

# HELPING YOUTH **THRIVE**

*HELPING YOUTH THRIVE THROUGH AN EQUITY LENS*



**PLWG**  
PROGRAM LEADERS  
WORKING GROUP



FACT SHEET  
9/12

*4-H Program Leaders Working Group*  
***Access, Equity and Belonging Committee***

## **African American Youth**

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## Why an Equity Lens?

4-H has made a bold commitment to youth across the United States: to reflect the population demographics, vulnerable populations, diverse needs, and social conditions of the country (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). 4-H has affirmed that we will help close the opportunity gap for marginalized youth and communities to fully thrive (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 4-H, 2019; National 4-H Council, 2020). Making good on these promises requires that all those working with youth in 4-H critically analyze current programs and deliver those programs through an equity lens. Administrators, professionals, volunteers, and stakeholders have a responsibility to be aware of and confront the disparities that exist within 4-H programs and in society. Doing so is critical because those who aim to develop youth without acknowledgment of and response to a young person's possible societal inequities is perpetuating injustice (Fields et al., 2018). The 4-H Thriving Model (Arnold, 2018) describes the process of positive youth development in 4-H. We should explore the 4-H Thriving Model, our national theoretical framework, with the same level of critical review to ensure it guides our work with equity and social justice at the fore.

The 4-H Program Leaders Working Group, Access, Equity, and Belonging Committee (AEBC) has joined with the 4-H Thriving Model Taskforce to ensure this nationally adopted model is explored and utilized through an equity lens. The following fact sheet explores the Thriving Model in relation to African American youth.

The vast diversity of African American youth served by Cooperative Extension (Extension) professionals is robust. The diversity of cultures within African American communities requires an Extension professional first to familiarize themselves with the unique culture, socio-economic ecosystem, and history of the cultural group they plan to work with in order to ensure a level of success. An equity lens will allow an Extension practitioner to understand the specific conditions they must consider when planning to program with youth in foster care. Examples of a few such conditions are below.

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## Social Conditions of Youth Population

The term African American will be used interchangeably with Black to acknowledge the heterogeneity of African descent populations and to provide inclusive language that captures the multiple ethnicities of this broad group of individuals. Scholarship has largely ignored the relevance of racial, ethnic, and cultural factors, nuances, and competencies, particularly as they relate to the resilience and strength of African American/Black youth. When researchers or educators talk about the social conditions of African American youth they often dismiss the strengths found among African Americans that invariably impact youth. Focusing on negative factors, especially those related to race, ethnicity, or culture means that positive assets are often overlooked. Indicators of well-being (i.e. familial ties, social networks, ethnic identity) have trended upward for African American youth for several years and examples include:

### **Positive Social Conditions**

- The strong achievement orientation, work ethic and flexible roles of Black families headed by Black parents and family members have promoted upward mobility for African American children (Mayudun & Lee, 2010).
- The Black church has a positive impact on Black youth and families. Research has found that Black youth who have positive outcomes as adults are those with strong religious commitments (McCray, Grant, Beachum, 2010).
- African American youths' high levels of self-esteem and positive racial identity are connected to their academic success, behavioral adjustment, and positive emotional functioning in school and other environments (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Webster, Bryan, & Patterson, 2020).

- Ethnic identity, strong coping behaviors, positive mother/child interactions and cultural pride positively affect Black youth outcomes by buffering against the negative impact of discrimination and stereotypes on various outcomes related to academic success (Wang & Huguley, 2012).
- Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) serve as a support system for Black youth and their educational aspirations and endeavors and provide numerous initiatives to enhance the economic self-sufficiency of Black youth and their communities (Gallo & Davis, 2009).

Understanding resilience and strength among African American youth also requires acknowledging their experience in the United States and recognizing the continuing legacy of oppression and discrimination that affects their daily lives. Systemic racism is interwoven into the fabric of education, health care, politics, the justice system, environmental conditions, economic institutions and every other system that forms our societal structures (Alexander, 2012; American Academy of Family Physicians, 2021; Collins, et al., 2016; Kober & Alexndra, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These experiences have manifested themselves in a number of ways:

### **Challenging Social Conditions**

- In the United States, 32% of African American children and adolescents are living in poverty (Kids Count Data Center, Children in Poverty 2019).
- In about half of the largest US 100 cities, most African American students attend schools where at least 75% of all students qualify as poor or low-income under federal guidelines (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020).
- Nearly 12% of African American college graduates between the ages of 22 and 27 were unemployed in 2013, which is more than double the rate of unemployment among all college graduates in the same age range (Jones & Schmitt, 2014).
- While the percentage of Black 18–24-year-olds with a high school diploma was nearly the same as their white peers, racial gaps remain for the time to complete the requirements for a high school diploma (NCES, 2020).
- In 2017, 12.6% of African American children had health related issues caused by environmental issues such as asthma compared with 7.7 percent of non-Hispanic white children (CDC, 2018).

