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Introduction

Millions of youth in North America attend summer camps each year. Researchers have documented the potential positive developmental outcomes associated with camp (Flynn et al., 2019; Gagnon et al., 2021; Gillard & Watts, 2013; Warner et al., 2021); however, some youth are required to depart from camp before the end of their session for differing reasons. Leaving camp early may have a negative impact on youth from low-income backgrounds because these youth often have access to fewer structured youth development programs each year compared to their more affluent peers (National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2019). Little is known about why youth are required to depart camp early and what can be done to address this issue. In this study, we sought to address this gap by examining one summer of administrative data from a large, multisite, not-for-profit camp organization serving youth from low-income backgrounds. We also reflect on the improvement efforts the organization implemented based on our findings.

Current Youth Developmental Landscape

Current events (e.g., mass-shootings, politics, racial unrest) and the growing influence of social media are constant collective stressors for many young people today (Minhas et al., 2021; Pease et al., 2022; Salerno & Boekeloo, 2022). Individual challenges and experiences also contribute to negative thoughts and feelings that impact overall mental, emotional, and social states. This downturn in youth well-being (e.g., Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2023; Wolf & Schmitz, 2024) has led many researchers and practitioners to focus more on understanding and supporting youth in holistic ways, acknowledging the complexity and interrelated elements of nonphysical health (e.g., US Department of Education [USDE], 2021). For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention assert that mental health is comprised of emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023), while the USDE adopt a framework of three critical components of mental health: social, emotional, and behavioral health (Chafouleas, 2020). Although many terms are used, including mental, social, emotional, and behavioral health, researchers and practitioners are referring to the same idea of nonphysical health.

Within the summer camp field, many have begun to refer to nonphysical health as mental, emotional, and social health, or “MESH” (e.g., Alliance for Camp Health, 2023; Owens et al., 2021). In keeping with this trend—being responsive to industry practice—and for clarity throughout, we also use the term MESH; however, we recognize that although the researchers cited may not have used this exact term, they are referencing many elements of the same concept. We also acknowledge that MESH is not a theory or a measurable construct, but rather a framework comprised of multiple interrelated, mutually reinforcing, and compounding components.

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted youth well-being and MESH (US Department of Education, 2021), and as the world continues to transition out of quarantined life, researchers and educators have begun to document the compounding effect of current events and the pandemic on youth well-being (National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2020; US Department of Education, 2021). These effects are exacerbated for youth from low-income backgrounds given their already taxed mental, social, emotional, and physical needs due to fewer financial resources and limited access to supportive programs (National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2023b; Statistics Canada, 2020; US Department of Education, 2021).

Decreased MESH puts youth at risk of immediate and long-term mental and physical health challenges (National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2023a; O'Connor et al., 2011). For example, decreased MESH can lead to anxiety, depression, and decreased physical health (National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2023a). In the long-term, decreased MESH can negatively impact emotional adjustment, the transition to adulthood, physical health, and overall quality of life (Diener & Chan, 2011; O'Connor et al., 2011).

One solution to addressing decreased MESH is to bolster positive youth development (PYD) programs that are known to support social-emotional learning. PYD is an approach to working with young people that emphasizes strengths, rather than deficits, aims to support youth thriving, and recognizes the mutually reinforcing elements of young people and the settings they participate in (Lerner et al., 2020). High-quality PYD settings, including out-of-school-time programs, include opportunities for structured activities and interactions between youth and adults, a supportive environment, and time for meaningful and reflective engagement (Frazier et al., 2021).

A growing body of research suggests that camp is a setting for PYD and can be a high-quality out-of-school-time setting for youth (e.g., Gillard & Watts, 2013; Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2018; Warner et al., 2021). For example, Povilaitis and Tamminen (2018) used a common PYD approach to reflect on and identify characteristics of camp that support PYD. Further, Gagnon et al. (2020) linked camp attendance to social-emotional learning, and Warner et al. (2021) suggested attending camp could lead to the development of important life skills. Scholars have also identified the characteristics of camp that support development.

