et al., 2011b). While positive youth development theories emphasize a focus on strengths and protective factors, they do not ignore risk factors. Rather, the processes of reducing risk and promoting positive development are viewed as complementary (Benson et al., 2011; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Additionally, positive youth development theories stress the importance of recognizing the influence of youth's culture and history when promoting positive development.

### **Relational-Developmental Systems Model**

The relational-developmental systems model of positive youth development (see Figure 1) posits that within the broader ecology of human development, when the strengths of adolescents are combined with ecological assets in their environment, positive youth

development occurs. This in turn leads to a decrease in risky/problem behaviors and an increase in positive contributions to themselves and others (Lerner et al., 2011b; Lerner, Bowers, Geldhof, Gestsdottir, & DeSouza, 2012).

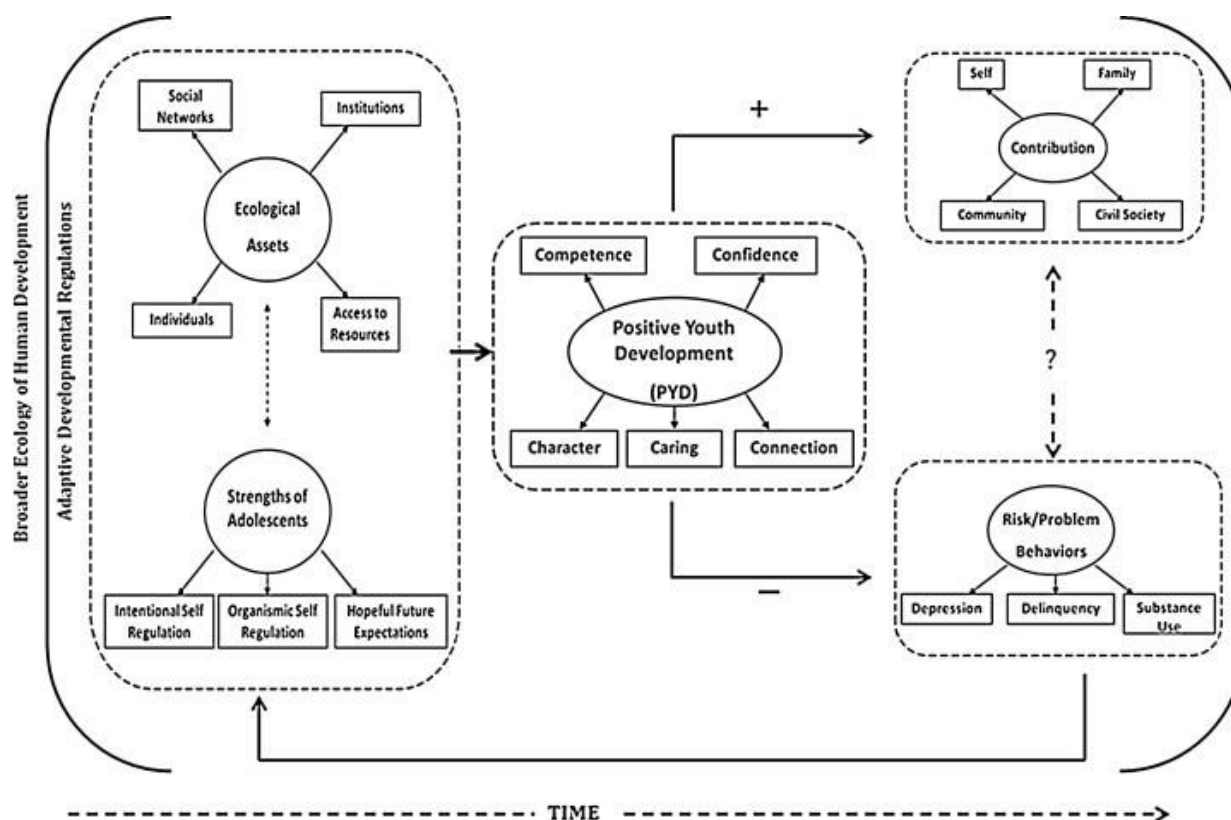


Figure 1. Relational-Developmental Systems Model

Source: Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., von Eye, A., Bowers, E. P., & Lewin-Bizan, S. (2011b). Individual and contextual bases of thriving in adolescence: A view of the issues. *Journal of Adolescence*, 34(6), 1107-1114.

**Strengths of adolescents.** Within the RDS model, the strengths of adolescents are operationalized as two types of self-regulation, as well as hopeful future expectations (see Appendix A for definitions) (Lerner et al., 2011b). Self-regulation is considered a key aspect of development across the lifespan and is "...the ability to flexibly activate, monitor, persevere, and/or adapt one's behavior, attention, emotions, and cognitive strategies in response to direction from internal cues, environmental stimuli, and feedback from others, in an attempt to attain personally-relevant goals..." (Moilanen, 2007, p. 835). This process is also known as

developmental regulation (Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2007). The types of self-regulation vary from physiological and innate (organismic; e.g. sleeping when tired) to psychological and cognitive (intentional; e.g. setting goals). Future hopeful expectations include youth having beliefs, emotions, and intentions about areas relevant to their futures (Lerner et al., 2011b). Other variations of the model have also included school engagement as an adolescent strength (Lerner et al., 2012).

**Ecological assets.** Ecological assets are positive resources in youth's lives such as individuals, social networks, institutions, and access to physical resources (see Appendix A) (Lerner et al., 2011b). According to the RDS model, the more ecological assets to which a youth has access, the greater the likelihood of positive development (Benson, 2002; Lerner, 2005). Positive youth development theories suggest that the strengths of adolescents are “meaningfully manifest(ed) only in the transaction between the person and environment” (Granger, 2002, p. 153). This key component of the relational-developmental systems model specifies that the developmental regulations between youth and their ecological assets must be mutually beneficial in order for positive youth development to occur (Lerner, Lerner, & Benson, 2011a; Lerner et al., 2011b). These mutually beneficial interactions are called adaptive developmental regulations (Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2011a; Lerner et al., 2012). According to the RDS model, in order for adolescents to achieve positive development, they must actively contribute to creating mutually beneficial relationships with their ecological assets (Lerner et al., 2011a, 2011b). In other words, youth who are meeting positive developmental milestones and thriving will be positively engaged in their social world.

**Positive youth development.** PYD theory conceptualizes positive development as a measurable outcome in youth, defining it through specific “indicators of the numerous mental,

behavioral, and social relational elements” (Lerner et al., 2005, p. 22) related to development. According to the RDS model, when adaptive developmental regulations exist between youth and their ecological assets, youth begin to develop the indicators of positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2012). These indicators are known as the Five Cs, and include “*competence* in academic, social, and vocational areas; *confidence* or a positive self-identity; *connections* to community, family, and peers; *character* or positive values, integrity, and moral commitment; and *caring* and compassion” (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p. 96). Some authors conceptualize a 6<sup>th</sup> C, *community*, defined as being active toward social change in one’s community (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). These indicators are defined further in Appendix B.

**Risk and contribution.** The RDS model indicates that youth’s risks will decrease as they develop the Five Cs (see Figure 1) (Lerner et al., 2011b). These risks have been operationalized primarily as depression, delinquency, and substance use; however, other risk factors may be identified for specific populations (Lerner et al., 2011b). According to the RDS model, when youth achieve the indicators of positive youth development (The Five Cs), they develop behavior “indicative of the Five Cs by contributing positively to self, family, community, and ultimately civil society” (Lerner et al., 2005, p. 23). This component of the model suggests that as youth develop the Five Cs, they will begin actively contributing to contexts from which they have benefited (Lerner et al., 2011b).

**Positive youth development and GSM youth.** One of the leading positive youth development theorists, Lerner (2005), stated that youth intervention programs and policies “must be specific to a group’s development and environmental circumstances” (p. 55) to be effective. Programs and policies aimed at promoting positive development among GSM youth are no exception, and yet literature on GSM programs has yet to incorporate PYD theory, while the

PYD literature has included very little detail on GSM youth. Mallon (1997) suggested that positive youth development is ideal for focusing on the development of GSM youth because of the historical context of programs attempting to “fix” or change GSM youth’s gender or sexual identities. For example, despite their ineffectiveness, privileging of heterosexual identities over GSM identities, and documented harm to participants, conversion (or reparative) therapy programs have historically attempted to change people’s gay, lesbian, or bisexual orientations to heterosexual (Panozzo, 2013). Because positive youth development programs focus on the strengths of youth, rather than trying to “fix” problem behaviors, research from this perspective may be able to succeed despite this complicated history.

The RDS model may be useful and potentially culturally adaptable to the study of GSM youth because of its focus on balancing risk and protective factors, as well as its attention to the associations between youth, their ecological assets, and positive development. Its attention to context, much like the interactions discussed in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems model, is relevant both to social work and studying GSM youth holistically. In order to fully use the theory with GSM youth, however, the model must be critiqued and adapted to best capture the experiences of GSM youth in varying contexts.

The next section includes an in-depth and critical discussion of the ecological assets component of the model, particularly regarding its applicability to GSM youth. This study begins with ecological assets as it is considered the starting point of the model. We must better understand the resources needed and used by GSM youth to begin to explicate other aspects of the model. In addition to critiquing the current state of theory and research regarding ecological assets, research on GSM youth relevant to ecological assets, namely social and community support, will be integrated to address areas of significant importance for study with GSM youth.

### **Ecological Assets and GSM Youth**

Ecological assets are resources in youth's lives that contribute to their positive development (see Appendix A) (Lerner et al., 2011b). The most widely used framework to examine the role of ecological assets is the Developmental Assets Framework (DAF) (Benson et al., 2011). Developmental assets are "agent(s) or characteristic(s) of the individual or his/her developmental ecologies (e.g. family, peer group, neighborhood, school, community) that [are] related to the increased probability of positive outcomes" (Benson et al., 2011, p. 204) and include both ecological assets and the strengths of adolescents. Organized conceptually into two categories (external [assets] and internal [strengths]) with eight sub-categories, the framework's 40 developmental assets are considered by some to be the "building blocks of healthy development" (Benson et al., 2011, p. 199).

Empirical research on developmental assets has come primarily from the Search Institute's Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors (PSL-AB) survey (Leffert et al., 1998). The PSL-AB includes items from standardized and validated scales, in addition to other items, to measure the presence of the 40 assets, as well as risk, well-being, developmental deficits, and demographics. In addition to community-based samples, the PSL-AB was administered in schools across the United States in 1996-1997 and included over 99,000 youth in middle and high schools (Mannes, Roehlkepartain, & Benson, 2005). Results indicated that of the assets measured by more than one survey item (n=27), the majority (n=23) demonstrated internal consistency above .50 (Leffert et al., 1998). Factor analyses also supported the two overarching (external/internal) and eight sub-categories (Leffert et al., 1998; Theokas et al., 2005). Specific developmental assets have also received empirical support, although Scales (1999) suggested that while three of the sub-categories of external assets (support, boundaries

and expectations, and constructive use of time) have been supported extensively by empirical research, empowerment has only received limited support.

The research utilizing the Developmental Assets Framework has contributed to a better understanding of the specific ecological assets critical for positive youth development; however, it is not without limitations, particularly when considering its applicability to GSM youth. Although the specific survey measures are not available without purchase, descriptions of the items include phrases that may not be applicable or may be confusing to GSM youth. For example, one of the risks measured by the PSL-AB is engaging in sexual intercourse. GSM youth may find answering questions pertaining to “sexual intercourse” problematic given the fact that “intercourse” is often taught as a male-female act involving penetration. This measure, therefore, may not accurately measure risky sexual behavior among GSM youth. Additionally, the assumption that any “sexual intercourse” is inherently risky values abstinence over other means of reducing risky sexual behavior. Furthermore, some of the assets considered beneficial to youth broadly may actually be associated with increased risk among GSM youth. For example, the “religious community” asset suggests that it is a positive resource when youth are engaged with a religious institution. For GSM youth involved in religious institutions that are not accepting of their gender identity or sexual orientation, this involvement may not result in the same positive outcomes associated with non-GSM youth’s involvement.

Within GSM youth research, the primary ecological asset studied has been schools (Allen et al., 2012), with less attention to other assets including individuals, social networks, and institutions. This schools-based research suggests that one important asset for youth may be access to GSAs (school-based GSM youth clubs) and supportive adults in school (Szalacha, 2003). In spite of this, however, not all schools have GSAs or adults whom GSM youth can trust.



Additionally, sub-groups of GSM youth, such as GSM youth of color, may be less likely to utilize school-based clubs and more likely to utilize community-based groups, at least in urban areas (McCready, 2003). Because of the limitations to school-based resources for GSM youth, it is important to examine resources outside the school context, as well.

### **Potential Ecological Assets for GSM Youth**

Although GSM youth may need the ecological assets outlined on the RDS model, they may also need additional or identity-specific supports. Although GSM research has rarely used PYD as a theoretical framework, the existing literature on GSM youth indicates that social and community support may be important to the positive development of GSM youth, particularly given the significance of social identity theory. Social identity theory posits that an individual's self-concept involves two important facets: individual identity and social, or collective, identity (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individual identity includes self-perception of one's competencies, goals, and values, or internal attributes. Social, or collective, identity refers to one's membership in social groups, often based on shared social identities, and the perceived value of these groups in society. For nonmetropolitan GSM youth, finding ways to enhance this positive collective identity may prove difficult due to lack of resources and access to other similarly situated peers or adults. In light of the limitations in the literature on PYD theory and the RDS model, and the importance of integrating social identity theory in research on GSM youth, the following sections examine GSM youth's access and utilization of social support and GSM community organizations, specifically within nonmetropolitan communities when possible. Additional potential sources of ecological assets for GSM youth are also explored, such as virtual resources.

**Social support.** Social support comprises the perceived or actual support received from an individual's social network and also includes a sense of belonging and feeling valued in one's social world (Detrie & Lease, 2007). Social support may be especially important for GSM youth as they navigate through contexts in which victimization may be prevalent. Within the RDS model, social networks and individuals (peers and supportive adults) may provide social support. Studies on GSM youth and social support have examined GSM youth's perceptions of their access to social support, the types of individuals they find supportive, and difficulties with support systems, as well as the association between social support and well-being. None of the following studies analyzed GSM youth and social support specifically within nonmetropolitan communities or within a PYD framework.

***Access to social support.*** Research on GSM youth's access to social support indicates that they generally report less support than non-GSM youth. For example, Teasdale and Bradley-Engen (2010) used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) and found that SMY reported feeling less cared about by adults and peers than heterosexual adolescents. While 17% of the sample reportedly attended rural schools, the authors did not differentiate between rural and urban youth in their analyses. Diamond and Lucas (2004) studied differences in peer relationships between SMY and heterosexual youth. They recruited 60 SMY through community and school-based SMY groups and 65 heterosexual youth and young adults through high schools and colleges within the same urban area. The questionnaire included items measuring number of peer friendships, difficulties encountered in these relationships, and demographic factors. They found that sexual minority males under the age of 18 had significantly smaller peer networks than heterosexual males under 18. The study did not differentiate between supports received from heterosexual versus sexual minority peers. It is

important to note that while sexual minority males reported fewer friends than heterosexual males, this does not necessary equate to less overall support.

*Sources of support.* Research indicates there are differences in GSM youth's sources of support. For example, Munoz-Plaza et al. (2002) examined GSM youth's access to social support in the high school environment. In an urban area of North Carolina, they interviewed 12 sexual minority young adults (18-21) about their experiences with social support in high school. This study used specific categories of social support including emotional (care, trust), appraisal (positive feedback), instrumental (providing tangible resources), and informational (advice). Participants indicated their heterosexual peers and non-family member adults provided more overall support than their families; furthermore, other GSM youth and adults provided the most support, predominantly in the form of appraisal and information. As one of the earliest studies specifically focused on GSM youth's needs for social support, this study is strong in its exploratory methodology and broad description of social support.

Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, and Malik (2010) examined SMY's perceptions of their social support related to stress they experienced because of their sexual identity. Their sample included 98 young adults (18-21) recruited throughout a university campus and broader community. Their survey included a measure of demographics, the Measure of Gay-Related Stress (Lewis, Derlega, Griffin, & Krowinski, 2003), the Behavior Assessment System for Children (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004), and an adapted Social Support Behaviors Scale (Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987). Results indicated that participants perceived the support they received from family and heterosexual friends as lower than support from sexual minority friends, for both sexuality-related stress and other stressors, echoing the findings of Munoz-Plaza et al. (2002).

***Difficulties with support systems.*** Very little research has examined the difficulties GSM youth may experience within their social systems. Diamond and Lucas (2004) found that SMY had a greater proportion of friends in their “inner circle” than heterosexual youth, yet also worried significantly more over losing friends and had, in fact, lost a greater number of friends than heterosexual youth. SMY’s higher proportion of friends in their “inner circles” than heterosexual youth may be explained by the finding that peer network size was negatively correlated with proportion of friends in “inner circle,” and SMY’s peer networks were smaller than those of heterosexual youth (although statistically significantly so only for males). Age and sex both had an impact on these findings; sexual minority males younger than 18 reported smaller peer networks, while friendship loss was only significant for younger SMY.

***Association with well-being.*** While the research on social support and GSM youth has been growing over the past decade, much of the research has examined youth’s access to social support with peers rather than its direct impact on well-being. Wright and Perry (2006) found an inverse relationship between sexual identity distress and youth’s level of outness to their social support networks. The number of people in youth’s social network was non-significant, suggesting that the quality of the relationships with members of the social support system may be more influential than the number of people available. Recent research suggests that social support does not impact school performance among multiethnic SMY who experience discrimination (Craig & Smith, 2014). While the research on social support and well-being among GSM youth is sparse, research on lesbian adults suggests that when they experienced a sense of belonging with the lesbian community, they felt more connected to the general community (McLaren, 2009). This connection to the general community was associated with decreased depression.

The findings from these studies suggest that social support may be associated with increased well-being. GSM peers and adults are generally perceived as providing the most support to GSM youth overall. GSM youth report less social support than their heterosexual and cisgender peers, however, especially younger adolescents and male youth. Although the studies used varying methods to ascertain these findings, they are limited in that they were mostly retrospective and either did not include nonmetropolitan GSM youth or did not conduct analyses to determine geographical differences. Social networks and supportive individuals, therefore, may be ecological assets that are beneficial, yet challenging for GSM youth to access, particularly in smaller communities with fewer GSM people. Additionally, GSM youth may be accessing social support in ways not assessed by these studies, similar to the youth in Gray's (2007, 2009) study, who found means of developing their GSM identities different from, but not inferior to, urban GSM youth. Accounting for these limitations and enhancing understanding of how the nonmetropolitan community impacts the availability and quality of social support is important.

**Community support.** Community-based GSM programs represent an alternative means of support for GSM youth who may not have access to school-based supportive programming or who prefer to maintain privacy in the school setting regarding their GSM identity. Although a few studies have examined community-based GSM youth programs, none have examined their use or impact in nonmetropolitan communities. CenterLink, the national organization of GSM community centers, and the LGBT Movement Advancement Project (MAP), an independent think tank, conduct a biennial evaluation on the status of GSM community centers across the United States. Their most recent report (2014) summarized findings from surveys of 111 GSM community centers across 32 states. The majority of the Centers (90%) provided programs or

services for GSM youth including outreach and education, support groups, social/recreational groups, health/wellness services, drop-in hours, and leadership development. In reviewing the report index, it appears that of the 111 centers that responded to the survey, only 16 were situated within nonmetropolitan communities across 11 states. It may be that GSM community organizations in nonmetropolitan areas are less likely to exist as formal nonprofit organizations (and may exist as informal groups within non-GSM organizations) (Oswald & Culton, 2003) and, thus, would be missed by this type of survey.

Allen et al. (2012) conducted similar research in their descriptive study of GSM youth programs across the United States. They used CenterLink data as well as two other GSM organization lists and emailed an online survey link to 116 GSM youth programs. Of those who responded (N=61), the most frequently reported youth programs included drop-in hours (87%), peer support programs (82%), and educational sessions (82%). Although the researchers did not specify the geographic context of these organizations, they did indicate that several programs reported youth traveling to access programming (up to 2-3 hours), suggesting a need for more community-based GSM youth programs across wider geographic areas. As a descriptive study, this research provides a starting point for examining the role of community-based programs for GSM youth more closely.

***Utilization of GSM organizations.*** Two studies described how and why GSM youth utilized GSM organizations. Nesmith et al. (1999) explored perceived social support among GSM youth within an urban GSM youth center. They engaged in qualitative interviews with 17 SMY and young adults. Similar to Munoz-Plaza et al. (2002), Nesmith et al. (1999) explored four types of social support: concrete, emotional, financial, and informational. Over half of their participants described seeking adult role models through GSM centers to act as substitute

parental figures due to strained relationships with their parents. They described seeking nurturance, a role model, and advice. Participants also described the community center as their primary place of support. As one of the earliest studies on community-based GSM programming, this study reinforces the importance of community organizations in providing GSM youth with options to access social support and adult role models. A more recent study (Gamarel et al., 2014) engaged in multiple qualitative methods with GSM youth of color within a GSM organization to better understand the importance of that space in their lives. They found that the GSM youth organization was a space that felt like home and in which youth could build community. In this way, the GSM organization provided a safe space where youth could feel less isolated as GSM individuals.

***Community-based needs of GSM youth.*** Two related studies examined the community-based needs of GSM youth. Davis et al. (2010) recruited 20 GSM youth through a metropolitan GSM community center (4 of the youth reported living in rural communities). Using concept mapping, the participants identified the specific areas of need they deemed important and then organized them in order of emotional or social importance. The need for role models and social support was ranked 3 out of 5 on emotional importance (with 1 the highest) and 2 out of 5 on social importance. Community support and involvement (including GSM youth centers) was ranked 5 out of 5 on emotional importance, but 4 out of 5 on social importance. Interestingly, the youth of color in the study rated community support and involvement more emotionally and socially important than did white youth, a finding consistent with McCready's (2003) work on how GSM youth of color tend to utilize community-based resources over school-based resources in urban areas. This was often due to the fact that school-based GSAs consisted primarily of white, female, allies, rather than GSM youth of color. It is important to note that while

participants ranked the areas by order of importance, all were deemed important by the participants.

Wells et al. (2013) conducted a study on the community-based needs of GSM youth but used quantitative methods and sampled more broadly than within GSM community centers. Their online survey was sent throughout the United States and included measures assessing demographics, connection to the GSM community, outness, geographic region, and perceived needs related to social service programs and preferred delivery method and location. By comparing zip codes, researchers reported that most of the participants lived in more densely populated areas when compared to the national average. The top service needs they listed included GSM sex education, peer support, and assistance with dating/relationships. The type of service needed was not related to geographic context. They preferred the format of services to be through peer-led or adult-led GSM youth groups or one-on-one services. The youth participants predominantly preferred programs offered in schools or community centers, but also GSM youth organizations.

***GSM organizations and well-being.*** Only one study was located that specifically examined the impact of community-based GSM programs on GSM youth. Craig, McInroy, Austin, Smith, and Engle (2012) evaluated the impact of a “strengths-based case management” community-based program on the self-esteem and self-efficacy of GSM youth in a major metropolitan city. The program provided individualized case management services to GSM youth in the community. Researchers administered a pre/post-test measure that included self-esteem and self-efficacy scales to 162 GSM youth between the ages of 14 and 18. The sample was primarily Black and Hispanic. No control or comparison group was utilized as all youth who were eligible for the program were provided services and eligible to participate in the study.



Youth who completed a minimum of four sessions with a case manager were included in the study. The results suggested that participants' self-esteem and self-efficacy increased significantly from pre-test to post-test. This study is important and relevant as it utilizes a strengths-based perspective among GSM youth in a community-based organization and examines impact and outcomes.

These findings suggest that community supports specific to GSM youth's identities may be important assets in providing them access to resources which promote well-being. Little attention has been paid to the role of GSM youth community organizations in GSM youth's lives, particularly in nonmetropolitan areas. Research studying community organizations has primarily surveyed agency staff about the programs offered; yet, we know very little about how and why youth are accessing these programs. As with social support, community organizations may represent an understudied, but important, ecological asset for GSM youth.

**Virtual resources.** In addition to social support and community organizations, GSM youth, particularly in nonmetropolitan communities, may seek out support virtually, through the use of social media, websites, and phone applications. The importance of social media for youth in this technological age cannot be understated (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). General populations of youth are using the internet to access information and find support in anonymous ways (Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005). Research specific to GSM youth suggests that they may use the internet to find out about local events or resources, GSM events, sexual health information, and local GSM organizations (DeHaan, Kuper, Magee, Bigelow, & Mustanski, 2013). GSM youth may also use the internet and social media sites to develop a better understanding of their own sexual or gender identity, to meet other GSM youth, or to talk in easier ways than in-person (i.e. talking about sensitive topics online may be easier than in

person). One study found that GSM youth were more likely to get social support from online peers than in-person non-GSM youth and to rate the emotional support they received from online friends as higher than in-person friends (Ybarra, Mitchell, Palmer, & Reisner, 2015). It may be that GSM youth in nonmetropolitan communities, with little access to other ecological assets, find support through virtual networks due to increased isolation and fewer supportive local resources (Gray, 2009).

This collection of research suggests areas in need of empirical attention. The important role of ecological assets for GSM youth is clear yet needs to be studied in relation to their access to GSM peers and adults, adult role models, GSM community organizations, and other areas of support, with particular attention to geographic diversity. In addition to access, we must develop a better understanding of the factors that influence GSM youth in nonmetropolitan communities to seek out support. For example, youth may seek out support to cope with negative experiences related to their GSM identity or to find opportunities to engage in activism and service, either through community organizations or other means when community organizations are not available or accessible (DiFulvio, 2011; Harper, Brodsky, & Bruce, 2012; Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008). The nonmetropolitan community context, however, may present barriers for GSM youth seeking service or opportunities for activism (cost of travel, lack of transportation, etc.).

Additionally, while broader, all-encompassing community organizations (such as 4-H) have been studied extensively within a positive youth development framework, very little attention has been paid to the role of community organizations for GSM youth and none within positive youth development research. The measures used within PYD research have not accounted for the varying experiences and realities of GSM youth. For example, survey

questions should not assume the gender identity or sexual orientation of participants and questions should reflect the realities of GSM youth's lives (e.g. using "sexual activity" instead of "sexual intercourse"). These changes in the way researchers examine the lived experiences of GSM youth can provide more accurate and sensitive information about this group. In spite of their limitations, PYD and the RDS model provide an appropriate theoretical framework for studying GSM youth within their nonmetropolitan communities.

### **Current Study**

The current study aimed to address the research gaps pertaining to GSM youth and PYD theory. The purpose of this study was to enhance understanding of the protective factors and support options for GSM youth living in small communities. The study involved examining the support seeking processes of GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan communities to better understand both their community contexts and ecological assets necessary to promote positive development. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions and five hypotheses (Table 1):

1. What is the relationship between living in a nonmetropolitan or small metropolitan community and GSM youth's a) needs, availability, and utilization of community-based resources, and; b) perceptions of social support? (see hypotheses in Table 1)
2. How do GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities get their needs for support met?
3. In what ways can positive youth development theory and the relational-developmental systems model be revised to enhance the cultural relevance of these models to GSM youth?

Table one illustrates the hypotheses set forth in this study, as well as a rationale for each. Chapter Three provides an in-depth discussion of the mixed methods used to answer the research questions and test these hypotheses.

Table 1

*Study Hypotheses (Research Question 1)*

Number	Hypothesis	Rationale
1	Within nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities, a supportive community climate will be associated with a) greater availability; b) greater utilization; and c) fewer unmet needs for GSM community resources.	Communities with supportive climates may have more options for GSM youth to access support and resources
2	Within nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities, a supportive community climate will be associated with greater perceived social support from a) GSM friends; b) non-GSM friends; and c) GSM adults.	Hostile communities may provide GSM youth less support from their peers and adults due to overall community climate.
3	Larger communities will be associated with a) greater availability; b) greater utilization; and c) fewer unmet needs for GSM community resources.	Because of their denser population, metropolitan communities may have more opportunities, and fewer barriers, for GSM youth to access and utilize support, thus having fewer unmet resource needs.
4	Larger communities will be associated with greater perceived social support from a) GSM friends; b) non-GSM friends; and c) GSM adults.	In metropolitan areas GSM youth may have a greater number of non-GSM peers, thus increasing their chances of finding supportive peers and adults.
5	Nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan GSM youth involved in a GSM community center will identify a) more availability; b) more utilization; and c) fewer unmet needs for GSM community resources than non-involved GSM youth.	Involvement in a GSM community center will facilitate greater access and utilization of additional resources, thus reducing total unmet needs.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

This chapter describes the methodology used to answer the research questions, including the philosophical stance of the researcher, study design, methods used, and data analysis procedures.

A mixed methods design was implemented to enhance understanding of this complex, understudied area. Utilizing mixed methods “provides a more complete picture by noting trends and generalizations as well as in-depth knowledge of participants’ perspectives” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 33). The original purpose for mixing methods in the study was complementarity—using different methods to understand varying “dimensions of the same complex phenomenon” (Greene, 2007, p. 101). Throughout the course of the study, a second reason for mixing, initiation, emerged. Both complementarity and initiation involve using multiple methods to assess varying aspects of the same phenomenon (Greene, 2007), however, with initiation the goal is to assess divergence in the data “in the service of fresh insights, new perspectives, (and) original understandings” (Greene, 2007, p. 103). Initiation was a particularly important focus on the data pertaining to community climate and social support (discussed later). Combining the results from quantitative methods situated in post-positivist traditions and qualitative methods situated in interpretive traditions allowed for deeper, more complex, findings and inferences than would have been possible using a single method (Greene, 2007).

### **Philosophical Foundations**

An inherent issue in mixed methods research is how to account for multiple paradigmatic stances compatible with differing methodologies that may contradict or conflict with one another (Greene, 2007). While there are several approaches one may take regarding this philosophical

conundrum, the researcher in this study took a dialectic stance (Greene, 2007). In the dialectic stance, paradigms are viewed as useful and important because they identify the researcher's assumptions about the nature of the social world and, thus, her selection of specific methodological traditions with which to study that world. Paradigms are not viewed as infallible, however. They are "historical and social constructs" (Greene, 2007, p. 69) and are subject to limitations and weaknesses.

The dialectical stance posits that a study can be strengthened by engaging with the social and political differences within paradigmatic assumptions and methods, thus producing greater understandings about the studied phenomena (Greene, 2007). The dialectic stance complements this study because of its focus on engaging with difference within the data and among measures to seek in-depth understanding of an understudied phenomenon (resources and support for nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan GSM youth). The particular mixed method design of this study (discussed later) utilized four methods, situated within two different paradigms, to measure the same phenomenon in different ways, from different perspectives (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). As such, the methods were mixed to enhance understanding and engage with differences emerging from various methods or perspectives. The goal was not that the findings from these methods converge, but that they dialogically produce greater insight and deeper knowledge about the studied topic. As this topic has not been studied, it is important to understand the perspectives of GSM youth from these diverse perspectives: individual, group, and aggregated experiences.

### **Defining Nonmetropolitan**

Prior to describing the study methods, it is important to operationalize the term "nonmetropolitan" as it has been defined in various ways. Three federal agencies define and

classify municipalities and counties by size, such as urban, metropolitan, nonmetropolitan, or rural. The United States Census Bureau's (2010) definitions are based on population density and include three distinct categories. Urbanized areas have populations of 50,000 or more and urbanized clusters have populations between 2,500 and 49,999. Rural includes those areas not identified as urban. Rather than focusing solely on areas based on population density, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) considers the urbanization of places within counties (Gray, 2007; United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2012). They utilize criteria including metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs; counties that contain a city with a population of 100,000 or more). Counties within these MSAs are considered metropolitan and counties outside of an MSA, or not tied to MSAs, are considered nonmetropolitan. The USDA (2012) uses the OMB's metropolitan/nonmetropolitan delineations by county, but expands on them by including nine distinct categories. Their criteria for classification include population size, adjacency to urban areas, and percentage of the population commuting to urban areas for employment. The USDA categorizes all counties in the U.S. as one of three metropolitan counties (ranging from a population of fewer than 250,000 to over 1 million) or one of six nonmetropolitan counties (ranging from populations of over 20,000 but adjacent to urban areas to populations of less than 2,500 and nonadjacent to urban areas).

While these coding schemas prove useful for much geographic-based research, they are problematic when examining the experiences of GSM youth. Classifications of urban and metropolitan communities collapse a vast range of community types from mid-sized towns to major metropolitan areas. Rural and nonmetropolitan communities are defined primarily by their relationship to urban and metropolitan communities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; USDA, 2012). Studies of GSM youth tend to include urban samples (Gray, 2007), including samples



predominantly from counties the USDA defines as metropolitan with a population of more than 250,000 (USDA, 2012). The few studies that have examined GSM youth and adults in rural areas have primarily focused on the most rural areas such as Central Appalachia (Gray, 2007, 2009) or East Texas (Yarbrough, 2003) although some have used broader criteria (Oswald & Culton, 2003). This leaves a large gap in understanding GSM youth's geographic contexts. For example, we know very little about the experiences of GSM youth in areas defined as urban by the U.S. Census Bureau but with populations less than 250,000. GSM youth in these communities may face challenges to travel to access resources if they have not disclosed their gender or sexual identity to their parents or adults in their lives. Additionally, rural and nonmetropolitan communities are determined by a "logic of definition by exclusion" (Gray, 2007, p. 52) that classifies what is non-urban as rural by default. This distinction may not account for the unique experiences of individuals outside major metropolitan areas while casting rural communities "as inadequacies in need of urban outreach" (Gray, 2007, p. 52).

Because of the limitations described above, and to better understand GSM youth's experiences across a geographic continuum, this study uses the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties (NCHS, 2014). NCHS categorizes counties into one of four metropolitan or two nonmetropolitan counties based on population, their OMB designation, and the size and location of an MSA, if present. Metropolitan counties include large central and large fringe metropolitan counties that contain an MSA of one million or more; medium metropolitan counties are located in an MSA with populations less than one million, but at least 250,000; and small metropolitan counties are located in an MSA with populations less than 250,000. Nonmetropolitan counties include micropolitan counties that contain a micropolitan statistical area and noncore counties, those

counties outside micropolitan statistical areas. To understand risks and protective factors for GSM youth across a geographic continuum, while maintaining adequate power in the data, these categories were collapsed into three groups: medium/large metropolitan, small metropolitan, and nonmetropolitan. Extending the definition of “rural” or “nonmetropolitan” to include small metropolitan counties (with populations less than 250,000) is consistent with Oswald’s empirical work on GSM individuals and families across downstate Illinois (see Holman & Oswald, 2011; Oswald & Culton, 2003; Oswald & Lazarevic, 2011).

### **Mixed Method Study Design**

This study used an integrated, blended, mixed method design (Greene, 2007). Multiple methods were implemented concurrently, given equal weight in analysis, “assess(ed) the same phenomenon”, and “intentionally interact(ed) with one another during the course of the study” (Greene, 2007, p. 125). The primary “integrative task (was) one of joint analysis or connection between data of different kinds during the analysis process” (Greene, 2007, p. 126). This design promotes exploration of a complex social issue from multiple perspectives, enhancing the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings. The concurrent implementation of methods meant that data were not subject to changes over time and measured the same phenomenon across methods; yet, the methods were less able to inform or build off of each other during data collection. Blended designs tend to integrate during analysis and interpretation (Greene, 2007), however, rather than throughout data collection, making this an appropriate design for this study.

Four methods were used to answer the research questions: online surveys; an objective community climate protocol using public data; in-depth interviews; and participant observations of a GSM youth program. These methods were able to answer the research questions in various ways and were chosen specifically for how they complemented each other in this study (see

Figure 2). All methods were implemented concurrently with GSM youth in Illinois over a six month period between January and June, 2014.

Survey methods were used to enable geographic comparisons between youth living in nonmetropolitan, small metropolitan, medium/large metropolitan counties and to allow for generalizability. The collection of public data through a community climate protocol was used to objectively measure community climate at the county and municipal levels. These data were linked to surveys by participant-provided zip codes. Interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of how GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties perceived their communities, peers, and support. Interview participants also completed the online survey and their interview, survey, and objective climate data were linked. Participant observations were the only method occurring over a period of time, thus providing an extended exploration of the processes and interactions within one small metropolitan community-based GSM youth program. Observations were focused on group processes and documented anonymously; therefore, while some observation participants also participated in other forms of data collection, they were not linked to individual participants or any other data type.

