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## Recreational Needs and Practices of Youth Living in Rural Areas in Quebec: Views and Concerns of Stakeholders and Parents

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## **RECREATIONAL NEEDS AND PRACTICES OF YOUTH LIVING IN RURAL AREAS IN QUEBEC: VIEWS AND CONCERNS OF STAKEHOLDERS AND PARENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Public recreation in rural areas is often a key factor in fighting the devitalization of small municipalities. Additionally, recreational activities support youth in their identity and social development, for instance through generated social interactions. Based on a qualitative case study conducted in Quebec, this research seeks to identify the needs and sought-after forms of recreational activities for youth living in rural areas according to local stakeholders and parents, and, simultaneously, to estimate land management, governance and social actions that will improve the recreational offer already in place. Results show that the interviewed stakeholders are aware of the merits of leisure for youth and acknowledge the need to take action to enhance recreational services and to make practice areas more accessible. In addition, they all believe that encouraging youth to get involved in their communities to make their living environments even more dynamic and attractive is essential.

Many recent studies have pointed out that the daily practice of recreational activities fosters adolescents' well-being (Healty Kids Canada 2013; Pronovost 2013). Some studies even shed light on the fact that leisure, in an organized or free perspective, contributes to youth's identity and social development notably through the social interactions created (Caldwell 2008; Kino-Québec 2011). In addition, the practice of recreational activities may, for many youth, become an outlet related to various experiences through which they seek and discover liberty from their family and school environments (Lemieux and Thibault 2011). As such and in this context, we speak of leisure in its most inclusive perspective that combines organized activities with other more spontaneous acts. We include in this definition traditional

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and outdoor leisure, as well as deviant or other more unusual practices. However, the sociological role that leisure can play is usually shaped by various endogenous and exogenous environmental and human factors.

David (2010) states that the space in which adolescents live, study, and interact greatly conditions their participation to recreational activities. In fact, for this author, as for Bélanger (2008) and Rodriguez, Khattak and Evenson (2006), the variety, quality, promotion, and accessibility of recreation areas and facilities are essential underpinnings when it comes to understanding and analyzing youth's dynamics linked to leisure. On this subject, Thibault (2012) and Bélanger (2008) mention that the issue of leisure may be a greater and more complex concern for youth living in rural areas than for youth living in urban and suburban areas. For these authors, often limited human and financial resources coupled with the amplified population exodus from the last decades is the context that limits recreational opportunities for these adolescents while bringing forward the increasing prevalent role played by stakeholders and parents in maintaining or even developing a recreational offer in these environments.

Oncescu (2014) states that Canadian rural communities face many challenges both in terms of economic revitalization of their territories and maintaining or developing services to their citizens. The geographical remoteness of some of these areas, the rural exodus, and the decline of several secondary industries complicate the implementation of potential actions to boost these spaces (Oncescu, 2014). Oncescu (2014), Devaux (2014) and Alpe and Barthes (2014) recall how schools play a central role in the communities' affirmation and development of leisure for youth. Oncescu (2014) goes as far as saying that the presence, or the absence, of school has affected the quality of life these environments. Through other research, this author stipulates that the well-being of these rural communities is closely linked to the presence of varied, innovative, and challenging leisure activities (Oncescu, 2015). Tonts and Atherley (2005), in a sport perspective, have demonstrated that the presence of sports clubs reinforces the social links of these rural communities, and, similarly, the pride of its residents.

In Quebec, as in other Canadian provinces as well, public recreation in rural areas is a key factor in fighting the devitalisation of small municipalities and, simultaneously, a means of maintaining territorial occupation (Kowalski et al. 2012; Poulet 2012). However, this correlation remains precarious since it is generally maintained thanks to the efforts and self-sacrifice of community and association stakeholders, volunteers and certain elected representatives (Thibault 2008). In the view of many, this balance is fragile and demands an engagement to create different service partnerships between many municipalities in a same administrative region to be stable (Barnidge et al. 2013; Edwards et al. 2014).

As such, a recent study by the Observatoire Québécois du Loisir highlights the existence of two major types of intermunicipal cooperation model in Quebec's rural territories (Garneau, 2015a). The first requires the creation of an administrative structure to manage and coordinate the partnerships established. The second does not require this type of structure as it is based solely on formal agreements and cooperation agreements. Consequently, sharing these actions, programs and equipment is paramount for the survival of public recreation in these environments and, therefore, for maintaining an attractive recreational offer for younger clientele (Kino-Québec 2013; Kowalski and Lankford 2010). Still, this territorial governance issue is intimately linked to the support and to the help provided notably by different levels of regional and provincial governments. The increased dependency of the recreation sphere on public authorities weakens, or at least restrains occasionally, the growth of these rural areas (Thibault 2012). Considering this, and as stated by several authors, the attractiveness of these areas generally depends on the ability of local stakeholders to work together, to finely estimate the needs of their population, to put to use natural and physical attractions available on their territories, and to display great creativity and originality in their usage of available resources (Barnidge et al. 2013; Edwards et al. 2014; Florida 2005; Yousefian et al. 2009).

This study is therefore rooted in the issue connecting public recreation, rural areas, and youth. More precisely, the Regional County Municipality (RCM) of Joliette and the Community Action for Youth of the RCM of Joliette (CAJOL) have been facing problems related to the poor participation of youth aged 12 to 17 in recreational activities offered in their territories since many years. These difficulties brought local stakeholders to question, among other things, the relevance and attractiveness of their actions so far along with the means to promote, provide, and facilitate them. From this exercise, they wished to better understand the needs and interests of youth aged between 12 and 17 and living in the RCM of Joliette. Consequently, this study targets two key research objectives:

1. Identify sought-after forms of recreational activities, benefits gained, needs in terms of recreational facilities, interests for social investment, quality regarding recreational infrastructures and barriers to the participation of youth aged 12 to 17 living in the RCM of Joliette according to parents and local stakeholders working with youth;
2. Estimate social, educational, and land management actions susceptible to reinforce recreational practices for youth according to parents and local stakeholders working with youth.