For example, Sibthorp et al. (2020) and Wilson et al. (2019) suggested that meaningful relationships with staff, the opportunity to have new experiences, opportunities to practice social skills in a supportive environment, and being away from home can foster growth at camp. Further, Povilaitis (2019) suggested that the absence of technology can be an important characteristic of the camp experience that supports social-emotional learning.

It is clear from the literature that staff are a critical element in youth programs (Lerner et al., 2020), including summer camp (Sibthorp et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2019). Sibthorp and colleagues (2020) asked camp alumni to identify the active ingredients of their learning and why those ingredients were important to their learning at camp. Camp alumni reported that staff were the most important ingredients in their learning as they were role models and teachers/facilitators and were a support to campers (Sibthorp et al., 2020).

Many camps are staffed by young adults who have also faced significant MESH challenges throughout the pandemic (US Department of Education, 2021). These young staff may not be fully equipped to meet their own needs, let alone the needs of youth they support. This widened gap in youth needs and a staff's abilities to help themselves and others creates a disparity in youth's success at camp. Lubeznik-Warner and Rosen (2023) found that when camp staff feel their employer supports their own MESH needs (these authors included spiritual, making it MESSH), they are better equipped to support the needs of youth under their care. A holistic health and wellness strategy at camps includes an intentional focus on supporting campers' and staff's MESH needs (Owens et al., 2021).

Youth from Low-Income Backgrounds and Camp

Given increases in inflation and job instability, many families in North America have limited financial resources to meet their basic needs (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023b). For example, a national report found that nearly one million children, or one in eight children in Canada (about 14 percent) are living in poverty (Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty, 2022). However, this rate is believed to be much higher as temporary pandemic financial relief benefits prevented over half a million youth under the age of eighteen from falling into poverty in 2020 (Campaign 2000, 2022). Without these benefits, the Canadian youth poverty rate would have been nearly 21 percent (Campaign 2000, 2022). Similarly, the 2021 youth poverty rate in the United States was about 15 percent, or one in six children (US Census Bureau, 2023), indicating the pervasive nature of poverty among youth in North America. For youth, the impacts of living in low-income circumstances are numerous and include differences in brain development, decreases in short and long-term physical, social, emotional, and mental health, as well as food insecurity and unstable housing (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023b).

Additionally, youth from low-income backgrounds often experience an opportunity gap regarding access to high-quality developmental programming (Frazier et al., 2021; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; 2023b), including camp. In turn, youth from low-income backgrounds may be less likely to experience the potential social-emotional outcomes associated with camp attendance. Not only can camp offer youth from low-income backgrounds similar experiences as their peers from more affluent backgrounds (Warner et al., 2021), it can be a safe place where their basic needs are met and that continues to be important in their lives years later (Povilaitis et al., 2023). Alumni from camps serving youth from low-income backgrounds report that overnight camp experiences provide secure and stable shelter, consistent meals, and supportive and caring relationships with nonfamilial young adults (Povilaitis et al., 2023).

Beyond basic needs, Richmond et al. (2022) focused on understanding why parents send their children to camp. These researchers found that parents with fewer financial resources wanted similar outcomes from a camp experience for their children as parents from more affluent backgrounds. These outcomes

included fun and belonging, intrapersonal development, and interactive learning (Richmond et al., 2022). However, parents with fewer financial resources valued opportunities for their child to work with others and engage in the camp environment more than affluent parents (Richmond et al., 2022). Thus, efforts to support youth from low-income backgrounds to be successful and reap the benefits of camp are of great need.

Attending camp can be costly and inaccessible to youth from low-income backgrounds (Browne et al., 2018). Despite this potential barrier, some youth from low-income backgrounds have opportunities to attend camp for free or at substantially reduced rates (Povilaitis et al., 2023). PYD programs may be beneficial for youth from low-income backgrounds, as the consequences of unstructured time may be profound and needs are high among these young people (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023b).

Why Youth Depart Programs Early

A common setting where youth may be required to depart early or to not attend is school. Most school suspensions or expulsions are disciplinary in nature (e.g., Cruz & Rodl, 2018). There appear to be two main categories of factors linked to youth being sent home from school: individual student and school level.