Although data were collected concurrently, data analysis occurred in two stages. During stage one, the data were analyzed separately by quantitative and qualitative methods. Upon completion of initial analyses, two types of integrated analyses occurred: data comparison and typology development. The final stage of analysis included interpretation of the varying levels of analysis.

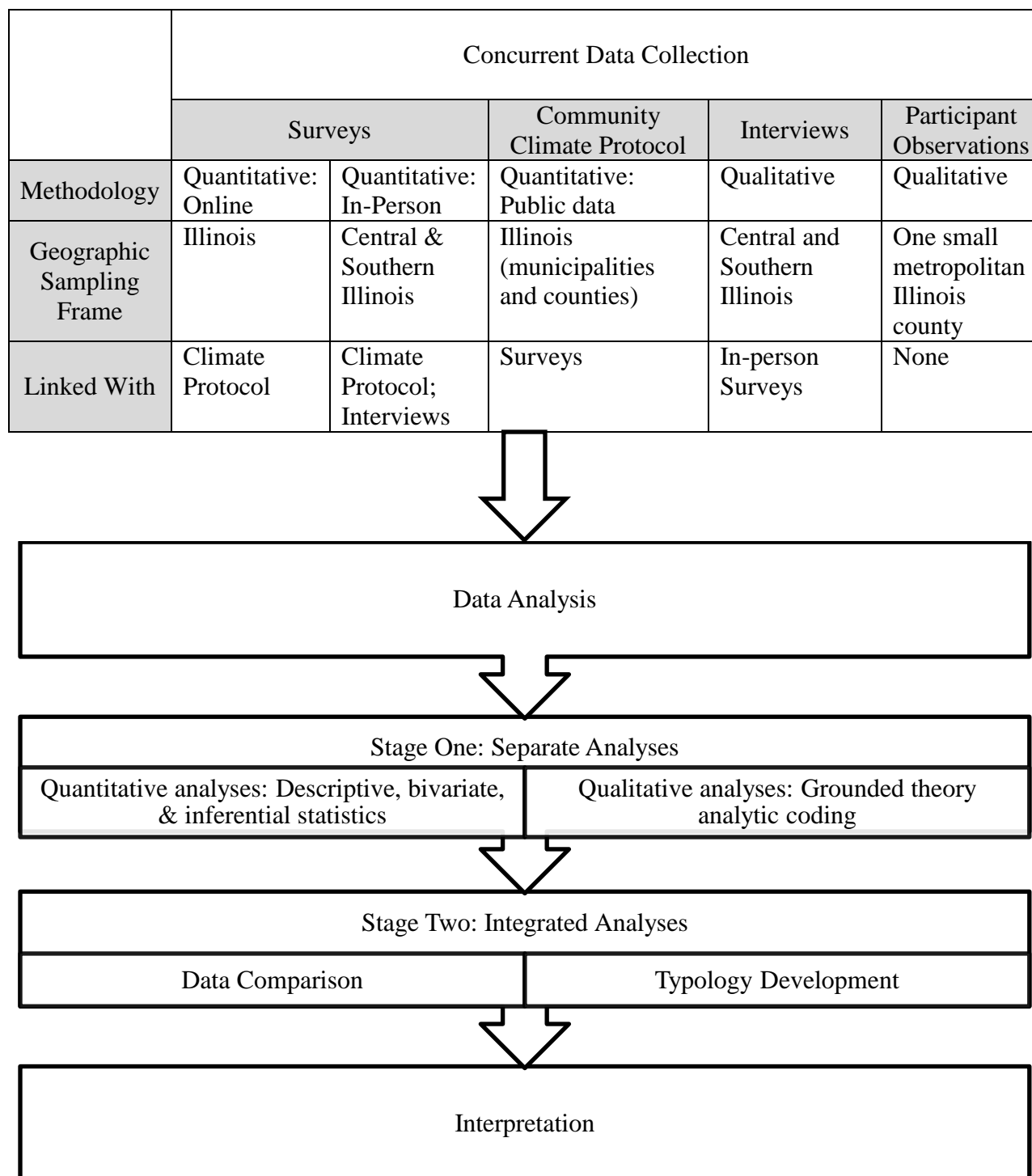


Figure 2. Integrated Blended Mixed Method Design

These methods are described in greater detail in the following sections.

### Component One: Surveys

A survey was developed with the purpose of gathering numerical data to a) describe GSM youth's needs, availability, and utilization of resources and supports; b) describe how GSM youth perceive the social support they receive from peers and adults; and c) statistically analyze relationships between these data and the community context. Open-ended questions on the survey provided opportunities for participants to expand on their answers or add items not included on the established measures (e.g. types of community-based GSM resources they use). Prior to engaging in data collection, the survey was pilot tested with two adolescents to ensure their comprehension of the questions and establish the length of time for survey completion.

### **Sampling**

Survey data were collected from GSM youth between the ages of 14 and 18 across the state of Illinois. Participants were recruited in several ways. Youth participating in qualitative interviews (discussed later) were asked to complete the survey in person, via the researcher's computer; surveys were linked to their interview with a unique ID number. Three of these participants had already completed the survey online on their own time. They gave permission for the researcher to locate their survey (by participant provided zip code, demographic information, and time frame of completion) and link it with their interview. For non-interview participants, notices about the study were posted in the observation site (discussed later), announced at youth group meetings, and mailed or hand-delivered to GSM and GSM-friendly organizations and groups throughout Illinois (e.g. GSM community centers, libraries, GSAs). Leaders at these organizations were asked to share the study website with youth in their programs. Notices about the study were sent to places in which GSM youth may congregate (e.g. schools, after school programs, coffee shops). Participants were also recruited for the study through online communities, message boards, and social media sites. Prior to data collection,

power analyses were conducted to determine an estimated sample size that would allow for enough power to test the hypotheses. Based on these power analyses, the researcher aimed to collect survey data from at least 200 participants.

### **Procedures**

The survey was administered in two ways: in-person via computer with interview participants ( $n=34$ ) and online throughout the state of Illinois with anonymous participants ( $n=304$ ). Youth completing the survey in-person were given an informed consent/assent form by the researcher and answered questions about consent and eligibility on the first page of the survey. The researcher input the participant's unique ID number for data tracking purposes. Youth completing the survey online without the researcher present started at the study website which included an online informed consent/assent with eligibility criteria questions (age, gender/sexual identity, state of residence) to ensure survey eligibility. Participants were instructed to read the informed consent/assent and check a box if they agreed to participate. The survey took 20-40 minutes to complete. The survey did not ask for identifying information until the survey was completed and submitted. At that time, participants could elect to enter a drawing for one of 10 \$20 gift cards. Participants were directed to a separate webpage where they entered their name and preferred method of contact (email, phone number). The drawing was held at the completion of data collection (July, 2014).

### **Participants**

A total of 396 individuals clicked the survey link, in addition to the 34 interview participants, for a total of 430. Of those individuals, 43 were not eligible to participate in the study (i.e. they were not between 14-18, lived outside of Illinois, or did not identify as a gender or sexual minority) and 26 (6.7%) were eligible but declined participation. Of the 361 remaining

individuals who started the survey, 338 provided a zip code required for inclusion in the study, thus this represents the final analytic sample (missing data procedures are discussed in data analysis). A total of 304 youth completed the survey anonymously online and 34 completed it as part of their interview. Demographics of survey participants are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Participant Demographics (N=338)*

Demographic	n	%
Age		
14	37	10.9%
15	49	14.5%
16	86	25.4%
17	98	29.0%
18	67	19.8%
Missing <sup>a</sup>	1	
Race/Ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	241	71.3%
Non-white	96	28.4%
Asian	(7)	(2.1%)
Black / African-American	(23)	(6.8%)
Hispanic/Latino	(28)	(8.3%)
Multiracial	(38)	(11.2%)
Missing	1	
Birth Sex		
Male	69	20.4%
Female	267	79%
Intersex	2	0.6%
Gender Identity		
Male	61	18.0%
Female	206	60.9%
Trans & gender variant	54	16.0%
Transgender	(22)	(6.5%)
Genderqueer	(18)	(5.3%)
Genderfluid	(7)	(2.1%)
Gender other	(7)	(2.1%)
Gender Questioning	16	4.7%
Sexual Orientation		
Lesbian or gay	90	26.6%
Lesbian	(45)	(13.3%)

Table 2 (cont.)

Gay	(45)	(13.3%)
Bisexual	94	27.8%
Pansexual or queer	92	27.2%
Pansexual	(71)	(21.0%)
Queer	(21)	(6.2%)
Questioning	44	13.0%
Other	15	4.4%
Missing <sup>a</sup>	3	--
Socioeconomic Status		
Free/Red Lunch (yes)	170	50.3%
Adults own home (no)	98	29.0%
Highest Ed (HS or less)	126	37.3%
County Size		
Medium/Large Metro	145	42.9%
Large Metro, Central	(49)	(14.8%)
Large Metro, Fringe	(62)	(18.3%)
Medium Metro	(34)	(10.1%)
Small Metro	106	31.4%
Nonmetro	87	25.7%
Micropolitan	(63)	(18.6%)
Noncore	(24)	(7.1%)

*Note.* Numbers and percentages within parentheses reflect the sub categories within the category used for analysis and are for descriptive purposes only; Race/ethnicity was coded as a single race or, if more than one race/ethnicity was selected, as multiracial

<sup>a</sup>These questions were skipped, however, participants completed eligibility questions pertaining to age and sexual orientation; therefore, their survey remained in the analytic sample

## Measures

The survey utilized existing scales and additional survey questions to measure demographics, community climate, community support, and perceptions of social support. These scales and their associated psychometric properties are included in Table 3 and Appendix C. The survey contained three sections related to the research questions: demographics, community context, and support and resources.

**Demographics.** Basic demographic information was collected. Participants were asked to indicate their current age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, birth sex, sexual identity, and religion/spirituality. Questions and answer options are included in Appendix D. Participants were



directed to “mark all that apply”, allowing them the opportunity to self-disclose multiple identities. For sexual identity, a “straight” response option was included. The only participants who identified as straight also identified as transgender, gender queer, gender questioning, or non-cisgender and, therefore, were kept in the sample. Although participants could select multiple identities within each demographic variable, for analytic purposes variables were re-coded so that participants were included in one category only. For race/ethnicity, participants were re-coded as having one race (e.g. White, African American, Asian, etc.) or as multiracial (e.g. identifying as more than one race/ethnicity). For gender and sexual identity, participants selecting more than one identity label were re-coded into a single category based on conceptual interest. Participants identifying as more than one gender identity were re-coded as a single gender identity using the following hierarchy: gender questioning, transgender, gender variant/other, male/female (e.g. a participant identifying as transgender and male was coded as transgender; a participant identifying as transgender, questioning, and female was coded as questioning). Participants identifying as more than one sexual identity were re-coded as a single sexual identity using the following hierarchy: questioning, queer/pansexual, bisexual, gay/lesbian (e.g. a participant identifying as bisexual and queer was coded as queer).

Level of outness about their gender or sexual identity was assessed using a series of questions from the Rainbow Illinois survey (Oswald & Holman, 2013) used with minor modifications. Participants were asked to rate how open they are about their gender or sexual identity to various individuals in their lives (e.g. parents, siblings, heterosexual friends, teachers, etc.). Answer choices ranged from “no one knows” (0) to “everyone knows” (1). The modifications to this question from the Rainbow Illinois survey included the following: “my

work peers” was changed to “my school peers”; “my work supervisors” was changed to “my school staff/teachers”; and “my LGBTQ friends” was added to the list of people/groups.

Finally, social class was measured using three categorical variables that youth were expected to be able to self-report. First, they were asked to indicate whether they participate in free or reduced lunch programs at their school (yes, no, not sure). Next, they were asked whether the adults they live with own their home (yes, no, not sure, not applicable). Third, participants were asked about the highest level of education obtained by the adults they live with the most. In order to account for varying family types the survey first asked participants to describe their current living situation and included ten possible options (e.g. one parent, two parents, foster parent, grandparent, etc.), as well as an “other: specify”. Then participants were asked to describe the education level of those individuals with whom they live (less than high school through doctoral degree). The highest level of education provided for any adult in the home was re-coded as high school or less (0) or some college or more (1).

**Community context.** The community context was operationalized as four variables, two of which were measured using the survey: county size and perceived community climate. Two objective climate measures (county and municipal climate) were measured using the objective climate protocol (discussed later). Participants were asked to include their zip code or town name in order to calculate county size and to link with public data gathered to objectively measure climate. To measure perceived community climate, a survey question asked “What is the climate toward LGBTQ people where you live?” with the answer options “Hostile (unaccepting), Tolerant, or Supportive (accepting)” (item used from the Rainbow Illinois survey [Oswald & Holman, 2013]).

**Support and resources.** Participants' perceptions of the support they receive were measured in multiple ways. First, they were asked to indicate the people in their lives who provide them with support as GSM youth from a checklist of individuals that included "other: specify" options (see Appendix D). Next, they used the same checklist to identify one person who is the most important to them as a GSM youth. An open-ended follow-up question asked them to describe what the person does that is supportive or not supportive of their GSM identity.

Perceived social support was measured using the Perceived Social Support from Friends (PSS-Fr) scale (Procidano & Heller, 1983). The PSS-Fr includes 20 questions that measure "the extent to which an individual perceives that his/her needs for support, information, and feedback are fulfilled" (Procidano & Heller, 1983, p. 2). Participants marked "yes", "no", or "don't know" to questions such as "My friends give me the moral support I need" and "If I felt that one or more of my friends were upset with me, I'd just keep it to myself." The PSS-Fr has been found to be an internally consistent ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and valid measure of perceived social support from friends. Two items were not used because of a data collection error, thus this study utilized a subset of 18 questions. The items are summed such that higher scores equal greater perceived social support. This scale has been used successfully with GSM youth (Detrie & Lease, 2007). Participants were asked to complete the scale for up to three different groups of people in their lives. First, they were asked if they have LGBTQ friends or know LGBTQ adults and if they actively seek out LGBTQ youth for support or friendship. Next, participants were asked to complete the PSS-Fr for each group in which they answered 'yes', as well as for non-LGBTQ friends. Alpha's for each version of the survey were high (.88-.90) indicating high internal consistency.

**Community support.** Needs, availability, and utilization of community-based resources were measured using the Involvement in Gay-related Activities (IGA) index (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). The IGA index was created based on focus groups with gay and lesbian youth and includes a checklist of GSM or GSM-friendly social, support, and recreational programs or organizations that may be present in a community. It has been found to be internally consistent ( $\alpha=.77$ ). The authors encourage modification of the index to include activities available in the research location, thus the IGA index was modified to include 15 support, social, volunteer, and educational activities specific to GSM youth in the study region. The specific items in the checklist are in Appendix D (e.g. “LGBTQ youth group at a community center”, “annual LGBTQ festival or Pride”, and “HIV/AIDS organization.”) Three versions of the IGA index were used to assess a) utilization of community resources, b) community resource needs, and c) availability of community resources. The utilization IGA index asked participants “Have you ever done any of the following things...” and included a modified response set of “yes, in my community”, “yes, in a nearby community”, and “no.” As this question was used to assess use of GSM resources, the “yes” answers were combined into one category. Responses were recoded as no (0) and yes (1). Additionally, participants were asked how frequently they participated in these activities (never, once, occasionally [monthly or less], often [weekly], or daily) and the estimated travel time to each activity. Follow-up questions assessed what is good and/or not so good about those programs (open-ended). To assess GSM resource needs, participants were asked: “which of the following resources do you believe would (or do) help you feel safe, welcome, and supported as an LGBTQ person in your community? (Check all that apply)”. Responses were coded as not needed (0) or needed (1). To assess availability, participants were asked: “Of the programs and events listed below, please mark whether they are

available in your community, whether you have used them, and your reasons for not using them (if applicable).” Response options included: “available and I have used”, “available but I have not used”, “not available”, and “reason for not using (open-ended)”. Responses were coded as not available (0) or available (1) such that both available responses were combined. Unmet resource needs were determined by subtracting what was utilized from what was needed. For each index, the response option pertaining to “online support” was removed in analysis because it does not reflect community support; however, utilization of online support was analyzed separately.

Table 3

*Survey Measures*

Scale/Measure	N	M (SD)	Range	alpha	Inter-item correlations
Perceived Social Support-Friends (GSM friends)	301	12.28 (4.654)	0 to 18	0.883	0.305
Perceived Social Support-Friends (Non-GSM friends)	338	11.17 (4.684)	0 to 18	0.872	0.276
Perceived Social Support-Friends (GSM Adults)	244	6.52 (5.222)	0 to 18	0.907	0.349
Involvement in Gay-related activities (availability)	338	5.15 (3.912)	0 to 15	0.877	0.322
Involvement in Gay-related activities (utilization)	338	6.55 (5.267)	0 to 15	0.950	0.571
Involvement in Gay-related activities (needs)	338	5.95 (3.625)	0 to 15	0.818	0.212

**Ethical Considerations**

The researcher took steps to ensure the ethical treatment of survey participants. As the survey was administered in the context of other in-person data collection or via an online anonymous survey, there was minimal risk to participating in the survey. A waiver of parental consent was granted by the university ethics board due to the inherent risk involved in asking GSM youth to obtain parental permission to participate in the study (Taylor, 2008). In the informed consent/assent, participants were told about the types of questions in the survey and that some may cause emotional discomfort. They were assured that they could stop at any time and skip any questions with which they felt uncomfortable. A list of national resources for GSM youth was listed at the end of the survey for participants who needed resources. Additionally, the researcher's email contact information was included for participants who wished to follow-up with questions regarding the survey or to inquire about access to resources.

### **Component Two: Objective Climate Protocol**

Understanding the community context in terms of how supportive, tolerant, or hostile a community is toward GSM individuals can enhance understanding of the support and resource needs of GSM youth in these communities. While the survey measured climate subjectively, public data measured climate objectively. This was useful in enhancing understanding of how to measure climate, as well as to determine how support and resources are associated with different measures of climate. Using both the objective and subjective measures provided a more nuanced view of the climate toward GSM individuals in a given locale.

### **Sampling**

Objective climate data were attached to surveys by participant provided zip code or town name. Sixty-eight counties and 181 municipalities were represented in the survey data and, thus, represent the community-level sample for this component.

## Procedures

The procedures described below were developed by Oswald et al. (2010), modified by Hatzenbuehler (2011), and were adapted to the current study. The same, or similar, public data used in these studies were used in this study, as well as additional public data.

**County-level variables.** At the county level, data were collected to measure the following: religious support, political support, employment opportunities, and presence of same-sex households. Each variable is continuous and was converted into a standardized z-score; the variables were then summed to create a total county climate score.

***Religious support.*** Religious doctrine is often associated with personal opinions about GSM individuals and related social issues (Olson et al., 2006). These ideologies are often not kept private, but expressed publically in a community (Oswald et al., 2010), contributing to the overall community climate. The degree of religious support for GSM individuals in a county was measured using the Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States (RCM) data (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies [ASARB], 2010). These data are collected at the same time as (but separately from) the U.S. Census and include the number of adherents (members, including their children, and people who attend regularly) within specific denominations at the county-level. The official websites of the denominations present in participants' counties were examined to determine if they publicly state their denomination is open and affirming of GSM individuals. If a website indicated that the denomination was open and affirming, it was coded as "supportive". Supportive denominations included: Episcopal, Jewish Reconstructionist, Jewish Reform, Metropolitan Community Church, Quaker, Unitarian Universalist, and United Church of Christ. County religious support was calculated as the ratio of

adherents of supportive religious institutions in a county to total religiously-identified individuals.

It is important to note that all but one of the supportive denominations have a top-down approach to determining their level of support for GSM individuals. In other words, when the denomination leaders determine the denomination is open and affirming, all of the congregations become open and affirming. The United Church of Christ (UCC), on the other hand, leaves the decision to become open and affirming to the congregation itself. While the denomination has expressed support for GSM individuals, whether they are open and affirming is determined at the congregation level. To accurately measure this, the adherents at UCC churches in Illinois that were not publically open and affirming were subtracted from the total UCC adherents at the county level. These changes were made in only eight counties across the state.

*Political support.* While positions on GSM political issues vary by individual, people with more conservative values are more likely to oppose GSM rights than those with less conservative values (Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). In Oswald et al.'s (2010) study, political support for GSM individuals was assessed by examining county-level voting patterns in the 2000 presidential election. The "proportion of the county vote that was for Gore or Nader" (p. 222) (i.e. Democrat or Green party) was assessed as supportive toward GSM individuals due to the history of individuals with these political affiliations being more supportive toward GSM people. This study examined county-level voting patterns in the 2012 presidential election with the proportion of the county who voted Green or Democrat coded as supportive toward GSM individuals. While this measure does not include non-voter sentiment, it is the best available data to assess political support in GSM community climate.



***Employment opportunities.*** Previous research suggests that communities with bohemian or creative class jobs (such as “fields with a focus on knowledge production, diversity, creativity, and the arts” [Oswald et al., 2010, p. 219]) tend to be more supportive or tolerant of GSM individuals (Florida & Gates, 2001). These companies are assumed to employ an economic strategy that attends to the needs of GSM employees in order to attract the best and brightest to their companies. As in Oswald et al.’s (2010) study, this study measured the proportion of bohemian or creative class jobs in a county using U.S. Census Bureau data.

***Presence of same-sex households.*** The presence of other GSM individuals can be associated with increased opportunities for support, as well as buffer the negative effects of GSM-related hostility (Oswald et al., 2010). Although there is no Census data that provides the number of GSM people in a county, counting same-sex partner households can serve as a proxy for the amount of GSM people in a community. Higher proportions of same-sex headed households may be associated with greater climate because of the increased possibilities of support and resources available for GSM individuals. The ratio of same-sex headed households in an area was assessed using Census data.

***Municipal-level variables.*** At the municipal level, data were collected regarding municipal laws, presence of GSM organizations, and school district policies. Each of these is a categorical variable that was coded numerically and then summed to create an overall municipal climate score between 0 and 7.

***Municipal laws.*** Municipal codes and laws establish what is acceptable or not in a given locale and, thus, contribute to the overall community climate for GSM individuals (Oswald et al., 2010). The passage of human rights and anti-discrimination laws in a community is often the result of the work of GSM leaders and activists in a community, sending a message that hostility

and discrimination will not be tolerated (D'Emilio, Turner, & Vaid, 2002). In this study, the presence of municipal human rights ordinances specific to GSM individuals was determined by examining municipal codes. A municipality was coded as 0 (not inclusive of sexual orientation or gender identity), 1 (inclusive of sexual orientation only), or 2 (inclusive of both sexual orientation and gender identity).

***Presence of GSM organizations.*** The presence or absence of GSM organizations was examined through internet searches specific to the particular communities (note that in Oswald et al.'s [2010] study, researchers used advertisements in a downstate Illinois GSM newspaper to determine the presence of GSM organizations, however, this publication is no longer available). A GSM organization was defined as an organization or group specifically aimed at affirming GSM identities in a particular community that was open to all GSM members of the community (e.g. not a workplace GSM group as it would only be accessible by members of that workplace). Municipalities were coded as 0 (no GSM organization) or 1 (at least one GSM organization).

***School district policies.*** As this study focused on adolescents, a third municipal indicator of climate was added. School district policies govern the schools within a municipality, thus the school board policies were examined for the presence of a) non-discrimination policies and b) anti-bullying policies that explicitly included protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Municipalities were coded for both non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies, as follows: 0 (not inclusive of sexual orientation or gender identity), 1 (inclusive of sexual orientation only), or 2 (inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity).

### **Component Three: In-depth Interviews**

Interviews ( $n=34$ ) were conducted using grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in order to explore participant's perceptions of their support and resource needs and their processes of getting those needs met in their communities.

### **Sampling**

The interview sample was recruited using both purposeful and theoretical sampling (Morse, 2007). Purposeful sampling included two a priori categories: community size and involvement in a GSM community center. The researcher sought to interview youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties to better understand the processes of support seeking in both rural and mid-size communities. Additionally, it was important to interview both involved and non-involved youth to explore the differences between youth who utilize community-based programs and youth who do not; this "negative case" strategy enhances analytic rigor (Brodsky, 2008). Theoretical sampling involved targeting sample recruitment to youth who could potentially provide additional or different data pertaining to emerging categories in the data. These procedures are discussed below.

Self-identified GSM youth between the ages of 14 and 18 were recruited for interviews across Central and Southern Illinois, which consists primarily of nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities. A portion of the sample ( $n=10$ ) were youth participating in GSM programming at community-based GSM programs ("involved youth"). These youth were recruited through announcements at youth groups and fliers posted at the three GSM organizations in the region, as well as online (Facebook, Twitter, & Tumblr). Efforts were made to ensure a diverse sample in terms of gender and sexual identity, age, race/ethnicity, and community size. All interview participants received a \$25 gift card. Participants were given the opportunity to help recruit additional youth for the sample with a chance to win another \$25 gift

card; however, no youth were referred in this manner. The other portion of the sample included youth not participating in community-based GSM programming (“non-involved youth”), but in the same geographic region ( $n=24$ ). These youth were recruited via word-of-mouth, announcements on social media, and fliers posted in GSM organizations and non-GSM spaces (libraries, coffee shops, etc.).

While these sampling procedures were developed to guide interview data collection, the researcher attended to the need to collect additional or different data from current or new participants in order to achieve theoretical saturation (Hood, 2007) by engaging in theoretical sampling. For example, early in data collection and concurrent data analysis, the researcher targeted recruitment toward GSM youth of color, males and transgender youth, and youth in the Southern region of the state in order to enhance the diversity of the sample and examine experiences among these sub-populations. This proved relevant to understanding the community context from various perspectives.

## **Procedures**

Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours ( $M=1$  hour) and took place at locations chosen by participants to maximize safety and privacy (e.g. GSM community centers, libraries, the researcher’s office, coffee shops, and participants’ homes). The researcher provided youth with an informed assent form and an optional parent letter to share with their guardian. Interviews were audio recorded with permission from participants. The researcher asked participants for permission to follow-up with them if questions arose later in the study or to share interpretations of findings (member checking) (Creswell, 2007). No participants refused follow-up. Interviews were coded with a unique ID number used for data tracking with surveys. The researcher wrote field notes following interviews that included a description of the interview,

potential methodological concerns, and emerging theoretical ideas. Youth participants were provided a \$25 gift card as compensation for time spent in the interview.

### Participants

The demographics of interview participants reflected the larger survey sample in most ways with two exceptions. Interview participants were significantly more likely to live in small metropolitan counties, and less likely to live in medium/large metropolitan counties, than the survey sample ( $\chi^2 (2) = 23.86, p < .0005$ ), which is a reflection of the sampling frame used to recruit interview participants. Additionally, interview participants were significantly more likely to identify as multiracial ( $\chi^2 (4) = 10.958, p = .027$ ). There were no significant differences on any of the other demographic characteristics between interview and survey participants.

Interview participants were invited to select their own pseudonym for use in the study. Most participants elected to do so; for those who did not, the researcher chose a pseudonym. Some participants selected a pseudonym that included a first and last name and, sometimes, these names reflected online identities or names they had for pets or objects. In order to protect the anonymity of these youth, the pseudonyms used in the following table and throughout Chapter Five include a first name only. Additionally, participants' preferred gender pronouns (he, she, or they) are used in Chapter Five. Table 4 provides contextual information about each interview participant including their gender and sexual identity, age, race/ethnicity, and county size.

Table 4

#### *Interview Participants (n=34)*

Pseudonym	Gender identity	Sexual identity	Age	Race/ethnicity	County Size
Adele	Female	Bisexual	14	African-American	Small Metro
Alejandro	Male	Bisexual	14	Multi	Small Metro
Alex	Female	Lesbian	18	White	Nonmetro
Alice	Questioning	Bisexual	16	Multi	Small Metro
Amber	Female/Fluid	Pansexual	15	White	Large Metro

Table 4 (cont.)

Anna	Female	Lesbian	16	Multi	Nonmetro
Athena	Female	Bisexual	17	White	Nonmetro
Bernadette	Female	Queer	18	White	Small Metro
Bridget	Female	Lesbian	18	White	Small Metro
Chloe	Questioning/Fluid	Pansexual	15	White	Large Metro
Clementine	Female	Bisexual	15	White	Small Metro
Dani	Female	Pansexual	14	White	Small Metro
Echo	Transgender Male	Pansexual	16	White	Nonmetro
Hazel	Female	Bisexual	17	White	Nonmetro
Hughes	Male	Gay	17	Asian	Small Metro
Jack	Male	Gay	18	White	Nonmetro
Jasmyne	Female	Bisexual	17	White	Nonmetro
Joey	Male	Gay	14	White	Small Metro
Lizzy	Female	Pansexual	16	African-American	Small Metro
Marilyn	Female	Bisexual	18	White	Small Metro
Missy	Female	Pansexual	18	Multi	Small Metro
Morgan	Female	Bisexual	14	Multi	Small Metro
Morris	Male	Gay	18	African American	Small Metro
Nicky	Female	Pansexual	15	White	Small Metro
Nina	Female	Bisexual	17	White	Small Metro
Oliver	Transgender Male	Pansexual	17	White	Small Metro
Quinn	Female	Pansexual	15	Multi	Small Metro
Rain	Trans (non-binary)	Pansexual	16	White	Small Metro
Salem	Male	Bisexual	17	African American	Small Metro
Sam	Male	Gay	18	White	Small Metro
Sasuke	Questioning	Pansexual	16	White	Small Metro
Travis	Male	Gay	14	Hispanic/Latino	Small Metro
Will	Male	Gay	16	White	Small Metro
Winona	Female	Lesbian	16	White	Nonmetro

### Protocol

Interviews were guided by an interview protocol. The protocol was designed to elicit information and stories about participants' identity and demographics; their community and community climate; social support from peers and adults, and; community support and resources (see Appendix E). Consistent with grounded theory methods (Hood, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), as categories emerged in the data, the researcher modified the interview guide to include additional questions on emerging categories.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher took several steps to ensure the ethical treatment of interview participants. First, because the researcher was involved as a volunteer with the observation site (discussed later), a student not familiar with the youth at the site announced the interview opportunity at youth groups in order to minimize the risk of potential coercion. The researcher then followed-up by providing youth with a card explaining how they could contact her if interested in participating in an interview. Interview participants were provided with an assent/consent form and verbal assent/consent was obtained prior to starting the interview. A waiver of parental consent was obtained by the university ethics board due to the inherent risk involved in asking GSM youth to obtain parental permission to participate in the study (Taylor, 2008). A parent information letter was given to participants and they had the option of sharing it with their parents if they felt comfortable. The information letter provided parents with details about the study, specific to the interviews, and provided them with a way to contact the researcher to ask questions or refuse participation for their child. As an added level of protection for participants, information specifically related to gender or sexual identity was not included in the parent information letter or the verbal assent/consent form.

In addition to consent procedures, the researcher ensured the confidentiality of participants through several methods. First, the audio recordings were deleted once transcriptions were checked for accuracy. Second, the interview transcripts were de-identified with all names, locations, and other identifying information removed. Third, the researcher stored participant names and contact information separate from interview data. Finally, the researcher created a unique ID number for each interview participant. This unique ID number was listed on the interview for purposes of data tracking; however, the list of unique ID numbers and participant

names was stored separately in a password protected file on a secure university server. The researcher established suicide and child abuse protocols. She informed youth during the consent process of her requirements as a mandated reporter; however, did not have to take action on risk of harm to self or others or suspected child abuse.

#### **Component Four: Participant Observation**

Participant observations were conducted to examine the context, processes, and interactions within one GSM youth program in the study region with the goal of answering research questions about GSM youth's needs, availability, and utilization of support.

#### **Sampling**

The observation site was a young GSM community center with minimal funding and staff. The site agreed to participate in the study and, at the time, housed three youth groups: a bi-weekly GSM youth support group, a bi-weekly GSM youth theater group, and a monthly GSM youth social group. The organization served between four and eight youth per month at these programs and an additional 25-30 at special events (e.g. GSM youth dances).

#### **Procedures**

The researcher, and two student assistants, actively participated as volunteers in each of the youth groups at the observation site between January and June, 2014. The researcher made her role as researcher known at the start of each group. She explained the purpose of the study, provided youth with assent (14-17 year olds) or consent (18 year olds) forms and parent information letters, and obtained verbal assent at each group. In addition to participating and observing in person, the researcher participated in and observed the organization's Facebook page used by GSM youth involved in the program. The researcher established a profile that clearly stated the purpose of the study and her role. The Facebook youth group was private;



therefore the researcher made her presence as a researcher known at regular intervals allowing youth opportunities to refuse participation. Youth involved in the Facebook page were also involved in-person at the site and had likely received an assent/consent letter at in-person group meetings.

While participating and observing these groups, the researcher looked for interactions, processes, and discussions related to needing supports that are not available, reasons for attending the GSM youth group(s), evidence of social support received from other peers and adult staff/volunteers, and potential benefits and barriers to being involved in the groups. For example, the researcher observed interactions between youth participants over the observation period to look for relevant patterns that could explain what youth were getting out of the program and why they keep coming back (i.e. benefits). The researcher, and student assistants, documented detailed field notes about observations (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) within 24-48 hours of observation sessions. Field notes were documented anonymously with no identifying information about youth participants. In this way, the participant observations examined primarily the group processes over time, rather than individuals. In addition to field notes, the researcher wrote memos throughout the research process. These memos focused primarily on theoretical concepts emerging during the process of data collection and analysis.

### **Participants**

Youth participants were between the ages of 14 and 18, lived in and around the small metropolitan community in which the site was located, and identified as GSM or ally youth. One to two groups per week were observed for a total of 20 hours to establish rapport and trust, as well as observe the ways youth engage with program leaders, other youth participants, and the organization.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher took several steps to ensure the ethical treatment of observation participants. She obtained verbal assent/consent from youth participants for all participant observations. Due to the inherent risk involved in asking GSM youth to obtain parental permission to participate in the study (Taylor, 2008), and the low-risk involved in participant observations, a waiver of parental consent was obtained with the university ethics board. Participants were given the option of taking a parent information letter home to share their involvement in the study with their parents. The information letter provided parents with details about the study, specific to the observations, and provided them with a way to contact the researcher to ask questions or refuse participation for their child. No youth declined participation, however, one guardian refused permission for their child to participate. This youth continued to attend groups, but was not included in observations or field notes. The researcher gave back to the organization as thanks for participating in the research study by providing \$125 in gift cards for snacks for the program; and sharing study findings with staff, volunteers, and youth participants.

## **Integration of Methods**

The four study components were implemented concurrently and integrated primarily during data analysis and interpretation; however, there were several opportunities for interaction during data collection. Interview participants completed the survey prior to engaging in the interview and, thus, often referenced the survey during the interview. Additionally, the researcher used preliminary findings from the surveys and interviews to inform the ongoing development of the interview protocol, as well as recruitment efforts. For example, interview participants sometimes discussed ways in which they were getting support which led to

recruiting youth participants through these means (e.g. different social media sites). Further ways in which methods overlapped during data analysis are discussed at the end of the next section.

### **Mixed Method Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed in two stages: first, qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately; second, data were integrated using mixed method analytic techniques (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Although these stages are described linearly in the following sections, this process was iterative: mixed method analytic techniques were included mid-way through analysis, near the end of data analysis, and during the interpretation and inference stages.

#### **Stage One**

First, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately to establish initial relationships among variables (quantitative) and identify patterns and contextual categories (qualitative).

**Quantitative.** Quantitative data, including closed-ended survey questions and the objective climate data, were analyzed using SPSS 22.0 (IBM, 2013). Analyses during stage one included descriptive (means, frequencies, etc.) and bivariate inferential statistics. ANOVA and logistic regression analyses were completed in conjunction with mixed method analytic procedures.

