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New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station



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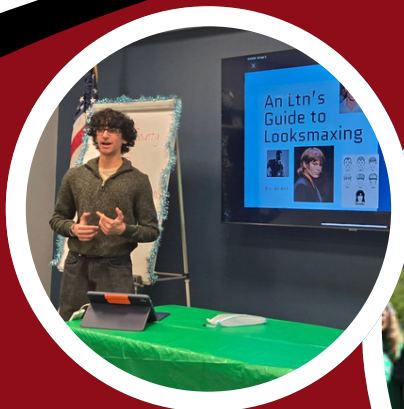
RUTGERS COOPERATIVE EXTENSION PASSAIC COUNTY

4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Building on Strengths - Removing Barriers - Creating Opportunities

A Needs Assessment for Passaic County Youth & Families



2025

*Findings reflect data collected during 2025
Report prepared and published in 2026
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WHO WE ARE...

Rutgers Cooperative Extension connects the research, resources, and expertise of Rutgers University with communities across New Jersey. As part of the national Cooperative Extension System, Rutgers Cooperative Extension is a partnership among federal, state, and local governments and the nation's land-grant universities.



Through this system, university research and innovation are translated into practical, research-based education that helps individuals, families, businesses, and communities address local challenges and create opportunities for success. Major program areas include Food, Nutrition, and Health; Agriculture and Natural Resources; and 4-H Youth Development.

WHAT IS 4-H?

4-H is America's largest youth development organization and the youth development program of Rutgers Cooperative Extension in New Jersey. Through hands-on learning, mentorship, volunteer support, and leadership opportunities, 4-H helps youth develop life skills, build confidence, and prepare for future success.

In Passaic County, this mission comes to life through programs in STEM, agriculture, environmental education, healthy living, leadership, career exploration, civic engagement, and community service. Whether youth are interested in science, gardening, animal science, public speaking, art, or leadership, 4-H helps them explore new interests while developing skills for lifelong success.

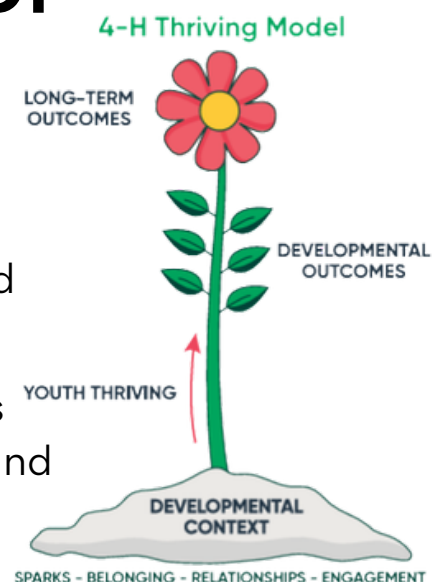


HELPING YOUTH BECOME BEYOND READY

Rooted in Positive Youth Development (PYD), the 4-H Youth Development Program utilizes the 4-H Beyond Ready framework, recognizing that youth thrive when they experience:

- **Sparks:** opportunities to discover passions and interests
- **Belonging:** environments where youth feel welcomed and valued
- **Relationships:** connections with caring adults and peers
- **Engagement:** meaningful, hands-on learning experiences

These experiences help youth become healthy, productive, and engaged citizens who are prepared for life, work, and leadership.





PASSAIC COUNTY AT A GLANCE

- **Population:** ~ 531,624 residents.
- **Land Area:** 186 square miles
- **Municipalities:** 16 cities, boroughs, and townships.
- **Population Density:** ~ 2,800 residents per square mile county-wide.
- **Youth Population:** Nearly 1 in 4 residents is under age 18.
- **Median Household Income:** ~ \$87,500.
- **Languages Spoken at Home:** More than half of residents (51.3%) speak a language other than English at home.