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The study area – the RCM of Joliette – is mainly constituted of rural territories and is located 75 kilometers east of the Montreal metropolitan area. According to the 2011 census, 65,000 people live on this 417.9 square kilometer territory (see Figure 1). Fifty percent of the territory is agricultural land. From a governance point of view, RCM is a Quebec administrative entity that brings together several municipalities and ensures the management and development of its communities. Joliette RCM consists of 10 municipalities and has responsibilities related to spatial planning, economic and social development and property assessment

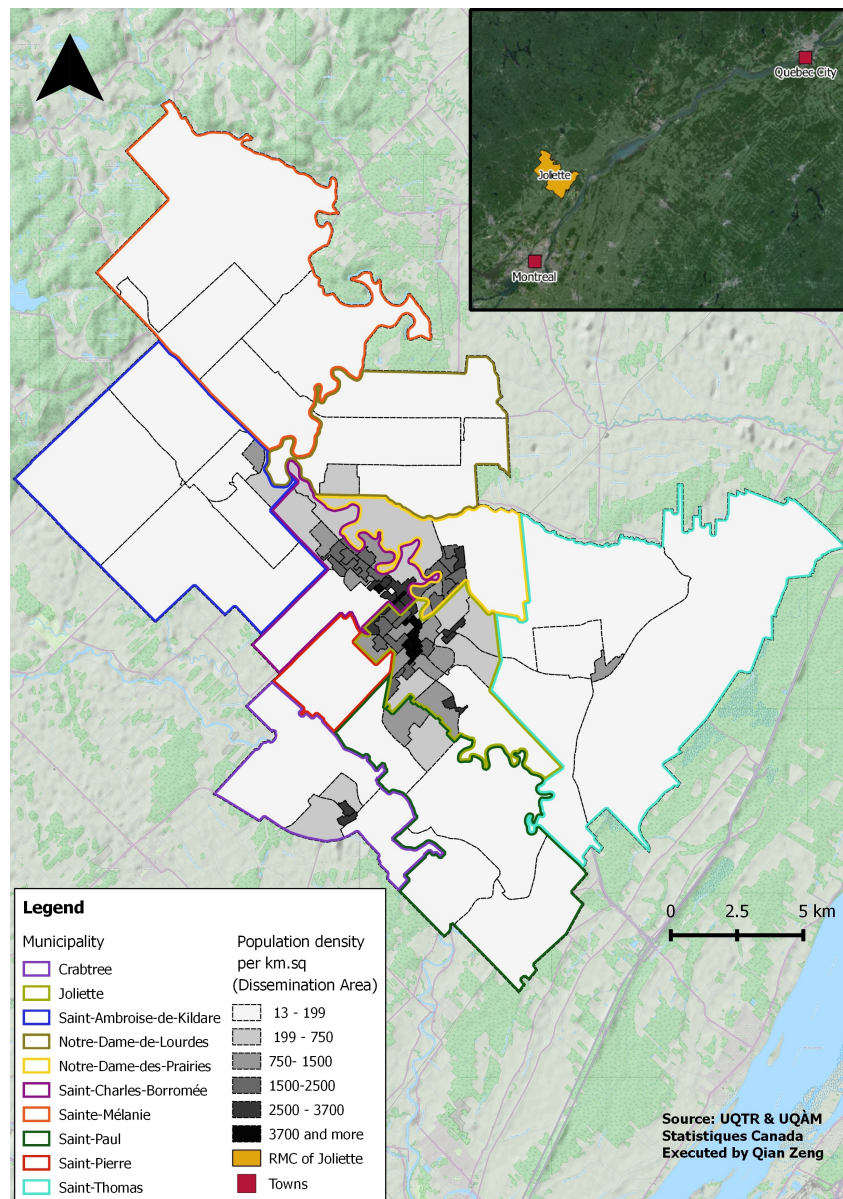


FIGURE 1. POPULATION DENSITY OF THE RCM OF JOLIETTE

## CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS

*Public Recreation Stakeholders in Rural Areas*

Many recent studies demonstrate how the role of public recreation stakeholders in rural areas has largely evolved over the last years (Edwards et al. 2014; Reid 2011; Simard 2012). From a 'utility professional' focusing on action, these stakeholders are now service providers, team managers, and advisors for different elected representatives (Edwards et al. 2014; Simard 2012). The evolution of this profession, which is undoubtedly beneficial for the development of leisure in rural areas, did not however translate into financial and human resources investments for this field (Mathieu 2014). For several authors, these public recreation stakeholders too often work and evolve precariously in relative isolation (Reid 2011; Simard 2012). Simard (2012) reminds that in Quebec however, just as in other Canadian provinces, different associative networks dealing with public recreation in rural areas can help these professionals acquire and renew their knowledge and practices. Most important, the latter enable solid contact networking that, according to Simard (2012), is needed to evolve in regions that are remote to urban centers.

In this respect, several studies point out the necessity, if not the obligation, to build partnerships between many municipalities and other association stakeholders to maintain attractive and varied recreational services in rural areas (Edwards et al. 2014; Shores, Moore, and Yin 2010; Yousefian et al. 2009). For the latter, the steady decrease of public subsidizing for the recreation sector combined with the rural exodus effects are bringing different rural communities to collaborate and share their resources (human, equipment and structures) to meet the needs and expectations of clientele and practitioners who remain heterogeneous.

These supralocal partnerships are, according to certain authors, a highway to mitigate or even totally expunge various structural and management obstacles that these stakeholders must live with every day (Barnidge et al. 2013; Edwards et al. 2014). Many studies highlight that setting up financial arrangements and sharing services resulted in improved geographical access for different sporting and cultural infrastructures and better financial support for poorer households (e.g., registration free of charge, equipment loans, transit passes offered, etc.) (Edwards et al. 2014; Lynch 2013; Simard 2012). Barnidge et al. (2013) as well as Thibault (2012) also state that these partnerships help performing upgrades, renovations and even building recreation areas as a benefit from sharing capital costs. Concomitantly, pooling available resources enabled actors to jointly submit funding requests to build new facilities, to support various community and volunteering actions, or to conduct inventory studies and other organizational assessments (Mathieu 2014; Simard 2012).

