

# Development Research in Selected United States Recreation Journals

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Youth have been a focus of recreation and leisure programmers for over a century. During that time, assumptions have been made about the value of recreation for young people. More recently, a resurgence of interest has occurred related to positive youth development. The purpose of this paper is to describe the results of an integrative review done to examine research conducted with youth as a focal point in four prominent U.S. based recreation journals over the past 21 years (1985-2005). We sought to discern thematic patterns in topical areas and to review the approaches and methods used. Systematic content and thematic analyses of the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, *Leisure Sciences*, and the *Journal of Leisure Research* were used. Findings showed that the research done about youth related to some aspect of recreation or leisure in the past ten years eclipsed what was done from 1985-1996. A variety of research methods were used with an equitable distribution of survey, literature reviews, experimental designs, and qualitative methods. The youth examined were primarily mixed gender groups, but boys were twice as likely to be studied as girls when single sex studies were undertaken. Most of the research was done with adolescent (ages 10-18 years) youth. Almost no research has been done in the recreation field related to early childhood (ages 1-4 years). The 11 major themes or topics that were studied in the past 21 years included: youth culture and leisure; leisure programming, treatment, and intervention; research, measurement, and evaluation; demographic factors; management, administration, and policy of youth programs; benefits of leisure for youth; youth and family leisure; recreation settings and leisure spaces; risk behaviors and delinquency; human development and developmental issues; and social behavior. In the integrative review, the focus on benefits and accountability relative to youth programs was obvious. The parallels between social change and youth development were also evident in the review. Recommendations for future research include more evidence-based work that links the program or intervention directly to youth development outcomes, as well as a focus on emerging topics such as physical inactivity

and obesity in children, the influence of television and technology in general, youth sport, and the relationships youth have with nature and the outdoors.

**Keywords:** Youth development, trends, research, children, methodology, adolescents, recreation.

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Youth (ages 0-19 years) represented nearly one-third of the American population (i.e., 28.5% or 80.5 million) in 2000, according to the United States Census Bureau (2001). Despite the historical significance of youth in the *Recreation Renaissance* (1840-1880) and *the Golden Era of Recreation* (1880-1920; Edgington, Jordan, DeGraaf, & Edgington, 2002), youth were not at the forefront of research in recreation in the modern era until a renewed emphasis occurred in the 1990s (Witt & Crompton, 1999a). Concurrent research efforts in psychology (e.g., Benson, 1997; Benson & Pittman, 2001) formed the impetus for youth development as the buzzword representing research and policy efforts on behalf of children and adolescents (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001).

Youth development today is described as efforts to create organizations and communities that enable youth to move toward adulthood by supplying supports and opportunities necessary to go beyond problem prevention (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Witt, 2002). Within the last five years, positive youth development has emerged as a guiding theoretical framework for research on youth. *Positive youth development* is defined broadly as a departure from the deficit view of young people as problems to be fixed to viewing youth as resources to be developed (cf. Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Damon, 2004; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002; Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001). Organizations such as park and recreation agencies, not-for-profit youth groups, churches, and camps offer opportunities to promote positive youth development through recreation activities.

Documenting the outcomes and positive change that may occur in youth through participation in recreation is an emerging area of study. Youth development programming in recreation organizations seems to have changed to encompass the dimensions that contribute to successful programs for positive developmental outcomes, but how the research topics and approaches to studying youth have changed in the field of parks, recreation, and leisure has not been systematically examined. This special issue of the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration (JPRA)* marks an opportunity to examine the past and present research literature focused on youth and recreation published in four selected park and recreation-related journals.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the results of an integrative review done to examine research conducted with youth as a focal point in four prominent U.S. based recreation journals over the past 21 years (1985-2005). We sought to discern thematic patterns in topical areas and to review the approaches and methods used in the reviewed papers. We adopted youth as the term representing all children and adolescents from infancy to 18 years of age. Historical contexts and the theoretical framework of positive youth development (PYD) provided the foundation for examining the literature for this integrated review and for offering recommendations for future research.

### **Background**

The importance of recreation as a positive socializing factor for youth is not a new concept. Recreation has been associated with efforts aimed at social reform and community well-being (Baker, 1997). In the U.S., the origins of park and recreation services have been traced back to pioneering visionaries during the late 19th century. For example, both Jane Addams, as the founder of Hull House and one of the leaders of the Settlement Movement, and Joseph Lee, the founder of the Playground Movement (Edgington, Jordan, DeGraaf, & Edgington, 2002; McLean, Hurd, & Rogers, 2005), recognized the importance of providing opportunities for children to recreate. These influences formed the basis of early efforts related to youth development and recreation.

Issues surrounding children and their recreation were important throughout the 20th century, but not until the 1980s were youth characterized as *at-risk*. Practitioners and researchers became focused primarily on eliminating or decreasing negative behaviors (Witt, 2002). For example, Crompton (1999) pointed out that park and recreation staff should focus on these risk factors to become better positioned in the minds of government officials and tax payers. Thus, resources and programs were targeted toward the stereotypic at-risk child, and applied to broader demographics such as minorities, urban or inner city youth, single parent families, and lower income levels. This at-risk focus was the precursor to moving from a deficit-based perspective of youth toward a more positive and optimistic outlook.

