# 4-H Membership Recruitment/Retention Problems: A Meta-Analysis of Possible Causes and Solutions

**Lynndell Newby**
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK
Lynndell.newby@okstate.edu


**Jeff Sallee**
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK
Jeff.sallee@okstate.edu

# 4-H Membership Recruitment/Retention Problems: A Meta-Analysis of Possible Causes and Solutions

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**Abstract:** As the largest youth organization in the United States, the opportunity for 4-H to be a positive influence on America's youth has never been greater.  4-H not only has a mandate to serve the needs and interests of young people today, but to provide a life experience that will enrich their lives and enable them to succeed in whatever path they so choose.  4-H has struggled with recruitment and member retention of certain age groups, especially teenage members. Researchers have sought to determine why youth do not join or drop out of 4-H. This article reviews that literature and summarizes the findings and possible solutions to this important issue. 4-H programs have found simple and innovative methods to retain 4-H members.

## Introduction

From its humble beginnings in the early 20th century as a corn club for rural boys, 4-H has developed into a formidable organization that provides quality activities for youth of all ages, race, and gender. 4-H has three primary program areas: Science, Engineering and Technology, Healthy Living, and Citizenship. The 4-H mandate, forever tied to the Cooperative Extension Service and U.S. Land Grant Universities, is to serve the needs and interests of young people today. The 4-H mission is to empower youth to reach their full potential, working and learning in partnership with caring adults (4-H, 2008).  In order to accomplish this task, it is critical that strong 4-H membership be prevalent in both the elementary and secondary years.  However, for decades, 4-H has experienced recruitment/retention difficulties in certain age groups.  In order to provide a full assessment of this issue, it is imperative to examine the advantages of 4-H membership, current membership issues, and possible solutions to membership challenges.

Why is membership in 4-H important to America's youth?  Today's economic pressures are taking a toll on the American family.  Parents are forced to work more and the existence of single parent families is on the rise (Cornell University Cooperative Extension, 2008).  This results in parents having less time to spend with their children, who are left to idolize actors, musicians or other powerful role models who can shape their values and lives.  Many youth

succumb to these inappropriate influences or become shy, insecure and introverted, feeling like no one cares enough to spend quality time with them. (Family TLC, n.d.; Hicks, 2008; Lowrey, n.d.) 4-H educators and volunteers understand the pressures that both parents and their children experience and have designed curriculum to bridge the gap resulting from parental work overload and an increase in single parent families.

## Methodology
The following data and findings were generated from a meta-analysis of literature regarding 4-H memberships trends published from 1983-2009, with the addition of current 4-H membership recruitment programs publicized on state 4-H websites.

## Current Membership Trends
No matter how successful 4-H programs are in providing quality education for today's youth, these programs are of little influence unless the child or youth is a member of 4-H. Figure 1 illustrates 4-H is the largest youth organization in the United States with almost 6 million members. Figure 2 illustrates the majority of 4-H membership is comprised of 8-10 year olds, with teenage membership decreasing at an increasing rate (National 4-H Headquarters, 2008). These statistics are confirmed in a study by Russell and Heck (2008) which found that annual enrollment is relatively stable before age 11, followed by increased program dropout and fewer new enrollments. Further frustrating 4-H educators and volunteers, a West Virginia study found in 1983 that approximately 45% of new 4-H members became dropouts after the first year, with a 1985 Kansas State University study concurring on first year dropout rates and further reporting that an additional 20% were lost after their second year of membership (Hartley, 1983; Astroth, 1985).

