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Enrollment in US youth development programs is decreasing annually. Research has shown that youth in the 4-H youth development program experience a broad range of positive youth development outcomes, including greater community contributions, healthier choices, higher academic competence, critical life and leadership skills such as problem-solving, goal setting, communication, responsibility, and a sense of belonging and purpose. Finding ways to retain youth in the program for more than a year or two can profoundly impact society due to the skills developed and opportunities provided to youth in 4-H. The purpose of this study was to understand why youth might leave the 4-H program after one year of involvement. Using data from a multiyear, multistate study of first-year 4-H members, we examined why youth might leave the program and what first-year experiences correlate with youth dropout. Quantitative and qualitative survey data suggest that youth leave the program because of challenges related to belonging, welcoming, time, communication, interactions with adults, and overall organization. These findings can provide youth development faculty, programming staff, and volunteers with directions for improving the program to retain more youth.

Keywords: 4-H, youth development, retention, first-year members, program experience, belonging, volunteers

Introduction

Enrollment in US youth development programs is decreasing annually. Total youth enrollment in the 4-H Youth Development Program in the United States has decreased yearly from 2010 to 2014 (most recent data is available; United States Department of Agriculture - REEIS, 2021). Anecdotally, colleagues at other youth-serving organizations have reported similar declines. Research has shown that youth involved in 4-H experience a broad range of positive youth development outcomes, including greater community contributions, healthier choices, higher academic competence, critical life and leadership skills such as problem-solving, goal setting, communication, responsibility, and a sense of belonging and purpose (Dodd et al., 2015; Lerner & Lerner, 2013). Former 4-H participants reported that they volunteer, hold leadership positions in community organizations, and continue to be a part of 4-H as adult volunteers (Merten et al., 2014). A review of participation in out-of-school-time programs in New York City found that youth in programs with higher retention rates over two years had better outcomes such as a greater sense of belonging, higher academic self-esteem, and improved academic performance than youth in programs with lower retention rates (Pearson et al., 2007). Through retention efforts (or by reducing dropout rates), more young people can experience the powerful impacts found to influence positive development of youth. In turn, these youth will contribute to their community by remaining engaged, volunteering, and maintaining employment. Long-term engagement in 4-H or other youth-serving organizations benefits not only young people but their communities as well. Finding ways to retain youth in programming for more than a year or two can profoundly impact society because of the skills developed and opportunities provided to youth participating in 4-H and other out-of-school experiences.

Involvement in 4-H programming provides youth with several contextual factors and opportunities that foster these outcomes. One of these is a sense of belonging. Belonging has long been an essential element of 4-H (Kress, 2005), and research shows the importance of belonging in youth development (Arnold, 2018; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). As youth first enter a program, they consider if they "fit in" (p. 97). A sense of belonging involves cultural inclusion, interpersonal comfort, and a socially and emotionally safe place to be (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Another element that promotes youth thriving is developmental relationships (Arnold, 2018). The Search Institute uses the concept of developmental relationships to describe a framework for a positive adult's role in the development of a young person. The components of developmental relationships include expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017). Eccles and Gootman (2002) also recognize this notion in what they frame as "supportive relationships," and Scales et al. (2011) describe this significant adult role as a "spark champion."

Several studies have examined why youth leave or do not leave the 4-H program. For example, Harrington and colleagues (2011) examined factors related to why youth joined, stayed, and left 4-H in Minnesota. The primary reason for leaving was loss of interest, and youth stayed in the

program because of friendships and club leaders. Albright and Ferrari (2010) examined retention in older 4-H members in Ohio. They found that youth left due to negative experiences, getting more involved in other activities, and having less time for 4-H. In Georgia, Defore et al. (2011) reported that middle school-aged youth left 4-H because of time conflicts and found the program boring or more suited for younger youth. Finally, in Florida, Ellison and Harder (2018) interviewed senior 4-H members (grades 9-12) who reported parental pressure to stay involved in 4-H. These findings demonstrate the complexity of 4-H involvement and the myriad factors influencing a youth's participation. Other studies have found that one of the primary indicators for youth dropping out of the 4-H program is being a first-year member (Astroth, 1985; Harder et al., 2005; Hartley, 1983). Enrollment trends in both New York (Hamilton et al., 2014) and California (Lewis et al., 2015) have shown that many youth spend only one year in 4-H.

