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The Lasting Benefits of Multiyear Camp Programming for Youth from Low-Income Backgrounds

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Abstract

Summer camps are a common youth development setting in North America; however, youth from low-income backgrounds often cannot attend because of financial barriers. Subsequently, although a robust camp literature exists, little is known about the lasting benefits for youth from low-income backgrounds. Even less is known about how these outcomes may differ based on the number of years youth attend a multi-year camp. The purpose of this study was to examine the long-term outcomes camp alumni reported as attributable to camp and that remain important in their life today. Eighteen outcomes examined via a cross-sectional retrospective survey completed by 449 camp alumni between the ages of 18 and 40 ($M = 22.1$, $SD = 5.17$) were analyzed using repeated-measures analysis of variance to examine the within-subject and between-subject associations between years attended camp and alumni reported outcomes. Alumni of multi-year camps for youth from low-income backgrounds reported that camp was important to the development of many outcomes that are useful to their lives today. The more years that alumni attended a multi-year camp program, the greater the impact they reported that camp had on outcomes important to them today and the more likely they were to have completed post-secondary education. The results of this study provide evidence that practitioners and policy makers may use to advocate for funding to make camp programs more accessible and supportive for youth from low-income backgrounds, and to support youth year-round to stay engaged with camp programs.

Introduction

Youth need opportunities to try new things, feel successful, and develop meaningful relationships with others. Summer camp (henceforth, “camp”) is an out-of-school-time youth development setting that is often associated with meeting these developmental needs of youth (Garst et al., 2011). Camp programs vary in focus and activities (e.g., STEM, outdoor skills, watersports, generalist), campers served (e.g., ages, genders, medical

diagnoses), purpose (e.g., religious development, childcare, LGBTQ+ belonging), and format and structure (e.g., day, overnight, weeklong, multiple weeks). Regardless, all share a common goal of providing youth with a safe and fun experience.

Due to financial constraints, not all youth, especially those from low-income backgrounds, have equal opportunities to attend camp (Browne et al., 2019; Wycoff, 2021). For youth from low-income backgrounds who have the opportunity to attend camp, many are only able to attend for one summer. As a result, little is known about the long-term benefits of camp attendance for youth from low-income backgrounds and even less is known about how the benefits may differ based on the number of summers such youth attended a multiyear camp. For the purposes of this study, we defined a multiyear camp as a camp that offers a progression of programming that occurs across several summers. Youth are encouraged and supported to return for all summers of programming, but some choose not to return. We sought to address this gap in the literature by examining the alumni-reported long-term benefits of attending a multiyear camp program for youth from low-income backgrounds.

Summer Camp Outcomes

Studies of camp are plentiful and indicate mostly positive outcomes for youth. (See Henderson, 2018 for a summary of camp-based research.) At a general level, camp outcomes include social emotional skills, confidence, independence, identity development, and resilience (e.g., Bialeschki et al., 2007; Henderson, 2018; Jones et al., 2011; Thurber et al., 2007; Whittington et al., 2017).

Although much research focuses on campers' own perspectives of their learning, studies have also included staff and parent perspectives (e.g., Bialeschki, et al., 2007; Henderson et al., 2007; Thurber, et al., 2007) of campers' development. As part of the American Camp Association's national outcomes study in the early 2000s, researchers found that parents believed their children showed sustained developmental gains at three and six months post-camp experience in four broad categories of: positive identity, social skills, physical and thinking skills, as well as positive values and spirituality (Thurber et al., 2007).

