

4-H Volunteer Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Christal Huber

University of Missouri
Howard County Extension
600 W. Morrison Ste #17
Fayette, MO 65248
hubercd@missouri.edu
660-248-2272

Tanner Adkins

University of Missouri
Franklin County Extension
116 West Main St.
Union, MO 63804
tadkins@missouri.edu
636-583-5141

Rebecca Mott

University of Missouri
123 Gentry
Columbia, MO 65211
mottr@missouri.edu
573-882-1208

4-H Volunteer Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction/Need for Research

In March of 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 virus a global pandemic. In the following months, the world came to a halt as several countries issued lockdown recommendations (Atalan, 2020). Youth were pulled from schools and participated in remote learning for the remainder of the school year (Linder et al, 2021). This also affected positive youth development organizations such as 4-H. Programing slowed as it migrated to an online format and policies were put into place dictating how programing occurred (Calvert & Maria G. Fabregas, 2021; Morefield & Fabregas Janeiro, 2021).

On the front lines of navigating the ever-changing norms of the COVID-19 pandemic were 4-H volunteers that served the organization. 4-H volunteers and leaders had to make decisions on how and if they could deliver a traditional hands-on program in a world the required distance. In this study, we saw that 4-H volunteers across the East Central Region of Missouri applied different degrees of ecological resilience during the pandemic (Community & Regional Resilience Institute, 2013). Research Priority 6 for the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda addresses the need for vibrant and resilient communities (Roberts et al., 2016). This study showcases varying examples of resilience in communities through the delivery of 4-H youth development programs. Providing programmatic evidence for the need to diversify community resources to programs allowing youth to thrive in adverse and unexpected environmental conditions.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, a resilience lens was used to describe the process of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic for volunteers and their 4-H programs. We frame this resilience lens through ecological resilience, the ability of the organization and its' members to continue to exist in a stable form when facing non-typical internal or external factors requiring the organization to be adaptable and utilize diverse resources (Longstaff, 2005). Ecological resilience is often used to frame human psychological resilience to problems outside their control like war and trauma (Turner et al., 2003). COVID-19 provided an unprecedented environment, where 4-H was an organization that facilitated the navigation of the unique world situation at varying levels.

The purpose of this study was to describe the impact COVID-19 had on volunteer involvement in content delivery, and the quality of 4-H programing during the pandemic. The research was guided by the following research questions. How did the COVID-19 pandemic shape volunteer's relationships with 4-H members and other volunteers? What were the challenges and benefits of COVID-19 on 4-H programing? What tools were used to maintain 4-H programing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodology

A qualitative instrumental case study was used to describe the experiences of 4-H volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic using Stake's style of case study research (Stake, 1995). Participants for this study were purposely selected by the researchers if they met the criteria of being a 4-H volunteer in the East Central Region for more than five years and were a club leader during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews and observations were conducted with four female

club leaders. Data was analyzed using Glaser and Strauss' constant comparative method by developing units of meaning, categorizing into families, and categorizing into meaningful themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To account for dependability and trustworthiness the researchers, maintained audit trails and reflections, and performed member checks. This data was then triangulated with interviews and observations to check for commonalities.

Results/Findings

Three main themes of community experiences, communication challenges, and strong feelings and opinions emerged from the data. We found that the 4-H volunteer experience during the pandemic varied by community. Despite these variations volunteers were still able to facilitate 4-H programming with delivery modifications. These variations and modifications were influenced by factors such as county population and geography, club size, and socioeconomic status. All volunteers attempted to utilize technology during the early days of the pandemic to maintain their programs with varying degrees of success. They all also viewed communication as a vital part of their role as a club leader, both prior to and during the pandemic. For some technology aided communication and for others it provided a barrier. The lack of in person programming also presented challenges with member and parent engagement as well as implementation of hands-on learning. No volunteers found a suitable communication method to compensate for this loss. All volunteers also relied on communication from the state 4-H office on COVID-19 regulations and resources for online programming during the pandemic. 4-H volunteers spoke with high regard and passion for 4-H programs often referring to members and parents as their family. When discussing the COVID-19 pandemic many strong feelings and opinions emerged. Feelings of frustration and disappointment were often associated with the pandemic particularly in relationship to youth missing out on experiences and implementation of state 4-H mandated regulations. Many had vivid recollections and positive emotions recalling the first in person meeting or 4-H program that occurred during the pandemic. They also noted that when these programs did occur there was a much stronger sense of community with all involved

Conclusions

4-H youth programs can be adaptable and resilient when managing ever-changing environmental factors, due in part to the network of people, traditions, and resources that 4-H has developed. These findings support the ecological resilience theory that an organization and its members can maintain stability during times of adversity (Longstaff, 2005). This was demonstrated in the continuation of 4-H programs and events during the COVID-19 pandemic with modifications. 4-H programs also promote a sense of belonging creating a resilient community that can thrive in an environment of change.

Implications/Recommendations/ Impact on Profession

4-H programs in areas that have more resources such as connectivity, volunteers, meeting spaces, technology training, funds etc. are more adept to weather environmental changes. 4-H practitioners can play an important part in the development of diversified resources for volunteers. Which enables volunteers and programs to be more resilient over time. An important part of this processes is understanding the community's unique needs and individually addressing those for each community. By understanding these needs practitioners can better communicate with stakeholders and administration about the feasibility of programs and procedures. Thus, creating clearer lines of communication with individual counties.

References

- Atalan, A. (2020). Is the lockdown important to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic? Effects on psychology, environment and economy-perspective. *Annals of medicine and surgery*, *56*, 38-42.
- Calvert, M. L., & Fabregas Janeiro, M. G. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 on Missouri 4-H state fair participation and implications for youth development programs. *The Journal of Extension*, *58*(6), 4.
- Community & Regional Resilience Institute. (2013). *Definitions of Community Resilience: An analysis*. Retrieved December 1, 2021, from <https://s31207.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Definitions-of-community-resilience.pdf>
- Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Longstaff, P. H. (2005). Security, resilience, and communication in unpredictable environments such as terrorism, natural disasters, and complex technology. *Center for Information Policy Research, Harvard University*.
- Morefield, S., & Fabregas Janeiro, M. G. (2021). Using learning management systems to provide 4-H programming during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. *The Journal of Extension*, *58*(6), 27.
- Roberts, T. G., Harder, A., & Brashears, M. T. (Eds). (2016). *American Association for Agricultural Education national research agenda: 2016-2020*. Gainesville, FL: Department of Agricultural Education and Communication.
- Stake, R.E. (1995) *The art of case study research*. Sage Publications.
- Turner, N. J., Davidson-Hunt, I. J., & O'Flaherty, M. (2003). Living on the edge: ecological and cultural edges as sources of diversity for social—ecological resilience. *Human Ecology*, *31*(3), 439-461.