The present study expands upon this research. First, prior research has only examined youth retention one state at a time. This paper reports findings from multiple states, with at least one state representing each region in the United States. Second, prior research has studied the 4-H population as a whole or by gender, age, or grade. To our knowledge, no other study has looked at *why* youth leave the program based on their length of time in the program (e.g., one year).

With that knowledge, the Youth Retention Study team, a multistate group of Cooperative Extension staff, decided to understand better the experiences of first-year 4-H members and their families. We developed a survey for first-year members and a separate survey for their parents or guardians asking about various aspects of their experience in the 4-H program near the end of the first year of involvement. In the current study, we focused on questions that asked youth why they might not rejoin the 4-H program after their first year. We have three research questions:

1. Why might youth leave 4-H?
2. Are there differences in why youth leave based on demographics?
3. What particular first-year experiences correlate with youth leaving the program?

Methods

The study reported here is part of a multistate, multiyear study addressing youth retention in the 4-H program. To date, we have collected five years of data from 4-H youth and their guardians following their first year in the program, with the first year of data collection in 2014-15 being a survey pilot test. The goal of this study is to understand youth and family experiences in 4-H to retain more youth in the program. The institutional review boards approved procedures and the survey instrument at all associated institutions.

Youth completed a survey about their experience in 4-H following their first year in the program. Members of the larger study team developed the survey, and details about the survey development have been published elsewhere (see Lewis et al., 2018). We created targeted questions guided by our overall research questions and hypotheses. We used 4HOnline, a 4-H

enrollment system used across the country, to generate a list of eligible youth. We sent surveys via email (using Qualtrics). We used methods guided by Dillman (1978) to recruit youth participants. We first sent an email to the youth (and/or to their parent/guardian or family email) to let them know they would receive a survey in one week. Then, we distributed the survey, followed by three reminders (approximately one week apart). We provided no compensation or incentive for participation.

This paper used study data from first-year 4-H members following the 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19 program years, as the dependent variables of focus were not collected until 2016-17 (the third year of data collection). In addition, these questions were only asked of youth, so the study results reported here only focus on youth experiences in the program. We excluded data from youth who were Cloverbuds (e.g., under age 9) or did not answer the question about age (*n* excluded = 1,308). We collected data from 4-H members in California, Idaho, New Jersey, Montana, Florida, Louisiana, Missouri, Washington, and Wyoming. We combined data from all three years into a single file for analysis. Table 1 shows the demographics of the sample. The mean age of the participants was 11.10 years (*SD* = 2.02).

Table 1. Demographics of the Sample (n = 2,054)

	n	*%*
Gender		
Female	1,227	59.7
Male	779	37.9
Missing	48	2.3
Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic or Latino	1,606	78.2
Hispanic or Latino	198	9.6
Missing	250	12.2
Race		
African-American	152	7.4
Asian	41	2.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	13	0.6
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	2	0.1
White	1,540	75.0
Other Race	87	4.2
Multiple Races	83	4.0
Missing	136	6.6
Residence		
Farm	355	17.3
Rural, non-farm	707	34.4
Town	598	29.1
Suburb	180	8.8
City	192	9.3
Missing	22	1.1

	n	*%*
Age		
9	473	23.0
10	540	26.3
11	367	17.9
12	230	11.2
13	175	8.5
14	114	5.6
15	68	3.3
16	50	2.4
17	19	0.9
18	12	0.6
19	6	0.3

Measures

Why Youth Might Leave 4-H

The dependent variables in this study were nine items about why youth might leave the program (e.g., "I didn't feel connected to other youth in the club," "4-H is too expensive," and "I don't have time for 4-H because of my other activities"). The questions were preceded with the following prompt: "Below are some reasons why youth might not come back to 4-H. Please tell us if any of these are reasons why you might not like to be in 4-H again. Tell us how true these statements are for you." All items were on a scale of 1 (Not true at all) to 5 (Completely true). We developed this list of reasons in conjunction with teens holding state-level 4-H leadership positions in California and New Jersey. We included an open-ended qualitative question asking for "other reasons you might not come back to 4-H."

