

# HELPING YOUTH **THRIVE**

*HELPING YOUTH THRIVE THROUGH AN EQUITY LENS*



**PLWG**  
PROGRAM LEADERS  
WORKING GROUP



**FACT SHEET**  
**2/12**

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

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## **Immigrant and Refugee 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 immigrant and refugee youth.

The vast diversity of immigrant and refugee youth served by Extension professionals is robust with each sending country having distinct characteristics that can empower or hinder a program's success. The diversity of cultures within immigrant and refugee (IRY) communities requires an Extension professional first to familiarize themselves with the unique culture, social 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 immigrant and refugee communities. Examples of a few such conditions are below.

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## Social Conditions of Youth Population

The immigrant population includes all current U.S. residents born abroad. Naturalized citizens, green card holders, refugees, asylum-seekers, and unauthorized immigrants make up nearly 15% (45M) of the U.S. population (USA Facts, 2019). Twenty-three percent of the immigrant population are youth aged 5 to 17 years (10.3M). Those youth are as diverse and heterogeneous as the global communities from which they originate.

Immigrant and refugee youth exist within a unique set of social conditions different from most other vulnerable populations, resulting in exceptional challenges for Cooperative Extension (Extension) professionals. The unique social condition of these youth should be carefully considered when creating developmental settings and programs that help immigrant and refugee youth thrive. Extension staff must have the knowledge and skill to apply culturally relevant teaching strategies (Bacsujlaky et al., 2014).

### ***Social conditions that immigrant or refugee youth may face:***

- Legal status of youth and/or their family (Linton et al., 2019)
- Displacement from a country because youth have “been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence” due to an underlying cause(s) such as violence, lack of job security, politics, religion, climate change/environmental, adoption/foster families or economic status. (International Organization for Migration, 2022)
- Policies, programs, and institutions are oriented to serving dominant cultures
- Social isolation and social exclusion
- Poverty

- Discrimination leading to physiological and emotional effects
- Navigating life as an emancipated minor
- Traumatic life experiences and resulting psychological effects
- Limited English language skills

### *Potential strengths of some immigrant and refugee youth:*

- Resilience
- Innovative thinking and problem solving
- Adept at responding to rapidly changing situations, crisis, or disasters
- Resource maximization
- Leadership
- Keen sense of bonding
- Strong spiritual connections
- Enhanced ability to cope with crisis, personal and public disasters, & trauma
- Strong sense of family
- Cultural membership (whether ethnic, racial, neighborhood or gang)
- Determination
- Bi-/multilingual
- Bicultural
- Wide range of interests/capacities

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## Competencies Needed to Engage Youth Population

The competencies listed below are referenced from the 4-H Professional, Research, Knowledge and Competencies, specifically from the Access Equity and Opportunity domain (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017b). Extension professionals need to:

- **Be Aware** - of the history and context of the people with whom you are engaging; to understand current immigration policy and its impact, and to demonstrate cultural humility—ask questions, be present, and listen.
- **Acknowledge** - culturally specific practices of the Immigrant and Refugee Youth audience may affect 4-H programs by their beliefs, religion, family involvement, legal protection, language differences, and advocacy.
- **Identify** - unconscious bias of the developmental context of Immigrant and Refugee Youth and families, and the privilege we hold as an agency.
- **Explore and Share** - using tools such as community mapping, policy mapping, and 4-H PRKC self-assessment Extension staff may reach Immigrant and Refugee Youth audiences.
- **Practice, Design, Develop, and Evaluate** - intercultural competence to create culturally relevant programs that cultivate a positive ethnic and racial identity. Also, develop promotion, marketing, and assessment tools for the Immigrant and Refugee Youth audience.

# Belonging and Participation in 4-H

Extension professionals have the responsibility to be aware of participation barriers and privilege (or lack thereof) of immigrant and refugee youth to create a culturally relevant sense of belonging (Fields, 2020). In a study of youth from across the globe, Ungar et al. (2007) identified seven “tensions” for which youth rely on their own culture to navigate:

1. **Access to material resources** - financial, educational, medical, food, clothing, and shelter
2. **Relationships** - with significant others, peers, adults, community, etc.
3. **Identity** - personal and collective sense of purpose, self-appraisal, aspirations, beliefs, and values
4. **Power and control** – the ability to effect change in one’s social and physical environment
5. **Cultural adherence** - adherence to one’s local and/or global cultural practices, values, and beliefs
6. **Social justice** - experiences related to finding a meaningful role in the community and social equality
7. **Cohesion** - balancing personal interests with greater good; a part of something larger than oneself

Extension professionals should develop programs that are relevant to the needs of youth and their communities by intentionally involving youth voices in planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Immigrant and refugee youth come from varied socio-economic, cultural, and demographic backgrounds. Due to the intersectionality of this population, 4-H professionals should be aware and implement strategies to ensure inclusion for all youth no matter their gender identification, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, etc. For further information and appropriate strategies, please refer to other relevant AEBC Youth Fact Sheets in this series.