As an extension of research on resiliency, which focused on youth's ability to thrive despite internal and external stresses (Werner & Smith, 1982), PYD emerged in the 1990s. This decade was characterized by a resurgence of interest by policy makers in youth related issues due to increases in social problems such as gang membership (Witt & Crompton, 1999b). Furthermore, staff in park and recreation departments became interested in what they could contribute to adolescent and youth development beyond delinquency prevention.

At the same time, research about the leisure behavior of young people and evaluating recreation program impacts also emerged. Researchers looked to the concept of PYD for insights regarding how to better serve adolescents and promote healthier adolescent development (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Proponents of this PYD perspective argued that a successful transition to adulthood was not simply a matter of avoiding problem behaviors. Although considerable evidence suggested that negative conditions can impede youth development, the mere absence of these conditions does not ensure PYD. Conceptually, youth and their environmental contexts were viewed as a bi-directional process (Lerner,

2002; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). Recreation as a major context in the lives of youth appeared to play a key role in the exploration of issues associated with PYD.

Two special issues in the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration (JPRA*; Caldwell, 2000a, 2000b) and the *Therapeutic Recreation Journal (TRJ*; Caldwell, 2001) were solicited to address the emerging research literature about youth. Caldwell wrote reflections in these two journals regarding her perceptions of the status of youth development at the beginning of the 21st century. The hope for these special issues was to “stimulate research and provide a forum for scholarly discourse” (Caldwell, 2001, p. 280). Caldwell also noted that cross-over existed in the topics of the two journals despite the different audiences for *JPRA* and *TRJ*. For example, the common theme of risk and resilience was evident in both special issues. *TRJ* focused more on interventions while *JPRA* addressed programs. Both journals, however, were aimed primarily at the recreation experiences of youth in communities. Evidence of a focus on prevention was also clear in these special issues. Furthermore, Caldwell applauded the growing theoretical frameworks about youth, as well how a variety of methods were reflected in the papers.

The work highlighted by Caldwell (2000a, 2000b, 2001) led us to reflect further on the history of youth development in the broader field of leisure research, and to identify trends that may guide future research in this area. Thus, our paper examines research conducted about youth over the past 21 years (1985-2005) that appeared in four recreation/leisure focused journals. This review follows several previous periodic empirical assessments of the overall recreation literature (e.g., Burdge, 1989; Crandall & Lewko, 1976; Jackson, 2004; Samdahl & Kelly, 1999; Van Doren, Holland, & Crompton, 1984), methodological and theoretical reviews (Henderson, 1994; Henderson, Presley, & Bialeschki, 2004), gender-based reviews (Henderson, 1990; 1993; 1996; Henderson, Hodges, & Kivel, 2002; Henderson & Hickerson, 2007) and analyses of race and ethnicity (Floyd, Bocarro, & Thompson, 2008). To date, no systematic assessment of youth-focused publications in the recreation literature and specifically in peer-reviewed recreation journals has been published. With this examination, we offer our analysis of the state of the art of research on youth and leisure so that others may draw possible insight for future research.

### **Method**

Systematic integrative literature reviews are important in identifying trends, synthesizing findings, and setting directions for future research agendas (Jackson, 2004). The integrative review is a strategy for analyzing literature focused on inferring generalizations about substantive issues from a set of studies that address these issues (Jackson, 1980). Themes in the methods and content of the literature were uncovered and described as a means for demonstrating how this body of knowledge about youth in the four recreation journals surveyed is maturing and contributing to a broader discourse about leisure behavior.

### **Article Selection**

Four prominent journals were selected for this review: *Leisure Sciences (LSc)*, *Therapeutic Recreation Journal (TRJ)*, *Journal of Leisure Research (JLR)*, and *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration (JPRA)*. We recognize that other youth related journals outside of the recreation field publish research on youth and leisure. However, we chose to limit our review to these four recreation journals because these journals have been the primary outlets for social science research on parks, recreation, and leisure studies over the last several decades. Our goal was to discern thematic patterns in topical areas and to review the approaches and methods used within the recreation literature. These journals are the primary sources of information about a variety of topics related to leisure and recreation behavior in the United States.

This review was limited to 21 years (1985-2005). This period of time provided a snapshot of the topics and the progression of research in these four journals that focused on youth. In addition, during this time a number of social and political issues occurred in the U.S. including: the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, which allowed youth with disabilities the opportunity to participate in recreation programs, such as traditional public parks and recreation programs, and other outdoor recreation programs (e.g., Brannan & Bender, 2003); an increasingly diverse youth population (e.g., Caldwell, 2005; Irwin, Burg, & Cart, 2002); and the rising percentage of children in single parent households, which changed the way children were supervised and cared for in the out of school hours (e.g., Irwin, Burg, & Cart, 2002; Witt, 2004). Furthermore, the first part of this period of study (1985-1995), was characterized by an increase in juvenile crime, gangs, and substance abuse (Witt & Crompton, 1999b).