Youth Involvement in 4-H

We examined the relationship between these nine items about why youth might leave and youth demographics (presented in Table 1 above), as well as time spent in 4-H and intent to re-enroll in the program. Time spent in 4-H was measured by the number of projects in which youth were enrolled, the number of club or projects meetings per month youth attended, and the number of hours per week youth spent on their 4-H projects. These variables were only collected in 2017-18 and 2018-19. Most of the youth were in one project (49%), had one to two club or project meetings per month (61%), and spent zero to five hours per week on 4-H projects (67%). See the Appendix for descriptive statistics of these variables.

We measured intent to re-enroll in the program by asking youth if they planned to re-enroll in 4-H the next year. Seventy-nine percent said yes, 7% said no, and 14% said they did not know or

did not answer the question. We did not use the "I don't know" for the study reported here; this response was treated as missing data.

Youth Experience in 4-H

We measured overall experience (positive or negative) with 11 items about program features that maximize youth development (e.g., "Adults who worked with me were caring," "My 4-H club made me feel important," and "I learned new things in my 4-H project(s).") All items were on a Likert-like scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These 11 items were combined into an overall "experience" scale (see Lewis et al., 2018). The mean was 4.16 ($SD = 0.90$), and Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) was 0.94.

We collected qualitative data through open-ended questions on the survey. Questions included "What was the best part of the 4-H program this past year?" and "If you could change one thing about 4-H, what would it be?" We also included, "Is there anything else you'd like to share?" Qualitative data provided insights into the quantitative data, describing specifics about the youth experience and illuminating what they found positive and problematic in the program.

Analysis

To address our first research question about why youth might not return to 4-H, we ran descriptive analyses (frequencies, means, and correlations). For the second research question, we ran independent samples t-tests and correlations to test for demographic differences in the nine items about leaving. Residence was treated as a continuous variable, with higher scores indicating a more urban location. Because of the small sample sizes for the different racial groups, race was treated as a binary variable (White or non-White). Finally, we ran multiple regressions for the third research question to test relationships between the time spent in 4-H, intent to re-enroll, and overall experience. For all analyses, we set the significance level at $p < 0.01$. For t-tests, we report results with an effect size greater than 0.20, indicating at least a small effect size. Effect sizes were calculated as Cohen's d (Cohen, 1988).

The research team collaborated to analyze the qualitative responses using a process of thematic analysis. Through open coding and consensus, they developed an initial codebook using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Patton, 2014; Rea-Keywood et al., 2021). As the data set grew and new states joined the project, questions were divided among sub-teams. Members within sub-teams individually coded responses, checked for inter-rater reliability with other sub-team members, and corroborated the codes through consensus. The codebook expanded with the deepening data set. The process for developing the code book is presented elsewhere (Rea-Keywood et al., 2021). Researchers recoded and compiled all four data sets using the current codebook to assure fidelity across years. This thematic analysis enabled the research team to fully explore all responses and determine themes with a higher prevalence that have a meaningful impact on a member's experience.

Results

Why Might Youth Leave 4-H?

The items with the highest percentages of youth responding "Completely True" or "A Little True" were "I didn't feel connected to other youth in my club" (19.9%), "I don't have time for 4-H because of my other activities" (18.3%), and "I didn't know when my club or project met" (13.0%). These items also had the highest means. "I didn't feel welcomed in my club" had 8.9% respond that youth might leave 4-H. Table 2 presents how youth responded to these items about leaving (separated by each response option), as well as the mean for each item. Correlations among the items are in the Appendix. Items are listed in the order that youth saw them on the survey.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Why Youth Might Leave Items (n = 1,927-1,953)