*Adolescence and Intervention in the Field of Leisure*

Despite setting up supralocal partnerships, several authors remind that interacting and meeting adolescents' needs in terms of leisure may be a substantial challenge (Leyshon 2002; Moore et al. 2010; Shores et al. 2010). While childhood mainly features close parental supervision, the transition to adolescence around 12 or 13 years old brings a redefinition of authority figures and influences. According to Caldwell (2008), to fully understand the substantial changes upsetting youth's lives, considering their relationships – both micro (e.g., family, important adults and peers) and macro (e.g., community, living environment, society) – is essential. For this author, the fact that youth develop in a now globalized world where information flows very quickly leads to shifting leisure interests that reflect national or even worldwide trends. Their interests are thus no longer simply shaped by fundamental societal debates in their communities. Pronovost (2007) adds that the way youth aged 12 to 17 build their identity and assert their interests is heavily influenced by relationships with peers and close family.

In parallel, the way youth build their leisure interests is also linked to sociocultural and economic factors. Kindelberger, Le Floc'h and Clarisse (2007) highlight how gender plays a key role in this issue. For the latter as for Lee, Wu and Lin (2012), boys generally spend their out-of-school time doing physical activities whereas girls often do schoolwork and learn a variety of cultural experiences. These stereotyped discrepancies also mix with economic and geographic elements. Family income, home and school environment attractiveness, and habitat quality also influence how adolescents develop their leisure interests (Kindelberger, Le Floc'h and Clarisse 2007; L'indice Marketing 2012). Farrugia (2014) adds to this more sociological thought that the classic theories in the field have often unduly or indirectly standardized the identity and culture of adolescents despite the spatial considerations that usually tinted these individual aspects. This author indicates that young people living in rural areas often comply with urban and international cultural references, yet they do not adopt them fully. Farrugia (2014) discuss in this recreational perspective of a local appropriation and adaptation of more global codes and standards.

Furthermore, many authors bring the idea of a double or even a triple challenge in some cases for rural stakeholders. They ought to generate an interest with unusual and experiential activities using limited means while ensuring their geographic and economic access and, simultaneously, allowing young people a certain liberty in these recreational practices (Moore et al. 2010; Shores et al. 2010; Yousefian et al. 2009). Therefore, several studies conclude that recreation stakeholders must take on the role of activity facilitators (by supporting initiatives from teen-agers) rather than simple action providers (by offering or imposing activities to teen-agers). If not, adolescents may forgo offered activities or fail to

identify with them (Barnidge et al. 2013; Edwards et al. 2014; Simard 2012). In this perspective, Fabiansson (2006) recalls how the community, or more specifically the reference group, plays a central role in the identity and social affirmation of rural adolescents. Indeed for this author, the physical and geographical constraints of rural areas require these youth to build affiliations to be able to integrate socially in their communities and thereby engage in organized or spontaneous recreational activities.

### *Leisure, Youth, and Living Environments*

The issue of youth leisure is complex as sociological, economic, healthcare and land management considerations intermingle. Several authors believe that the quality, configuration, and attractiveness of living environments play a key role in encouraging youth recreation (Bélanger 2008; Rodriguez et al. 2006; Roult et al. 2014). For David (2010), as for Lefebvre, Adjizian and Roult (2012), territorial disparities regarding recreational services are closely related to geographic contexts, but also to the content and relevance of local development policies.

Regarding urban centers, Thibault (2013) mentions that leisure plays an increasingly important role in shaping modern cities. Sometimes, 'cities of leisure', oriented as much toward tourists than local citizens, is the way to describe it. For this author, enjoyment, festivities, and culture are now the main engines related to land management and development for urban areas. In this perspective, real recreation zones shape the landscape of different neighborhoods by offering not only practice areas, but also a variety of recreational amenities (restaurants, bars, shopping facilities, etc.) focused on the consumer experience during visits at venues. Thus, for young clienteles living in urban centers, it is less about the availability of recreation than about its accessibility and attractiveness (Kino-Québec 2013; Perkins et al. 2007; Roult et al. 2014; Ville de Montréal 2013).

Concerning urban peripheries, different authors brought forward how the urban spread and the prominence of automobiles strongly affect the consumption of various forms of active leisure among local citizens (Frank and Engelke 2001; Morrow-Jones, Irwin and Roe 2004; Rodriguez et al. 2006). These, along with Crane (2000), David (2010), and Soubrier (2000) highlight how long distances separating home from leisure areas, the development of leisure time at home, poor equipment quality, and lack of knowledge about recreational services bring residential populations to adopt sedentary behaviors to fill their free time. Contrasting with the urban picture dressed above, the leisure intervention in suburban territories turns out to be more limited or poorly perceived notably due to certain weaknesses linked to existing facilities (L'indice Marketing 2012).

As for rural areas, Thibault (2012) states that their situation currently faces a dead end regarding the range of recreational services. For the latter, the lack of



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financial, material, and human resources combined with the constant decrease of residential clientele contribute to restrain leisure to mere classical or even marginal activities. Simultaneously, it widens the gap separating these territories from urban and suburban areas. Many authors believe that these territorial and economic discrepancies lead to a multi-tiered public recreation system where citizens have an uneven access to one of their essential needs in terms of social and personal fulfillment (Bélanger 2008; Chamberland and Froment-Prévosto 2003; Craike et al. 2011).

*Rural Planning and Social Considerations*

As an answer to these gaps, several initiatives from Quebec and from Canada reveal possibilities based on planning and management strategies that involve participation, consultation, and partnership to energize recreational services in rural areas. On this matter, the actions taken by the community organization called *Partenaires 12-18* prove relevant. Founded in 1994, this organization's first goal is to support the creation of youth steer committees for rural municipalities in different RCM in Quebec. The heart of *Partenaires 12-18*'s mission is to break with the traditional youth house concept that is often poorly adapted to rural areas. Instead, the latter wants to foster the involvement of youth 12-18 through projects that they build and manage themselves (Cayer 2011). This inspiring and innovative initiative has been evaluated from 1998 to 2008 and reveals that young people who would take an active part in leading those projects would acquire great knowledge, a variety of abilities, and would also become particularly engaged and responsible citizens thereafter (Bélanger 2008). Nevertheless, Bélanger (2008) reminds that these initiatives alone cannot solve all the problems that rural youth encounter notably sedentary lifestyle, social isolation, poor parental involvement, bad lifestyle habits, poor social participation, and/or rural exodus. According to this author, more effective and targeted public policies and a better acknowledgment of youth and of their actions are needed to support the growth of these territories.

