I pledge my **HEAD** to clearer thinking, my **HEART** to greater loyalty, my **HANDS** to larger service, and my **HEALTH** to better living, for my club, my community, my country and my world.

The Year in Review

NC 4-H Annual Report 2024

Reflections from Dr. Mike Yoder

July 22, 2025

This morning, as I sit in room one of the McKimmon Center, contemplating North Carolina 4-H Congress and the hundreds of youth participating in this morning's workshops, I am again reminded that 4-H has been offering youth opportunities like this for approximately 115 years - through the Spanish Flu, World Wars I and II, the Great Depression, the Korean War, Vietnam, and Covid. Through it all, 4-H has continued to prepare youth for the next step in life.

Today, we celebrate the Beyond Ready initiative that is uniting all 50 states in preparing youth to join the workforce, enter post-secondary education, or serve our Country in the military. Key life skill development continues to differentiate 4-H from other youth development organizations. While our program offerings have increased drastically, especially in STEM fields, emphasis on life skill development is still our primary focus. We have proven that it works. Through the pursuit of their program of interest (SPARK), 4-H'ers develop content competencies, communication skills, and confidence. All skills that prepare them for that next step.

"It takes a village to raise a child," that old African proverb popularized by Hillary Clinton in her 1996 book, It Takes a Village, is as true today as it was when it was first uttered. It takes well trained youth development professionals (Specialists, agents and program assistants), volunteer leaders, donors and sponsors, and supporting development and communications personnel to be able to offer the many opportunities we now offer 4-H youth. Thank you, to all of our NC 4-H alumni, donors, supporters, and volunteers, for helping us achieve success in preparing youth for their own success.

Dr. Mike Yoder
Associate Dean, NC State Extension
and 4-H State Program Leader

4-H'ers are ...

4x
more likely to give back to their communities

2x
more likely to make healthier choices

2x
more likely to participate in STEM activities

SERVE GROW THRIVE MAKE

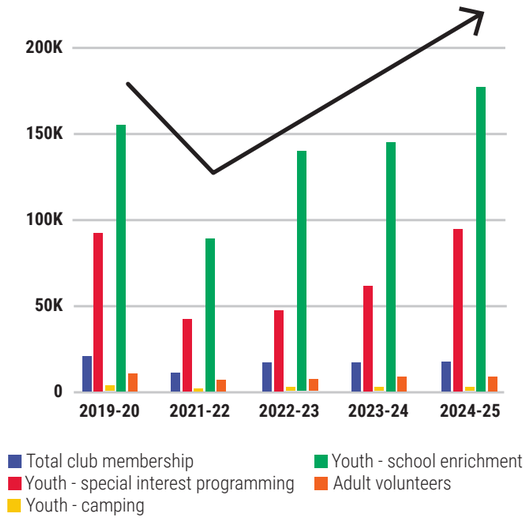
4-H's Post-Pandemic Rebound

By Julie Hayworth-Perman

A lot can happen in six years. Companies form and even fall. A newborn becomes a first grader. A Christmas tree grows from a seed into a holiday centerpiece (a small one, anyway). Yes, a lot of change can happen in a seemingly short span of time.

True, too, for NC State Extension's 4-H youth development program. In 2019, North Carolina 4-H enjoyed strong participation, as 21,000-plus youth engaged in 4-H clubs and 4-H touched the lives of 259,000 youth. Community support was booming with nearly 13,300 adult volunteers. But the dawn of a global pandemic upended everything for North Carolina youth, and in 2020, 4-H participation took an unprecedented dive.

After five challenging years (and a hurricane in the mountains), Extension 4-H staff and volunteers have proven once again that even grown-ups can "learn by doing." Now we celebrate data that shows an impressive rebound in 4-H involvement statewide.



2020 — Well, It Was Rough

Life as we knew it came to a mandatory screeching halt as all business, education and civic organizations sent workers and customers home with no notion of when things might return to normal. No facet of society went untouched—over the next year, businesses shuttered, restaurants closed, and for organizations relying on volunteer support and philanthropy, uncertainty was rampant.

According to PBS, in 2020, one in every six nonprofit organizations was at risk of closing their doors. 4-H numbers sank, as historical participation has been measured primarily through in-person interactions—of which there were few to none during the pandemic shutdowns.

Like many other organizations, 4-H staff knew they were needed more than ever—but to survive, they had to pivot fast. In a passionate move to keep youth engaged in learning and connected to one another, Extension 4-H agents, program assistants and specialists mobilized to offer online clubs and curricula to isolated and lonely kids. At-home educational kits were developed and deployed in the field to stimulate young minds stuck at home for months.

For Extension 4-H agent Jordan English, that meant helping parents deal with what she called "the huge unknowns."

