Exploring African American Male Youth's Perceptions of Community Involvement Through 4-H Programs

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Abstract

Civic engagement research suggests that youths' involvement in their communities results in a number of positive personal and social attributes. However, among urban populations, there is still a dearth of research on their involvement and the impact of civic participation on their development. More importantly within these populations, there is limited understanding of how Black male youth engage within civic participatory spaces. Increasing but limited research on young Black male youth usually focuses on identity, participation in programs, and socioeconomic levels. Further understanding is needed as to the factors which influence and impact Black male youths' interests and actual participation in community and extracurricular activities. This paper explores data from urban African American high school male youth that include their perceptions and knowledge and attitudes toward being involved in their community through 4-H youth programs. The authors find that opportunities to learn a new skill and building professional portfolios assist these young Black males in their perception of being effective in their communities and making a difference for themselves.

Key words: *African American males, Black youth, community involvement, civic participation, extracurricular activities*

Introduction

While extensive research exists on community involvement and its impact on a young person's development, there still remains a dearth of literature on the impact of these types of experiences on minority youth. And the limited studies that do exist rarely focus exclusively on young Black males. Research has historically approached examining Black males from a deficit perspective (Howard, 2014) or they are included in the total dismal numbers of minority youth participants. The authors posit the need to approach Black male community engagement from a perspective that examines their perceptions and attitudes from 4-H youth development programs that have historically not had extensive participation among Black youth. In examining Black male involvement in 4-H, we hope to gain a better understanding of African American male youth perceptions about engaging within their communities and more importantly, how educators, practitioners and researchers can better support their civic participation in society.

Literature Review

Historical Areas of Black Positive Engagement

According to Stewart (2000), academic achievement, parent and youth aspirations, racial identity, and Black colleges are associated with African American strength and success in urban areas. They are often found in cultural and spiritual spaces within the Black community and offer a holistic approach to youth development. Spaces like these provide a safe haven and support system for families and individuals and help direct Black males to spaces of development and support. Historically, Black colleges have provided young adults with opportunities, representation, and success in urban communities. According to Hill (1997), historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) provide many services to enhance economic self-sufficiency and give young people access to a quality education that respects their culture and history. Black churches also continue to exert a positive impact on Black youth in urban communities.

Black churches also serve as places for religious practice, social activism, perspective on family, political activism, and as a place to release emotional stress from a society that is not always accepting of race and ethnicity (Moore et al., 2015). The early work of scholars such as Rubin et al. (1994) stress the importance of the role of the Black church in providing and nurturing positive opportunities for Black males from the inner city. Their work speaks to the extent of friends, family, and neighborhood in creating a supportive and positive system for Black youth, despite the negative narrative that some have shaped in the youth development field (Noguera,

2003; Webster, 2021; Woodland, 2016). Another area that has provided young Black males and, Black youth in general a safe haven is within the context of out-of-school time activities.

In the Black community, after-school programs and social clubs have long provided support for youth and families. Marsh et al. (2012) note that social clubs promote social networks, balance socioeconomic opportunities, and honor Black excellence. Many after-school programs provide the same opportunities as social clubs, though many also provide academic support, peer mentoring, and opportunities to work with and learn from professionals within their communities. These after-school settings typically engage Black youth in positive opportunities inside their community and teach them how to use their skills to help their community.

Perceptions of Community Involvement

Scholars Cunningham (1999); Swanson and colleagues (2002), investigate African American adolescent males' perceptions of their community resources and limitations and the impact of these experiences on their racial, social, and psychosocial development. Youth indicated that positive experiences with peers and other caring adults and teachers within community spaces such as Black churches, after-school programs, and social clubs, not only combat negative peer pressure but also provide a layer of protective factors which helps impact positive decision making for the long and short term. Cunningham notes that mentoring relationships, male identity programs, manhood weekend camping experiences, partnerships of school and community, and career development and identity programming as community involvement opportunities for Black males make a distinct different in their lives.

Fredricks and Eccles (2008) state that youth have unique opportunities to experience development in different contexts. By participating in community and extracurricular activities, youth can experience development and social growth through positive activities. Regarding 4-H youth participation in areas such as civic engagement, Lerner and Lerner (2013) note that youth involved in 4-H programs are twice as likely to be active and engaged in their local communities and four times more likely to make contributions to their communities than youth who are not in 4-H or other out-of-school time programs. Scholars such as Kirshner (2007) and Ginwright (2007) further expand on the role of youth civic identity in youth's development and specifically note the need for greater understanding of the participation of Black youth in civil society.

