

INTRODUCTION

The 4-H Youth Development Program, which is largely community-centered and volunteer driven, provides high-quality educational program to youth ages 5-18. Youth who participate in 4-H earn higher grades, have higher civic engagement, and engage in less risky behavior compared to non-4-H youth (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). However, these positive impacts can only be made if participants remain in the 4-H program over time (Pratt & Bowman, 2008). A review of the USDA 4-H enrollment reports (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010) from 1996 to 2003 indicates that 31 (54%) of the states and territories in the US reported declines in 4-H club enrollment. In an effort to understand why youth do not re-enroll in the 4-H program, the Youth Retention Study, a multi-state collaborative effort to investigate youth retention, was developed. The study explores first-year experience in 4-H from both member and adult perspectives and seeks to understand why youth and families join and stay in the program.

METHODS

Data were collected over four years (2015 -2019) in 9 states to nearly 4,400 youth and their parents. The number of states in the study varied annually, with three states participating all four years. Data were collected using a Qualtrics online survey.

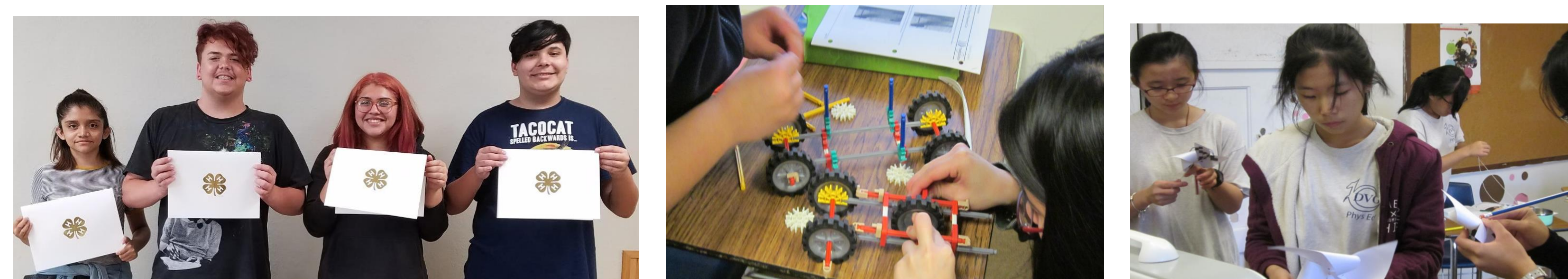
Participants: From the 4-H Online enrollment system, participating states identified all individually enrolled first-year 4-H members in their program.

Procedure: First year 4-H members, along with their parents/guardians, received an online survey at the close of the program year. Three follow-up emails were sent as reminders asking youth and adults to complete a survey about their experience during their first year in 4-H.

Qualitative Analysis: In the initial year, the research team analyzed qualitative responses collaboratively, and developed, through open coding and consensus, an initial code book using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss, 1987). As the data set grew and as new states joined the project, questions were divided among sub-teams, and members within subteams individually coded responses and checked for inter-rater reliability. The codebook expanded with the deepening data set. To assure fidelity across years, researchers then recoded all four data sets using the current codebook.

QUALITATIVE QUESTIONS

- Why child joined 4-H
- Family history in 4-H
- Expectations for joining 4-H (*Adult only*)
- Best part of 4-H
- Changes they'd make
- Reason they may not return (*Youth only*)



PARTICIPATION BY STATES

Adult

State	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	Cumulative
California (CA)	498 (59%)	534 (57%)	317 (26%)	318 (17%)	1,667 (35%)
Idaho (ID)	117 (14%)	111 (12%)	136 (11%)	229 (13%)	593 (12%)
Montana (MT)	98 (11%)	--	--	--	98 (2%)
New Jersey (NJ)	148 (16%)	121 (13%)	56 (5%)	159 (9%)	484 (10%)
Wyoming (WY)	--	165 (18%)	155 (13%)	160 (9%)	480 (10%)
Florida (FL)	--	--	293 (24%)	146 (8%)	439 (9%)
Louisiana (LA)	--	--	258 (21%)	342 (19%)	600 (12%)
Missouri (MO)	--	--	--	112 (6%)	112 (2%)
Washington (WA)	--	--	--	365 (20%)	365 (8%)
Total	846	931	1,215	1,831	4,823

Youth

State	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	Cumulative
California (CA)	590 (59%)	418 (56%)	207 (18%)	207 (14%)	1,422 (32%)
Idaho (ID)	125 (12%)	92 (12%)	109 (9%)	196 (14%)	522 (12%)
Montana (MT)	125 (12%)	--	--	--	125 (3%)
New Jersey (NJ)	169 (17%)	127 (17%)	82 (7%)	90 (6%)	468 (11%)
Wyoming (WY)	--	114 (15%)	99 (8%)	98 (7%)	311 (7%)
Florida (FL)	--	--	85 (7%)	201 (14%)	286 (7%)
Louisiana (LA)	--	--	594 (51%)	240 (17%)	834 (19%)
Missouri (MO)	--	--	--	115 (8%)	115 (3%)
Washington (WA)	--	--	--	288 (20%)	288 (6%)
Total	1,009	751	1,176	1,435	4,371

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The top reasons for joining 4-H:

- To learn (e.g., learning new things, gaining new knowledge/experiences)
- To do activities in a specific topic or content area (e.g., rabbits, archery, robotics)
- To socialize (e.g., make new friends, interacting with others)

The best parts of 4-H:

- Socializing and making friends
- Opportunities with animals (e.g., competitions, showmanship)
- Learning content in specific topic areas
- Participating in events (e.g., camp, fair)

Reasons for leaving 4-H:

- Poor or lack of organization (e.g., meetings/events were messy and unorganized)
- Lack of communication
- Lack of mentoring and orientation for new families (e.g., new families feeling lost)
- Families not feeling a sense of belonging (e.g., families did not feel welcomed)

IMPLICATIONS

Some implications from our findings suggests that Extension leadership should consider the following:

- Develop streamlined communication systems at all levels of 4-H
- Creating clear organizational practices that promote positive experiences of 4-H families
- Provision of first year family orientations such as videos/handbooks and mentoring
- Training volunteers in practices that promote inclusivity, sense of belonging, and connectedness

Parents and youth view 4-H as an opportunity for learning, enjoyment, and social connectivity. Therefore, efforts must be taken to ensure that the program continue to serve youth in this capacity in order to retain youth in the 4-H program.