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William P. Evans

University of Nevada, Reno, evans@unr.nevada.edu

Lorie L. Sicafuse

University of Nevada, Reno, sicafuse@unr.nevada.edu

Eric Killian

University of Nevada, Reno, killian2@unce.unr.edu



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4-H Youth Worker Characteristics: Comparisons with Workers from Other Youth-Serving Organizations

William P. Evans

Professor of Human Development and Family Studies
State Specialist for Youth Development
University of Nevada, Reno
evans@unr.nevada.edu

Lorie L. Sicafuse

Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in Social Psychology
University of Nevada, Reno
sicafuse@unr.nevada.edu

Eric Killian

Associate Professor
Youth Development Specialist
University of Nevada Cooperative Extension
Reno, Nevada
killiane@unce.unr.edu

Abstract: Participation in 4-H has been linked to a variety of positive youth outcomes. Yet little is known about the youth workers responsible for the implementation of these programs. Using survey data collected from a national sample, the study reported here examined the characteristics of 4-H workers and youth workers from other organizations. Analyses revealed both the strengths of 4-H workers and the challenges they may face in expanding and promoting programming. Recommendations are offered to ensure the continued development and success of 4-H programs.

The focus on the positive development of youth in recent years has produced a profound interest in the ways that organized, community-based out-of-school time programs contribute to this process. Involvement in out-of-school time programs facilitates youth interaction with other peers and adults in the community, thereby fostering positive growth and development (Hirsh, 2005; Perkins, Borden, Keith, Hoppe-Rooney, & Villarruel, 2003).

Participation in 4-H, the largest out-of-school time youth program in the U.S. (National 4-H Headquarters, 2008), has been linked to a variety of positive youth outcomes. Research has shown that participation in 4-H programs reduces risk behaviors, promotes academic success, increases self-confidence, and enhances leadership, problem-solving, and communication skills (Astroth & Haynes, 2002; Goodwin, Carroll, & Oliver, 2007; Lerner, Lerner, & Phelps et al., 2008). Less attention, however, has been given to youth workers, who work directly with youth as professionals or volunteers and are responsible for the

implementation of these programs (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006).

Recent studies have revealed that youth workers are essential in ensuring the success of out-of-school time programs (Hartje, Evans, Killian, & Brown, 2008; McLaughlin, 2000; Walker, 2003; Yohalem, 2003), although the specific characteristics of youth workers that lead to positive outcomes for children remain largely unclear. Using a national sample, the study reported here examined the characteristics of 4-H workers and compared them with youth workers from other organizations. The authors are not aware of any other studies that have conducted such a comparison.

This information can help Extension professionals assess how 4-H workers compare to others in the youth work field, contributing to how 4-H can respond to workforce issues and increasing the likelihood that 4-H will remain a relevant and thriving out-of-school time program. Additionally, this knowledge can be used to maximize collaborative efforts between 4-H and other youth-serving organizations, leading to the successful expansion and enhancement of positive youth outcomes.

Method

Procedure

Data were collected through a Web-based survey using a Web site exclusively designed for survey research. The survey was assigned a specific Web address, making it accessible only to individuals who had obtained that Web address from the researchers. This process helped to ensure access to the survey only by legitimate program staff. Because most youth-serving organizations use the Web as their principal communication method with staff (National Collaboration For Youth, personal communication, April 14, 2006), this was believed to be an appropriate method of data collection for the study.

The first step in administering the survey to youth workers was to contact administrative representatives from national youth organizations and youth-serving collaborative organizations throughout the United States. Representatives from these national organizations were asked to distribute the survey link to front-line program staff by an email message to their listserves or providing their organizational email lists to the researchers.

The survey was available between February and July, 2004. During that time period, 1,147 individuals who work in out-of-school time programs visited the site to participate in the survey. After eliminating respondents who were screened out because they did not meet the criteria for participation in the study (e.g., administrators and individuals who did not work directly with youth ages 10 - 18 years old in out-of-school time programs), the total number of program staff who completed the survey was 886. Institutional Review Board approval was sought and obtained for this project through the authors' home academic institution.

Participants

The sample for the study was composed of adults, ages 18 years or older (mean age = 38 years old), who work directly with youth in out-of-school time programs. Responses were obtained from program staff who represented a variety of organizations (e.g., 4-H and Extension, State and National Parks and Recreation Associations, Big Brothers/Big Sisters) that directly work with youth throughout the country. For the purposes of the study, "youth worker" was defined as any frontline adult staff directly working with youth (ages 10 - 18) to positively influence their development.