Individual student factors often include gender, disability status, race, and socioeconomic background. For example, scholars have identified that males are more frequently suspended than females (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Hemphill et al., 2014). Similarly, youth with disabilities, broadly defined, have increased rates of suspension compared to their peers who do not have a disability (Sullivan et al., 2014). Youth of color are more frequently suspended than White youth (Skiba et al., 2011) and youth from lower socioeconomic statuses are at higher risk of being suspended than their more affluent peers (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011).

School-level factors related to expulsion exist at many levels within institutions. Scholars have linked expulsion to factors such as school size, staff-to-student ratios, access to resources (e.g., financial resources or behavioral support workers), and adequate staff training on behavior management to expulsion (e.g., Miller et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2001; Snell et al., 2012). Overall school culture and work environment are also related to expulsion (Carlson et al., 2012). When youth are required to leave or are unable to complete programs, regardless of the reason, they are unlikely to benefit from the developmental setting. Given that school and camp are both common structured youth development settings, there may be similar consequences for missing camp as there are for missing school.

There are many potential reasons why youth depart camp early. Some reasons may include medical issues, MESH challenges, homesickness, or behavior. In some cases, youth recognize that camp is not the best place for them and voluntarily ask to leave early. Other times, camp staff identify that youth may not be successful in completing a full camp session for various reasons and ask them to return home before the end of a camp session. Regardless of who initiates an early departure, this loss of opportunity may be detrimental for youth from low-income backgrounds, given that they may not otherwise have access to such programming (Putnam, 2015). Additionally, leaving youth programs early may contribute to negative feelings for youth who experience other systemic barriers, such as reduced access to high-quality programs. Although many youth leave camp early each summer, relatively little is known about the reasons why. A better understanding of the reasons why youth depart early may help practitioners address this critical issue.

Current Study

This study is grounded in the concept of continuous improvement, which is the process of systematically and repeatedly using information to inform changes (Browne et al., 2015). Continuous improvement typically occurs over a four-stage cycle, such as the plan-do-study-act cycle (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017) or the prepare-assess-plan-improve cycle (American Camp Association, n.d.). Continuous improvement initiatives are common in youth development settings such as schools (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017), after-school programs (e.g., Baldwin et al., 2015), and summer camps (Bialeschki, 2008; Browne et al., 2015; Love, 2022). Improvements may be made to various aspects of a program, including structural considerations, human resources, and program practices. Typically, continuous improvement efforts use outcomes and experience data from participant perspectives; however, this work can be completed with any type of data, including program observations, staff assessments, and administrative records (American Camp Association, n.d.).

To the best of our knowledge, researchers have yet to examine the individual or camp-level factors linked to youth who depart early from camp. Given the potential practical implications of this research for both youth participants and camp professionals, including opportunities for continuous improvement of youth camp experiences, we sought to address this gap. The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to identify predictive factors associated with the likelihood of youth departing early from camp; and (2) to identify predictive factors associated with the reasons for youth departing early.

Methods

Data

To address our study aims, we used de-identified administrative data from a large, multisite, not-for-profit summer camp organization serving youth from low-income backgrounds. The organization provides camp experiences to youth at no cost. Youth may attend camp for a ten-day session each summer for four summers as part of the multiyear program.

For this study, we used data from youth camper applications collected before camp in 2022 and records documented by staff during and after the summer of 2022. Since the organization administrators did not collect these for research purposes, the data have been de-identified, the study did not qualify as human subjects research, and Institutional Review Board approval was not required.

Data for summer 2022 included a total of 2,011 youth campers (M age = 14.84; SD = 1.88; min. = 11; max. = 18) who had attended one of the six camps operated by the organization during the summer of 2022. About half of the participants identified as White and about half identified as female. In this sample, a total of 123 youth departed camp early for nonphysical health reasons during the summer of 2022, yielding an early departure rate of 6 percent. Given the intention of the study to identify factors that could benefit from continuous improvement efforts, specifically those related to MESH, we excluded physical health cases ($n = 55$) from analyses. Additionally, based on the records used for analysis, we were unable to determine which physical-health instances were related to COVID-19 and which cases were unrelated. Camp-based information included the number of staff social workers per session and camper to counselor ratio.