**Figure 1**
2008 U.S. Youth Organization Membership, (4-H, 2010)
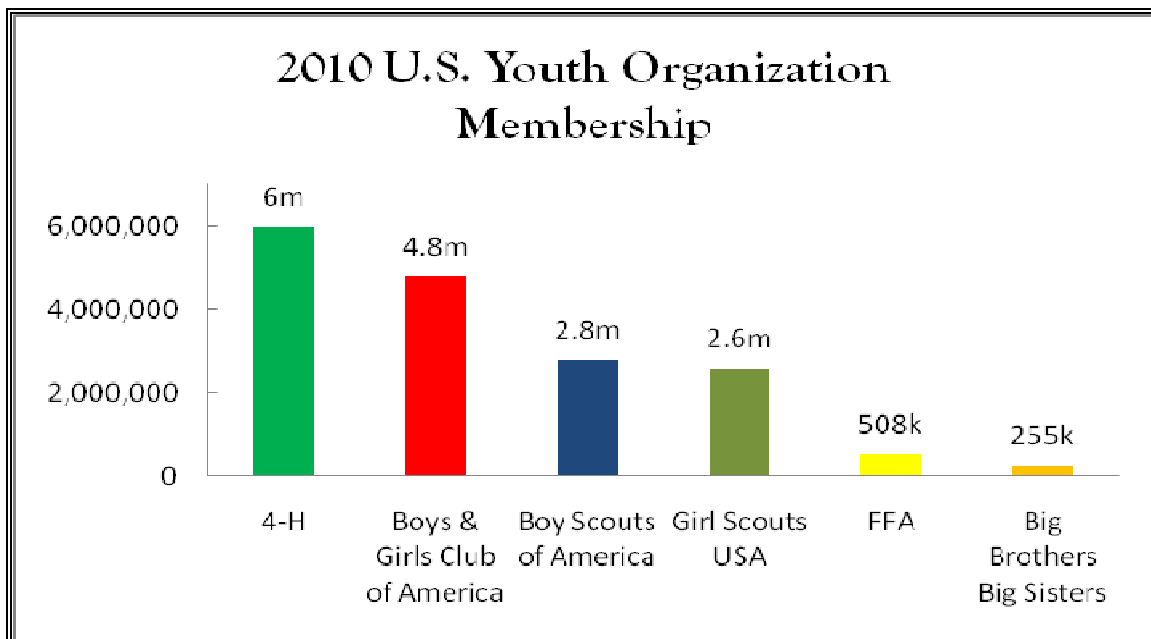
Figure 2
2008 National 4-H Membership (National 4-H Headquarters, 2010)



## 2008 National 4-H Membership
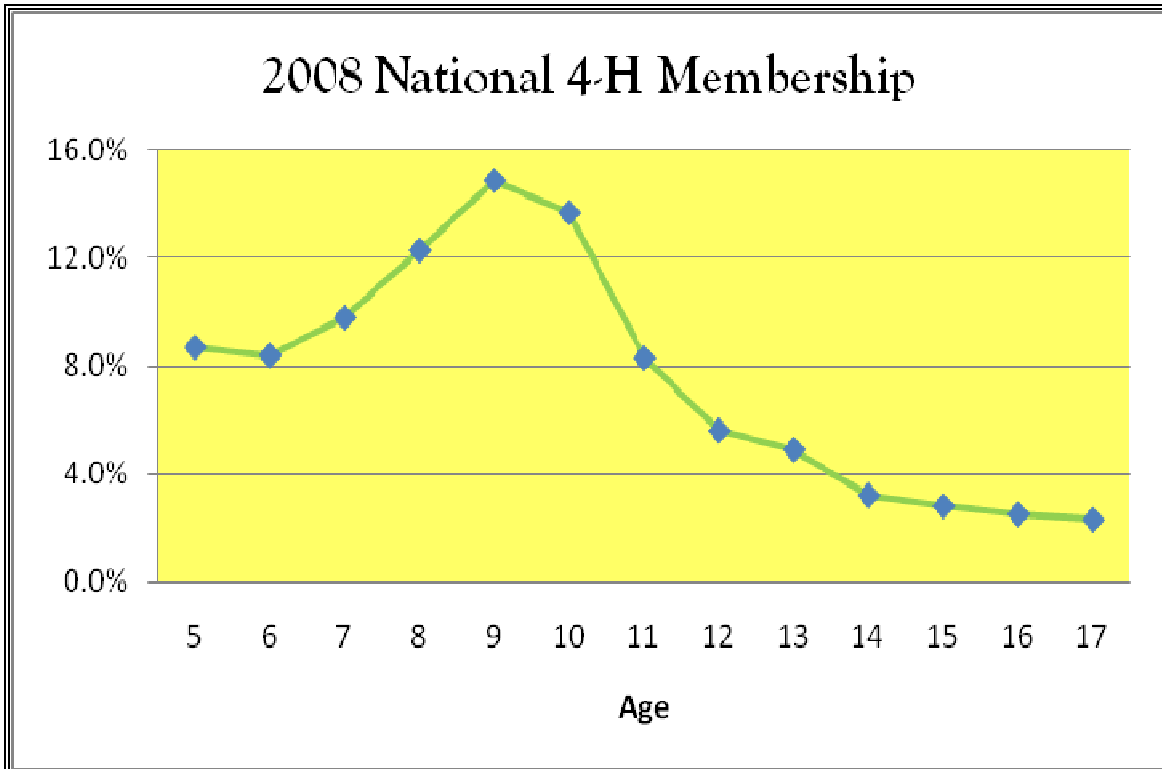
**Why Youth Drop Out of 4-H**
Many have speculated to the causes of this decrease in 4-H membership, citing hypotheses involving both internal and external factors, such as a feeling of not being accepted or deciding to join a club with a different focus. In attempt to truly discover why youth drop out of 4-H, educators and researchers across the country have conducted surveys of youth in 4-H and those who discontinued their membership. One of the most notable surveys was conducted by Ritchie and Resler (1993), who discovered that the primary reason for 4-H drop out was internal, not external. The most frequent reason given by youth for leaving 4-H was displeasure with 4-H clubs, which was a result of boring meetings and not getting enough help with projects. When Ritchie and Resler interviewed the corresponding parents, the results reflected those of the youth, as they remarked that their child wasn't happy with the club. It was noted in the study, that parental involvement with their child's club and project was minimal, which could be a factor in the youth's displeasure.

