2026 National 4-H Index Study

Executive Summary

The 2026 National 4-H Index Study examined how young people experience 4-H and how they believe 4-H contributes to their readiness for work and life. The study included **7,390 youth** ages 13 and older from **42 land-grant universities** across all four regions of the United States. Youth responded to questions about the quality of their 4-H experiences and the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors they developed because of 4-H.

Overall, the findings provide strong evidence that 4-H is helping young people become **healthy**, **productive**, **engaged**, and **prepared for their futures**. Youth reported particularly strong development in leadership, persistence, professionalism, community engagement, caring for others, and personal integrity. The findings also reinforce a central principle of the Beyond Ready Framework: Positive outcomes are most likely when young people participate in high-quality programs where they feel they belong, develop meaningful interests, and have supportive relationships with adults.

Key Findings

- **Most youth experience 4-H as a safe, welcoming, and supportive place.** More than **eight in ten youth reported feeling welcome, safe, supported, and that they matter in 4-H**. Youth also described adults who care about them, respect them, listen to their ideas, expect them to succeed, and encourage them to grow.
- **4-H helps young people discover and pursue interests that matter to them.** More than **three-quarters of youth reported opportunities to explore their interests, deepen their learning, and participate in activities they are passionate about**. These interests emerged as the strongest and most consistent program-quality predictor of every outcome measured.
- **Program quality is essential to achieving Beyond Ready outcomes.** Youth who experienced higher-quality 4-H programs reported stronger outcomes across every area of readiness. Together, Sparks, Belonging, and Developmental Relationships accounted for 36% to nearly 50% of the differences in youth outcomes. This is a substantial finding: **Program quality is not simply an added benefit of 4-H but the foundation upon which positive youth outcomes are built**.
- **Youth reported that 4-H helps them become healthy, productive, and engaged.** Nearly three-quarters said that, because of 4-H, they fill their time with positive activities, and more than two-thirds reported balancing their responsibilities with time for fun. Approximately **two-thirds or more said they volunteer, help when their communities have a need, seek leadership roles, and contribute to projects that benefit others**. Health outcomes were positive overall, although youth were less confident in their strategies for managing emotional and mental health.



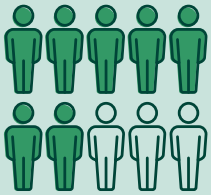
8 in 10 youth reported feeling welcome, safe, supported, and that they matter in 4-H.



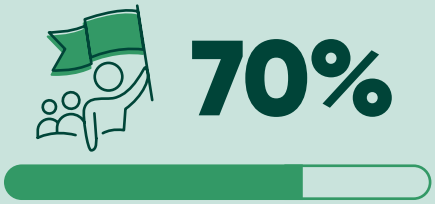
3/4 of youth reported opportunities to explore their interests, deepen their learning, and participate in activities they are passionate about.



2/3 of youth said they volunteer, help their communities, seek leadership roles, and contribute to projects that benefit others.



7 in 10 youth reported that 4-H helped them work hard, persist through challenges, and adjust when plans do not work.



70% of youth said 4-H had a very strong or extreme influence on their leadership development.



Youth enrolled in STEM projects were **more likely to develop STEM skills** and consider a career in STEM.

- **4-H is building skills that young people need in the workplace. Seven in ten youth reported that 4-H helped them work hard, persist through challenges, adjust when plans do not work, and work successfully toward goals**. Youth also reported strong professionalism, including behaving respectfully, understanding workplace expectations, and following through on commitments.
- **Leadership is a particular strength of 4-H.** Approximately two-thirds or more of youth reported confidence across all six leadership skills measured, including communicating effectively, including others, working with people who are different from themselves, and taking on leadership roles. Nearly **70% said 4-H had a very strong or extreme influence on their leadership development**; this was the highest influence rating among all outcomes measured.
- **College and career readiness increases as youth get older. Older youth reported greater career exploration, clearer plans for life after high school, and a stronger understanding of the education they will need**. However, many youth, including some approaching high school graduation, had not received concrete guidance or experiences such as college visits, individualized education planning, internships, summer employment, or job shadowing.
- **Focused programs are associated with stronger outcomes.** Youth participating in Healthy Living or Mindfulness projects reported stronger health outcomes. Those involved in civic engagement, leadership, and service projects reported greater community engagement. Youth enrolled in STEM projects were also substantially more likely to report developing STEM skills and considering STEM education and careers. **These findings provide support for the importance of content-specific programming for key outcomes**.
- **Artificial intelligence education represents an important opportunity for growth.** More than half of youth said they had not learned about AI through 4-H, and 45% reported no learning about responsible AI use. As AI becomes increasingly important in education and employment, **expanding practical and responsible AI learning could strengthen 4-H's workforce-readiness efforts**.
- **4-H contributes to qualities that prepare youth for life as well as work.** Approximately **seven in ten youth said that, because of 4-H, they show concern and compassion for others, are generous, care about others' feelings, and can be counted on to help**. Similar proportions credited 4-H with helping them become honest, truthful, and respectful.



What the Findings Mean

The study's central message is clear: **High-quality 4-H programs help young people develop the strengths they need to succeed in work, life, and their communities.** Activities alone are not enough. The strongest outcomes occur when young people can pursue interests that matter to them, feel that they belong, and develop meaningful relationships with adults who care for them, challenge them, and respect their ideas.

High-quality 4-H programs help young people develop the strengths they need to succeed in work, life, and their communities.

The results also identify priorities for continued improvement. These include strengthening emotional and mental health support, providing more concrete postsecondary and work-based experiences, helping youth develop thoughtful decision-making skills, and expanding education about AI and its responsible use.

Because the study was a one-time, nonrandom survey, the findings should be understood as youths' reports of their experiences and 4-H's contribution to their development; they do not establish that 4-H alone caused the outcomes. Nevertheless, the large, geographically diverse sample and consistent pattern of findings provide considerable confidence that 4-H is making an important contribution to preparing young people to thrive.

NATIONAL 4-H COUNCIL

4-H COMMON MEASURES

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