Analysis

To answer our research questions, we used data about individual youth participants and camps. Data about individual youth participants included age; gender (girl = *yes* [1] or *no* [0]); race (camper of color = *yes* [1] or *no* [0]; and number of preexisting health concerns (i.e., behavioral, developmental, mental health). For all statistical analyses, we used only those cases with complete demographic information ($n = 1,250$). We used this listwise deletion approach given our inability to make inferences about demographic information based on existing camper records, thus rendering data-imputation techniques inappropriate (Zhang et al., 2022). We also examined data about campers that were reported by camp staff, including whether a youth left camp early and the reason why the youth left early (i.e. behavior, family emergency, homesick, mental health, other). Data about camps included the number of licensed camp social workers on staff during each session (social worker = 0–3) and camper-to-counselor ratios (3:1 or more = 1).

To answer research question one, we used a binomial logistic regression to determine if the predictors (i.e., youth and camp) were related to the likelihood of youth participants leaving camp early. We used data from participants who departed camp early and those who did not depart early for this analysis. To answer research question two, we used a multinomial logistic regression to determine if the predictors (i.e., youth and camp) increased the likelihood of youth participants leaving camp early for different reasons. This analysis only used data from youth who departed camp early. In multinomial logistic regressions, one of the categories is the reference group to which the other categories are compared. This means that the estimated effects can be interpreted similarly to binomial regressions, in which the odds ratios describe the likelihood of a value compared to the reference group. To examine all possible comparisons of reasons why youth were leaving camp early, we changed the reference group across three separate multinomial logistic regressions. To reduce our type one error rate due to familywise analyses, we reduced our alpha of .05 to .01.

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors associated with the likelihood of youth departing camp early and the factors associated with the reasons why youth leave camp prior to the end of their program session. Our results suggest that individual and camp-level factors were associated with why youth departed early. Our results also point toward areas of focus to better support youth before, during, and after camp. We present the results for each research question below.

Research Question One

Research question one focused on understanding the individual and camp factors associated with the likelihood of youth leaving camp early. Table 1 presents information about how many campers left each camp during each session.

We found that youth were 52 percent more likely to leave early for each documented category of behavioral, developmental, or mental health concern on their application paperwork before attending camp. We also found that youth were about half as likely to leave early per camp social worker present during the camp session and about 120 percent more likely when there were higher camper-to-counselor ratios (i.e., 3:1 or above). Age, identity as a girl, and identity as a person of color were not significant predictors of the likelihood of departing camp early compared to not departing camp early. See table 2 for full model estimate.

Table 1. Number of Campers Who Departed Early, Social Workers, and Counselors to Camper Ratios Per Location and Session

Camp		Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6	Total
	Total campers who departed early	2	20	41	16	31	13	123
Camp A	Number of campers	-	4	15	7	3	1	30
	Social workers	-	0	0	1	2	2	
	Camper to counselor ratio	-	< 3:1	3:1 +	3:1 +	3:1 +	3:1 +	
Camp B	Number of campers	2	2	2	3	13	-	22
	Social workers	0	1	1	1	1	-	
	Camper to counselor ratio	3:1 +	3:1 +	3:1 +	3:1 +	3:1 +	-	
Camp C	Number of campers	-	7	16	4	8	6	41
	Social workers	-	1	1	1	2	2	
	Camper to counselor ratio	-	3:1 +	3:1 +	3:1 +	3:1 +	3:1 +	
Camp D	Number of campers	-	0	3	0	-	-	3
	Social workers	-	2	2	2	-	-	
	Camper to counselor ratio	-	< 3:1	3:1 +	3:1 +	-	-	
Camp E	Number of campers	-	5	4	1	7	6	23
	Social workers	-	2	2	2	2	2	
	Camper to counselor ratios	-	< 3:1	< 3:1	3:1 +	3:1 +	3:1 +	
Camp F	Number of campers	0	2	1	1	-	-	4
	Social workers	0	0	0	0	-	-	
	Camper to counselor ratio	< 3:1	< 3:1	< 3:1	< 3:1	-	-	