	Not True at All (%)	A Little Not True (%)	Both (%)	A Little True (%)	Completely True (%)	*M (SD)*
1. I didn't know when my club or project met	70.9	9.3	6.8	7.1	5.9	1.68 (1.22)
2. I didn't feel connected to other youth in the club	54.5	14.8	10.7	13.2	6.7	2.03 (1.34)
3. I didn't feel welcomed in my club	77.7	7.3	6.1	5.0	3.9	1.50 (1.07)
4. I don't have time for 4-H because of my other activities (like sports, church, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, FFA)	51.5	16.5	13.7	14.9	3.4	2.02 (1.25)
5. 4-H is too expensive	75.8	9.6	8.0	5.0	1.6	1.47 (.95)
6. Parents in 4-H don't get along	84.6	6.6	4.2	3.1	1.4	1.30 (.81)
7. 4-H isn't for kids like me	8.5.0	6.9	4.4	2.4	1.2	1.28 (.77)
8. I was bullied by adults in my club or project	93.3	2.4	1.1	1.6	1.5	1.16 (.66)
9. I was bullied by other youth in my club or project	92.6	3.4	1.6	1.5	1.0	1.15 (.61)

Note. The sample size varies because of variation in missing data for each item.

Are There Differences in Why Youth Leave Based on Demographics?

Independent samples t-tests revealed no differences by gender or race on any items. Correlations of the "why youth leave" items with age and residence are in Table 3. Though there were several significant correlations with age, all correlations were under .07, indicating weak correlations. All age correlations were positive, indicating that older youth were more likely to report that the leave items were true. Older youth were more likely to report that they "didn't feel welcomed" in their club ($r = .05$), "don't have time for 4-H" ($r = .07$), that parents do not get along ($r = .05$), and that "4-H isn't for kids like me" ($r = .06$) than younger youth. Similarly, for residence, all correlations were below .09. Several correlations were negative, indicating that youth in more rural locations reported that they didn't "have time for 4-H" ($r = .05$), "4-H is too expensive" ($r = -.09$), and "Parents in 4-H don't get along" ($r = -.05$).

Table 3. Correlation Between Why Youth Might Leave Items, Age, and Residence (n = 1,919-2,053)

Item	Age	Residence
I didn't know when my club or project met	-.01	-.03
I didn't feel connected to other youth in the club	.03	.03
I didn't feel welcomed in my club	.05*	-.02
I don't have time for 4-H	.07*	.05*
4-H is too expensive	.03	-.09*
Parents in 4-H don't get along	.05*	-.05*
4-H isn't for kids like me	.06*	.01
I was bullied by adults in my club or project	.06*	.01
I was bullied by other youth in my club or project	.05*	-.01

Note. The sample size varies because of variation in missing data for each item. For residence, higher scores indicate a more urban location.
*$p<.01$.

What Particular First-year Experiences Correlate with Youth Leaving the Program?

We ran multiple regressions predicting each "why youth might leave" item from their involvement and experience in 4-H: number of projects, number of meetings attended per month, number of hours spent per week on 4-H projects, whether they intended to re-enroll, and their overall experience in the program. Correlations among these items are presented in the Appendix. Multiple regression results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Why Youth Might Leave Predicted from Youth Involvement and Experience (n = 1,119)

	Number of projects (β)	Number of meetings per month (β)	Number of hours per week (β)	Intent to re-enroll (β)	Overall experience (β)	R^2	Model Fit
I didn't know when my club or project met	.06	-.07	-.01	-.05	-.48*	.26	$F(5,1441) = 103.20, p < .01$
I didn't feel connected to other youth in the club	.04	-.01	-.02	-.04	-.53*	.31	$F(5,1441) = 129.31, p < .01$
I didn't feel welcomed in my club	.05	-.01	.06	-.14*	-.46*	.29	$F(5,1441) = 119.53, p < .01$
I don't have time for 4-H	.00	.02	-.03	.05	-.17*	.02	$F(5,1441) = 6.92, p < .01$
4-H is too expensive	.08*	.02	.12*	.01	-.15*	.04	$F(5,1441) = 12.41, p < .01$
Parents in 4-H don't get along	.03	-.01	.16*	-.02	-.19*	.07	$F(5,1441) = 20.02, p < .01$
4-H isn't for kids like me	.04	.03	.03	-.23*	-.15*	.10	$F(5,1441) = 33.00, p < .01$
I was bullied by adults in my club or project	-.02	.05	.12*	-.06	-.15*	.05	$F(5,1441) = 14.15, p < .01$
I was bullied by other youth in my club or project	-.01	.02	.08	-.03	-.14*	.03	$F(5,1441) = 8.40, p < .01$