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## **Competencies Needed to Engage Youth Population**

It is essential that educators understand the educational and social inequities related to race, social class, gender, and the specifics of the political economy in the U.S. This understanding serves as a core key element to creating successful, sustainable and thriving relationships with African American communities. This awareness increases the possibility of supporting African American youths' thriving.

It is critical that community relationships are grounded in trust, respect, honesty, transparency, flexibility, adaptability, kindness, patience, compassion, caring, fun, and shared values. For these relationships to develop, professionals need to increase their understanding of African American racial awareness and the realities that African American youth and their families face daily. A participatory framework that fully engages professionals in implementing and supporting culturally competent programs is key to the success of African American youth and their development. The following competencies were adapted from the 4-H Professional, Research, Knowledge and Competencies (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017):

- Recognizing cultural differences and the ways in which those differences impact needs and participation in programs.
- Acknowledging and accepting cultural differences, including family values and strengths, and the positive effects those differences may have on behavior and development.
- Developing cultural competence and responsiveness to the realities of African American youth is essential to serving children and youth respectfully and effectively.
- Recognizing the types of experiences that foster deeper engagement and participation.

- Creating community relationships and partnerships which will support and build capacity for providing the foundation for community change.
- Understanding local needs of the community which will enhance youth development.
- Eliminating negative stereotypes of people of color in programming activities.
- Promoting an inclusive and collaborative youth development philosophy by fostering peer learning with Black community partners and colleagues.
- Utilizing culturally appropriate resources and making programmatic adaptations to be inclusive.

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## Belonging and Participation in 4-H

We propose that youth programs promote African American youths' development of ethnic-racial identity by adopting a *culture-specific philosophy* that informs *racial-ethnic socialization* practices (e.g., choice of culture-specific curriculum and activities) and opportunities for meaningful *interpersonal interactions*. To ensure 4-H programs focus on the Black child and their realities within the context of their communities, we will use theoretical frameworks (i.e., African American Development Theory, Black Development Identity Theory) to support, develop, and implement culturally relevant programs. Research shows effective youth programs that are inclusive of cultural assets are important for creating a deeper sense of belonging and deeper participation of African Americans and ultimately impact their development.

Educators who successfully implement the elements of belonging and participation:

- Foster a positive relationship with a caring adult who acts as an advisor, guide and mentor. The adult helps set boundaries and expectations for young people. The adult could be called supporter, friend, or advocate.
- Develop and support an inclusive environment for African American youth that acknowledges and understands the unique attributes of their race and ethnicity, shaping a deeper sense of belonging, and encouraging and supporting them with positive and specific feedback.
- Celebrate the success of all members while taking pride in the collective efforts of all participants.
- Create a safe emotional and physical environment free of microaggressions, bias, and discriminatory practices that can cause emotional harm. Youth should not fear physical or emotional harm while participating in a 4-H experience, whether from the learning environment itself or from adults, other participants or spectators (Essential Elements of 4-H Youth Development, 2016).

### **Questions educators should ask themselves as they prepare programming for African American youth:**

- How can we meet youth and African American families where they currently are (e.g. interests, geographic location, etc.)?
- How do African American youth gain a sense of belonging?
- How can educators ensure programs are culturally relevant and attractive to African American youth? (Kennedy, Bronte-Tinkew, Matthews, 2007)
- What literature examines culturally relevant programming to meet the interests and needs of African American youth?
- Are our local, state, and national 4-H events culturally relevant (e.g. content, music, speakers, visual representation, etc.)? Are African American voices informing programmatic decisions? How can I assist to make my youth feel more represented and valued in these spaces?