Concerning successful characteristics of after-school programs, Woodland (2008) investigated after-school programs most effective for young African American males. These programs

included the extracurricular activities model, mentoring model, and cultural rites of passage (ROP), which exposed youth to activities such as sports, academic assistance, computer technology, and the creative arts. Specific to the mentoring model, its essential components enabled a supportive relationship between young African American males and caring adults. Take, for example, programs such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Mentoring Brothers in Action, or 100 Black Men of America, Inc., which provide a space for quality mentoring between minority youth and Black males, respectively. Each of these organizations, while serving different populations, assist urban youth in areas of mitigating social risk and increasing self-esteem issues and academic performance (Marbley, 2006; Park et al., 2016). The mentoring aspect of providing positive role models to assist youth in low-income areas through critical thinking, positive reinforcement, and opportunities to be involved in social and community activities is central to their mission. Organizations such as these are critical to meeting the needs of urban underserved youth and providing them with the necessary skills toward their academic achievement and social and healthy well-being.

Based on this discussion, there are several core elements that we have found to be critical to successful after-school programs. The core elements needed in effective after-school programs for Black youth include adult–child relationships, flexibility, staff training and education, safe and secure environments, cultural components, family involvement, enriching curricula, one-on-one academic assistance, and rigorous and empirical evaluations (Woodland, 2008). We posit that the combination of these elements not only supports the growth of the young person but also provides a platform for engaging the family in their holistic development. We find that these elements are further supported by an ecological model that acknowledges the individual, community, and greater society.

African American Male Theory

We position our work within the context of Bush's (2013) African American Male Theory (AAMT) to examine developmental opportunities that Black male youth encounter in after-school clubs/programming. These encounters are attributed to interpersonal relationships, mentoring, participation in leadership positions, and understanding of culture. In contrast to other models such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which supports a myopic perspective and provides an inadequate understanding of Black males, we present this particular theory to understand better the social–cultural dynamics that impact Black male development. We approach our work through this dynamic ecological systems theory lens, allowing for more fluid interaction and the juxtaposition between abstract and concrete concepts, environments, time, and other phenomena experienced by the Black male.

Focusing on the lived experiences of African American males, the AAMT is grounded in six tenets:

1. The individual and collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, events, phenomena, and trajectories of African American boys' and men's lives are best analyzed using an ecological systems approach.
2. There is a uniqueness about being male and of African descent.
3. There are continuity and continuation of African culture, consciousness, and biology that influence African American boys' and men's experiences.
4. African American boys and men are resilient and resistant.
5. Race and racism coupled with classism and sexism profoundly impact every aspect of African American boys' and men's lives.
6. The focus and purpose of study and programs concerning African American boys and men is for the pursuit of social justice.

According to Bush (2013), the individual and collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, events, phenomena, and trajectories of African American boys' and men's lives are best studied in the context of an ecological systems approach, which is the first tenet. The African American Male Theory integrates Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory with five environmental levels including, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Belgrave & Brevard, 2015). Yet, it divides the microsystem into two parts that are intrinsically African American. The inner microsystem consists of components such as biology, personality, perceptions, and beliefs. In contrast to the first layer, the outer microsystem provides the space to examine an individual's family, peers, neighborhood, and school settings. The mesosystem is further developed into a sixth division by the addition of a subsystem. This system, known as the chronosystem, examines the dynamics of the changing family structure and segregation (Bush, 2013). According to Bush (2013), the subsystem allows African American males to acknowledge and reflect on the role and impact of spirituality, Black consciousness, and collectivism.

We believe that an ecological systems theory originated to analyze Black males' social development and integration in society is most appropriate for this study's population (Pocock et al., 2012). Other scholars such as Swanson et al. (2002) and Livingston and Nahimana (2006) concur that ethnic populations with unique lived experiences with issues such as racism and poverty should be studied from an ecological perspective that takes cultural nuances into account. Thus, the African American Male Theory model offers researchers a vantage point from which to analyze how positive youth development through community engagement can be

achieved using an ecological system theory framed by the Black male and their community's lived experiences.

Factors Hindering Youth Participation

Several factors can hinder youth participation in after-school or community engagement programs. The reasons for this can be mistrust or a lack of confidence in a program, financial constraints, or individual perceptions of what can be gained from a program. Even though these are important, there are other factors that can contribute to youth engagement, particularly marginalized youth in urban areas. Typically, these circumstances revolve around family, school contexts, and societal issues founded in systemic racism.