The lead author examined two journals and the other two authors each examined one of the other identified journals. The criteria for inclusion in the integrative review was based on the presence of a derivative of the words "youth, child, or adolescence" in the article's title, abstract, or keywords, with the primary unit of analysis (e.g., conceptual or empirical) focused on youth. After completing this selection process for each journal, each author reviewed the selections of the other authors. We discussed the inclusion of articles in the review with youth being the "primary unit or focal point of analysis" as the deciding factor. Although the definition of adolescence has included individuals as old as 25 years (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992), we excluded populations older than 18 years to focus our review on school-aged children (i.e., not university students).

Our underlying goal was to identify methods, thematic topics, and distinguishable gaps relative to youth in these four recreation journals during a 21-year period. A complete list of articles selected by the authors is available on request.

### **Analysis**

The analysis of trends in research on youth involved several steps. The analysis followed protocols used by other authors who have conducted similar literature and integrative reviews (e.g., Dwyer, 1997; Jackson, 1980). The extent of the youth literature was examined by providing a numerical count of the articles published in each journal in five-year increments. The second procedure involved a content analysis of research methods (e.g., method of data collection, type of design, and analysis) used in the studies, followed by an examination of selected demographics of the population studied and the location of the study.

The major focus of this integrative review was the analysis of the selected recreation articles to identify research themes. Themes were determined by each author listing areas that were addressed based on titles, keywords, and content. Independent lists of themes were then aggregated, and we discussed where similarities existed and where themes needed further refinement. With this final list, each author conducted another independent content analysis for theme identification and article placement. The articles were assigned to non-exclusive thematic categories. Therefore, many articles were placed in more than one thematic category to maintain the integrity of the article's focus. In the end, 11 themes emerged as descriptors of the majority of topics examined in the 21-year period.

## Results

Of 1,913 articles published in these four journals from 1985-2005, 182 or 9.5% had children, youth, and/or adolescence as a focal point (see Table 1). *TRJ* (15%) and *JLR* (11%) published a greater percentage of articles focused in this area than the other two journals (*JPRA*=9%; *LSc*=4%). With all the journals, an increase in research about youth was evident during the past 10 years. The number of articles published in *JPRA* increased dramatically during this period, with only five articles (less than 2%) from 1985-1995 compared to 44 articles (17%) from 1996-2005. The special issues on youth in *JPRA* (Caldwell, 2000a, 2000b) and *TRJ* (Caldwell, 2001) were major contributors to the increase in published articles. However, these special issues were the result of increased interest in youth development and the emergence of a cadre of researchers interested in youth development research.

### *Methods in Youth Research*

The review provided a means to identify the methodological foundations of the recreation literature about youth (see Table 2). Survey research (n=49, 27%) was the dominant method for studying youth in most of the journals. Methods incorporating a qualitative approach represented a growing number of studies on youth (qualitative methods, n=31, 17%; case studies, n=16, 9%). Studies in *TRJ* were more likely to be experimental designs or case studies, while *JPRA* made use of a number of literature reviews. The methods used varied across all the journals.

### *Selected Demographics and Settings*

To further understand the research about youth, several demographic characteristics were noted in the results (see Table 3). By breaking down the ages of the youth studied into early childhood (1-4 years), middle childhood (5-10 years), and adolescence (11-18 years), our review showed that adolescents outnumbered studies about middle childhood by almost a three to one ratio (n = 112 and 39, respectively). However, this ratio was difficult to discern, as several research studies described their sample only as "middle school" without including age ranges. Middle school in most cases only accounts for one grade level (5th) that includes middle childhood ages (i.e., 5-10 years). Therefore, the consideration of this confounding factor creates an even greater dearth of research on middle childhood when compared to adolescence. With recreation programming in most cases not beginning until age 5, and the lack of a clinical

**Table 1. Comparison of the number of articles on youth as a percentage of the total number of articles published per journal in five year increments (1985-2005)**

Year	JPA			JLR			LSc			TRJ			TOTAL		
	Number of articles published on youth	Total number of articles published	% of total	Number of articles published on youth	Total number of articles published	% of total	Number of articles published on youth	Total number of articles published	% of total	Number of articles published on youth	Total number of articles published	% of total	Number of articles published on youth	Total number of articles published	% of total
1985-1990	1	162	<1	11	130	8	5	137	4	16	158	10	33	587	5.62
1991-1995	4	119	3	11	119	9	1	104	1	24	110	22	40	452	8.85
1996-2000	32	119	27	16	107	15	2	104	2	6	89	7	56	419	13.37
2001-2005	12	136	9	12	110	11	8	119	7	21	90	23	53	455	11.65

Note: 1985-1990 was included as a 6-year rather than a 5-year increment for the purpose of this article.

focus in leisure and recreation research, the lack of research for early childhood was not surprising.

