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Diverse community contexts and community resources for sexual and gender minority youth: A mixed methods study

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Sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth face marginalization and victimization because of their sexual and gender minority status (Russell & Fish, 2016). Additionally, they often lack traditional support systems such as families, schools, and peers that help alleviate the stressors of being part of a marginalized group (Aragon, Poteat, & Espelage, 2014). SGM youth frequently report that their schools are unsafe and hostile environments (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009) where violence, harassment, bullying, damaged or stolen property, and social exclusion regularly occur without intervention from teachers or administration (O'Connell, Atlas, Saunders, & Philbrick, 2010). Additionally, SGM youth report difficulties in their families, including a lack of acceptance and concerns about victimization (Aragon et al., 2014; Higa et al., 2014). These experiences leave many SGM youth at risk of lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression, self-harm, suicide attempts, substance use, eating disorders, homelessness, and sexually risky behaviors (Higa et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2009), as well as poor academic performance and high dropout rates (Kosciw et al., 2009).

Studies have shown that support from individuals and institutions such as teachers, gender and sexuality alliances (also known as gay-straight alliances; GSAs), safe places at schools, and community centers can help alleviate minority stressors and mitigate the association between marginalization and poor well-being (Johns et al., 2013; Wagaman, 2014). However, we lack knowledge of how access of and engagement with these supports vary based on the geographic context in which SGM youth are situated, such as the size of one's community and the community climate toward SGM youth – both of which may impact the

availability and utilization of SGM resources. For example, a smaller town with limited resources may opt to spend those resources somewhere other than on a community center for SGM youth or a suburban school located in a conservative county may reject the establishment of a GSA due to protests of parents. It is also possible, however, that established family histories and identities in small communities could provide alternative means of support for SGM youth whereas in larger communities they might face the challenges of well-funded and established anti-SGM movements. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between community size, community climate, and the availability and utilization of SGM resources (e.g., SGM community centers, SGM youth groups within churches, etc.).

Theoretical Framework

Minority stress theory and ecological systems theory informed this study.

Minority stress theory.

Minority Stress Theory (MST) posits that SGM youth experience distal and proximal stressors related to their marginalized sexual and/or gender identities and that this increased stress puts them at risk for a host of negative outcomes (Meyer, 2003). Distal stressors originate outside the individual, such as harassment and victimization; proximal stressors are situated within the individual and include internalized heterosexism and cissexism or attempts to conceal one's SGM identity for fear of rejection. MST also recognizes the importance of resilience among SGM youth and the significant roles of coping and social support in combatting the negative effects of minority stress (Meyer, 2003).

MST has been used in a variety of ways to explore the social context and health of SGM youth and adults. Johns et al. (2013) used MST to explore how SGM friendships provide a defense against SGM-stressors and the association with smoking. MST has also been used as a theoretical base for measuring family support and overall community climate for SGM people (Oswald, Cuthbertson, Lazarevic, & Goldberg, 2010). Experiencing minority stress has been found to be associated with increased involvement in SGM organizations in nonmetropolitan areas (Author) and used to inform studies that examine the association between overall social climate, psychological well-being, and the relationship between them (Author).

Ecological systems theory.

Ecological Systems Theory (EST) provides insight into the important role of context in SGM youth's lives. Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified the interconnected systems that affect individuals, including micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-systems. Microsystems include individuals and groups with whom SGM youth interact (e.g. home, church, school). Mesosystems include relationships between microsystems. Exosystems refer to settings that indirectly, rather than directly, affect individuals (e.g. media, parent's workplace). Macrosystems include the larger systems, such as organizations, culture, community, and politics that influence other systems. Finally, chronosystems encompass important life events and changes over personal (e.g. moving homes, employment changes) and

sociohistorical time (e.g. improved societal attitudes towards SGM people). Bronfenbrenner described how, in order to understand the individual, one must understand the ways in which the various systems interact to influence the development of youth. This study focuses specifically on micro- and macro-systems.

EST has been used to explain the relationship between the current environment and the negative and positive factors associated with SGM youth well-being (Higa et al., 2014) and how climate and demographic variables create hostile school environments for SGM youth (Kosciw et al., 2009). For the purposes of this study, we use EST to frame our investigation of SGM youths' local environment as well as the importance of proximity when considering the influence of youths' engagement with resources in their local context.

Combined, these theories emphasize the importance of understanding what factors dictate access to specific resources for SGM youth including the role of geographic contexts in determining the availability of SGM resources and their subsequent utilization. The following sections will attend to the research on SGM resources and community context.