"There was a lot of stress and confusion as parents were trying to teach their kids at home," English said. "Families needed enrichment activities that met COVID-19 guidelines. We created pick-up kits, taught Zoom cooking classes—we had to look for those opportunities for learning."

The transition to virtual programs during the pandemic allowed 4-H to maintain connections with youth, and as in-person activities eventually resumed, many participants returned, eager to engage in hands-on learning experiences. But for some, the forced slow-down allowed families to reevaluate and reprioritize their pre-pandemic, overscheduled lives.

It was a learning experience not just for kids, but for North Carolina 4-H as a program—a lesson that agents took to heart and applied to help youth recover from another disaster just six years later: Hurricane Helene.

Western North Carolina Slogs Through Helene

"COVID brought this completely new disruption," said Holly Jordan, Extension director in Buncombe County. "We have seen similar disruption now with Hurricane Helene. Youth feel a lack of connection, even lack of internet connection in places post-Helene. Disaster, stress, out-of-routine, lack of connection—teachers started calling us as soon as school went back in session."

Why call 4-H? Because teachers and communities have learned to look to 4-H for enrichment and for programs

where kids can connect and have fun. They knew that during the > challenging weeks after Helene, 4-H could bring something more to youth than classroom curriculum alone could offer.

“They wanted that enrichment and the routine and really needed programs where kids could connect,” said Jordan. “We have a great relationship with our schools. 4-H comes in and implements curricula that are group-based and build communication skills. [During crises] it can be easy to ‘retreat,’ but a lot of our families see the value of connection and Helene just emphasized that.”

Outside the classroom, 4-H clubs also emphasize connection—a core part of the program that remains vital, especially as youth face disruptions that go beyond school closures during crises.

Erin Silver, Extension 4-H agent in Mitchell County, explained it well:

“We see that youth have a hard time talking to each other and to adults—we have been so homebound between the pandemic and the hurricane and our dependence on technology,” she said. “4-H offers a sense of community and friendship that kids of this generation are not around anymore because of the reliance on technology. Through 4-H, they build a sense of community with their own age group.”

“4-H is important for youth today because we are giving them opportunities that are not given elsewhere—opportunities to work hands-on, to learn leadership, to participate in community service. In terms of workforce and career-readiness, the possibilities are endless for 4-H’ers. 4-H builds the child who is prepared to face the world,” she said.

Moving 4-H Forward

Despite the challenges, 4-H has found ways to thrive through adversity. Often, that happens through the sheer will and determination of Extension staff at every level of the organization.

For Jordan English in Extension’s Buncombe County center, that involves reaching two considerably different markets: urban youth in Asheville and their rural counterparts in other areas of the county. That has meant guerrilla marketing—boots-on-the-ground visits to community events, schools, social engagements and using good, old-fashioned word-of-mouth to inform families of opportunities.

“Since the storm, we have focused on mental health and building resilience—helping youth process the trauma,” English said.

Brylee Wilson, Landree Grindstaff, and Vivi Royale learn how to properly measure ingredients at 4-H Junior Cook Camp, N.C. Cooperative Extension - Mitchell County Center.

“This summer, we are sending more kids to 4-H camp than we’ve ever sent. Parents want to help their kids cope by giving them opportunities like these,” she added.

3,710 youth participated in 4-H camping programs

Those positive participation numbers have been happening statewide as 4-H figures have risen—and in many cases, surpassed participation rates from 2019. Participation in school enrichment programs has soared, climbing from a previous high of 159,000 youth to more than 176,000. Special interest programming has attracted 92,248 youth this year—over 2,000 more than in 2019.

“What we need going forward is our volunteers,” said English. “Reinvesting in the 4-H program and helping grow the next generation of 4-H’ers is so important as we work to bring back our volunteers. The impacts they make—even the small things—five or 10 years down the road can be very long-lasting. It is hard to measure a volunteer’s impact on a long-term scale, but they are invaluable,” she said. ■

Dinah Gore 4-H Healthy Food Challenge Teaches Skills Beyond the Kitchen

By Julie Hayworth-Perman

Catawba county 4-H’ers participate in the Dinah Gore Healthy Food Challenge. As state champions, the team will participate in a national competition in September.

Food, fitness and education are pillars that the Gore family has supported for numerous years across North Carolina. Dinah Gore, the benefactress of the Dinah Gore Teaching and Research Kitchens at NC State, is again supporting 4-H youth through her endowment, funding the Dinah Gore 4-H Healthy Foods Challenge - a contest that offers youth the opportunity to think creatively, cook safely and responsibly, and build presentation and leadership skills as they work to claim bragging rights in their county, region, state and even in a national competition.