In addition, retrospective approaches allow researchers to investigate the potential long-term impact of attending camp for alumni (e.g., Garst et al., 2016; Richmond et al., 2019; Sibthorp et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2021). For example, Wilson and colleagues (2019) found that former camp participants reported learning relationship skills and experiencing enhanced self-identity and confidence during their time at camp. In addition, Garst and colleagues (2016) found that greater participation in camp was associated with positive developmental outcomes. Similarly, Wilson and Sibthorp (2019) examined how duration (i.e., number of weeks spent at camp) related to camp-based outcomes for former camp participants and found that individuals who attended seven weeks or more of camp reported significantly greater responsibility, leadership, and relationship skills compared to reports from alumni who attended for two weeks or less. The authors also found that those who attended overnight camp reported significantly greater degree of independence, affinity for nature, ability to live in the moment, knowledge of how to live with peers, and sense of self-identity compared to those who attended day camp (Wilson & Sibthorp, 2019). In addition, Sibthorp and colleagues (2020) found that alumni reported developing relationship and teamwork skills, friendships, and independence during their camp experience. Similarly, Richmond and colleagues (2019) asked former campers to reflect on camp-based outcomes but also to consider how important those skills are in their lives as young adults. Results indicated that the most impactful camp outcomes (i.e., those developed at camp and useful in life) were an appreciation for differences, being present, an enhanced sense of independence and of responsibility, as well as greater perseverance (Richmond et al., 2019). Collectively, this body of research indicates the long-term benefits of a camp experience for youth.

Opportunity Gap for Youth from Low-Income Backgrounds

Despite efforts to reduce financial inequality, many youth grow up in families that experience financial hardship at some point during their lives (Hostinar & Miller, 2019). Growing up in a family with limited financial resources can pose risk factors, such as poorer mental and physical health, that can have lasting effects into adulthood (Nagaoka et al., 2015). In addition, youth from low-income backgrounds are more likely to be placed in special education programs (Schifter et al., 2019) and less likely to attend institutions of postsecondary education (Maytree, 2010) than their peers from high-income households.

While out-of-school time developmental experiences may serve as protective factors for youth from low-income families (Tidmarsh et al., 2022), rising economic disparities have reduced access to such experiences for youth from families with relatively limited financial resources (Putnam, 2015). Subsequently, there is an opportunity gap regarding out-of-school-time experiences (NASEM, 2019; Putnam, 2015).

Given the rising costs associated with a camp experience, an opportunity gap exists in this realm as well (Browne et al., 2019; Wycoff, 2021). Indeed, many families with low-income report cost as a barrier to camp participation for their children (Richmond et al., 2022). As a result, many camps offer financial assistance through scholarships or reduced fees for these youth and their families (Browne et al., 2019). Although financial assistance is vital, in many cases it is only available for a single camp experience and it may not address other logistical constraints of attending camp (Allen et al., 2006).

Despite these barriers, many youth from low-income backgrounds have the opportunity to attend camp each summer through specialized programs and/or subsidies. Consequently, researchers have begun to explore the impact of a camp experience for such youth (e.g., Allen et al., 2006; Barcelona & Hartman, 2021; Smith et al., 2022; Warner et al., 2021). For example, Allen et al. (2006) found that a resiliency-based curriculum at a day camp led to resiliency outcomes for African American youth from low-income backgrounds. Similarly, Barcelona and Hartman (2021) found that youth from low-income backgrounds benefited from a day camp experience and that the more that youth felt connected to others, the higher the outcome scores. Warner et al. (2021) found that camp alumni reported the development of social-emotional skills at camps serving more than 50% youth from low-income backgrounds and that camp was especially important for the development of their confidence, independence, appreciation for nature, and leisure skills when compared to alumni from other types of camps. Further, the authors indicated that alumni described camp as a novel experience compared to their other experiences (Warner et al., 2021). Although researchers are building a body of evidence regarding camp-related outcomes among youth from low-income backgrounds, researchers have yet to examine the effects of repeated camp experiences for this population.

The Current Study

Given inequitable access to camp and the limited number of multiyear camp programs serving youth from low-income backgrounds, little is known about the long-term benefits of camp attendance for this population. We sought to address this gap by examining the role of camp experiences among alumni who grew up in a family with low-income and who attended a multiyear camp program at Tim Hortons Foundation Camps (henceforth, Tims Camps). In doing so, we aimed to provide evidence that highlights the potential value of greater access to camp and to inspire efforts for creating more equitable and culturally sustaining camp experiences. To this end, we sought to answer two research questions: (1) What outcomes do camp alumni from a multiyear camp serving youth from low-income backgrounds report as influenced by camp and important to their lives today? (2) What is the relationship between years of camp attended and the extent to which alumni reported a substantial influence of camp and its importance in their lives today?