SGM Resources

Community-level support for SGM youth includes the availability and use of SGM-supportive resources, such as SGM community centers, school-based GSAs, and other SGM-supportive organizations, such as open and affirming churches. The use of SGM resources, relative to other non-SGM-specific coping strategies, are most strongly associated with adult well-being and academic attainment, even in the face of minority stress (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2018). GSAs represent the most-studied type of support for SGM youth; having a GSA in school is associated with decreased risk of suicide attempts, even among SGM youth who do not participate in the GSA (Walls, Wisneski, & Kane, 2013). Participation in a GSA is also associated with positive SGM identity development and decreased substance use (Walls et al., 2013). In spite of their importance to well-being, not all schools have GSAs or adults whom SGM youth can trust. Additionally, SGM youth of color may be less likely to utilize school-based clubs (McCready, 2003).

Community-based SGM organizations represent an alternative to school-based programs for youth in schools without GSAs or who prefer to access support outside of school. SGM organizations provide a host of services including support groups, social outings, health and wellness services, drop-in hours, and leadership development (Allen, Hammack, & Himes, 2012; Centerlink & LGBT Movement Advancement Project, 2016). In smaller communities, SGM organizations are less likely to be formal non-profits; rather they may exist as informal groups within non-SGM organizations (Oswald & Culton, 2003), such as mental health centers or churches. Only one study was located that examined the impact of community-based SGM programs on the well-being of SGM youth. Craig, McInroy, Austin, Smith, and Engle (2012) evaluated a strengths-based case management program and found that SGM youth participants' self-esteem and self-efficacy increased from pre- to post-intervention.

Despite the growth of these types of programs, many organizations who provide SGM-specific services have been limited due to a lack of resources (Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore,

& Giambrone, 2011), misdirection of resources (Johns et al., 2013; Wagaman, 2014), or an environment where the resources are not wanted (O'Connell et al., 2010). This is especially true in certain rural areas, where religion and conservative social values often take on openly anti-SGM tones (Sherriff et al., 2011) and teachers and other school staff may be reluctant to provide support or intervene in the discriminatory or prejudicial actions of others (O'Connell et al., 2010).

This literature suggests that SGM resources may be beneficial to SGM youth; however, we know little about how these resources vary by the communities in which youth are situated.

Community Context

The community context in which youth are situated includes the size of the community as well as the community climate toward SGM people. Community size is often conceptualized as urban versus rural. SGM youth living in rural communities are frequently considered to be living in inherently hostile communities (Kazyak, 2011; Oswald & Culton, 2003), with some empirical research to support this narrative. SGM individuals in rural communities may face increased isolation (Author), hostile climates (Oswald & Culton, 2003), homophobic teachers (O'Connell et al., 2010), and lack of access to SGM-supportive resources (Oswald & Culton, 2003). Rural communities, however, are complex contexts and not all rural areas are similar. Although rural areas are often associated with greater discrimination against the SGM community (O'Connell et al., 2010; Sherriff et al., 2011), they are at times characterized positively by SGM individuals. A focus on familiarity, small town values, and close-knit ties represent important aspects of living in a rural community (Kazyak, 2011; Oswald & Culton, 2003). In some cases, SGM individuals are able to construct identities that emphasize being "a local" over being an SGM individual (Kazyak, 2011). Additionally, SGM people in rural communities have also reported close connections to other SGM community members (Oswald & Culton, 2003).

Community climate is defined as the "level of community support" for SGM individuals (Oswald et al., 2010). Community climate can be measured objectively or subjectively at the state (Woodford et al., 2015), county (Oswald et al., 2010), or city level. Community climate is associated with the well-being of SGM youth. Woodford et al. (2015) found that hearing anti-SGM messages in one's community was associated with increased stress and anxiety among young adults. Sexual minority youth who live in hostile climates are 20% more likely to attempt suicide than sexual minority youth living in supportive climates (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). A supportive religious climate, in particular, is associated with fewer symptoms of alcohol abuse and fewer sexual partners among sexual minority youth (Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012). Another study examined the relationship between community climate and SGM resources among transgender youth and found that youth identified a link between the lack of transgender-related resources and how hostile their community was toward transgender people (Author).

Research suggests that community climate is essential to the well-being of SGM youth; however, very few studies have examined the association between community climate and the availability and utilization of SGM resources among SGM youth. Given the deleterious

effects of a hostile community climate on SGM youth, and the positive effects of SGM-related support, it is essential to understand the ways in which community climate influences the provision of support for SGM youth. If climate is related to support, it will be important for social workers, educators, and SGM youth advocates to identify areas of community intervention to shift the climate to promote greater supportive resources and impact the health and well-being for SGM youth. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the availability and utilization of SGM-specific community resources among SGM youth across two indicators of community context: community size and perceived community climate.