**Table 2. Methods used in research on youth in four major leisure studies journals from 1985-2005**

Method	JPRA		JLR		LSc		TRJ		TOTAL	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Survey	7	14	24	48	5	31	13	19	49	27
Literature reviews	19	39	2	4	3	19	5	7	29	16
Experimental design	3	6	4	8	1	6	23	34	31	17
Direct observation	0	0	1	2	0	0	4	6	5	3
Mixed methods	4	8	3	6	1	6	4	6	11	7
Qualitative methods	13	27	9	18	4	25	5	7	31	17
Case studies	3	6	0	0	0	0	13	19	16	9
Historical/content analysis	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Secondary data analysis	0	0	7	14	2	13	0	0	9	5
Total	49		50		16		67		182	

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding errors.

The majority of articles included populations consisting of both boys and girls ( $n = .153$ ; 84%) However, when studies limited their sample to one gender, twice the number of studies were undertaken about boys than girls. *TRJ* was particularly focused on disability issues related to males. Race/ethnicity were not examined in detail in this integrative review since the majority of the articles did not report the race/ethnicity of their population. However, in their integrative review on race/ethnicity, Floyd, Bocarro, and Thompson (2008) did examine youth and children in the context of the overall recreation and leisure literature. They noted a small number of studies within the leisure studies literature that focused on girls and issues of race and ethnicity. Similarly, Henderson and Hickerson's (2007) integrative review on gender also examined children and youth within the broader recreation and leisure literature.

Community programs were the dominant setting of studies focused on youth (74%). *JLR* and *TRJ* represented more diverse settings or contexts, with at least two studies in each journal examining youth in the following contexts: home/family, community programs, school, camp, outdoor, and sport. Home/family (36%) represented the greatest number of study settings in *JLR*, while hospital/institution (25%) represented the greatest number of research settings in *TRJ*.

### **Research Themes**

Beyond the counting of articles, the most important part of this integrative review was identifying the dominant themes in the literature and examining some of the possible conclusions that can be drawn from this research about youth appearing in the four targeted recreation journals. First, we examined the literature as a whole to provide insight on the most frequently studied topics. Second, we compared themes within journals to assess whether these journals treated specific topics differently. Noting that the thematic categories were unique to this study and were not mutually exclusive is important. Thus, many articles were placed in more than one thematic category to en-



**Table 3. Selected demographics numbers in four major leisure studies journals through 1985-2005**

<b>Gender</b>	<i>JPRA</i>	<i>JLR</i>	<i>LSc</i>	<i>TRJ</i>	<b>Total</b>
Boys	2	2	0	15	19
Girls	3	3	1	3	10
Both	44	45	15	49	153
<b>Setting/Context</b>					
Home/family	0	10	0	5	15
Community programs	28	5	1	5	39
School (including daycare)	4	4	2	9	19
Camp	1	2	0	9	12
Outdoor	2	3	1	7	13
Sport	1	3	2	4	10
Hospital/institution	1	1	0	13	15
<b>Age group</b>					
Early childhood (1-4)	0	1	1	1	3
Middle childhood (5-10)	16	11	4	8	39
Adolescence (11-18)	21	44	9	40	114
General reference to youth	22	4	4	23	53

Note: Not all articles specifically indicated the gender, setting, or age group of the sample.

compass the article's focus. Furthermore, research on youth is contextual and holistic, so placement of articles in only one category would have been forced and artificial. Eleven major themes or topics finally emerged from the literature, including: youth culture and leisure; leisure programming, treatment, and intervention; research, measurement, and evaluation; demographic factors; management, administration, and policy of youth programs; benefits of leisure for youth; youth and family leisure; recreation settings and leisure spaces; risk behaviors and delinquency; human development and developmental issues; and social behavior. We provide a brief description of each topic along with examples of some of the findings (see Table 4).

*Youth Culture and Leisure.* This category included studies focused broadly on youth culture and its relationship to leisure. Examples in this category included studies about youth consumer behavior (e.g., Howard & Madrigal, 1990), leisure boredom (Wegner, Flisher, Muller, & Lombard, 2002), time use studies (Ellis & Rademacher, 1987) and general discussions on youth culture (Cook, 2001; Wilkens, 1999). The linkage among these studies often related to consumption with a critical eye toward capitalism and the commodification of leisure. The research on youth culture and leisure also addressed sociocultural factors affecting children's leisure choices and patterns. Caldwell, Baldwin, Payne, and Dowdy (1999), for example, found support for leisure boredom in adolescence as a complex construct linked to identity and autonomy development and cognition. This research magnified the need to further examine theories of boredom as fashionable and influenced by pop culture.