Belgrave and Brevard (2015) assert that family and household structures significantly influence African American males' life outcomes and well-being. They point out that societal issues impact many families, but those in marginalized communities struggle to cope with the stress of living in historically disregarded and economically forgotten neighborhoods. One consequence of living in systems of social disparities is the impact on their health and well-being. As a result of these living conditions, youth or their families may face numerous difficulties, limiting their capacity to participate in programs. These limitations might spill over into financial burdens, time constraints associated with job-related duties for parents or guardians, and even transportation barriers, all of which would limit a young person's access to these programs.

Academic achievement can also potentially play a role in preventing young Black men from participating in after-school or community programs. Zamani-Gallaher and Polite (2010) reported that Black male youth are disproportionately impacted by factors such as higher dropout rates than their peers and limited pathways to higher education, results of inadequate educational systems in these communities. Young Black males may be unable to participate in programs because of these issues, or they may be discouraged from participating due to a lack of representation. Givens et al. (2016) discuss the process and meaning of representation and its role on Black males who were able to reimagine themselves in all-Black manhood development courses within urban public schools. The study's findings noted that positive adult mentors for young Black males supported students in redefining Black manhood and attitudes towards expressing feelings, emotions, attachment, fatherhood, and identity (Givens et al., 2016). Black adult males' participation in community programs for youth is essential for the youth to acquire necessary life skills to grow into adulthood and to reinforce positive identity development in youth.

Kafele (2009) cites the need for positive Black male role models in young Black males' lives as a support component of their positive development. He notes that Black males who lack positive figures may seek meaning through activities that tempt them to engage in negative behaviors. A connection to other Black males supports Black male youths' social–emotional development through group processes (e.g., unity, brotherhood, trust). These experiences also enrich Black boys' racial identity, resulting in positive outcomes in other spheres of their lives (e.g., academic performance). For Black males, besides the typical sports and entertainment activities, taking part in programs using positive Black role models and promoting cultural development can encourage a greater sense of community involvement (Kafele, 2009). Taking part in programs promoting cultural development and positive Black role models can develop a greater sense of community involvement in Black males (Kafele, 2009).

When community engagement programs acknowledge the complexities of family and social society, they can provide a structure for the development of young Black males. A framework that is purposeful of the inclusion of cultural context (Belgrave & Allison, 2018; Franklin, 1994; Harris & Ferguson, 2010) further impacts the development of young Black males (Bush & Bush, 2019; Howard, 2014). Positive youth development for young African American males that is shaped through after-school programs using the African American Male Theory is necessary because it comprises their realities and life experiences. Being intentional in the formation of programs that speak to racialized young people helps to contextualize their experiences and deepen avenues of participation and personal growth and development.

4-H Involvement and Minority Youth

4-H is one of the largest youth development organizations in the United States, involving about 6 million youth (National 4-H Council, 2020). As a youth-based organization, it offers research-based after-school programs and activities that enhance young people's development across a variety of modalities (Shek et al., 2019). However, despite 4-H's noted positive efforts, minority participation remains low (Chilek, 2012; Smith, 2018). According to a study by Alston and Crutchfield (2009), 4-H programs do not adequately meet the needs of minorities, making retention strategies vital. Since most minority members of 4-H come from some urban areas (Alston & Crutchfield, 2009), their inclusion and participation in these programs remain a challenge.

Researchers (Alston & Crutchfield, 2009; Cano & Bankston, 1992; Russell & Heck, 2008; Schinker, 2010; Weikert et al., 2014) have explored factors associated with minority youth participation in 4-H youth development programs. Several significant findings related to access,

barriers, and parental involvement were found to be relevant. Although these factors contribute to meaningful conversations about minority youth participation, Black males were excluded from many of these studies. Focusing on young Black male participation in after-school programs requires taking into account various programmatic approaches to support their well-being and success. Thus, the authors adopt a theoretical framework that aids them in focusing on the program context and factors that lead to greater community engagement. With the AAMT model, we can investigate the essential components necessary to understand and support African American male participation in 4-H, including differences in community orientation, perceptions of needs, and individual motivations.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate African American high school males' perception and attitudes towards community involvement through their participation in 4-H programs. The questions for the survey given to participants were revised and adapted from the Prudential Spirit of Community Youth Survey on community engagement. The questions were meant to explore 4-H program perceptions of experiences reported by young Black male participants compared to those non-involved in similar settings. Three schools were selected based on African American demographic data to ensure a diverse representation of Black males. Based on the locations and the percentage of African American males enrolled in high schools in urban Pennsylvania counties, the target schools included two public schools and one charter school. A convenience sampling technique was used to recruit study participants. These participants were purposefully selected according to their unique perspectives. A target sample of 255 young African American males, ages ranging from 13 to 18, was recruited for this study.

