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Illinois Extension's Readiness to Address Children, Youth, and Families at Risk

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Illinois Extension's Readiness to Address Children, Youth, and Families at Risk

Abstract

The study described here evaluates existing preparedness of Extension unit leaders in one state to meet the needs of children, youth, and families at risk. Survey findings of a representative sample include how leaders perceive at-risk audiences and how they assess their own experience, knowledge, and interest in serving them. We report the specific audiences needing programming in local communities and the programming that currently exists for them. Findings also include the programming leaders would like to offer given unlimited resources. We discuss existing strengths and propose ways to further support these professionals in areas relevant to at-risk audiences.

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Introduction

Extension's mission has been to "tak[e] the University to the people by conducting research-based educational programs for many of the diverse groups making up our nation," (Rasmussen, 1989). This has gained importance with shifts in demographics (U.S. Census 2000). In response to dynamic needs of American families, Extension has accepted the challenge to more fully address youth, family, and community development. Still, many "needs are not being met because funding and staff are not available," (Rasmussen, 1989). A fundamental challenge is to meet expanding and diverse needs with substantially fewer resources.

Historically, the educator (county agent) connects citizens and land-grant universities by identifying research problems and communicating research findings (Garrett, 2001). In Illinois, units are local Extension points of contact for one or more counties. Unit leaders provide programmatic leadership, assess community needs, and build coalitions to accomplish local goals (Peeples, Zwilling, Wiley, & Spelke, 2000). Like educators (Wiley & Ebata, in press), unit leaders need training to work with emerging issues that impact diverse youth and families at risk. Is Extension ready to meet this challenge?

Illinois Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) State Strengthening evaluators examined how unit leaders assess experience, knowledge, and interest in reaching at risk audiences. We look perceptions of at-risk audiences, their programming needs, existing programming, and ideal

programming. We evaluate existing strengths and propose training opportunities in areas relevant to at-risk audiences.

Method

In 2000, a sample was selected using a stratified random sampling technique based on the poverty level of the counties (Cook County, home of Chicago, was not included due to skewed population demographics compared to the rest of the state). One quarter (20) was selected using a quartile technique. Units were divided into four quartiles based on poverty level (high, medium, low, and very low), and the same number of units was randomly drawn from each quartile. Surveys were administered via telephone interviews.

The instrument consisted of several rating scales and open-ended questions. Respondents were asked to rate their experience, knowledge, and interest in at risk programming using a five-point scale (1 = very low, 2 = low, 3 = so-so, 4 = high and 5 = very high). Unit leaders responded to open-ended questions about perceptions of at risk audiences, existing and potential programs addressing at risk audiences, and constraints and opportunities for more programming.

We transcribed all information and did interpretative qualitative analyses, specifically open coding (Straus & Corbin, 1998). After several readings, major concepts were identified and coded. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were used to compile the results.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic Profile

- 74% were females, and 26% males.
- 37% had an agriculture-relevant degree.
- 26% were trained in home economics.
- 10% were trained in education.
- 32% had been in Extension more than 25 years.
- 20% had 20-25 years of field experience.
- Average was 19.45 years of experience (range 1-25).

Ratings of Experience, Knowledge and Interest

Over half of unit leaders rated themselves as 3 ("so-so") or below in experience with at-risk programming (Table 1). Forty-two percent felt they have high experience, while only 6% rated themselves as very high. There was great variation in work with at-risk audiences. When asked about their knowledge of at-risk issues, 48% reported "so-so" to low knowledge. These unit leaders rated only slightly higher their knowledge compared to experience with at-risk programming. While not completely confident in their experience and knowledge, a full 88% rated their interest as high or very high in such programming. Local Extension managers need more support and training to do work they really want to do with at-risk audiences.

Table 1.

Self-Ratings of Experience, Knowledge, and Interest (Percentage of Unit Leaders in Each Category)

	Very Low 1	Low 2	So-So 3	High 4	Very High 5
Experience	0%	20%	32%	42%	6%
Knowledge	0%	16%	32%	46%	6%
Interest	0%	6%	6%	68%	20%

Unit Leaders' Perceptions of Children, Youth, and Families at Risk

We asked "what comes to your mind when you hear 'children, youth and families at risk?'" Table 2 summarizes Extension unit leaders' perceptions. The first column shows responses in each category. The second shows how many responses in a particular category were the initial answer to the question. This first answer may be an indication of the primacy of a particular category for the respondent.