*$p<.01$

Overall experience was a significant predictor for all items when controlling for the other predictor variables. The effect was negative, indicating that as youth's overall experience score increased, their score in the "leave" item decreased (to "Not True at All"). Youth with a more positive experience in 4-H were less likely to report that these reasons were why they might leave the program. When controlling for overall experience, only a few other predictors were significant. The number of monthly projects and meetings was related to youth saying they didn't know when their club or project met ($\beta = .06$ and $\beta = -.07$, respectively). Meetings per month were negative, indicating that with fewer meetings per month, youth reported not knowing when these meetings were. Number of projects was related to youth saying that 4-H is too expensive ($\beta = .09$), as was the number of hours youth spent per week ($\beta = .10$). Number of hours spent per week was also related to reporting that parents don't get along ($\beta = .15$) and being bullied by adults ($\beta = .10$). Intent to re-enroll in 4-H was negatively related to not feeling welcomed in the club ($\beta = -.16$) and that 4-H isn't for kids like them ($\beta = -.21$), indicating that youth who intended to re-enroll in the program were less likely to report that these reasons were true for them.

The research team identified 23 themes in the qualitative data youth provided. In responding to the open-ended question "other reasons you might not come back to 4-H," youth reported reasons often coded under three prominent themes: communication, adult interactions, and organization. Although there was a range of replies to this question ranging from losing interest to what did or didn't happen at 4-H meetings, these three themes represented the most prevalent responses.

Communication

Communication was the most frequently used code. Topics in this theme included needing more information, how information was delivered about meetings and the program, lack of communication, and conflicting or insufficient information (i.e., short notice about events or meetings). Communication issues spanned all levels of the organization, from local clubs to the county 4-H office. Youth reported that they "felt lost" due to not knowing what was going on. Specific quotes from youth regarding communication included:

> "Main reason is lack of knowledge sharing. I felt like it was an uphill battle to figure things out as a person new to 4H. I felt behind the curve not knowing anything about farming/livestock so had a hard time asking simple questions. I didn't feel like the leaders were very organized in teaching material about each project."

> "Month after month the groups didn't meet, when my parents emailed for info, none was given."

> "We really didn't know what was going on. Half of the time by the time we got paperwork it was too late."

Adult Interactions

Adult interactions was the second-most coded theme. The theme focused on interactions between adults and/or between adults and youth - both positive and negative. It included topics like role modeling; mentoring and support; guidance and helpfulness; project, club, or event leadership; and comments about lack of youth-adult partnership or a desire for new leadership. Quotes from youth included:

> "Adults always seemed angry. People in charge didn't seem like they wanted to be there."

> "Leaders didn't follow threw [sic] and do the projects."

> "Not getting good instruction or knowledge in projects."

> "Everyone just assumed I knew what to do, but in fact, I didn't. I never had classes for my projects and didn't know how to do them."

> "My mom was upset and seemed frustrated because no one would get back to her from the 4H [sic] office and they didn't seem to know what was going on. The leaders were great, and I loved that and the animals and the other stuff, but the leaders were really upset [be]cause they could not get help or answers either."

Organization

Another commonly mentioned theme was organization or structure. It included topics like clarity of program expectations; coordination of meetings, events, and projects; time management; and clarity of activity and events. Examples of youth statements under the organization theme included:

> "I didn't understand it at all, it was so confusing didn't know what I was doing or why I was there."

> "Some of the rules were super complicated or confusing or unclear."

> "The club seems to be unorganized. As a 1st year member, no orientation was given as far as what to expect or what items were needed for meets (or actually that there was even going to be one - found out from another participant), when practices were being held & when practices were cancelled was always on short notice and wasn't often. Made to feel like we were fending for ourselves."

Other Program Elements

Finally, statements coded as other program elements included the amount of paperwork required, record keeping, being overwhelmed, focus on showing versus learning, and policies.

Discussion

This study examined reasons that youth gave for possibly not returning to the 4-H program after the first year. No differences were found in why youth might leave based on gender or race. Further, there were few significant correlations between why youth might leave and their age or residence. These results suggest that the reasons youth might leave 4-H are universal and similar amongst youth in the club program, regardless of their demographic background.