Method

Using a cross-sectional, retrospective design, we collected online survey responses from camp alumni who attended at least one 10-day session at one of seven camp locations from across North America operated by a youth-serving nonprofit, Tims Camps. The organization provides programming for youth who qualify as low-income based on Canadian low-income cut-offs as determined by Statistics Canada, and poverty thresholds established by the United States Census Bureau. Community members (i.e., teachers, religious leaders and other out-of-school time leaders) refer youth campers to the program based on perceived need. Following an application process, youth are able to attend multiple summers of camp programming at no cost to families. Youth are between the ages of 11 and 17 during their camp attendance.

Using emails from camper records dating back to 2003, we sent both English-speaking alumni ($n = 12,384$) and French-speaking alumni ($n = 1,671$) a link to an online survey available in their respective languages. Of the first batch of emails, 1,722 bounced back for undeliverable email addresses, due to outdated or inactive parent email accounts. We sent a reminder email approximately three weeks after the initial recruitment email, and a final reminder after another two weeks. The survey was open for eight weeks.

A total of 449 camp alumni over the age of 18 ($m_{age} = 22.1, SD = 5.17, 18-38$) provided responses. The survey began with study details, and participants were instructed that by completing the survey they were providing informed consent. Participants were then asked to answer demographic questions. Sixty-three percent of alumni identified as female and 56% identified as white, 9% Black, 2% Hispanic, 7% multiracial, 7% Asian, 6% Indigenous, and 11% other. (Due to rounding, the percentages do not total 100.) About 56% of participants reported earning at least a high school degree; 15% reported earning a bachelor’s degree; 11% completed a two-year degree; 7% reported no degree; 5% reported earning a graduate degree (i.e., masters, PhD, MD); and 5% reported completing trade school. Alumni reported attending the organization’s camp programs for an average of 4.20 years ($SD = 1.58, 1-6$).

In addition to answering demographic questions, participants responded on 10-point Likert-type scales to questions about the role of attending the organization’s camp in their development of 18 camp-related outcomes (survey question 1 for each outcome) and the importance of these outcomes in daily life (survey question 2 for each outcome). The 18 outcomes were: affinity for nature, appreciation for diversity, being present, college and career orientation, confidence, emotion regulation, empathy and compassion, how to live with peers, identity, independence, leadership, leisure skills, organization, perseverance, relationship skills, responsibility, teamwork, and willingness to try new things. These 18 outcomes are based on findings from Phase 1 of the American Camp Association National Youth Impact Study (Wilson & Sibthorp, 2019; see Richmond et al., 2019 for outcome descriptions). These outcomes have been used in subsequent camp-based research (e.g., Warner et al., 2021), and in this study, we replicated the survey protocol for our specific population of youth from low-income backgrounds. Aligning with Richmond et al. (2019), when alumni responded with a 7 or higher to the camp role questions (survey question 1 for each outcome), they were prompted with a list and asked to indicate the primary setting where the outcome was developed (survey question 3 for each outcome, if applicable). See Table 1 for example survey questions. The University of Utah’s Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and survey.

Following Warner et al. (2021), we created *camp impact* scores to demonstrate participants’ perceptions of camp’s role in outcome development *and* the importance of these outcomes in everyday life. We created camp impact scores by calculating the square root of the sum of each variable squared (range of 0–14.14). It should be noted that camp impact scores should not be interpreted as the level or degree of outcomes development. To answer our research questions, we used a repeated measures analysis of variance with camp impact score as the within-subjects factor and total number of summers as a continuous between-subjects predictor. We included age, gender, and race as covariates in all analyses.

Question 1	Camp was critical to the development of your appreciation for the natural world/nature.	1 (very false)–10 (very true)
Question 2	In your daily life, how important is your appreciation for the natural world/nature?	1 (least important)–10 (most important)
Question 3 (if participants selected 7–10 for question 1)	In what one setting did you primarily develop your appreciation for the natural world/nature?	Multiple choice options: home, school, work, Tims Camps, organized sports, church or religious setting, arts or music programs, other (please specify)