A COUNTY OF MANY COMMUNITIES

Passaic County includes communities with vastly different experiences and opportunities. While cities such as Paterson and Passaic have population densities exceeding 20,000 residents per square mile, northern communities such as West Milford and Ringwood have fewer than 500 residents per square mile, creating very different environments for youth and families across the county.

Urban centers such as Paterson, Passaic, and Clifton often face challenges related to housing, transportation, and population density, while communities such as Wayne, Ringwood, Pompton Lakes, and West Milford often navigate challenges associated with geographic distance and access to services. Throughout this needs assessment, stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of increasing youth access to meaningful opportunities, supportive relationships, life skill development, and pathways to future success.

WHY WE CONDUCTED THIS ASSESSMENT...

Passaic County is uniquely shaped by urban, suburban, and rural communities, each with distinct strengths, opportunities, and challenges. To ensure local 4-H programs remain relevant, accessible, and responsive, Passaic County 4-H conducted a community needs assessment to better understand the experiences, interests, barriers, and aspirations of youth, families, volunteers, and community partners. The findings in this report will help guide future programming, partnerships, and investments that support youth across Passaic County.



WHO WE HEARD FROM...



This assessment incorporated survey feedback from 4-H members and families, community youth and families, current and retired volunteers, and program alumni, as well as key informant interviews and a review of existing research and community data. All data collection activities were conducted in accordance with Rutgers University Institutional

Review Board (IRB)-approved procedures. Together, these sources were used to identify community strengths, emerging needs, and priorities for future 4-H programming, outreach, and partnerships.

Youth (n = 123) ; Parents or guardians (n = 34); Current adult volunteers (n = 4); Retired volunteers (n=2); Alumni (n=9); Key informant interviews (n=3).



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

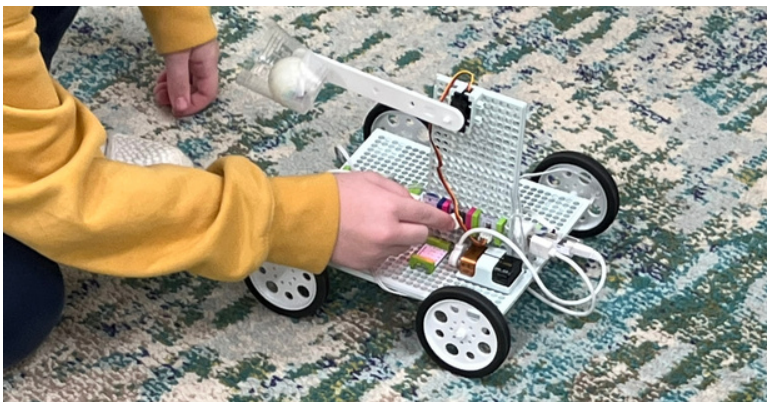
Youth, families, volunteers, community partners, and stakeholders shared a common message: Passaic County youth need opportunities to build confidence, develop life skills, explore future opportunities, and form meaningful connections with supportive adults.

Across surveys, interviews, and community conversations, five themes consistently emerged:

- **Hands-on learning** experiences continue to be highly valued and engaging.
- **Life skills and workforce readiness** are essential for preparing youth for the future.
- **Mental health, resilience, and belonging** are critical needs for today's youth.
- **Teens need additional opportunities** for leadership, mentoring, and career exploration.
- **Access and awareness** various barriers continue to limit participation in programs and opportunities.



While the interests, needs, and barriers of youth may differ across Passaic County's urban, suburban, and rural communities, youth consistently thrive when they have access to experiential learning, opportunities to explore new interests, and environments where they feel valued and empowered. The findings from this assessment provide a roadmap for future program development, partnerships, and resource allocation, ensuring that 4-H continues to meet evolving community needs while helping youth build the skills and experiences needed to become Beyond Ready for their future.



HANDS-ON LEARNING AND EXPLORATION

Across the county, youth, families, and community stakeholders emphasized the value of hands-on learning experiences that help youth explore new interests, build confidence, and develop practical skills.