Sample and Participants

The selection of study schools was based on the presence of 4-H youth programs within the select urban high schools. Sample size also was determined by the demographics of the area and school. The study sample of high-school-aged African American males was recruited with the assistance of an urban Cooperative Extension center and local school agricultural education program teachers. The institutional review board at The Pennsylvania State University approved the protocol for the study. Permission was obtained from each school's administration after sending them a recruitment letter and attending a research meeting. Participants were included in the study if they self-identified as male African Americans, ages 13 to 18, enrolled in a high school in an urban setting, and active or non-active participants in an after-school, extracurricular, and/or school-based 4-H enrichment program.

Procedures

Data collection started in late January 2017 at urban high schools and continued until April 2017. Parents were sent passive parental consent forms to obtain their agreement or refusal to allow their child to participate in the study. The researchers piloted a sample questionnaire with six to eight participants (ages 13 to 18) to assess the types of questions to use in the study and to ensure that data from the questions were valid and reliable. Suitability was determined by asking the participants for their impressions of the questionnaire during the validity testing. This process helped identify the main concerns and form the basis for the types of questions to be used in the study. After this process, the data collection phase began. All data collection procedures took place at the participants' schools. Data collection visits were scheduled with administration and teacher approval in the respective schools.

Survey

The questionnaire was composed of questions from the Prudential Spirit of Community Youth Survey (Wirthlin Group, 1995) used to assess participants' perceptions and experiences in community involvement and related programs. The survey contains 27 questions, including demographic questions, and uses a Likert-type scale of 1 to 5, with other questions focusing on student involvement in 4-H programs and activities. The items focus on *quality of life*, *perception of community involvement*, *knowledge and attitudes towards community involvement*, and *importance of* and *participation with community involvement*. The subscale on knowledge and attitudes towards community involvement items includes statements such as, "I think my school system makes it a point to highlight the importance of participating in community activities." The subscale on importance and participation in community involvement includes statements such as "Being involved in the community helps me to be a better person in school and at home." The questionnaire indicated a coefficient alpha of .378, measuring knowledge and attitudes indicated low reliability. In addition, the coefficient alpha of .623 indicated that there could be acceptable reliability for scales measuring importance and participation with community involvement.

Between 15 and 25 participants at a time completed the study instrument in a computer classroom using technology clickers to fully engage individuals in the questionnaires and assist with reading levels. Data collected through clickers were transferred to Excel and analyzed using SPSS. Prior to analysis, data were cleaned, and the reliability of Likert-type scale items was measured through Cronbach's alpha values. Then, descriptive statistics for frequencies for categorical and ordinal variables were analyzed. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used to describe results through means, standard deviations, and range of scores

(Creswell, 2014). Descriptive statistics and multiple ANOVA were used to determine whether community involvement and 4-H youth program experiences differed by grade, age, location, household size, SES, and the highest level of parents' education.

Results

Data were collected from African American high-school-aged males in three urban schools in Pennsylvania. In total, 255 students took the survey, while approximately 230 students' data were reported. About 45% of the survey participants were students from Public School A and Public School B, and the rest of the participants were students from Charter School C. Nearly all (96.7%) of the courses in which participating students were enrolled were grade level 9 to 12, but 3.3% of the participants' courses were advanced. Some students involved in the study in junior high or gifted/talented educational areas took high school courses that were classified as advanced subjects. About 31.8% ($n = 75$) of the respondents lived in urban pioneer, and about 27.1% ($n = 64$) lived in urban core. This shows both groups' participants resided in urban pioneer neighborhoods from similar urban areas. Urban pioneer areas are classified as neighborhoods in urban settings that are up-and-coming near downtown and suburbs, while urban core neighborhood areas are located downtown within the heart of major cities metro.

