

WISCONSIN 4-H

2023 IMPACTS • UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON EXTENSION



26,067

YOUTH MEMBERS
ENROLLED IN 4-H

1,108

CHARTERED 4-H CLUBS
AND GROUPS

5,654

ADULT VOLUNTEERS

2,560

YOUTH WHO COMPLETED
THE WISCONSIN 4-H
YOUTH SURVEY

Because of the work of Extension, and the thousands of volunteers who work together to support the 4-H program, young people throughout Wisconsin can engage in research-based, high-quality programs and experiences. Wisconsin 4-H creates environments which supports young people in discovering their pathway to becoming engaged, contributing, purposeful, and thriving young adults.

Building High-Quality Programs to Help Youth Thrive

Young people throughout Wisconsin are the next generation of community leaders, public officials, educators, health care workers and laborers. At the same time, youth mental health challenges, racial and economic inequities, and instances of school violence continue to increase. Societal realities have led to a decrease in social connections and an increase in the reliance on technology to fill this void. In December 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a public health advisory calling attention to the growing mental health crisis impacting young people throughout the country: in 2019, 30% of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness; suicide rates of 10-24-year-olds increased 57% between 2007 through 2018. Young people in every community need experiences where they are engaged in learning activities that are meaningful to them and where they find the support of caring adults and peers.

Wisconsin youth have unequal access to educational and social support to build resilience in the face of these barriers. Young people of color and those who live in communities lacking resources due to poverty or rural remoteness lack the support available to wealthier and more connected communities. Youth who have positive youth development (PYD) program experiences are more likely to thrive as adults – pursuing academic and vocational training, engaging in the civic life of communities, finding stable employment, and exhibiting overall happiness and well-being.



Sparks, Relationships, Belonging, & Engagement

In response, Extension supports the development of a high-quality 4-H program throughout the state.

Supported by the rich academic knowledge base of UW–Madison, in partnership with a network of Land-Grant Universities, 4-H provides young people the opportunity to recognize and develop their interests through curriculum and project-based learning in partnership with caring adults and strengthens post-secondary pathways. Evidence-informed outcomes of 4-H members demonstrate they are two times more likely to make healthier choices; two times more likely to be civically active than other youth; and four times more likely to contribute to their communities.

Wisconsin 4-H is the largest and most visible youth development program of UW–Madison Extension and is a youth-driven and adult volunteer-supported program committed to expanding access and empowering all young people to thrive. In 2023, Extension offered 4-H programming in 71 counties and three tribal nations, which reached 26,067 youth enrolled in 1,108 chartered 4-H clubs and groups. This work was made possible by the assistance of 5,654 enrolled, certified adult volunteer leaders. Extension is critical to the development, sustainability, and growth of 4-H program opportunities for Wisconsin youth. Local 4-H programs are managed by professional 4-H educators who create high-quality 4-H experiences where young people can belong and grow.

The quality of PYD programming impacts youth outcomes. In Wisconsin 4-H, PYD programming is built upon the foundation of the “4-H Thriving Model” which demonstrates the connection of a high-quality program setting to evidence of youth thriving. The elements of the needed development context for high-quality programming are defined as: 1) intentional and developmentally appropriate spaces where youth explore their areas of interest, or “sparks;” master new skills and knowledge; 2) develop supportive relationships with peers and adults in emotionally, physically, and psychologically safe environments; learn and grow through challenging experiences; and 3) develop a strong sense of belonging within their 4-H clubs, programs, and communities.

To support and achieve high-quality 4-H programs, both statewide and county-based 4-H Program educators, specialists, administrative support, and managers strategically prioritize and align their work based on evidence of need in the core areas of program quality: sparks, relationships, belonging, and engagement. In 2023, county-based colleagues reported intentional delivery of 196 programs focused on developing “belonging,” 94 programs focused building positive relationships, 459 programs focused on “sparks,” and 139 programs focused on increasing engagement.

Additionally, organizational systems and support for 4-H are provided by Extension, which include curriculum development; policies and procedures to ensure safe environments for youth; and partnership development to expand 4-H programming to new audiences – meeting the needs of diverse audiences with new, innovative 4-H opportunities.



On a 'Thriving Trajectory'

To evaluate the impact of the Wisconsin 4-H program on enrolled youth, the "Wisconsin 4-H Youth Survey" was administered statewide in November 2023. During this time, 4-H members ages 13+ were invited to complete a questionnaire regarding the quality of their 4-H experiences and the PYD outcomes associated with those programs; 2,560 youth completed this survey (22.7% response rate).

Is Wisconsin 4-H a high-quality program? Survey results indicated the overall quality of the Wisconsin 4-H program to be 5.81 (on a scale of 1-7), documenting very high program quality. Overall program quality score consists of subcategories identified by the 4-H Thriving Model: Sparks, Belonging, Challenging Growth, Caring Adults, and Youth-Adult Partnership. Of these subcategories, respondents reported Belonging (6.00) and Youth-Adult Partnerships (5.96) to be the strongest areas of program quality.

When youth are engaged in high-quality PYD program, including positive Youth-Adult partnerships, they gain social-emotional and other skills that put them on a "Thriving Trajectory." The higher the trajectory score, the more confident we can be that youth are on a path to longer term success in life. The overall Trajectory Score (5.81, very high) is informed by the skills of Growth Mindset, Open to Challenge & Discovery, Hopeful Purpose, Pro-Social Orientation, Positive Emotionality, and Goal Management. Lastly, the Thriving Survey results document that highly engaged youth in Wisconsin 4-H indicate a very high level of overall development outcomes (5.98).

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