Seventy-two percent of youth workers who participated were female, and 28% were male. Ethnic

background was reported as follows: White/Nonhispanic (77%); African-American (10%); Hispanic/Latino (5%); Multi-ethnic (3%); Asian/Pacific Islander (2%); and Other (1%). Level of formal education was reported as follows: high school diploma or GED (2%); community college degree or certificate (6%); some college (13%); bachelor's degree (48%); master's degree (29%); doctorate degree (4%). Program staff were well distributed regarding the geographic area in which they work, representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Thirty-seven percent of respondents reported serving urban areas, 31% suburban settings, and 32% rural areas. Nearly one-third (32%) of program staff said that 76-100% of their program was made up of low income or at-risk youth; almost half (49%) said that ethnic minorities comprised up to one quarter of their program. 4-H workers comprised over one quarter (28%, n = 251) of the total sample; the remaining 635 respondents worked for other youth-serving organizations.

Measures

A multi-step process was used to develop the self-report Web-based instrument that assessed staff's characteristics. First, the researchers used features of program settings that promote positive youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) to create a measure of youth worker competence (Hartje et al., 2008). Following completion of the entire survey, a panel of five youth development experts reviewed each item for relevance and clarity. Items were modified according to suggestions, and the survey was re-reviewed by the same panel of experts before administration.

Youth Program Staff Characteristics

Data were obtained on the following program staff characteristics: sex, age, ethnicity, length and status of employment, level of formal education (including percentage of youth development-related specialization, the focus of staff's programs (e.g., mentoring, life skills), degree of "street experience" (defined as having lived through experiences similar to the youth in their program), whether or not staff learned about the job from more experienced staff, perceived level of competency in implementing program features associated with positive youth development, level of job satisfaction, and intent to continue working with youth (Hartje et al., 2008). Additionally, data were collected regarding the amount of time youth spent in staff's programs; the percentage of minority, low income, and at-risk youth participating in these programs; and whether program youth were from rural or urban areas.

Self-Reported Competency Scale (SRSC)

Initially, eight subscales were created to assess youth program staff's self-reported competency in implementing the features associated with positive youth development as outlined in a recent National Academy of Youth Development Report (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) Because an exploratory factor analysis revealed that several items in the original scale had low factor loadings, a shortened version of the SRSC was used for the purposes of the study and was comprised of seven subscales (Table 1). Response sets were on a 10-point scale ranging from "I am not good at this" to "I am extremely good at this." Cronbach's alphas for each of these subscales ranged from .77 to .92. The composite competency score had a Cronbach's alpha of .95.

Table 1.

Self-Reported Competency Scale: Features of Positive Development and Corresponding Sample Survey Items

Scale	Sample Survey Items
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Physical and Psychological Safety	Keeping youth from hurting each other's feelings Managing conflict between youth
Appropriate Program Structure	Making sure our program's rules are followed by youth Managing the time of youth while they participate in our program
Supportive Relationships	Listening to youth If a youth has a problem, I am easy to approach
Positive Social Norms	Ensuring that youth act appropriately in my program Ensuring that youth know I have high expectations of them
Developing Social Capital	Encouraging youth to take on leadership in our program Providing opportunities for youth to give back to their local neighborhood or community
Skill Building Opportunities	Conducting activities with youth that are challenging to them Providing activities that reinforce what youth are learning in school
Social Integration of Family, School, and Community	Communicating with the parents or guardians of the youth in my program Providing referrals and resources to the youth and families in my program

Results

As Table 2 indicates, the majority of youth workers in our national sample reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs (81%), were employed full-time (73%), believed they were likely to continue working with youth 5 years from now (84%), and reported high levels of overall competency related to their work with youth. In terms of comparisons between 4-H workers and youth workers from other organizations, 4-H workers reported that they had worked for their organization significantly longer than respondents from other organizations ($\chi^2 = 74.47, p < .01$).

Table 2.

Chi-Square and Independent t-test Comparing Characteristics of 4-H Workers with Other Youth Workers

Characteristic	χ^2	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Employment status (e.g., full-time, part-time)	2.52	-	4
Length of employment	50.58	-	7
Level of education	74.47*	-	5

Percentage of education in youth development	6.67	-	4
Learned from more experienced colleagues	2.66	-	3
Program centers on life skills	282.97*	-	15
Amount of time youth spend in program	83.60*	-	4
Worker ethnic background	36.28*	-	6
Minorities comprise 0-25% of program	103.25*	-	3
Program youth from rural vs. urban areas	117.78*	-	2
Over half of program are low income/at risk	97.15*	-	3
Life experience similar to youth participants	-	1.57	859
Satisfied or very satisfied with job	-	1.79	785
Likely to work with youth 5 years from now	-	1.39	785
Overall competency rating	-	-9.25	652
*p<.01			

4-H workers also reported significantly higher levels of formal education than workers from other organizations ($\chi^2 = 74.47, p < .01$). No significant differences between the two groups were found, however, regarding levels of youth development-specific education, "street experience," or the amount learned about their job from more experienced colleagues. 4-H workers were significantly more likely than non-4-H workers to report that their program centered on life skills ($\chi^2 = 282.97, p < .01$). Non-4-H workers were most likely to work in drop-in teen programs, followed by programs that focused on recreation and mentoring.