Table 2.

Unit Leaders' Perceptions of Children Youth and Families at Risk

Response	Category Frequencies (Percent Total Responses)	First Mention Frequencies (Percent Respondents)
Economic Resources	19 (42%)	13 (69%)
Family Structure	10 (22%)	3 (16%)
Race/Gender	6 (13%)	0 (0%)
Social Emotional	4 (9%)	1 (5%)
Legal/Social Issues	3 (7%)	1 (5%)
Age & Physical Vulnerability	3 (7%)	1 (5%)
Total	45 total responses	19 respondents (100%)

Respondents used different criteria to define children, youth, and families at risk. While many (69%) talked first about economic situations, they differed on other defining features. These included family structure (e.g., single parent), legal issues (alcohol and drug abuse), age and physical vulnerability (youth and elderly), race and gender (minority status and girls), and social and emotional status (working parents with loosely monitored children and dysfunctional families).

Lack of economic resources is the defining at risk characteristic for these unit leaders. All of them mentioned this, and it was the initial response for nearly 70%. While nearly one quarter of all responses concerned family structure, it was mentioned first by only 16% of unit leaders. This may indicate its relative lower importance when compared to economic stress. Only 13% of all responses concerned race and/or gender, and none mentioned it first.

At Risk Audiences in Need of Programming

We asked "What audiences in your county could benefit from programming for Children, Youth and Families at risk?" Initial responses (Table 3) were almost evenly divided between economically challenged audiences and those with legal and/or social challenges (e.g., alcohol/substance abuse and violence). A smaller number were concerned about audiences with contextual challenges (e.g., geographical context such as urban or rural audience).

Table 3.
Primary Target Audiences for CYFAR Programming (First Responses)

Response	Frequencies	Percent
Economic Resources	7	37
Legal/Social Issues	6	32
Context (geographical & institutional)	3	16
Family Structure	1	5
Age & Physical Vulnerability	1	5
Other	1	5

Total	19	100%
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Answers to this question likely indicate the at-risk audiences unit leaders perceive to be represented and in need of programming in their communities. Economic challenges, seen as a primary defining feature in Table 2, are also seen as prevalent in the at-risk audiences present in the communities of these unit leaders. While family structure issues were deemed important in defining at risk audiences, families with these challenges were not seen as primary targets for at-risk programming.

It is also notable that audiences with legal/social issues are seen as in need of local programming (nearly one-third of respondents reported this) but are not as important when defining at-risk audiences (Table 2). Both of these findings may reveal that unit leaders see their own at-risk communities as unique when compared to more general at-risk populations.

Finally, three of the unit leaders were concerned that audiences with contextual challenges (in these cases rural families and schools) need programming. Again, this category was not represented in their more general definitions of "at-risk" audiences, perhaps as a result of seeing their own communities as having local problems not represented more broadly. It is also interesting to note that audiences based on race and/or gender were not identified by any unit leaders as needing programming in their communities. This may show that unit leaders are confident that there is enough programming to meet the needs of these audiences or that they do not see audiences with these needs as represented in their communities sufficiently to warrant programming.

Existing Programs for Children, Youth, and Families at Risk

In answering the third question, "What Extension programs are you aware of that address the needs of children, youth and families at risk?," 74% (14) of unit leaders mentioned nutrition programs (Table 4). An equal number reported youth-related programming (e.g., 4-H), while fewer than half (43%) mentioned programs related to education and job training. These figures are interesting when compared to the reported needs of local at-risk audiences. While the reported programming may address some needs of the economically challenged, no unit leader mentioned any existing programming focused on the legal issues (e.g. substance abuse and violence) identified as an important need in the prior question.

Table 4.
Existing Programs That Meet the Needs of Children, Youth, and Families at Risk
(Frequency and Percentage of Category Mentions, Not First Responses)

Response	Number of Times Mentioned	Percentage Total Responses
Nutrition	15	29
Teen/children	14	27
Education/Job	10	19
Budget management	4	7
Parenting	3	6
Conflict Management	3	6
Aging	3	6
Total (all programs mentioned)	52	100%

Programming in an Ideal World

Finally, respondents were asked, if they had unlimited resources, where they would target more programming for at-risk audiences in their communities (Table 5). About 37% of the unit leaders expressed first the need for more programming in the area of education and job training, and references to this type of programming made up more than a quarter (29%) of their responses. Preschool and after school programs, literacy training, and GED training were also mentioned in this category.

