



# Supporting Youth Mental Health Through Social Involvement

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## Introduction

- This cross-sectional study was designed to examine the relationship between the total number of youth participants' endorsed involvement in social activities on their depression and anxiety scores.
- The positive academic effects of youth involvement in extracurricular activities has been well documented (Shulruf, Tumen, & Tolley, 2007). However, the research on activity participation with regards to mental wellness, more specifically depression and anxiety, has presented mixed findings.
- Cross-sectional studies have demonstrated associations between extracurricular involvement and lower levels of self-reported depression symptoms (Mahoney, Schweder, & Stattin, 2002; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005), whereas other studies have presented evidence that the two constructs are unrelated (Darling, 2005; Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001).
- Similarly, participation in extracurricular activities has been linked to lower levels of anxiety (Rose-Krasnor, Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmer, 2006). However, Melman, Little, and Akin-Little (2007) found evidence for higher levels of self-reported anxiety in individuals dedicating greater amounts of time to extracurricular activities.
- It was hypothesized that as youths' social involvement increased their total depression and anxiety scores would decrease at a significant level (i.e.,  $p < .05$ ).

## Methods

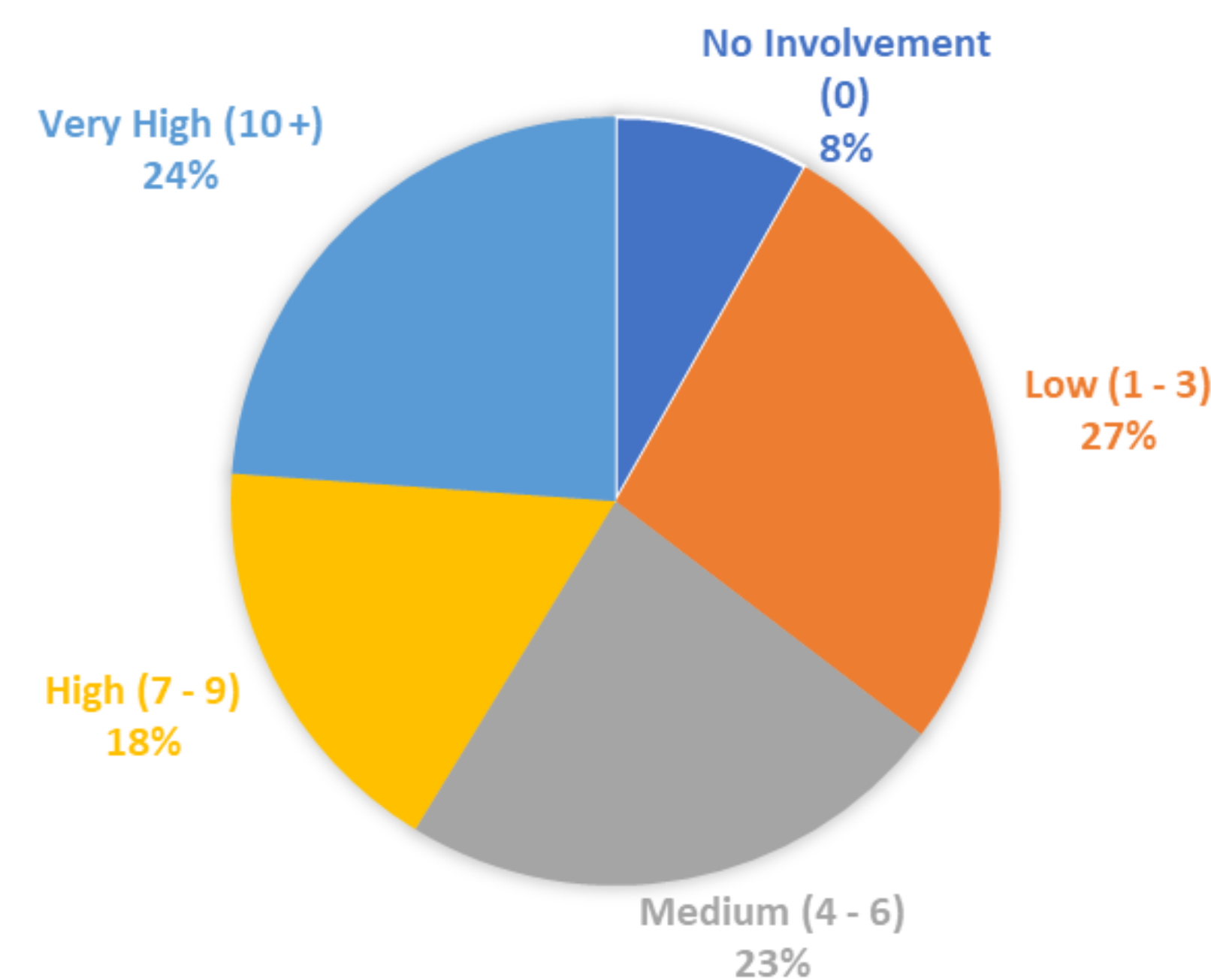
### Procedures

- This study is part of a larger, ongoing international study with youth and young adults ages 13-25 years-old.
- Data collection took place between May 2016 and March 2017 using the Qualtrics online platform.

### Participants

- A total of 1,178 youth (ages 13 - 18) completed the Born Brave Experiences 3.0 survey. Inclusion criteria: Students (ages 13 -18) from the United States ( $n = 390$ ) who completed questions about their social involvement and the BDI and MASC. Participants had a mean age of 15.91 ( $SD = 1.51$ ), with 65.6% identifying as Caucasian and 56.7% identifying as female.

