COMMUNITY ADDICTION SUPPORT GROUPS AND TRANSITIONAL AGE YOUTH: ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES
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BACKGROUND
Community support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART) are widely regarded as beneficial for adult substance users. Recent literature supports their efficacy in young adult and adolescent addiction recovery. This is especially the case when an individual becomes actively involved within a group. Despite these benefits, many transitional age patients do not engage or continue in these groups like their adult counterparts.

A small body of evidence suggests that young people may not feel they fit with traditional community support groups due to factors like average membership age and severity of problem substance use. Given the rise in adolescent and young adult illicit substance abuse and dependence, there are more transitional age youth attempting to access community treatment. Now more than ever it is important for clinicians and community support group leaders to understand youth perceptions and barriers to engagement in participation. When these factors are better understood, changes can be made to help youth feel more connected.

PURPOSE OF STUDY
The purpose of this study is to examine adolescents’ attitudes and experiences with addiction support groups in the community including AA, NA, and SMART.

METHOD
Participants
Participants (N=20) were admissions to a short-term, community, detox and stabilization unit designed for adolescents. The facility is located in Brockton, Massachusetts. Some had been to the facility before. Participation was voluntary and there was no compensation offered. All participants met DSM-5 criteria for a substance use disorder. Age range of participants was 16yo to 18yo (M=16.75, SD=0.64). Study included 5 females (25%) and 14 males (70%). One participant did not report their gender. Half of participants lived at home and half lived in a program or facility. The primary drugs of choice for most participants were opiates (45%), followed by cannabis (20%) and alcohol (15%). Half of sample was Caucasian (55%), other participants were mixed ethnicity (20%) and Hispanic (15%). Two participants did not identify their ethnicity.

Measure
Participants were asked to complete a 23 question survey about their experiences with community support groups. These questions were developed after literature review. Initial questions related to demographic information, drug-of-choice, and types of meetings attended. Remaining items were statements asking participants to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale.

RESULTS
SUPPORT GROUP PARTICIPATION
- Nearly all of these adolescents (90%) felt they could relate with other members of the group.
- Most participants (80%) felt the support of others at meetings.
- Most active participants (80%) felt they learned new things to help with their recovery.
- The most common answer (50%) was “neither” when active participants were asked if meetings helped to stop or reduce their substance use; 80% agreed that meetings did not make their use worse.
- Most of these participants (80%) felt that meetings were an important part of their recovery.

ACTIVE SUPPORT GROUP PARTICIPANTS (N=10)
- Only 30% of active participants enjoyed work on the 12 steps; 30% did not enjoy working on them and 40% were neutral.
- Only 30% of these adolescents enjoyed working with a sponsor while the majority of respondents in this group (60%) were neutral.

INACTIVE SUPPORT GROUP PARTICIPANTS (N=6)
- Half of these adolescents (50%) were neutral when asked if they could relate with other group members.
- Despite this, participants (80%) felt the support of others at meetings.
- Half of inactive participants felt they learned new things to help with recovery.

AA/NA Specific Experiences
- No one in this group identified liking to work with a sponsor, 33% stated they did not enjoy it and the majority were neutral.

Prayer and Spirituality
- Non-active participants felt similarly about prayer as compared to active support group participants.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS
- Both active and inactive participants were mixed in their experience with similar age group members.
- Active participants reported they could relate with other group members while non-active members felt neutral about this.
- Active and non-active adolescent participants felt supported at meetings.
- Active participants liked spirituality being addressed at meetings while non-active participants felt neutral about this.
- Most of the participants had not attended SMART meetings and no participants had attended an online meeting.

More research is needed to understand why transitional age youth have more difficulty becoming active participants in community support groups.