First, missing data were analyzed in SPSS. Of the 361 eligible participants who started the survey, 200 (55.4%) fully completed the survey and 161 (44.6%) partially completed the survey. Of the partial completers, 23 (6.4%) did not provide a zip code or town name. Because these surveys represented only 6.4% of the participants (Schlomer, Bauman, & Card, 2010) and geographic location is a key variable in this study, these surveys were excluded from analysis, leaving a total of 338 participants. Additionally, travel time to access resources was missing for

the majority of participants and could not be imputed, thus, this variable was not analyzed. In SPSS, a Missing Values Analysis was conducted on the following variables: outness, the three PSS-Fr scales, and the three IGA indexes. These variables were found to be missing at random and, thus, were imputed using Multiple Imputation in SPSS. Imputations went through 10 iterations and then were pooled and aggregated prior to analysis.

All continuous variables underwent normality testing and all were determined to not be normally distributed, thus nonparametric tests were used to test the hypotheses. Hypotheses involving a continuous variable and a categorical variable with two groups were tested using a Mann-Whitney U Test. Hypotheses involving a continuous dependent variable and a categorical variable with three or more groups were tested using a Kruskal-Wallis test. Hypotheses involving two categorical variables were tested using chi-square tests of independence. Finally, hypotheses involving two continuous variables were tested using spearman correlation. The five hypothesis, variable types, and statistical procedure used are listed in Table 5.

Table 5

*Hypotheses, Variable Types, and Statistical Analyses*

Hypothesis	IV (Type)	DV (Type)	Test
Hypothesis 1	County climate (cont)	Community support (cont)	Spearman correlation
	Municipal climate (cont)	Community support (cont)	Spearman correlation
	Perceived climate (cat)	Community support (cont)	Kruskal-Wallis test
Hypothesis 2	County climate (cont)	Social support (cont)	Spearman correlation
	Municipal climate (cont)	Social support (cont)	Spearman correlation
	Perceived climate (cat)	Social support (cont)	Kruskal-Wallis test
Hypothesis 3	County size (cat)	Community support (cont)	Kruskal-Wallis test
Hypothesis 4	County size (cat)	Social support (cont)	Kruskal-Wallis test
Hypothesis 5	Involvement (cat)	Community support (cont)	Mann-Whitney U-test

Although planned analyses only included testing bivariate associations, as part of the mixed methods analysis, ANOVA and logistic regression analyses were conducted. These procedures are described in more detail in Chapter Five, as they involved mixed methods analytic procedures.

**Qualitative.** Qualitative data, including interview transcripts, observation field notes, and open-ended survey questions, were analyzed using NVivo 10 (QSR International, 2012). Each data source was analyzed individually and collectively to understand the processes and mechanisms surrounding the support and resource needs, access, and utilization among small and nonmetropolitan GSM youth. To that end, qualitative analyses were conducted using grounded theory analytic methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory methods examine social processes and the meaning attached to these processes, making this analytic technique appropriate for this study on social support and community resources for GSM youth.

Consistent with grounded theory methods, data analysis began simultaneously with data collection in order to engage in constant comparison of data from multiple methods and to add to or modify the sample for theoretical saturation (Hood, 2007). Qualitative coding of observed processes and interactions, interview statements, and open-ended survey answers were used to sort, compare, and synthesize data. This coding process consisted of an iterative process involving three stages of coding: open, axial, and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Starting with open coding, qualitative interviews were sorted and categorized into discrete parts to develop an early coding scheme. These early codes focused on organizing the data into categories to describe the processes surrounding support seeking among GSM youth. This early coding scheme was then used to code field notes and open-ended survey questions, while allowing for new codes to emerge from the data. Codes and segments of text were then

compared within categories and across data sources to compare and contrast emerging codes and categories to produce a more nuanced understanding of the data.

Next, axial coding involved defining the properties and dimensions of categories and making connections between categories and sub-categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Categories were examined to develop their properties and dimensions and then each data source was reviewed and coded for where it fit along each category's dimensions and properties. Finally, selective coding involved refining the categories and ensuring their validity with the data and final model (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This included examining the data for where it converged and diverged with the categories and emerging model. The final two stages also included mixed method data analytic techniques, discussed in the next section.

This grounded theory coding process was abductive; requiring attention to different levels of coding, and the links between codes and data, in an iterative and reciprocal manner. Sensitizing concepts from positive youth development theory were examined as consistent or divergent with the ongoing qualitative findings. Analysis did not begin with positive youth development, however, because of the inductive nature of the analysis. As positive youth development theory has rarely been used with GSM youth, it was important to examine the data inductively at first, rather than impose positive youth development on the data. An additional coder was utilized at all levels of data analysis to ensure analytic rigor and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The second coder independently read and coded the qualitative data to compare with the researcher's codes. They discussed discrepancies until consensus was reached. Findings from this initial stage of grounded theory coding began with preliminary answers to the research questions (e.g. the types of resource needs GSM youth identify in different geographic regions), but expanded on these findings to understand the mechanisms and

processes behind the findings (e.g. the processes or mechanisms attributable to the resource needs among GSM youth). This process, when integrated with other data and new analysis, leads to theory development.

## **Stage Two**

Although stage one included separate analyses by method type, the integrated mixed method design of this study included integrating primarily at the levels of data analysis, interpretation, and inference (Greene, 2007). Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) encourage this process of beginning with separate analyses and then moving toward integrated analyses to enhance understanding. Two strategies were used to integrate the four data types: data comparison and typology development. These strategies aimed to answer parts of the second research question (pertaining to how GSM youth seek support) and the third research question (pertaining to how positive youth development and the relational-developmental systems model could be enhanced using this data).

**Data comparison.** Data comparison involves examining data from multiple sources simultaneously to enhance understanding of the findings and develop future analyses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This integrated analytic procedure was utilized with the sub-set of 34 participants who had linked interview, survey, and climate data during multiple levels of data analysis. During axial coding procedures, survey and objective climate data were analyzed alongside interview transcripts to better understand the processes involved in GSM youth seeking support and resources in their communities. This data comparison process led to the development of an emergent model of support seeking among GSM youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities.

During the final stages of data analysis, data comparison was used again. Data from the coded interviews, surveys, and objective climate were analyzed by participant with the purpose of enhancing understanding of their community context; needs for support; utilization of support; and benefits to accessing support. By examining these 34 participant's full interview transcripts, survey responses, and objective climate data at the county and municipality levels, the data were examined for where individual participants fit within the model, which helped illuminate patterns of support needs and utilization. Additionally, this technique was useful in determining where the qualitative and quantitative data were consistent, which enhanced validity of findings, or divergent, which allowed for the development of additional analyses or examination of data that did not fit neatly with the emerging model.

**Typology development.** Another strategy utilized was typology development (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This process involves developing a typology from one type of data and using it to analyze another. During the open coding process, the barriers and facilitators to utilization of social and community support emerged as an important category. Although this was based solely in qualitative data, the survey data included variables that matched the categories in the emerging typology. Statistical analyses were conducted with survey data based on these preliminary qualitative findings. This allowed for the statistical testing of one component of the model.

Through these integrated analytic procedures, findings that were consistent or divergent were explored in greater detail. Consistent findings served to enhance the validity of the overall findings while divergent findings required further investigation as to the possible reasons for the divergence. Divergent findings can lead to future research questions, enhanced understanding,



and complexity in research. In Chapters Five and Six, divergent and convergent findings are discussed.

### **Data Quality**

Data quality issues were attended to within individual methods prior to and during data collection. The procedures used to enhance the quality of the data during data collection are discussed below. Broader discussions of data quality, such as those more specific to evaluating the quality of the data following data analysis, as well as the quality of inferences made (Greene, 2007), are discussed in Chapter Seven.

#### **Quantitative**

Quantitative data collection and analysis attended to issues of validity, reliability, variance, and bias (Fowler, 2009; Groves, 1987). Internal validity was enhanced by using established measures of demographics, climate, perceived social support, and involvement in GSM resources. The survey was pilot tested with two adolescents to ensure validity of the questions. External validity was controlled for by ensuring a diverse sample in terms of geographic location, age, race, and involvement in GSM programming. The reliability data for each established measure was reported in the survey measures section, including reliability and inter-item correlations within this study (see Table 3).

Variance and bias are two measures of quality specific to survey methods. Variance includes the extent to which a sample population differs from the larger population for which it is intended to represent, also called sampling error (Fowler, 2009). This study did not involve random selection from an established sampling frame. Surveying GSM youth often relies on self-selection into a sample. If a sampling frame were used, for example, from a list of youth attendee's at a GSM youth program, this would unduly bias the sample by including only youth

receiving GSM services. The researcher attempted to limit sampling error by reaching a diverse group of GSM youth who may represent the larger population of GSM youth across Illinois. This included targeting sampling efforts to include youth living in diverse geographic contexts; involved and non-involved youth; and GSM youth of varying ages, races, and genders. Additionally, the administration of the survey online allowed youth to complete the survey in any location with mobile or internet access on any device (laptop, home computer, phone, or tablet).

Bias occurs when a sample systematically responds differently to survey questions than the larger population would (Fowler, 2009). This can occur due to self-selection into the study or item non-response (Fowler, 2009; Groves, 1987). As described earlier, self-selection bias was minimized by reaching a diverse sample of GSM youth. Additionally, it may be that youth who were more “out” about their gender or sexual identity would be more likely to self-select into a study on GSM youth; however, the outness variable on the survey showed wide variation in how out youth reported being about their GSM identity. Item non-response may have occurred for several reasons, including the time burden involved in completing a 30-minute survey. The researcher attempted to minimize this through survey design (providing encouragement to continue between survey pages, making the questions short and easy to understand) and by allowing participants to leave the survey and return to complete it within two weeks. Additionally, a missing value analysis was completed on all variables of interest and they were found to be missing at random.

### **Qualitative**

Several techniques were used to ensure data quality within qualitative methods. These techniques are described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as useful techniques for enhancing the

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. Quality issues pertaining specifically to grounded theory methodology are discussed in Chapter Seven. During participant observations, the researcher maintained prolonged engagement for six months with the research site to ensure her ability to see patterns and trends in the observation data, as well as to provide youth participants time to get used to being study participants. Additionally, multiple analysts (three) were used to analyze the qualitative data to ensure data was seen in multiple ways to enhance overall understanding of patterns and categories in the data. Member checking was also used as a way to check emerging findings with the participants themselves. Four interview participants discussed the findings with the researcher and shared their opinions about how they did or did not make sense to them; participants shared how the findings were consistent or inconsistent with their own experiences.

**Reflexivity.** Another important data quality issue attended to throughout this study was reflexivity. Reflexivity requires “attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process” (Malterud, 2001). Thus, it is important for the researcher in this study to make known her position within the GSM community and the study context. The researcher identifies as a member of the GSM community and was involved in the observation site since the organization’s inception in 2010. Because of her involvement in the organization, she had personal relationships with several members of the Board of Directors and her spouse was employed by the organization working directly with youth during the time in which data collection occurred. The researcher primarily served as an administrative and evaluation volunteer, but knew some of the youth participants through her involvement in the organization. This familiarity with the program, staff and volunteers, and some of the potential research

participants may have had both benefits and potential conflicts. Because the researcher is familiar with the organization and its programming, she had little difficulty navigating a new observation site. She also already had rapport established with some of the youth, giving her credibility with other youth participants. She was able to work closely with organizational stakeholders to ensure that the study was beneficial to them and their constituency, an important consideration when conducting research within a small community or organization.

The researcher's positionality could have presented potential conflicts, specifically within the qualitative methods. Because of her familiarity with the organization and some of the youth participants, ethical concerns about possible coercion among GSM youth to participate in the interviews arose. Additionally, because some of the GSM youth were familiar with the researcher, this could have limited what they shared in interviews because they may have assumed she already knew certain stories and facts about their lives or they may have been hesitant to share negative feelings about the organization. Because the researcher has a vested interest in making the organization successful, due to her prior and current involvement and her spouse's employment, a potential conflict might have existed if the study were directly about the impact of the organization on youth participants. This study, however, focused on youth needs, access, and utilization rather than agency effectiveness. Additionally, the researcher was involved in ongoing impact evaluation of the organization, reporting positive and negative findings to funding organizations, thus had a history of attending to the ethical issues involved in research and evaluation. Finally, it is important to note that this research was funded by the Williams Institute, thus one motivation of the study was to make important policy implications and recommendations.

The researcher incorporated several strategies to attend to potential conflicts due to researcher positionality. The possible concerns related to the researcher's position and context were addressed throughout the study development process. The research questions were developed in collaboration with stakeholders at the research site, including members of the Board of Directors and staff. In this way, although some of the ideas and questions originated from the researcher, those directly involved with the youth program were able to identify what research questions they deemed would be most helpful to them as an organization. The researcher also established guidelines for ethical conduct to minimize the risk of coercion to participate in interviews. Rather than the researcher make interview recruitment announcements at youth groups, two student assistants attended groups and made the announcements. In this way, she did not directly ask youth to participate and if they choose not to, they simply did not contact her (a process approved by the university ethics board).

The researcher also established a plan for attending to reflexivity throughout the study. The student assistants served as additional data analysts coding qualitative data and engaging in category and theory development. The student assistants were not sensitized to positive youth development concepts, thus providing a check on the researcher to ensure she was not seeing positive youth development concepts solely because of her familiarity with the theory. Using additional analysts also allowed for discussion surrounding competing interpretations about what conclusions may be drawn from the data.

### **Mixed Methods**

Threats to data quality were also minimized in the mixing of methods. The qualitative and quantitative methods were implemented concurrently in order to measure the same phenomenon during the same time period. This ensured the methods were measuring the same

phenomenon in different ways. For example, participants' perceptions of community climate were assessed qualitatively via interviews and quantitatively via survey, while an objective measure of community climate used publicly available data. Because these methods were implemented concurrently, they all measured community climate in different ways over the course of the same time period. If they were implemented consecutively, changes within communities may have account for differences obtained between data sources. By using multiple measures of climate, and examining each against the other study variables, this study was able to produce a more nuanced understanding of the role of climate on support in small communities.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **RESULTS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION ONE**

This study was designed to answer three research questions. This chapter describes results from the first research question: *What is the relationship between living in a nonmetropolitan or small metropolitan community and GSM youth's a) needs, availability, and utilization of community-based resources, and; b) perceptions of social support?* This research question is primarily quantitative and includes all of the hypothesis testing. Chapter Five discusses the mixed methods findings pertaining to the second research question. Chapter Six integrates the findings from chapters four and five with empirical and theoretical literature to answer the third research question. An alternative representation of the findings is included in Appendix F in the form of a poem created using participant quotes.

Understanding the differences in social and community support across a geographic continuum is important given that very little research has examined the variations between youth in nonmetropolitan communities and those in somewhat larger, but not urban, communities. In this study, the community context included county size and community climate. County size was measured using a variable with three categories: nonmetropolitan, small metropolitan, and medium/large metropolitan counties. Community climate was measured quantitatively in three ways: perceived climate (categorical), objective county climate (continuous), and objective municipal climate (continuous). Social support was measured as a continuous variable using the Perceived Social Support-Friends (PSS-Fr) scale (Procidano & Heller, 1983) for GSM youth, non-GSM youth, and GSM adults (continuous). Availability, utilization, and unmet needs for GSM resources were measured using the Involvement in Gay-Related Activities (IGA) index (Rosario et al., 2001). Total availability, utilization, and unmet needs are continuous variables.

Individual items from the IGA index are binary categorical variables (available/not available, utilized/not utilized, etc.).

### **Hypothesis One**

Hypothesis one predicted that, among participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties, community climate would be associated with a) greater availability of community-based GSM resources; b) greater utilization of community-based GSM resources; and c) fewer unmet needs for community-based GSM resources.

#### **Availability**

The association between the availability of community-based GSM resources and community climate was tested using each measure of climate among participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties.

**Perceived climate.** A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to measure the association between perceived climate and availability of community-based GSM resources. For participants in both nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties, total availability of GSM resources by perceived climate was non-significant. Although the hypothesis predicted total availability only by climate, chi-square tests measured the association between perceived climate and availability of each individual resource. Within nonmetropolitan counties, there were significant differences in availability of GSAs, such that as the perceived climate became more supportive, so did the reported availability of GSAs: hostile (30%), tolerant (52.6%), supportive (80%) [ $\chi^2 (2)=6.947$ ,  $p<.05$ ]. Within small metropolitan counties, youth who perceived their community climate as hostile (0%) or supportive (18.8%) reported significantly less availability of GSM church groups than youth who perceived their climate as tolerant (48.4%) [ $\chi^2 (2)=15.225$ ,  $p<.001$ ].



**County climate.** Spearman correlations tested the association between county climate and total availability of community-based GSM resources. Among nonmetropolitan participants, county climate was moderately positively correlated with the availability of GSM community resources ( $r=.34$ ,  $p=.001$ ); among small metropolitan participants, there was no significant correlation between county climate and availability of community-based GSM resources. Logistic regression was used to test the association between county climate and availability of each individual GSM resource. Among participants in nonmetropolitan counties, a more supportive county climate was significantly associated with greater availability of GSM community centers [ $\chi^2(1)=17.028$ ,  $p<.001$ ], GSM social groups [ $\chi^2(1)=27.149$ ,  $p<.001$ ], GSAs [ $\chi^2(1)=10.375$ ,  $p<.001$ ], and GSM concerts [ $\chi^2(1)=22.453$ ,  $p<.001$ ]. Among participants in small metropolitan counties, a more supportive county climate was significantly associated with greater availability of Pride Festivals [ $\chi^2(1)=8.493$ ,  $p<.01$ ], GSM community centers [ $\chi^2(1)=11.105$ ,  $p<.001$ ], GSM social groups [ $\chi^2(1)=5.286$ ,  $p<.05$ ], and GSAs [ $\chi^2(1)=7.418$ ,  $p<.01$ ].

**Municipal climate.** Spearman correlation was used to test the association between municipal climate and total availability of community-based GSM resources. Among participants in nonmetropolitan counties, municipal climate was not significantly correlated with availability of GSM resources. Among participants in small metropolitan counties, there was a small, negative correlation between municipal climate and the availability of GSM community resources ( $r=-.23$ ,  $p=.019$ ). This is opposite of what was expected. Logistic regression was used to test the association between municipal climate and availability of each individual GSM resource. Among participants in nonmetropolitan counties, a supportive municipal climate was significantly associated with less availability of HIV organizations [ $\chi^2(1)=7.828$ ,  $p<.01$ ]. Among participants in small metropolitan counties, a supportive municipal climate was significantly

associated with fewer GSM plays [ $\chi^2(1)=5.142, p<.05$ ], GSM social groups [ $\chi^2(1)=4.685, p<.05$ ], and GSM concerts [ $\chi^2(1)=4.582, p<.05$ ]. Again, the association between municipal climate and availability was in the opposite direction than predicted.

**Summary of hypothesis one: availability.** The availability component of hypothesis one is partially supported for youth in nonmetropolitan counties. Community climate was associated with the total availability of GSM community resources when climate was measured objectively at the county level, but non-significant when measured using perceived climate or objectively at the municipal level. Individual resources, such as GSAs (perceived and county climate), GSM community centers, GSM social groups, and GSM concerts (county climate), and HIV organizations (municipal climate) were also significantly associated with climate, even when the association with total resources was non-significant (see Table 10).

The availability component of hypothesis one is rejected for youth in small metropolitan counties. Community climate was associated with the overall availability of GSM community resources when climate was measured objectively at the municipal level in the opposite direction than expected (more support equaled fewer resources). Community climate was not significantly associated with overall availability of GSM resources when measured using perceived climate or objectively at the county level. Individual resources such as GSM church groups (perceived climate), Pride Festivals, GSM community centers, GSAs (county climate), GSM social groups (county and municipal climate), GSM plays, and GSM concerts (municipal climate) were also significantly associated with climate, even when total resources were non-significant. These findings suggest that while the total number of resources may vary as a result of the county-level climate in nonmetropolitan counties; climate may be more related to individual resources that are presumably a better fit in more hostile or supportive climates than others.

## Utilization

Bivariate associations between community climate and utilization of GSM community resources were tested using the three measures of climate for participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties.

**Perceived climate.** The association between perceived climate and total utilization of GSM resources was tested using a Kruskal-Wallis test. For participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties, total utilization was not significantly different by perceived climate. Chi-square tests were used to test the association between utilization of each individual resource and perceived climate. Among participants in nonmetropolitan counties, there was a significant association between utilization of GSM concerts and perceived climate, such that youth who perceived their climate as hostile were significantly less likely to utilize GSM concerts (5%) than youth who perceived their climate as tolerant (31.6%) or supportive (40%) [ $\chi^2(1)=6.447, p<.05$ ]. Among participants in small metropolitan counties, there were no significant associations between perceived climate and utilization of any individual resource.

**County climate.** Spearman correlations were used to test associations between county climate and total utilization of GSM resources. Correlations were non-significant for participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties. Logistic regression was used to test the associations between utilization of each individual resource and county climate. Among participants in nonmetropolitan counties, a more supportive county climate was associated with utilization of GSM social groups [ $\chi^2(1)=7.006, p<.01$ ], GSAs [ $\chi^2(1)=7.729, p<.01$ ], and GSM concerts [ $\chi^2(1)=8.330, p<.01$ ]. Among participants in small metropolitan counties, there were no significant associations between county climate and utilization of individual resources.

**Municipal climate.** Spearman correlations were used to test associations between municipal climate and total utilization of GSM resources. Correlations were non-significant for participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties. Logistic regression was used to test the association between utilization of individual resources and municipal climate; all associations were non-significant for participants in nonmetropolitan counties. For participants in small metropolitan counties, a more supportive municipal climate was associated with utilization of public/community spaces [ $\chi^2(1)=5.743, p<.05$ ].

**Summary of hypothesis one: utilization.** The utilization component of hypothesis one is rejected. For participants in both nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties, none of the measures of climate were significantly associated with total utilization of GSM community resources. Utilization of individual resources, however, such as GSM concerts (perceived and county climate), public/community spaces (municipal climate), GSM social groups, and GSAs (county climate) were associated with climate (see Table 10). These findings suggest that climate is not associated with total utilization of resources, but may be related to the use of specific resources. It may be that youth are traveling to access resources in nearby communities.

### **Unmet Needs**

Bivariate associations between each measure of community climate and unmet needs for GSM community resources were analyzed for participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties.

**Perceived climate.** The association between perceived climate and unmet needs for GSM resources was tested using a Kruskal-Wallis test. For participants in both nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties, total unmet needs was not significantly associated with perceived climate. Chi-square tests were conducted to determine if perceived climate was associated with

unmet needs for each individual GSM community resource. Among participants in nonmetropolitan counties, perceived climate was significantly associated with unmet needs for GSAs [ $\chi^2(2)=7.684, p<.05$ ] and GSM concerts [ $\chi^2(2)=6.04, p<.05$ ]. For GSAs, as perceived climate increased, unmet needs for GSAs decreased: hostile (45%), tolerant (22.8%), supportive (0%). Youth in communities they perceived as tolerant reported fewer unmet needs for GSM concerts (17.5%) than youth in communities they perceived as hostile (45%) or supportive (30%). Among participants in small metropolitan counties, perceived climate was significantly associated with unmet needs for GSAs [ $\chi^2(2)=8.132, p<.05$ ] such that youth who perceived their communities as supportive reported fewer unmet needs for GSAs (9.4%) than participants who perceived their climates as tolerant (35.5%) or hostile (16.7%).

**County climate.** Spearman correlations were used to test associations between county climate and total unmet needs for GSM resources. There were no significant correlations between county climate and unmet needs for participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties. Logistic regressions tested the relationship between county climate and unmet needs for each individual GSM resource. Among participants in nonmetropolitan counties, a supportive county climate was significantly associated with fewer unmet needs for Pride Festivals [ $\chi^2(1)=4.620, p<.05$ ] and GSM book stores [ $\chi^2(1)=6.380, p<.05$ ]. There were no significant correlations between county climate and unmet needs for individual resources among participants in small metropolitan counties.

**Municipal climate.** The Spearman Correlations between municipal climate and unmet needs for GSM community resources were non-significant for participants in both nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties. Logistic regressions tested the relationship between municipal climate and unmet needs for each individual GSM resource. Among

participants in nonmetropolitan counties, there were no significant relationships between municipal climate and unmet needs for individual resources. Among participants in small metropolitan counties, a supportive municipal climate was significantly associated with more unmet needs for GSM public/community spaces [ $\chi^2(1)=6.342, p<.05$ ]. This is in the opposite direction than expected.

**Summary of hypothesis one: unmet needs.** The unmet needs component of hypothesis one was rejected. For participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties, none of the measures of climate were significantly associated with total unmet needs. Individual resources such as GSAs, GSM concerts (perceived), Pride Festivals, GSM book stores (county), and community/public spaces (municipal), however, were associated with climate, even when total unmet resources was non-significant (see Table 10). As with the other components of hypothesis one, these findings suggest that climate may be more related to unmet needs for individual resources, rather than a sum total of resources.

### **Hypothesis Two**

Hypothesis two predicted that, among participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties, community climate would be associated with perceived social support from a) GSM friends; b) non-GSM friends; and c) GSM adults such that as climate increased so would GSM youth's perceived social support from each group. These associations were tested using each measure of climate among participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties.

#### **GSM Friends**

A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test the association between perceived climate and perceived social support among GSM friends. There were no significant associations between

perceived climate and perceived social support among GSM friends for participants in nonmetropolitan or small metropolitan counties. Spearman correlations tested the association between county and municipal climate on perceived social support among GSM friends. There were no significant correlations for participants in nonmetropolitan or small metropolitan counties.

### **Non-GSM Friends**

Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to test the association between perceived climate and perceived social support among non-GSM friends. Among participants in nonmetropolitan counties, perceived climate was significantly associated with perceived social support among non-GSM friends ( $\chi^2(2) = 7.990, p < .05$ ), such that youth who perceived their community as hostile ( $M=8.7$ ) or tolerant ( $M=10.39$ ) reported lower social support from their non-GSM friends than youth who perceived their community as supportive ( $M=13.8$ ). There were no significant associations for participants in small metropolitan counties. Spearman correlations were used to test the association between perceived social support among non-GSM friends and county and municipal climate. No significant correlations were found between county or municipal climate and perceived social support for participants in nonmetropolitan or small metropolitan counties.

### **GSM Adults**

A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test the association between perceived climate and perceived social support among GSM adults. There were no significant associations between perceived climate and perceived social support among GSM adults for participants in nonmetropolitan or small metropolitan counties. Spearman correlations tested the association between county and municipal climate on perceived social support among GSM friends. There were no significant correlations by county climate; however, among participants in

nonmetropolitan counties, municipal climate was moderately, positively correlated with perceived social support among GSM adults ( $r=.356$ ,  $p=.004$ ) (see Table 6). There were no significant correlations for participants in small metropolitan counties.

Table 6

*Spearman Correlation between Perceived Social Support Scores and Total Municipal Climate among Nonmetropolitan (n=87) and Small Metropolitan (n=106) Participants*

Perceived social support	<u>Nonmetropolitan</u> Municipal climate		<u>Small metropolitan</u> Municipal climate	
	Correlation	p-value	Correlation	p-value
PSS GSM Friends	-.057	.624	.021	.836
PSS non-GSM Friends	-.159	.140	.020	.836
PSS GSM Adults	.356	.004	.051	.661

### Summary of Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis two is partially supported. Among youth in nonmetropolitan communities, there is a significant association between perceived climate and perceived social support among non-GSM peers and between municipal climate and perceived social support among GSM adults in nonmetropolitan communities. The hypothesis is rejected when considering GSM friends. Among youth in small metropolitan counties, hypothesis two is rejected for each category of social support (see Table 10). These findings suggest that the association between climate and social support may be more relevant for youth in nonmetropolitan communities. As these youth likely have predominantly non-GSM peers in their community, it makes sense that their perceived community climate and perceived social support from these peers would be positively correlated. The finding that municipal climate and perceived support from GSM adults is



interesting. It may be that a higher municipal climate occurs when a GSM center is present in a community; thus, youth in these communities may have more access to supportive GSM adults.

### Hypothesis Three

Hypothesis three predicted that county size would be associated with a) availability of community-based GSM resources; b) utilization of community-based GSM resources; and c) unmet needs for community-based GSM resources such that as county size increased, GSM youth's availability and utilization of resources would increase and unmet needs would decrease.

#### Availability

A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test the association between county size and availability of community-based GSM resources. Participants living in small and medium/large metropolitan counties reported significantly more available GSM resources ( $M=5.33$  and  $5.26$ , respectively) than nonmetropolitan youth ( $M=2.26$ ) [ $\chi^2(2) = 45.406$ ,  $p < .0001$ ].

Table 7 displays the percentage of youth reporting the availability of each individual community-based GSM resource by county size. Only availability of public health departments was not significantly different by county size.

Table 7

#### *Chi-Square Tests of Availability of GSM Community Resources by County Size*

Support Source	Non <sup>a</sup> %	Small <sup>b</sup> %	Medium /Large <sup>c</sup> %	$\chi^2(2)$	p
GSA	50.6%	62.3%	74.5%	13.909	<.001
GSM book store	0%	8.5%	26.2%	34.976	<.001
GSM church group	0%	34.0%	19.3%	35.929	<.001
GSM community center	13.8%	53.8%	36.3%	33.135	<.001
GSM concert	12.6%	35.8%	32.4%	14.622	<.001
GSM play	3.4%	34.0%	40.7%	38.482	<.001
GSM shelter	20.7%	8.5%	35.2%	24.934	<.001
GSM social event	11.5%	57.5%	46.2%	44.988	<.001
GSM theater group	0%	42.5%	20.7%	50.207	<.001
HIV organization	13.8%	35.8%	18.6%	15.712	<.001

Table 7 (cont.)

Pride festival	12.6%	63.2%	60.0%	61.605	<.001
Public/community space	24.1%	59.4%	49.7%	25.205	<.001
Public health	23.0%	32.1%	35.9%	4.223	.121

Note. <sup>a</sup>n=87. <sup>b</sup>n=106. <sup>c</sup>n=145

The availability component of hypothesis three is supported. GSM youth in nonmetropolitan counties reported significantly fewer available GSM resources than youth in small and medium/large metropolitan counties; however, there were no significant differences in availability of GSM resources between youth in small and medium/large metropolitan communities (see Table 10).

### Utilization

A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test the association between county size and utilization of community-based GSM resources. The differences in utilization approached significance [ $\chi^2(2) = 5.657, p=.059$ ]. Participants in nonmetropolitan counties used fewer community resources (M=2.26) than participants in small metropolitan (M=5.33) or medium/large metropolitan (M=5.26) counties.

Table 8 displays the percentage of youth reporting utilization of each individual community-based GSM resource by county size. The only statistically significant association between utilization and county size was with GSM concerts. As county size increased, so did utilization of GSM concerts.

Table 8

#### *Chi-Square Tests of Utilization of GSM Community Resources by County Size*

Support Source	Non <sup>a</sup> %	Small <sup>b</sup> %	Medium/ Large <sup>c</sup> %	$\chi^2(2)$	p
GSA	54.0%	62.3%	66.9%	3.831	.147
GSM book store	19.5%	21.7%	15.2%	1.853	.396
GSM church group	36.8%	32.1%	42.1%	2.639	.267
GSM community center	40.2%	46.2%	51.0%	2.567	.277

Table 8 (cont.)

GSM concert	26.4%	34.0%	49.7%	13.846	<.001
GSM play	44.8%	50.9%	57.9%	3.868	.145
GSM shelter	37.9%	33.0%	43.4%	2.840	.242
GSM social event	49.4%	50.9%	58.6%	2.374	.305
GSM theater group	37.9%	47.2%	50.3%	3.436	.179
HIV organization	37.9%	36.8%	43.4%	1.328	.515
Public/community space	51.7%	62.3%	63.4%	3.429	.180
Pride festival	46.0%	50.0%	56.6%	2.630	.268
Public health	35.6%	32.1%	43.4%	3.616	.164

Note. <sup>a</sup>n=87. <sup>b</sup>n=106. <sup>c</sup>n=145

The utilization component of hypothesis three is rejected. There was not a significant difference in utilization of community-based GSM resources by county size (see Table 10).

### Unmet needs

A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test the association between county size and utilization of community-based GSM resources. Unmet needs did not vary significantly by county size.

Table 9 displays the percentage of youth reporting unmet needs for each individual community-based GSM resource by county size. The only statistically significant associations between unmet needs and county size were with GSM concerts and GSM church groups. For GSM concerts, youth in small metropolitan counties reported the most unmet need for this resource. For GSM church groups, as county size decreased, so did unmet needs for GSM church groups.

Table 9

### *Chi-Square Tests of Unmet Needs for GSM Community Resources by County Size*

Support Sources	Non <sup>a</sup>	Small <sup>b</sup>	Medium/ Large <sup>c</sup>	$\chi^2(2)$	p
	%	%	%		
GSA	25.3%	25.5%	17.9%	2.668	.263
GSM book store	34.5%	39.6%	37.9%	0.552	.759
GSM church group	19.5%	18.9%	9.0%	6.859	.032
GSM community center	31.0%	21.7%	19.3%	4.376	.112
GSM concert	25.3%	34.9%	20.0%	7.099	.029
GSM play	19.5%	18.9%	10.3%	4.971	.083
GSM social event	20.7%	17.0%	20.0%	0.520	.771

Table 9 (cont.)

GSM shelter	27.6%	27.4%	20.0%	2.510	.285
GSM theater group	20.7%	14.2%	13.8%	2.229	.328
HIV organization	8.0%	11.3%	9.0%	0.672	.714
Pride festival	31.0%	34.9%	26.2%	2.240	.326
Public/community space	20.7%	16.0%	17.2%	0.753	.686
Public health	20.7%	17.0%	13.8%	1.890	.389

Note. <sup>a</sup>n=87. <sup>b</sup>n=106. <sup>c</sup>n=145

The unmet needs component of hypothesis three is rejected. There were no significant associations between county size and total unmet needs for community-based GSM resources (see Table 10).

#### **Hypothesis Four**

Hypothesis four predicted that larger communities would be associated with greater perceived social support from a) GSM friends; b) non-GSM friends; and c) GSM adults. A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test the association between county size and perceived social support among each group. There were no significant differences by county size. Hypothesis four is rejected for each social support group (see Table 10).

#### **Hypothesis Five**

Hypothesis five predicted that nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan GSM youth involved in a GSM community center would identify a) more availability; b) more utilization; and c) fewer unmet needs for GSM community resources than non-involved GSM youth. A Mann-Whitney U-test was conducted to test for associations between involvement and availability, utilization, and unmet needs for community-based GSM resources. The sum of the IGA scales for this analysis excluded involvement in a community center as involvement was the independent variable.

#### **Availability**

Involvement in a GSM community center was significantly associated with total availability of other GSM resources. Participants in nonmetropolitan counties who reported involvement in a GSM community center reported significantly more available GSM resources ( $M=3.46$ ) than non-involved youth ( $M=0.89$ ) ( $U=198.5$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Participants in small metropolitan communities who reported involvement in a GSM community center reported significantly more available GSM resources ( $M=5.8$ ) than non-involved youth ( $M=3.75$ ) ( $U=817.5$ ,  $p=.001$ ).

### **Utilization**

Involvement in a GSM community center was significantly associated with utilization of other GSM resources. Participants in nonmetropolitan counties who reported involvement in a GSM community center reported significantly more utilization of GSM resources ( $M=8.94$ ) than non-involved youth ( $M=1.04$ ) ( $U=74.5$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Participants in small metropolitan counties who reported involvement in a GSM community center reported significantly more utilization of GSM resources ( $M=8.39$ ) than non-involved youth ( $M=2.20$ ) ( $U=306$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

### **Unmet needs**

Finally, involvement in a community center was significantly associated with fewer unmet needs for GSM resources. Participants in nonmetropolitan counties who reported involvement in a GSM community center reported significantly fewer unmet needs ( $M=1.08$ ) than non-involved youth ( $M=4.21$ ) ( $U=322$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Participants in small metropolitan counties who reported involvement in a GSM community center reported significantly fewer unmet needs ( $M=1.55$ ) than non-involved youth ( $M=3.83$ ) ( $U=720$ ,  $p<.0001$ ). Hypothesis one is supported.