In addition, Norman, Power and Dupré (2011) state that in many rural communities, "everybody knows everybody." This increases the social pressure on young people in terms of supervision and control. These research findings are similar to some interpretations of Hollingshead (1949) on social class-based cliques and their reproduction within communities. For their part, Kowalski et al. (2012) note that rural youth in foreign areas are forced to rely on public recreation since traveling is often a problem (hometown and urban centers being far away, increased dependency toward parental transportation, etc.). Fabiansson (2005) rightly notes that what rural recreation offers is limited but also very little renewed leading to forms of weariness and abandonment by adolescents in particular, but also to an almost unique holding of a traditional leisure that is widely tinged with masculinity.

Consequently, Mooney, Casey and Smyth (2012) note that the omnipresence of sports in public recreation for rural areas in Australia limits teenage girls to cultural forms of leisure often inappropriate to their needs or, in the worst cases, to stay at home to do household or academic tasks. Moreover, Eime et al. (2010) highlight that leisure activities designed for young people are often poorly perceived by their parents and families. This stigmatizing situation grows stronger when recreational offerings are limited and when public authorities do not acknowledge the problem (Eime et al. 2010). This leads Morrison et al. (2015) to observe the planning and development of rural areas through a central notion of innovation. Be it social, economic, technological, or cultural, these authors emphasize that these territories, often at the margins of decision-making and financial centers, must focus on their social capital and their natural potential to develop their living environments and their communities strategically.

## METHOD

The data presented in this article are from a larger research that had the objective to identify the interests, practices and recreational needs of adolescents ages 12-17 of the RCM of Joliette. Data were collected through local adolescents, but also from local actors and parents. For the purposes of this article and the readability of the results, we chose to present only the results from the qualitative approach conducted among the community stakeholders and the parents.

Results were obtained qualitatively through focus groups. Four focus groups were conducted with local stakeholders and parents during Spring 2014: 1) a group from the educational system; 2) a group from associations and recreational services; 3) a group from the political, economic and public healthcare sphere, and 4) a group consisting of parents. Participants were selected following discussions with funders and with the advisory committee. It should be noted that this sample was purposive and that we made sure not to have an over-representation of actors and parents residing in urban areas. Therefore, one third of the participants were from the main urban areas of the RCM (i.e., the city of Joliette) and the rest from small towns and rural communities. Noting that participants from Joliette are still regularly confronted with teenage clientele from rural areas as they manage spaces, facilities, and public organizations affecting all of the RCM of Joliette is important. As a whole, 26 participants took part in these exchanges, including 18 women and 8 men. The resulting sample is distributed as follows:

- 2 school principals;
- 2 student life advisors;
- 1 recreation technician in school settings;
- 4 representatives of municipal recreation departments;

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- 2 representatives of sports and cultural associations and organizations;
- 3 representatives of voluntary and community organizations;
- 1 representative of the field of public health;
- 4 political actors;
- 2 actors from the economic and transport fields;
- 5 mothers of teenagers from working and middle classes.

Between five and seven participants were present at each focus group. The focus groups were conducted between April 24, 2014 and May 15, 2014. They took approximately two hours each and were recorded via a digital recorder. Each focus group was led by a researcher-facilitator who was assisted by an observer. It is also noteworthy that two focus groups were held in a school and the other two in the conference room of the RCM of Joliette. These spaces of exchange were selected to ensure the most neutral possible place for participants.

Overall, the discussion guide used to lead focus groups was structured around six main themes concerning the extracurricular leisure activities of the adolescents at the RCM of Joliette:

1. Recreational forms practiced outside school (sports, cultural, social, technological, etc.);
2. Withdrawn benefits (physical, social, experiential, etc.);
3. The need for recreational services (diversity of supply, modes of communication, facilitation and promotion strategies, etc.);
4. Interest on non-formal social involvement (types of volunteering modalities and frequency of involvement, involvement places, etc.);
5. The quality of practice sites (diversity, accessibility, security, maintenance, etc.);
6. The obstacles to the social and recreational participation of young people aged 12-17 in the RCM of Joliette (major obstacles vs. minor obstacles, solutions or actions to reduce or eliminate these barriers, etc.).

All these themes and related issues were discussed around a broad definition of leisure – both in terms of particular types of practices (sports, cultural, social, etc.) and modes of practice (organized, free, spontaneous, etc.). However, it should be noted that participants in these focus groups often gravitated the discussion of leisure toward sports and cultural leisure practices, mainly in an organized or free perspective. Therefore, the facilitator of each group had the responsibility of making all the participants talk on issues and questions other than those that were brought voluntarily by group members.

As for data analysis, all audio-taped information issued from the focus groups has been transcribed. These textual elements were then codified using Nvivo

qualitative analysis software. Beyond constituting a codification tree, this computer program allowed regrouping and categorizing the core findings. After this codification phase, analysis and data processing were performed by three members of the research team. Each member built an individual analysis without interacting with the others. This process was then concluded by a pooling period. This analytical technique minimizes interpretative bias, therefore enhancing objectivity. It must be noted that a sample of this size is not statistically significant. However, it has proven of sufficient size to fulfill this study's qualitative objectives. In fact, researchers noted that the findings had reached a point of theoretical saturation during the global analysis phase.