We found that youth might not choose to re-enroll in 4-H because they did not feel connected to other youth or welcomed in their clubs, they didn't have time for 4-H, they didn't know when their club or project met, they felt the program was unorganized, or they experienced negative interactions with adults. Youth's overall experience in the program was significantly related to why they might leave; youth with more positive experiences were less likely to report reasons for leaving the program. In examining both the quantitative and qualitative data, we see that youth leave 4-H for primarily structural (program organization, logistics, and communication), interpersonal (relationships with adults and peers, feeling a sense of belonging), and personal (not having enough time) reasons.

Structural Reasons for Leaving

Communication and organization are among the top reasons youth leave 4-H; in our qualitative analysis, these codes were often coupled. Throughout the data, we find a theme of youth not knowing or understanding expectations, how to do things, and when meetings would take place. This was sometimes cited as "feeling lost." To some, it felt as though returning members knew expectations and details unavailable to new members, and those new to the program needed to figure things out on their own. These expectations and details include fundamental information for successful program participation. First-year members suggest orientations and mentors as a way to enhance communication and clarity of the expectations in 4-H. They also shared that they feel excluded because they often don't know what is expected of them.

Astroth (1985) reported new 4-H families' lack of understanding of the 4-H program is a primary reason for leaving, indicating that the issue is not new for the organization. The challenges with communication align with findings from the parent/caregiver data. Adults have also reported challenges in communication in 4-H (Lewis & Miller, 2018), and together these findings suggest that communication is an important factor for both youth and their guardians.

Interpersonal Reasons for Leaving

Interpersonal components influencing the first-year 4-H experience included a sense of welcome and belonging, adult interactions with youth and each other, and relationships with peers. While bullying was not prevalent in our data, the quantitative results reveal new youth feeling disconnected and unwelcomed—a finding supported by the qualitative data. Feeling lost as a new member, especially when returning members seem "in the know," may lead to the perception of insiders and outsiders and contribute to feelings of not belonging.

Data revealed both positive and negative experiences with 4-H adult leadership and the interactions between adults at 4-H functions. Qualitative data revealed that youth sometimes viewed adults in the program as poorly organized or unable to lead well. Leadership was sometimes characterized as unhelpful, unreliable, or providing inadequate instruction. This lack of leadership pertained to both volunteers and professional staff. These data would align with quantitative findings that the program lacks communication and organization. Youth reported that they didn't receive adequate instruction in project areas ("Our pig leader didn't teach us anything and didn't help us at all.") and adults didn't put forth an effort to connect ("I don't know who my club leader is she never bothered to meet us, and I haven't wanted to go to club meetings because of that."). Youth also mentioned adult favoritism and cliques amongst peers as disheartening parts of their first-year experience.

Youth who intend to re-enroll were less likely to say they didn't feel welcomed or that 4-H isn't for kids like them. This finding supports previous research showing that as the degree of participation in 4-H increases, so does a youth's perceived sense of belonging (Hensley et al. 2007). This research indicates that these youth likely feel connected and included in their club and projects, further emphasizing the need for building connections and belonging for youth.

Belonging is instrumental to attaining positive outcomes (Arnold, 2018; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Prior research suggests that 4-H members do perceive a sense of belonging as participation increases (Hensley et al., 2007) and that belonging is positively impacted by the youth's "interaction with a caring adult" (DeCubellis & Barrick, 2020). Per Hensley and colleagues (2007), 4-H participation is a voluntary choice, and youth who do not feel as if they belong in the organization will limit their engagement or resign. Our study's findings suggest that belonging is not universally established in all 4-H programming, especially for first-year families. Also, 4-H volunteers and staff need to make more intentional efforts to help youth feel connected to their 4-H community.

Personal Reasons for Leaving

A large number of youth reported leaving the program for reasons that may be unrelated to their program experience. Some cited not having time for 4-H or the inability to fit the program into their schedule. The lack of 4-H program options seemed to contribute to this. Not having time for

4-H because of other activities is consistent with prior research. Albright and Ferrari (2010) and Astroth (1985) have found that teens drop out of youth programs as they get older because of competing interests. Youth in our study also cited losing interest in the program as a reason for leaving. They sometimes stated that they found the program "boring"; however, they may have left the program to pursue other, perhaps new, activities.

