

**Perceptions of 4-H Agents about Problems and Solutions in Reaching Youth in
Underserved Communities in North Carolina**

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Introduction/Need for Research

The role of the 4-H Extension program is to prepare youth for being responsible citizens and leading the 21st century workforce (Cochran, Catchpole, Arnett, & Ferrari, 2010). Youth participation in 4-H can have a significant impact on positive youth development (Mulroy & Kraimer-Rickaby, 2006). Community support organizations such as 4-H are vital to the positive development of youth (Hobbs, 1999). The 4-H program's mission is to help youth gain the necessary skills they need to be preemptive assets in their communities and develop ideas for a more innovative economy (Tempel, 2010). However, getting youth involved in 4-H programs within underserved communities presents challenges for 4-H agents serving in those communities. The term "underserved" is defined as disadvantaged (Waterman, Kost, Lazzar, & Dobie, 2011). Disadvantaged youth are often those in most need of opportunities and support, but are many times not served by their community (Hobbs, 1999). Voices and needs of underserved communities are often unnoticed (Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, 2013). The lack of youth participation in 4-H in underserved communities is a concern among the youth development professionals. This situation can have a lasting negative effect on how youth in these communities develop as productive and responsible citizens. Understanding the problems and solutions in reaching youth in underserved communities is helpful in serving these youth with effective educational programs.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research was to determine the perceptions of 4-H Extension agents in reaching youth in hard to reach underserved communities in North Carolina. This study aimed to accomplish two objectives: a) to determine the problems in reaching youth in underserved communities, and b) to determine solutions for reaching youth in underserved communities effectively. The purpose and objectives of this study align with the research priority area four and six of the National Research Agenda (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The theory of social capital provides the framework for conceptualizing this study. Social capital is described as an "asset by virtue of actors' connections and access to resources in the network or group of which they are members" (Lin, 2001, p.19). Based on the notion of social capital, Lin (2001) described four reasons to explain why embedded resources in social networks contribute to the outcomes of actions: a) facilitation of the flow of information, b) ability of social ties in the system for exerting influence on the members, c) social ties to individuals reflecting their access to resources through networks, and d) the ability of social relationships to reinforce identity and recognition of members. This social capital theory can be used to examine how Extension can link with youth and their parents in underserved communities.

Methodology

This was a modified Delphi study conducted with a group of 32 4-H Extension agents in North Carolina. This group of agents were identified by the Associate State 4-H Program Leader representing counties having underserved communities. This Delphi study was completed in three rounds. In the first round, 4-H Extension agents were asked two questions: a) what are the problems they face when reaching youth in underserved communities, and b) what are the solutions they recommend for reaching youth in underserved communities effectively?

Responses to these two questions were listed as unique items and sent to the panel in the second round for seeking any additional responses. In the third round, the panel members were asked to rate the importance of each response for the two questions on a 5-point Likert type scale (1=least important, 2=somewhat important, 3=important, 4=very important, 5=extremely important). The items rated 85% and over by panel members as important, very important, or extremely important in the third round were considered as important problems and solutions in analysis.

Findings and Conclusions

The study found nine major problems and eight solutions in reaching youth in underserved communities. The identified major problems were a) lack of transportation, b) lack of community volunteers, c) lack of funding, d) lack of parental support, e) lack of parents' awareness about available 4-H programs, f) parents' interests in other activities for their children, such as sports, g) lack of community network and support, h) distance to program location, and i) cultural and language barriers. The identified major solutions to those problems in reaching youth in underserved communities were: a) allocation of more state funding or reducing the cost of state and district 4-H activities, b) volunteer development modules especially designed for these communities, c) securing grants to support youth in these communities, d) innovative marketing strategies to make parents aware of 4-H programs, e) offering programs within their community location, f) recruiting more volunteers from the community, g) streamline volunteer screening process and pay for background check as an incentive, and h) taking measures to educate parents that the 4-H program is good for all kids.

Recommendations and Implications

When reviewing the major problems and solutions in reaching youth in underserved communities, it is clear that building social links with the community members using existing social capital within the underserved communities is the best option to overcome many of these major problems. For instance, lack of community volunteers, lack of parental support, lack of parents' awareness about available 4-H programs, parents' interests in other activities for their children, lack of community support, and cultural and language barriers are problems that may be able to resolve by finding ways to link with the existing social capital of underserved communities. The possible options to link with the social capital of the community is using identifiable community leaders such as pastors, educators, etc. within the underserved community. These community leaders' existing linkages with the community can be used to market the 4-H program, find additional volunteers, and educate parents about the 4-H program, validating it as an important program to kids in the community as discussed in the theoretical framework.

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