## RESULTS

### *Forms of Leisure Activities Practiced by Adolescents*

One element on which there was unanimity in all four focus groups was the role played by parents on what leisure activities children do. In some ways, parents have a leading influence on their children. Father and mother are frontline role models, and their child or adolescent will build his or her lifestyle through the actions and the family frame that the parents make. Therefore, if parents are often sedentary, children will very likely follow the same way according to various participants interviewed. Beyond this model role, it seems parents also ought to be a 'leisure educator' mainly by teaching their children how to become autonomous. There is a belief that, through a certain level of autonomy, the adolescent will learn to create his own leisure or reach out for the tools and information required to practice various leisure activities. In this line of thought, a mother explained:

Moi le mien a 16 ans, mais je ne sais pas, il est comme plus autonome, il va chercher l'information, il a le goût de faire des choses. Quand on est arrivé ici, il est allé explorer. Par exemple il se demandait, ils sont où les terrains de tennis? Des fois, j'ai l'impression qu'ils savent bien plus parfois d'affaires que moi. (Version originelle en français)

[My son is 16, but I don't know, he seems more independent. He gets the information himself, he looks interested in many things. When we arrived here, he went exploring. For instance, he asked where he could find tennis courts. Sometimes, I feel like they know a whole lot more than me.]

Concerning family environment, the family structure affects the link between youth and leisure to some extent. Several stakeholders from the school community brought forward fragmented family structures (divorced or separated parents) as a plausible barrier to youth participation to various recreational activities.

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According to the latter, the fact that the child has to travel from his mother's to his father's house regularly radically reduces the time available for leisure. Yet, this new family model with reconstructed families growing more predominant does affect the free time of both children and parents. Two consequences of that phenomenon were identified during the focus groups. The first, less time spent with their children has seemingly conducted parents to try to optimize their agenda to fit in more activities for their adolescent. The second consequence appears when separated parents live far away one from the other. This, adding up to an already overcharged agenda, seems to affect youth's participation to recreational activities, mainly 12-14 years old youth. This situation can be explained by the fact that youth this age need to have people to transport them over long distances. For some stakeholders, this issue could be solved either by developing intergenerational activities or by having a same location hosting multiple activities simultaneously. When travelling becomes a gain, parents will not feel like they are losing time waiting for their children's activity to be done.

According to several stakeholders from associations and recreational services and from the economic, healthcare and political community, these changes at the family level are linked to other social changes and seem to modulate the forms of leisure activities done by youth. Indeed, fewer people participate in organized activities now as demonstrated by the important decrease of registration for a variety of courses proposed in the RCM of Joliette. Adolescents often prefer spontaneous activities. This observation is based on discussions among all four focus groups. Beside not having enough time and relying on adults for transportation, stakeholders from the political, economic and healthcare community bring forward that redundancy seem to discourage youth to join organized activities in their communities. According to them, sought-after forms of leisure activities are focused on the experience and are non-traditional.

### *Leisure Benefits*

According to stakeholders from the school community, while students acknowledge the positive effects of leisure activities, they do not fully understand them since very few experience them. For these students, being part of a recreational activity means gaining new life experiences. It is therefore through leisure that we develop as human beings. The same stakeholders however observe that youth are either afraid of or not interested in engaging with the leisure activities that are proposed for them. Furthermore, many participants from the school system noted that creating a stimulating living environment for these adolescents is necessary. A certain balance must be achieved to meet their needs. The idea of getting adapted to their living environment thus keeps coming out. School remains for the representative of the social world – the place through which

the young can live these early life experiences, because that is where he spends most of his time and where he practices most of his organized leisure activities. School stakeholders were unanimous about the lack of communication between schools and recreation organizations in the RCM of Joliette. In fact, discussions from the focus group with school stakeholders not only highlighted the existing lack of communication among all schools in the RCM of Joliette, but also their desire to address this problem.

#### *Youth's Needs in Terms of Recreational Facilities*

Lifestyle is influenced by parental environment, but according to all stakeholders interviewed except parents, activities are determined by the presence of friends. They think, friends play the more significant role for adolescents. In fact, the presence of peers and friends conditions whether adolescents will attempt to various leisure activities or not. This presence substantially contributes to youth's need to belong, according to the economic, political and healthcare stakeholders. School stakeholders, for their part, believe that adolescents develop their self-esteem through this sense of social belonging. In some ways, leisure activities become a tool that youth use to establish themselves socially.

Beyond this sense of belonging, the notion of enjoyment was often brought forward during all four focus groups. For every participant, pleasure mainly results from the feeling of fulfillment that comes with the practice of a sport or a leisure activity. In the view of some participants, this need to feel worthwhile is precisely what repulses youth from doing competitive activities. As such, a participant from the school community states:

Bien je pense aussi que c'est de se sentir valorisé. Peu importe quelle activité que ce soit au niveau participatif ou au niveau compétitif. Au niveau compétitif souvent, leur première pensée, c'est moi je n'irai pas parce que je ne serai pas bon. Mais l'idée ce n'est pas si tu seras bon ou si tu ne seras pas bon, viens dans l'équipe, on va faire ce qu'on a à faire. On va dealer avec notre niveau. (Version originelle en français)

[Well, I think it's also about feeling valued. It doesn't matter what kind of cooperative or competitive activity it is. Oftentimes, at a competitive level, the first thing that comes to youth's mind is I won't go because I won't be good. In fact, it's not about being good or not. Join the team, we'll do what we have to do and we will deal with our level.]

The lack of interest toward certain organized activities, mainly competitive ones, brings young people to try other unstructured kinds of leisure activities

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according to representatives from recreational associations and organizations. Moreover, the “cumbersome” bureaucratic structure often disheartens youth from participating, but also recreation workers from creating new activities. Several stakeholders, mainly from associations, leisure organizations and schools, deplored the substantial delays needed to develop an activity that has proven popular among adolescents. Some participants talked about how they were directly approached by adolescents who had a precise activity to develop in mind. However, since planning and managing these projects (e.g., the organization of a skateboarding event, the planning of a downhill skiing outing or the implementation of a mobile disco) had to go through lengthy processes, the interest for the activity was already gone by the time the activity started. As a result, very few young people participated.