Youth who are in more projects and spent more hours per week in 4-H said they might leave 4-H because it's too expensive. They might think it's too expensive because they are enrolled in projects requiring additional fees and/or being involved in animal-related projects that can be costly. Youth who spent more hours per week in 4-H also said that parents do not get along in 4-H; it is possible that these youth are witnessing more tension between adults and are aware of the disagreements amongst the adults. Furthermore, youth who spent more hours per week in 4-H reported being bullied by adults; we are unsure why this might be, and further research is needed to explore these relationships.

Limitations

The survey was sent out electronically; therefore, families in rural areas or with limited internet access may be underrepresented. Hard copies were available upon request, and some states mailed or printed them out. The survey was sent out near the end of the program year; it is possible that youth who had already disengaged from the program did not participate in the survey. Some respondents may have hesitated in answering honestly, given that the survey asked in which county they resided, although no other identifying information was asked. Though the sample was representative of youth enrolled in the club program, the diversity of the sample was limited. Lack of diversity may explain why we didn't find demographic differences. The data may also be biased, given the survey's self-reporting nature (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Finally, given the low mean scores on the "why youth might leave" items, we are not fully capturing why youth leave the program. For example, several respondents noted in the qualitative data that they had lost interest. Loss of interest may mean that some first-year members are trying out 4-H and learn that the program is not a good fit for them. Future research should focus on interviewing youth about why they are leaving 4-H and what can be done to help retain more youth. As such, three states are developing a structured interview process to conduct exit interviews with youth who did not re-enroll in 4-H.

Implications

Study findings provide several implications for retention in youth development programs. While this study reinforces some elements of program quality that are known to promote positive youth development, it is evident that advancements in the field can be made to ensure that youth program staff and volunteers are knowledgeable and trained in how to implement these practices. First, building a sense of belonging is crucial for a positive program experience. Many youth

development frameworks include belonging as an aspect of high program quality (Arnold, 2018). However, not all programs may intentionally incorporate practices that ensure members, especially new ones, feel that they are a part of the program and connected to others. Training and guidance should be provided to direct-delivery staff and volunteers so they can create warm, welcoming, inclusive environments for all youth. Youth are aware of issues among adults (e.g., bullying, parents not getting along), suggesting that 4-H volunteers lack training on how to work with challenging parents. Especially in established programs where participants return year after year, adult leadership should be sensitive to new youth and adults who understand little about the systems and programs others know well. From enrollment and paperwork to unwritten procedures and program expectations, new families express feeling overwhelmed and lost. Orientations, mentors, and an intentional personal connection to new families may help establish a sense of inclusion and better inform them about the new program.

Second, to improve communication, some states are developing new family handbooks to help first-time families orient themselves to the program and give them the resources they need to navigate their first few years in the program. Upon initial rollout of the handbook in California, less than half of 4-H youth (43%) and parents or guardians (3%) were aware of the handbook's existence. Still, those that knew about it and used it found it to be a useful resource (Lewis et al., 2019). Having handbooks or other tools to support youth and adults in getting to know a youth program, knowing when meetings occur, and who to contact should they have questions are necessary for a positive experience. Youth program staff and volunteers also may want to consider setting up a system for checking in with first-year families to ensure that they feel part of the program and establish two-way communication regarding their experience. Some states provide informal mentoring relationships or activities for new families (e.g., Pleskac & Kennedy, 2008), and this was a statement shared by first-year families. Creating a better flow of information will help establish a welcoming environment for families in youth programs.

Third, with respect to adult interactions, youth will benefit from adults who have positive exchanges with one another, do not participate in favoritism, and intentionally encourage youth in their program. Youth program staff and volunteers will benefit from training that can guide them in practical efforts to support, challenge, and provide opportunities for youth to expand their skills and experiences. Additionally, adults may consider ways to engage youth more fully in decision-making to promote growth and leadership.