This is not surprising given that economic challenge was the primary criteria in most leaders' definition of children, youth, and families at risk. The need for more programming in this area is probably indicative of the depth of the perceived problem as well as the reality of hard decisions that must be made in the face of limited funding.

Table 5.

Given Unlimited Resources, What Kind of Programming Would You Like to Have in Your Unit?

Response	Category Frequencies (Percent Total Responses)	First Mention Frequencies (Percent Respondents)
Organizational change	14 (27%)	1 (5%)
Educational/job	15 (29%)	7 (37%)
Teen/children	7 (14%)	1 (5%)
Self-esteem, Conflict and Leadership Skills	4 (8%)	1 (5%)
Parenting	3 (6%)	3 (16%)
Nutrition	5 (10%)	3 (16%)
Budgeting/management	2 (4%)	1 (5%)
Marriage/Couples	2 (4%)	1 (5%)
More of current programs	1 (2%)	1 (5%)
Total	52 (total responses)	19 (total respondents)

Responses in the most commonly mentioned category (27%) concerned organizational changes in Extension. Fourteen of 19 unit leaders identified at least one organizational change. We did not anticipate that this question about ideal programming would elicit answers about how the Extension organization must change to reach at-risk audiences. It was as if most unit leaders could not talk about programming in an ideal world without passionately addressing how to make that world possible. They spoke of:

- Additional staff training,
- More purposive collaboration with other agencies,
- Recruiting and keeping more diverse professional and paraprofessional staff, and
- Reviewing and updating Extension educational materials.

Additionally, three spoke of changing the way Extension does business to actually providing some concrete resources (such as food when needed) and face-to-face direct assistance to at-risk audiences.

Under the "teen/children" category, several respondents mentioned programs to prevent adolescent pregnancy, and one spoke about drug abuse prevention programs. Beyond this, we were surprised that unit leaders did not mention adding programs focused on legal/social challenges, even though many identified this as a need among at-risk audiences in their

communities and none mentioned relevant existing programming.

Implications

Extension has always responded to the evolving needs of the public. As in times past, Extension is now called upon to grow and stretch in new directions. This is especially true given the myriad of sources people can now turn to for information. Extension must find ways to underline and expand its reputation as a credible source of research-based information that is relevant to real and pressing social problems. The needs of children, youth, and families at risk are one example.

The results of this survey provide us with a limited picture of how unit leaders in Illinois assess their own experience, knowledge, and interest in providing services to children, youth, and families at risk. We are also given a picture of how these local managers perceive at-risk audiences and, more specifically, what at-risk audiences they believe need Extension programming, the programming that exists, and ideally the targeted programming unit leaders would offer with unlimited resources. We end this article with some general conclusions and suggestions for future training, programming, and inquiry for Extension professionals.

- Given the shifting population, Extension must provide training and support to front-line leaders in areas relevant to at-risk audiences. It is encouraging that these unit leaders were very interested in programming for at-risk audiences. They may lack resources and training, but they do not lack heart.
- The overwhelming attention to economic challenge as the primary defining feature of risk may be related to a local salient reality. It also suggests that continued efforts should be made to raise awareness of the many complex issues that contribute to the vulnerability of families and youth.
- The focus on legal and social challenges present in local communities suggests that unit leaders and their staff might benefit from more training and support in providing appropriate educational support for such audiences and their families.
- Given the salience of economic and legal/social risk, it would be prudent to invest more training and programming resources in these areas. Findings imply that more effort should be focused on sexuality education and pregnancy, and disease and violence prevention programming for youth audiences.
- There is a pressing need for more administrative and infrastructure support for addressing the needs of at-risk audiences. Additional leadership, incentives, and training would benefit the efforts of these local managers.

We believe the findings and implications of this study provide insights for Extension organizations outside Illinois, although population demographics and specific needs may differ. Across the U.S., Extension must provide support for increased attention to children, youth, and families at risk.

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