Method

Sample & Recruitment

Data for this study come from a larger mixed methods study on SGM youth and well-being designed to examine the community-level experiences of SGM youth. Data collection methods included an online survey and in-person interviews. Youth were recruited from a variety of geographic areas within one Midwestern state via social worker and teacher referral, fliers posted in SGM and non-SGM spaces, and advertisements via social media. Parental consent was waived by the ethics review board due to the inherent risk in requiring SGM youth to disclose their SGM identity to their parents to participate in research. Survey participants answered eligibility questions after reading an assent form. Interview participants were provided an assent form at the in-person meeting. Survey and interview participants were recruited separately: all interview participants completed the survey, however, they were not recruited from the survey.

Online Survey

An online survey was utilized to assess SGM youth's community size, perceptions of their community climate toward SGM people, the availability of SGM resources, and their utilization of SGM resources. The survey took 20–40 minutes to complete and youth were provided an opportunity to enter their name into a drawing to win a \$10 gift card.

Community context.—Community context was measured as two variables: community size and perceived community climate. Participants were asked to include their zip code or town name. Counties were categorized as nonmetropolitan, small metropolitan, or large metropolitan based on the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties (NCHS, 2014) to examine community size on a continuum rather than a dichotomous categorization of urban and rural. Perceived community climate was measured using a previously validated item from the Rainbow Illinois survey (Oswald & Holman, 2013), which asked “What is the climate toward LGBTQ people where you live?” with the response options of *hostile (unaccepting)* = 0, *tolerant* = 1, or *supportive (accepting)* = 2.

SGM resources.—The availability and utilization of SGM resources were measured using the Involvement in Gay-related Activities (IGA) index (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). The IGA index ($\alpha=.77$) listed fifteen support, social, volunteer, and

educational activities specific to SGM youth in the study region (e.g. “LGBTQ youth group at a community center”, “annual LGBTQ festival or Pride”, and “HIV/AIDS organization”). To assess availability, the survey asked participants “Are the following things available in your community?” with response options of “yes” or “no/I don’t know.” To capture utilization, the survey asked “Have you ever done any of the following things...” and included a modified response set of “yes, in my community”, “yes, in a nearby community”, and “no.” As this question was used to assess use of SGM resources, the “yes” answers were combined into one category. Responses were recoded as *no* = 0 and *yes* = 1, and summed for an overall score of community resource availability ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 3.14$) and community resource utilization ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.96$)

Demographic characteristics.—Main effects estimates were adjusted for age (in years), race/ethnicity (White = 0, all Other = 1), sex assigned at birth (male = 0, female = 1), sexual identity (dummy coded, lesbian/gay (ref), bisexual, pansexual/queer, questioning/other), gender identity (cisgender = 0, transgender/genderqueer = 1), and the degree to which youth are out to family and at school (range 0–4). Youth were included in the final sample if they were not missing on all SGM community resource items ($n = 210$). See Table 1 for survey sample demographic characteristics.

Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with SGM youth to explore their experiences within their communities and with their peers. Interviews lasted an hour and were conducted in locations chosen by youth to maximize privacy and safety (e.g. SGM organizations, libraries, coffee shops, homes). The interview guide included questions such as “*Tell me about your community*”, “*Describe the climate in your community toward LGBTQ people*”, “*Where can LGBTQ people in your community go to feel safe?*”, and “*What’s missing in your community that could help LGBTQ young people?*” Interview participants ($n = 34$) were an average of 16 years old; White (65%), African-American (12%), Hispanic/Latino (3%), and multiracial (17%); girl/woman (53%), boy/man (26%), transgender (12%), and gender questioning (9%); and bisexual (32%), pansexual (32%), gay (21%), lesbian (12%), and queer (3%).

Analytic Strategy

For analyses of survey data, we first tested bivariate associations between study variables (Pearson’s correlations, *t*-test, and analysis of variance [ANOVA]) to assess the availability of SGM community resources by sociodemographic and community characteristics. Next, we used multivariate Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models to estimate the main effects of community climate and community size on the availability of SGM resources and the utilization of those SGM resources while adjusting for age, race/ethnicity, sex assigned at birth, sexual identity, gender identity, and the degree to which youth are out to family members and at school. We used multiple imputation on final OLS models to account for missing data on covariates (< 1% for all variables).