### **Summary**

A summary of the results and conclusions from hypothesis testing is displayed in table 10. These results will be referenced throughout Chapter's Five and Six when relevant.

Table 10

*Summary of Hypotheses and Conclusions Related to Research Question One*

Number	Hypothesis	Results	Conclusion
1	Within nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities, a supportive community climate will be associated with a) greater availability; b) greater utilization; and c) fewer unmet needs for GSM community resources.	a) partial support (nonmetro); reject (small metro) b) reject c) reject	In nonmetropolitan communities, county climate is associated with availability of community support such that as county climate is more hostile, the number of available resources is lower. Perceived and municipal climate were non-significant for both groups.  Community climate was not significantly associated with utilization or unmet needs for community support
2	Within nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities, a supportive community climate will be associated with greater perceived social support from a) GSM friends; b) non-GSM friends; and c) GSM adults.	a) reject b) support (nonmetro); reject (small metro) c) support (nonmetro); reject (small metro)	In nonmetropolitan communities, a higher perceived climate is associated with higher perceived support from non-GSM peers; higher municipal climate is associated with higher perceived support from GSM adults.  Community climate was not significantly associated with perceived support for youth in small metropolitan communities.  County climate was non-significant for both groups.
3	Larger communities will be associated with a) greater availability; b) greater utilization; and c) fewer unmet needs for GSM community resources.	a) support b) support c) reject	County size was associated with availability and utilization of GSM resources, such that smaller counties had fewer resources and less utilization, but not overall unmet needs.

Table 10 (cont.)

4	Larger communities will be associated with greater perceived social support from a) GSM friends; b) non-GSM friends; and c) GSM adults.	a) reject b) reject c) reject	County size was not associated with perceived social support.
5	Nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan GSM youth involved in a GSM community center will identify a) more availability; b) more utilization; and c) fewer unmet needs for GSM community resources than non-involved GSM youth.	a) Support b) Support c) Support	Involvement in a GSM community center is associated with fewer unmet community support needs, more available GSM resources, and utilization of more GSM resources, including online support.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION TWO**

Research question two asked: *How do GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities get their needs for support met?* This question was answered using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods data analysis procedures. It is important to represent the results in a way that illustrates the mixing of methods, traditions, and perspectives (Greene, 2007). Thus, this chapter aims to answer research question two by telling the story of how and why GSM youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities seek support. These findings are also illustrated in an alternative manner in Appendix F.

This chapter integrates the quantitative results discussed in Chapter Four with qualitative and mixed method findings, as well as additional post-hoc statistical analyses to describe and provide evidence for a model of support seeking among GSM youth. The primary focus is on engaging with the story told in the data, including where and how the story is convergent or divergent. The organization of the chapter in this way reflects the iterative data analysis process utilized in this study and paints a portrait of support among GSM youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities. The ways in which these findings relate to Positive Youth Development (research question three) are discussed in Chapter Six.

### **Model of Support Seeking**

Data analyses revealed a process of support seeking among GSM youth growing up in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities. The model illustrating these processes has seven primary categories: Community Context, Needs, Support Sources, Intervening Conditions, Benefits, Drawbacks, and Unmet needs (see Figure 3). The community context (A), including county size and community climate, was related in varying ways to each category in the model



and, thus, surrounds the other components of the model. GSM youth identified support needs (B) related to their GSM identities and these needs led them to seek support from various sources (C) within their social networks, community organizations and spaces, and online. Seeking support was not a linear process, however. Several intervening conditions (D) - barriers and facilitators - impacted whether and how youth were able to access different types of GSM support. For youth who utilized any or all of these supports, there were benefits (E) and drawbacks (F) of each. Additionally, youth unable to access support, or with limited support, were left with unmet needs (G). These categories are described in the following sections. Each category within the model includes evidence from one or more data sources (i.e. surveys, public data, interviews, or participant observation), and, when appropriate, the mixed methods analysis procedures are discussed to enhance credibility of the findings.

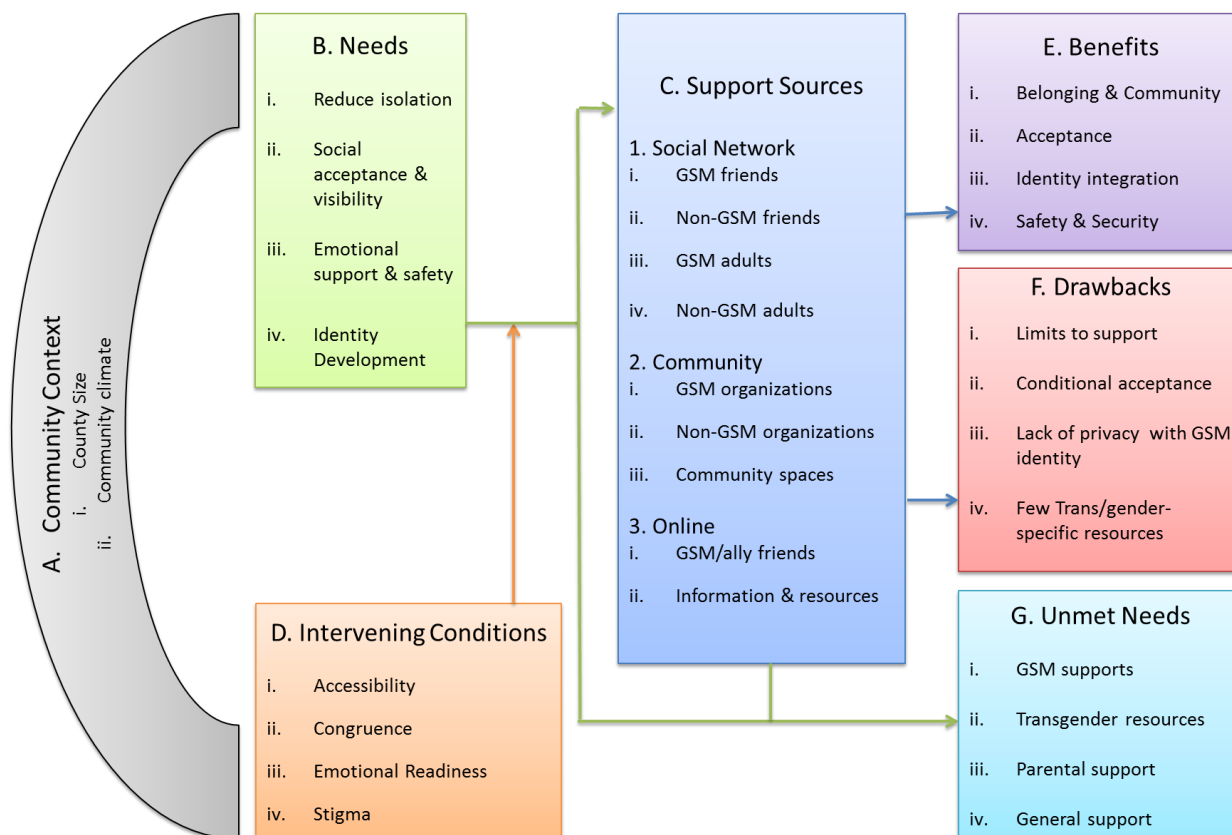


Figure 3. Emergent Model of Support Seeking among Nonmetropolitan and Small Metropolitan GSM Youth

*Note.* The community context surrounds the model because it interacts with each category in the model. GSM youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities have GSM specific needs that lead them to seek out support within their social networks, communities, and online. Several intervening conditions act as barriers or facilitators to utilizing support. Support sources are associated with benefits and drawbacks. Some GSM youth have unmet needs due to not utilizing support or inadequate support.

### Community Context (Figure 3, A)

In GSM youth's stories, community served as both a backdrop for their experiences and a major character. Thus, community context appears throughout the model in various ways. This section describes the community context as the backdrop for youth's experiences; however, the ways in which community appeared as both an antagonist and a supporting character in youth's stories are discussed within the sections focused on other categories in the model. Community context included county size and community climate.

### County Size

The size of the community in which youth were living represented one component of their community context. Survey analyses discussed in Chapter Four revealed numerous differences between youth living in nonmetropolitan counties and small or medium/large metropolitan counties; with fewer differences between youth in small metropolitan and medium/large metropolitan counties. As will be discussed throughout this chapter, the size of GSM youth's communities impacted their needs for and ability to access support, often because of the limited number of individuals in smaller communities. Although size was a relevant factor in the quantitative data, youth rarely talked about the size of their communities without discussing the role of community climate.

### **Community Climate**

The community context also included the community climate toward GSM people. Community climate represented a much more dynamic character in youth's stories than did county size, showing variation by type of measurement and often revealing differences even within the same community. As illustrated in Chapter Four, hypothesis testing revealed wide variation by climate measure. Perceived or objective county or municipal climate were sometimes in conflict with one another or were significantly associated with different variables. The qualitative data provide a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which climate acted as a backdrop in youth's lives, helping to enhance our understanding of GSM youth's community context.

**Climate on a continuum.** In the interviews, youth described community climate across a continuum from hostile to supportive. Very few youth felt their community fit neatly into one climate category. For example, communities were described as "between tolerant and supportive" (Marilyn) or "pretty supportive, if not supportive, then tolerant" (Morgan). Some

youth related the climate of their community to the size of their town. A few youth living in small metropolitan communities perceived the smaller nonmetropolitan towns surrounding them as more hostile or tolerant than larger towns. Oliver, for example, described his community and surrounding areas as such: “I feel like if you go out of [town] a couple miles any direction, it’s almost immediately turned into this super gay-hating community.” Alternatively, youth living in some of these smaller communities did not identify them as inherently hostile. Jack, an 18-year old gay male living in a nonmetropolitan community outside Oliver’s town, described his nonmetropolitan community as “a pretty hick town, but we kind of tolerate a lot of things.” Quinn, who had lived in two nonmetropolitan communities, one significantly smaller than the other, described the difference between them. She explained that people in the smaller community did not talk about GSM people or issues at all and, thus, described that community as tolerant. The larger (but still nonmetropolitan) community, she explained, encompassed vocal opinions from both supporters and non-supporters, making both the support and the hostility more visible. These data introduce more variance in the interaction between county size and community climate, suggesting it is a complex character in youth’s lives. For example, climate may not be a univariate variable measured as different points on one continuum, but rather multiple continuums. A community may be high in support, tolerance, and hostility, depending on a variety of factors.

**Defining climate.** To better understand the distinctions between different levels of perceived climate, interview participants were asked to describe the ways in which their community was hostile, tolerant, or supportive. Amber (15) lived in a very small town within a large metropolitan county. She identified her community as “hostile because I see people on the street talking about how gay people are an abomination and so are bisexual people.” Hostile

communities were described as lacking GSM visibility, hearing and seeing openly anti-GSM sentiment, and lacking GSM resources. Additionally, as Amber illustrated, hostile communities did not just lack GSM visibility, but tended to have high anti-GSM visibility.

Tolerant communities were described in two ways. First, they were identified as encompassing both hostile and supportive individuals. Rain, a 16-year old transgender youth in a small metropolitan county, described their community as tolerant: “Half-and-half or hit and miss in certain areas. Yeah, for the most part—there are some places that have—they will open their arms to LGBT people. Then there's some people that are just naysayers.” Second, tolerant communities were described as silent or invisible to GSM people or issues, such that negative or positive attitudes about GSM people were kept private. There were not openly anti-GSM people, but there were not openly supportive people either. Echo, a 16-year old, transgender male, said about his nonmetropolitan community: “well, here, it's pretty much, it exists. It's not embraced or degraded. It's just there.”

Supportive communities were defined as having extensive GSM visibility, including GSM organizations and events. Quinn, 15, described the difference between her former (tolerant) community and her current (supportive) community:

Here, I think, everybody's a lot more open with everything. In the school, you can definitely tell, there's a lot of LGBT students, and everything, around. Whereas, in [my former town], nobody was really that talkative about everything. I don't know if there—wasn't that many people. I mean, there were a few, but everybody kept to themselves. There's this openness here.

**Climate and social location.** While describing how they perceived their community climate, several interview participants indicated their perception is based on their social location.

This included one's status within the hierarchy of GSM identities or within their community.

Bridget, 18, explained:

It depends on your kind of LGBT. I think that, for me, I always say there's a totem pole, and I feel like I'm on the top, because I don't look stereotypically gay, so I haven't had a bad experience, but then, my partner who looks like she's gay, has people stare at her and stuff like that. Then I have a feminine gay friend—gay guy friend—and he has gotten bullied before and stuff like that.

Although Bridget perceived the more visibly gay youth to be potentially targeted more for violence, Oliver, a 17-year old transgender male youth, had a different perspective. He indicated that “it tends to be the more flamboyantly gay people [who] are more supported in school...because they're just so out there with everything...”

Winona, a 16-year old lesbian, described her nonmetropolitan community as hostile, citing numerous experiences of discrimination and victimization based on her sexual identity. She discussed how one of the other gay youth in her community likely perceives the community climate differently than she does: “He's lived here all his life, so he knows everybody, and so he's grown up with this certain group.” When asked to clarify why she thought there was a difference between his experience and hers, she explained that she was the only one of the gay youth who had not grown up in that town and who was not part of the popular crowd: “You can be whatever you wanna be, but you're popular, so you're cool with us.” Numerous youth also clarified their definitions of climate with “in my experience” or “but I haven't had any negative experiences,” suggesting they also understood the importance of an individual's location and experiences in defining one's climate.

Although the study did not set forth to examine differences in climate by social location or demographics, given the interview participants' descriptions of climate variations by social location, post-hoc analyses using survey and climate data were conducted. Associations were tested at the bivariate level between gender identity, sexual identity, race/ethnicity, and age with perceived climate, county climate, and municipal climate. Among nonmetropolitan youth, no demographic variables were associated with perceived climate or objective climate at the county or municipality level. Among small metropolitan youth, only sexual identity was significantly associated with perceived climate ( $\chi^2(8)=18.962, p=.015$ ) such that youth questioning their sexual identity were less likely to identify their community as supportive than lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth. It may be that youth who are questioning their sexual identity are less out than youth identifying as sexual minorities and, thus, the individual-level messages of support are not present in their day-to-day lives. Additionally, there may be fear associated with identifying as a sexual minority that reduces the perception of support in the community. Municipal and county climate for small metropolitan youth were also significantly different by race/ethnicity, such that non-white youth were more likely to live in communities with higher municipal ( $U=8163.5, p=.047$ ) and county ( $U=807.5, p=.043$ ) climates than white youth. Although most of the demographic variables were not associated with climate, and therefore seem divergent from the qualitative data, these data only tested demographics and no other factors such as time in community, victimization experiences, or school climate.

**Climate and attachment.** It is important to note that community climate did not always directly relate to how youth felt about their community. Some youth who described their community as supportive could not wait to graduate from high school so they could move away. Other youth who described their community as hostile voiced love for their community and

neighbors. Travis, 14, made this clear when he described the climate of his community as more supportive than he perceived it to be, simply to be nice: “It’s not super supportive. No, it leans more towards tolerant, but then I just went with supportive [on the survey], I guess to be nice.” Athena, 17, who described a great deal of hostility toward GSM people in her nonmetropolitan community, described this attachment to her community: “Sometimes I hate this community, but sometimes I love it...if I had come out...people would make more jokes and make it harder for me to be here. I love being a part of it. I don’t love the standards and morals that they live by here.”

### **Summary of Community Context**

In examining the community context as a backdrop for youth’s experiences, it is clear that county size and community climate are important factors in GSM youth’s lives. Although there may be some correlation between the size of one’s county and the community climate toward GSM people, this relationship is complex and variation exists. The community context plays a relevant role in youth’s lives such that it encompasses their schools, neighborhoods, and families, all of which interact with the youth and their community to create different levels of hostility, tolerance, and support.

The community context also played a role in youth’s stories as an antagonist or supporter (or both) in relation to other components of the model. The processes of support seeking among GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities are described in the following sections. When applicable, community size and community climate are discussed as they pertain to each section.

### **Needs (Figure 3, B)**



GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties indicated that they have needs related to their gender and sexual identities. These needs were identified by youth in the qualitative data, primarily interviews. Youth described four sub-categories of GSM-specific needs: reduce isolation, social acceptance and visibility, emotional support and safety, and identity development. These needs are organized by saliency in the data with the most salient and frequently discussed needs presented first.

### **Reduce Isolation (Figure 3, B.i)**

GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties identified a need to reduce the isolation they felt as GSM youth. Although most of the study participants had at least one GSM friend, interview participants reported needing to reduce their isolation because they had few GSM friends, lacked access to GSM peers, or felt as if they were the only GSM youth in their school or community. When asked what she needed as a GSM youth, Nicky, 15, explained, “just having someone to talk to about everything ‘cause I don’t have that many people that I can just talk to about all of my problems.” This sense of isolation was discussed by youth across social identities, in different community climates, and with varying experiences of discrimination and victimization. This category emerged primarily in interviews; however, the need to reduce isolation was also evident in the participant observations and open-ended survey questions. Thus, this need to reduce isolation, even when life was otherwise good for GSM youth, was one of the most salient needs expressed.

**Having few GSM friends.** One way that the need to reduce isolation was evident was by how youth discussed their friendships. Survey data revealed that over 95% of participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities reported having at least one GSM friend, however, this question did not specify whether their GSM friend(s) were in their community or

lived far away, such as online friends. Regardless of whether youth indicated they had GSM friends or not, this need for one or more GSM friends in order to reduce isolation was highly salient across interview participants. GSM friends were described as being better able to understand issues related to being a gender or sexual minority and, thus, were discussed as necessary by most participants.

When asked what they felt they needed, youth frequently responded with “more LGBT friends” or “to meet people like me.” Bridget, 18, commented: “Cause you watch *The L-Word* and you’re like ‘How come I don’t have a bunch of friends like that?’ Yeah, I’d like to meet a group of—I mean, we have so many straight friends, it’s like, bleh, but yeah.” Hughes, 17, described having a couple of GSM friends in his school, but feeling as if he needed more: “[I need to] just not [be] alone...It would just help if I had other people to talk to rather than the same two people...over and over again.” The need for GSM friends was particularly relevant for transgender participants, or youth questioning their gender identity, who described needing not just GSM friends, but friends who identified as transgender, gender queer, or gender questioning. Sasuke, a 16-year old questioning their gender identity, discussed needing “some friends, a support group in town of teenagers who are transgender that could come together and make friends.”

Several youth also described feeling isolated in terms of dating. They discussed not having many options for potential dating partners due to the low number of GSM adolescents in their small community. A survey participant discussed how “it’s very hard to find a good level-headed partner in the area.” Travis described having a couple GSM people in his school but wishing that he...

...went to maybe (another high school), a really big public high school so that I would have, I guess, more queer people to date and...have a crush on. I wish that I went to a bigger high school, just for the sake of having a bigger queer community.

This need to have more GSM friends and potential dating partners was particularly relevant for youth living in smaller communities or attending smaller schools, as their pool of potential friends and dating partners was smaller, although this was not consistent across small communities. Some youth in small communities reported having predominantly GSM friends while other youth indicated they did not necessarily want or need GSM friends.

**Lacking GSM spaces.** In addition to a need for more GSM friends, interview participants discussed having a lack of access to spaces in which they could meet or hang out with other GSM peers. This was sometimes described in the context of a small town—not having resources through which they could meet a diverse group of peers due to the small population of their town. It was also discussed in terms of not knowing how other youth identify. Dani, 14, explained:

It's hard to meet people like that in the LGBT community because when you look at a person, the first thing you don't think is, 'Hey, are they straight or are they gay?'

Sometimes, I do. If they're attractive...I wish there were better ways to just find people that are in the LGBT community and stuff.

Predominantly, youth indicated a need for physical spaces in which they could meet other GSM peers. Bernadette, 18, stated that she and her GSM peers needed “queer youth meet-ups. Let's go bowling. I don't know. Let's go parkour.” Echo stated “There needs to be—I don't know—just like an activity center. Then if there's one for that, and then maybe even a separate one for LGBT youth, or youth meetings, or just an LGBT get-together, that'd be great.” Amber

described how having a physical space to meet GSM peers could allow for improved well-being: “I think that maybe there should be a center where a lot of us can get together and find support from each other. In that way, we can all get better together and maybe get stronger.” Youth seemed to be keenly aware that, although their community was small and, thus, the number of potential GSM people in their town was low, lacking a physical space in which to meet other GSM people contributed to their need to reduce the isolation they felt as GSM youth.

**Feeling like the only one.** Finally, the need to reduce isolation was described as feeling like the only GSM person in their school or community. Youth described not knowing other GSM peers and feeling like “the only one”. Echo described feeling like “I’m the only out transgender [person] I know at our school.” Even when other peers identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, Echo didn’t have peers who identified as transgender which made him feel alone. Alex, 18, said she wished:

there was a group for LGBT youth in [my town] ‘cause as far as I know there’s not one. I think that would help a lot of people who are scared to come out, know that they’re not alone in this town. It seems like there’s no one in this town that’s LGBT.

The need to reduce isolation was relevant for youth across communities and experiences, thus, it was one of the more salient and most discussed needs. Interestingly, the number of friends youth had mattered little; youth who only had one or two friends identified this as a need along with youth with numerous close friends. It may be that youth have found GSM friendships online or in former communities and, yet, still feel isolated in their schools or communities.

### **Social Acceptance and Visibility (Figure 3, B.ii)**

Another identified GSM-specific need among small and nonmetropolitan GSM youth was social acceptance and visibility. Social acceptance included acceptance at the individual and

community levels. At the individual level participants needed peers or adults who would accept them as GSM youth and spaces where they could be themselves. At the community level youth indicated needing greater visibility for GSM people in their communities and public displays of acceptance in their community in order to feel supported as GSM youth. This category and its sub-categories emerged primarily from interviews; however, this category was also reflected in participant observations. Youth across social locations and community climates reported this need, although youth who identified their communities as tolerant or hostile tended to discuss this need more often.

**Acceptance from others.** Youth indicated a need for acceptance from others in their families, peer groups, schools, and communities. Youth described this on an individual-level, needing the people close to them to accept them. Several interview participants described verbal and physical abuse from peers and rejection from family members. These experiences led them to need acceptance from others, as well as their community, but also from the individuals from whom they experienced rejection and abuse. For example, Dani, 14, discussed ongoing conflict with her mother about her sexual identity and how, if she could feel accepted by her, this would help her. A survey participant described this need for acceptance, relating it to the climate of, not just her community, but the world:

I just want people to love one another and not be so hateful. I know that won't work, or happen anytime soon, but that is what I want. I think it's important to help LGBTQ youth, but I also think it is important to understand we're all the same. We all have problems and bullying exists no matter who you are. I just want to find myself in a more tolerant world in the future where I am not still partially scared to be myself.

The need for acceptance was also evident in the participant observations. At the research site, youth discussed experiencing rejection from peers or their peer's parents because of their gender or sexual identity. Some transgender youth shared how they felt a lack of acceptance within the gay and lesbian community because of their gender identity; feeling as if issues related to gender identity were ignored or misunderstood.

**Community support and visibility.** The need for social acceptance and visibility was also present at the community level through a need for increased community support and visibility of GSM people and issues. Youth described the need for acceptance at a community-level, needing to know their community was supportive to them as GSM youth. Marilyn, 18, talked about growing up in a nonmetropolitan community where she was not sure how people felt about GSM individuals. When asked what she needed, she replied:

I guess just acceptance. Overall, I felt accepted by those that do know about my sexuality but there are times especially growing up in a community where it's mostly a lot of elderly people who I have no idea how they'd feel about the LGBT community, I've always been scared about—especially if I ever came out to the whole town—how they would react to it as a whole. It's just always—I've always been wary on how widely accepted I would be, but for the most part, yeah, it's just acceptance.

Several interview participants discussed needing community-level education pertaining to GSM issues as a way of increasing both individual and community-level support and acceptance.

Bridget suggested: "...try[ing] to educate more people...when you're a gay kid, you depend on other people who are straight most of the time to accept you." Bernadette echoed this sentiment:

[We need] more stuff with Planned Parenthood about young queers. They need to come into the schools and educate the kids in school. Like 'Okay, some people are bisexual.

Some people are just straight and lesbian, and it's okay. You gotta be accepting. Don't be an asshole.'

Alice described needing "more trans awareness in school and around town and stuff." She discussed how her community was pretty aware when it came to sexual orientation, but that transgender awareness was lacking.

Interview participants discussed the lack of GSM visibility in their communities and how increased visibility could meet their need for community-level acceptance. Some youth described this need for visibility as a need for large, public events. Susuke stated: "I do like the idea of a pride festival or a rally or something. 'Cause I feel like we're hush hush about everything here." Quinn, 15, suggested that a Pride festival could not only bring increased visibility, but increase the community support for GSM individuals: "It'd be cool to have a pride parade around here. Those seem fun. You get all the people, and the colors...to help support the community with the LGBTness of everything." Other youth described the visibility they wanted or needed as broader than a once-a-year event; visible signs of community support, such as rainbow flags and GSM events throughout the year. Lizzy, 16, suggested ongoing events "like just more LGBT focused centered things...like plays and concerts and stuff like that. That would be awesome." Dani stated:

If just little places would have signs that—like the flag or something that they're supportive, that'd be cool 'cause then you'd know that it's okay to go in there and then be who you are, and people won't judge you and stuff like that.

Social acceptance and visibility were important needs to youth in this study. This category included needing to feel accepted by individuals in their lives and their communities as a whole, as well as increased visibility.

**Emotional Support and Safety (Figure 3, B.iii)**

GSM youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities identified a need for emotional support and safety related to the stress they experienced as GSM youth. Emotional support and safety needs included support for mental health needs associated with growing up in a society that stigmatizes and marginalizes their identities and the need for safe spaces to escape harm or be free to be themselves. As with the other needs, this category emerged primarily in interviews, but was also reflected in participant observations. Although youth across county sizes and climates indicated a need for emotional support and safety, only youth who were not involved in GSM community centers reported this need. None of the ten interview participants involved in GSM community centers discussed this as a support need. This is the only needs category in which this is true.

**Support for mental health issues.** Many youth identified a need for mental health support for issues such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and eating disorders. Some youth related their mental health needs to their GSM identity and how they were treated; others perceived them as unrelated. Regardless of their origin, however, youth indicated needing competent, well-trained, affordable counseling options in their communities. Participant observations revealed youth asking about and seeking support for relationship issues, depression, dealing with upsetting emotions, and body image issues. In her interview, Dani attributed her depression, suicidal thoughts, and anorexia to a range of issues and indicated she “would like to actually go to a support group for depression and suicide or stuff like that. Anorexia groups...I’ve never actually heard of a group that does stuff like that. I know there probably are.” Alejandro, 14, said he needed “emotional support...[from] trauma in my childhood and stuff...” and “probably more counselors...” in his community. A survey participant did not specifically



mention counseling, but did reference bullying and how that has impacted their mental health: “I had gotten bullied most of my life, making me feel worthless. I’ve been pushed really far to the point of self-harming and attempted suicide. I wish people wouldn’t need to go through this.”

Some youth, such as Chloe, 15, reported that they had mental health resources available, but had to travel distances to access them:

What I have support for right now for me is dealing with trauma. (*Interviewer: You have that in place?*). Yeah, there are places in [neighboring town] and in [other neighboring town]. If people really do need it, they can go down there. It’s just, it’s a really small town. They don’t have the resources for that here.

Participants also discussed a need for counselors who were trained in how to address GSM issues and respond compassionately and ethically to GSM youth, both for themselves and their peers. Bridget described school counselors who were ineffective at helping GSM youth:

I know some of the gay kids at my high school were struggling and didn’t get any help from the counselors; like one that I talked about didn’t get any help, so I guess maybe people should be better trained on how to deal with that, especially straight counselors. They don’t know what they’re doing.

Rain talked about the need for affordable therapists trained in gender questioning and transgender issues, indicating their community needed: “mental health [resources]...and maybe some training for different staff at different places to be more inclusive on how to handle LGBT people, not to be hateful or anything.”

**Presence of a safe space for GSM youth.** Youth also indicated a need for a space in the community that was safe for GSM youth to be themselves or escape risk of harm. Many interview participants indicated there was no safe space in their community, or that the spaces

that existed were not youth-specific. These youth described this safe space as a need that would allow them to be themselves, safe from harm, judgment, or discrimination. When asked what she needed in her community, Chloe responded, “Definitely a place where we can just go and not worry about being judged.” Hazel, a 17-year old bisexual youth, described needing

just a place where we could go and hang out and we wouldn’t have to hide ‘cause some people are open at school or in public with their friends, but at home, they are so closed in their closet. It would just be a good place. It would be a good thing to have a place or a designated area or something to where we could just go there and not be afraid of being shunned or cut out from people’s lives. It would be so amazing.

Nina described what such a safe space might look like:

I think it’d be really great if we had an LGBT book store. I think that would be a really great thing for [my town]. Then you could have books about it and you could have some place for people to go and they could talk and they could be as gay as they wanted to be.

In addition to spaces where youth could go to be themselves, several interview participants described needing safe spaces, such as shelters, where GSM youth who were at risk of harm could be safe. These shelters were described as needing to be GSM-specific or GSM-friendly. Missy, 18, talked about the need for shelters for GSM youth, particularly youth who are experiencing violence in relationships or at home. When asked what she would add to her community if she could, she replied:

I would make some sort of—almost like a refugee place, like a community center where people could go to get away from [violence at home]. Especially in the LGBT community, because there really aren’t any resources, as far as people who are in danger because of their sexuality, so I would do something about that...For like kids whose

parents aren't okay with it, get abused at home because of it, or adults who are in abusive relationships with a same-sex partner or whatever.

Bernadette talked about the existing shelters in her community and how they could not meet the needs of GSM people or youth:

There needs to be a queer youth shelter okay? At [the domestic violence shelter], they don't let boys in over the age of ten. At [the faith-based shelter], they don't let gay people in at all...yeah, there needs to be a safe overnight space for queers. [My friend] and I are talking about when we grow up, we'll open one up. 'Cause we're both bisexual and we know that's a need in the community.

Although not all youth identified emotional support and safety as an individual need, most recognized it as a need for GSM youth in their community. From mental health support, to supportive peers and safe spaces for GSM youth, this category relates to the ways in which GSM youth are treated and, subsequently, need support.

### **Identity Development (Figure 3, B.iv)**

The final GSM-specific need was identity development. GSM youth need support in developing their GSM identity, finding resources about what it means to be GSM, and how to come out to family and friends. The process of identity development was sometimes more difficult in the smaller community context because of the lack of GSM-specific resources available. The need for help with identity development was reflected in the interviews and participant observations, as well as open-ended survey questions. Additionally, as it related to identity development, this section includes quantitative analysis of youth's level of outness from survey data.

**Developing GSM identity.** Youth identified a need to better understand what it means to be a GSM youth. Even youth who were confident and comfortable with their gender or sexuality discussed wishing to better understand GSM issues, terminology, and what it means for them. During participant observations, youth often talked about the various identity labels available to them, how to figure out which one fit them best, and trying to explain these terms to others. In an interview, Marilyn described how she needed help developing her own GSM identity: “I feel like when I first started at [the GSM community center] I needed support mostly to feel comfortable with myself ‘cause growing up, especially when you’re in the pre-teenage years, are so confusing.” Nicky talked about needing help to feel comfortable with her sexual identity: “Probably just if I feel uncomfortable about my sexuality, I might want support to tell—just for people to tell me that I’m fine. I’m just like everybody else. I guess I would need support for that.”

Some youth discussed wishing they had been able to access support earlier in adolescence as they were figuring out their GSM identity. Morris, an 18-year old gay male, indicated he wished he had used a local GSM community center when he was first coming out: “I think a formal support group, definitely, would’ve been great. Just having people there to tell me their own experiences, and maybe give me advice on what I was going through, and how to deal with that.” In this way, youth discussed the need to develop their identity in the presence of other GSM people as a way of figuring out what it means to be GSM.

**Access to GSM resources.** Youth also reported that it would be helpful to have access to more GSM resources and information as they are developing their GSM identities. Lizzy stated that she would “like more information, because I know that I am—well, I mean, I consider myself [pansexual], but it would be nice if I could have a clear, concise definition.” Transgender

and gender questioning youth discussed the need for trans-specific resources. Oliver said he needed help with “legal stuff. ‘Cause I don’t...eventually I’m gonna try to legally change my name...I definitely don’t know how to do that on my own.” In addition to GSM-specific resources, youth described needing more access to GSM-friendly sex education as Nina described:

I wish there was some better support in this town for sex education and condoms and if you’re having sex how to do it safely. I don’t really know who would—like if your specific parents aren’t cool, I really don’t know who you could ask in this town about that.

**Coming out.** Finally, youth identified a need for assistance with coming out about their gender or sexual identity to friends and family. In participant observations, youth were observed discussing who they were out to and asking others about their coming out stories as a means of figuring out their own coming out narrative. While many of the interview participants were out as gender or sexual minorities, several youth were out to very few people and most youth had at least some groups of people to whom they were not out. Athena lived in a very conservative, nonmetropolitan community. When asked what she needed for support, she responded: “How to come out effectively...not letting it change my whole entire dynamic or life or anything. I really don’t want it to. Because, like I said, sexuality is such a small part of a big thing that is me.” Athena, and several other youth, described not wanting their GSM identity to be perceived as their sole identity and, yet, still seeing a need to come out to friends or family. Survey participants also described this need. One participant said: “I haven’t been treated unfairly because of my sexual preference and I’m grateful for that. I just wish I knew how to tell people without having to worry how they will take it.” Another participant said: “We need to educate

our youth more and make it more normal to be LGBTQ. We need to make it easier for people to come out.”

Youth’s level of outness was measured on the survey and bivariate associations between outness and the community context were conducted to better understand how the community context interacts with the need for GSM identity development. There were no significant differences in level of outness by county size; the mean outness score for youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties was 2.06 and 2.15, respectively (range 0 to 5). Community climate was not significantly associated with outness when measured objectively; however, perceived climate was significantly associated with level of outness [ $\chi^2(2)=8.341$ ,  $p=.015$ ]. Youth who perceived their climate as tolerant were significantly less out ( $M=1.96$ ) than youth who perceived their climate as supportive ( $M=2.55$ ). There were no differences between youth with a perceived climate of hostile ( $M=2.10$ ) versus the other two groups. Although it is difficult to determine from this cross-sectional study, two possible conclusions may be made from these results. First, if a need for GSM youth is assistance with identity development and coming out, this need may be more relevant in communities perceived as tolerant, regardless of their size. Second, it may be that being less out results in youth being more likely to perceive their community as tolerant because the individual-level messages of support or hostility are missing from their day-to-day interactions.

The association between level of outness and demographic factors was also tested at the bivariate level. Among youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties, there was a small, positive correlation between age and outness ( $r=.160$ ,  $p=.026$ ); females had significantly lower levels of outness than males ( $[\chi^2(3)=12.476$ ,  $p=.006$ ); and bisexual and questioning youth were significantly less out than lesbian and gay youth [ $\chi^2(3)=37.013$ ,  $p<.0001$ ]. Although these

results are not surprising, particularly that younger adolescents and those questioning their sexual identity had lower levels of outness, they suggest that the identity development need may be more relevant to these demographic groups.

Identity development, while the least discussed need, was important to youth because it was one of the needs in which general supports in their community could not meet. As discussed more in the following sections, youth identified needing GSM-specific resources and people to help them meet this need. Having resources with which to help youth understand what it means to be GSM, coming out to friends and family, and accessing GSM-specific resources was important even to the most out and comfortable youth, although as indicated by the outness analyses, this need may be more relevant in communities perceived as tolerant and among younger and questioning adolescents.

### **Summary of Needs**

Youth's needs for reduced isolation, social acceptance, emotional support and safety, and identity development related directly to their GSM identities. While it was not the focus of this study, a few youth also identified non-GSM needs such as assistance with school work or college applications, mental health support not related to their GSM identities, and reducing oppression related to other social identities (e.g. race/ethnicity, social class). It is important to attend to these needs, as well, as a way of not privileging GSM identities over other identities. Additionally, these needs may relate directly to the positive youth development model and, thus, are important to include in a study about GSM youth development.