*Leisure Programming, Treatment, and Interventions.* This theme included studies that focused on specific leisure programs, treatments, and interventions such, as acces-

**Table 4. Articles on youth categorized by predominant themes from four journals (1985-2005)**

Themes	JPRA		JLR		LSc		TRJ		TOTAL	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Youth culture and leisure	2	2	8	12	5	21	0	0	15	5
Leisure programming, treatment, and interventions	13	14	4	6	1	4	37	27	55	17
Research, measurement, and evaluation	16	17	5	8	1	4	4	3	26	8
Demographic factors	10	11	13	19	4	17	3	2	30	9
Administration of youth programs	13	14	0	0	1	4	6	4	20	6
Benefits of leisure for youth	6	7	10	15	5	21	41	30	62	19
Youth and family leisure	0	0	8	12	1	4	8	6	17	5
Recreation settings and leisure spaces	17	18	8	12	3	13	15	11	43	13
Risk behaviors and delinquency	15	16	3	5	1	4	5	4	24	7
Developmental issues	4	4	1	2	2	8	2	2	9	3
Social behavior	0	0	7	10	0	0	17	12	24	7

Note: Totals do not reflect the number of articles due to placement of articles into more than one theme.

sibility and inclusion (e.g., Loy & Dattilo, 2000), therapeutic programs (Armstrong, 1991; Pommier & Witt, 1995), job training recreation programs for youth (Dein, Duffy, & Wright, 1997), prevention programs (Green, Kleiber, & Tarrant, 2000), and leisure education (Caldwell, Baldwin, Walls, & Smith, 2004). As Table 4 shows, leisure programming, along with the benefits of leisure, were the two most researched themes. Given the climate of the field since the early 1990s, this finding is not surprising. For example, since that time period the park and recreation field began to embrace the concept of positioning (Crompton, 1999). This concept required park and recreation agencies to re-frame recreation politically as a necessary public service as opposed to a luxury. Therefore, as Caldwell (2000b) noted, the field moved from leisure and recreation being considered as a dependent variable (i.e., setting a platform for change to occur) toward it being an independent variable (i.e., examining how recreation and leisure services could impact positive change within their participants).

This reframing of programs occurred at the same time as the number of after school programs available for children increased (Witt, 2004). The reason for this increased programming was attributed to a growing need for child care, value placed on programs designed to decrease negative behavior in children while subsequently promoting positive behaviors, and a realization that these programs could play a pivotal role in providing supplemental educational benefits (Witt, 2004).

*Research, Measurement, and Evaluation.* This thematic category included articles focused on scale development (e.g., Baldwin & Caldwell, 2003; Barnett, 2005), model development (e.g., Witt & Crompton, 1996a; 1996b), and program evaluation (e.g., Baker & Witt, 1996; Henderson, Powell, & Scanlin, 2005; Maddy, 1988), as well as articles describing the theoretical and/or philosophical issues relating to research with

youth (e.g., Hunnicutt, 1990). Most articles included in this category were found in *JPRA* (61.5%), with program evaluation the dominant sub-category. Henderson, Powell, & Scanlin. (2005) highlighted the use of a mixed methods approach to program evaluation in reporting findings from a national study on camp settings. In an example of progressive or alternative methods being employed in recreation research on youth, Yuen (2004) used drawings alongside focus groups to more accurately capture experiences and meanings from a child's perspective. While incorporating new evaluation methods with youth leisure research appeared exciting, Baldwin (2000) cautioned that a sound theoretical base for designing and evaluating youth recreation programs is necessary.

*Demographic Factors.* Articles that focused on specific youth characteristics such as gender (e.g., James, 2000), sexual orientation (e.g., Caldwell & Kivel, 1998), ethnicity/race (e.g., Philipp, 1999) and social class (e.g., Campagna et al., 2002) were included in this demographic factor category. *TRJ* focused almost exclusively on youth with disabilities. Therefore, disability was only considered as a demographic factor when examined in other journals besides *TRJ*. Research showed that sexual identity was a part of the social construction of leisure for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth (Kivel, 1994). James (2000) found that one of the issues that constrained some girls from active recreation was body image. Conversely, Anderson, Bedini, and Moreland (2005) found that the benefits of active recreation for girls with disabilities outweighed constraints such as issues of body image. Furthermore, Outley and Floyd (2002) pointed to unique issues that youth from certain racial/ethnic backgrounds face that impact leisure and recreation programming and delivery.

*Management, Administration, and Policy of Youth Programs.* This thematic category primarily focused on articles relating to administrative and policy issues governing recreation programs. Specific topics included administrative practices for youth programs (e.g., Carruthers & Busser, 2000), government policy and how it impacts youth programs (e.g., Hultsman & Little, 1995), and staff training (e.g., Ellard, Geisthardt, & Schilling, 2004). Research showed that with the tightening of budgets and funding, community agencies clearly benefited from collaboration to provide a continuum of services (Scholl, Dieser, & Davison, 2005). Studies also uncovered the potential for inclusive recreation for youth in communities (Scholl, Smith, & Davison, 2005).

One issue that emerged within the broader youth development literature was the growing recognition of the importance of staff. For example, recent research within the broader youth development literature pointed to the role of non-parental adults (e.g., staff and volunteers) within youth programs (Scales, 2003). Researchers also highlighted that successful community youth programs structured relationship development as one of their key programmatic objectives (e.g., Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Scales et al., 2004). Studies also emphasized the role that recreation staff members have in developing relationships with children and the need for trained staff to work with youth (e.g., Bocarro & Witt, 2003; King, 2000).