Figure 1. Total Number of Activities

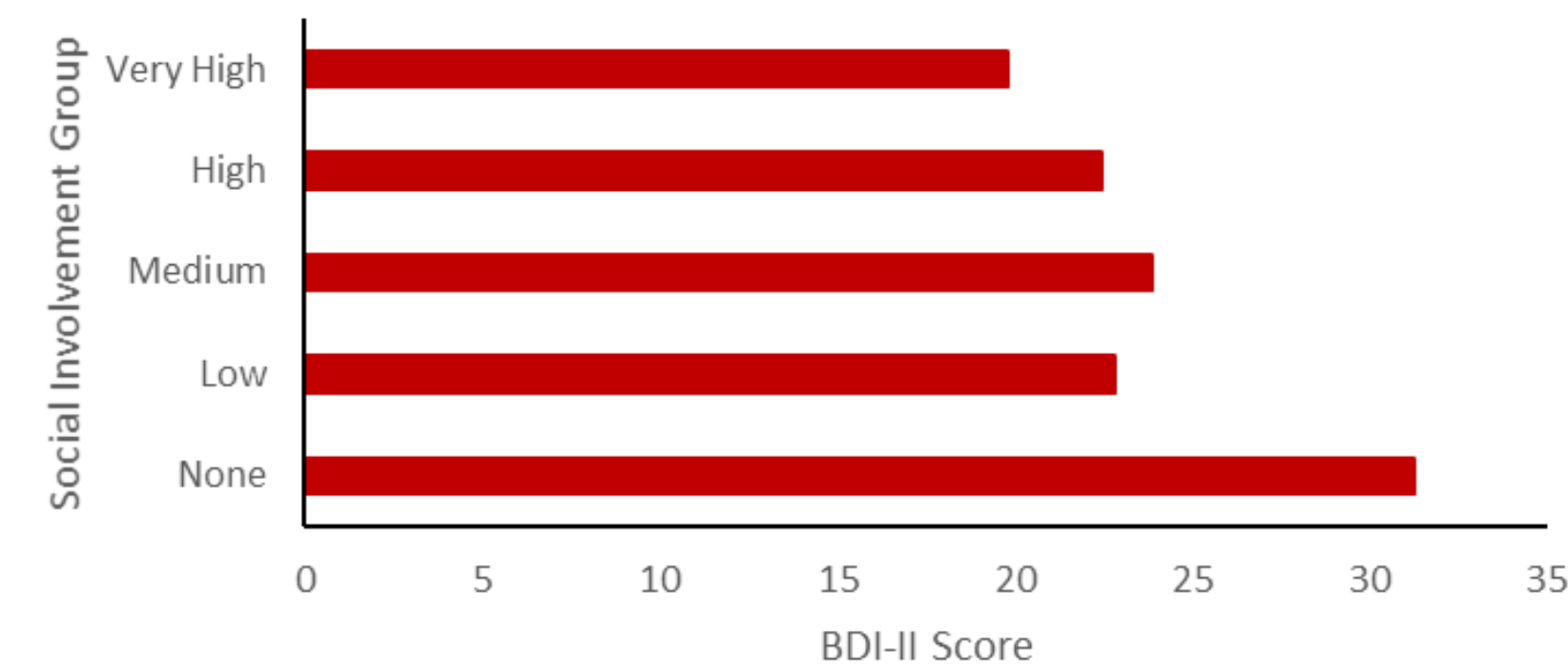


### Measures

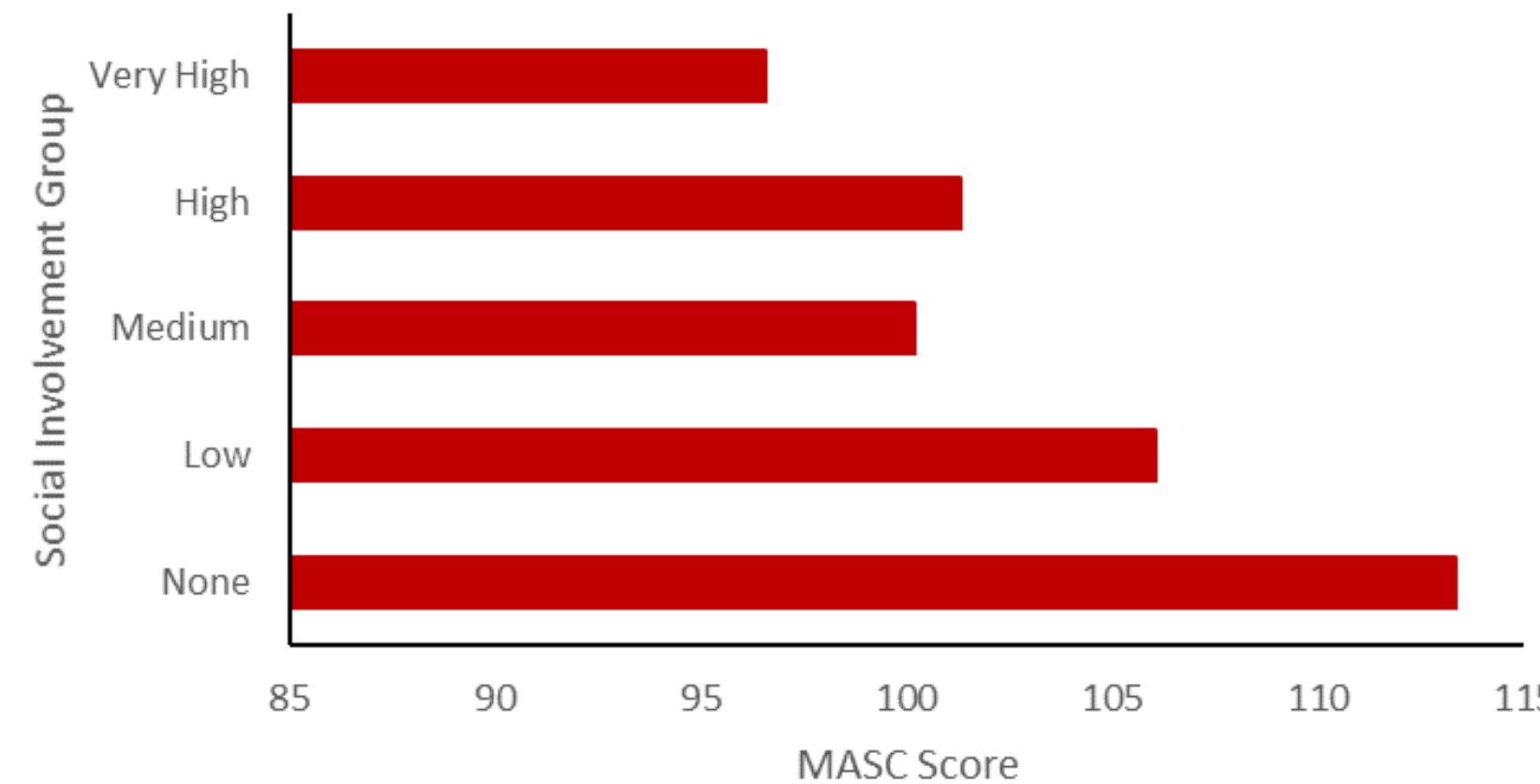
- Depression was assessed using the 21-item *Beck Depression Inventory – Second Edition* (BDI-II; Beck, 1996). Total score ranged from 0 to 63. Internal consistency for the BDI-II was .95
- Anxiety was assessed using the 39-item *Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children* (MASC; March et al., 1997) on a 4-point Likert scale. Total score ranged from 0 to 117, with higher scores indicating a higher level of anxiety. Internal consistency for the MASC was .92.
- Social and Online Involvement*: Five questions were asked regarding youth's degree of participation within the past 12 months across five areas (i.e., Clubs, Arts Groups, Sports, Leadership Groups, and Academic Groups). Figure 1. shows the total number of activities each participant endorsed participating within the past year. The mean number of activities youth participated in was 6.42 ( $SD = 5.45$ ).