Top 10 Areas of Interest as Identified by Youth

1. 4-H Camp
2. Animal Science
3. Cooking & Food Science
4. Leadership & Personal Development
5. Creative Arts
6. Computer Science/Coding
7. Teen Leadership Retreat
8. Robotics
9. Engineering & Technology
10. Photography & Videography

"While I was very fortunate of doing many things with the 4-H during the time with the organization like state and national conferences, my favorite memory from 4-H was the county fairs... (where) we would run our stand and work together with my community and my fellow 4-Hers. I really enjoyed this time and it would really bring the 4-Hers and the community together."
 -Passaic 4-H Alumnus

"Exposure changes trajectories."
 -Key Informant Interview



Families and Community Partners Agree...

Parents and community stakeholders identified many of these same topics as priorities for youth programming, particularly:

- STEM
- Leadership
- College and Career Readiness
- Mental Health & Social-Emotional Well-Being
- Agriculture & environmental education
- Animal Science
- Life Skills and Adulting

More than just activities, these experiences help youth explore their interests, build confidence, develop new skills, and connect with others in meaningful ways.



LIFE SKILLS AND WORKFORCE READINESS...

Families, volunteers, and community stakeholders consistently emphasized that preparing youth for the future requires more than academic success alone. Across all audiences, respondents identified life skills, leadership, workforce readiness, and real-world experiences as essential for helping youth navigate adulthood and future career pathways.

WHAT PARENTS, VOLUNTEERS, AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS WANT YOUTH TO DEVELOP

- **Critical Thinking & Goal Setting**
 - **91%** of adults identified goal setting, persistence, and critical thinking as important life skills.
- **Growth Mindset & Curiosity**
 - **94%** of adults identified creativity, curiosity, and growth mindset as important areas of development.
- **Leadership & Decision Making**
 - **94%** of adults rated leadership development as important or very important.
- **Professionalism & Work Readiness**
 - **91%** of adults identified work ethic, professionalism, and organizational skills as important workforce skills.
- **College & Career Exploration**
 - **94%** of adults rated college and career readiness as important or very important.
- **Real-World Experiences**
 - **94%** of adults prioritized internships, apprenticeships, mentoring, and real-life learning experiences.



"(4-H) helped me do things that were out of my comfort zone and do things that I never thought I would have an interest in. I was also able to go to new places through 4-H within my own county which was pretty nice to see. A lot of the skills I learned I was able to use throughout my years at undergrad and in real life." -Passaic 4-H Alumnus



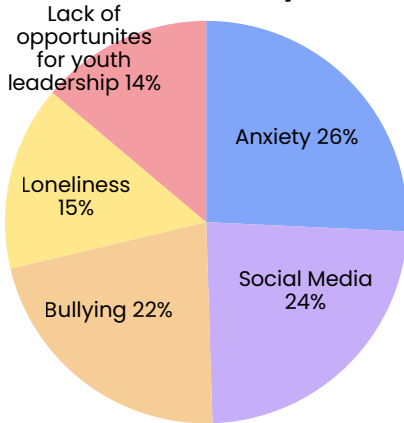
MENTAL HEALTH, RESILIENCE, AND BELONGING

Across all data sources, mental health and social-emotional well-being emerged as one of the most pressing concern for Passaic County youth.

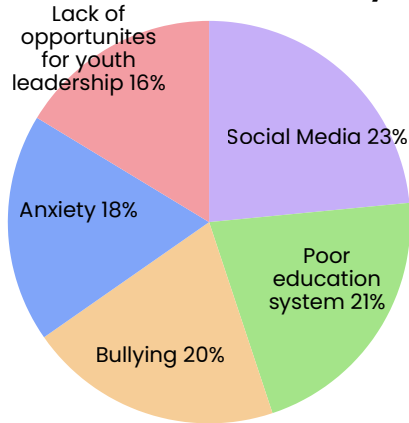
Top Challenges Facing Youth in Passaic County

Top five responses selected from 26 survey options

Youth Surveys



Parent/Guardian Surveys



Percentages shown reflect the relative distribution among the top five responses only.