Analyses of interviews were conducted using grounded theory analytic techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Analysis consisted of an iterative process involving three stages of coding:

open, axial, and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding included sorting and categorizing data into discrete parts and developing an early coding scheme. Axial coding involved defining the properties and dimensions of categories and making connections between categories and sub-categories. Finally, selective coding involved refining the categories and ensuring their validity with the data.

Once initial analyses were completed, mixed method data analysis was conducted to better understand the findings holistically. Given that the purpose of this study was to understand the relationships between community context and community resources, we examined both datasets to see where they converged or diverged using the mixed method strategy of data comparison (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). During the axial coding procedure phase, survey data were compared with emergent findings in the interview data to better understand the ways in which community context related to community resources and support. This process was also completed at the end of the qualitative analyses to better understand and integrate findings.

Results

The survey and interview results are presented below and summarized in Table 2. The quantitative findings provide a general understanding of the role of community in the availability and utilization of SGM community resources while the qualitative findings provide additional context about the relationship between community and the provision of SGM resources.

Quantitative Survey Results

Results from Pearson's correlations, *t*-tests, and ANOVA are reported in Tables 3–6. Multivariate OLS regression models testing adjusted main effects between community characteristics and SGM resources are presented in Table 7. Bivariate analyses indicate that the availability of SGM resources was associated with both community climate ($F = 4.99, p = .008$) and community size ($F = 17.15, p < .001$), while utilization of SGM resources was only associated with community size ($F = 4.66, p = .010$). Specifically, SGM youth living in communities they perceived as supportive reported a greater number of available SGM resources than those in climates perceived as hostile ($M = 3.77$ for supportive compared to $M = 1.59$ for hostile). SGM youth living in nonmetropolitan communities reported significantly lower numbers of available SGM resources than youth living in small and medium/large metro areas ($M = 0.89$ for nonmetropolitan relative to $M = 3.90$ for small metropolitan and $M = 2.96$ for medium/large metropolitan areas). SGM youth in nonmetropolitan communities reported significantly less utilization of SGM resources ($M = 1.25$) than youth in small metropolitan ($M = 2.25$) and medium/large metropolitan areas ($M = 2.07$).

Multivariate models predicting SGM resource availability (see Table 4) showed that youth living in nonmetropolitan areas reported less available SGM resources than SGM youth living in large metropolitan areas ($B = -1.75, SE = .53, p = .001$) and were less likely to utilize these resources ($B = -0.75, SE = .35, p = .031$). Post-hoc follow-up analyses indicated that nonmetropolitan youth also reported less SGM resource availability ($B =$

$-2.57, SE = 0.55, p < .001$) and utilization ($B = -0.88, SE = .36, p = .016$) than youth living in small metropolitan areas. At the multivariate level, there were no significant associations between community climate and community resource availability or utilization.

Qualitative Interview Results

Qualitative analyses yielded three main findings related to the availability and utilization of SGM resources across community context: 1) community climate is characterized by SGM resource availability; 2) SGM resources may improve community climate; and 3) SGM youth actively seek out and travel to utilize SGM resources.

Community climate is characterized by SGM resource availability.—First, youth indicated that community climate is partially explained by the availability of local SGM resources. Hostile communities were frequently described as lacking SGM resources, while supportive communities were characterized as having extensive SGM visibility and resources. Morris explained:

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

Bernadette described availability of SGM resources in her small town in this manner: "If you know where to look, there is queer stuff. If you don't know where to look, then you're fucked...there's not really visibility." Anna lived in a nonmetropolitan community she described as tolerant. When asked what it would take to make it supportive, she replied: "I feel like we'd actually have an LGBT community place. Then I feel like we're a big enough town, we could host a little pride thing." Quinn described the difference between her former (tolerant) community and her current (supportive) community:

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

Thus, youth discussed 1) the difference between the availability of SGM resources and the visibility of SGM identities between supportive, tolerant, and hostile communities, as well as 2) how the presence or absence of SGM resources affected how supported they felt in their communities.

SGM resources may improve community climates.—Second, SGM community resources were discussed as a potential way to improve the climate of a community. SGM youth in this study discussed needing increased SGM visibility and resources in their towns. Several interview participants talked about needing community-level education pertaining to SGM issues as a way of increasing both individual and community-level support and acceptance. Bridget suggested: "...try[ing] to educate more people...when you're a gay kid,

you depend on other people who are straight most of the time to accept you.” Bernadette echoed this sentiment:

[We need] more stuff with Planned Parenthood about young queers. They need to come into the schools and educate the kids in school. Like ‘Okay, some people are bisexual. Some people are just straight and lesbian, and it’s okay. You gotta be accepting. Don’t be an asshole.’