The competition has become so popular that this year, for the first time in its four-year history, a regional competition was added. Sixteen teams competed in the Eastern competition, and 13 in the West.

While the competition format is similar to the popular show, Chopped, where chefs are given a mystery ingredient and have to prepare a meal featuring the item for judges to sample, 4-H adds components such as teamwork and presentation skills which factor strongly into the scoring. Local foods are sourced for the ingredients and youth are given “game” dollars with which to purchase from the competition grocery store.

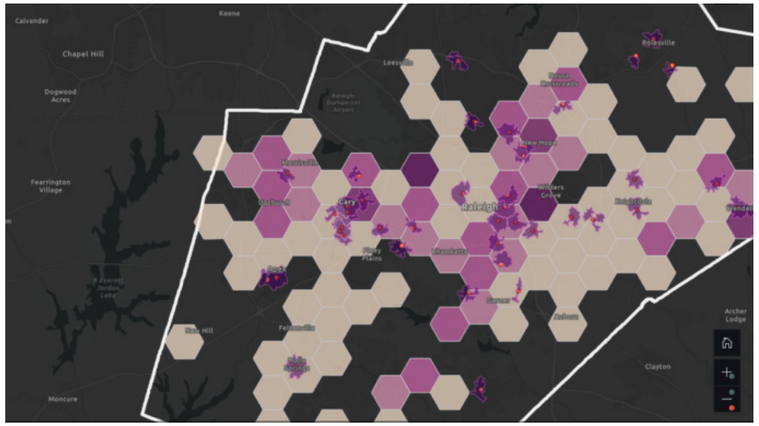
Dr. Shannon McCollum, Extension associate and youth and adult leadership training specialist, coordinates the competition at the regional and state levels and oversees a committee that executes the events. Local coaches work with youth directly throughout the year to prepare. McCollum, along with committee member Jackie Helton, Extension 4-H agent in Harnett county, will travel with the state’s winning team out of Catawba county to Texas for the national competition in September.

Lupita Ortiz is a member of the Catawba county champion team. “The most challenging thing about this contest is really managing our teamwork, Ortiz said. ”We have gotten so much better at working together and getting in sync. We have learned to be a team, how to plan... and we have learned how we all (individually) like to work.” ■

Adventures with Technology

By Simon Gonzalez

Thanks to the NC 4-H GIS club, officials in Fuquay-Varina know which of the town's sidewalks need to be repaired, Raleigh historians can learn the locations of the city's lost Freedmen's Villages, and prospective food entrepreneurs can gain valuable insights into their business plan.



This map shows areas of need identified by Wake County Public School social workers and NC Cooperative Extension / Wake County Health and Human Services staff along with already present community food resources before County efforts in increase access.

GIS stands for geographic information system. It is a method of visually representing data, primarily on maps, and employing storytelling elements to give it context.

"GIS applies to anything that happens on the planet," said Thomas Ray, 4-H program specialist in Wake County. "If it happened in a neighborhood or in a community, it's happening on a map somewhere. Place gives so much context to whatever's happening. If you can map it while you're telling stories, it adds another dimension to the information."

Ray joined the Wake County 4-H team in 2006 after teaching math in West Virginia and Fuquay-Varina for more than a dozen years. He started the club the following year to teach youth about GIS and mapping software.

"I'm a long-time educator," Ray said. "I love education and love the idea that young people can learn best by just getting in there and doing it. That's why this model works."

Learning technology skills is an important component, but the club goes far beyond that. Members put their skills to use on service projects that have a real world impact.

"Each year the young people generate really awesome ideas," Ray said. "I'm really pleased with the work they have been doing. They get to have their own adventures with technology."

They have won national and international awards for maps showing food access in Wake County, the correlation between income and high school dropout rates across North Carolina, and for investigating health issues specific to Black communities.

The sidewalks in Fuquay-Varina, the Freedman villages in Raleigh, and the food grower maps are projects that this year's club members have worked on. All involve information-gathering steps before the data can be displayed.

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>
> **Thomas Ray**
> 4-H program specialist,
> Wake County

In Fuquay-Varina, Johnathan Stroup, Brock Reese, Yug Sarin and George Major collected data on damaged infrastructure and entered it on a survey form developed by Esri, a major mapping software company.

"They built a dashboard for that," Ray said. "And they presented their findings to the town and got feedback on how they could make it even better this coming year.

Freedmen's Villages were Black-founded settlements established during and after Reconstruction. In Raleigh, 13 such villages emerged between 1865 and 1880. Brandon Estevez, a student in Ray's Wake County 4-H club and director of the National 4-H Geospatial Team, wanted to explore the history of the villages — who built them, what life was like, and what happened to them. That meant a deep dive into the state archives.