"I really think [youth] don't have coping skills. They've lost communication skills, and they've lost coping skills."
- Key informant interview

"[Youth] immediately go to 'I can't do it.' They don't have that ability yet to think, process, and problem solve."
- Key informant interview

Alumni reflected on these issues from a longer-term perspective. Several described 4-H as one of the few environments where they felt supported while learning how to take healthy risks and learn from mistakes. **One alumnus described 4-H as "a safe place to learn confidence without being judged,"** a sentiment echoed by current youth participants.



"4-H taught me how to communicate clearly and be a teacher and leader to others. It made me have more self confidence and be more open to experiencing new things."
-Passaic 4-H Alumnus

Why Relationships Matter

Across interviews and survey responses, participants consistently emphasized the importance of supportive adults, mentors, volunteers, coaches, and peers. Youth thrive when they have opportunities to build positive relationships, feel connected to their communities, and experience a sense of belonging.



TEEN LEADERSHIP AND FUTURE PATHWAYS



*"The leadership and communication skills I learned in 4-H are things I still use every day at work."
-Passaic 4-H Alumnus*

WHAT THE YOUTH ARE SAYING...

Teens surveyed expressed strong interest in opportunities designed specifically for older youth, including:

- Leadership & Personal Development
- Teen Leadership Retreats
- Computer Science & Coding
- Engineering & Technology
- Public Speaking & Communication
- Community Action & Service
- College & Career Planning

Teen years represent a critical period for developing leadership, confidence, career awareness, and independence. Stakeholders and volunteers consistently emphasized that providing meaningful opportunities for teens not only prepares youth for life after high school, but also **helps them remain engaged, connected, and invested in their communities.**

"There are a lot of programs for little kids. The teens are the ones we're losing." – Key informant interview

As youth move into middle and high school, opportunities that build leadership, independence, career awareness, and real-world skills become increasingly important. Across surveys and interviews, participants identified a need for additional opportunities that help teens explore their futures while remaining connected to their community.

COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS NOTE PROGRAMMING GAPS:

- Limited programs for youth ages 14-18
- Workforce readiness opportunities
- Job and career preparation
- Social skills development
- Financial literacy and life navigation skills



ACCESS AND AWARENESS

While interest in youth development opportunities was high across all audiences, participants identified several barriers that can limit participation in both 4-H and other similar programs and opportunities throughout Passaic County.

"There's a lot of cool stuff happening, but people don't know about it."
-Key Informant Interview

- **Transportation and Geographic Access**

- Transportation was one of the most consistent barriers identified throughout the assessment.
- In urban communities, barriers often include vehicle access, work schedules, and public transportation.
- In rural communities, distance and travel time can limit participation.

- **Time & Family Commitments**

- 62% of parents identified family commitments as a barrier and 38% identified a lack of time.
- Youth programs often compete with sports, employment, caregiving responsibilities, and other activities.

- **Cost and Competing Commitments**

- Families and stakeholders noted that rising costs continue to influence participation decisions.
- While affordability was viewed as a strength of 4-H, increasing financial pressures are affecting how families prioritize activities and educational opportunities.

- **Awareness and Outreach**

- 38% of parents identified a lack of awareness as a barrier.
- Community members repeatedly noted that many families simply do not know what opportunities are available.
- Marketing and outreach were among the most frequently identified areas for improvement.

"We're cancelling a lot of our luxury events. I get it because families have to put food on the table."
-Key Informant Interview

"I remember marketing being an issue when I was a 4-H'er. I think outreach is very important."
-Passaic 4-H Alumnus

The data and feedback suggests that **interest is not the primary challenge.** Instead, participation is often influenced by transportation, scheduling, cost, awareness, and competing family responsibilities. Expanding access will require continued efforts to bring programs closer to youth, reduce participation barriers, strengthen community partnerships, and increase awareness of available opportunities across Passaic County.