Although this study is cross-sectional, some connections may be made between youth's reported needs for support and their support seeking behaviors. In the interviews, youth were specifically asked how they go about getting these needs met and their answers sometimes

described a temporal order. Even in cases where a temporal order was not clear, however, this need for support related directly to the ways in which youth sought support. The next section describes these sources of this support.

### Support Sources (Figure 3, C)

Youth's GSM-specific needs led them to seek support within various sources. This category developed out of the interviews, observations, and survey data, and related to each type of climate data. Youth sought support within three primary contexts: social networks, community organizations and spaces, and online.

#### Social Networks (Figure 3, C.1)

One source from which youth sought support was their social networks. The social network included GSM friends, non-GSM friends, GSM adults, and non-GSM adults, including parents/guardians. Table 11 displays the people survey participants reported as the most important to them as GSM youth. While youth in nonmetropolitan (41.5%) and medium/large metropolitan (27.8%) counties reported GSM friends as most important, youth in small metropolitan counties reported parents/guardians (30.3%) as more important than GSM friends (26.3%), although by a small margin. Nonmetropolitan youth also identified a parent/guardian (24.4%) and non-GSM friends (14.6%) as most important. None of these differences were statistically significant by county size.

Table 11

*Univariate Statistics for Most Important Person Measure among Non- and Small Metropolitan Participants*

	Nonmetropolitan <sup>a</sup>	Small metropolitan <sup>b</sup>	Medium/Large metropolitan <sup>c</sup>
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
GSM Friend	34 (41.5%)	26 (26.3%)	37 (27.8%)
Parent/guardian	20 (24.4%)	30 (30.3%)	35 (26.3%)



Table 11 (cont.)

Non-GSM Friend	12 (14.6%)	22 (22.2%)	29 (21.8%)
Other family	6 (7.3%)	6 (6.1%)	5 (3.8%)
Other	5 (6.1%)	10 (10.1%)	9 (6.8%)
Sibling	3 (3.7%)	2 (2.0%)	14 (10.5%)
Professionals	2 (2.4%)	3 (3.0%)	4 (3.0%)

Note. <sup>a</sup>n=87. <sup>b</sup>n=106. <sup>c</sup>n=145.

The following sections provide more in-depth detail about the process of GSM youth seeking support from people in their social networks. These categories reflect the GSM identity of individuals in their social network, as well as whether they were peers or adults, as these were important considerations for youth in this study. Therefore, the following sections were organized to include GSM friends, non-GSM friends, GSM adults, and non-GSM adults, rather than by the individual groups of people listed in Table 11.

**GSM friends (Figure 3, C.1.i).** Overall, the most frequently discussed group from whom youth reported seeking support was GSM friends. Over 96% of the survey sample indicated they had at least one GSM friend, regardless of county size, although this question did not specify the context of that friendship (community, online, etc.). Additionally, over half of the survey participants in nonmetropolitan (56.3%) and small metropolitan (58.0%) counties reported actively seeking out other GSM peers to establish friendships. Many interview participants also reported actively seeking GSM friendships. Chloe reported that she actively sought out GSM peers because “gay people are awesome!” and Rain said they wanted to meet more GSM, specifically transgender, people because “I do enjoy meeting people who identify similar to me.” Participants described trying to meet GSM peers at GSM organizations, GSA meetings, school, through other GSM friends, and online. Several youth described “just kind (of) find(ing) each other...like, magnetism” (Alice, 16, gender questioning).

In the interviews, youth who sought support from GSM friends most often did so in order to meet their needs to reduce isolation, obtain emotional support & safety, and develop their GSM identity. It is relevant to note that youth did not identify GSM friends as able to meet their need for social acceptance and visibility. It is possible that the need for acceptance is more related to groups of individuals who are not automatically assumed to accept them, such as peers and adults outside the GSM community.

***Seeking GSM friends to reduce isolation.*** Most of the youth who sought out GSM friends did so to reduce isolation. GSM friendships were described as closer friendships than those with non-GSM peers. Clementine, 15, described being “closer to the people that are LGBT.” Nicky described her GSM friendships as “more genuine...we talk more. We talk about more important things...more deep, meaningful conversations. I definitely feel more comfortable around them.” Youth identified a greater sense of understanding surrounding GSM issues from their GSM peers and felt they could better talk with them about GSM-related topics.

***Seeking GSM friends for emotional support and safety.*** Youth also identified GSM friends as helping them meet their emotional support and safety needs. Missy described the importance of having transgender friends who could understand the process she and her partner were going through with his transition: “It’s just really comforting ‘cause they...know the terminology, they know what to say, they know the general process. So it’s not like I’m talking to a wall.” Sasuke described being able to talk to a gay friend more than non-GSM friends: “He understands because he went through the same thing. We talk about that a lot. He’s really understanding.” GSM friends were also described as providing protection against bullies or uneducated peers or adults. Echo explained:

In my old school, one of my friends was LGBT. I was telling someone about being transgender, and they were commenting on like, that was weird or abnormal, and she just kinda helped me explain ‘it’s not abnormal. It’s human.’

Anna, 16, also described how she and her GSM friends would “stand up for each other [if we] see one of us getting harassed.”

***Seeking GSM friends for help with identity development.*** Finally, youth described GSM friendships as helping them meet their GSM identity development needs. Alice discussed how they needed GSM friends to help better understand their own gender identity: “[My GSM friend] was really important for me throughout school and stuff with identifying myself.” Echo described how finding transgender friends was critical to developing his own knowledge about trans-related issues: “They’ve helped me to understand masculine make-up. They’re showing me other ways, like instead of taping your chest, doing binders, and healthier, more effective ways to transition.”

***Quality of GSM friendships.*** In addition to talking about how GSM friendships were important to helping them meet their identified needs, participants described the quality of these relationships. Although not part of hypothesis testing, additional statistical analyses measured differences in perceived social support among GSM friends, non-GSM friends, and GSM adults. A repeated measures ANOVA showed that among nonmetropolitan participants the difference in perceived social support means for GSM adults ( $M=5.74$ ,  $SD=5.37$ ) was significantly lower than the means for GSM friends ( $M=11.77$ ,  $SD=4.31$ ) or non-GSM friends ( $M=10.89$ ,  $SD=4.62$ ),  $F(2, 73) = 37.811$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\text{partial } \eta^2 = .403$ . This finding was consistent for participants in small metropolitan counties, as well. The mean perceived social support means for GSM adults ( $M=7.34$ ,  $SD=5.53$ ) was significantly lower than the means for GSM friends ( $M=12.41$ ,

SD=5.15) or non-GSM friends (M=11.91, SD=4.57),  $F(2, 73) = 50.771, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .407$ . These results are illustrated in Table 12.

Table 12

*Repeated Measures ANOVA testing the Differences between Perceived Social Support among GSM Friends, Non-GSM Friends, and GSM Adults for Nonmetropolitan and Small Metropolitan GSM Youth*

County size	GSM friends		Non-GSM friends		GSM adults		$F(2, 73)$	$p$	$\eta^2$
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$			
Non <sup>a</sup>	11.77	4.31	10.89	4.62	5.74	5.37	37.811	<.001	.403
Small <sup>b</sup>	12.41	5.15	11.91	4.57	7.34	5.53	50.771	<.001	.407

Note. <sup>a</sup>n=87. <sup>b</sup>n=106.

Finally, it is important to note that not all youth sought support from GSM friends. Some were indifferent to the idea of actively seeking GSM friends, such as Quinn. When asked if she looked for more GSM friends, she replied “Not really, I mean, ‘hey, if you are, you are. If you’re not, you’re not.’ It doesn’t really matter.” Some youth also said they did not necessarily want other GSM people to hang out with. Morris described avoiding the GSM community due to his concern about being a part of the Black, gay community because “everybody knows everybody”. This was particularly relevant given his small metropolitan context. These youth either sought friendships regardless of gender or sexuality or specifically looked for non-GSM friends as a source of support.

**Non-GSM friends (Figure 3, C.1.ii).** Non-GSM friends were another source of support GSM youth reported seeking to meet their identified needs. Although GSM friends may be difficult to access, particularly in smaller communities, most youth have access to non-GSM peers. Survey participants ranked the support they received from non-GSM friends lower than from GSM friends, but significantly higher than GSM adults (see Table 12). Interview participants described non-GSM friends as primarily meeting their needs for social acceptance

and emotional support and safety; less so for meeting their isolation or identity development needs.

*Seeking non-GSM friends for acceptance.* The lack of acceptance youth felt, by family members and friends, or the community at large, made receiving unconditional acceptance from non-GSM peers important. Nina discussed how she had one GSM friend and one non-GSM friend. She described the acceptance she received from her religiously conservative non-GSM friend:

It's just nice to know that she'll love me no matter what. I can do whatever...I can be whoever I want to be and it's just nice to know that she won't hate me if I get a girlfriend. She won't hate me; that's pretty nice to know.

Sam, an 18-year old gay male, talked about the importance of having non-GSM friends who accepted him but did not make being gay his only identity:

They're supportive. They're cool with me being gay, but they also realize that that's not my defining characteristic. We don't go to gay lunch. We go to lunch. I will hang out with my friend, eat a thick burger, and just chill, or watch movies or something. It doesn't have to be related to me being gay, but, if I want to talk about, say, boyfriend troubles, I can.

*Seeking non-GSM friends for emotional support and safety.* A few participants also described the importance of non-GSM friends for providing them with emotional support and safety. More youth referenced non-GSM friends than GSM friends as standing up for them when people were making fun of them or talking negatively about GSM people. Oliver described being made fun of at school and how his non-GSM friends would stand up for him: "They back me up whenever I need it. If they hear anybody [they say] 'What are you talking about? Why are you

calling him [the wrong name]?’ or something, they’ll take them aside and explain things to them.” Thus, while GSM friends were important to participants, the importance of non-GSM friends cannot be understated. The provision of acceptance and safety against bullies or uninformed peers was highly important.

**GSM adults (Figure 3, C.1.iii).** Another potential source of support for the youth in the study was GSM adults. GSM adults included staff at GSM organizations, teachers, school social workers, family members, neighbors, or other adults met through activities such as sports or theater. More than three-fourths of survey participants in each county size reported knowing GSM adults (84.9% to 88.2%), although the mean perceived social support scores were relatively low for GSM adults (see Table 12). This may be due to the fact that the PSS was established to measure social support among friends, rather than support received from adults; the supportive relationship with adults is likely different as described by youth in the interviews.

Interview participants illustrated some of the ways they did or did not seek GSM adults for support. First, just because youth knew GSM adults did not mean they utilized them for support. Several youth described how, given the choice, they would prefer to get support from their peers. Bernadette said: “If I needed something, I’d go to [GSM adults, but] I usually go to people my own age.” Hughes talked about how knowing GSM adults at his school was a good thing and that they would support him if he needed it, but that he preferred to talk to peers: “I know they’re there for me, but they’re still, as much as I don’t wanna say it, they’re still adults. It’s just kind of uncomfortable for me to share everything with an adult.”

For youth who did utilize GSM adults for support, they did so to meet three of the identified needs: social acceptance, emotional support and safety, and identity development. GSM adults were not described as meeting youth’s needs to reduce isolation.

***Seeking GSM adults for acceptance.*** Youth described how having GSM adults in their lives was important for meeting their needs for social acceptance and visibility. This came out in two ways: some youth described generally feeling accepted by GSM adults while others discussed the importance of seeing GSM adults in their schools or communities because it gave them hope for their future. Bernadette described how having GSM teachers at her school helped her feel more accepted. “I only know of two, maybe three, LGBT teachers. They’re not there to judge. They’re there to teach. They’re passionate about what they do for the most part.” Alex described the importance of having out GSM adults in her community and how, even if she did not directly seek out support from them, knowing them was helpful: “There’s a woman who has a wife and just knowing that she’s out and happy and has a partner, just helps reassure me that it’ll be okay.” Chloe knew GSM adults, but did not specifically use them for support because she was not out to any of them. She indicated, however, that even just knowing them helped her: “I mean, the fact that there are a lot of—there are adults who are open and happy. It’s comforting.”

***Seeking GSM adults for emotional support and safety.*** Most of the interview participants who sought support from GSM adults did so to meet their needs for emotional support or safety. Adele, 14, and Sam, 18, described staff at GSM organizations whom they sought for support. Adele said:

She checks up on me a lot. I met her once for the Day of Silence. Then we were Facebook friends...She’s nice. She actually cares. She’ll check up on me and make sure I’m doing okay. If I’m going through something, I can tell her about it. Stuff like that.

Sam described the type of support he sought from the GSM organization staff: “Mainly advice, really...I feel like I can say whatever I’m feeling like, if I do need support...usually dating advice, or financial advice...college-related advice.” Alice talked about the importance of having

a GSM adult friend whom she could talk with about anything: “I can talk to him about stuff, and it doesn’t just have to be LGBTQ stuff. It can also be stuff in general.” Some youth also described the importance of GSM adults for meeting their needs for safety. Alejandro described how his GSM teacher intervened when bullies would make fun of him.

If she can hear somebody talking about me, she be like ‘Be quiet’. She will notice. ‘Get out and go to the office.’ Then she gives the whole class a speech about ‘how would you feel if you were that person? You’re talking to them like they’re trash’ and stuff like that.

***Seeking GSM adults for help with identity development.*** Interview participants also described seeking support from GSM adults to meet their identity development needs. GSM adults were considered supports in this way because they had “been there” and could give advice or share ideas with youth. Anna relayed how knowing GSM adults was “definitely helpful, because I can talk to—they can share experiences with me. I can see how they handled them to help me.” Alex discussed GSM adult friends she met through theater: “One of ‘em actually helped me to be more okay with myself.” Salem, a 17-year old bisexual male, described support he received from a GSM adult who was a friend of his family:

We talked a lot for a little bit...that helped with my own, I guess, confidence a little bit talking to people...Then he also told me some things about if people ask you about it and if you don’t know the answer just don’t really say anything.

**Non-GSM adults (Figure 3, C.1.iv).** Finally, other adults, not GSM-identified, played a role in how youth sought support within their social networks. Although survey participants were not asked to complete the PSS scale for non-GSM adults for methodological reasons (e.g. minimizing survey length, diversity of non-GSM adults in youth’s lives), these adults were discussed as sources of support during interviews. Non-GSM adults included parents/guardians,



teachers, counselors or social workers, religious leaders, and friends' parents. Given the relevance of parents/guardians in youth's lives, discussion of these individuals will occur separately from the rest. Youth primarily described the support they sought from non-GSM adults as meeting their needs for social acceptance and emotional support. Dani discussed how she sought support from her counselor to meet her mental health needs, but how receiving unconditional acceptance from her counselor was just as important:

There's my counselor. She's really supportive about [my bisexuality]. She's just one of those 'I don't care' people, like 'tell me what you want' and blah-blah-blah. I think it's cool. She's supportive about it, but, I also don't go to her just to talk about that. I talk about everything.

Jasmyne talked about several non-GSM adults in her life from whom she sought support. She described how most of her teachers identified as Christian and expressed surprise to learn how some were "really open and supportive" about her GSM identity:

They're willing to talk about it without telling me 'Oh, you need to go to church. That's wrong. You shouldn't do that.' They just listen more than anything. They listen to my problems and listen to what it's like...I love some of my teachers. Just absolutely adore them. I'm really close with two of my teachers, and we talk about my family problems, my relationships problems. They're just really open and loving about it.

She also talked about seeking support from her youth pastor's wife: "She's just really supportive about everything...She knows about my cutting, and my smoking, and being Wiccan, and being bi. We get along really well. She just listens to all of my problems." Oliver described seeking support from teachers who guided him on making institutional changes in his school:

Adult-wise, I've told a couple of my teachers at school. They've been really great about it, especially my English teacher. Since this school doesn't really have policies in place based on gender identity or anything of that sort, he sort of pointed me in the right direction of somebody who I could talk to to start maybe working on something like that. Rain was one of the few youth who described how they sought out their friend's parents to meet their need for a safe, accepting space: "[My friend's] parents, they don't really care—like not in a bad way, but they're not gonna discriminate. Their house, in general, is a pretty safe space."

*Parents/guardians.* As with other adults, most youth preferred to seek out support from peers rather than parents/guardians. Many youth were out to their parents about their gender or sexual identity, although with varying levels of support. Some felt completely accepted while others had been rejected by their parents. Other youth, who were not out to parents, feared coming to their parents for support because disclosing their GSM identity could mean rejection.

Even though youth preferred support from peers, the importance of parents in providing acceptance and emotional support was clear. Several youth talked about being rejected from their parents due to their gender or sexual identity and how they felt they needed acceptance from these individuals specifically. Bridget described her mother being "disappointed" by her sexuality and wishing she were fully accepted at home. Other youth talked about being generally accepted by their parents, but not being able to fully be themselves. Morris said "me and my mom are actually really close now. We don't necessarily discuss my relationships."

Alternatively, a few youth described getting some of their identified needs met from their parents. Winona discussed being victimized at school. When asked who she sought support from at that time, she responded; "I talked to my mom and I told her how I was feeling." Morgan, 14, described several family members and adults who she felt were supportive to her, but indicated

that “if I needed an adult, I would probably go to my mom.” Alice said that if she needed to talk, she could talk with her dad. Missy discussed how her mom helped her and her transgender partner access transgender resources and people, thus helping them meet their identity development and emotional support needs.

**Summary of social networks.** The findings on social networks as a source of support suggest that having a diverse set of support options is important. While participants generally preferred to seek support from friends, having both GSM and non-GSM adults in their lives was important as they provided greater social acceptance and visibility, and resources to access when needed. Additionally, while some variation existed, most youth reported seeking both GSM and non-GSM peers to meet different support needs. These findings were generally consistent across county sizes and community climates, although some variation did exist. The ways in which community interacted with support networks as a support source is discussed further in the intervening conditions section.

### **Community Organizations & Spaces (Figure 3, C.2)**

Another source from which youth sought support was their communities. Community support sources included GSM organizations, non-GSM organizations, and public community spaces. The following sections include findings for each category of community support including the support needs most related to each type of community support. The ways in which community support interacted with community climate are discussed in the intervening conditions section. Results pertaining to community organizations and spaces include data from interviews, surveys, and participant observations.

**GSM organizations (Figure 3, C.2.i).** GSM organizations were defined as both formal GSM organizations, such as non-profit community centers, as well as informal GSM groups

within non-GSM organizations, such as churches. Five of the thirteen items measured on the survey (via the IGA index) were categorized as GSM organizations based on this definition: GSM community center, GSM church group, GSM shelter, GSM book store, and a school-based gay-straight alliance (GSA). Table 8 (Chapter Four) displays the percentage of youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties who reported using each of these types of GSM organizations. By far, youth reported the most involvement in a school GSA. The next most common GSM organization utilized was a GSM community center. About one-third of youth reported using a GSM shelter or GSM church group.

*GSM community centers.* On the survey, about 43% of youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties reported utilizing a GSM community center in their or a nearby community. GSM community centers were primarily sought to meet needs to reduce isolation and gain social acceptance, rather than for emotional support or identity development. This may be partially due to the fact that youth involved in a GSM community center did not indicate they needed emotional support. It may be possible that this need was already met at the time of participation in the study, although it is not possible to determine given the cross-sectional nature of this study.

*Seeking GSM community centers to reduce isolation.* Participant observations of one GSM community center revealed youth attending each of the three different types of groups offered (e.g., support, social, and a theater group). Some youth utilized all three, while others utilized only one or two depending on their needs and schedule. Within support groups, youth were often observed chatting socially with peers in a friendly manner. It was clear that they had established friendships with each other by how they would check-in on each other's lives outside of group.

Interview participants described actively seeking out GSM community centers in their town or nearby communities. Some youth described driving an hour or more to utilize such an organization. Missy, 18, who lives in a nonmetropolitan community, indicated she crossed state lines just to go to a GSM community center to meet other GSM peers:

[My friend] had a lot of friends that identified in the LGBT community and they would go to these places. There's something called the [neighboring state GSM community center]...they had pride picnics and pride prom...then we started going to places like that...actually, that's how I met my partner now, was through them.

Jack also talked about going to a GSM community center in a town about 40 miles from his home: "I just like hanging out with friends. We just do whatever the hell we want, basically. Friday's are pretty well set on going to [the GSM center]." Clementine went to the GSM center in her town for the first time because a friend invited her. She described why she stayed: "(My friend) was interested and didn't want to go alone, so we went—I went with her. I was like 'Okay, this is fun' and then they started asking about theater stuff which we were interested in, and that was fun."

*Seeking GSM community centers for social acceptance.* Some youth also described utilizing GSM community centers to get their need for social acceptance and visibility met. During participant observations of GSM community center support groups, youth attendees self-identified their name and preferred gender pronoun; staff and volunteers did not question them, even when pronouns or preferred names changed from group to group, suggesting acceptance for where youth were in their development at any given time. Sam described being accepted by staff at a GSM community center as important to him and one of the reasons he kept returning to groups. A few youth also described the GSM visibility afforded by a GSM community center as

helping meet their need for community-level acceptance and visibility. Several youth mentioned the importance of public events and education provided by a GSM community center for helping them feel more accepted in their community.

In addition to utilizing GSM community centers, GSM youth reported using a variety of other GSM organizations. In fact, survey participants who indicated they had been involved in a GSM community center were significantly more likely to report utilizing other GSM community resources (see Chapter Four). Although the cross-sectional nature of this study cannot determine a temporal order between involvement and utilization of resources, it may be that youth utilizing GSM community centers learn about other resources through their involvement (or learn about the GSM community center through other involvement). It may also be that youth who can access a GSM community center also have more resources in their community with which to utilize.

*Gay-straight alliances.* The most common form of GSM organization sought and utilized by GSM youth was a school-based GSA. Over half of nonmetropolitan and nearly two-thirds of small metropolitan survey participants reported utilizing a GSA. GSAs were most commonly used to meet needs to reduce isolation and develop GSM identities. Youth rarely described GSAs as meeting needs for social acceptance and emotional support.

*Seeking GSAs to reduce isolation.* Several interview participants described using GSAs because they were the only GSM-related group in their community, particularly for youth. When asked where he goes to feel safe and find community, Salem replied: “not publicly, but in school we just started a GSA for that. That’s been going for, I guess a year now.” Sam talked at length about helping start his school’s GSA in a small metropolitan county, but a small rural town. “The GSA grows in numbers every year. The first year I did it, there were maybe five or six people.

The second year, there was 12 to 15 per meeting. This year, our first meeting had 35-40 people.” When asked how they get their support needs met, Alice replied: “For me, there’s the GSA. I have my friends and teachers I know.” Other youth talked about trying to start a GSA in their schools to meet their needs but being turned down by their administration.

*Seeking GSAs for help with GSM identity development.* A few youth also described using a GSA to learn more about their GSM identity and access GSM information. Lizzy talked about using the GSA in her school for GSM-related identity development needs: “We had this one session where we would talk about just sexuality and sex and being safe and stuff like that. It was a really nice meeting. We had people—a couple reps talk and stuff like that. It was really cool.” The GSA, then, provided a (mostly) accessible resource for youth to access other GSM peers and get some of their support needs met. A few exceptions occurred when there were scheduling or interpersonal conflicts, discussed in the section on intervening conditions.

*Other GSM organizations.* Other GSM organizations included GSM shelters, church groups, and book stores. Although one-third of survey participants reported using a GSM shelter or church group; very few interview participants discussed these types of GSM organizations as sources of support they sought. Rain and Bernadette talked about seeking support through a local church’s GSM youth group. Although from different communities, they both described the same denomination as open and affirming to GSM individuals and, thus, having a youth group specifically for GSM youth. Bernadette did discuss the need for a GSM-friendly shelter in her community and Rain also utilized her community’s local safe school’s alliance to try to make her school and community more accepting.

**Non-GSM organizations (Figure 3, C.2.ii).** Non-GSM organizations were defined as organizations in the community that were potentially accepting of GSM identities, but were not

specifically GSM organizations. Two of the thirteen items measured on the survey (via the IGA index) were categorized as non-GSM organizations based on this definition: HIV organizations and public health departments. About one-third of youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties reported utilizing these organizations (see Table 8, Chapter Four).

Very few interview participants discussed seeking out or utilizing non-GSM organizations for support. While Lizzy had not used any community support, she reported knowing about several non-GSM organizations and wishing she had been able to participate in them. For example, she wanted to be a part of the local Planned Parenthood teen group: “I know there’s Planned Parenthood, and I know that there are some groups...I haven’t been to any of them...I’m gonna try and do it for this year.” Another participant, Hughes, also discussed a Planned Parenthood group as a space where he could meet other GSM and ally peers and feel safe and accepted.

**Community spaces (Figure 3, C.2.iii).** Finally, community spaces were defined as public spaces or events that were considered GSM-friendly or accepting. Six of the thirteen items measured on the survey (via the IGA index) were categorized as community spaces based on this definition: Pride festivals; GSM-oriented plays, social events, concerts, or theater groups; and other public/community spaces, such as libraries or parks (see Table 8, Chapter Four). In the interviews, community spaces were described predominantly as meeting needs for social acceptance/visibility.

*Seeking community spaces for social acceptance.* Youth generally described libraries and local businesses as places where it was safe for them to be openly GSM. Morgan, 14, talked about utilizing the library in her community as a place where she could access information or be with friends: “Usually I just like to go alone and find books or movies that I want to read or



watch. Sometimes I'll go with friends after school to just hang out." Bernadette also utilized her library as "a safe queer space" and indicated her high school library had more recent and relevant GSM materials than the public library. Bernadette was also one of the youth who described a local game store as a "shining example of [a] safe place to be queer." She said:

I just started going there last year. It's really more of a safe place for nerds...I don't know where non-nerdy LGBTQ people go for fun...what makes it safe is that we're all pretty nerdy here. We're marginalized, made fun of. Well, we don't wanna see that. We wanna be accepting.

Other youth did not have access to libraries or accepting businesses and, thus, utilized even more public spaces. When asked to describe where he and his GSM friends found safe spaces in their community, Jack responded "We could go to the park. It's a pretty safe place up there."

**Summary of community organizations and spaces.** The findings on community organizations and spaces as a source of support suggest a variety of ways in which youth sought to meet their needs. GSM organizations, non-GSM organizations, and community spaces represented spaces in the community from which youth could get support related to their GSM identities, although not all youth had access to these types of organizations and spaces. One final source of support was discussed by youth: online support.

### **Online (Figure 3, C.3)**

The final type of support youth reported seeking and utilizing was online support. On the survey, 70% of youth in nonmetropolitan counties and 66% of youth in small metropolitan counties reported using the internet for support. As with other types of support, survey participants in nonmetropolitan (91.4%) and small metropolitan (85.7%) communities who

reported involvement in a GSM community center were more likely to utilize online resources for support than non-involved youth (51.1% and 49.1%, respectively).

Online support was discussed in nearly all of the interviews. GSM youth reported using online support in a variety of ways to get various needs met, specifically: reducing isolation, emotional support, and identity development. The need for social acceptance was not discussed as related to seeking support online.

**Seeking support online to reduce isolation.** The reason participants discussed most for seeking out support online was to reduce the isolation they felt as GSM youth in their small communities. Some youth described the difficulties in meeting other GSM youth and how the internet afforded them the ability to do so. Dani summed this sentiment up well: “Cause I know nowadays, really, you can only meet people like that online because they’re just everywhere, but not where you are.”

Tumblr and Facebook were identified as two primary social media sites used for meeting and socializing with other GSM people. Jasmyne described Tumblr as a big meeting place for GSM teens and adults: “It’s just really easy to find other people all around the world that identify as LGBT. It’s easy to talk about issues with them.” Tumblr was frequently defined as “the gay person’s haven” (Chloe). Nicky explained how she sought GSM peers on social media in order to feel less alone:

Sometimes I’ll go on social networking sites to meet friends. Or to meet people who share the same interests. Just to have more people to talk to. ‘Cause a lot of the times I have problems with feeling alone and stuff. I’ll just try and make more friends.

Quinn described a sense of safety in meeting online peers versus peers in her community:

It's a cool way to be able to meet people. Be completely open. Because if they don't like you, you obviously don't have to communicate with them ever again, since they don't live around here. You can just block them on everything.

A couple of youth also identified social media sites as places to meet potential dating partners:

Sam, 18, said:

I usually go [online] to meet LGBT friends—usually guys because I'm also usually single. I just kinda—there's an option for locals and you can look through people in your area to meet them...on this website called MeetMe. It's a teen dating site, but they can't call it a dating site.

Will, a 16-year old gay male, identified Grindr as “the hook up” social media application he uses to meet other GSM guys.

**Seeking emotional support online.** Additionally, youth sought out support online to meet their needs for emotional support. Youth utilized Tumblr, YouTube, Facebook, and GSM websites to help them deal with emotional issues. When asked how he gets support when he feels bad, Hughes said “Social media's a big one. I wouldn't wanna say it, but I am connected to my phone a lot. Texting and Facebook and SnapChat and stuff like that. It just helps to have people a click away that I can confide in.” Nicky described how on Tumblr “there's a lot of people who will comfort you, and talk to you, and message you.” This immediate access to supportive individuals was expressed by youth repeatedly. Joey, a 14-year old gay male, said “If there's not anybody at school to talk to or there's not anybody to support you at some time, there's always people online. There's always somebody who's gonna be online to talk to.” Joey also utilized a GSM website for troubled GSM youth to help him during middle school. Missy described thinking about starting a YouTube channel about being the partner of a transgender person:

We were gonna start making YouTube videos about being with someone who was going through the transition. I mean, you go on YouTube and stuff, and there'll be a lot of things about people who are FTM (female-to-male), but not a lot about people who are with those people.

**Seeking support online for identity development.** Finally, youth sought out support online to help them better understand and develop their GSM identity. Youth indicated that talking with other GSM people online or accessing internet resources was important for them in understanding their gender or sexual identity, as well as their coming out process. Youth used a variety of online resources to get this need met including Tumblr, Facebook, YouTube, and GSM-specific websites. Marilyn indicated that:

...whenever I was exploring the idea of 'maybe I am bisexual; maybe I am gay; or maybe I am straight. I don't know.' That was how that—why I first started using Tumblr, but as it progressed I just started to learn more about myself and become more comfortable with who I am.

Nina said that she will “message people who identify as bi. I talk to them about what they think and what that means to them...I've talked to a lot of people on Tumblr, and that's helpful.”

Participant observations revealed youth discussing how they used YouTube as a means of getting their GSM identity development needs met. Youth shared YouTube channels they watched pertaining to GSM rights and transgender-specific videos, as well as funny video blogs that just made them laugh. In her interview, Lizzy described utilizing YouTube to get GSM and sex education specific information: “I watch some videos online, which aren't all LGBT, just kind of like sex in general. It also talks about LGBT stuff.” Oliver described how:

...a YouTube diary is a popular thing. I go and I find people's stories of their transition process and watch their progress. [It's] helpful to see what changes will happen and that this person is succeeding on their journey. Gives me hope for the future.

Athena described how online support helped her identify her own sexual identity, particularly in the context of a living in a hostile community:

I didn't think in-depth into it until I really got into Tumblr. Everybody seems to like to label there. I just thought about it and I was like 'I guess I'm bisexual' ...it was more present. I saw it more. Here in the community you don't, I mean we're a very hostile environment about LGBTQ. It's—you don't really—you just throw it away until you have to think about it. Tumblr makes you think about it.

Some youth also shared how they used social media and online resources to help them come out; social media was either a platform through which they could come out, or could help them find the courage and support to come out. Several youth described coming out via Facebook. Lizzy said "When I went out with my girlfriend, when we first went out, I put it on Facebook, because if you put it on Facebook, everyone's just like 'Oh my God' ...people wanna know. 'Cause sometimes you get married on Facebook.'" Bernadette went through the same process: "Well, we confirmed our relationship on Facebook first. All my Facebook friends knew, and my mom found out from that." Will also came out on Facebook: "The summer going into high school is when I came out. It was through a Facebook status." Amber found a support system on Facebook that allowed her to come out: "I've found a lot more friends through Facebook...I felt that I could trust them, so that's why I came out."

**Summary of online support.** Although the research questions primarily related to the role of social and community support among GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small

metropolitan communities, the importance of online support emerged across data sources.

Particularly in smaller communities where youth may not have access to other GSM resources, the availability of online support in lieu of in-person support was essential to many of the youth in this study.

### Summary of Support Sources

Overall, youth primarily sought support in these three contexts: social networks, community organizations and spaces, and online. Most youth had access to at least one support source, while some youth had access to, and utilized, all of the support options described above. Whether and how youth had access or could utilize these types of support depended on a variety of factors, discussed in the next section. Table 13 illustrates the most common support sources used to meet the identified needs.

Table 13

#### *Support Sources Most Commonly Sought to Meet Individual GSM Needs*

Support Source	Reduce Isolation	Social Acceptance & Visibility	Emotional Support & Safety	Identity Development
GSM Friends	X		X	X
Non-GSM Friends		X	X	
GSM Adults		X	X	X
Non-GSM Adults		X	X	
GSM Community Center	X	X		
GSA	X			X
Other GSM Organizations		X		
Non-GSM Organizations		X		
Community Spaces		X		
Online	X		X	X

*Note.* Cells with an “X” indicate that support source was commonly discussed as meeting the associated need.

### Intervening Conditions (Figure 3, D)

Intervening conditions included the barriers and facilitators to utilizing the different support options described above. The four categories of intervening conditions initially emerged

in the qualitative data and included accessibility, congruence, emotional readiness, and stigma. Typology development, a mixed methods analytic procedure, involved utilizing emergent qualitative categories to develop a typology within the quantitative data, and then testing it within the model. Each intervening condition had associated quantitative data and, thus, was used to test the association between each intervening condition and utilization of four types of community support. Only community support was tested in this way because utilization of social support was not measured; rather, the quality of social support was assessed. The findings related to intervening conditions, as well as the mixed methods analytic procedures and findings are discussed in the following sections.

### **Accessibility (Figure 3, D.i)**

Accessibility as an intervening condition included the availability of and access to the various support sources in the model. As a barrier or facilitator, accessibility related primarily to a) whether a support option was available in a community or b) whether youth could access available support. Accessibility was most commonly discussed in relationship to utilizing support from GSM friends, GSM community centers, GSAs, and community spaces, although various types of supports were referenced.

**Lack of availability.** First, some youth indicated that while they wanted to seek certain types of supports, they simply were not available in their community. Numerous youth indicated there were no GSM resources available within driving distance. Oliver wanted to meet more GSM friends, but indicated “there’s not really a big group of us around [town].” One survey participant described their lack of access to GSM peers:

I feel that I would have a good relationship with LGBTQ friends if I had any. I just live in a small town and I feel that I am the only one sometimes but I know that I am not. I may, however, be the only one at school who is ready and open about who I am.

Survey participants also wrote in that they did not have community support available in their communities. Survey participants in nonmetropolitan counties reported fewer available GSM resources than participants in small or medium/large metropolitan communities; although differences in utilization of these organizations only approached statistical significance (see Chapter 4).

When support options were present, several accessibility conditions still existed: distance to the source of support, lacking information about support options, time/schedule conflicts, and conflict with parents.

**Distance.** Some youth described GSM supports being available in neighboring towns, but indicated the distance was too great for them. Chloe lived in a very small town, but knew of GSM 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.” Hazel had the same experience: “I heard that there’s places in [town] but for someone who doesn’t have a car, that’s hard...[it’s] about 30 minutes to an hour depending on what way I go...I don’t even know how to drive.” Survey participants commented that GSM organizations took “hours to get to”, “are a 30 minute bus ride or more”, and “[the] closest [one] is 40 minutes away.”

Even with the distance some youth were able to access GSM organizations. Sam lived about 30 minutes from the nearest GSM organization. He said: “Well, my mom, of course, she’s very supportive...before I had my own car, she would drive me around everywhere. She would drive me to [the GSM community center].” Thus, the distance barrier could be overcome in the



presence of supportive parents. Jack also lived a 40-minute drive from a GSM organization and while he was able to attend the groups, sometimes distance presented a problem: “I mean, I love the [GSM community center] but I don’t love the gas it takes...gas is pretty expensive. There’s been a couple of times that we couldn’t go because we had no money.”