The food grower maps are part of a statewide project to use GIS data and AI to develop an application that food entrepreneurs, based on their location, would be able to put in their business plan. Estevez interviewed growers at three farms in the Raleigh area to understand and map the local food entrepreneur experience.

"The concept is to promote more access to fresh foods through local food entrepreneurship," Ray said. "We've been their partner on the ground, collecting some of the data that doesn't show up on the big databases."

Each project — along with ones to map the impact of tobacco advertising on children, a study on voting age populations, and a look at financial disparities in Mecklenburg County — requires the 4-H'ers to conduct their own research and interviews.

Wake County 4-H GIS Club members Michael, Brandon and Uma with Dr. Thomas Ray after making a presentation on AI and GIS at the Warren County stop on the N.C. A&T State University Chancellor's Tour in June 2025.

"These kids are asking questions and digging in and exploring what they don't know yet," Ray said. "This information doesn't just show up on your Instagram feed. You actually have to go get it. They are developing critical thinking skills. They recognize that they are in control of their own learning."

The GIS club is one of many that focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) education. But, as Ray points out, it is so much more.

"If you just think about this as a technology club, you would miss the big picture," Ray said. "Look at all these projects. This is a humanities club. This is a civic engagement club. This is a science club, for sure. This is a public speaking club. You can go on down the line. It is at its core a technology club. But you don't have to love tech to get a lot out of this experience."

A major goal of 4-H Youth Development is to ensure that young people are prepared for life after high school. That is the impetus of Beyond Ready, a nationwide initiative that has been enthusiastically adopted by NC 4-H.

Beyond Ready emphasizes the development of essential life skills — including public speaking, critical thinking, organization and confidence — that equip youth to be workforce-ready, community-minded, and future-focused. The GIS club exemplifies that, Ray says.

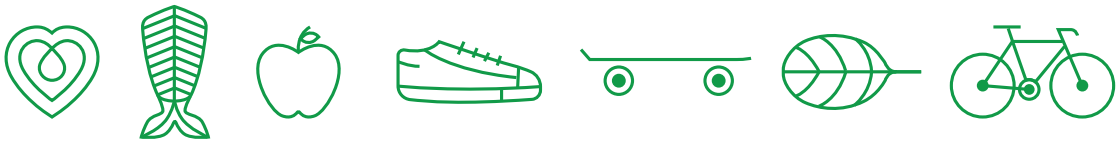
"I personally think that this work that young people are doing in GIS is a prime example of what it means for 4-H to have young people be beyond ready. They're gaining all these skills. They're not on their phones. This is 100% voluntary. They're not doing this for a class, they don't get a grade. These are young people who are learning to be self motivated."

They are also learning how to work in collaboration with each other and with adults. The club works closely with the Wake County Public School System, Wake County's GIS team, and with NC State's Center for Geospatial Analytics.

"They're motivated to do this on their own. But they also are learning to team up with other people," Ray said. "They're learning the value of networks and communication and professional skills, and it all comes together in one of these projects."

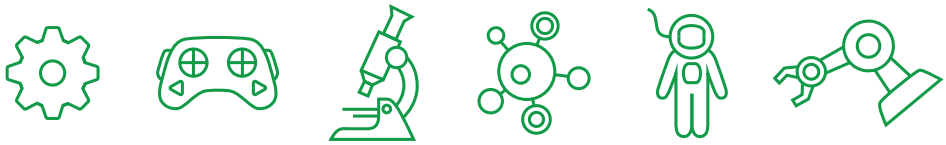
While Ray is a 4-H program specialist in Wake County, he also works with students in Mecklenburg County and in other states, including Arizona and California, in his role as a board member of the National 4-H Geospatial Team. He would like to see even more youth have an opportunity to learn about GIS.

"We're really trying to get other counties involved," he said. "We've really been working hard to expand this work. I don't think that the GIS club is for every young person. But I really wish every young person had at least an opportunity to try it out." ■



From the youngest cloverbud to college-age students, 4-H provides learn-by-doing experiences based on youths' interests, guiding them as they develop their own pathways and passions in their formative years.

- **276,389** participants in 4-H activities
- **21,329** participants in 4-H clubs
- **176,825** participants in school enrichment programs
- **10,621** adult volunteers supported 4-H
- **3,710** participants in 4-H camping programs



4-H programs in areas like health, science, agriculture and civic engagement help youth gain the tools and experience to make the world better. Today's 4-H youth are tomorrow's leaders.

- **21,316** youth enhanced their knowledge of leadership and personal development
- **17,134** youth enhanced their knowledge of technology and engineering
- **40,527** youth enhanced their knowledge of civic engagement
- **21,759** youth enhanced their knowledge of health

NC STATE EXTENSION

NC4H.org