Discussions about difficulties surrounding planning recreation programs in the RCM of Joliette resulted in a generalized questioning. Most participants collectively tried to answer the following question: “To what extent should we organize activities designed for adolescents?”. Through this central question, stakeholders discussed youth’s real needs in terms of leisure. Overall, there is a common belief that today’s youth are excessively organized, which is partly what keeps them away from structured activities. For many, young people are imaginative enough to create their own activities and are therefore able to independently fulfill their needs in terms of leisure. Others believe that because they were organized since early childhood, these now adolescents do not have the tools required to set up an activity with people of their own age. This is why some participants consider that service providers should, occasionally, play the role of facilitators rather than being mere activity providers. Nevertheless, for many economic, political and public healthcare stakeholders, youth must be given the opportunity to create their own activities. They add that their role should be to “generate all advantageous conditions in order to make something happen.”

To do so, many pointed out the need to better learn how to adapt to this young clientele that, apparently, is nothing like previous generations. This adaptation must carry out on several levels. It seems obvious to some that a change has to take place in the actual recreational offer. While keeping some organized activities since they already answer the needs of a certain clientele, an effort must be given to enhance youth’s potential to develop their own activities and equip them with the tools needed to do so.

### *Regarding Quality Recreational Infrastructures*

The importance of thoughtfully adapting recreational facilities for young people was recurrent through all focus group discussions. For political, economic and public healthcare stakeholders as well as from recreational associations and organizations, several elements can make a venue attractive to young people. One

of these elements is the absence of parents. A need for freedom and independence drives adolescents to opt for venues where adults will most likely be absent. Also, many participants state that the appropriation or the constant occupation of a place is a positive context for adolescents to affirm their own identity and to belong to a social group. According to some representatives from leisure associations, youth opt for a venue based on their perceptions of it. If a place is associated with a social group that the adolescent does not want to be affiliated with, he will not be found there. Moreover, all participants believe that there is a misconception about youth gathering exclusively in some places in the RCM of Joliette for leisure purposes. On this matter, one representative from the associative community states:

Moi, je pense qu'ils sont un peu partout. C'est dépendant du type d'ados. Il y a des ados qu'on va retrouver dans des activités structurées, règlementées, organisées. Ça, il y en a. Mais t'as des ados qui vont être dans le sous-sol des parents, d'autres, c'est dépendant du type d'activité. Donc, ils sont omniprésents partout, et c'est peut-être un des plus grands défis pour les gens qui offrent des services, particulièrement les municipalités. (Version originelle en français)

[I do believe that they hang out here and there. Much depends upon the type of adolescent. We'll find some of them in structured, regulated and organized activities. This, it's for sure. But some teenagers will be down in their parents' basement, others, it depends on the type of activity. In fact, they are everywhere and this is probably the biggest challenge for people who offer services, especially municipalities.]

The second element that affects how youth use a location is access. This is mainly true for youth 12-14 of age who need somebody to transport them when the location is farther than one kilometer from their home. Some stakeholders from the economic, political and healthcare community note that this one-kilometer zone problem is the main reason several outdoor rinks are not used. Beyond geographical considerations, accessibility is also a problem when it comes to using various sports facilities, as noted by stakeholders from associations and recreation organizations. Many pointed out that organized sports teams often have priority over sports facilities. Consequently, time reserved for free practice is very limited for some equipment. Moreover, the same participants denounce the exaggerated emphasis that some elected representatives put on national and international sports standards when it comes to developing sport facilities. They add that these standards are not necessarily adapted to the needs nor to the reality of youth living in the RCM of Joliette. These stakeholders believe that sports equipment in a same location should



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be more diversified, adapted to youth's needs, and more abundant. According to them, too much quality sports gear would deter certain youth from using them. In the end, high quality gear would be monopolized by more advanced young players. Also, representatives from the political, economic and public healthcare community as well as from leisure associations and organizations believe that too much focus is given to sports when developing recreational facilities. For them, this tendency helps to exclude girls who, during adolescence, often put sports aside.

*Barriers to Youth's Participation in Leisure Activities*

All participants agree that geographical accessibility linked to recreational facilities is the main barrier to youth's participation to various extracurricular leisure activities in the RCM of Joliette. Parents and stakeholders from schools are even more mindful of this transportation problem and confronted to it. On this topic, different parents believe that their only answer to this is to organize car-pooling within a group of families in a same community. It appears to them that having a close-knit community of parents is what makes a certain variety of leisure activities available to their children. For most stakeholders from schools and from recreation organizations, the issue of geographical accessibility is real and even worrying for youth living in remote rural areas. However, this issue could be partially or totally solved through increased knowledge sharing among all local stakeholders. In their point of view, actions taken so far in the RCM of Joliette for youth between 12 and 18 of age are excessively sector-based and sometimes overlapping. Establishing an inventory of existing practices, projects, and recreational facilities aiming this clientele is now paramount for them, as is initiating meetings between different local stakeholders regularly to stimulate and foster multi-sectoral exchanges. On this matter, one school participant notes:

On n'arrête jamais. On ne prend pas le temps de s'arrêter, de faire l'inventaire de ce qu'il y a, des plateaux, des installations, etc. Tsé il y a plein d'affaires qui se passent partout, mais qu'on le sache, qu'on soit capable de l'évaluer puis qu'on dise ok, peut-être que mon projet de taekwondo pourrait donner un coup de main chez vous. Puis ça pourrait permettre le réseautage.  
(Version originelle en français)

[We never stop. We do not take the time to stop, to establish an inventory of what we possess, sports courts, facilities, etc. You know, a whole lot of initiatives are taken here and there, but we must know that. We must be able to make an assessment and say ok, maybe my taekwondo project could be useful for people around me as well. This could lead to networking.]

Some political, economic, and public healthcare stakeholders further develop the idea by suggesting Internet applications for smart phones and electronic tablets designed to easily identify and update all recreational activities available in the RCM. As such, it should be noted that there is no digital divide across the RCM of Joliette since it is completely covered by mobile phone networks and the Internet. In addition, many stakeholders from leisure associations state that they cooperate with elementary schools regularly to organize and promote extracurricular leisure activities. Nevertheless, the same initiatives are way harder to implement in high schools. They believe it is mainly linked to a difficulty to target the “proper” contact person in these institutions. This situation is a true concern since cooperating with elementary schools, which they consider to be youth’s real “living environment,” is of utmost importance to promote their activities. This conclusion is in line with certain statements held by interviewed school representatives. They brought forward that budget cuts demanded over the last few years by the Quebec Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sports have forced their respective directorates to reduce the number of work hours given to recreation technicians. This uneasy financial situation thus translates into fewer extracurricular leisure activities available for students, hence weakening the bonds between schools and their communities.