Results

The purpose of this study was to identify the camp impact outcomes that alumni reported and the importance of these outcomes to their lives today. A secondary purpose was to examine the association between the number of years campers attended multiyear camp programs and reported outcomes. In general, alumni reported relatively high scores for camp impact outcomes (scores > 9); however, alumni reported higher camp impact scores for some outcomes compared to others ($F_{(17, 5933)} = 2.70, p < .001, partial \eta^2 = .01$). On

average, appreciation for diversity ($EMM = 12.02$), perseverance ($EMM = 11.93$), and affinity for nature ($EMM = 11.80$) were the highest. (See Table 2 for descriptive statistics for all outcomes.) In addition to the camp impact outcome results, we found that alumni reported camp as being the primary setting where they developed most outcomes. One outcome, responsibility, was reported to primarily be developed at home. Although some skills were reported as developed elsewhere, camp was still the top out-of-school-time setting for the development of all skills measured. That is, the top reported skill developed through sports was leisure skills (11.4%), yet it was more commonly reported to be developed at camp (21.6%). Similarly, a willingness to try new things was the most commonly reported skill developed in arts and music programs (3.1%); however, many more campers reported a willingness to try new things as being developed at camp (57.9%). See Table 3 for frequencies of settings reported by alumni as being important to their development of outcomes. Of note, it is important to interpret these results as a secondary prompt to examine the impact of camp on outcomes for alumni who, when first asked, reported camp as important.

The results also suggested that, on average, alumni who attended camp for more summers reported higher camp impact scores ($F_{(1, 349)} = 9.24, p = .003, partial\ eta^2 = .03$, individual outcomes $B = .175-.430, S.E. = .07-.09$). Relatedly, the differences across the camp impact score of each alumnus were associated with the number of years they attended camp ($F_{(17, 5933)} = 8.69, p < .001, partial\ eta^2 = .01$). Lastly, for each year of attendance past the first summer, alumni were one and a half times more likely to have earned a bachelor's degree compared to no degree ($B = .42, S.E. = .18, Wald = 5.69, p = .017, Exp(B) = 1.53, 95\% CI [1.08, 2.16]$).

Outcome	Camp Critical <i>M (SD)</i>	Importance to Life <i>M (SD)</i>	Camp Impact <i>M (SD)</i>
Willingness to Try New Things	8.5 (1.8)	8.01 (1.75)	11.8 (2.5)
Affinity for Nature	8.4 (2.0)	8.24 (1.84)	11.8 (2.2)
Perseverance	8.1 (2.0)	8.70 (1.58)	11.9 (2.0)
Being Present	8.0 (2.3)	8.31 (1.85)	11.7 (2.5)
Teamwork	8.0 (2.2)	8.40 (1.74)	11.7 (2.2)
Appreciation for Diversity	7.9 (2.2)	8.94 (1.51)	12.0 (2.2)
Relationship Skills	7.8 (2.3)	8.24 (1.86)	11.5 (2.4)
Self-Confidence	7.7 (2.2)	8.44 (1.82)	11.5 (2.4)
Leadership	7.6 (2.3)	7.83 (2.16)	11.0 (2.7)
Living with Peers	7.6 (2.5)	6.47 (2.75)	10.2 (2.9)
Independence	7.4 (2.4)	8.64 (1.71)	11.5 (2.3)
Empathy	7.3 (2.5)	8.50 (1.77)	11.4 (2.5)
Self-Identity	7.3 (2.5)	8.66 (1.73)	11.5 (2.5)
Responsibility	7.2 (2.4)	8.85 (1.42)	11.5 (2.2)
Leisure Skills	6.8 (2.6)	6.93 (2.51)	9.9 (3.0)
Self-Regulation	6.6 (2.7)	8.40 (1.87)	10.8 (2.7)
Organization	6.1 (2.8)	8.16 (1.98)	10.4 (2.7)
College and Career Orientation	5.4 (3.0)	8.02 (2.31)	9.9 (3.0)

Note. Camp Impact scores demonstrate participants' perceptions of camp's role in outcome development *and* the importance of these outcomes in everyday life. We created camp impact scores by calculating the square root of the sum of each variable squared (range of 0–14.14).

