

Exploring the Challenges and Benefits of Online Youth-led Nutrition Programs

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Introduction

Nutrition educators at the University of California Cooperative Extension have been engaging low-income youth in Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) for several years. During COVID-19, these educators transitioned from in-person to online YPAR programming. Delivering the YPAR program online presented challenges but also fostered new strategies and provided benefits. This study assesses the challenges, strategies, and benefits of online YPAR programming, and it examines future program implications from the perspectives of both nutrition educators and youth.

Method

Qualitative interviews were conducted via Zoom with eight nutrition educators who attempted to implement YPAR programming during the 2020–2021 school year. We used a retrospective Qualtrics survey to gain information from 54 youth participants.

Results

Challenges of online delivery

- missed in-person communication and connection
- issues with internet connectivity and technology
- difficulties focusing and staying engaged

Benefits of online delivery

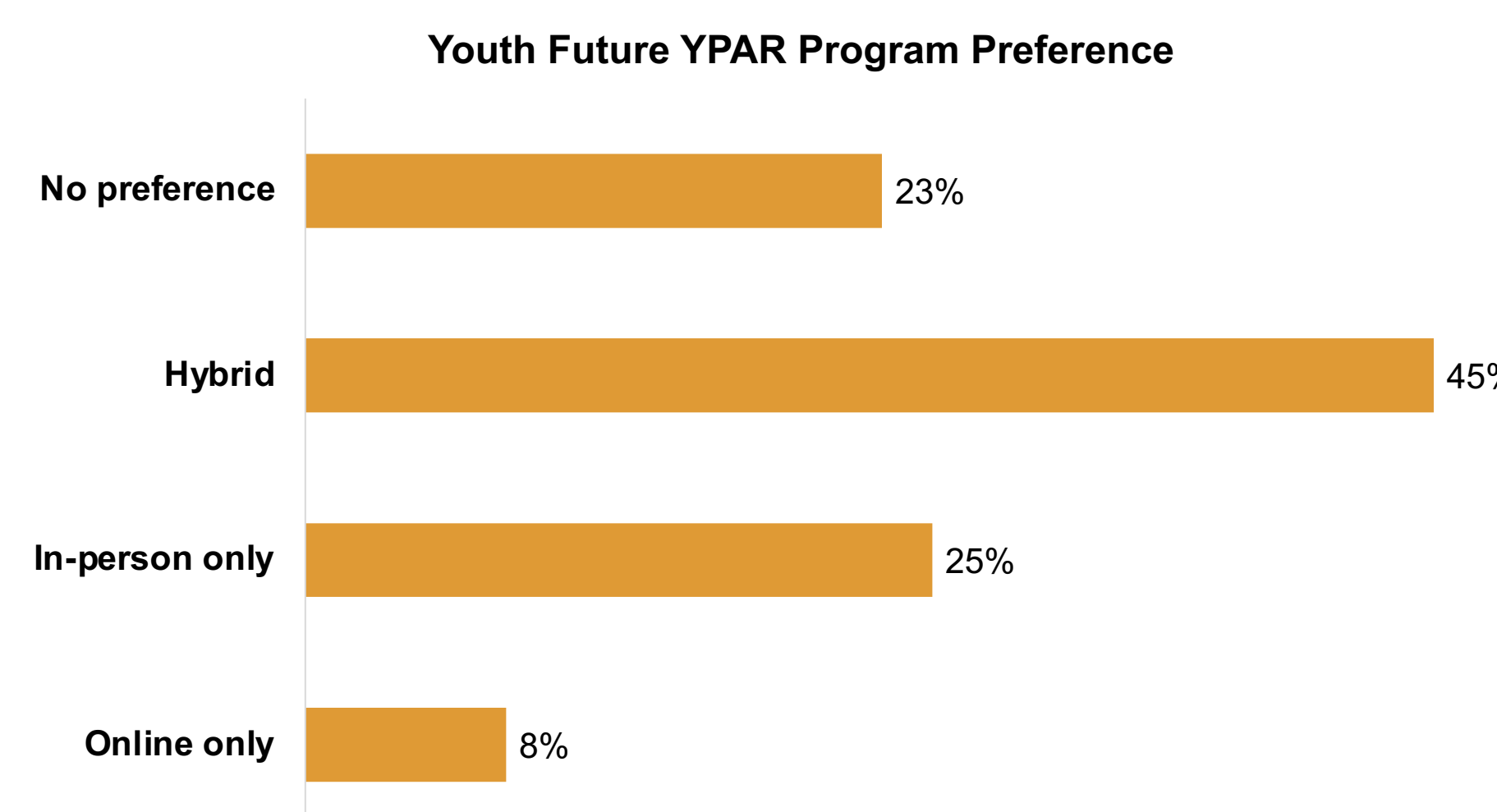
- convenience
- the discovery of enjoyable, interactive, technology-assisted activities
- the discovery of effective, efficient ways to share and document information

Adaptations and innovations

- incorporating a variety of activities into their meetings in an effort to foster engagement, with varying levels of success
- adapting and augmenting the Stepping Stones curriculum
- attempting to avoid or overcome technology-related issues

Preference for future

- 50% of nutrition educators prefer hybrid format (a mix of in-person and online delivery)
- 45% of students prefer hybrid format (youth votes were **based on engagement and opportunities for hands-on activities; convenience; and communication**)



"I felt there was a loss or short of a connection with my team because online is not the same as in person."

By YPAR youth

"They have access to school Chromebooks, but the Chromebooks are not that great from what I understand. And some of the students would be in class on their phones, and it's difficult for them to go to a poll or go to another website or to close the Zoom window..."

By Educator

Future Implications

Given our findings, we offer these practical recommendations to organizations and individuals implementing YPAR projects:

- Provide **training and resources to YPAR facilitators** for continued online/hybrid programming, including lessons and activities adapted to online learning, with associated presentation slide decks; access to online educational tools such as age-appropriate mapping tools and videos; and hardware to support online facilitation such as microphones and cameras.
- Enhance professional development support including **shadowing and mentoring opportunities** with other YPAR facilitators.
- Address **youth internet access and/or equipment needs** to enhance opportunities for full participation.
- Conduct **additional research to understand any outcome differences** for youth, organizations, and communities between participating in fully online, hybrid and in-person YPAR programming.