*Benefits of Leisure.* Studies that centered on the benefits of leisure and recreation for youth included physical activity benefits (e.g., Anderson, Bedini, & Moreland, 2005), social psychological benefits (e.g., Ferguson & Jones, 2001; Hedrick, 1986), positive youth development as a theoretical framework (e.g., Henderson, Powell, & Scanlin, 2005), and enhanced leisure skills (e.g., Aguilar, 1987; Dattilo, Williams, & Cory, 2003). In addi-

tion, more than two thirds of the articles in the benefits category were found in *TRJ*. This finding particularly emphasized leisure's role in aiding the development of youth with disabilities and the efficacy of therapeutic recreation programs and interventions.

Several researchers examined the value of leisure education as a way to help young people experience positive leisure and to help them overcome barriers and constraints (e.g., Bedini, Bullock, & Driscoll, 1993; Mahon & Bullock, 1992; Zoerink, 1988). The benefits and value of leisure education programs for youth have also been recognized by major funding agencies. For example, the Caldwell, Baldwin, Walls, & Smith, (2004) *TimeWise* project received funding from the federal government to examine the effects of a leisure education program in promoting healthy free time use among middle school adolescents.

The benefits of leisure category is directly related to the youth development field, which has been challenged to provide more meaningful community programs to help youth develop during the out of school hours (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) and to be able to measure outcomes. Benefits also underlined the holistic nature of youth development, since articles in categories such as recreation settings and leisure spaces, leisure programming, and program evaluation were more likely to be classified under benefits of leisure.

*Youth and Family Leisure.* These articles specifically included articles on parental involvement in youth programs (e.g., Zeijl, TePoel, DuBois-Reymond, Ravesloot, & Meulman, 2000), family recreation (e.g., Mactavish & Schleien, 2000), and parental perceptions regarding their children's leisure behavior (e.g., Dattilo, Light, St. Peter, & Sheldon, 1994). Leisure researchers have a history of supporting the notion that family recreation positively impacts family relationships and overall quality of family life (e.g., Orthner & Mancini, 1990). In the therapeutic recreation field, Mactavish and Schleien (2000) noted that family recreation was beneficial particularly in families that had a child with a developmental disability because it helped to promote the overall quality of family life as well as helped families develop life-long recreation skills. Leisure scholars have also begun to examine whether leisure can positively impact family cohesiveness (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003). Furthermore, researchers have begun to examine how parenting practices can influence what children do in their free time (Hutchinson, Baldwin, & Caldwell, 2003).

*Recreation Settings and Leisure Spaces.* These articles included investigations concentrating on the role and influence of where programs were situated. Examples of leisure spaces can be found in Table 3 and included after-school programming sites (e.g., Baker & Witt, 2000), camps (e.g., Yuen, Pedlar, & Mannell, 2005), ropes courses and other outdoor recreation programs (e.g., Green, Kleiber, & Tarrant, 2000; Hurtes, 2002), and sports programs (e.g., Recours, Souville, & Griffet, 2004). Adventure programming has been particularly useful for individuals in treatment (e.g., Autry, 2001; Tate & Ellis, 1997), as well as for youth without physical or mental disabilities. The research about youth and recreation has used a plethora of sites and spaces.

*Risk Behaviors and Delinquency.* Research articles that related to deviancy, delinquency, risk factors, and at-risk behavior were included in this thematic category (e.g., Allen, Stevens, & Harwell, 1996; Robertson, 1999; Witt & Crompton, 1996a). These studies were more prevalent prior to the turn of the 21st century. However, studies showed the value of leisure education in addressing delinquent behavior (e.g., Aguilar,

1987; Hunter, 1987) and the important role that therapeutic recreation specialists have in rehabilitation (Munson, 1991). The leisure literature seems to mirror the broader youth development field as the number of “at-risk” studies have been replaced with more emphasis on positive youth development.

*Human Development and Developmental Issues.* Another group of studies specifically addressed developmental issues. Baldwin (2000) argued that understanding developmental processes should be the basis for all intervention and prevention strategies for youth. Thus, examples of research within the recreation field included how youth activity involvement related to leisure across the life span (e.g., Scott & Willits, 1989) and how leisure impacted human development among children and youth (e.g., Bembry, 1998; Norman, Baldwin, & Shinew, 1997). Other specific developmental issues were also examined, such as how recreation and sports programs can contribute to youths’ identity and self-efficacy (Groff & Kleiber, 2001).

*Social Behavior.* This final thematic category highlighted the social relationships of youth and included studies examining the role of peers and friendship (e.g., Chiang, Lee, Frey, & McCormick, 2004), social capital (e.g., Yuen et al., 2005), and sense of community and socialization with non-family group members (e.g., Wright, Owen, McGuire, & Backman, 1994). Social behavior also included studies that focused on the role of social interaction and social integration (e.g., Edwards & Smith, 1989). Several studies about youth with and without disabilities uncovered that social needs were one of the most important contributions that recreation and leisure education could make in their lives (e.g., Chiang, Lee, Frey, & McCormick, 2004; Hurtes, 2002; Maddy, 1988). The social relationships of youth and how they can be developed through recreation also had overlap with other categories.