Note: N = 2,011 total campers in summer 2022

Table 2. Logistic Regression of Factors Predicting Retention

Predictor	M	SD	%	B	SE	z value	e ^b
Age	14.66	1.91		-.09	.07	-1.38	.91
Girl				-.07	.25	-.27	.94
Camper of color			40	-.42	.27	-1.57	.66
Number of precamp behavioral, developmental, or mental health	.28	.57		.42	.18	2.35*	1.52
Number of camp social workers	1.35	.75		-.66	.18	-3.67***	.52
Camper-to-counselor ratio			82	.79	.40	1.98*	2.20

Note: n = 1,201; * = p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001

Research Question Two

Research question two was focused on understanding the individual and camp factors related to the reasons (table 3) why youth depart camp early. The listed reason for leaving early is the primary reason that was selected when the camper departure record was created. The $n = 123$ used throughout this study does not include any cases in which *physical health reasons* was selected as the primary reason for departure.

Our results suggest several statistically significant results. The results suggested that campers who identified as girls compared to campers who did not identify as girls were nearly sixteen times more likely to leave early for mental health reasons than for behavioral reasons ($B = 2.77, SE = .99, e^b = 15.95, p < .01$). We also found that campers with more documented behavioral, developmental, or mental health concerns listed on their application before attending camp were nearly six times as likely to depart camp early for a mental health reason rather than a behavioral reason ($B = 1.76, SE = .68, e^b = 5.83, p < .01$). The other multinomial did not yield statistically significant differences in rates of leaving camp early (when adjusting alpha = .01).

Table 3. Nonhealth Reasons Youth Left Camp Early

Reason for Leaving	%	<i>n</i>
Behavior	34	42
Homesickness	26	32
Mental health	24	30
Other (nonhealth reason, e.g., family emergency)	15	19

Discussion

This was an exploratory study about the factors linked to why youth depart camp early. We found that youth with documented behavioral, developmental, or mental health concerns were more likely to leave early. We also found that youth were more likely to leave early when fewer camp social workers were present. There were also differences in the factors that predicted the reasons why some youth departed early compared to other youth. Based on the results from this study, there are multiple implications for continuous improvement efforts, many of which we have implemented. Below, we discuss findings and associated implications for practice. Future research should use designs that support causal inferences based on improvement efforts.

Our results align and contrast with literature about school suspension and expulsion. Our results related to youth with documented behavioral, developmental, or mental health concerns on their application paperwork being more likely to depart from camp early align with literature about youth with disabilities being more likely to be suspended from school (Sullivan et al., 2014). Unlike previous studies in the school setting (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Hemphill et al., 2014), we did not find that participants' gender identities were predictive of the likelihood of leaving camp early. We did find that certain gender identities were more likely to depart early for specific reasons. (Girl-identifying youth were more likely to leave camp early for mental health reasons than behavioral reasons compared to non-girl-identifying youth.) Additionally, our results align with literature about the structural elements of school (e.g., student-to-teacher ratios, access to social workers) that have been linked to suspension or expulsion (e.g., Miller et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2001; Snell et al., 2012). In particular, more social workers present at camp decreases the likelihood of youth departing early.

Potential Implications for Practice

In addition to aligning with the broader literature about young people leaving youth development settings early, this study provides some information that can help youth-serving organizations more holistically support youth in attending and completing programs. Camps may consider employing social workers to conduct initial camper screening and provide specialized support prior to and during the camp experience for youth that may come to camp with additional needs related to certain behaviors, mental health, or intellectual disabilities. Additionally, camps may consider reviewing staffing ratios and work schedules for specialized staff and implementing staff training and programmatic changes to better support all youth. Camp has generally been reported as a positive experience for youth (e.g., Sibthorp et al., 2020), and studies have shown the developmental benefits for youth from low-income backgrounds who attend camp (e.g., Povilaitis et al., 2023). Supporting these youth to successfully complete a full camp session may have important long-term impacts for their MESH, overall well-being, and development.