**Lack of information.** Another condition related to lack of access was a lack of information about supports in youth’s communities. Interview participants described not knowing resources existed, or when they did, what times they met or who was eligible to attend. Lizzy indicated that:

[At the GSM center] I knew that there were like—there’s gay youth and adult gay and different kind 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?

A couple of youth who were involved in GSM organizations also commented on the lack of information in the community about these programs. Sam utilized the GSM community center, and had this feedback about lack of access “I feel like the [GSM community center] could promote itself a little more, ‘cause the attendance at the youth meetings has been a little on the low side. I am not an advertising expert, but some sort of getting the name out there more.”

Quinn, involved in a different GSM community center, had similar advice: “I mean, this place could get more advertisement out. Just to let more people know. Because a lot of people don’t know that this place is [here]. Just advertisement for places like this.” Nicky sought support from the GSM community center in her town, but felt as if it was not enough: “This [GSM community center] is a really good one, but [we need] more of them. Because this is nice, but they’re only open sometimes. Like Fridays. It would be nice to have somebody more consistent, who was always there.” Survey participants wrote in open-ended responses as to why they did not use

community supports. Many described not knowing when programs met, as well as time and scheduling conflicts. In her interview, Dani indicated that she could utilize her school GSA when it met during school hours, but when it was changed to meet after school, she had to stop attending.

Although lack of information and, therefore, access to support was primarily discussed in terms of GSM organizations, Bridget shared how she wanted to seek support from GSM adults, but did not want to assume who was a GSM and who was not. When asked if she could get support from teachers she perceived as gay, she replied:

No, I didn't ask them for anything 'cause they weren't—I mean, if you asked them, they were out, but I didn't wanna just assume, and just be like, 'can you help me?' 'cause they're private. Most of them were private about it.

**Conflict with parents.** Finally, youth discussed how conflict with parents surrounding their GSM identity made available GSM organizations inaccessible to them. Dani, 14, shared how she wanted to attend youth group meetings at a local GSM community center:

I want to go to those, but I'm not able to, which really sucks. I was really, really wanting to go to it, but then when I asked my mom, she's just all like 'Haha, you're funny.' I've just never been able to get that kind of help because my mom, she's just really mean about stuff like that.

Adele was not out to her parents and that, in itself, presented a barrier:

It's harder to reach out and get [that support] without coming into some problem, like explaining to my family what I'm doing. Why I'm doing it with this group of people and not this group of people. Even just being in GSA in middle school was World War II to my dad.

Survey participants also indicated that they could not utilize community supports because “[my] parents won’t let me” or it is “hard to hide from [my father].”

**Accessibility as a facilitator.** Accessibility acted as a facilitator to utilizing GSM community resources when GSM people and organizations were present in a community and were easy to find and utilize. Additionally, involvement in a GSM center may act as a facilitator to accessing other GSM-related organizations. As discussed in Chapter Four, youth who were involved in a GSM community center reported significantly more utilization of other types of GSM community resources. It may be that involvement in a GSM organization facilitates awareness of additional programs and resources in a community.

**Community context and accessibility.** The community context emerged as an antagonist or supportive character within the intervening conditions component of the model. The community acted as a force that could prevent GSM youth from using needed support sources, or make it easier for youth to use these resources. The availability of supports, particularly community supports, was directly associated with the community context and reflected in the quantitative and qualitative data.

***Climate, size, and accessibility.*** On the survey, participants indicated what GSM community resources they had available to them in their community or a nearby community using the IGA index (see Table 7, Chapter Four). Youth in nonmetropolitan counties reported GSM shelters as available more than youth in small metropolitan counties. Youth in small metropolitan counties were more than twice as likely as nonmetropolitan youth to report a public/community space was available and nearly three times as likely to report a GSM community center was available. Overall, youth in small and medium/large metropolitan

communities reported an average of 5 available GSM resources, while youth in nonmetropolitan communities reported an average of 2.

Community climate also played a role in the accessibility of GSM organizations. In nonmetropolitan communities, youth with a perceived climate of hostile reported fewer GSAs than youth with perceived climates of tolerant or supportive while more supportive county climates were associated with greater number of GSM resources, specifically GSM community centers, GSM social groups, GSAs, and GSM concerts. In small metropolitan communities, youth with a perceived climate of hostile or supportive reported fewer GSM church groups than youth with a perceived climate of tolerant. More supportive county climates were associated with more Pride Festivals, GSM community centers, GSM social groups, and GSAs.

The association between climate and the availability of resources was also present in the qualitative data. In the interviews, youth discussed how they perceived their community climate and community support interacting. Morris explained:

In a hostile environment, you're not really gonna have the support groups. The things like the [GSM community center] really wouldn't be around...because it's kind of looked down upon, people are really not gonna make resources available to you...with your supportive community, you have all the resources and different programs...that really do provide people with necessary help.

Bernadette, who identified her community as tolerant, described access to GSM resources in this manner: "If you know where to look, there is queer stuff. If you don't know where to look, then you're fucked...there's not really visibility." Anna lived in a nonmetropolitan county she described as tolerant. When asked what it would take to make it supportive, she replied: "I feel like we'd actually have an LGBT community place. Then I feel like we're a big enough town,

we could host a little pride thing.” Although the quantitative data did not show a significant relationship between perceived climate and availability of resources, in the interviews youth frequently associated the level of support for GSM individuals with the presence of visible GSM resources.

The accessibility of GSM support options, including GSM organizations, GSM peers, and other forms of support, was one of the largest barriers preventing youth from accessing support. Accessibility interacted with youth’s community context, including the size and climate of their community, as well as whether GSM organizations were well-known or advertised. Accessibility also related to their individual context, such as whether they had supportive parents, were able to drive, or could afford the cost of gas. While accessibility primarily related to availability, the next intervening condition related primarily to need.

### **Congruence (Figure 3, D.ii)**

Congruence as an intervening condition related to how well a support option met the needs or desires of the youth. Congruence involved a support being a fit what youth needed or wanted, as well as potential conflict within a support option. Congruence related most to GSM friends, non-GSM friends, GSM community centers, and GSAs.

**Fit.** Congruence was most often discussed as the match between what was available and what GSM youth needed or wanted. Congruence between the GSM organization and youth needs was observed during participant observations. When observations began, the GSM center provided a support group and a theater group for GSM youth. Mid-way through observations, the GSM center staff informed youth participants they would be adding a regular social group. Youth responded in a variety of ways, from excitement and commitments to attend regularly, to shrugs and comments that they would probably just continue to use the support or theater group.

Additionally, during structured support groups, youth were sometimes given autonomy over how the group would go. For example, when only two or three youth attended, they chose to have a social night, chatting about school and movies, rather than a structured support group. In this way, youth could structure the group to meet their own needs.

Interview participants also talked about congruence as a barrier to utilizing GSM organizations. Dani wanted “a place we could go to have fun...not just being all serious a lot of times in groups and stuff.” GSM community center groups were primarily perceived as providing structured support groups which some youth identified as not what they needed.

Hughes explained:

Personally, I don't need it. If I did I would go to the [GSM community center] or something like that. I know that's there, it's just I've never really needed to go...as a younger child I saw it as a resource where people went to for help...not just going there in general, or specifically asking for help was a bad thing...I regret that.

Adele was unable to get to the GSM community center in her town due to accessibility barriers, but commented that:

Even if I found a way to get to [the GSM center], I feel like...I can't sit in a group of people my age and have a chat. I'd rather be a leader, like someone-that I can give someone my number, and when they're having a hard time, they can call me.

A couple youth had utilized a GSM Center, but still found it did not always meet their needs.

Will talked about using his local GSM center and how it did not fit what he wanted:

[The GSM center] has a youth group, too. I went there a couple times, but it was just strange. 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...based off the fact that we're gathering because we're gay or lesbian, whatever, I almost feel like that's a strange reason to meet. Oliver said a barrier to him using the GSM 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 barbeque or potlucks."

Youth who sought out GSAs to reduce their isolation and make GSM friends found it problematic when GSAs were dominated by non-GSM students. Bridget indicated her GSA "was totally run by straight people. It was so frustrating." Hughes described how he joined his school's GSA to meet other GSM youth and meet his need to reduce isolation, but that it did not work out that way: "Most of these groups are just made up of allies. Which is fine, which is great, actually, but it's just like...well...(interviewer: *that's not helping you meet LGBT people?*) Yeah." Some survey participants wrote in that they did not feel they needed the available community resources or that resources were "fairly boring" or "disorganized." One survey participant wrote that:

One youth organization is a difficult place to just go and hang out because it feels very 'support group' and not enough 'just go to hang out.' There are virtually no places, forums, activities, etc. that create a relaxing and normalized LGBTQQ+ environment where people can go to just be who they are.

**Interpersonal conflict.** The other factor involved in congruence was conflict with peers. Youth described wanting to utilize GSM supports, but avoiding them because of conflict or drama with other peers. Dani sought GSM friendships, but had conflict with the few GSM peers at her school: "I know people that are really out there, but they just annoy me. There's this

guy...and he's gay, but he irritates me." Morris discussed wanting to use the GSM 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 [to the GSM center], so I'm not gonna go there, 'cause that's just gonna be awkward'...I've had bad experiences with people in the LGBT community in [city]. Using the resources and knowing that this person's gonna be here, and this person's gonna be there, it's like, I'm not the type of person to go somewhere if I feel like I'm gonna have a confrontation or a conflict.

Joey discussed how he used the GSM center, but "one time my ex went [there]...then I thought 'well, if you're gonna start going then I'm not gonna go anymore.'"

On the survey, some youth described not using community resources because of "rude people", "because the community in the area is so small, there were often problems with drama," or feeling a lack of congruence with how other GSM people expressed their sexuality or gender identity. One survey participant said they felt that "some people at [town] Pride are an embarrassment to the LGBTQ community." Survey participants also described GSM organizations lacking diverse identities, for example a range of gender identities or sexual orientations.

In addition to congruence with GSM organizations, a few youth discussed a lack of congruence with online support. Will talked about using Tumblr for support, but how the "dark side of Tumblr" stopped him:

These people just think that everything about society is wrong and you can do whatever you want...they'll just be like, 'Cis[gender], het[erosexual], white people, blah blah blah,



they're the white people, kill all cis hets.' Whatever. It's just ridiculous. I'm actually growing away from it.

**Community context and congruence.** On the survey, youth were asked to identify which resources would (or do) make them feel safe and supported in their community. Thus, this data shows what resources youth indicated would help them as GSM youth in their community and not whether they have access to those resources. While this doesn't measure congruence, per se, it does provide a description of the types of resources youth perceive they need to feel safe and supported in their community. Although analyses in Chapter Four described unmet needs, additional analyses were conducted to test associations between the community context and reported needs for community resources. Youth in small metropolitan counties were more likely to report needing a Pride Festival (80.2%) than youth in nonmetropolitan communities (60.9%). Nonmetropolitan youth were more likely to report needing GSM social events (55.2% versus 37.7% and public health organizations (33.3% versus 19.8%).

Additional analyses tested the association between community climate and need for GSM resources. Among youth in nonmetropolitan communities, county climate was moderately, positively correlated with total needs ( $r=.444$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Among youth in small metropolitan communities, youth who perceived their climate as supportive reported significantly fewer needs ( $M=4.25$ ) than youth who perceived their climate as tolerant ( $M=6.11$ ) or hostile ( $M=6$ ). This data suggests that while county size plays only a marginal role in GSM youth's needs for resources, how they perceive the climate of their community and the county climate, play significant roles in what they feel they need to feel safe and supported. Youth in more supportive communities reported fewer resource needs.

### **Emotional Readiness (Figure 3, D.iii)**

The third intervening condition was emotional readiness. This included youth's willingness to participate in supportive services due to fear or anxiety and their level of outness.

**Fear and anxiety.** A few youth identified their fear or anxiety as a barrier to utilizing primarily community-based GSM organizations. Alejandro, 14, described himself as "self-conscious. I'd be scared to talk in front of others. Be scared to open up." Salem did utilize a GSM center despite his initial fears and hesitation: "I was a bit nervous when I was there, 'cause I didn't know anyone, but then I kinda got used to it 'cause I think it was social night with pizza and a movie." Survey participants also described fears and anxiety related to public groups of GSM youth: "I feel uncomfortable," "I feel out of place/awkward," "It takes me a while to fully trust them to be open about myself," "I have social anxiety and there are a lot of people," and "I'm scared to" were just a few of the comments. One survey participant described using online resources instead of resources in their community: "they're online so I don't have to worry about feeling awkward in public after saying things."

**Level of outness.** Youth also described fears of being outed if they participated in GSM organizations or accessed online support. Morris said: "Initially, when I first came out, it was just like, well, what if somebody sees me there? Then what?" Dani described her fear of being outed online: "I remember when I used to start posting things on Facebook about LGBT. I would get really nervous. I'm like, 'Should I hit send? 'Cause all my friends and family are gonna see this.'" Athena used Tumblr to get support, but said:

I'm really afraid that if I were to meet somebody from school, and they—'cause that's happened before. I've met somebody that goes to my school, and I'm like 'oh crap'. I have to block them, make sure they don't know who I am. If they know what my bio says, that I'm bisexual, then what's gonna happen?

Emotional readiness was the one intervening condition that had little relationship to the community context; rather when it acted as a barrier it was generally situated within the individual or the support source itself.

### **Stigma (Figure 3, D.iv)**

The final intervening condition was the stigma associated with GSM identities. In the interviews, only a couple of youth discussed being hesitant to access different support options because of stigma associated with GSM identities or due to a hostile community. This was different than accessibility because youth had access to supports, but were hesitant to use them because of the stigma surrounding GSM identities in their community or society as a whole. Sasuke described this barrier to their school GSA: “There’s a stigma. Even if you’re straight, if you go there, you don’t want—you know people are like ‘I wouldn’t want people to think I’m gay.’”

**Community context and stigma.** Unlike the other intervening conditions, stigma as a potential barrier or facilitator was more present in the quantitative data. Chapter Four described findings pertaining to the association between community climate, utilization of GSM community resources, and perceived social support. Among youth in nonmetropolitan communities, a perceived hostile climate was associated with lower utilization of GSM concerts than a perceived climate of tolerant or supportive. A supportive county climate, alternatively, was associated with greater utilization of GSM social groups, GSAs, and GSM concerts. A more supportive municipal climate was also associated with greater perceived social support from GSM adults. Among youth in small metropolitan communities, there were no significant associations between climate, utilization of GSM resources, and perceived social support. This

data suggests that stigma as a barrier may be more relevant in nonmetropolitan and/or hostile communities.

**Intervening conditions and utilization of community support.** Although the categories of intervening conditions emerged in the qualitative data, survey data matched at least one component of each condition. Thus, using the typology of intervening conditions developed in the qualitative data, this component of the model was tested quantitatively. Although intervening conditions are in the model as a potential moderator, this study did not include quantitative data on needs, thus moderation could not be tested. Rather, each intervening condition was matched with a survey measure that approximated how youth described it as a barrier or facilitator and tested for its association with utilization in four primary types of community support: GSM community centers, GSAs, community spaces, and public health organizations. These resources were selected for testing in order to measure at least one type of support in each of the community support categories and because they were salient to youth participants. Tables 14-17 display the results of logistic regression analyses, as well as which intervening condition pairs with the variable used to test it quantitatively. Each logistic regression model was statistically significant; however, each independent variable (intervening condition) was not individually significantly associated with utilization of a GSM resource.

Table 14

*Logistic Regression of Intervening Conditions on Utilization of GSM Community Centers among Nonmetropolitan and Small Metropolitan GSM Youth (n=193)*

Intervening Condition	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI	Wald Statistic	<i>p</i>
Accessibility:						
Availability (Yes)	1.770	.384	5.868	[2.764, 12.460]	21.214	<.001
Congruence:						
Need (Yes)	-.109	.342	.897	[0.458, 1.755]	0.101	.750
Emotional Readiness:						
Mean Outness	.197	.174	1.217	[0.866, 1.711]	1.284	.257

Table 14 (cont.)

## Stigma:

Perceived climate tolerant <sup>a</sup>	.950	.473	2.586	[1.024, 6.528]	4.041	.044
Perceived climate hostile <sup>a</sup>	1.231	.598	3.424	[1.061, 11.053]	4.238	.040

Note. Controlling for age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation

CI = Confidence interval for odds ratio (OR)

<sup>a</sup>reference group: supportive

Model  $\chi^2$  (14)=39.255, p<.001

Two intervening conditions were significantly associated with utilization of GSM community centers: accessibility and stigma. Participants who reported a GSM center was available in their or a nearby community were at five times greater odds of utilizing that resource. Stigma, or perceived climate, was also significantly associated with utilization of GSM community centers. As perceived climate went from supportive to tolerant or supportive to hostile, participants were more than 4 times as likely to utilize a GSM community center. Emotional readiness (outness) and congruence (need) were non-significant.

Table 15

*Logistic Regression of Intervening Conditions on Utilization of GSAs among Nonmetropolitan and Small Metropolitan GSM Youth (n=193)*

Intervening Condition	B	SE	OR	95% CI	Wald Statistic	p
Accessibility:						
Availability (Y/N)	3.861	.519	47.54	[17.18, 131.54]	55.288	<.001
Congruence:						
Need (Y/N)	1.540	.534	4.666	[1.640, 13.278]	8.335	.004
Emotional Readiness:						
Mean Outness	-.024	.236	0.977	[0.615, 1.551]	0.010	.920
Stigma:						
Perceived climate tolerant <sup>a</sup>	-.368	.624	0.692	[0.204, 2.350]	0.348	.555
Perceived climate hostile <sup>a</sup>	-.012	.757	0.988	[0.224, 4.357]	0.000	.987

Note. Controlling for age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation

CI = Confidence interval for odds ratio (OR)

<sup>a</sup>reference group: supportive

Model  $\chi^2$  (14)=115.065, p<.001

Two intervening conditions were significantly associated with utilization of GSAs: accessibility and congruence. Participants who reported a GSA was available in their or a nearby

community were 47 times more likely to utilize a GSA. Congruence (need) was also significantly associated with utilization of GSAs, such that youth who reported needing a GSA were four times more likely to utilize one. Emotional readiness (outness) and stigma (perceived climate) were non-significant.

Table 16

*Logistic Regression of Intervening Conditions on Utilization of Public Health Organizations among Nonmetropolitan and Small Metropolitan GSM Youth (n=193)*

Intervening Condition	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI	Wald Statistic	<i>p</i>
Accessibility:						
Availability (Y/N)	3.238	.501	41.69	[9.536, 68.089]	41.689	<.001
Congruence:						
Need (Y/N)	-.233	.510	0.800	[0.294, 2.175]	0.191	.662
Emotional Readiness:						
Mean Outness	-.107	.210	0.898	[0.595, 1.357]	0.260	.898
Stigma:						
Perceived climate tolerant <sup>a</sup>	1.059	.578	2.884	[0.929, 8.960]	3.355	.067
Perceived climate hostile <sup>a</sup>	1.411	.727	4.101	[0.987, 17.037]	3.771	.052

*Note.* Controlling for age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation

CI = Confidence interval for odds ratio (OR)

<sup>a</sup>reference group: supportive

*Model*  $\chi^2$  (14)=85.478, *p*<.001

Two intervening conditions were significantly associated with utilization of public health organizations: accessibility and stigma. Participants who reported a public health organization was available in their or a nearby community were 41 times more likely to utilize that resource. Stigma, or perceived climate, was also marginally significantly associated with utilization of public health organizations. As perceived climate went from supportive to hostile, participants were nearly 4 times as likely to utilize a public health organization. Emotional readiness (outness) and congruence (need) were non-significant.

Table 17

*Logistic Regression of Intervening Conditions on Utilization of Community Spaces among Nonmetropolitan and Small Metropolitan GSM Youth (n=193)*

Intervening Condition	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI	Wald Statistic	<i>p</i>
Accessibility:						
Availability (Y/N)	2.780	.438	16.12	[6.824, 38.066]	40.193	<.001
Congruence:						
Need (Y/N)	1.027	.399	2.791	[1.278, 6.096]	6.636	.010
Emotional Readiness:						
Mean Outness	-.162	.195	0.850	[0.580, 1.245]	0.694	.405
Stigma:						
Perceived climate tolerant <sup>a</sup>	.792	.512	2.209	[0.809, 6.028]	2.393	.122
Perceived climate hostile <sup>a</sup>	1.512	.660	4.537	[1.245, 16.532]	5.256	.022

*Note.* Controlling for age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation

CI = Confidence interval for odds ratio (OR)

<sup>a</sup>reference group: supportive

*Model*  $\chi^2$  (14)=77.957, *p*<.001

Three intervening conditions were significantly associated with utilization of community spaces: accessibility, congruence, and stigma. Participants who reported a GSM-friendly community space was available in their or a nearby community were 16 times more likely to utilize that space. Congruence, or need for a community space, was associated with nearly three times greater odds of utilizing that space. Stigma, or perceived climate, was also significantly associated with utilization of community spaces. As perceived climate went from supportive to hostile, participants were more than 5 times as likely to utilize a GSM community space. Emotional readiness (outness) was non-significant.

This quantitative testing of intervening conditions is fairly consistent with interview data, although a few discrepancies exist. For example, interview participants frequently discussed emotional readiness as a barrier to utilizing community resources, yet, emotional readiness (or outness) was non-significant in each model. It may be that the fear and anxiety, not measured in the survey, acts as the barrier or facilitator, rather than level of outness itself.

### **Summary of Intervening Conditions**

While exploratory, this combination of qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that the ways in which intervening conditions act as barriers or facilitators to utilizing community support resources is complex. There were salient categories across the qualitative data; however, some were non-significant in the quantitative data, such as level of outness acting as a barrier to utilizing GSM community organizations. It may be that different intervening conditions are more relevant for different types of support; the survey measures may also not be adequate proxies for the conditions described in the interviews. These complexities will be further explored in Chapter Seven. Table 18 illustrates the intervening conditions most commonly acting as barriers with the support sources in the model.

Table 18

*Intervening Conditions Most Commonly Acting as Barriers with Support Sources*

Support Source	Accessibility	Congruence	Emotional Readiness	Stigma
GSM Friends	X	X		
Non-GSM Friends		X		
GSM Adults	X			
Non-GSM Adults				
GSM Community Center	X	X	X	X
GSA	X	X	X	X
Other GSM Organizations				
Non-GSM Organizations	X			X
Community Spaces	X	X		
Online			X	

*Note.* Cells with an “X” indicate that intervening condition was commonly discussed as related to that support source.

**Benefits (Figure 3, E)**

Youth who utilized social networks, community organizations or spaces, or online resources for support identified several benefits of their utilization. These benefits nearly exactly matched the identified needs (Figure 3, B) in the model. This category emerged primarily from interviews, although was also reflected in the participant observations. Youth who utilized



support described the benefits of belonging and community, acceptance, identity integration, and safety and security.

### **Belonging and Community (Figure 3, E.i)**

The most common category of benefits described by youth participants was a sense of belonging and community. This category included youth finding a sense of community and establishing meaningful connections with peers and adults. Belonging and community was most often discussed in reference to GSM peers, GSM community centers, and online support.

Participant observations revealed several examples of youth getting a sense of belonging and community through their GSM community center involvement. Youth who had been attending programming for years, but who had not been present for several weeks, excitedly greeted staff and other youth participants, chatting about updates on their lives, sharing hugs and smiles.

Groups that were more social in nature showed youth engaging with each other, talking about their schools, friends, families, and communities.

Interview participants who utilized a GSM community center discussed this benefit as well. Nicky described the benefit of utilizing a GSM community center: “just feeling like I’m myself with some people.” Marilyn credited the friends she made at the GSM community center for keeping her coming back: “I just kept wanting to come back just because I liked the environment and the people. ‘Cause it was new people every week so I got to meet different kinds of people through it and I really liked that.” Survey participants described benefits to GSM community centers as “it’s been nice being surrounded by people like me”, “knowing that I am not alone”, and “nice to meet other LGBTQ+ people.” Sasuke discussed this benefit in relation to her GSA:

I did go to the GSA and that was a nice group of people. I've had a bunch of friends who also identify as LGBT. We have our own little support group. It's very comforting knowing you're not the only one who's like that. You're not weird. That's nice."

Other youth described the sense of belonging and community they got from their GSM friends, both online and offline. Missy described how her GSM friends provided her with a sense of community when her partner first came out as transgender: "During that time, as much as everyone was focused on him and his transition, a lot of them were also very focused on me and like 'how's this affecting you?'" After describing her sense of isolation and lack of acceptance in her nonmetropolitan community, Winona described the sense of belonging and community she got from using social media for GSM support: "[the] people like me that are on Tumblr. I feel like it's the unofficial gay website. You assume somebody's gay until proven straight on Tumblr, but—so that's good."

### **Acceptance (Figure 3, E.ii)**

Youth also identified acceptance as a benefit to utilizing different sources of support. They described feeling welcome and fully, unconditionally accepted as GSM youth. Acceptance was discussed across support types, but primarily with non-GSM friends. Bridget talked about how she felt "special sometimes" when her non-GSM friends accepted her:

I like when people are interested about it, 'cause I don't get to talk about it very much. I like when people are really supportive, like when I see people—'cause there are straight people that are super pro-gay and that's really cool to see.

Some youth, while having to educate their non-GSM friends about GSM issues and terminology, found the support they received worth it. Hazel described how she ran into a close friend that she had not seen since she was younger:

I was dating a girl...and [my friend] was like ‘I didn’t know you liked girls’...she was kind of grossed out at first, and then once I explained to her ‘it’s just love; it’s no different from whenever you’re dating a guy’, she never thought of it that way. She actually has opened up to gay people and bisexual and lesbian people since then. I feel like I helped her with her mind ‘cause now she’s more open-minded. It makes me happy.

Nicky discussed feeling accepted at both the GSM community center and her school GSA. She said:

One day we went around the classroom and said everything about ourselves. I just got to say that I’m pansexual. Everyone just smiled. They were accepting. I knew that no one in the room was negative about it. It was nice.

### **Identity Integration (Figure 3, E.iii)**

Identity integration was another benefit described by youth, particularly youth who utilized GSM friends and GSM organizations such as community centers and GSAs. Participants discussed how having GSM friends helped them understand or integrate their GSM identity.

Missy talked about this in terms of language and labeling:

I kind of identified as bisexual for a long time. Then, about three or four years ago, I made friends with a girl who identifies as pansexual and kind of explained to me what that meant. I was like ‘that actually sounds more accurate’ so I started identifying as pansexual after that.

Alice had a similar experience; having GSM friends helped them identify their own sexual identity: “Having the words for it sort of helped me to realize what I was feeling, too. She was really important for me throughout school and stuff with identifying myself.” GSM friends were credited for “helping me be more okay with myself” (Alex).

Youth who utilized GSM organizations, including community centers and GSAs, also talked about how their involvement in these organizations helped them better understand their gender or sexual identities or be more comfortable with themselves. Lizzy talked about a benefit of being involved in her school's GSA as learning more about her own GSM identity:

Well, I get to learn—I get to know about other LGBT things. Even before I realized I was LGBT, I was learning about that because my friends all got a little bit of gay in them.

We're all a little gay inside.

Sam described his involvement with a GSM community center and his opportunity to explore and practice drag as a benefit that helped him better understand his own identity:

My character...she was always really strong and confident and stuff. I was able to translate that into my own life as...as my usual male-life...I figured if I can be confident in six-inch heels, with a wig on my head, I can be confident in my Converse and no wig.

Marilyn also talked about being able to be more fully herself as a result of utilizing the GSM community center:

I've gotten to learn more about myself...I didn't really know if I even wanted to identify as bisexual because I was always worried about how people would perceive me...I've gotten to love not only the sexuality side of myself, but also me as a whole...I feel like it's just been more of a finding myself kind of experience with the LGBT community.

Survey participants talked about “feeling comfortable and happy with who I am” and “feeling proud” of their GSM identity as a result of being connected to these supports.

### **Safety & Security (Figure 3, E.iv)**

Finally, some youth identified a benefit to utilizing GSM community centers as having their need for safety and security met. This benefit was not discussed in relationship to any other

source of support. This category emerged only among interview participants who were also involved in GSM community centers. The GSM community center was described by Sam as “being a safe place [where] I feel like I can say whatever I’m feeling” and by Jack as “pretty well a safe haven”. Quinn described the sense of safety she felt at the GSM community center as more emotional safety: “I like that you don’t really have to hide anything. You can just be you. I like how they make sure that it’s a safe environment for everybody.” Alternatively, Salem described a benefit to the GSM community center as being in a space where he did not have to worry about being bullied or abused: “I’m comfortable going there. I do not have to be afraid of people being mean to me or anything like that.” Survey participants also described this as a “good thing” about GSM community centers: “having an environment where I don’t feel threatened with revealing my sexuality,” “finding people who don’t treat u [sic] shitty,” and “I feel very safe among these people who I am speak freely too [sic] and they understand.”

### Summary of Benefits

Utilizing social support, community organizations or spaces, or online resources resulted in several benefits for GSM youth. Table 19 displays the benefits most commonly associated with the support sources in the model. Although some support sources do not have benefits marked in the table, that does not mean there were not benefits to utilizing them. The table below only shows the most commonly discussed benefits.

Table 19

#### *Most Common Benefits Associated with Support Sources*

Support Source	Belonging & Community	Acceptance	Identity Integration	Safety & Security
GSM Friends	X		X	
Non-GSM Friends		X		
GSM Adults				
Non-GSM Adults				
GSM Community Center	X		X	X

Table 19 (cont.)

GSA	X	X
Other GSM Organizations		
Non-GSM Organizations		
Community Spaces		
Online	X	

*Note.* Cells with an “X” indicate that benefit was commonly discussed as associated with that support source.

### **Drawbacks (Figure 3, F)**

Youth also described drawbacks to utilizing support sources. Drawbacks included limits to support, conditional acceptance, lack of privacy of GSM identity, and few transgender or gender-specific resources. As with benefits, drawbacks emerged from qualitative data only.

#### **Limits to Support (Figure 3, F.i)**

Interview participants described getting some support from the sources of support they utilized, but described limitations to that support. For example, non-GSM friends, considered important and essential by many participants, were also described as sometimes lacking the ability to support their GSM peers. Interview participants described having to educate their non-GSM peers about GSM issues and terminology and how this could be tiring at times. Rain said of their non-GSM friends:

I feel like they don't understand me, but I always feel like they support me. Sometimes they really don't understand that you put a bunch of straight people in a safe space for queers, it becomes a safe space for straight people. They don't seem to get that. There's a lot of stuff they don't get that I just can't get through their heads.

Hazel described trying to talk about her relationships with non-GSM friends:

We try talking it out, but most of our conversations, they talk about their boyfriends, all of their past boyfriends. I try talking about my past boyfriends and girlfriends, and they get really confused. A lot of our conversations and relationships, our friendship is me explaining things to them, so it's kinda weird.

GSM friends were most often described as supportive and knowledgeable about GSM issues; however, this was not always the case, particularly for transgender participants. A few transgender youth indicated that while their sexual minority peers tried to be helpful, they did not necessarily understand gender-related issues, such as pronouns, bathroom usage, and transitioning. These youth had to educate their gay, lesbian, and bisexual peers in much the same way that they educated non-GSM peers.

Online support also carried with it some limitations. A few interview participants who utilized social media for support discussed the support they received from these websites or phone applications, but indicated that it was hard when their online friends lived so far away. They described how receiving support from someone online is nice, but that it is important to have someone close to them who can support them, as well. Although they credited these virtual resources for sometimes being their only access to GSM peers, they indicated that it would be nice to have someone in their community from whom they could get support.

### **Conditional Acceptance (Figure 3, F.ii)**

Youth also described how they felt accepted by support sources, but that sometimes this acceptance was conditional. For example, some interview participants indicated that while they had non-GSM friends who remained their friends regardless of their GSM identity, sometimes these peers were not fully accepting. Lizzy described her friendship with a non-GSM friend:

She was raised and has the mindset of just not really understanding...well, not really supporting LGBT. She's still friends with me, but she doesn't get that I am—that I can love or that other people can love—the same sex and stuff like that...She doesn't really think that it's a good thing.

Oliver talked about losing non-GSM friends because of his gender identity:

I have some religious friends who I stopped hanging out with since I started more openly identifying as transgender, because they had expressed anti-gay sentiment before. I knew that if that was that prominent of a belief for them, that something more drastic as changing one's gender would probably be even more unacceptable.

A few youth also described how they had non-GSM adults in their life who tolerated their gender or sexual identity, but did not approve. Bernadette described her mother's reaction to her coming out as pansexual as "she let me stay at home", indicating that although her mother did not approve of her sexual identity, she did not go so far as to kick her out of her home.

### **Lack of Privacy of GSM Identity (Figure 3, F.iii)**

A couple of youth also discussed the fear (and reality) of being outed as a drawback to using support sources. The lack of privacy around GSM identities was discussed primarily in relation to GSM organizations (community centers and GSAs) and online support. Utilizing GSM organizations, in school or the community, carried the risk of being outed (inadvertently or intentionally) as a gender or sexual minority. Youth found this lack of privacy more salient in smaller communities where it was harder to maintain privacy around one's daily activities. This lack of privacy limited the support they could receive at these organizations. Interestingly, while online support was described as a way of getting support anonymously, with less risk of judgment and rejection, it was also described as a place where privacy may be at risk. Athena described having her Tumblr page found by a peer in her community and having to work fast to change it so her peer did not realize it was her.

### **Few Trans/Gender-Specific Resources (Figure 3, F.iv)**

Finally, a drawback to support sources, specifically GSM organizations, was a lack of transgender and gender-specific resources. Youth indicated that they could utilize resources in



their school or community, but that staff or volunteers at these organizations sometimes lacked knowledge about transgender people and issues. They also described being the only transgender individual utilizing a support source, thus increasing their sense of isolation or feeling different. Alice described her community as being pretty tolerant toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and issues, but that they needed “more transgender awareness.”

### Summary of Drawbacks

Although the support sources utilized by youth often came with benefits, there were also sometimes drawbacks. Table 20 displays the most common drawbacks associated with support sources in the model.

Table 20

#### *Most Common Drawbacks Associated with Support Sources*

Support Sources	Limits to Support	Conditional Acceptance	Lack of Trans Resources	Lack of GSM Privacy
GSM Friends	X			
Non-GSM Friends	X	X		
GSM Adults				
Non-GSM Adults	X	X		
GSM Community Center			X	X
GSA			X	X
Other GSM Organizations				
Non-GSM Organizations				
Community Spaces				
Online	X			X

*Note.* Cells with an “X” indicate that drawback was commonly discussed as associated with that support source.

### Unmet Needs (Figure 3, G)

The final component of the model was Unmet Needs (G). Specific unmet needs included the needs described in the model (Figure 3, B), but also more specific needs such as transgender resources, support for parents of GSM kids, and general supports that were GSM-friendly such as medical care or college assistance. Unmet needs resulted from youth not being able to access specific types of support because of intervening conditions or those supports not meeting their

needs in some way, as described in drawbacks. Youth with unmet needs did sometimes utilize supports, but the ones they used or had access to were not enough to meet their needs. For example, Winona only had online supports available to her and while this helped to reduce the isolation she felt in her community, she still lacked a place in her community where she could be safe from harm as a GSM youth.

Some youth who indicated they had unmet needs reported trying to meet those needs in other ways, such as sneaking into gay bars. Several youth stated that “we don’t really have anything related [to GSM support] in our community” (Anna). As discussed in Chapter Four, involvement in a community center was significantly associated with fewer unmet needs among participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties.

**Community context and unmet needs.** Youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties reported a similar number of total unmet needs on the survey. Youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties, however, were more likely to report unmet needs for GSM church groups than youth in medium/large metropolitan counties (see Table 9, Chapter 4). Among participants in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties, perceived climate was associated with unmet needs for GSAs such that a climate perceived as supportive was associated with fewer unmet needs for GSAs. Among nonmetropolitan participants only, a more supportive county climate was associated with fewer unmet needs for Pride Festivals; whereas among participants in small metropolitan counties, a more supportive municipal climate was associated with fewer unmet needs for public/community spaces.