### **How can educators make 4-H relevant and marketable to African American youth?**

- Understand the local needs of youth.
- Conduct programs, events and activities in their communities.
- Choose, build or adapt programs that fit the cultural content of the African American community.
- Provide programs that engage youth in identifying and addressing their needs.

- Eliminate negative stereotypes of people of color.
- Consider no membership fees or reduced fees and tap into the community's capital and financial assets within affluent African American communities. Financial resources have been systemically and disproportionately held from Black communities. This leads to higher proportions of Black communities living in poverty.
- Secure support from stakeholders for participation in local, state, regional and national programs, events and activities.
- Develop engagement strategies that speak to the needs of youth. We should meet youth where they are (e.g. working with community members, recruiting volunteers from the community, etc.).

### **Recommendations for increased participation among African American youth:**

- Increase marketing within communities to highlight the value and benefits of 4-H (timeframe, schedule, mentoring, educational involvement, inclusive environment, etc.).
- Incorporate and diversify opportunities for adults (e.g. include African American parents' involvement in volunteer opportunities, facilitation of 4-H curriculum, or becoming club leaders).
- Utilize community hubs and centers for 4-H programs to address limitations related to transportation.
- Advertise in local communities through barber shops, hair salons, local churches, convenience/grocery stores, laundromats, or shoe stores. Research has shown that working through Black owned businesses and organizations can increase visibility and participation (Webster & Ingram, 2016).
- Develop strategies for advertising programming on social media. These strategies can increase the likelihood of greater participation because research shows that Black youth utilize these spaces at higher rates than other youth.
- Partner with civic groups (sororities, fraternities, chamber of commerce, local law enforcement, church leadership groups, local politicians, etc.) to provide opportunities for creating greater linkages and partnerships between educators and Black communities.

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## **Community Relationships and Partners**

Strategic partnerships, outreach strategies, and trust will help drive meaningful results to address equity, access, and belonging among African American youth. Creating community relationships and partnerships among public and private organizations will support and build capacity for community change. Various 4-H programs have taken place through partnerships with community and school organizations such as afterschool programs, Boys and Girls Clubs, YWCA/YMCA, urban agriculture sites (community gardens, urban farms), schools, community centers, youth service departments, faith-based organizations, and civic groups. Community partners can be organizations, groups, or individuals with a like-minded mission/vision who want to work together to create a synergistic effect in support of startup ecosystems (Riegle-Crumb, et al., 2012).

According to Riegle-Crumb, et al., (2012), African American youth and families don't care what you think or say until they know or feel that you care. Horsager's (2012) eight pillars of trust (consistency, clarity, compassion, character, contribution, competence, connection, and commitment) have been shown to be what matters most among Black families. These pillars align with Hughes and Samuel's (2014), and Harper and Davis' (2012) core key elements to creating successful, sustainable and thriving African American community relationship partners.

For any educator willing to establish a strong partnership foundation in and among Black communities, all eight key pillars should be considered. For example, being transparent about your mission, purpose and goals brings clarity to priorities and establishes a foundation for growth. Genuinely caring and showing compassion for others help to build trust among organizations. Virtues such as honesty and integrity promote good character and consistency, which deliver results for positive change. It is also important to stay relevant and current on trends to

increase competency skills as more knowledge is gained. Connection within relationships and a commitment to make a difference helps to maintain key community partnerships.

## Evaluation

While we acknowledge the need for robust and sound instruments for evaluating the impact of 4-H youth programs, there must also be a collaborative and participatory evaluation frame that fully engages stakeholders in implementing a culturally competent evaluation.

### *Culture and evaluation tools*

In culturally competent evaluation, culture is defined in the broad context. Culture can be defined by race/ethnic background, gender, etc. However, in the case of this group, we are focused on using **appropriate tools and instruments** which:

1. have been validated with a sample size that is inclusive of Black youth,
2. recognizes evaluator's **knowledge and awareness of the culture of a program and its participants**, and
3. is constructed to develop a deeper understanding of that program/activity within the context and lived experiences of Black youth.

Given the number of Black youth that take part in social and educational programs within 4-H, more culturally relevant tools are needed to evaluate these programs along with cultivating a cohort of young evaluators of color. These relationships are mentoring relationships that help novice evaluators develop competency, as well as socialize them to the field. Developing and mentoring evaluators of color who can practice culturally competent evaluation helps to ensure that more evaluators can meet the demands of the field.

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