Interview participants also discussed the lack of SGM visibility in their communities and how increased visibility could meet their need for community-level acceptance. Some youth described this need for visibility as a need for large, public events. Susuke stated: “I do like the idea of a pride festival or a rally or something. ‘Cause I feel like we’re hush hush about everything here.”

Quinn suggested that a Pride festival could not only bring increased visibility, but increase the community support for SGM individuals: “It’d be cool to have a pride parade around here.

Those seem fun. You get all the people, and the colors...to help support the community with the LGBTness of everything.” Other youth described the visibility they wanted or needed as broader than a once-a-year event; visible signs of community support, such as rainbow flags and SGM events throughout the year. Lizzy suggested ongoing events “like just more LGBT focused centered things...like plays and concerts and stuff like that. That would be awesome.” Dani stated:

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

SGM youth actively seek out and travel to access SGM resources.—Finally, youth described actively seeking and utilizing community resources outside their primary residential community. Interview participants described actively seeking out SGM community centers in their town or nearby communities. Some youth described driving an hour or more to utilize such an organization. Missy, who lives in a nonmetropolitan community, indicated she crossed state lines just to go to a SGM community center to meet other SGM youth:

[My friend] had a lot of friends that identified in the LGBT community and they would go to these places. There’s something called the [neighboring state SGM community center]...they had pride picnics and pride prom...then we started going to places like that...

Jack also talked about going to an SGM community center in a town about 40 miles from his home: “I just like hanging out with friends. We just do whatever the hell we want, basically. Friday’s are pretty well set on going to [the SGM center].” Although Missy and Jack were able to utilize neighboring SGM centers, several youth indicated the distance was just too great. Chloe lived in a very small town, but knew of SGM organizations in a town 40 minutes away. She said “They have clubs and groups of gay people [in neighboring town]...

[I] probably [couldn't go] until I told my parents." Hazel had the same experience: "I heard that there's places in [town] but for someone who doesn't have a car, that's hard...[it's] about 30 minutes to an hour depending on what way I go...I don't even know how to drive." Survey participants commented that SGM organizations took "hours to get to", "are a 30 minute bus ride or more", and "[the] closest [one] is 40 minutes away." Even with the distance, some youth were able to access SGM organizations. Sam lived about 30 minutes from the nearest SGM organization. He said: "Well, my mom, of course, she's very supportive...before I had my own car, she would drive me around everywhere. She would drive me to [the SGM community center]." Thus, the distance barrier could be overcome in the presence of supportive parents. Jack also lived a 40-minute drive from a SGM organization and while he was able to attend the groups, sometimes distance presented a problem: "I mean, I love the [SGM community center] but I don't love the gas it takes...gas is pretty expensive. There's been a couple of times that we couldn't go because we had no money."

Discussion

This study sought to understand the relationship between community size, community climate, and the availability and utilization of SGM resources. The mixed method findings reveal important connections between SGM youth's communities and access to SGM resources. Quantitative findings showed a strong association between community size and SGM resources. On average, youth in nonmetropolitan areas reported two fewer resources than youth in large metropolitan areas and three fewer resources than youth in small metropolitan areas. Findings are consistent with previous studies that have described a lack of access to SGM resources for SGM adults living in nonmetropolitan communities (Oswald & Culton, 2003). Oswald and Culton (2003) found that SGM adults living in the nonmetropolitan areas of Illinois reported lacking an SGM community and having few resources. This study therefore provides an important contribution to the literature by illustrating the lack of SGM resources in rural areas remains a problem over a decade later and extends these findings to SGM youth. Despite the increase in GSAs across the country, as well as SGM youth-based programs in major cities, rural youth continue to report a lack of available SGM resources. Our findings also support previous research that illustrates that SGM youth in nonmetropolitan communities desire spaces to meet and socialize with other SGM youth in order to reduce the isolation they feel (Author). One surprising finding was that youth in medium/large metropolitan communities reported fewer resources than youth in small metropolitan communities. It may be that major metropolitan communities have a small number of larger resources, such as a large LGBTQ community center, whereas small metropolitan communities may have several smaller resources. It may also be that resources are harder to find in larger communities. Future research should attend to understanding this finding.