Demographic Characteristics

Seventy-five respondents (31.5%) reported that their parents had a high school degree. Fifty-seven (23.9%) students reported that their parents had a graduate degree, whereas 51 students' (21.4%) parents had a university degree. In response to a question about future career interests, 32.9% ($n = 78$) indicated digital media/technology/music whereas 5.5% ($n = 13$) indicated education/teaching. Respondents also considered STEM fields ($n = 66$, 27.8%) as the highest future career of their choice. A slight majority of participants ($n = 132$, 54.8%) were 15 to 16 years old, and four students were ages 19 to 20. Table 1 shows demographic characteristics of the participants from the two urban public schools (A and B) and one public charter school. The result shows the distribution of students aged 15-16, which was almost consistent in all three urban schools.

Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents based on the school in which they were enrolled and their involvement in 4-H programs. The majority of students were from Urban Charter School C. Table 1 also displays a breakdown of demographic characteristics by the two groups (*4-H program participants* and *non-4-H program participants*). The majority of students were between the ages of 15 and 16 in both groups. Relatively higher non-4-H respondents were in the ninth grade in their specific urban school. Results show that participants who

resided in urban pioneer neighborhoods were 4-H participants and only two of the youth residing in urban pioneer neighborhoods were non-4-H participants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample Participants

	Public School A	**Public School B**	**Charter School C**	**4-H-involved**	**Non-involved**
Age groups					
13-14	14 (20.0%)	1 (2.4%)	21 (16.3%)	14 (12.5%)	21 (17.8%)
15-16	30 (42.9%)	24 (57.1%)	78 (60.5%)	59 (52.7%)	66 (55.9%)
17-18	24 (34.3%)	17 (40.5%)	28 (21.7%)	36 (32.1%)	31(26.3%)
19-20	2 (2.9%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.6%)	3 (2.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Total	70 (100%)	42 (100%)	129 (100%)	112 (100%)	118 (100%)
Grade level					
Grade 9	30 (43.5%)	0 (0.0%)	67 (51.9%)	40 (36.0%)	54 (45.8%)
Grade 10	2 (2.9%)	22 (52.4%)	31 (24.0%)	21 (18.9%)	31 (26.3%)
Grade 11	18 (26.1%)	19 (45.2%)	11 (8.5%)	27 (24.3%)	18 (15.3%)
Grade 12	15 (21.7%)	0 (0.0%)	17 (13.2%)	17 (15.3%)	13 (11.0%)
Adv. Subject	4 (5.8%)	1 (2.4%)	3 (2.3%)	6 (5.4%)	2 (1.7%)
Total	69 (100%)	42 (100%)	129 (100%)	111 (100%)	118 (100%)
Neighborhood type					
Urban Core	22 (31.9%)	4 (10.3%)	38 (29.7%)	32 (28.6%)	30 (26.3%)
Urban Pioneer	23 (33.3%)	19 (48.7%)	33 (25.8%)	40 (35.7%)	32 (28.1%)
Suburbs	10 (14.5%)	7 (17.9%)	21 (16.4%)	15 (13.4%)	21 (18.4%)
Historical	7 (10.1%)	4 (10.3%)	15 (11.7%)	14 (12.5%)	11 (9.6%)
Rural/Urban	7 (10.1%)	5 (12.8%)	21 (16.4%)	11 (9.8%)	20 (17.5%)
Total	69 (100%)	39 (100%)	128 (100%)	112 (100%)	114 (100%)

Table 1. (continued)

	Public School A	Public School B	Charter School C	4-H-involved	Non-involved
Parents' level of education completed					
< High school	8 (11.6%)	6 (14.9%)	9 (7.0%)	13 (11.7%)	9 (7.6%)
High school	17 (24.6%)	15 (36.6%)	43 (33.6%)	31 (27.9%)	39 (33.1%)
Vo/tech/ trade	10 (14.5%)	3 (7.3%)	19 (14.8%)	5 (13.5%)	6 (13.6%)
Univ. degree	20 (29.0%)	9 (22.0%)	22 (17.2%)	28 (25.2%)	21 (17.8%)
Graduate degree	14 (20.3%)	8 (19.5%)	35 (27.3%)	24 (21.6%)	33 (28.0%)
Total	69 (100%)	41 (100%)	128 (100%)	101 (100%)	108 (100%)

Quality of Life in the Community

Students' responses to three items measuring the quality of life were grouped by the status of their involvement in 4-H programs (Table 2). The importance of this table is its ability to provide context of the perceptions young people have about their community (the place where they currently live) and provide a snapshot comparison between those perceptions held by young people involved in 4-H and those who were not involved. The majority of the students who were 4-H involved ($n = 59$, 53.6%) and non-involved ($n = 65$, 55.1%) in programs were somewhat satisfied to very satisfied with the way things were going in their own life. Results show that about 36.7% of the respondents in 4-H-involved ($n = 40$, 36.0%) and non-involved ($n = 44$, 37.3%) programs mentioned school-related issues and employment as two of the most significant problems youth face today. Results in Table 2 show an even distribution of respondents to a question related to the overall condition of their community. Nearly 45% indicated the overall condition of their community as "average."