### **Summary of Model**

Built out of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods data, this model expands our understanding about why and how GSM youth seek support. GSM youth growing up in

nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties are situated within their communities; the size and climate matter and relate to the other components of the model in varying ways. For example, the size of the community impacted whether GSM peers or organizations were available; the climate related to their needs for support such that youth in more tolerant or hostile communities reported greater needs. GSM youth have needs related to their GSM identities (B) including to reduce isolation, social acceptance and visibility, emotional support and safety, and identity development. These needs lead them to seek support through various sources (C) within their social networks, communities organizations and spaces, and online. Seeking support is not a linear process. Several intervening conditions (D), or barriers and facilitators, impact whether and how youth are able to access different types of GSM support: accessibility, congruence, emotional readiness, and stigma. For some youth who utilize supports, benefits (E) to these supports include belonging and community, acceptance, identity integration, and safety. There are also drawbacks (F) to these supports including limits to support, conditional acceptance, lack of privacy of GSM identity, and lack of transgender resources. For youth who are unable to utilize supports or have limited support, they have several unmet needs (G), including a lack of transgender resources and supports for parents. Chapter Six includes a discussion of the key findings from Chapters Four and Five, incorporated with PYD theory and current research on GSM youth, to answer the third research question.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **RESULTS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION THREE**

This study sought to enhance understanding of the support and resource needs of gender and sexual minority (GSM) youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities. Chapters Four and Five illustrated the findings of the first two research questions. The findings from these two research questions revealed a complex model of support seeking among GSM youth situated in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities (See Figure 3, Chapter Five).

The third research question is more conceptual: *“In what ways can positive youth development theory and the relational-developmental systems model be revised or improved upon to enhance the cultural relevance of these models to GSM youth?”* To recap from Chapter Two, PYD theory posits that when the strengths of adolescents are combined with ecological assets (positive resources) in their environment, positive youth development occurs, leading to a decrease in risky/problem behaviors and an increase in positive contributions to self and others (Lerner et al., 2011b; Lerner et al., 2012). The relational-developmental systems (RDS) model (see Figure 1, Chapter Two) situates these PYD processes within youth’s broader ecologies, including family, neighborhood, school, and community. This study attended to two components of the RDS model: the broader ecology (community context) and ecological assets (social, community, and online support).

To answer the third research question, this chapter provides a critical analysis of how the different components of the quantitative findings and the model of support seeking are consistent or divergent from PYD theory and the RDS model, as well as empirical literature on GSM youth and nonmetropolitan communities. The chapter ends with a proposed ecological assets model for

nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan GSM youth (Figure 4). In this way, answering the third research question also serves as a discussion of the findings from this study. Implications that follow from this discussion will be detailed in Chapter Seven.

### **The Broader Ecology of GSM Youth's Communities**

The RDS model emphasizes the importance of the interactions between the individual and their contexts. PYD theorists posit that “systematic change in behavior exists as a consequence of mutually influential relationships between the developing person and his or her biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture, physical and designed ecology, and historical niche” (Lerner et al., 2005, p. 11). Attention to the broader ecology is essential for all adolescents and GSM youth may be situated within contexts that do not align well with their GSM identity. This study specifically examined the ecology of youth's communities and how this interaction between the youth and their community (individual $\leftrightarrow$ context) impacted their needs for and sources of support, as well as the barriers, benefits, and drawbacks of utilizing these supports. Although the family and school contexts have been studied at length among GSM youth, the role of communities is largely missing from the GSM youth literature.

The findings from this study reveal that the community context for GSM youth is an ecology warranting further study. In this study, youth's community contexts varied across county sizes and community climates. Although rural communities have historically been painted as inhospitable to gender and sexual minorities, recent research suggests nonmetropolitan communities are more complex than this (Gray, 2007; Kazyak, 2011; Oswald & Culton, 2003; Wienke & Hill, 2013). The findings from this study are consistent with this empirical work. The community is an ecology capable of both increasing stigma (Preston & D'Augelli, 2014) and

providing support for GSM youth, sometimes simultaneously. The varied experiences of youth within the same community, including their perceptions of the community's climate toward GSM individuals, illustrate this reality. Attending to both the size and climate of GSM youth's communities is essential to understanding how best to support them.

In this study, the findings related to community climate are especially relevant given the common belief that rural communities are inherently hostile toward GSM individuals. A key finding is that youth in this study rarely identified community climate as an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Certainly, some youth described hostile communities in which overt homophobia, transphobia, and acts of violence and discrimination were present. Most youth, however, described their communities on a continuum of tolerance. Tolerance was defined in multiple ways: as a mid-way point between hostile and supportive, as lacking GSM visibility, and as encompassing both hostile and supportive people. Several youth described their community as ignoring GSM identities; indicating it was rarely discussed or acknowledged. This invisibility of GSM-identified people in a community may send a message of "aggressive neutrality" (King, 2008, p. 367), described by King's participants as people, institutions, or communities not being overtly anti-GSM but not being GSM supportive either. This lack of acknowledgement of GSM identities may lead youth to identify their communities as tolerant, rather than supportive or hostile.

Tolerance paints a somewhat different picture than the traditional narrative of hostile small communities; however, this tolerance is not without consequence. Tolerance as invisibility of GSM identities may result in GSM youth feeling uncertain about who they can be themselves around (King, 2008). This was reflected in the finding that youth in tolerant communities were less likely to be out about their GSM identity than youth in supportive or hostile communities. It

may be that youth in supportive or hostile communities have a better sense of who is safe to be out about their gender or sexual identities to and, thus, are more out than youth in tolerant communities who are living within a context of “aggressive neutrality”. It may also be that youth who are less out about their GSM identity are less likely to witness acts of support or hostility, leading them to perceive their communities as tolerant. Tolerance as encompassing both visible hostility and support was discussed as being dependent on one’s social location, experiences, family, and neighborhood. This is consistent with previous work indicating that a variety of factors may be more important to GSM youth being accepted in a small town, such as familiarity (Gray, 2007) and social location (Swank et al., 2013).

Another key finding related to community climate was the attachment some youth felt to their community despite describing it as hostile toward GSM individuals. This also counters the rural narrative that implies GSM individuals grow up in hostile rural communities only to escape to major metropolitan gay mecca’s as they reach adulthood (Weston, 1995). There is empirical evidence showing the importance of residential community attachment for GSM adults (McLaren, 2009) and why GSM adults choose to live in nonmetropolitan communities (Oswald & Lazarevic, 2011). Although rural GSM adults tend to report less attachment to their communities than urban GSM adults (Power et al., 2014), those who do have higher attachment to their communities report decreased depression and increased social support (McLaren, 2009; McLaren, Jude, &McLauchlan, 2008). Research has yet to examine this phenomenon among GSM youth.

Although it may seem like a conflict to simultaneously perceive one’s community as hostile and have strong feelings of attachment to it, this is a common experience. For example, Power, Norman, and Dupre (2014) found that rural youth identified both good and bad aspects of

their communities and that these characteristics were often contradictory. Youth indicated that their community was good because “everybody knows everybody” but that it was bad because of too much “adult surveillance” (Power et al., 2014, p. 1119). Although simultaneous love and hate for one’s community may be common and community attachment can be a protective factor, we know very little about how being attached to a community one perceives as hostile to one of their core identities impacts GSM youth’s well-being.

It is also important to note that several youth identified their small communities as supportive to GSM individuals. This also counters the narrative of the hostile rural community. These supportive communities were described as such because of their visibility of GSM people and public displays of support (such as rainbow stickers on businesses, local Pride festivals or picnics, and people standing up to anti-GSM sentiment). These data reveal the complexities of rural communities. The size of a community is not a proxy for its community climate; climate represents a community-level factor warranting attention. Recall that county size was associated with availability of GSM community-based resources. Community climate was associated not only with availability, but also with unmet needs for GSM community-based resources, as well as perceived social support among non-GSM friends and GSM adults. These data suggest that the climate of one’s community may be important to study, above and beyond community size, in determining access to support. Additionally, it may be that communities can encompass high levels of support, tolerance, and hostility simultaneously, rather than across a single continuum of hostility to support.

Findings regarding the relationship between county size and community climate provide evidence that the community is an important ecology impacting GSM youth. Although this is consistent with the inclusion of youth’s broader ecology in the RDS model, empirical literature



has not specifically attended to the varying roles of community in increasing stigma or providing support for GSM youth. Attention to the community context as an important ecology, including how youth interact with their communities, is essential for understanding their experiences and how best to support them (Higa et al., 2014) and promote positive development. In 1996, Fontaine and Hammond suggested that youth's contexts-including school, family, and community-could act as constraints or facilitators to youth developing positive GSM identities. This holds true today. When PYD theory and the RDS model are utilized with GSM youth, it will be important to attend to the ways in which the community can be both a risk and protective factor impacting other components of the RDS model. The following sections provide a discussion of the ways in which community interacted with GSM youth's needs, support sources (ecological assets), and intervening conditions for utilizing support.

### **GSM Youth Have Identity-Specific Needs**

GSM youth in this study identified needs specific to their GSM identity. This is a relevant point not directly discussed within the PYD model. Although GSM youth are developing within the broader context of adolescence, and thus have similar needs to other youth, they may also have GSM-specific developmental and social needs that must be attended to in the provision of support and resources (Wagaman, 2014). Additionally, having unmet identity-specific needs may result in increased risk (Button et al., 2012; Russell, 2005; Wright & Perry, 2006). The GSM youth in Wagaman's (2014) study identified three categories of needs: basic, school, and GSM-related. Youth in this study identified their GSM-specific needs on a micro-macro continuum. On the micro-end of the continuum, youth described three individual-level needs: reduce isolation, emotional support and safety, and identity development. On the macro-end of the continuum, youth reported needing social acceptance and visibility of GSM identities. An

understanding of these needs on a continuum contributes both to enhancing the PYD model and our understanding of what may be considered support. Although individual-level support is necessary and needed, as shown in the following sections, community-level support for GSM individuals may also promote well-being and reduce the risks youth face. These needs highlight one possible revision to the PYD model when using it with GSM populations: specificity of GSM needs and identities within ecological assets.

### **The Need to Reduce Isolation**

As a developmental stage, adolescence is a time to form bonds outside of one's family of origin by establishing friendships and romantic relationships (Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Finchman, 2004; Steinberg, Bornstein, Vandell, & Rook, 2011). Rural youth tend to experience greater social isolation than urban youth (Chipuer & Pretty, 2000). Additionally, there is empirical evidence to suggest that GSM youth experience a sense of isolation (Grossman & Kerner, 1998), particularly in non-GSM dominated spaces (Crowley, Harre, & Lunt, 2007; Wagaman, 2014). One possible reason for this is that GSM youth's friendships may include rejection and harassment, increasing the isolation they experience (D'Augelli et al., 2002). Isolation is associated with poor mental health outcomes such as depression and suicide (Grossman & Kerner, 1998).

In this study, the need to reduce isolation was the most commonly discussed need among interview participants. Youth reported needing GSM friends, specifically, to help them reduce their isolation. Transgender, genderqueer, and gender questioning youth reported needing gender minority friends, not just gay, lesbian, and bisexual friends, who could understand their identities and experiences. The need to reduce isolation was consistent across community sizes and climates, although youth in nonmetropolitan communities described having few GSM friends

and a smaller pool of GSM people in their communities. The need to reduce isolation led youth to seek support from their social networks, communities, and online. These sources are discussed later; however, it is important to note that youth with this need most often sought out support from GSM friends, GSM community centers, school-based GSAs, and online. GSM individuals and organizations, then, represent an ecological asset necessary for helping GSM youth in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities meet their need to reduce isolation, a concept reflected in the empirical literature (Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore, & Giambrone, 2011; Wagaman, 2014).

### **The Need for Emotional Support and Safety**

GSM youth's need for emotional support related to mental health issues such as depression, suicide, and anxiety has been well documented in the literature (Burton et al., 2013; Cohn & Leake, 2012; Poon & Saewyc, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Consistent with prior research (Sherriff et al., 2011), youth in this study discussed needing mental health support specifically from social workers and mental health providers sensitive to the needs of GSM youth. Numerous youth in this study described the lack of GSM competent social workers or mental health providers in their schools or communities. The lack of resources in small towns may be exacerbated for GSM youth due to the need for a provider with competence in working with GSM individuals.

The need for emotional support may interact with the community context and the need for visibility and community-level acceptance of GSM identities. For example, King (2008) found that a lack of public acceptance toward GSM individuals led youth to hesitate seeking interpersonal support out of fear of being rejected from counselors or friends. Alternatively, having ally or rainbow stickers in prominent locations sends a message of support to GSM youth,

such that they may be more willing to seek out support knowing their identity will be affirmed in those locations (King, 2008). A possible concern arises, however, if these spaces are not actually GSM-affirming.

Another important finding related to emotional support was that only those youth who were not involved in a GSM community center reported emotional support as a need. The nature of this cross-sectional study cannot determine if GSM community centers are meeting this need for GSM youth; however, it may be that the involved youth did not discuss emotional support because that particular need was being met through a GSM center. The relationship between GSM community centers and emotional support may be an important addition for the RDS model and has implications for practice. GSM-specific organizations may send a blanket message of support to GSM individuals, which can provide GSM youth additional options for seeking support.

### **The Need for GSM Identity Development**

The need for assistance related to GSM identity development, while discussed less often than other needs, is important particularly in the context of PYD theory. Youth in this study identified needing to better understand their GSM identity, particularly youth who identified as transgender or were questioning their gender identity. Youth also reported needing assistance with GSM-specific sex education and coming out to friends or family. Identity development, generally, is one of the key tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1968) and gay and lesbian identity development processes have been studied at length (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Cass, 1979; Glover, Galliher & Lamere, 2009; Troiden, 1988). Research suggests GSM youth need assistance in developing their GSM identities (Sherriff et al., 2011). Research on identity development, however, has primarily attended to the developmental stages of coming to terms, or finding

comfort, with one's sexual identity. There has been less attention to identity development outside of gay and lesbian identities, as well as learning about what it means to be GSM, as opposed to being comfortable with it. Gray (2007) argued that the GSM identity development literature has attended to identity development as a "crisis" rather than trying to understand the ways in which youth develop their identities in diverse contexts. Although some of the interview participants in this study were in a questioning stage, most did not express discomfort with their gender or sexual identity. However, many participants discussed needing information to help them understand their own identity. Within the RDS model, general supports such as after school programs, schools, or peers may help adolescents through the developmental stages of adolescence; however, GSM youth may need GSM-specific supports to help them better understand their GSM identity in a safe and supportive environment.

An interesting and relevant finding related to identity development was that GSM youth indicated a need for sex education that was GSM-specific, or sensitive to the needs of GSM youth. Sex education may be considered a general need for adolescents, provided by ecological assets such as families or schools (to varying degrees). While this asset may be more accessible for non-GSM youth, GSM youth may lack access to reliable sex education pertinent to their identities and relationships (McNeill, 2013). Sex education programs may be based in policies and curriculum that center heterosexuality as the norm and either ignore GSM identities and behaviors or paint them in a negative light (McNeill, 2013). Additionally, some states don't require schools to teach sex education at all and a few states require any mention of GSM identities to be discussed negatively (Klein, 2014). This provides further evidence of a need to expand PYD and the RDS model for use with diverse populations. Even when general supports exist, such as sex education, they may not be meeting the needs of diverse groups of youth. This

may be particularly relevant in smaller communities due to a general lack of resources pertaining to sex education, for example, a lack of a Planned Parenthood or public health organization.

### **The Need for Social Acceptance and Visibility**

If growing up in a society that marginalizes one's identity is associated with risk and negative outcomes, it is reasonable to assume that growing up in a society that accepts one's identities may be associated with resilience and positive outcomes (Herrick, Egan, Coulter, Friedman, & Stall, 2014). This need to feel accepted and to belong is important and may be particularly relevant for marginalized adolescents. Youth in this study indicated a need for acceptance from the people in their lives, as well as their community as a whole. Additionally, consistent with research on rural GSM adults (Holman & Oswald, 2011), they described the need for increased visibility of GSM identities on a local level. This primarily macro-level need suggests that important ecological assets for youth should go beyond individual-level support and consider ways to impact a community-at-large, for example, through public GSM supportive events or open and affirming religious institutions and businesses. Broadening the definition of ecological assets to include more macro forms of support is another important contribution of these findings to the PYD and GSM literature. Ecological assets may need to include not just individual-level resources, but public displays of acceptance within a school, neighborhood, or community. This type of need is not currently addressed within PYD and the RDS model; ecological assets are primarily individual-level resources.

### **The Needs of Adolescence**

Finally, although youth described several GSM-specific needs, they also talked about having needs not related to their GSM identities, such as homework help or college assistance. Ecological assets aimed at meeting these needs are included in the general RDS model; however,

these assets may need to be intentionally inclusive of diverse groups of youth in order to fully meet their needs. For example, if a youth seeks out college assistance from a school counselor who assumes heterosexuality or acts in homophobic or transphobic ways, that youth may discontinue seeking assistance from that counselor. It is essential to understand this collection of needs for GSM youth in order to ensure that general and identity-specific supports are available and appropriate. The general and identity-specific supports youth identified as essential for helping them meet these identified needs are discussed further in the following sections.

### **GSM Supports as Ecological Assets**

Positive youth development theory purports that the more resources to which a youth has access, the greater their likelihood of positive development (Benson, 2002; Lerner, 2005). These resources, however, must meet the needs of youth for whom they are intended to support. The model of support seeking (Figure 3, Chapter Five) developed in this study illustrates several support sources within youth's social networks, communities, and online that youth sought to meet their identified needs. These sources of support generally align with the ecological assets described in the RDS model (Figure 1, Chapter Two): social networks, individuals, institutions, and access to resources. As discussed in the previous section, however, these ecological assets may need to be more specific to GSM youth's identities in order to meet their developmental needs. The following sections provide an in-depth discussion of the key findings related to the three categories of support sources, including an integration of youth's community contexts, needs, intervening conditions, benefits, and drawbacks associated with these support sources. Theoretical and empirical literature pertaining to PYD, GSM youth, and nonmetropolitan communities is included.

#### **Social Networks and Individuals**

Individuals within GSM youth's social networks include people within their families, schools, and communities. GSM youth reported needing a variety of individuals to meet their needs, including GSM friends, GSM adults, non-GSM friends, and non-GSM adults. GSM friends were important to most youth in the study, providing them with a way to meet needs related to isolation, emotional support, and identity development. Literature on social support for GSM individuals suggests that GSM peers provide more support than heterosexual and cisgender peers and family members (Doty et al., 2010; Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002). The findings of this study are consistent with research regarding the importance of having GSM friends to provide social support.

Although GSM peers were highly sought after by the youth in this study, and most indicated they had at least one GSM friend, there were barriers to using GSM friends for support. Accessibility, the most salient intervening condition across support sources, acted as a barrier when there simply were no other GSM youth for participants to meet in their community. Lack of accessibility to other GSM youth is one way in which community interacted with support sources as this barrier often occurred in the context of a small town with a limited number of people. Accessibility as a barrier also relates to the "access to resources" component of ecological assets. Congruence, or how well youth perceived available support could meet their needs, was also a barrier. Several youth reported that while there were a few other GSM peers in their school or community, they did not want to be friends with them because they were not compatible in other ways (i.e. lack of shared interests, personality conflicts).

When youth had friendships with GSM peers, they identified two primary benefits to these relationships: belonging/community and identity integration. Establishing a sense of community and belonging within the GSM community is associated with positive mental health



and identity development among GSM adults (LeBeau & Jellison, 2009; McLaren, 2009; Ramirez-Valles, Fergus, Reisen, Poppen, & Zea, 2005). Additionally, identity integration may include increased understanding of and comfort with one's sexual/gender identity, as well as incorporating that identity into one's whole self (Kennedy & Dalla, 2014).

Drawbacks to GSM peers as ecological assets included primarily a lack of transgender awareness. Transgender and gender variant youth discussed having to educate their sexual minority friends about transgender issues in much the same way that sexual minority youth had to educate their non-GSM friends. This need to educate friends in order to get support may be stressful for the youth seeking support. GSM friends represent an extremely important ecological asset for GSM youth. This held true regardless of youth's community size or climate, although the need to reduce isolation through GSM peers may be more salient for youth in more hostile communities.

In addition to GSM youth, GSM adults should be considered potential ecological assets, although in a different way than GSM friends. Research suggests that GSM adults are an important source of support for GSM youth (Doty et al., 2010; Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002); however, the youth in this study described the support they sought from GSM adults differently. Although a few participants did seek GSM adults to meet their needs for emotional support and identity development, most youth who identified GSM adults as support sources did so to help meet their needs for social acceptance and visibility. They indicated that while they did not necessarily want to seek out interpersonal support from GSM adults, knowing them and seeing them as happy and successful helped them see a potential future for themselves.

The need for visibility of GSM adults in the community provides further evidence for support being conceptualized beyond interpersonal (micro) support and examining the ways in

which support can be provided on larger scales. The visibility of GSM adults in youth's communities may help alleviate stress and impact their overall well-being. As with GSM friends, though, GSM adults were sometimes hard to access. Youth described not knowing if the adults in their life identified as GSM and not wanting to ask for fear of being rude. Because few youth sought GSM adults as support, specific benefits and drawbacks were not discussed in relationship to GSM adults. A possible implication of this is that youth's needs for social acceptance and visibility through GSM adults remained unmet.

In addition to GSM individuals, participants described the importance of non-GSM friends and adults in providing them with social acceptance and emotional support. Non-GSM friends, over any other social network group, were sought out to help meet youth's needs for social acceptance. As discussed earlier, feeling accepted may be critically important for GSM youth's well-being (Herrick et al., 2014). Non-GSM friends may be especially important to GSM youth in smaller communities because they may be the only friends to whom GSM youth have access. Additionally, receiving support from a non-GSM peer may be especially meaningful given these youth do not share the same marginalized identity; being accepted as a GSM person may mean more because it is not automatic. The primary barrier to utilizing non-GSM friends was congruence. This was discussed in the same way as GSM friends: youth indicated there were non-GSM peers with whom they could be friends, but the available pool of friends did not match what they were looking for in a friend. For example, some youth could not find a non-GSM peer who was accepting of their GSM identity.

When youth did access and utilize non-GSM peers for support, the most commonly discussed benefit was a sense of acceptance. Youth discussed feeling as if their friend would support them unconditionally as GSM youth. Although non-GSM friends were described as

being extremely important for providing GSM youth with acceptance of their GSM identity, youth sometimes felt tokenized as the “gay best friend” or as though they had to constantly educate their non-GSM friends about GSM issues.

Finally, the importance of non-GSM adults, particularly parents and guardians, cannot be understated. Although most youth preferred to seek support from other youth, participants discussed the importance of knowing supportive adults such as teachers or family members. Acceptance or rejection from parents played a major role in how they perceived the support they needed. Youth who had been fully accepted by their parents expressed how meaningful this was to them; youth whose parents were tolerant or unaccepting wished they had better support for their GSM identities. The importance of family acceptance in this study is consistent with research from the Family Acceptance Project that indicates acceptance from family toward youth’s GSM identities is associated with positive mental and physical health (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010).

Individuals within GSM youth’s social networks, therefore, represent important ecological assets. These individuals, however, must meet the needs of GSM youth in order to be positive assets. GSM youth need access to supportive adults, including visibly out GSM adults, other GSM peers, and supportive non-GSM peers. Additionally, supportive family members, including parents/guardians, are essential assets for promoting GSM youth’s well-being.

### **Institutions within a Community**

Sources of support were also situated within youth’s communities and schools, primarily in the form of organizations. GSM organizations, such as community centers and GSAs, were discussed by many of the youth, even when barriers prevented access. GSM community centers were primarily sought to meet youth’s needs to reduce isolation. Although research on GSM

community centers is limited, some studies suggests that they serve as a primary source of support, a place to seek adult role models, and a safe space for GSM youth (Gamarel et al., 2014; Higa et al., 2014; Nesmith et al., 1999; Wagaman, 2014). It is interesting to note the findings from this study that compared youth involved in a GSM community center and non-involved youth. First, involved youth did not indicate that they needed emotional support. Although a causal connection cannot be made from this study that shows GSM community centers meet the emotional support needs of youth, this is a finding warranting further attention. Additionally, youth involved in GSM community centers reported more access and utilization of GSM resources, overall, and fewer unmet needs. It may be that in communities where GSM centers exist, there are additional resources for GSM youth to access or that youth find out about additional resources through the GSM center.

Each intervening condition was discussed as a potential barrier to utilizing GSM community centers, although two were especially relevant. Accessibility was the biggest barrier to utilizing GSM community centers, primarily because they were rarely available in the sampled communities. Sometimes community centers 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 et al.'s (2014) study that found that youth in rural areas reported a lack of GSM organizations; even in places where GSM organizations existed, youth reported access issues, especially when organizations relied on volunteers to operate youth groups. Congruence was also a major barrier to utilization discussed by youth participants, occurring when youth wanted to utilize a resource but it did not conform to what they needed or wanted. A lack of congruence between need/want and availability was a barrier particularly for transgender and gender questioning youth who

indicated 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).

The barriers to utilization of GSM community centers are somewhat different than the ones described by youth in Wagaman's (2014) study; while transportation and geographic access were discussed by Wagaman's participants, youth also described feeling excluded at GSM organizations. Exclusion was not discussed by the youth in the current study. The community context may play a role in why youth described exclusion as a barrier in Wagaman's (2014) study but not this study. In an urban setting, there are likely more youth participants and staff/volunteers involved in a group, potentially increasing the risk of youth feeling excluded. Within the three GSM community centers in the qualitative study region, there were often only a few youth attending groups at a given time (3-10) and programs were primarily run by one or two volunteers or staff. When youth were able to utilize GSM community centers, they described benefits of belonging and community and identity integration. Drawbacks included conflict with peers and sometimes feeling as if they still had unmet needs, such as a lack of transgender awareness or programming.

GSAs were described as more accessible than GSM community centers because they were more likely to exist and because youth could attend within the school context rather than in the community. Youth in this study primarily sought GSAs as support to meet their needs to reduce isolation and develop their GSM identity. Research suggests that GSAs affect GSM youth in varying ways. Simply having a GSA in a school has been found to be associated with decreased risk of suicide, even among youth not participating in the GSA (Davis, Stafford, & Pullig, 2014; Walls, Wisneski, & Kane, 2013). Furthermore, participation in a GSA is associated

with decreased substance use and GSM identity development (Walls et al., 2013). In this study, youth described GSAs as more accessible than GSM community centers, yet accessibility issues still acted as barriers particularly when groups met at inconvenient times (e.g. after school versus during school). Another important intervening condition to youth utilizing GSAs was stigma. Youth indicated they were sometimes hesitant to use a GSA because they did not want to be stigmatized as GSM youth in their schools. They expressed concern that using a GSA in a school setting would potentially out them to their peers as GSM youth. In this way, the stigma and emotional readiness barriers interacted to limit utilization of GSAs. Because of the stigma associated with GSM identities, youth feared being known as gender or sexual minorities within the school setting.

Benefits of participating in GSAs, as described by youth in this study, included belonging and community, social acceptance, and identity integration. Drawbacks included the stigma around GSM identities and feeling as though their specific needs were not met in the group (e.g. it was full of allies so they could not meet GSM peers). Privacy around GSM identities was also a concern, primarily with school and community-based supports, especially GSAs. This lack of privacy may exacerbate issues of marginalization and stigma. Gottschalk and Newton (2009) found that while the rural GSM adults in their study described similar stigma and discrimination as GSM adults in urban areas, their experiences were intensified by the lack of privacy around their GSM identities in their small communities. This represents another way in which the community context interacts with GSM youth's support seeking.

In smaller communities, where a GSM organization was not available, non-GSM organizations and community spaces became even more relevant. This is consistent with Gray's (2009) research on rural GSM youth. Public health organizations, including Planned Parenthood,

were sought out because they were assumed to be GSM-friendly. This is an important addition to the literature on PYD and GSM youth as this potential source of support has not been specifically examined as an ecological asset. A few interview participants described volunteering with their local Planned Parenthood or public health department because it was a space where they could be accepted as GSM youth. Community spaces were also described as important resources and safe spaces for GSM youth. Youth discussed wanting their community to host public events, such as a Pride Festival, to show their support for GSM individuals. Youth also described libraries and parks as safe spaces for GSM youth. These spaces were considered GSM friendly or as spaces where they could meet with other GSM peers without being judged or harassed. Although these community spaces have been understudied in the social sciences literature, there is some evidence for the importance of libraries as a support option for GSM youth within library sciences research. For example, some libraries are establishing GSAs, training their librarians and employees on working with GSM youth, and integrating young adult literature applicable to GSM identities (Martin, 2006).

Institutions represent an important ecological asset for youth (Lerner et al., 2011b). While some institutions (e.g. schools) may meet the general needs of GSM youth, other institutions may be important to add to a PYD model focused on GSM youth. GSM and GSM-friendly organizations may help meet the needs of GSM youth to reduce isolation, gain social acceptance, and develop GSM identities. General institutions can also increase risks for GSM youth such as schools that are hostile toward GSM youth (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Szalacha, 2003) or religious institutions that condemn GSM identities (Gattis, Woodford, & Han, 2014; Higa et al., 2014; Page, Lindahl, & Malik, 2013). Within the GSM literature, there has

been a stark lack of attention to GSM organizations and other community organizations and spaces that may provide support for GSM youth, particularly within smaller communities.

### **Online**

Online resources as an ecological asset are not directly discussed in the PYD model, although they may be encompassed within individuals, social networks, or access to resources. The importance of these virtual resources as potential sources of support must be addressed, particularly in a study about GSM youth. GSM youth who do not have access to supportive individuals or resources within their communities may seek them out online (King, 2008; Mustanski, Lyons, & Garcia, 2011). For example, research indicates that GSM young adults may utilize the internet to access sexual health information when the resources in their community are not GSM-friendly (Mustanski et al., 2011). The youth in this study sought support online by establishing online friendships with other GSM individuals, accessing GSM-related websites and blogs, and expressing their feelings online through personal blogs. Research suggests that online friends may be important in the provision of social support for GSM youth (Ybarra et al., 2015) and that GSM youth are more likely to have online friendships than non-GSM youth (Hillier, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2012). A concern about online support may be related to the safety of youth utilizing these supports, although studies indicate that GSM youth generally feel safe using the internet (Ybarra et al., 2015), a finding not true for non-GSM youth (Hillier et al., 2012). Nevertheless, it may be important to educate youth users on potential safety issues when promoting online support as a potential ecological asset. For example, GSM youth may be targeted for online harassment (Robinson & Espelage, 2012) by individuals who know them through their community and virtually.



It is interesting to note that GSM youth in nonmetropolitan communities were actually less likely to utilize online support than youth in small metropolitan communities, even though nonmetropolitan youth had fewer community-level resources. There is high internet access in the study region, suggesting that a lack of internet resources did not account for this discrepancy. Although few youth discussed intervening conditions specific to utilizing the internet for support, congruence and emotional readiness were both discussed. Congruence included finding resources, such as Tumblr blogs, but not finding what they needed, such as online outlets to meet local GSM peers. Emotional readiness primarily related to youth's concerns about being outed online. Benefits of utilizing online support included belonging and community, social acceptance, and identity integration. Empirically, there is support for several benefits to accessing support online. Hillier et al. (2012) reported that GSM youth utilized online support rather than in-person because it is easier to come out, they are able to more fully be themselves, there is reduced judgment, and it is safer (Hillier et al., 2012). In this study, youth reported safety as a potential drawback, particularly in terms of being outed or bullied online, as well as having GSM friends who were far away and could not provide support in person.

### **Summary of Ecological Assets for GSM Youth**

The ecological assets on the RDS model (see Figure 1, Chapter Two) represent important resources for GSM youth; however, GSM youth need additional GSM-specific or GSM-friendly resources. These resources may be very beneficial in meeting the general and GSM-specific needs of GSM youth, although they are not without drawbacks. Attending to the positive and negative aspects of utilizing different support sources, or ecological assets, is essential in understanding the ways in which we can mitigate risk and promote positive development. Youth utilizing support sources may be getting some of their needs met while others remain unmet.

Additionally, in smaller communities, or in more hostile climates, access to these resources may be limited, also leaving youth with unmet needs.

### **Some GSM Youth are Left with Unmet Needs**

Ultimately, not all youth are able to utilize supports and resources to get their needs met. For these youth, and for youth who accessed supports that were not meeting their needs, unmet needs were common. These unmet needs have direct practice implications, discussed in Chapter Seven, but are also relevant in light of the RDS model. Although the model specifies the interactions between youth and ecological assets that need to happen in order for positive development to occur, it does not incorporate a focus on what youth need and, subsequently, how having unmet needs impacts their development. The unmet needs for youth in this study included their identified GSM-related needs, but also more-specific unmet needs such as resources for gender questioning and transgender youth, GSM-inclusive sex education, and a sense of privacy around their GSM identity.

### **Enhancing PYD and the RDS Model for GSM Youth**

This chapter illustrated the ways in which the findings from this study can inform revisions to PYD theory and the RDS model for use with GSM youth living in small and nonmetropolitan communities. Several potential revisions must be considered when utilizing PYD and the RDS model with GSM youth (see Figure 4).

First, the RDS model attends to the broader ecology of youth's communities. With GSM youth, however, understanding how the community can act as an ecological source of both risk and protection is essential. The community-level risks and protective factors need to be examined beyond neighborhood safety and access to resources to include the level of acceptance in a community for GSM individuals. In this study, the size of the community directly related to

the number of resources available and the level of privacy around GSM identities. Community climate also related to availability of resources as well as the quality of support youth received from friends and adults. Additionally, climate related to the needs youth had, whether they felt accepted or supported in their communities, and their willingness to seek out support. These community-individual interactions specific to GSM identities require attention in the RDS model when adapted for use with GSM populations.

Second, GSM youth have identity-specific needs that require ecological assets beyond the general needs of adolescents. It is important that the general assets illustrated in the RDS model (social networks, institutions, individuals) are accepting of GSM identities and sensitive to the needs of GSM youth in order to act as positive resources; otherwise, they may be furthering the risks that GSM youth encounter. Social networks should be expanded to include online and in-person GSM networks of peers and adults. Institutions may include schools, religious organizations, and after-school programs, but also places in which youth assume GSM-acceptance: public health departments and Planned Parenthood. These institutions and organizations must be sensitive to the needs of GSM youth and accepting of their identities in order to act as protective factors. Additionally, GSM organizations such as community centers and GSAs should be considered ecological assets important for GSM youth. Access to resources should include GSM-specific resources to assist with identity development and GSM-inclusive sex education.

Finally, individuals as ecological assets should include peers and adults accepting of GSM individuals, as well as GSM friends and adults. In addition to the assets listed in the RDS model, two other ecological assets should be considered when adapting the model for use with GSM youth: community spaces and community acceptance. Community spaces include local

libraries and parks, spaces where youth can socialize and access resources without fear of judgment or harassment. Community acceptance represents the macro-level needs of GSM youth: visibility of GSM identities and public displays of community acceptance for GSM youth. These assets may be incorporated within support sources aimed at meeting individual-level needs, such as a GSM community center that provides support groups but also organizes annual Pride marches; or they may require interventions specifically at a community-level, such as those aimed at making a community climate more supportive toward GSM individuals. These proposed revisions are shown in Figure 4.