Financial accessibility related to various leisure activities proposed in the RCM of Joliette was also discussed in all four focus groups. All the participants are aware that the cost needed to practice various types of leisure activities can be a serious barrier, especially for disadvantaged families. However, many programs and local initiatives exist to address this issue. For their part, participants from the institutional group acknowledge this problem. For many years, they have been trying to carry out actions inspired by models from the private sector (increased time slots for a certain practice, free introduction courses, equipment loans, etc.). Furthermore, these same participants added that they must handle precarious financial situations on a case-by-case basis to ensure that some youth can continue their activities throughout the season. It is still uneasy for these stakeholders to answer one demand that is paying for each course separately. Constraints linked to programming (e.g., room reservation, staff recruitment, equipment purchase) force them to obtain financial guarantees to be able to plan the season. According to them, but also according to stakeholders from the school system, the idea to allow people to pay for each course rather than for a whole season is interesting, but should be supported by public authorities. Until now, these participants regret that municipal and regional authorities above them follow programming structures that lack innovation and are overly focusing on immediate economic profitability regarding leisure activities. According to stakeholders from recreation associations

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as well as from schools, these governance elements are real barriers when it comes to developing new action strategies for the field of leisure.

Simultaneously, some parents and representatives from the political, economic and healthcare group spoke critically of the fact that perhaps too much emphasis is placed on performance and competition rather than on enjoyment when promoting certain sporting activities, which brings different adolescents to find excuses and pretexts to avoid participating. Many participants from the school system and from recreation associations identify a problem on this topic related to adolescent girls. They believe that as she grows, a young woman often abandons group activities and, in turn, prefer more individual forms of leisure, or even activities that she can do with family members (i.e., parents, cousins, sisters, etc.).

Finally, both stakeholders from recreation organizations and from schools agree that if all stakeholders working with this clientele were to exchange regularly and establish an inventory of all actions carried out, communicating it with these adolescents would thus be easier. Therefore, for the latter and for the economic, political and public healthcare stakeholders, improving communication strategies goes hand-to-hand with a better consultation of youth's needs.

*Youth's interest for social involvement*

Except for parents, all interviewed stakeholders believe that youth aged between 12 and 17 in the RCM of Joliette are less involved than their elders. Some school representatives note that their students achieve various social or even humanitarian activities, but only in a context associated with school. To nuance this idea, several parents affirm that adolescents of this generation are more likely to get involved when a cause matters to them or when a specific event has touched a family member. Besides that, some participants from recreation organizations note that young people like to get involved to organize one-time or spontaneous events that have direct and tangible effects on their communities, such as festivities related to National Holiday or Pancake Day.

For their part, representatives from the political, economic and public healthcare systems believe that youth's involvement level is often the reflection of their participation to various leisure activities. They add that the more these adolescents practice various forms of leisure, the more likely they are to acknowledge and value the importance of social involvement. They think, it is also paramount that youth get involved to develop their community. This is important to ensure a certain social cohesion and an evolution that reflects all population strata. In this idea, a stakeholder from the political, economic and public healthcare community states:

Tu rencontres des jeunes. Tu fais des *focus groups*. Tu considères ce qu'ils veulent et tu bâtis en fonction de leurs besoins, quitte à en impliquer un ou

deux dans le développement plus spécifique de l'activité. Bien, je ne vois aucun problème là-dedans. Je pense que la participation citoyenne est recommandée dans toutes les sphères d'activité d'une communauté. (Version originelle en français)

[You meet young people. You conduct focus groups. You consider what they want and build according to their needs, not excluding the idea of getting one or two of them involved in the process of developing the activity. Well, I see no problem in that. I think involving citizens is recommended in all spheres of a community.]

This interview segment also leads to the issue of youth's involvement in decision-making positions in public recreation. When different representatives interviewed were asked if they find relevant the creation of youth steer committees involved in programming, planning and animating recreational activities in the RCM of Joliette, the vast majority answered positively. However, some reservations were expressed. Stakeholders from recreation associations and organizations believe that this community engagement strategy was already attempted in the past. According to them, it failed notably due to youth losing their motivation because of lengthy periods needed to bring an activity to completion. Stakeholders from the economic, political and public healthcare community believe that municipal recreation authorities in the RCM of Joliette are generally inclined to receive demands from adolescents, but those requests always arise from the same young leaders. For these stakeholders, it hence becomes uneasy to ensure that these requests represent the whole adolescent clientele. For their part, parents and school representatives believe that this form of involvement and citizen participation is already up and running in multiple schools, known as "student governments." Here again, stakeholders note that the same young leaders get involved in these committees. From this point onwards, the goal for representatives interviewed is not to know whether these youth steer committees are relevant or not, but to figure out how to get less active adolescents, in terms of social involvement, to integrate these decision-making and consultative committees.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study clearly highlights the predominant influence of family and peers on how youth assert their leisure interests and get involved in their communities. Further to this point, Wheeler and Green (2014) demonstrated that parents have a preponderant influence on the types of leisure activity their children will practice and on the intensity level as well. In a perspective related to sports and physical activity, the organization Jeunes En Forme Canada [Kids in Shape Canada] (2013)

shows how the family, specifically the parents, have an important influence on the promotion and adoption of healthy lifestyles by their children. This was corroborated by local stakeholders who also believe that parents are often seen as models by their children. In parallel, King and Church (2014) indicate that the passage from childhood to adolescence brings youth to abandon many recreational activities to focus on a few. The consistent practice of some activities is often determined by the presence of a close-knit group of friends. Parents and stakeholders interviewed about this clearly stated that belonging to a social group is paramount for youth's self-esteem.