Table 2. Questionnaire Response Summary: Quality of Life in the Community

Question 1: Personal satisfaction with own life

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Neutral	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
4-H-involved	24 (21.8%)	35 (31.8%)	27 (24.5%)	18 (16.4%)	6 (5.5%)
Non-involved	26 (22.0%)	39 (33.1%)	27 (22.9%)	12 (10.2%)	14 (11.9%)

Question 2: Single greatest problem youth face today

	School related/ employment	Violence substance abuse	Social problems	Depression	Parents
4-H-involved	40 (36.0%)	17 (15.3%)	15 (13.5%)	26 (23.4%)	13 (11.7%)
Non-involved	44 (37.3%)	28 (23.7%)	21 (17.8%)	13 (11.0%)	12 (10.2%)

Question 3: Overall rating of the condition of living in own community

	Very good	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor
4-H-involved	11 (9.8%)	25 (22.3%)	49 (43.8%)	16 (14.3%)	11 (9.8%)
Non-involved	11 (9.2%)	32 (26.9%)	56 (47.1%)	(14.3%)	1 (2.5%)

Maintaining Civic Engagement

Responses in Table 3 relate to three items measuring community involvement grouped by the status of their involvement in 4-H programs. Results showed that a relatively large number of students who are involved in 4-H programs (n = 63, 57.8%) felt community involvement was (somewhat to very) important compared to non-4-H-program-involved students (n = 48, 40.3%). About one third of males not involved in 4-H programs were neutral in their perception of community involvement and its importance. The opportunity to learn new skills and build a resume was the most frequent reason cited by both 4-H and non-4-H youth for participating in volunteer or community programs. When asked to identify the type of community activity in which they had recently participated, 4-H youth identified environmental activities more often than other types (making up about one third of the responses), whereas youth not involved in 4-H identified educational activities more often than other types (a little more than one third of the responses). Slightly more than 18% of youth in both groups indicated participation in charitable activities in the past 6 months.

Table 3. Questionnaire Response Summary: Maintaining Civic Engagement

Question 4: Feeling of being involved in the community					
	Very important	Somewhat important	Neutral	Not too important	Not at all important
4-H-involved	33 (30.3%)	30 (27.5%)	23 (21.1%)	17 (15.6%)	6 (5.5%)
Non-involved	13 (10.9%)	35 (29.4%)	40 (33.6%)	21 (17.6%)	10 (8.4%)
Question 5: Greatest reason for participation in volunteer/community programs					
	Requirement in school	Opportunity to learn new skill/build resume	Mandatory community involvement	Personal satisfaction/ confidence	Address problems in community/care for community
4-H-involved	30 (26.3%)	51 (44.7%)	12 (10.5%)	14 (12.3%)	7 (6.1%)
Non-involved	28 (23.5%)	50 (42.0%)	11 (9.2%)	17 (14.3%)	13 (10.9%)
Question 6: Types of community activities in which they participated in the past 6 months					
	Charitable	Educational	Environmental	Political/ governmental	Religious/ cultural
4-H-involved	20 (18.5%)	28 (25.9%)	36 (33.3%)	5 (4.6%)	19 (17.6%)
Non-involved	22 (18.8%)	45 (38.5%)	23 (19.7%)	6 (5.1%)	21 (17.9%)

Knowledge and Attitudes Toward Community Involvement

The results in Table 4 present the distribution of students' responses to four questions related to knowledge of and attitudes toward community involvement. The table also presents the means and mean difference test, t-test results for the four items by two groups: students who were involved in 4-H programs, and students who were not involved in 4-H programs. Results showed significant mean differences between the two groups for the statements: "I think my school system makes it a point to highlight the importance of participating in community activities/programs" and "I think there is a significant amount of information available regarding community service activities for youth in urban areas."