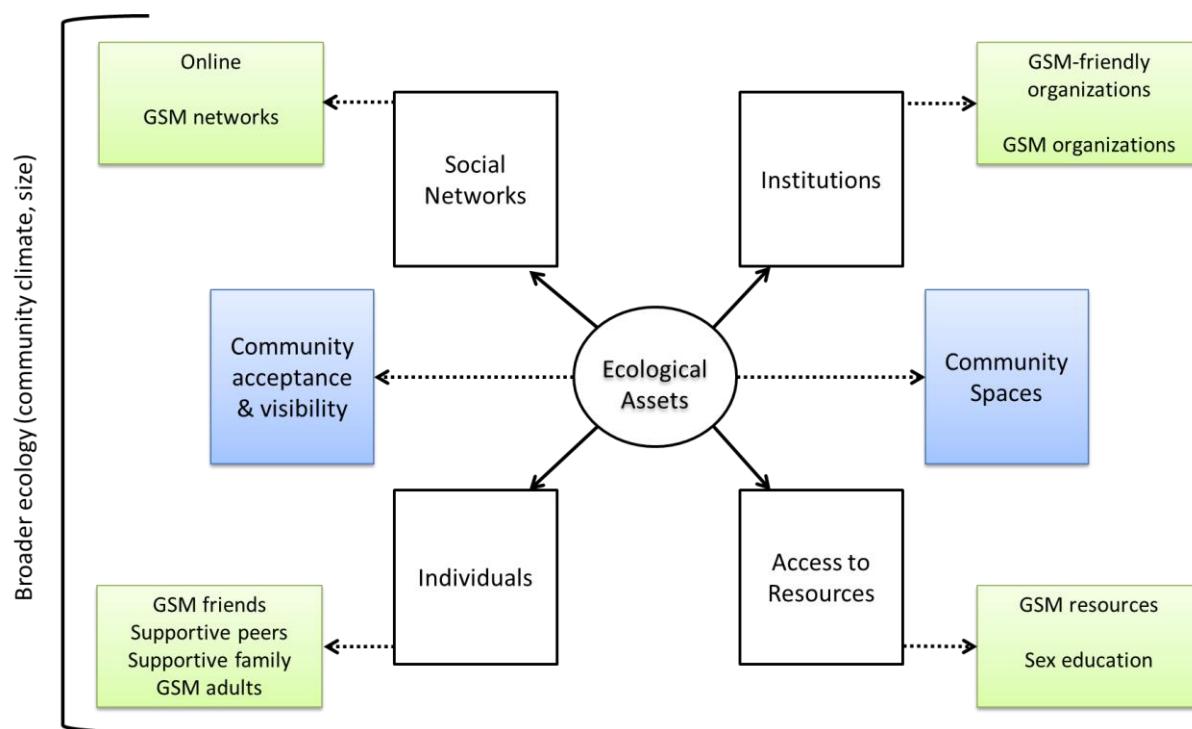


Figure 4. Proposed Ecological Assets for GSM Youth Adapted from RDS Model of PYD

*Note.* The RDS model (Lerner et al., 2011b) includes social networks, institutions, access to resources and individuals as important ecological assets for youth. When adapting the RDS model for GSM youth, it is important to attend to the GSM-specific assets highlighted in green. Additionally, the findings from this study suggest the addition of two additional assets when using PYD with GSM youth: community acceptance and visibility and community spaces. Ecological assets are situated within youth's broader ecology, which must include community climate and community size when used with GSM youth.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to enhance understanding of the protective factors and support options for GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities while expanding the use of Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory with this population. The model of support seeking (Figure 3, Chapter Five) represents an emergent theory of support seeking among GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities. This theory illustrates that GSM youth have needs related specifically to their GSM identities. These needs may be exacerbated in a hostile environment or minimized in supportive environment. Because they have GSM-specific needs, GSM youth seek out sources of support to help them meet their needs. These support sources are primarily located within GSM youth's social networks, community organizations and spaces, and online. Intervening conditions within the community, organization, social networks, or the youth themselves inhibit or promote utilization of these supports. These intervening conditions interact with youth's needs and options for support within their community contexts. The size of the community, as well as its community climate toward GSM individuals, impact youth's needs and ability to access resources. For GSM youth who are able to utilize supports, there are benefits and drawbacks to each; while some GSM youth are left with unmet needs.

Key findings from this study suggest that the community plays an important role in the provision of support and resources for GSM youth. The size of the community coupled with the community climate can impact GSM youth in numerous ways. These findings, discussed in Chapter Five, serve to disrupt the typical narrative surrounding rural communities and illustrate their complexities.

## **Implications**

The findings from this study have direct implications for research, theory, policy and practice. Lerner et al. (2011a) indicated that:

the developmental system is sufficiently diverse and complex that some means may be found (by researchers and/or practitioners) to couple individual and context in manners that enhance the probability of change for the better, of promoting more positive features of human development. (p. 4)

The following sections describe the ways in which the findings of this study can be used to enhance research and theory, as well as policy and practice to promote positive social change and positive development among GSM youth.

### **Research & Theory**

This study has direct implications for research and theory. As an exploratory study, the model of support seeking was developed out of qualitative and quantitative data. It will be important for future studies to quantitatively measure the different components of this model that were primarily measured qualitatively in this study: needs, intervening conditions, benefits, and drawbacks. Doing so will allow for future testing of the model to better determine its applicability to GSM youth. Additionally, future research should expand on this study by testing the associations between the components of this model (needs, utilization of support, etc.) and indicators of well-being, such as mental and physical health, educational disparities, and positive development.

In addition to further testing of the model, future research should attend to the contextual factors in GSM youth's lives, including family, school, neighborhood, and community (Fontaine & Hammond, 1996). Studying these contexts within the same study can help further our

understanding of how they interact to create hostile, tolerant, or supportive environments for GSM youth. Within the community context, future research should explore the complexities of measuring both community size and climate. This study provides support for examining youth across a geographic continuum, rather than rural-urban dichotomies; however, the county-level distinctions used in this study were problematic. When GSM youth live in a small town (e.g. with a population of less than 5,000), it matters little that the county in which their town is situated is a large, medium, or even small metropolitan county. Without supportive parents or transportation, their ability to access resources may more closely mirror that of a youth living in a nonmetropolitan county. Enhancing understanding of how to measure geographic differences that take into account these nuances will be essential for understanding the community context.

Additionally, this study found support for studying community climate alongside community size. Climate is important in studying youth within their communities; size alone does not account for variation in their experiences. This study used four measures of community climate and found wide variation in their association with study variables. The different measures of climate were related to different study variables, sometimes inconsistent with each other and/or the qualitative data. Future research may need to explore the intricacies of measuring climate to better understand how each measure is assessing climate. For example, it may be that community climate does not exist on one continuum from hostile to supportive; rather it may exist on several continuums. A community may be simultaneously supportive and tolerant; or supportive and hostile. Future measurement testing should elucidate the nuances of measuring climate. Additionally, these studies should assess whether perceived or objective climate (or a combination of the two) matters more in the provision of support and resources for GSM youth living in small communities.

Qualitative assessments of climate can help us understand what factors are relevant when youth rank their perceived climate. For example, do county-level policies or presence of supportive religious institutions matter to GSM youth when they are identifying their community as hostile, tolerant, or supportive? Furthermore, the individual components of each objective measure of climate should be assessed for its individual association with the study variables to determine which have a greater association. Better understanding how to measure community climate, particularly among GSM youth in smaller communities, will be essential for being able to intervene to change the climate of communities in order to impact well-being. It may be important to consider how community climate is perceived in smaller communities versus larger communities to avoid conceptualizing climate based on urban understandings. Additionally, developing measures to study climate across multiple continuums of hostility and support, rather than one continuum ranging from hostile to supportive, may provide more nuanced understanding of the role of community climate. Enhancing the ways in which we study the geographic differences between GSM youth living in rural, small, mid-size, and urban communities, as well as better understanding the role of community climate, can further disrupt the hostile rural narrative and target attention toward the strengths of small communities.

These research implications relate directly to the theoretical implications of this study. The model of support seeking among GSM youth (Figure 3, Chapter Five) is an important contribution of this study that warrants further attention as an emerging theoretical model. As a new theory, continued research should examine the different components of the model as they relate to the well-being of GSM youth. Additionally, prior research has established that PYD is an important theory for addressing how to promote positive development among youth while balancing risk and protective factors; however, as it is, the RDS model of positive youth



development may not be adequate for diverse groups of youth. Among GSM youth, research on ecological assets must attend to how these assets support, reject, or ignore youth's identities. Future theoretical and empirical work should attend to the ways in which these GSM-specific resources impact well-being and positive development. Additionally, research on, and using, PYD should account for limitations in the existing PYD literature as it pertains to GSM youth. For example, questionnaires should use language that is more inclusive of GSM identities such as using "sexual activity" instead of "sexual intercourse." Additionally, the role of religious institutions as a protective factor should be examined in light of how GSM youth may be excluded within these institutions.

### **Policy & Practice**

This study also has important implications for social work policy and practice. At the policy level, it is important not only to have GSM-inclusive anti-discrimination policies but to enact and enforce them on a local level. A few youth who identified their communities as hostile indicated that one way in which their community could be more tolerant or supportive was by promoting anti-discrimination or GSM hate crime policies on a local level. It mattered little to youth that there were these types of policies within their schools or at the state level if they were not enforced by local government and leaders. Additionally, social work organizations should implement policies consistent with the National Association of Social Workers code of ethics (NASW, 2008) that promote acceptance of diverse GSM identities. These policies should include non-discrimination policies, as well as policies allowing staff and clientele to use a preferred name, access to all-gender restrooms, and procedures for reporting anti-GSM behavior.

This study also has numerous practice implications. It is clear that GSM youth need access to other GSM peers and organizations, as well as education for their parents, non-GSM

peers, and the community as a whole. Social workers should be at the forefront of advocating for these types of programs and resources to help connect marginalized youth. GSM organizations or groups in schools and communities can be established or strengthened to meet the diverse needs of this population. McGuire and Conover-Williams (2010) suggest that GSM centers should address transgender individuals and issues, not just issues pertaining to sexuality. These centers should address basic needs, such as adequate housing, but also socioemotional, identity development, and education needs. Even in communities that cannot support an official GSM organization, there may be ways to establish connections between GSM youth through social outings or informal groups within existing organizations, such as public health organizations, supportive churches, or libraries. Social workers may need to work with community development professionals to enhance access to and investments in accessible internet, libraries, and parks.

Social workers should also be working to educate their community about GSM individuals and issues in order to increase sensitivity and decrease hostility toward GSM youth and adults. Ensuring that schools, mental health organizations, after school programs, and churches are sensitive and inclusive of GSM identities is another way of ensuring that GSM youth are getting their support needs met. Horn and Romeo (2010) suggest that one way to foster inclusive climates is by “creating an atmosphere in which multiple identity expressions and a diversity of views and opinions are encouraged, valued, and supported” (p. 9). Social workers can do this by helping to transform social norms with their schools or communities, for example, through the use of inclusive language. Other ways to show support at the organizational or community level is through GSM-supportive signs (rainbows, ally stickers), sponsoring GSM youth groups, and modifying organizational paperwork to be more inclusive of LGBT identities

(e.g. having multiple gender options on an intake form). These activities may help increase the community-level support and visibility of GSM identities.

Another area of practice implications for social workers relates directly to the model of support seeking among GSM youth (Figure 3, Chapter Five). The intervening conditions and drawbacks to support represent logical places where social work practitioners, community organizers, and activists can intervene to increase support for GSM youth. Existing GSM organizations should be made more accessible, either through satellite offices or group meetings in nearby small towns or through reimbursement for gas or travel expenses to youth when possible. Outreach to youth in various ways will be necessary to ensure youth know when and where groups meet. Program options should be diverse at GSM organizations, for example, providing both structured support groups and social outings to meet the needs of a diverse constituency of youth. Conducting community-level needs assessments may help organizations understand the needs of youth in their community and how best to provide outreach to them.

### **Evaluation**

In light of the findings and implications of this study, it is important to evaluate the quality of the study in terms of its overall strengths and weaknesses, adherence to grounded theory methodology, and quality of mixed methods and inferences. These three evaluative criteria are discussed in the following sections.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study has both limitations and strengths that must be addressed. As an exploratory study on an understudied social issue, this study is strong in its use of multiple methods. Because qualitative and quantitative methods were implemented concurrently, the data measured the same phenomenon over the same time period, thus ensuring measurement of the same variables and

concepts. The data revealed both consistencies and differences, which serve to enhance the findings and quality of the study, particularly given that one of the purposes of mixing methods was initiation, to assess divergence in the data. The ways in which data quality was attended to throughout the study were discussed in Chapter Three and included utilizing valid and reliable measures on the survey; sampling a diverse group of participants; ensuring power in analyses; and utilizing mixed methods to enhance understanding of the data.

Although this study has several strengths, there were also limitations. As with many studies on GSM youth, the sample was self-selected which may introduce some bias and make the findings not generalizable beyond the studied population. Several categories within the model of support seeking (Figure 3, Chapter Five) could not be tested quantitatively because they were developed solely out of qualitative data. This was appropriate for an exploratory study, but a limitation to consider in future research. As described earlier, the geographic distinctions at the county-level may also have not been the best way in which to measure community size. It may be more important to measure at the town/city level, or determine other ways of assessing the impact of community size. Another limitation existed in the way social support was measured. First, youth who indicated they knew a GSM adult completed the Perceived Social Support (PSS) scale for this group. The scale, however, is focused on social support among friends and, therefore, may not have accurately measured the quality of support youth perceived they receive from GSM adults. Additionally, only the quality of social support was measured, not different kinds of support such as emotional, appraisal, instrumental, and informational (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002). The survey also asked participants to indicate if they had any GSM friends, but did not ask them to specify in what context (school, community, online), making it difficult to determine where and how youth are accessing GSM friends.

## **Grounded Theory Evaluation**

As a mixed methods study utilizing grounded theory methodology, it is important to evaluate the grounded theory components of this study. Hood (2007) identified three primary components of a study that differentiate it as a grounded theory study rather than another type of qualitative study: inclusion of theoretical sampling, utilizing of the constant comparative method, and “the development of theory via theoretical saturation of categories” (p. 163). The researcher engaged in purposeful and theoretical sampling (Morse, 2007) based on both a priori criteria and theoretical categories developed during early data analysis. A priori categories included involved and non-involved youth in a GSM center, and youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan counties. It was important to interview youth in these a priori selected categories to understand the variation in youth’s support seeking processes by these contextual factors.

In addition to a priori categories, sampling and data collection were guided by categories that emerged during early analysis. For example, early in analysis support seeking options discussed by participants included libraries and online resources. Based on these emerging categories of support, the interview guide was modified to ask youth specifically about these resources as support sources. Additionally, participants frequently provided “shadowed data”, or stories about others rather than themselves (Morse, 2007), such as youth in communities smaller than their own or GSM youth with varying gender expressions. The sample selection, then, was targeted toward youth in these “other” categories to better understand their experiences within the emerging categories and model. A limitation to the theoretical sampling in this study was that due to time and funding limitations, multiple rounds of theoretical sampling were not feasible.

Hood’s (2007) second criterion for a grounded theory study is that it uses the constant comparative method. The qualitative component of this study was inductive and cyclical such

that early analysis informed ongoing data collection and sampling. Data analysis involved comparing emerging codes and categories within the data to other codes and categories within a participant's set of data and across data sources. This often involved not just the qualitative data, but the survey and climate data, as well. For example, the climate component of the community context category was measured in multiple ways, allowing for comparison across data types by participant. The researcher, thus, examined each participant's coded text regarding community climate and how it related to their process of support seeking with their other (quantitative) ratings of climate, to enhance the emerging theoretical category of "community context". Throughout this process, the researcher completed memos that attended to the ongoing interpretation of categories as they related to the emerging theory.

Finally, Hood's (2007) third criterion is that a true grounded theory study achieves theoretical saturation of categories to elucidate the emerging theory. Although the researcher engaged in theoretical sampling and ensured a cyclical research and data analysis process, due to time and funding limitations, this represents a limitation of this study. Many of the categories did reach saturation, however, properties of some of the categories warrant additional future data collection, specifically emotional readiness and stigma as intervening conditions and the benefits and drawbacks to support.

### **Mixed Methods Evaluation**

Until recently, no framework existed to evaluate the quality of mixed methods studies; rather criteria pertaining to the quality of the individual components of a study (i.e. qualitative and quantitative) were used to assess quality. O'Cathain (2010) presented a summary of mixed methods quality frameworks that include eight domains in which mixed methods research can be

assessed. Four domains relevant to this study are discussed here: design quality, data quality, inference quality, and reporting quality.

**Design quality.** The first domain relevant to this study is design quality. The study design was clearly described in Chapter Three, including the “priority of approaches, purpose of combining methods, sequencing of methods, and stage at which integration takes place” (O’Cathain, 2010, p. 545). Additionally, the overall design was suitable for the research questions and purpose of the study.

**Data quality.** The second domain, data quality (O’Cathain, 2010), was described in Chapter Three. It is important to note that the data quality of this study was enhanced by being transparent about methods used, data collection procedures, sampling procedures, and analytic procedures. Additionally, the sample sizes for each type of method were adequate. Finally, the ways in which data were integrated during analysis represent a strength of this study. Utilizing data comparison and typology development to further develop and test components of the model allowed for in-depth integration during analysis and interpretation.

**Inference quality.** Inference quality is “an umbrella term for evaluating the quality of conclusions that are made on the basis of the findings in a study” (Bergman, 2008, p. 3). Attending to the quality of the inferences made is particularly important in a mixed methods study wherein the findings are integrated. There are numerous ways of addressing the quality of inferences made in a mixed methods study and this evaluation addresses several. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) suggest attending to several factors including interpretive agreement and theoretical consistency. Interpretive agreement (O’Cathain, 2010; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) includes peer agreement on the inferences made and whether the inferences are consistent with how research participants perceive their experiences. The researcher included multiple data

analysts, utilized peer debriefing, and engaged in member checking with interview participants and leaders of GSM youth programs to ensure interpretive agreement.

Theoretical consistency (O’Cathain, 2010; Tashakkori & Teddlie; 2003) references whether the inferences made are consistent with current theory and knowledge. Throughout the discussion, the researcher made explicit where and how the inferences made in this study are consistent or divergent from existing knowledge and theory. Additionally, interpretive transparency (O’Cathain, 2010) occurs when a researcher is clear about what findings emerged from what methods. Throughout Chapters Four, Five, and Six, both qualitative and quantitative data are provided as support for the interpretations and inferences made (Greene, 2007; O’Cathain, Murphy, & Nicholl, 2008). Finally, interpretive bias reduction (O’Cathain, 2010) refers to whether “explanations are given for inconsistencies between inferences.” Throughout the results chapters, whenever findings or inferences were divergent, the researcher addressed these inconsistencies and cited potential reasons for these discrepancies and/or sites of possible future research.

**Reporting quality.** The final domain relevant to this study is reporting quality (O’Cathain, 2010). The quantitative results were presented first for the sake of clarity, but then combined with qualitative data and mixed method findings to illustrate the inferences made. Because of the quality of integration and inferences made, this study was able to yield more knowledge than separate quantitative and qualitative studies. This knowledge serves to enhance understanding of what GSM youth need for support and how they can or cannot access such support in their communities. This increased understanding is key to improving the conditions that impact well-being among nonmetropolitan GSM youth.

## **Conclusion**



This study provided enhanced understanding of the ways in which GSM youth living in nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan communities sought support for their GSM-specific needs and how these processes were impacted by their community contexts. The findings from this mixed methods study were used to build a model of support seeking among nonmetropolitan and small metropolitan GSM youth. This emergent theory is important and relevant for ensuring adequate understanding of how to meet the needs of GSM youth living in smaller communities. Through future research, social change efforts, advanced theory, and interventions within communities, this research can help advance well-being among GSM youth.

## APPENDIX A:

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Term	Definition
Adaptive developmental regulations	Mutually beneficial interactions between youth and their ecological assets (Lerner et al., 2011a)
Contribution	Ideological and behavioral indicators of youth making positive contributions to their “self, family, community, and ultimately civil society” (Lerner et al., 2005, p. 23)
Developmental assets	Ecological assets and the strengths of adolescents that combine to promote positive youth development (Benson et al., 2011)
Developmental regulation	"...Mutually influential relationship between and individual and his or her context" (Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2007, p. 508)
Ecological assets	Positive resources in youth’s lives including individuals, social networks, institutions, and access to physical resources (Lerner et al., 2011b)
GSM	Gender or Sexual Minority: individual identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or non-heterosexual/non-cisgender
Intentional self-regulation	"...Contextualized actions that are actively aimed towards harmonizing demands and resources in the context with personal goals in order to attain better functioning and to enhance self-development...goal-directed behaviors..." (Lerner et al., 2013, p. 299)
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer
Nonmetropolitan	Includes micropolitan counties that contain a micropolitan statistical area and noncore counties, those counties outside micropolitan statistical areas (NCHS, 2014)
Organismic self-regulation	"...Broad...relatively consistent...attributes of a person that involve biologically based, physiological structures and functions that contribute to the relationship and individual has with the environment..." (Lerner et al., 2013, p. 299)
Protective Factors	Variables which “interact with sources of risk such that they reduce the probability of negative outcomes” (Compas et al., 1995, p. 273)
Self-regulation	"...The ability to flexibly activate, monitor, persevere, and/or adapt one's behavior, attention, emotions and cognitive strategies in response to direction from internal cues, environmental stimuli and feedback from others, in an attempt to attain personally-relevant goals..." (Moilanen, 2007, p. 835)

SMY	Sexual Minority Youth: youth identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, or non-heterosexual
Small metropolitan	Counties located within a metropolitan statistical area with populations less than 250,000 (NCHS, 2014)
Social Support	Perceived or actual support received from an individual's social network; includes a sense of belonging and feeling valued in one's social world (Detrie & Lease, 2007)
Thriving	"...Acting in manners that optimize one's chances for a life marked by health and positive exchanges with one's world..." (Lerner et al., 2013, p. 298)

**APPENDIX B:**  
**POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS (THE FIVE C'S)**

Indicator	Definition	Operationalization <sup>1</sup>
Competence	Having a "positive view of one's actions in...social, academic, cognitive, and vocational" areas	academic competence, social competence, athletic competence, grades
Confidence	Having "an internal sense of...self-worth and self-efficacy..."	positive self-identity, self-worth, positive evaluation of one's physical appearance
Connections	Having "positive bonds with people and institutions...in which both parties contribute to the relationship"	Psychological attachment ?connection to family, school, peers, and community
Character	Respecting "societal and cultural rules" and having "a sense of right and wrong"	Behavioral conduct, valuing diversity, personal values, social conscience
Caring	Having "sympathy and empathy for others"	concern for others
Community	Sometimes added 6 <sup>th</sup> C: Being active toward social change in one's community	Activism and service (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003)

Source: Lerner et al., 2005, p. 23

<sup>1</sup> As operationalized in Lerner et al., 2005

## APPENDIX C:

## PSYCHOMETRIC PROPERTIES OF SURVEY MEASURES

Variable(s)	Measure	Reference	Psychometric Properties	Modifications
Demographics -level of outness	Rainbow Illinois outness scale	Oswald & Holman, 2013	Alpha = .86	Added gender identity, my school peers, my school teachers, and my LGBTQ friends to list of options
Community Climate	County climate	Oswald et al., 2010	Alpha = .88 Good face validity Good convergent validity (county level variables only)	Added school policy and voting patterns in state elections
	Perceived community climate	Oswald & Holman, 2013	N/A	None
Social support	Perceived Social Support- Friends (PSS- Fr)	Procidano & Heller, 1983	Alpha = .88	3 versions: GSM peers, non-GSM peers, GSM adults Changed “fringe” to “outside” on Q7
Community support	Involvement in Gay-related Activities Scale	Rosario et al., 2001	Alpha = .77	Modified to include activities specific to the research area; added frequency of use; access without utilization; and not available in their community

**APPENDIX D:**  
**SURVEY QUESTIONS**

Demographics

1. Current age
2. How do you define your race/ethnicity (mark all that apply)? (*African-American/Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino/a, Native American, White/Caucasian, Multiracial, Other (Specify)*)
3. How do you define your gender (mark all that apply)? (*Male, Female, Transgender, Genderqueer, Questioning, Other (Specify)*)
4. What is your birth sex (the sex assigned to you at birth)? (*Male, Female, Intersex*)
5. How do you define your sexual identity/orientation (mark all that apply)? (*Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Pansexual, Queer, Questioning, Straight, Other (specify)*)
6. Use the following rating scale to indicate how open you are about your sexual orientation/gender identity to the people listed below. Put a check in the box under the column that best describes how open you are with the person listed. (Answer choices: *No one knows; some know, but most don't; some know/some don't; most people know/some don't; everyone knows*) (Individuals: *Mother(s), Father(s), Siblings, Extended family/relatives, My new heterosexual/straight friends, My school peers, My school staff/teachers, Members of my religious community, Leaders of my religious community, Strangers/new acquaintances, My old heterosexual/straight friends, My LGBTQ friends*)
7. Do you participate in a free/reduced lunch program at school? (*Yes, No, Not Sure*)
8. What is your current living situation? (*Live with two parents/guardians, Live with one parent/guardian, Live with adult sibling(s), Live with grandparent(s), Live in a foster home, Live in a group home/residential facility/independent living program, Live in a shelter, Live alone/with same-age roommates, Currently homeless/without a residence, Other (Specify)*)
9. What is the highest level of education obtained by the adults you live with the majority of the time (\*include yourself if you live alone or with same-age roommates or are currently homeless)? (*Less than high school, High school or GED, Associates/2-year degree, Bachelors/4-year degree, Masters or doctorate degree, Not applicable*)
10. Do the adults you live with own their current home? (*Yes, No, Not Sure*)

11. How do you identify your religion/spirituality? (*Agnostic, Atheist, Buddhist, Christian-Protestant, Christian-Catholic, Christian-Other, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Pagan/Wiccan, Spiritual/Not religious, Other (specify)*)

### Community

12. What is your zip code (if not sure, enter town/city name)?
13. How long have you lived in this community? (*Less than six months, Between six months and one year, More than one year*)
14. What is the climate toward LGBT people where you live? (*Hostile-unfriendly, Tolerant, Supportive-Accepting*)

### Support and Resources

15. Who is the person, or people, who provide you with the most support as an LGBTQ youth? Please select all that apply. (*Mom, Dad, Stepmom, Stepdad, Foster parent, Other guardian (specify), Brother, Sister, Aunt/Uncle, Grandparent, Cousin, Other family member (specify), Best friend—LGBTQ, Best friend—Not LGBTQ, Other friend—LGBTQ, Other friend—Not LGBTQ, Teacher, School staff, Religious leader, Other religious person (specify), Neighbor, Co-Worker, Boss, Counselor/Social Worker, Doctor, Nurse, Other LGBTQ adult (specify), Other Non-LGBTQ Adult (specify), Other (specify)*)
16. Given who you are now who is the most important person to you as an LGBTQ youth? Please select one. (*Mom, Dad, Stepmom, Stepdad, Foster parent, Other guardian (specify), Brother, Sister, Aunt/Uncle, Grandparent, Cousin, Other family member (specify), Best friend—LGBTQ, Best friend—Not LGBTQ, Other friend—LGBTQ, Other friend—Not LGBTQ, Teacher, School staff, Religious leader, Other religious person (specify), Neighbor, Co-Worker, Boss, Counselor/Social Worker, Doctor, Nurse, Other LGBTQ adult (specify), Other Non-LGBTQ Adult (specify), Other (specify)*)
17. What does this person do that's supportive or not supportive of your LGBTQ identity? (open-ended)
18. Do you have any friends who identify as LGBTQ? (*Yes, No*)
19. Do you actively seek out other LGBTQ youth for support or friendship? (*Yes, No*)
20. Do you know any adults who identify as LGBTQ? (*Yes, No, Not Sure*)
21. (PSS-Fr)  
The statements that follow refer to feelings and experiences which occur to most people at one time or another in their relationship with friends. For each statement, think specifically of:
- Your friends who identify as LGBTQ (answered only if “yes” to question 18)
  - Your friends who do not identify as LGBTQ

c) Your adults who identify as LGBTQ (answered only if “yes” to question 20)

Answer choices: (*Yes, No, Don't know*)

1. My friends give me the moral support that I need.
2. Most other people are closer to their friends than I am.
3. My friends enjoy hearing about what I think.
4. When I confide in my friends who are closest to me, I get the idea that it makes them uncomfortable.
5. I rely on my friends for emotional support.
6. If I felt that one or more of my friends were upset with me, I'd just keep it to myself.
7. I feel that I'm on the outside in my circle of friends.
8. There is a friend I could go to if I were just feeling down, without feeling funny about it later.
9. My friends and I are very open about what we think about things.
10. My friends are sensitive to my personal needs.
11. My friends come to me for emotional support.
12. My friends are good at helping me solve problems.
13. I have a deep sharing relationship with a number of friends.
14. My friends get good ideas about how to do things or make things from me.
15. My friends seek me out for companionship.
16. I think that my friends feel that I'm good at helping them solve problems.
17. I don't have a relationship with a friend that is as intimate as other people's relationships with friends.
18. I've recently gotten a good idea about how to do something from a friend.

22. (IGA Index)

Have you ever done any of the following things...)? (*Yes, in my community; Yes, in a nearby community, No*) (*How Frequently?-never, once, occasionally, often, daily*) (*How long does it take you to get to these places, in minutes?*)

Gone to an annual LGBTQ festival or Pride?

Attended an LGBTQ youth group at a community center?

Seen a play with LGBTQ characters or themes/saw an LGBTQ comedian?

Participated in LGBTQ youth social groups/outings/events?

Attended a church group specifically for LGBTQ and ally people?

Attended meetings of a school-based GSA (gay-straight alliance)?

Went to a concert or musical event with LGBTQ performers?

Visited a youth shelter specifically for LGBTQ youth?

Participated in a theater group with many other LGBTQ youth?

Went to an LGBTQ book store?

Attended a group for LGBTQ youth at a public health department?

Attended meetings or volunteered at an HIV/AIDS organization?

Gone to other public places that LGBTQ people frequent (restaurants, libraries, coffee shops, etc.)?

Participated in online/internet communities for LGBTQ youth (including social media networking sites and other online-based meeting spaces)?



23. How long, on average, does it take you to get to these programs/places (in minutes)?
24. What's good about the places/programs you have used?
25. What's not so good about the places/programs you have used?
26. Which of the following resources do you believe you would (or do) help you feel safe, welcome, and supported as an LGBTQ person in your community? (Check all that apply)
- An annual LGBTQ festival or Pride
  - An LGBTQ youth group at a community center
  - LGBTQ plays or comedians
  - LGBTQ youth social groups/outings/events
  - A church group specifically for LGBTQ and ally people
  - A school-based GSA (gay-straight alliance)
  - Concerts or musical events with LGBTQ performers
  - A youth shelter specifically for LGBTQ youth
  - A theater group with many other LGBTQ youth
  - An LGBTQ book store
  - A group for LGBTQ youth at a public health department
  - An HIV/AIDS organization
  - Other public places that LGBTQ people frequent (restaurants, libraries, coffee shops, etc.)?
  - Online/internet communities for LGBTQ youth (including social media networking sites and other online-based meeting spaces)
  - Other (specify)
27. Of the programs and events listed below, please mark whether they are available in your community, whether you have used them, and your reasons for not using them (if applicable). (*Not available, Available and I have used, Available but I have not used, Reason for not using or attending*)
- An annual LGBTQ festival or Pride?
  - An LGBTQ youth group at a community center?
  - LGBTQ plays or comedians?
  - LGBTQ youth social groups/outings/events?
  - A church group specifically for LGBTQ and ally people?
  - A school-based GSA (gay-straight alliance)?
  - Concerts or musical events with LGBTQ performers?
  - A youth shelter specifically for LGBTQ youth?
  - A theater group with many other LGBTQ youth?
  - An LGBTQ book store?
  - A group for LGBTQ youth at a public health department?
  - An HIV/AIDS organization?
  - Other public places that LGBTQ people frequent (restaurants, libraries, coffee shops, etc.)?
  - Online/internet communities for LGBTQ youth (including social media networking sites and other online-based meeting spaces)?
  - Other (specify):

**APPENDIX E:**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Identity:

1. How would you describe your identity?
2. Tell me more about your gender/sexual identity. When did you start to identify as (insert label they use)? Who knows about your gender/sexual identity?
3. What aspects of your identity do you think are most important these days?
4. Are there parts of your identity that are more present at different times or in different places (e.g. with your family, at school, etc.)?
5. Are there parts of your identity that people talk to you about a lot? Or tease you about?

Community:

6. Tell me about the community you live in?
7. Are there places in your community where people who are LGBTQ can go and be safe? Tell me about it.
8. Would you describe your community as hostile, tolerant, or supportive to LGBTQ people? What do these terms mean to you?

Experiences:

9. Has anyone every treated you differently because of your gender/sexual identity? How? In what ways?
10. Tell me about your school. What is it like being an LGBTQ person at your school?
11. What are some positive/good experiences you've had because of your (insert label) identity?

Social Support:

12. Tell me about your close friends. What are they like? How do they support you? Do you ever feel like they don't support you? In what ways?
13. Do any of your friends identify as LGBTQ? Tell me about these friends specifically. How is your friendship with them different from your friendship with your other friends?
14. Tell me a story about a time when your LGBTQ friends were there for you.

15. Tell me a story about a time when your non-LGBTQ friends were there for you.
16. Tell me about a time when you wish your friends (LGBTQ or otherwise) had been more supportive of you.
17. Do you know any adults who identify as LGBTQ? How did you meet them? Tell me about how they support you.
18. Tell me about other important adults in your life and how they support or don't support you as an LGBTQ person.

Support/Resources:

19. What kinds of things do you think you need support for, generally? What about needs related specifically to your sexual or gender identity?
20. What types of resources do you have in your community that can help meet these needs?
21. Tell me about which of these resources you have used (if any).
22. Tell me about the resources you haven't used (if any).
23. Are there ways you get support that I haven't asked about?
24. What's missing in your community that could really help LGBTQ youth? What would you add if you could?
25. At the beginning of the interview you told me about how your community feels about LGBTQ people. How do you think it influences the types of resources available for LGBTQ youth in your area? How do you think it influences which resources you use?

## APPENDIX F:

### “IN THEIR WORDS”

I see people on the street talking about how gay people...  
 ...are an abomination.  
 There are some places that open their arms to LGBT people...  
 ...then there's some people that are just naysayers.  
 It's not embraced or degraded. It's just there.  
 Maybe...maybe...  
 ...it depends on your kind of LGBT.  
 “... *you're popular, so you're cool with us...*”  
 Sometimes I hate this community, but sometimes...I love it.

Growing up...is so confusing.  
 I'm just like everyone else.  
 Sexuality is such a small part of me...  
 ...I mean, we're all a little gay inside...  
 But...I'm the only out transgender person I know.  
 It seems like there's no one in this town that's LGBT.  
 When you're a gay kid...  
 ...you depend on other people who are straight to accept you.  
 You gotta be accepting. Don't be an asshole!  
 I've been pushed really far to the point of self-harming and attempted suicide.

I don't have that many people that I can just talk to.  
 Straight counselors? They don't know what they're doing.  
 There needs to be a queer youth shelter...  
 It would be. So. Amazing.  
 I enjoy meeting people who identify similar to me...  
 It's like...magnetism.  
 My straight friends? They're cool.  
 We don't go to gay lunch. We go to lunch.  
 But, sometimes they don't understand me.  
 LGBT adults? I usually just go to people my own age  
 I mean, they're still adults...  
 But...knowing they're out and happy...  
 Helps reassure me that it'll be okay.  
 If I needed an adult, I would probably go to my mom.  
 ...*My* mom is really mean about that stuff.  
 But, she let me stay at home...  
 ...even though I'm bisexual.

If you know where to look, there's queer stuff here.  
 If you don't, well...you're fucked.  
 We don't have any LGBT support in our community.

Fridays we go to the LGBT Center...  
...but it's 30 minutes away...I don't even know how to drive...  
And I'm scared to open up...  
I wouldn't want people to think I'm gay...  
Besides, you can only meet people like that online.  
Tumblr? It's the gay person's haven.  
And, sometimes you get married on Facebook.

I have some LGBT friends.  
I did go to my school's GSA...  
The library.  
The park.  
Social media.  
Planned Parenthood.  
The LGBT Center.  
It's pretty well a safe haven.  
But...they need more transgender awareness.

I kept wanting to come back.  
I'm not alone.  
You're not weird. That's nice.  
I'm more okay with myself.  
I learned drag...  
...if I can be confident in six-inch heels with a wig on my head...  
...I can be confident in my Converse and no wig  
I've gotten to love not only the sexuality side of myself...but also me as a whole.

Note: This poem was created using only interview and survey quotes from participants in this study. It was created to illustrate the findings of this study using an alternative form of representing research findings.

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