Staffing Considerations

A key element to a youth's success in a camp experience is how prepared and supported they are to attend. For youth with documented behavioral, developmental, or mental health concerns, this requires precamp communications, openness, and honesty between camp staff and families. A camp social worker who is trained in this area and able to effectively understand the camper's needs and the camp's ability to appropriately meet the camper's needs at camp is essential. Additionally, social workers and other camp staff may work directly with parents to provide strategies to prepare youth for camp before the experience (e.g., visiting the camp property before attending their session, encouraging sleepovers at friends and extended family's homes, taking social media breaks, packing for camp together). Many camps now consider various models to support camper and staff MESH needs during the camp season, such as employing licensed social workers (Wright et al., 2022), soliciting social workers' services in exchange for camp fees for their children, partnering with universities to offer social work summer internship experiences at camp, or using telehealth services (e.g., Owens et al., 2021).

Our study results indicate the importance of employing a certified social worker during the summer season and year-round to support youth before camp. Recognizing that many camp organizations have minimal year-round staffing, prioritizing a social worker during the summer and considering ways to extend that contract on a part-time or contract basis in the spring and fall months may be fruitful. Alternatively, if the organization is large enough and serves high camper numbers or numerous campers with documented concerns, multiple social workers during the summer and nonsummer months may be beneficial. In this role, a social worker would provide MESH support for all youth, through precamp and postcamp communication, and summertime support. A social worker with camp experience would be able to have honest conversations with families about their child's needs before attending camp and help determine if camp is a good fit. In some cases, precamp conversations may indicate that a camper is not ready to attend overnight camp, or is not suited for the specific camp experience. In this case, resources may be provided to support the family in finding another day camp or specialized overnight camp program, for example a medical specialty camp or camp serving youth with unique needs. Similarly, if a child had challenges at camp, this person could connect with the youth after the experience to discuss any supports that can be put in place for future seasons or to recommend another program that may be a better fit.

Further, to best support youth in completing a camp experience, staffing ratios and abilities must be considered. Camps should review staffing ratios of campers to counselors and other youth-facing staff (i.e., activity leads, junior managers), as well as ratios of campers to camp social workers. Reviewing data about when behavioral issues arise and when campers depart may encourage camp leadership to increase staffing ratios around key times. For example, employing an additional social worker for a few days at

the beginning of each camp session to act as a liaison with home to learn about transferable strategies to support individual youth may be beneficial. During this time, the social worker could also provide additional coaching to camp counselors to understand how best to work with campers with unique needs.

Programmatic Changes to Camp Operations

Changes may also be made to camp programming to support all youth in a positive experience. General support for all youth and their positive MESH is important given increased rates of undiagnosed mental health challenges (i.e., anxiety and depression) and the associations of high-quality social-emotional learning programs and positive outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). This may be addressed through programmatically focusing on supportive relationships at camp, teaching positive coping strategies (e.g., gratitude, mindfulness, journaling), and offering opportunities for youth to engage, disengage, or self-soothe as needed (e.g., time out or “chill zone” areas, fidget toys, sensory safe spaces) (Alliance for Camp Health, 2023).

Other precamp virtual program elements may provide a space for campers to experience different elements of camp and ease anxieties before the overnight experience. Alumni connections, such as spotlights in newsletters or on social media, and opportunities for youth to interact with camp staff (e.g., orientation meetings, camp tour videos) may contribute to supportive relationships, which Sibthorp et al. (2020) found to be a key ingredient of the camp experience. These opportunities may ease the transition into camp for all youth, but especially those with additional MESH needs. Given challenges with minimal year-round staffing, options to support this work include providing former or rehired staff with stipends, camp clothing or gifts, or part-time employment contracts.