Other educators recognized that a retention problem exists and conducted surveys with families to find out possible causes of drop out, which are listed as follows:

- There was a lack of an understanding of the 4-H program, its goals, activities, events and time commitment (Astroth, 1985).

- Teens were interested in different subjects than were being taught, such as jobs, careers, and teen years' emotional, physical and psychological adjustments (Acosta & Holt, 1991; Butler & Bowman, 1998).

- Kids had a feeling of not being welcomed or part of the group (Astroth, 1985).

- 4-H is perceived more favorably by female than male youth, as females are more likely to agree that 4-H is "fun," "cool," and less likely to agree that 4-H is "boring" (Homan et al, 2007b).
- Project groups didn't meet often and/or frequently enough to satisfy children (Astroth, 1985).
- High school age participants experienced frustration in feeling that 4-H is focused toward younger members (Homan et al, 2007a).

Other research studies have noted additional factors resulting in a lack of interest in 4-H membership, such as:

- In spite of the national 4-H program's 1965 goal to desegregate, 4-H is stereotypically viewed as an organization of white, rural youth, mostly due to clubs being based in communities, which tend to be homogeneous (Van Horn et al, 1999).
- 4-H agriculture programs are not meeting the needs of a growing diverse population. Data indicates that minorities have a negative perception of agriculture which is a limiting factor to recruiting a diverse membership (Alston & Crutchfield, 2009).
- The 4-H incentive system appeals mainly to those individuals who are extrinsically oriented, as the 4-H members who were the most highly successful and had long tenure in 4-H appeared to enjoy extrinsic motivation and competition, while intrinsically oriented members tended to focus on fewer projects and not consider themselves as thriving in their club (Forbes, 1992).
- Natural adolescent development results in youth dropping out of 4-H, which parents encouraged their kids to participate in, and searching for an organization that they, not their parents, decide is best for themselves (Harder et al, 2005; Heinsohn & Lewis, 1995).