As demonstrated by Royer (2013) and by the results of our study, the scope of actions undertaken along with societal or even ideological considerations turns out to be of utmost importance for youth to decide whether they should get involved in their communities or not. It seems youth get socially involved mainly on principle and out of conviction rather than to reproduce a parental or family model. This model is apparently what provides the initial motivation or inspiration that tends to slowly fade away for the benefit of other influences emerging from everyday environments and friends. These conclusions are similar to what Pronovost (2007, 2013) stated on the existing link between leisure in all its forms and how youth affirm their identity. In parallel, Bélanger (2008) considers that the degree to which adolescents get involved is strongly linked to the freedom to practice and to the responsibility granted by society. The same author however acknowledges that if no global and inclusive action is taken to encourage youth involvement, the same young leaders engage themselves (Bélanger 2008). This is similar to what several local stakeholders pointed out about the difficulty to know if the requests submitted by these young leaders truly reflect the needs and interests of the whole adolescent clientele, even if they are not helped or related to the reproduction of social models as set out in particular by Hollingshead (1949).

Many stakeholders also acknowledge the fact that youth in the RCM of Joliette do not have access to meeting places that are neither organized nor commercial during bad weather periods. Further to this point, David (2011) explains that frequenting indoor and outdoor spaces, going for outings and discussing on the Internet are ways to encourage exchanges and, also, increasingly popular forms of leisure through which adolescents express themselves. For this author, these conclusions are essential to consider while establishing public policies and other actions in the field of municipal recreation.

Findings of this study also highlight that youth are likely to show great interest in being requested and involved in decision-making processes related to managing and animating sporting and cultural facilities on their territories. This very relevant result concurs with the analyses conducted by Bélanger (2008) and Israel and Ilvento (1996) which underline how important it is that youth are listened to, heard,

and understood by municipal leisure representatives and, simultaneously, involved in some decision-making processes. For this author as for Edwards et al. (2014), the necessity to get youth involved in different spheres of community development is essential in rural areas. In fact, increased isolation for some cases, limited financial and human resources combined with the issue of youth moving to population centers fuel the need to get them involved in certain policy decisions that affect them directly (Edwards et al. 2014; Thibault 2012). This is also confirmed by a recent study of the Observatoire Québécois du Loisir (OQL (Garneau, 2015b) that demonstrates that Quebec rural municipalities of less than 2000 inhabitants spend an average of \$114 (CAD) per citizen per year for recreation and culture, while those with a population between 2,000 and 5,000 inhabitants spend \$173 (CAD). Therefore, there is a breaking point between the municipalities of less than 2,000 inhabitants and those with a population of more than 2,000 inhabitants. Furthermore, these data are lower than those of the 10 largest cities in Quebec (expenditure estimated between \$180 (CAD) and \$300 (CAD) per citizen), clearly illustrating very different budgetary and financial realities of these territories (Lavigne, Martin, and Garneau 2014).

Interviewed participants mention that rural youth may face a lack of recreational facilities designed for them. This is combined with a poor public transit access to specialized equipment available in urban centers. This substantial issue forces them to travel long distances to benefit from recreational services and facilities. In such context, youth greatly depend on their parents. For Edwards et al. (2014) as for Barnidge et al. (2013) and Kretzmann and McKnight (1996), the issue related to accessibility and land management in rural areas stresses the necessity to encourage the creation of financial, logistic and social partnerships between different municipalities, schools, associations and other groups of parents. Our results are consistent with those of Edwards and Matarrita-Cascante (2011), which identifies several issues related to development of recreation in rural areas in North America. According to them, the most consequent development of natural resources in these territories causes undeniable economic and tourism impacts but should also be considered in the context of increasing leisure offerings for local people. Meanwhile, limited human and financial resources of many communities require citizen and community mobilization to support and maintain existing recreational programs. Moreover, it appears increasingly important that political actors work with more sustained partnership with associations, community and school environments when it comes to set up leisure-related large-scale actions.

For these authors as for Kowalski et al. (2012), these approaches of sharing available resources are important and even crucial to maintain attractive recreational offerings that answer youth expectations. It is therefore not about trying to offer the same activities available in urban and suburban areas, but about

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seizing opportunities linked to rural territories (high quality outdoor areas, social proximity between local stakeholders and practitioners, easier renewal of the recreational offer due to its small size) to adapt them to a variety of clienteles such as adolescents, girls, youth with an obesity problem, functional limitations or immigrant origins (Fabiansson 2005; Moore et al. 2010; Norman et al. 2011; Yousefian et al. 2009; ). Hence, Edwards et al. (2014) and Shores et al. (2010) summarize these different interpretative thoughts by stating that any action taken in rural areas in the field of leisure and sports must hereon be carried out with and for adolescent clienteles.

This study thus sheds light on several contextual elements helpful to further understand the issues linked to recreational practices and leisure needs of rural youth. Overall, interviewed stakeholders acknowledge the benefits of leisure for young people and the need to improve available recreational offers as well as the access to practice areas. In addition, they all agree that encouraging youth to get involved in their communities is paramount, which in turn will energize them and boost their attractiveness. This reflection also raises other substantial issues for most participants interviewed, such as renewing governance modes for public recreation or establishing cooperation processes between local stakeholders. Therefore, our findings outline the importance to facilitate youth's ability to travel in remote areas by further supporting public transit. Simultaneously, acknowledging and affirming the role played by local stakeholders working in the field of public recreation as 'facilitators' rather than 'activity providers' is paramount. This will properly pave the way for youth to get involved in their communities. Finally, diversifying recreational programming in outdoor and indoor leisure facilities in ways to avoid putting too much emphasis on sports and on competition is crucial. This will notably ensure a better response to the needs and expectations of women clients.

Lastly, it must be reminded that this qualitative study includes two main methodological limits. First, samples used for the focus groups were only sociologically representatives. Results may therefore not be generalized. They allow, however, making a renewed and accurate reading of the issue linked to leisure in rural areas. Furthermore, the focus group leader had to intervene to foster discussions on several topics, which may in some ways affected the results.

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