Staff Training

Initial and ongoing staff training should address best practices for engaging with youth from a positive youth development lens. A key component of program quality is creating a safe and supportive environment (Smith et al., 2012), which is achieved through creating developmental relationships with youth (Nagaoka et al., 2015). Youth need to feel that they are seen, heard, and understood by their camp leaders. Staff may benefit from additional well-being, behavior management, conflict resolution, and early intervention training to apply to their work with campers. With greater training on MESH needs, and when working with youth with elevated needs, staff are better equipped to form positive relationships with youth. These relationships may be preventative in nature and allow staff to facilitate camp programming without ongoing interruptions to respond to escalated MESH situations. Trainings of this type include CampWell from the Alliance for Camp Health; various webinars and continuing education courses through the American Camp Association’s Learning Center; modules focused on youth development, mental health, and behavior from Expert Online Training; Youth Mental Health First Aid; and workshops developed in collaboration with camp consultants.

Organizational Changes Summary

This study began the conversation about early departures at a multisite, overnight camping organization and highlighted the need to focus on continuous improvement efforts. In an effort to reduce the early departure rate for summer 2023, the organization implemented many changes, including reviewing and updating admittance criteria for campers, introducing new onboarding materials for campers (e.g., camp tour videos, offering a one-on-one phone call to campers), providing additional staff training from MESH experts, purchasing MESH resources for staff, prioritizing hiring camp social workers for each location and session, and reminding staff of the Employee Assistance Program to support their needs. In summer

2023 the organization saw a lower early departure rate than during summer 2022. We cannot claim that organizational efforts directly caused a reduction in the early departure rates; however, continuous improvement efforts may have supported this change. We also understand that camp may not be a good fit for all youth and extenuating circumstances may arise, meaning there will never be an early departure rate of 0 percent. The organization is committed to continuous improvement in all spaces and hopes to further reduce this rate in future summer seasons.

Limitations and Future Research

Readers should consider several limitations when interpreting the results of this study. For example, this study focused on one organization's data as it relates to campers who departed camp before the scheduled end of the session. The needs of these campers may be unique to this population of youth from low-income backgrounds. Therefore, these results may not generalize to other campers or institutions. Further, much of the data included in this study are from the organization's first summer operating in-person programs after a two-year pause due to COVID-19. Staff skill and capacity may have been lessened after the two-year in-person hiatus. The data used for this study were collected for administrative and operational purposes, not for research. Future research may involve collecting information specifically to target individual and organizational level factors as they relate to rates of early departures. Future research may consider how to measure the impact of specific organizational changes on overall early departure rates. Further future research related to improvement efforts and the impact on groups of campers with shared characteristics (e.g., MESH staff training and impact on interactions with youth with MESH challenges) may be helpful.

Additionally, future research will be beneficial to understanding how quality programmatic elements are connected to youth engagement, program experience and completion, and retention year to year. Youth may need to engage in and complete a program to reap the benefits camp has to offer. Finally, greater research into how to connect with youth between summers will deepen understanding of how to support youth and their families holistically—before, during, and after the camp experience. For example, future research can attend to the transition of MESH care for campers year-round.

Conclusion

Studies of the youth camp experience have indicated that young people experience positive development while in these programs (e.g., Flynn et al., 2019; Gagnon et al., 2021; Gillard & Watts, 2013; Warner et al., 2021), however, with increased camper MESH needs due to societal factors (US Department of Education, 2021) not all youth complete a camp experience. There may also be important long-term implications of leaving camp early, including a missed opportunity for social-emotional learning. This may lead to decreased well-being, which has the potential to negatively impact physical health, one's transition to adulthood, and overall quality of life (Diener & Chan, 2011).

In this study, we explored reasons youth from low-income backgrounds departed camp early, including individual youth factors and camp factors. Results indicated that various factors may impact camper early departure experiences, including camper needs and staffing roles and ratios. Based on these findings, camps may consider implications such as additional precamp supports, structural changes to camp operations, staffing considerations, programmatic changes, and additional staff training. Although camp may not be a positive and successful experience for all youth, continually considering and implementing changes to the camp experience may have important impacts for youth in these programs. Supporting youth to complete a full camp session may be an impetus to a successful transition to young adulthood and contribute to overall positive well-being and quality of life in campers' adult years.

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