Results from multivariate models showed no significant association between climate and SGM resources, however, bivariate findings indicated SGM youth living in communities they perceived as supportive reported two more available resources than SGM youth living in communities that they perceived as hostile. This finding was consistent with the qualitative findings, which suggests that a supportive community climate is characterized by

availability of SGM resources. Although this cross-sectional study cannot answer the question as to whether supportive communities are more likely to provide additional resources for SGM people or whether SGM resources promote a more supportive community, it may be that the investment into SGM related resources could impact both individual level well-being and nonmetropolitan community climates. Research with transgender youth, for instance, highlight that participants often perceive a lack of support in their communities when they are silent about transgender people and issues (Author). The lack of visibility and resources in the community directly affected how youth identified their communities. Thus, it may be that SGM resources bring greater visibility and more support, although, empirical research is needed to test this hypothesis.

This study also assessed whether SGM youth were utilizing SGM resources in their communities. SGM youth in nonmetropolitan communities reported lower levels of SGM resource utilization than youth in small and large metropolitan counties; however, nonmetropolitan youth reported more utilization than they did availability suggesting they are traveling to access important resources. In the interviews, youth noted significant barriers to utilizing SGM resources, which may be related to the survey findings. These barriers are critical when considering youth in nonmetropolitan areas and include an absence of information about available programs, a lack of visibility of SGM people, and the need to travel long distances to access resources. This finding supports previous research suggesting that youth will travel great distances to acquire SGM specific services (Allen et al., 2012). This is usually only possible for youth with financial resources or parental support, leaving those youth who are most vulnerable without access to important SGM-specific resources. Research on SGM adults in rural areas also found that available resources were often inaccessible or undesirable, such as bars or groups that were perceived as cliquish (Oswald & Culton, 2003). Therefore, the quality of youth-based SGM-resources may also vary by community size, though there is currently no empirical research on this topic.

Finally, it is important to note how these findings can be utilized in a theoretically informed manner. As illustrated above, SGM resources may impact youth within various levels of their ecology. Research documents that having SGM-specific supports is critical to the well-being of SGM youth (Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010; Toomey et al., 2018). Findings from the current study suggest that SGM resources may also affect youth on a macro level, by creating visibility and support within the community. Identifying interventions that can alleviate the minority stressors SGM youth experiences in addition to the root causes of oppression – such as a broader hostile community climate – is critical to addressing the marginalization that SGM youth face. Attending to the role of community in providing resources and support for SGM youth is essential to understanding and addressing the minority stressors affecting SGM youth in small towns.

Limitations and Areas of Future Research

This study has several important limitations to note. First, the survey assessed the total number of SGM resources available or utilized, rather than examining a specific type of resource. Future work may find that certain SGM-specific services have a larger impact for SGM youth in smaller communities or in their ability to foster a supportive community

climate for SGM youth. Additionally, we were not able to determine whether supportive communities provided more resources or whether youth identified their communities as supportive because of the availability of SGM resources. Future research could help to untangle the process by which youth come to understand their local communities as supportive in the context of available resources. Finally, the data are geographically limited to one state in the Midwest. Population-based studies that include measures of sexual orientation, gender identity, and community resources would yield unprecedented understanding about how SGM-specific community resources shape the lives of SGM youth across community contexts. In spite of these limitations, however, this study is strong in its use of mixed methods, measuring community size on a continuum, and amplifying the voices of SGM youth in small towns.

Implications

This is a burgeoning area of research with critical implications for research and practice with SGM youth. Because smaller communities are limited in their ability to provide services for niche populations, it would be beneficial to research what types of SGM resources are the most associated with SGM youth well-being. This would allow for community advocates, social workers, and educators to implement programs that are most likely to have a high impact on SGM youth. Additionally, as described earlier, future studies should measure the impact of adding SGM resources to a community over time in order to understand the impact on individual SGM youth, but also on the community climate as a whole. In light of research that emphasizes the unique impact of SGM-specific support (Doty et al, 2010) and resources (Toomey et al., 2018), it is important to understand that the investment into SGM-specific resources have tangible effects for the mental health and educational attainment of SGM youth in more rural areas. Given the correlation between community size and community climate, the investment in these strategies could be an effective way to reach SGM youth, but also in shifting their immediate community contexts to be more accepting of SGM people.

The youth narratives in this study also indicated the importance for communities to communicate what resources are available for SGM youth. Thus, it may be important to examine how SGM youth come to learn about services in their local contexts. Local resources can then adapt their outreach and marketing strategies to reach more youth. Additionally, although this study focused on in-person support options, the importance of online resources and support, particularly for SGM youth, is important. Future research should attend to the ways in which SGM youth access support online and how this may provide an option for support in lieu of or in combination with in-person resources in a small town.