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## Community Relationships and Partners

Community partnerships support Extension professionals to improve recruitment and sustained involvement of immigrant and refugee youth, families and volunteers. These partnerships will fund and sustain programs (ECOP, 2019). Extension professionals should resist the implementation of programs “to” the community, and instead engage “with” the community. By engaging with the community, Extension professionals can work alongside community partners in the design and development of youth programs to recognize and integrate cultural values. “Youth development professionals and volunteers must be intentional about building relationships with youth and community as this is a means to developing social capital for youth” (Fields, 2020, p. 186).

Examples of community partners who support immigrant and refugee youth include:

### **Federal Agencies:**

- Department of Education
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department of Family and Children Service

### **National Agencies:**

- Annie E. Casey Foundations
- Bill Gates Foundation & Gates Millennium Scholar
- Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services

- International Rescue Committee
- Intercultural Development Research Association
- National Council of La Raza / UNIDOS
- MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership
- National Mutual Aid Associations
- National Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
- McDonald Hispanic Scholarship (HACER)
- Center for Applied Linguistics
- Center for Health and Health Care in Schools
- Center for Mental Health in Schools
- Foundation for Child Development
- The Urban Institute
- U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
- UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)
- Catholic Charities USA
- American Bar Association Commission on Immigration
- American Immigration Lawyers Association
- American Immigration Council
- Lutheran Immigrant & Refugee Services

### **Local Agencies:**

- Arts and cultural organizations
- Businesses
- City and county departments
- Consulate or Embassy
- Ethnic based associations and newspapers
- Other grassroots organizations

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## **Evaluation**

It is important to understand the complexity of challenges faced by immigrant families, and to consider these experiences when planning for programs and evaluating outcomes. According to the American Evaluation Association (2011) culturally competent evaluation should engage immigrant and refugee youth, families, and communities during the entire evaluation process.

Culturally sensitive and sensible evaluation generates meaningful findings and enhances immigrant and refugee youth engagement and retention. Thus, before conducting evaluation, staff should engage in self-reflection (see below for guidance) on their own biases, stereotypes, identity, social class, potential opportunities, challenges, and conflicts.

### ***Program design and evaluation self-reflection process or considerations while engaging immigrant and refugee youth (IRY) audience:***

- Are there multiple voices in planning, implementing, interpreting, and decision making of the evaluation process?
- Are the perspectives of the immigrant and refugee youth, family, and community appropriately reflected in the process?
- Are we connected to the “cultural guides” within the immigrant and refugee youth community that can help describe the social and political context of the program/community?

- Whose values and perspectives are represented in the evaluation questions? Do the questions encompass cultural context and values of the community (i.e., open ended questions, reflection, and storytelling)?
- Are the language, content, and design of the evaluation instruments culturally sensitive? Have these audiences validated the instruments?
- Are our programs culturally designed to connect “the unfamiliar concepts to the known concepts?” For example, some youth may have a cultural resistance to physical contact while other cultures view it as welcoming.

Current evaluation tools center and normalize certain stories, clubs, programs, and mindsets. The tools highlight the lives, cultures, and values of 4-H’ers who have not experienced migration and associated traumas. These evaluation tools often fail to fully consider the experiences of 4-H’ers who are immigrants and refugees and their (often) intersectional characteristics: being people of color, linguistically diverse, low-income, LGBTQ+, differently abled, or young people from single-parent or multiple homes or multi-generation homes.

Evaluations that impose values and perspectives from the dominant culture can restrict meaning data in a number of ways. For example: conceptual mismatches, language barriers, different values, or differences in the meaning and manifestation of emotions. The challenges and barriers associated with the use of standardized instruments can also lead to poor or limited data, resulting in an ineffective evaluation that does not capture and incorporate the strengths of immigrant or refugee youth and families.

Direct translation of measurement tools is not sufficient to ensure culturally accurate evaluation data as the meaning of constructs can vary across cultures and are often embedded within the economic, social, religious, linguistic, and political contexts of a particular society. Results can be meaningless or have lower reliability if research instruments are not translated or adapted to the target population. To ensure the effectiveness of evaluation questions, a culturally competent staff, community partner or volunteer should make the cultural and literacy adaptations.

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## In conclusion

The United States will probably continue to be a nation of immigrants. Scholars, educators, and practitioners can move the needle in supporting immigrant youth by establishing positive relationships, nurturing empathy, and understanding, along with cultivating leadership skills so that immigrant youth thrive. It is important to keep in mind that refugees and immigrants are a heterogeneous group with much diversity in their language, religion, culture, belief system, socio-economic status, linguistic backgrounds, and their reasons for migration. 4-H professionals need to understand these unique, rich, and complex communities by developing and disseminating culturally relevant educational curriculum, policies, and practices to engage diverse stakeholders to support immigrant youth. Along the same lines, it is our responsibility to evaluate our programs in partnership with communities, to uplift youth voices and communities and measure strengths in a promising way.

To transform Extension and 4-H to be inclusive and equitable, it is our responsibility as professionals to understand the context of the youth and their families and meet them where they are. The purpose of this Fact Sheet is to direct 4-H professionals to help those youth thrive by educating all young people to learn to live with, work with and respect human differences, by enhancing empathy and appreciation of cultural differences.

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