Taken together, these 11 themes were indicative of the research and evaluation topics addressed in the past 21 years in four peer-reviewed U.S. recreation journals. The topics point to the holistic nature of youth development research and raise issues to be considered for the future.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to describe the results of an integrative review examining research conducted with youth as a focal point in four prominent U.S. based recreation journals over the past 21 years (1985-2005). We described thematic patterns in topical areas and reviewed approaches, methods, and settings in recreation research about youth. These trends offered insight into the past and current state of research on youth in our field, as well as insight for future research.

Only about one in ten articles appearing in these four major recreation/leisure journals addressed issues centered on youth. We cannot judge whether that is high enough for recreation and leisure based journals. However, since the U.S. Census Bureau (2001) identified that 28% of the population is made up of youth, 10% may not be enough emphasis for the future. Obviously, the field of leisure and recreation research is broad. Therefore, many topics must be addressed in these research journals. Due to the focus on children with disabilities within the therapeutic recreation community and the accessibility of settings such as camps and outdoor programs for collecting data, *TRJ* had the highest percentage of youth articles compared to the other three journals. Jour-

nals have different missions and the content is often influenced by the gatekeepers of the journals (Jackson, 2004). As Caldwell (2001) suggested, special issues often stimulate further research in an area, which can lead to more publications in that journal. Our data do not allow us to speculate about these differences in publishing across the journals. Nevertheless, the increasing number of articles published suggests a growing interest and body of knowledge about youth development in selected recreation journals.

The research methods used to study youth have been varied. We believe that methodological diversity is important given the breadth of questions asked about youth. Caldwell (2000a) indicated that one of the challenges of producing useful research for agencies is to ensure that the right questions are asked. Asking the right questions results in the need for a range of research methods, as well as an array of conceptual perspectives in addition to a theoretical framework such as positive youth development (PYD).

Some point of comparison exists for the methodologies, although the different span of years makes definitive statements impossible. Although some of the articles were the same, Henderson, Presley, & Bialeschki, (2004) conducted a broader study of theory in these same four journals during the 1990s. The number of surveys used for all articles was greater for the Henderson, Presley, & Bialeschki, (2004) examination (i.e., 49% for all topics as opposed to 27% for youth research). Approximately the same number of literature reviews were done on the topic of youth (16%) compared to all research articles published (17%). Youth development research also showed a similar percentage of qualitative studies (17% youth compared to 19% of research overall), but a higher percentage of case studies was evident in the youth journals (i.e., 9% youth compared to 3% for overall research). Therapeutic recreation researchers have focused largely on both self-efficacy for people with disabilities as well as the efficacy of treatment, so experimental designs often worked best in that field. These comparisons simply show that for the most part, youth research has reflected leisure and recreation research in general with a few exceptions.

The eleven themes from the literature covered a range of topics with distinctions evident in the focus of the specific journals. Benefits of leisure and recreation were areas often examined across all the journals due to issues of accountability that exist in fields like public parks and recreation, as well as therapeutic recreation. As might be expected, the more theoretically focused journals (i.e., *JLR*, *LSc*) addressed youth culture issues and demographic issues relative to young people more than the applied journals (i.e., *TRJ*, *JPRA*), which emphasized leisure programming and interventions, as well as recreation spaces and settings that included venues for recreation (e.g., ropes courses, recreation centers, camping programs). Social behavior related to youth with disabilities was much greater in *TRJ*, but clearly social development cut across many of the themes examined.

The analysis of the themes in the youth literature in the recreation and leisure field seemed consistent with what might be expected related to timing and accountability. As Henderson (1993) suggested related to research on women and girls, the research published in the recreation field seemed to parallel societal issues with a ten year delay. PYD issues and intentional youth programming have primarily emerged in the past ten years, and these frameworks are now beginning to appear in the recreation and leisure research.

The growth of PYD programs has also been accompanied by increased accountability, reflecting a shift in the type of research reported particularly in *JPRA*. For example, Caldwell's (2000a) comments in the *JPRA* special issue referred to the shifting research focus toward research promoting both "good science" and making a difference with "usable research" (p. 2). Many of the articles within the last six years reflected both Caldwell (2000a) and Witt's (2004) assertion about the increased importance of accountability, evaluation, and usable research. Youth program evaluation studies also are focusing on a wider array of recreation settings, such as camps (e.g., Henderson, Powell, & Scanlin, 2005) and sports programs (e.g., Astbury, Knight, & Nichols, 2005; Wells, Ellis, Paisley, & Arthur-Banning, 2005).

Another critical theme highlighted by Caldwell (2000b), revolved around the tension between the youth prevention model, which is strongly linked to the youth at risk definition, and the youth development framework. For example, Caldwell (2000a) challenged researchers to be vigilant and aware of how they operationalized the term "at-risk" within their articles. Caldwell (2000b) also posed the question of whether researchers and programmers in the park and recreation field should adopt either framework. Six years later, research within the park and recreation field has moved away from studying risk factors toward the concept of PYD.

Samdahl (1999) noted that examining what *is not* studied is as important as describing what is studied. Several areas that have not yet been addressed extensively in the youth development research in the field of parks and recreation include issues facing young children, as well as minority youth, physical inactivity in children and youth sport, and the influence of television and other forms of technology.

