



HELPING YOUTH THRIVE THROUGH AN EQUITY LENS



PLWG
PROGRAM LEADERS
WORKING GROUP



FACT SHEET
7/12

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

Youth Living in Poverty

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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 youth living in poverty.

The vast diversity of youth living in poverty served by Extension professionals is robust with each community having distinct characteristics that can empower or hinder a program's success. The diversity of cultures within communities living in poverty 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 communities living in poverty. Examples of a few such conditions are below.

Social Conditions of Youth Population

Children living in poverty, especially when compounded with racism and other systemic inequities, need greater support to increase their capacity to thrive. Of the almost twelve million children living in poverty, approximately 30 percent are African American, 29.1 percent are American Indian/Alaska Native children and 23.7 percent were Hispanic/Latinx children, compared to 8.9 percent white children (Children's Defense Fund, 2018). Children living in poverty experience adverse childhood conditions that may result in poor academic outcomes, issues with physical health, a strained ability to manage emotions, and social exclusion. Youth living in poverty can feel devalued by and inferior to others in society, which can impede their abilities to thrive and achieve an alternative future to poverty (DeJaeghere, 2019).

Youth living in poverty have assets that, if honored and developed, can facilitate their thriving. Youth are resilient and possess varying degrees of skills including coping techniques in response to the high stress situations in which they live (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Youth living in poverty often have strong family connections and have a social network of people (namely, others also living in poverty) for material and emotional support (Beegle, 2006).

Youth living in poverty 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 that acknowledge the whole child, including gender identification, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, etc. For further information and appropriate strategies, please refer to the other AEBC Youth Fact Sheets for the cultural, LGBTQ+, and racial demographics of the youth living in poverty the 4-H professional is working with.

Competencies Needed to Engage with Youth Population

Fostering youth belonging in 4-H requires that youth professionals take on the critical role of understanding and responding to the social conditions of youth living in poverty by honoring their assets and supporting them to overcome barriers. Youth development professionals should develop skills and knowledge that allows them to design and conduct programs that benefit all youth. The following skills were adapted from the 4-H Professional, Research, Knowledge and Competencies (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017).

Become Aware

- Understand one's own implicit bias and acknowledge how it affects their values and assumptions.
- Show self-awareness for values, norms, and myths about those living in poverty.
- Understand trauma and how it affects the neurodevelopment of youth living in poverty.

Develop Programs

- Build relationships of trust, safety and mutual respect.
- Utilize communication methods that are reaching families in poverty
- Involve youth when and how they show up

Support Youth

- Actively listen to youth and give them the space to “tell their story” without judgment or assumptions.
- Design learning environments, curriculum materials and resources that support the thriving of youth in poverty.

Identify Barriers

- Recognize and reduce the barriers to accessing programs for those living in poverty.
- Recognize youth in poverty as valued young people and contributors to their own pathway.

Belonging and Participation in 4-H

All youth should have equitable opportunities to thrive. Youth living in poverty need opportunities to assess their lives, reclaim hope, dignity, and develop a plan to achieve the lives they want for themselves and for their communities. Belonging and participation in 4-H is important for youth in poverty as they experience heightened social exclusion and are more likely to feel devalued or discounted by society (DeJaeghere, 2019).

A critical examination of systemic and local 4-H policies to identify barriers to participation and belonging for youth living in poverty is essential. For example, participation fees might discourage youth living in poverty with limited to non-existent financial abilities. Lack of transportation to and from activities can also be a barrier. Activities such as fundraisers to generate money for the program or community service projects to give back to the local community can present challenges. Assuming each family and/or youth in a 4-H program can sell items for a fundraiser might deter participation, and the “assumed contributions” needed for program activities can also be a barrier. Programs that are free, located near public transportation, or developed by and with youth ensure that youth living in poverty can define and implement programs to engage them and their families. 4-H programs that

help youth (re)discover their value and chart their paths to alternative thriving futures can support youth living in poverty (DeJaeghere, 2019).

Community Relationships and Partners

Establishing partnerships with organizations that have a positive reputation in the community for engaging with and serving children and families living in poverty is essential to build trust and rapport with families in the area (Denner, Cooper, Lopez, & Dunbar, 1999). Autonomously funded youth-serving organizations historically do an exceptional job at engaging low-income youth audiences (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Tips for Professionals

- Conduct one-on-one interviews with members and leaders in the community to build relationships and learn what matters most to youth and families.
- Conduct environmental scans of the communities in which youth in poverty live to learn the resources and key issues.
- Seek out partnering with youth-serving organizations/programs in the community.
- Enter into program agreements with community partners to create a collaborative approach to the work.
- Be flexible with program policies and structures that are placing barriers to participation.

Evaluation

Approaches

Evaluation of youth programs that include youth living in poverty may be challenging. As mentioned above, youth are living in stressful situations so their attendance in a program may not be consistent or predictable but engaging them when they are present is advisable. Professionals should consider multiple ways to gather evaluation information throughout the program and it is best to gather this information during face-to-face activities or programs. Consider the following concepts when developing your evaluation approach:

- Establish relationships with youth at the onset of the programs.
- The Evolving Evaluation allows youth to create the topics based on what they deem as important. These topics allow youth to participate in a discussion around a topic they view as important following the activity (Jens, 2007).
- A youth-initiated evaluation should be complemented by evaluation measures developed around the 4-H Thriving Model (Oregon State University, 2020).

Methods

- Track attendance to determine if you are retaining youth.
- Reach out to youth who are not participating. Ask: “What is going on? We miss you. Why are you not coming?” This could shed some light on the issues youth are facing and/or the value of the program.
- Visual storyboarding allows youth to communicate their ideas and reflections to others through visual creations and drawings (Flores, 2013).
- Journaling/reflecting (either electronic or handwritten) for participants at the end of each session.
- Taking notes through qualitative observations from a neutral observer to document the desired knowledge, attitude, or behavior change.
- Empowerment Evaluation is a three-step approach that is valued for its simplicity of implementation (Fetterman, 2001).

Step 1 – Establishing their Mission

- Youth use group consensus to establish their values and what is important to them. This moves them towards a common mission about where they want to go.

Step 2 – Reviewing their Current Status

- What are the important activities or tasks that will move them towards their mission?
- Generate a list of activities and tasks and allow youth to vote on those they rank as essential for accomplishing their goals for the program.

Step 3 – Planning for the Future

- Now that the group has identified their “current status” and ranked activities and tasks, it's time to start developing goals and strategies to move those activities forward. Goals and strategies allow the program to be successful in the future but not without someone monitoring the group accountability for implementation.

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Authorship

Joanna Tzenis
University of Minnesota

Travis West
The Ohio State University

Sarah Chvilicek
University of Nevada Reno

Jennie Hargrove
Iowa State University