Conclusion

The findings from this study illustrate the connections between community size, community climate, and the availability of SGM resources. The size and perceived climate of local communities affect SGM youth's access to and utilization of SGM-specific resources. These findings provide important implications and next steps for researchers, educators, and

practitioners. Finding ways to increase access to SGM supports in small towns may have an effect on the well-being of individual youth as well as the overall positive climate of the community, particularly for those youth who are actively seeking support.

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Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics

	Online Survey Sample (n = 210)	Interview Sample (n = 34)
	M(SE) / %	M(SE) / %
Age	16.27 (.09)	16.00
Race/Ethnicity		
White	73.33 %	56.00%
All Other	26.67 %	44.00%
Sex Assigned at Birth		
Male	19.14 %	--
Female	80.86 %	--
Sexual Identity		
Lesbian/Gay	26.32 %	24.00%
Bisexual	26.79 %	29.00%
Pansexual/Queer	31.10 %	38.00%
Questioning/Other	15.79 %	15.00%
Gender Identity		
Cisgender	73.46 %	79.00%
Transgender	26.54 %	21.00%
Out to Family	2.01 (.09)	--
Out at School	1.78 (.09)	--
Community climate		
Hostile	15.24 %	--
Tolerant	61.90 %	--
Supportive	22.86 %	--
Community size		
Medium/Large Metro	39.81 %	0.00%
Small Metro	33.65 %	76.50%
Nonmetro	26.54 %	23.50%
LGBTQ Community Resources		
Available	2.72 (.22)	--
Utilized	1.91 (.13)	--

Table 2.

Combined Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

	Quantitative / Survey	Qualitative / Interviews	Conclusion
Community Size	Nonmetropolitan communities have fewer resources than small or large metropolitan communities	SGM youth actively seek out SGM resources in their communities	Small communities need greater SGM resources needed to promote health and well-being. Coordination to reduce the travel burden of SGM youth may be essential to promote service provision across a geographic region.
	SGM youth in nonmetropolitan communities reported less utilization of SGM resources than youth in small or large metropolitan communities	SGM youth in small towns will travel to neighboring communities to access SGM resources; however, the distance may be too far for some youth	
Community Climate	Hostile communities have fewer resources than supportive communities (bivariate only)	Community climate is related to availability of SGM resources in 2 ways: 1. Presence of SGM resources increases SGM visibility which then makes a community be perceived as more supportive, 2. The presence or absence of SGM resources relates to how supportive SGM youth feel in their communities	Although community size cannot be changed, community climate may represent an area of potential intervention. Hostile climates are related to less SGM resources. Adding SGM resources to a community may improve the community climate; this should be tested empirically. Visibility of SGM identities is important to making SGM youth feel seen and validated. Interventions should find a way to improve SGM visibility, particularly in hostile communities.
		Adding SGM resources may improve community climate	

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Table 3.

Association between community climate and community size

Community Climate	Community Size			$\chi^2, p\text{-value}$
	Medium/large metropolitan	Small metropolitan	Nonmetropolitan	
Hostile	12.05%	9.86%	26.79%	13.58, .009
Tolerant	65.06%	57.75%	62.50%	
Supportive	22.89%	32.39%	10.71%	

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Table 4.

Bivariate Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. SGM Resource Availability	–					
2. SGM Resource Utilizations	.378 ^{***}	–				
3. Age	.002	.081	.067	.034	–	
4. Out to Family	.047	.048	.159 ^{**}	.033	.130 [*]	–
5. Out at School	.130	.141 [*]	.176 ^{**}	–.020	.135 [*]	.614 ^{***}

*
p < .05,

**
p < .01,

p < .001.

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Table 5.

Bivariate Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. SGM Resource Availability	–					
2. SGM Resource Utilizations	.378***	–				
3. Community climate	.214**	.140*	–			
4. Community size	–.232***	–.149*	–.164**	–		
5. Age	.002	.081	.067	.034	–	
6. Out to Family	.047	.048	.159**	.033	.130*	–
7. Out at School	.130	.141*	.176**	–.020	.135*	.614***

*
p < .05,**
p < .01,***
p < .001.

Table 6.

Bivariate Associations between Demographics, Community Size, Perceived Community Climate, Resource Availability, and Resource Utilization.

