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The Effects of Active Shootings on 4-H Youth and Families

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Abstract. The effects of active shootings should be a priority to provide needed assistance to 4-H youth and families in coping with their social-emotional well-being. Exposure to such violence can lead to lasting impacts on youth that can affect behavior. Addressing this sensitive topic is crucial in ensuring that Extension professionals are prepared to meet the needs of youth and families. Higher rates of depression, aggression, to name a few, are a result of having witnessed such events as a shooting. Providing training for Extension personnel can aid in reducing the amount of PTSD and other social-emotional trauma.

INTRODUCTION

When COVID restrictions were lifted, Lane County Fairgrounds drew record daily crowds of eager community members ready to participate in the festivities of the county fair—none more eager than Oregon State University Extension 4-H members. One of those days will remain etched in the minds of many attendees. It was 4 p.m. on Saturday, July 24th. In broad daylight, when security was lax, one shot fired at the Lane County Fairgrounds resulted in one injured and thousands fearing for their lives. With that one loud bang, a flood of bodies clamored through the 4-H and FFA Youth Auction barn. OSU 4-H faculty reacted by corralling youth, families, and other attendees to safety on the other side of the barn. The atmosphere was reminiscent of a movie scene: people in disbelief, crying kids separated from parents, animals roaming, and dust filling the air as people searched for a safe haven. No one could predict the events that unfolded that afternoon, and no one could predict the aftermath. That shot changed the trajectory of the evening's events and left a vivid memory for those who took cover.

Our environment is unpredictable; uncertainties lurk around every corner, every day. These uncertainties can range from violence and work conditions to school opportunities and, as we've now experienced, global pandemics. Exposure to violence and other such travesties leaves a lasting impact on youth, families, and communities, especially those within vulnerable populations. Each year, youth are exposed to gun violence at home, in the media, in their communities, and at school (Garbarino et al., 2002).

Just as tornado drills and earthquake drills are common practice at schools and workplaces, preparing for a shooting—and the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that can follow—should be required as well. The social-emotional and psychological well-being of individuals warrants attention. Preparing our youth and volunteers to be safe and to know how to cope with shootings is a necessary step in the right direction. According to Cimolai et al. (2021), preparedness intervention is important, and those delivering this intervention should be careful not to further traumatize those involved. Studies show that ethnic minorities, males, and urban residents are more likely to experience higher rates of depression, aggression, and PTSD; an increased risk for witnessing violence; and the externalization of behavior disturbances (Buka et al., 2001). Once individuals experience a shooting, their psychological well-being should be a top priority. For adolescents living in urban areas, exposure to community violence has the potential to influence them psychologically (McDonald & Richmond, 2008). Youth exposed to gun violence report significant PTSD, total trauma, dissociation, and increased anger (Slovak & Singer, 2001). Regardless, exposures have negative impacts on youth.

Efforts to address this prevailing issue require immediate attention. At OSU, some Extension and 4-H faculty take part in required active shooter trainings; however, this training is not required for all Extension faculty and staff. Trained faculty and staff can share information and preventative measures with 4-H members, families, and volunteers. Additionally, such training instills a sense of empowerment and preparedness that allows people to react in a crisis rather than feel helpless. Information learned during training helps promote understanding, increase awareness, and guide faculty and students, which in turn increases self-confidence and safety (Davis, 2020). In the Lane County Fair shooting incident, OSU 4-H faculty had to react quickly, without the guidance of prior training. With safety in mind, OSU 4-H faculty searched for youth, families, volunteers, and auction supporters. When Lane County Fairgrounds staff gave the green light, everyone retreated to the safety of the barns. As police and paramedics arrived and the chaos subsided, OSU 4-H faculty could see the trauma in the eyes of their youth exhibitors—evidence that their mental health suffered. In an article by Cimolai et al. (2021), the authors state that violence has many effects not only on physical health, but on mental health. Extension should heed research to support mental and physical health by providing free or low-cost services for those affected by traumatic experiences.

The lone shot will remain a memory that may trigger PTSD for those present that fearful day, despite the situation not escalating to a mass shooting. Whalen (2007) states that fear is important, as it helps us to remember crucial things. For an agonizing thirty minutes, OSU 4-H faculty did not know if more shots would be fired or if the shooter had been contained. Encountering real-life violence leaves victims with lasting physical and emotional scars that can be devastating (Shaw, 2004). This uncertainty caused great trauma for the youth, volunteers, and faculty. Additionally, parents and youth experienced trauma due to the risk of losing their loved ones during this event; the threat of losing loved ones, or actually losing them, is strongly associated with PTSD (Shultz et al., 2014). Children are particularly vulnerable during these traumatic events. After witnessing and living through shootings, children become extremely fragile and vulnerable, showing signs of anxiety, indicators of fear, and feelings of helplessness (Shultz et al., 2014). Childhood and adolescence are times of rapid development, and any negative impacts on the mental health of children or adolescents can trigger further mental health disorders (Min et al., 2013).

As the dust settled from the incident at the Lane County Fair, retrospection provided opportunity for reflection, reframing, and renewal, shifting Extension's focus to preventative measures. Prevention is one of the most valuable tools in public health and can be classified as primary, secondary, or tertiary. Primary prevention focuses on evaluating determinants of health and preventing individuals and communities from being impacted by negative health outcomes; secondary prevention focuses on early detection and intervention; tertiary prevention deals with recovery and reducing the risk of a repeated diagnosis or experience (Min et al., 2013). Extension must consider incorporating each level of prevention in order to provide an atmosphere that fosters safety, which can aid in addressing active shootings. Currently, Lane County 4-H faculty are enforcing tertiary prevention; however, they are seeking support to address primary preventative measures from their colleagues across the state. Efforts include training and drills that engage staff, faculty, and Extension volunteers to prepare for active shootings. Additionally, free or low-cost mental health resources must be accessible for employees and community members who experience traumatic events. Research has shown that violence within the community can seriously disrupt the healthy progression of adolescent development and ultimately lead to negative developmental outcomes (Chen et al., 2017). When Lane County 4-H faculty inquired about support for volunteers and youth, available resources required payment, creating barriers for accessing help. Aisenberg and Ell's (2005) research suggests that helping parents with their mental health needs will aid in their child's behavioral adjustment in diminishing the negative effect of community violence. Resources from OSU Extension must be readily accessible so families can receive the care they need when dealing with PTSD or otherwise addressing their physical and mental health post-trauma.

The shooting at Lane County Fair opened our eyes to the lack of existing training and preventative measures within Extension. This is a call to action for Extension programs across the nation to address this sensitive yet dire topic. Shootings are rampant, and Extension should focus on taking action to protect our youth and the families within our communities—our most valuable assets. To ensure the safety and social-emotional well-being of our families, efforts need to focus on addressing trauma. Now is the time to develop trainings and become industry leaders who advocate for change that stands to benefit us all. Knowledge is power, and Extension must lead and model the way; after all, Extension is an organization founded in research.

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Safety should never be compromised. Advocating for change that positively influences the greater good is paramount, and Extension should be leading this endeavor. We must make concerted efforts to minimize moments of tragedy that can have lasting effects and disrupt lives for years to come.

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