

Strategies for 4-H Program Planning and Recruitment Relative to African American Male Youths

Abstract

Extension educators often seek new strategies for engaging minority youths in 4-H programs, especially young Black males. These strategies require programming developed in response to the context of this population. We offer insights into the social context of Black males and offer suggestions that will help educators develop identity and integrative site-based programs for this population.

Keywords: [African American males](#), [minority participation](#), [urban youths](#)

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Introduction

Extension's 4-H youth development program area helps young people and families build skills for themselves and their communities. In addition, a responsibility integral to Extension's purpose is planning and disseminating programs based on community needs. Extension's foci have been on gaining a greater understanding of its audiences' histories and cultures, identifying relevant issues, and finding solutions to those issues (Hoorman, 2002). More recently, an overlying focus in Extension has been increasing the participation of urban minority youths in 4-H (Garcia, Piña, & Dromgoole, 2017).

Many youths in urban communities experience challenges and pressures similar to those of other youths as they progress through their adolescent years. However, youths in high-risk urban communities often also face significant social and economic challenges that affect their development and integration into society. Common issues include exposure to violence, minimal connections to community resources, limited social networks, and limited financial opportunities (Yarmuth et al., 2012).

Although sweeping assumptions cannot be made about all those who live in urban communities, research has shown that a large number of African Americans who reside in urban communities experience social and familial challenges. For example, a high percentage of Black youths live in single-parent households or those headed by

older individuals such as grandparents (Belgrave & Brevard, 2015). Higher rates of familial challenges can lead to higher rates of crime (Williams, Auslander, Houston, Krebill, & Haire-Joshu, 2000), ultimately affecting family dynamics and community interactions.

Community and family contexts also influence physical and psychological health and well-being in urban African American communities. For example, increased levels of asthma and obesity are experienced in such communities (Belgrave & Brevard, 2015). Young Black males, in particular, face their own set of physical and psychological health challenges. In addition to bringing about typical changes, puberty affects young Black males much differently than it does other emerging adults due to sociological factors they face, such as familial challenges, discrimination, and racism (Belgrave & Brevard, 2015). Research has shown that at puberty young Black males, particularly those in urban areas, begin a series of transitions that include spending less time with family and more time with friends and losing interest in school (Belgrave & Brevard, 2015). Additionally, according to Neblett, Chavous, Nguyễn, and Sellers (2009), youths faced with racial discrimination and stereotyping can feel helpless. Moreover, research has shown that racial discrimination in afterschool programs is often the reason for young African American males' low engagement, poor grades, and violent activity (Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, Schmeelk-Cone, Chavous, & Zimmerman, 2004; Neblett et al., 2009). Young Black males also may deal with substance abuse and the related consequences, which include exposure to the criminal justice system and educational problems (Belgrave & Brevard, 2015).

Although obstacles may be greater for young African American males, access to life skills through school teachers and administrators, major mentors, civic groups, and churches can reduce their impacts, especially as this group has indicated having greater levels of trust in the aforementioned groups (Harris & Taylor, 2012). Consequently, by gaining this group's trust, Extension may be able to make positive impacts on individuals and their communities through associated 4-H programming.

Lack of Black Male Participation in 4-H and Youth Development Programs

Some researchers (Cano & Bankston, 1992; Russell & Heck, 2008; Schinker, 2010) have explored factors associated with participation and nonparticipation of minority youths in 4-H youth development programs. Many programs have proved quite successful and had positive impacts on youth development; however, minority youths often are not represented by these statistics. Barriers such as family and financial constraints play a major role in low participation in afterschool programming by urban minority youths. Research also has suggested that although minority youths are willing to participate, barriers related to accessibility, location, and type of programs offered limit their involvement (Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Ingram & Syvertsen, 2005). Furthermore, Ward and Webster (2011) named identity development and self-esteem as factors that contribute to the lack of participation by minority youths.

Strategies for Engaging Young African American Males in 4-H Programming

Table 1 lists suggestions and planning tips 4-H programming staff will find useful for engaging young African American males. These suggestions are based on research with Black youths indicating that environmental and cultural forces shape the relationship between identity, particularly related to race and gender, and the inclusion of Black adolescent males (Bryan, Williams & Griffin, 2015). Although this list is by no means exhaustive, it can help those involved in 4-H understand how to better reach Black males via 4-H programs.

Table 1.

Recruitment and Program Planning Tips for Engaging African American Male Youths in 4-H

Topic	Strategy
Culturally relevant and inclusive programming	
Cultural rites of passage	Incorporate cultural rites of passage activities and programming in 4-H programs for urban African American male youths to foster their learning more about their culture and race and the challenges facing them in today's society (Brittian & Williams, 2017).
Inclusivity and identity	Include more programming and models that address and adapt to African American male ethnic identity and racial pride (Crawley, 2018).
Male-focused perspective	Create father–son intervention leadership programs to address the lack of appropriate role models and increase in single-parent households (Woodland, 2016).
Social and wellness programming	
Mentoring	Establish strong mentoring programs that can serve as catalysts for African American young male participation and foster deeper and more supportive relationships with adults (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Jackson, 2016).
Health and wellness	Integrate programs that address stress management skills and strategies for dealing with racial discrimination (Jones & Neblett, 2016). Many of these programs can foster greater leadership and community service within 4-H clubs and among members.
Family- and community-focused programming	
Religious pathways	Create partnerships and collaborations with church-based youth programs or mentoring programs. African American young males are involved in religious activities and feel a level of trust with church and community groups (Harris & Taylor, 2012); therefore, such partnerships may increase 4-H afterschool programming participation.
Collaboration with sports and recreational programs	Develop collaborations with sports and recreation programs for increasing involvement with young Black males in rural and urban communities (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010). Establishing 4-H programs with existing sports programs not only may help increase participation but also may improve the perception of 4-H among these youths.

Inclusion of the entire family	Incorporate strategies to support the entire family within the program to enhance the growth and development of young African American males (Jones & Neblett, 2016). Inclusion of the entire African American family in 4-H programs, rather than only the caregiver, may increase participation in 4-H programming.
Extracurricular activity models	Integrate extracurricular activity models focusing on 4-H afterschool programming to benefit youths; consider including sports, academic assistance, computer technology, music, and creative arts (Zarrett, Abraczinskas, Skiles Cook, Wilson, & Ragaban, 2018).

Conclusion

African American males' participation in youth development programs is a worthwhile investment for both individuals and communities. Young men who participate in 4-H programming have the opportunity to build self-esteem, create personal networks, and improve their outlooks on the future. Because of many social challenges faced by this group, 4-H educators must have a clear understanding of the group's realities and use that information to foster purposeful and meaningful inclusion in 4-H programs. To increase enrollment by this specific audience, Extension educators should consider integrating the tools described here into their 4-H programs.

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