	SGM Resources Available				SGM Resources Utilized			
	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> ^a / <i>F</i> ^b ,	<i>p</i>	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> ^a / <i>F</i> ^b ,	<i>p</i>
Race/Ethnicity			0.91,	.366			0.45,	.803
White	2.61	(3.10)			1.92	(1.94)		
All Other	3.05	(3.23)			1.84	(1.99)		
Sex Assigned at Birth			3.01,	.003			1.71,	.088
Male	4.08	(3.63) <i>a</i>			2.40	(2.28)		
Female	2.44	(2.93) <i>a</i>			1.81	(1.87)		
Gender Identity			0.21,	.838			1.52,	.130
Cisgender	2.70	(3.21)			1.79	(1.94)		
Transgender	2.81	(2.91)			2.25	(2.00)		
Sexual Identity			1.13,	.338			1.98,	.118
Lesbian/Gay	3.29	(3.59)			1.96	(2.04)		
Bisexual	2.20	(3.14)			1.63	(1.96)		
Pansexual/Queer	2.75	(2.87)			2.34	(2.00)		
Questioning/Other	2.70	(2.81)			1.48	(1.66)		
Community size			17.15,	<.001			4.66,	.010
Medium/Large Metro	2.96	(2.85) <i>a</i>			2.05	(2.07) <i>a</i>		
Small Metro	3.90	(3.74) <i>b</i>			2.25	(2.00) <i>b</i>		
Nonmetro	.89	(1.41) <i>ab</i>			1.25	(1.59) <i>ab</i>		
Community climate			4.99,	.008			2.35,	.098
Hostile	1.59	(2.83) <i>a</i>			1.28	(2.13)		
Tolerant	2.64	(3.08)			1.96	(2.01)		
Supportive	3.77	(3.21) <i>a</i>			2.23	(1.64)		

Note.

^a *t*-test values are presented as absolute values;

^b *F*-test for analysis of variance. All analysis of variance estimations passed Bartlett's tests for equal variances at $p < .01$. Bolded text indicates a significant association at $p < .05$. Subscripts denote statistical differences between means at $p < .05$ using Bonferonni corrections for pairwise comparisons.

Table 7.

Associations between Community Characteristic and SGM Community Resources

	SGM Resources Available				SGM Resources Utilized			
	<i>B</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	[95% <i>CI</i>]	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	[95% <i>CI</i>]	<i>p</i>
Intercept	3.40	(1.08)	[1.26 , 5.53]	.002	1.22	(.71)	[-0.18 , 2.62]	.086
Community climate								
Hostile _[ref]								
Tolerant	0.45	(.59)	[-0.72 , 1.61]	.449	0.37	(.39)	[-0.39 , 1.14]	.336
Supportive	1.24	(.71)	[-0.16 , 2.64]	.082	0.55	(.47)	[-0.37 , 1.47]	.238
Community size								
Large _[ref]								
Small Metro	0.81	(.48)	[-0.14 , 1.76]	.092	0.12	(.32)	[-0.50 , 0.74]	.699
Non Metro	-1.75	(.53)	[-2.80 , 0.71]	.001	-0.75	(.35)	[-1.44 , 0.07]	.031
Age	-0.07	(.17)	[-0.41 , 0.26]	.660	0.12	(.11)	[-0.10 , 0.34]	.281
Race/Ethnicity								
White _[ref]								
All Other	0.04	(.48)	[-0.91 , 0.99]	.929	-0.17	(.32)	[-0.79 , 0.46]	.596
Sex Assigned at Birth								
Female	-1.26	(.57)	[-2.38 , 0.14]	.027	-0.60	(.37)	[-1.33 , 0.14]	.111
Sexual Identity								
Lesbian/Gay _[ref]								
Bisexual	-0.35	(.61)	[-1.56 , 0.85]	.562	0.16	(.40)	[-0.62 , 0.95]	.683
Pansexual/Queer	0.06	(.63)	[-1.18 , 1.30]	.923	0.77	(.41)	[-0.04 , 1.58]	.061
Questioning	0.16	(.77)	[-1.36 , 1.68]	.837	0.07	(.50)	[-0.93 , 1.06]	.894
Gender Identity								
Cisgender _[ref]								
Transgender	0.40	(.49)	[-0.56 , 1.36]	.411	0.41	(.32)	[-0.22 , 1.04]	.202
Out to Family	-0.16	(.19)	[-0.54 , 0.22]	.397	-0.07	(.13)	[-0.32 , 0.18]	.591
Out at School	0.28	(.21)	[-0.13 , 0.70]	.180	0.21	(.14)	[-0.07 , 0.48]	.137

Note. [ref] = Reference category. Multiple imputation was used to account for missing on covariates (50 replications).