## Results

### Depression Score by Social Involvement Group



### Anxiety Score by Social Involvement Group



- A simple linear regression was calculated to predict level of social involvement on depression. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(1,388)=6.84, p < .05$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .02.

- There is a statistically significant difference between groups by participated activities as determined by one-way ANOVA ( $F(4,385)=3.65, p < .05$ ). A Bonferroni post- hoc test revealed significant differences in mean levels of depression between participants who did not participate in social involvement activities vs. participants who were in the very high activity group.

- A simple linear regression was calculated to predict level of social involvement on anxiety. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(1,388)=16.68, p < .05$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .04.

- There is a statistically significant difference between groups by participated activities as determined by one-way ANOVA ( $F(4,385)=5.81, p < .001$ ). A Bonferroni post- hoc test revealed significant differences in mean levels of anxiety between participants who did not participate in social involvement activities vs. participants who in the medium group, high group, and very high group. A significant mean difference was also found for students in the low activity group when compared to the high activity group.

## Discussion

- Consistent with our hypothesis, youth with higher levels of social involvement endorsed lower scores on the BDI-II and the MASC.
- Interestingly, the mean depression score of youth who endorsed not participating in any activity was found to be in the "severe depression" range (Beck, 1996).
- While social involvement is important, our findings do not suggest that more social involvement is better.

### Limitations

- Since this study utilized a cross-sectional design, we cannot assume a temporal relationship between social involvement and mental health outcomes (i.e., depression and anxiety) since both variables were simultaneously assessed.
- With regards to social involvement, the intensity of social involvement (i.e., time spent participating in endorsed activity) was not assessed. Future studies should investigate the breath and intensity of social involvement participation in relation to mental health outcomes (Rose-Krasnor, Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmer, 2006).

## Implications for School Professionals

- Important to recognize the outward signs of anxiety and depression in youth. Some of these symptoms include:
  - Avoidance in previously enjoyed activities
  - Explosive outbursts
  - Difficulty sleeping
  - Feeling weak/tired
  - Difficulty concentrating
- It is important to identify youth who are disengaged. Teachers and school personnel can help monitor youth and make referrals to school mental health professionals.
- Avoidance reinforces anxiety and depression
- Involvement in some activities is better than no involvement.
- Provide a space for youth to speak openly about their mental health.
- Get Help Now at [bornthisway.foundation/get-help-now/](http://bornthisway.foundation/get-help-now/)