## Possible Solutions

Researchers are providing 4-H educators and volunteers with valuable insight into changes that might need to be made in their programs, such as:

- Listen to youth's perceptions of 4-H and desires in order to remain successful in meeting the needs of diverse youth. This can be accomplished by critically evaluating 4-H programs to make sure that they are enticing to youth and are seen as "fun" or "cool" (Homan et al, 2007; Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Harder et al, 2005).
- With parental participation being critical to membership retention, design 4-H activities that encourage the involvement of the entire family (Hartley, 1983; Norland & Bennett, 1993).
- Create programs that promote a sense of belonging and inclusiveness among all 4-H members (Hensley et al, 2007).
- Provide stronger member and family support for 1st and 2nd year members (Astroth, 1985).
- Design program rewards to provide both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards (Forbes, 1992).

## New Approaches to Recruitment and Retention

Armed with all of the research and survey findings, 4-H educators across the United States have dedicated themselves to conquering the enrollment issues plaguing their organization.  Many innovative ideas from educators have resulted in successful programs, including the following:

- Many 4-H educators throughout the United States have implemented "Cloverbud/Clover Kids" programs for ages 5-8 (Harder et al, 2005). Research conducted by Dr. Amy Harder indicates that kids who enroll by age seven are the most likely to remain in 4-H throughout their teenage years. The youth participate in activities, games, and other positive experiences to explore areas of healthy living, earth environment, citizenship, plants and animals, computer skills, science and technology, personality development and expressive arts.  Working parents are assured that developmental skills are enhanced through cooperative games, explorative simple science experiments and creative projects (Iowa State University Extension, 2006).

- Taking a visionary approach, Ohio State University details on its website the sponsorship of the Ohio 4-H Tech Team. The Tech Team embraces the greater educational power and use of technology. The Tech Team is designed to not only stabilize membership retention, but spark renewed interest from non 4-H members. This team provides technology support and education for 4-H events, staff, volunteers, and members across the state of Ohio. The Tech Team assesses Ohio 4-H technology needs and then develops activities and projects to meet these shortfalls.  This program helps meet the needs of today's employers, who want to see technologically literate applicants, by providing technological curriculum and events.  It also challenges technologically savvy teens by opening up new doors for technology exploration, while giving them a chance to develop teamwork, leadership, time management and public speaking skills (Ohio 4-H, 2004).

- Purdue University has created the Indiana 4-H Youth and Adult Congress, which is held once per year to address incentive programs for the retention of Indiana 4-H members in grades 8-12, establish significant scholarship opportunities for 4-H members in the areas of 4-H program accomplishment, and provide leadership/ achievement role models for younger 4-H members (Indiana 4-H, n.d.). This innovative idea addresses the concern that high school age participants are experiencing frustration from the belief that 4-H is focused on younger members, while also addressing the concern that 4-H needs more intrinsically motivated programs/awards.

- In an attempt to reduce the loss of members from 5th to 6th grade, University of Georgia's Gwinnett County 4-H program restructured its Junior Council Programs to include 6th-8th grade students.  In doing so, the 4-H programs are more in-line with the school and athletic programs of the area.  After this change, 82% of enrolled 5th graders returned to the 4-H program, as compared to a 20% return rate before the restructuring.  This adjustment also assisted retention rate in later years, as 40% of the 5th graders that were active during the change are still participating in 4-H in high school (Zeigler, 2005).

- As an example program demonstrating how 4-H can reach out to teens with current and relevant topics,  the University of Florida  4-H program currently teaches youth about proper nutrition, wise decision-making, personal hygiene, teen pregnancy, and saving 4-H money (Wingenbach et al., 1999).

Disturbed at the alarming membership trend within their beloved organization, 4-H members themselves are rising to the challenge of attracting/retaining fellow 4-H members. Many creative ideas have emerged; the results of these programs have not been published, including the following:

- According to Oklahoma 4-H's website, in 1988, Oklahoma State 4-H President Natalie James started a program called "Each One, Reach One." In this program, an enrolled 4-H member recruits one "new" member into their local club and mentors that person during their first year of enrollment. When mentoring, the recruiter helps the new member and their family to understand 4-H, encourages their attendance and participation at club meetings, activities and 4-H events. During the first year of enrollment, the recruiter also provides the new member with the leadership and guidance necessary to plan and carry out project work in one 4-H project area. The goal of this program is "Quality vs. Quantity." This program was popular for many years, but eventually faded out until the 2006-07 State 4-H Officer Team decided to revive this once effective program once again (Oklahoma 4-H, n.d.). This program is an excellent example of conquering many of the complaints of 4-H dropouts, including not feeling welcomed, a lack of an understanding of the 4-H program, and not getting enough help with projects.