Table 4. Questionnaire Response Summary: Knowledge and Attitudes Toward Community Involvement

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	N	Mean	SD	Mean difference	t	p
I think there is a strong social and cultural acceptance of being involved in the community with youth in urban areas.											
4-H-involved	14	13	46	21	16	110	3.11	1.184			
	12.7%	11.8%	41.8%	19.1%	14.5%				0.15	1.08	.28
Non-involved	11	13	72	16	7	119	2.96	0.924			
	9.2%	10.9%	60.5%	13.4%	5.9%						
I think my school system makes it a point to highlight the importance of participating in community activities.											
4-H-involved	34	23	23	23	6	109	2.49	1.281			
	31.2%	21.1%	21.1%	21.1%	5.5%				-0.38	-2.33	.02**
Non-involved	19	25	37	29	9	119	2.87	1.178			
	16.0%	21.0%	31.1%	24.4%	7.6%						
I think there are many community service organizations that provide activities for youth in my area.											
4-H-involved	13	28	39	22	11	113	2.91	1.138			
	11.5%	24.8%	34.5%	19.5%	9.7%				0.18	1.24	.22
Non-involved	20	30	33	30	4	117	2.73	1.127			
	17.1%	25.6%	28.2%	25.6%	3.4%						
I think there is a significant amount of information available regarding community service activities for youth in urban areas.											
4-H-involved	12	21	44	28	6	111	2.95	1.05			
	11.5%	24.8%	34.5%	19.5%	9.7%				0.23	1.71	0.09*
Non-involved	15	28	50	20	3	116	2.72	0.98			
	12.9%	24.1%	43.1%	17.2%	2.6%						

*p < .10. **p < .05.

Discussion

In examining Black male involvement in 4-H, we hope to gain a better understanding of how Black youth are engaging and more importantly, how educators, practitioners and researchers can better support their civic participation in society. From the collected data, we examined the perceptions and attitudes regarding community involvement from program respondents.

Perception of Quality of Life in Urban Communities

Another important focus in the results was the *perception of community involvement* among young Black males participating in 4-H programs compared to those not involved in these programs. The findings determined that young Black male youth who are active participants in 4-H programs are more likely to feel that community involvement is essential compared to young Black males who do not participate in 4-H programs. Fredricks and Eccles (2008) stated that by participating in school-based clubs and programs, all young people have the chance to build the academic and leadership skills needed for their future.

The AAMT's underpinnings promote the concept that programs that include the collective experiences of African American boys' might contribute to their participation in programs. Citizenship is a major focus point within 4-H programs and has been noted as a cornerstone of youth's positive development (Zaff et al., 2010). Maintaining civic engagement, service within the community, civic education about governmental processes and structure, leadership, and character development all play a significant role in developing youth's full potential within 4-H programs (National 4-H Council, 2020). Community organizations focused on service are often a place where youth can become engaged and have a voice to change their community, especially those in urban settings. Hibert (2000) suggested that urban youth involved in community youth organizations, like 4-H, discover a sense of identity and connection to their community central to the subsystem levels of the AAMT. Jones and colleagues (1993) also found that mentoring and community involvement programs among young Black males were central to Black fraternities and other cultural, social groups and clubs.

Hibert (2000) noted that extracurricular activities and community-focused programs can shape the future of young urban males through experiences and understanding of the way young Black males self-identify. Hansen and colleagues (2003) examined African American high-school-age males' interest in after-school education and enrichment programs, where sports were determined to be the most popular activity. Activities such as sports and music build bonds between youth, their parents, schools, and the community, further supporting a young person's holistic development.

Community programs, other than 4-H, in which young Black males can participate, include mentoring programs such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, rites-of-passage programs, Urban League programs, and even workforce unemployment prevention programs, all of which embrace and incorporate the social and cultural development of youth within their communities. Other related programs, known as Strong African American Families Programs, fit with student interests and give young Black males a sense of belonging as well as a chance to give back to their community. Programs such as the Aban Aya Youth Project, which focuses on social development and school-community development; The Boys Forum, which focuses on masculine-identity and development; and the Brothers of Ujima, whose cultural lens is structured to support Black males' ethnic identity, while addressing problematic behaviors, all offer opportunities for culturally responsive programming and more impactful support for youth.