4-H IN THE COMMUNITY... MAKING A DIFFERENCE

What We Know Works... While this assessment identified opportunities for growth, youth, parents, volunteers, alumni, and community partners described 4-H as a positive environment where youth develop confidence, leadership skills, friendships, and real-world experiences.

"I truly believe 4-H could have done nothing better to help prepare me for my life after high school. Since graduating from high school I have successfully graduated from my undergraduate with my bachelors degree and will be moving on to law school in the Fall. I have used all the skills given to me through our programs, meetings, and conferences to aid me to this point in my life and I will continue to do so in my future journeys." -Passaic 4-H Alumnus



Among current 4-H members:

- 100% reported enjoying 4-H
- 100% reported learning new things
- 100% reported feeling comfortable at 4-H events
- 96% would recommend 4-H to a friend



Parents and guardians reported that 4-H helps youth develop:

- Confidence, curiosity, optimism, and positive relationships (96%)
- Emotional awareness and self-management (88%)
- Leadership and decision-making skills (82%)
- College and career readiness (73%)
- Real-world learning experiences (68%)

"4-H exposed me to many opportunities I believe would not have been available to me otherwise. It also helped me financially and through professional development. I have a great amount of appreciation for Passaic County staff who supported me in many ways."

-Passaic 4-H Alumnus

Top Benefits Identified by 4-H Youth

- Friendships (69%)
- New Experiences (53%)
- Learning New Things (51%)
- Confidence Building (47%)
- Leadership Opportunities (44%)



What Makes 4-H Unique

Top themes identified across youth, families, volunteers, and alumni included:

- Hands-on learning
- Positive relationships
- Leadership development
- Opportunities to try new things
- Service to community
- Real-world skill development

To make the best better!

LOOKING FORWARD...

Building a Beyond Ready Passaic County: The needs assessment highlighted both opportunities and challenges facing youth across Passaic County. While needs vary across urban, suburban, and rural communities, respondents consistently emphasized the importance of creating opportunities that help youth make new friends, build confidence, develop life skills, explore future pathways, and give back to their community.



Based on community feedback, several priority areas emerged for future growth and community support.

1. Expand Hands-On Learning Opportunities

Increase opportunities in STEM, agriculture, environmental education, animal science, leadership, camp experiences, and creative arts while connecting youth to real-world experiences and career pathways.

2. Strengthen Youth Connections and Belonging

Create opportunities for youth to build positive relationships with caring adults, mentors, volunteers, and peers through clubs, camps, leadership programs, and community partnerships.

3. Build Confidence and Resilience

Integrate activities that support confidence, communication, problem solving, coping skills, and personal growth.

4. Grow Leadership and Workforce Readiness

Expand opportunities that help youth develop leadership, financial literacy, communication skills, career awareness, public speaking, and workforce readiness.

5. Expand Opportunities for Teens

Increase intentional leadership, mentoring, service-learning, career exploration, and workforce development opportunities specifically designed for older youth.

6. Improve Access, Awareness, and Community Connections

Increase programming opportunities in communities throughout the county, strengthen partnerships with schools and community organizations, improve outreach and marketing efforts, and reduce barriers related to transportation, & cost.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Passaic County 4-H would like to thank the youth, parents and guardians, volunteers, retired volunteers, program alumni, community partners, and stakeholders who took the time to complete surveys, participate in interviews, and share their experiences throughout this needs assessment.

Your feedback and insights were essential in helping us better understand the strengths, needs, and opportunities facing youth and families across Passaic County. Most importantly, your input helps ensure that Passaic County 4-H remains responsive to the unique needs of our communities and continues to provide meaningful opportunities for youth to learn, grow, and thrive.

Thank you for helping shape the future of youth development in Passaic County.



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