As noted in Table 3, one area that has not been examined in the youth literature about recreation is early childhood (i.e., ages 1-4 years). This research about children and play is likely to be found in other areas, such as in the child development field. We are not suggesting that recreation research is remiss in not addressing this age group, but youth research seems to address organized recreation more often than the "play" of youth. Furthermore, a dearth in research on middle childhood was discovered. Research on early childhood can be explained by the lack of organized recreation programming for younger children, but recreation programming is in many cases just beginning for children ages 5-10. Methodological challenges do exist for research on middle childhood and likely provide at least a partial explanation for the shortage of research, as the self report measures characteristic of leisure and recreation research are not as effective for this age group. However, methodology should not dictate whether research is conducted or not, and the scarcity of research on this important age group should certainly be addressed by future researchers.

Although gains over the past 10 years have been made in some areas of youth health (e.g., lower mortality rates), other concerns relating to healthy youth development have been identified, especially concerning childhood and youth obesity (Koplan, Liverman, & Kraak, 2005). We might argue that physical activity and sport are the purview of other journals outside recreation and leisure. Yet the concern of physical inactivity among children, as well as growing obesity, has challenged all organizations that work with youth to help address this epidemic.

Inter-related concerns not addressed in the recreation research include excessive television and computer use (Salmon et al., 2005), as well as a loss of connection to the

outdoors and nature (Louv, 2005). Technology and media may not be examined due to a perceived lack of direct application to leisure services, but constraints upon young people's time certainly affects recreation and should be examined more extensively in our literature. Furthermore, Schor (2004) noted that children are playing less and shopping more as manufacturers recognize the importance of consumerism within children's lives.

Numerous issues obviously influence what research is done and published on youth including human subjects requirements (i.e., IRB), partnerships with school districts or youth-serving agencies, and parental consent. Furthermore, many of the studies use convenience samples, which often do not lend themselves to theory development, generalizability, or follow-up studies. Researching children, in particular, may be more difficult because of the different research measures needed, as well as the difficulty of obtaining data that are reliable and valid. For example, although self-report questionnaires are cost and time effective and can be used for large sample sizes, their effectiveness and accuracy have been questioned, particularly when used with younger children (Sallis, Buono, Roby, Micale, & Nelson, 1993). This aspect can limit the type of methods used by researchers in attempting to collect reliable data. However, our research revealed over half of the studies in the *Research, Methods, and Evaluation* thematic category grouped in the program evaluation sub-category. This finding was not surprising given the applied nature of our field. However, the dearth of research focused on methodological elements like scale and model development may be reflective of the recreation field's historical reliance on theory and measurement from other disciplines.

An assumption has existed for well over a century that recreation is good for kids. However, researchers are only beginning to uncover the relationship between recreation programs and PYD. Organized recreation programs do not necessarily lead directly to PYD. The programs and interventions provide supports and opportunities that can help youth develop in positive ways (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002). The evidence-based research linking programs and outcomes requires more focus, as do the theoretical underpinnings of all the work undertaken in the field of recreation and leisure. Each year, researchers uncover more evidence about the value of recreation and the best practices that might be associated with programs. Disseminating that message more effectively to both the academic community and general public is of critical importance to the field's significance in the 21st century. Few recreation researchers would argue that this mission has been wholly successful over the last 21 years.

Recreation programmers and therapeutic recreation specialists should continue to redesign their programs to include outcomes (e.g., improvement on academics, reducing delinquent behavior, enhanced social skills). Research and evaluation are needed to measure these outcomes and justify programs. However, despite these needs, we agree with Caldwell's (2000b) caution against ignoring some of the key principles that make recreation and leisure programs different. Enjoyment and fun are important reasons for why children choose to get involved in a recreation program (e.g., Caruthers & Busser, 2000; King, 2000). This fun component is important in an era where increasing competition exists for children's leisure time. Thus, continuing to reconcile some of the positive developmental outcomes that recreation programs address within the unique enjoyable environment that differentiates these programs from other youth agencies is important.

We hope our analysis has provided a perspective about the youth and recreation literature that has been published in the field of leisure research. This integrative re-



view, however, focused only on the literature in selected recreation journals. Research about youth and recreation occurs in many other journals (e.g., *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *American Psychologist*, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*). We applaud the value of the studies in all journals that contribute to understanding play, recreation, and leisure for youth. However, focusing specifically on all literature about youth and recreation was outside the scope of this baseline work. Further integrative reviews might take a topic such as “after-school programs” or “youth and connections to nature” and synthesize this literature from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Other questions our research raised concerned why research from other disciplines is not more abundant in the recreation journals as well as questions about how much of the work done by recreation researchers is published outside the leisure field. These questions will be important to investigate in the future while addressing youth development and recreation from a transdisciplinary perspective. Nevertheless, we hope that this integrative review has shown how leisure and recreation researchers are positioning themselves in examining social problems as well as promoting positive youth development in children and adolescents of different backgrounds and abilities through recreation.

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