Table 3
Camp Outcomes by Setting

Outcome	Setting							
	Home	School	Tims Camps	Sports	Arts/Music	Religious	Work	Other
WTTNT	5.4%	8.7%	57.9%	2.8%	3.1%	1.5%	4.4%	3.1%
AFN	11.3%	2.4%	61.5%	.7%	.7%	0%	1.1%	5.5%
BPRES	11.8%	3.5%	47.0%	1.1%	1.1%	.9%	1.7%	7.3%
PERS	9.6%	10.9%	43.2%	1.5%	.2%	.9%	8.0%	4.5%
TEAM	3.4%	19.1%	35.4%	4.6%	.4%	.4%	15.6%	2.0%
DIV	6.7%	17.3%	34.3%	.4%	.4%	2.0%	8.7%	2.7%
REAL	3.8%	23.8%	33.4%	1.1%	.6%	.3%	6.1%	3.0%
CONF	5.1%	12.0%	39.4%	2.4%	.7%	.6%	7.1%	3.1%
LEAD	1.6%	10.9%	37.6%	2.0%	.7%	1.1%	13.3%	2.7%
IND	13.3%	9.3%	29.0%	.7%	.3%	.4%	10.4%	2.6%
EMP	9.3%	8.0%	31.7%	1.1%	.2%	2.4%	6.0%	2.4%
RESP	21.2%	9.5%	18.9%	0%	.2%	1.1%	8.3%	2.7%
IDEN	16.4%	6.4%	30.3%	.2%	.7%	1.1%	2.2%	6.2%
LWP	7.1%	6.7%	48.3%	.2%	.4%	0%	2.6%	1.8%
LES	6.9%	11.6%	21.6%	11.4%	.4%	.2%	.9%	2.9%
SREG	15.6%	6.9%	19.6%	.9%	.4%	.2%	4.4%	2.2%
ORG	9.6%	10.7%	16.1%	.4%	.2%	0%	6.0%	.4%
COCAR	4.5%	12.5%	14.5%	0%	.6%	0%	2.4%	2.0%

Note. Bold font indicates the highest for setting; shading, highest for outcome. The outcomes are arranged from highest average score to lowest average score.

Discussion

Little is known about the outcomes of attending camp among youth from low-income backgrounds and how multiple years of camp attendance may be related to outcomes. Results of this study build on previous research (e.g., Barcelona & Hartman, 2021; Richmond et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2021) and highlight the impact that a camp experience can have on the lives of youth from low-income backgrounds. Practitioners can use the results of this study to articulate alumni perceptions of the role that attending camp can have in the development of outcomes that are important in daily life. These results also provide evidence that can be used to advocate for funding for multiyear camp programs, as well as funding for year-round programs. These efforts may increase retention and provide youth with greater support for a successful transition to young adulthood and beyond.

Impact of Camp on Youth from Low-Income Backgrounds

Previous researchers have described the long-term impact of a camp experience as alumni reported developing the following skills at camp, and using those skills in their adult lives: appreciation for differences, being present, independence, perseverance, and responsibility (Richmond et al., 2020). In addition, when considering the long-term impact of camp on youth from low-income backgrounds, alumni reported similar outcomes as the general camp population, but highlighted the importance of camp in developing their confidence, independence, appreciation for

nature, and leisure skills (Warner et al., 2021). Our study supports and adds to these findings, as alumni reported developing similar skills at camp and feel that these outcomes are important in their daily lives. The development and importance of perseverance, appreciation for diversity, teamwork, and confidence were particularly salient for the alumni in this study.

In addition, participants who responded that camp was fairly critical to the development of any of the 18 outcomes (i.e., who selected 7 or higher), were asked to reflect on the primary setting they developed these outcomes in. Camp was the most critical setting for the development of all but one outcome (responsibility). These findings indicate that camp may play an important role in bridging the opportunity gap for youth from low-income backgrounds (NASEM, 2019). Many young people from this type of background do not have access to important out-of-school-time settings (Putnam, 2015; Tidmarsh, et al., 2022) that foster the development of foundational skills needed for thriving in young adulthood (Nagaoka, 2015). Although participants in the current study had the opportunity to select other OST settings (i.e., sports, arts/music, religious, other) when prompted about the primary setting where they developed skills, no other OST setting was more important to developing skills than camp. These findings indicate that camp may play an essential role in supporting youth from low-income backgrounds and that youth from these backgrounds may not have the opportunity to develop important skills elsewhere.