Finally, creating overall positive environments and opportunities for youth can contribute to them wanting to stay in the program. Focusing on developing and implementing programming that centers on the positive program features outlined by Eccles and Gootman (2002) and a high-quality developmental context (Arnold, 2018) can help create an experience for youth to thrive.

Conclusion

Our study examined reasons why youth might leave the 4-H program after membership for one year. We found the most common reasons are related to belonging, welcoming, communication, organization, interactions with and between adults, and time. Identifying and understanding why youth join 4-H and reasons for leaving 4-H can be useful to 4-H professionals and volunteers, as well as other youth-serving organizations, in creating ways to address these concerns and thus retain members. Consistent with research on attainment of positive youth development outcomes, a program that fosters a high-quality developmental context where belonging, inclusion, and positive relationships with adult mentors are intentional, youth will gain more positive outcomes and most likely choose to remain engaged. The findings of this study will be useful in developing resources and methods to better orient new families into the program and develop strategic plans and materials to improve organizational practices and communication among leaders, families, and staff within the program. Youth development practitioners who train volunteers and program staff to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment may find that youth want to remain engaged in the program. Youth development professionals may also find that providing templates for volunteers or easy-to-use tools that enhance communication will also help families feel more connected to and a part of their organization.

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Appendix

Table 1a. Number of Projects (n = 1,443)

	1	2	3	4	5 or more
Percent of Youth	49.3%	23.4%	15.2%	5.1%	6.9%

Table 1b. Number of Club or Project Meetings per Month (n = 1,573)

	0	1-2	3-4	5 or more
Percent of Youth	8.6%	60.7%	17.2%	13.4%

Table 1c. Number of Hours Spent per Week on 4-H Projects (n = 1,565)

	0-5 hours	6-10 hours	11-15 hours	16-20 hours	20 or more hours
Percent of Youth	66.5%	19.4%	6.3%	4.0%	3.8%

Table 2. Correlations Among the Why Might Youth Leave Items (n = 1,907-1,953)

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.	I didn't know when my club or project met	--	.45*	.49*	.14*	.23*	.19*	.30*	.18*	.21*
2.	I didn't feel connected to other youth in the club	.45*	--	.61*	.22*	.22*	.25*	.37*	.22*	.24*
3.	I didn't feel welcomed in my club	.49*	.61*	--	.07*	.24*	.31*	.42*	.33*	.37*
4.	I don't have time for 4-H	.14*	.22*	.07*	--	.23*	.04	.18*	.08*	.10*
5.	4-H is too expensive	.23*	.22*	.24*	.22*	--	.27*	.20*	.20*	.19*
6.	Parents in 4-H don't get along	.19*	.25*	.31*	.04	.27*	--	.20*	.44*	.36*
7.	4-H isn't for kids like me	.30*	.37*	.42*	.18*	.20*	.20*	--	.27*	.29*
8.	I was bullied by adults in my club or project	.18*	.22*	.33*	.08*	.20*	.44*	.27*	--	.61*
9.	I was bullied by other youth in my club or project	.21*	.24*	.37*	.10*	.19*	.36*	.29*	.61*	--

Note. The sample size varies because of variation in missing data for each item.

*p < .01.

Table 3. Correlations Among the Experience Items and Why Youth Might Leave Items (n = 1,347-1,948)

	Number of projects	Number of meetings per month	Number of hours per week	Intent to re-enroll	Overall experience
I didn't know when my club or project met	-.02	-.21*	-.07*	-.27*	-.52*
I didn't feel connected to other youth in the club	-.03	-.12*	-.07*	-.31*	-.57*
I didn't feel welcomed in my club	-.04	-.12*	-.01	-.40*	-.60*
I don't have time for 4-H because of my other activities (like sports, church, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, FFA)	-.01	.00	-.03	-.06*	-.11*
4-H is too expensive	.07*	.03	.13*	-.05*	-.18*
Parents in 4-H don't get along	.02	-.02	.15*	-.09*	-.22*
4-H isn't for kids like me	.01	-.03	-.01	-.28*	-.29*
I was bullied by adults in my club or project	-.01	.01	.13*	-.09*	-.21*
I was bullied by other youth in my club or project	.00	-.01	.10*	-.14*	-.21*

Note. The sample size varies because of variation in missing data for each item.

*p < .01.