4-H workers were significantly less ethnically diverse than workers from other organizations ($\chi^2 = 36.29, p < .01$). Demographic differences in the youth these workers served also were found. 4-H workers reported significantly fewer ethnic minorities in their programs than other youth workers ($\chi^2 = 103.25, p < .01$). This may be because 4-H workers were significantly more likely to report that the youth in their programs were from rural areas, whereas non-4-H workers were significantly more likely to report working with urban youth ($\chi^2 = 117.78, p < .01$). Similarly, individuals representing 4-H programs were significantly less likely than workers from other organizations to work with youth from low income/at-risk backgrounds ($\chi^2 = 93.15, p < .001$). Finally, respondents reported that youth spent significantly less time per month in 4-H programs than in other programs ($\chi^2 = 83.60, p < .01$).

Conclusion

The study reported here compared characteristics of 4-H workers with youth workers from other organizations. Analyses revealed important similarities and differences between the two groups, illuminating both the strengths of 4-H workers and the challenges they may face in promoting positive youth development. These findings also provide a greater understanding of 4-H youth workers while highlighting opportunities for 4-H to remain a relevant and thriving organization.

Our results indicate that 4-H workers possess educational and employment characteristics conducive to the continued development and success of 4-H. Previous studies have found education to be associated with

greater tenure among youth workers, as well as increased job-related competency (Hartje et al., 2008). Not only were 4-H workers more educated and significantly more likely to hold a master's degree than other youth workers in our sample, but they also reported working for their 4-H organization for a longer period of time. Further, they indicated a greater desire to continue working with youth in the future, although this difference did not reach significance. The longer tenure of 4-H staff may allow more opportunities for training, as well as the development of positive youth-adult relationships with youth participants and other staff members (Yohalem, 2003).

Plans to double the number of 4-H clubs nationwide (Astroth, 2007) and to increase programming in urban areas (Kerrigan, 2007) may present significant challenges for 4-H professionals in many states. Our findings revealed that 4-H workers were less likely than youth workers from other organizations to be ethnically diverse, have minorities in their programs, and work with youth from low-income and high-risk backgrounds. Not only will 4-H programs need to increasingly focus on enhancing the development of urban and suburban at-risk youth, but also staff members working in such environments must understand the unique circumstances specific to these communities and audiences (Kerrigan, 2007).

Urban 4-H development has begun to thrive in many 4-H systems across the country, and collaboration with other youth-serving organizations experienced in these contexts can provide direction to this process. Prior research indicates that youth workers recognize the value of collaboration and express a willingness to learn from others in their field (Garza, Artman, Roehlkepartain, et al., 2007). Unfortunately, collaboration may be impeded by a lack of awareness regarding inter-organizational assets and resources (Garza et al., 2007).

By identifying the specific strengths of 4-H workers and the challenges they face in positively affecting youth, the results of the study can be used to enhance collaborative efforts between 4-H programs and other youth-serving organizations. Strategies may be developed to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and skills to achieve a goal that transcends all differences among youth workers: The promotion of positive youth development.

In planning and implementing such collaborations, 4-H workers and workers from other organizations should focus on sharing best practices, implementation strategies, and expertise to the mutual benefit of youth-serving organizations and the youth they engage. Similarly, youth workers should acknowledge the challenges they face in promoting positive youth development in differing contexts with diverse audiences. Current findings indicate that non-4-H youth workers are more ethnically diverse, with more experience in intensive programming with at-risk urban audiences. This expertise can help 4-H workers to better understand the challenges specific to promoting positive youth development in urban environments. Conversely, 4-H brings staff experienced in life-skills programming, along with linkage to land-grant universities for research, evaluation, and professional development opportunities.

All youth workers in the study possessed a number of strengths relevant to positive youth development. Most notably, 4-H workers and workers from other organizations were equally confident in their skills, with both groups reporting high self-competency levels in implementing features associated with positive youth development. Future research should further investigate the training needs of 4-H workers, as well as areas in which 4-H staff may use their expertise to enhance the skills and knowledge of youth workers from other organizations. Such information may help youth-serving organizations to reconcile their strengths and weaknesses, maximize collaborative efforts, and increase positive youth outcomes.

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