- Arizona 4-H has implemented an innovative way to attract teenagers to 4-H by hosting an annual "road trip" activity modeled after the popular MTV series. The rationale was that with multiple parents in the workforce, many families cannot afford the cost or time to take family vacations. Being accustomed to having affordable 4-H events where teens can make friends, learn valuable skills and have fun, the Maricopa County 4-H Teen Association suggested this innovative idea. Started in 2001, this program encourages teens 13-18 to go on the road throughout a specified region of Arizona with activities that promote trust-building, exploration, personal responsibility, interpersonal skills and problem solving. The "road trip" uses five components to engage the teens: interactive geography/history lessons, service learning, work force/career exploration, cultural/diversity awareness and appreciation, and technology in action. The program immediately became so popular with teens that in 2004, 80% of the participants were repeat attendees (University of Arizona, n.d.). This program successfully addresses the complaint from high school age 4-H dropouts who believe that 4-H is focused on younger members. It also addresses the teen request for new curriculum subjects, such as career exploration.

Relatively new programs such as Shooting Sports, Healthy Living, and Science and Technology show much promise in attracting more teen membership, especially with males. In addition, Job Readiness, which is effective in meeting teens' career needs, is a program identified by Acosta and Holt's (1991)studies as a curriculum area that kids desire to be taught. The University of Wisconsin, among many other institutions, utilizes a 4-H Youth Development Retention Survey, which is given to members that decide not to re-enroll (Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development, n.d.). Although this survey is a great instrument and could be utilized by all 4-H Youth Development Educators, it is used in a reactive manner. This assessment tool would be better used in a preventive fashion by soliciting feedback from current and prospective 4-H members in an informal fashion every two years. Many may criticize the use of the survey so frequently. Based upon a study by Butler and Bowman, if a survey is not taken often enough, changes in societal needs and trends in youth interests go undetected and unmet (Butler & Bowman, 1998). By surveying current and prospective 4-H members, Extension Educators can offer projects that attract youth's interest. Through addressing this need, 4-H Educators can increase membership and their retention rate to achieve the mission of 4-H.

## Implications for Youth Development

As the largest youth organization in the United States, the opportunity for 4-H to be a positive influence on America's youth has never been greater.  4-H not only has a mandate to serve the needs and interests of young people today, but to provide experiences that will enrich their lives and enable them to succeed in whatever path they so choose.  Extension researchers, 4-H educators, volunteers, and 4-H members are heading in the right direction by:

- providing both traditional and innovative programs that interest youth of all backgrounds, ages, race, and gender,

- promoting a spirit of inclusiveness that incorporates the acceptance and participation of all youth,

- keeping 4-H member input as a priority and treating it as an essential ingredient to successfully increasing 4-H enrollment and membership,

- encouraging parental involvement because it is imperative to keeping 4-H members in the program.

Once a 4-H program implements these findings, it is important that these programs be evaluated and revised to reflect current interests, trends and changes in our society.  In doing so, 4-H researchers, educators, and volunteers will truly be observing and honoring the 4-H motto by "Making the Best Better."

## Implications for Youth Development in Other Organizations

In order to appeal to youth in today's ever changing, more technologically advanced society, it is imperative that organizers understand the needs and interests of their members.  Maintaining the heritage and original mandate of the organization, while obtaining member input on curriculum additions is essential to capture and maintain member interest.  Furthermore, promotion of diversity and inclusiveness will help foster an environment where youth feel comfortable to participate.  Finally, parental involvement will strengthen the connections that youth have to the organization and within their own family unit. Applying these methods can enhance any youth development organization. As simple as it may seem, educators should listen to youth and strive to meet their needs. The literature indicates that effort alone will attract youth and improve organizational membership.

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