Black male leadership and community engagement programs offer coping and support strategies, which also help Black male youth in urban areas increase their life skills and citizenship experiences through structured activities focused on building academic achievement (Belgrave & Brevard, 2015). These programs offer more guidance on building and developing young Black males to understand academic advancement; employment and career readiness; leadership development; prevention and identity formation; and cultural knowledge, including arts and music, sports, and mentoring. The strengths-based model for Black youth is incorporated in most of the above-mentioned programs focusing on understanding the qualities of young Black males and preparing programs that can build their awareness on society, community, social and family problems, and racial socialization (Nicolas et al., 2008).
Based on study findings, young Black male students involved in 4-H youth programs differ from non-involved 4-H young Black male students only by their *knowledge and attitudes toward community involvement*.

Students who do not participate in 4-H programs are more in agreement with *thinking that their school system highlights the importance of participating in community activities.* Woodland (2008) stated that urban youth community programs are focused on socioeconomic issues that plague young Black males in their community. Without programs like these, young male African Americans may be prompted to join other programs or activities that are more suited to support their growth and development. This point is uniquely supported by the sixth tenet of the AAMT, which notes that the focus and purpose of programs concerning African American boys and men should have a social justice lens. In this particular case, young men's ability to be involved in 4-H programs that have a community involvement focus might have more appeal for young

Black males. In addition, high unemployment rates, single-parent families, unstructured after-school time, and limited parental involvement as well as low rates of parental involvement can impact young men's participation in positive after-school experiences (Woodland, 2008). In spite of the possibility of increased after-school activities among Black males, Belgrave and Brevard (2015) mentioned teachers and other school staff may discriminate against some young Black males due to disruption or poor academic achievement or a lack of cultural instruction.

A study by Francois and colleagues (2012) reported that underserved urban Black male youth who participated in community youth programs such as 4-H demonstrated better outcomes academically compared to Black male youth who did not participate. In the current study, both groups (4-H youth and non-4H-youth participants) seem to be aware of community service activities; however, young Black male students who participate in 4-H programs are more aware of these community involvement programs and activities in their urban setting, while non-involved 4-H young Black male students locate more information about community activities through their schools' system. However, the results show that the two groups (young Black male students involved in 4-H and those not involved in 4-H) seem not to differ in their responses to questions related to *importance* and *participation* in community involvement.

Conclusion and Program Implications

Current studies focus on the needs for programming in urban areas but do not fully explain avenues to maintain the interest and recruitment of young Black males in urban settings. This study's findings support the current literature by showing the barriers to participation and the need for new effective programming methods in urban areas, specifically with Black males. The current study also shows that youth in 4-H programs are gaining some positive experiences by participating in specific programs compared to those who are not involved. 4-H program educators and administration, as well as cooperative extension leaders, will benefit from the results of this study by gaining a more in-depth perspective of young Black males' views on quality of life in the community, maintaining civic engagement, and knowledge and attitudes toward community involvement.

In assisting practitioners and educators to become more astute in their understanding of the complex issues facing Black male youth and their participation in such programs, we offer a few pointers. First, youth educators and 4-H extension program coordinators should provide more leadership opportunities for young Black males through clubs and other 4-H programming. Opportunities for leadership could help diminish (or eliminate) the stereotypical negative

perceptions people have of young Black males as being a threat to society. Second, Black youth should be able to engage in activities of interest to them. Often 4-H youth programs are developed and planned based on the needs of the community; however, educators should take the next step of incorporating more urban youths' academic and social interests, aspirations, and self-need into the development of programs in urban settings. In the current study, all participants (4-H youth and non- involved youth participants) mentioned music, sports, technology, STEM, business, and entrepreneurship as topics of interest, showing their curiosity and outlook in life. Third, exploring more urban collaborations and partnerships in urban areas can foster an understanding and appreciation for different economic circumstances African American male youth may encounter. Consideration should be given to national youth-serving agencies, independent agencies, minority community agencies, and local HBCUs if located in their communities. Connections to these groups could increase the development and recruitment of volunteers while enriching the programs offered.

In order for educators to better value and understand the spaces of African American males and Black youth in general, cultural sensitivity training must be developed to assist in their cultural awareness and development. Training, awareness, and discussions on understanding the role educators play in the lives of African American males and gaining more insight into particular vital values for this audience in urban settings are critical to their serving in these roles. 4-H practitioners must also develop programs and strategies that include both parents and African American youth to strengthen parental bonds and communication between parent and child through youth and adult partnerships. Understanding the family structure of young Black males and ways to honor their realities are also essential in meeting the needs of this particular urban audience. The integration of the practitioner into these spaces must come from a place of humbleness and cultural sensitivity in order to support the development of young African American males fully.

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