Benefits of Multiyear Camp Programming

Additionally, our findings extend previous research (e.g., Garst et al., 2016; Wilson & Sibthorp, 2019) finding that more time spent at camp yields greater benefits for youth. In particular, we found that alumni from low-income backgrounds who had attended more summers of camp reported higher outcomes than alumni who had attended camp for fewer years. The results suggest how attending multiple years of camp may impact outcomes important to alumni's lives years after attending camp. With additional years of program participation, youth may be more likely to attend (and graduate from) college or university. Considered alongside the association between years of camp attendance and outcomes, it is possible that the skills alumni reported having learned at camp may have laid the foundation for essential elements of thriving, such as college and career success (Nagaoka et al., 2015). The results of this study suggest that supporting youth to return to camp each summer benefits youth beyond their camp experience.

Implications for Practitioners

These findings have implications for practitioners who wish to serve youth from low-income backgrounds. In particular, practitioners can use the findings from this study to advocate for funding to support youth in many ways. Funding that assists youth from low-income backgrounds with a repeated camp experience is important and may yield increased outcomes and greater success in postsecondary education. However, it is possible that youth may not wish to (or have the ability to) attend camp for multiple years, given their developmental needs and interests, as well as systemic barriers associated with low income, such as obtaining summer employment or caring for siblings. Funding could begin to address these barriers through program development and additional financial support for families when youth are attending camp. Further, year-round programs and engagement initiatives may help youth stay engaged with camp, which has the potential to lead to greater year-to-year retention. Funding and in-kind donations for regular workshops related to gaining employment, accessing postsecondary institutions, developing social-emotional skills, or other topics may be beneficial during the nonsummer months to keep youth engaged and connected. This type of year-round support and engagement has been found to be beneficial to complement an in-camp experience for youth from low-income backgrounds (Smith et al., 2022). Finally, financial support in the form of scholarships or grants for postsecondary education may be impactful for former campers, as it is evident that once youth are able to enter college or university, skills they learned at camp provide a foundation for success.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has a few limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. Although we had a large initial participant pool, our response rate was low, due to the nature of the alumni email list. The email addresses on record for many alumni were those they used during their time as participants, which could have been from nearly

20 years ago. We suspect that many email addresses belonged to parents or had become inactive, meaning that a large proportion of alumni may not have received the survey link at all. Secondly, most alumni who responded may have done so because they had either particularly positive or negative experiences that they consequently recall, whereas many others may have chosen not to respond. In addition, the survey protocol, although used in other camp research, may be framed in a way that elicits a positive response bias. That is, given that the study is camp-based and questions led with camp as the setting, participants may be positively biased toward camp. This may be compounded with the nature of this camp experience being cost-free for participants. As a result, the alumni sample may not be representative of all alumni of the organization's camps or camps serving youth from low-income backgrounds more broadly. Cultivating a strong alumni network through regular communication may allow for more accurate representation of participants in retrospective and longitudinal research. Lastly, the data presented in this study are cross-sectional and retrospective, thus eliminating the potential for causal arguments to be made regarding the link between camp attendance and alumni reported outcomes. Researchers should seek opportunities to conduct longitudinal studies with control groups to better understand the links between camp attendance and outcomes.

Conclusion

Given the opportunity gap (NASEM, 2019) that creates limited access to quality youth programs, camp is a setting that youth from low-income backgrounds rarely have equitable access to. We found that alumni from low-income backgrounds reported having learned skills at camp that they often do not have the ability to learn elsewhere and using these skills in their lives beyond camp. With greater years of participation, alumni reported an increased role of camp in the development of outcomes, greater use of outcomes in their current lives, and increased rates of successful college or university completion, making repeated camp experiences particularly salient. Specifically, the current study suggests that a multiyear camp program can be an impactful experience for this population. Practitioners can use these findings to advocate for funding to support repeated camp experiences for youth from low-income backgrounds. While camp can be beneficial for all youth, it may be particularly important for youth who don't have other, comparable out-of-school-time opportunities.

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