

Introduction

For many students, the summer is a time for family vacations, new friendships, new adventures in camps and summer learning programs, or taking summer classes to catch up or get ahead in school. For some families, affordable summer programs and camps can be a lifeline, while other families who may not be able to afford summer programs or activities struggle because they lose access to free and reduced-price school meals or because parents are not able to take time off from work to care for their children. Until now, a complete picture of what summer looks like—who is engaged in enriching learning experiences and who is missing out on these opportunities—was obscured by a lack of data.

The 2020 edition of America After 3PM is designed to build a better understanding of how young people are spending their summers and to dig deeper into the types of summer experiences children across America have. Respondents' answers to a new set of summer-specific questions provide a view of a typical summer.* First fielded in 2004, with updates in 2009, 2014, and now 2020, America After 3PM continues to chronicle how young people spend their afterschool and summer hours. To complement this data, as typical summer experiences were cancelled or changed to meet health and safety protocols, the Afterschool Alliance commissioned nationally representative surveys of parents and program providers to learn how COVID-19 changed young people's summer experiences.



Time for a Game-Changing Summer, With Opportunity and Growth for All of America's Youth, reviews the America After 3PM summer 2019 findings, with 2020 parent and provider summer survey data included to shed light on what young people are experiencing during the pandemic. This data can be helpful as families, educators, and policymakers debate the best supports for young people after more than a year of pandemic conditions. As this report is written, 79 percent of programs plan to offer summer enrichment in 2021. The data about what summer looked like prior to the pandemic and information about how summer program providers addressed emerging needs during the 2020 summer can inform the design of 2021 summer experiences and the funding allocated to summer programs, enabling summer providers to help all young people re-engage, recharge, and rebound from the pandemic.

Photos in *Time for a Game-Changing Summer, With Opportunity and Growth for All of America's Youth* include both photos taken pre-pandemic and photos taken during the pandemic.

* Parents surveyed were asked to report on their child's 2019 summer experiences.

I. Participation in summer programs soars as more than 9 in 10 parents report satisfaction

Prior to the pandemic, participation in summer programming was on an upward trajectory. In the summer of 2019, participation in summer programming was at the highest level ever recorded by America After 3PM, with most parents satisfied with their child's summer experience.

- **Summer participation:** Close to half of families (47 percent) report at least one of their children attended a summer program, an increase from 1 in 3 families during the 2013 summer (33 percent) and 1 in 4 families in the summer of 2008 (25 percent).[†] For the first time, America After 3PM projects the number of children participating in a structured summer experience—which include participation in a summer learning program, sports program, summer camp, summer school, or summer job or internship, and are different from child care—and finds that 12.6 million U.S. school-aged children (22 percent) participated in a structured summer experience in 2019.
- **Types of structured summer experiences:** Non-STEM specialty camps or programs—such as arts, sports, or drama camps or programs—are the most commonly reported summer experience, with 6.8 million children (12 percent) participating, followed by 5.4 million children (9 percent) participating in voluntary summer programs. Less commonly reported summer experiences include optional summer school classes for credit or enrichment (3 percent), STEM camps (3 percent), summer jobs or internships (3 percent), and mandatory summer school (2 percent).[‡]
- **Parents give summer experiences top marks:** Parents overwhelmingly report that they were satisfied with their child's 2019 summer experience. Fully 95 percent of parents were satisfied with the structured summer experience their child attended most, and 65 percent report that they were extremely satisfied with the experience.



II. Academic enrichment is important, but parents prioritize building connections, exploration, and being active in the summer

Although a safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff were far and away the driving forces behind parents' decisions regarding what their child did during the 2019 summer, parents report that they wanted activities that were engaging, offered choice, and kept their child active and outside, more so than a summer focused on academics.

- **Prioritization of life skills, activity, variety, and the outdoors:** While 3 in 4 parents (75 percent) say that it is important to them that a summer experience helped keep their child from losing academic ground, roughly 9 in 10 parents report that opportunities to build life skills (94 percent), physical activity (92 percent), the variety of activities in a program (90 percent), and opportunities to experience the outdoors (86 percent) were important when choosing their child's summer activities.

[†] In America After 3PM, a "summer program" is defined as a program that is a "safe, structured program that provided activities designed to encourage learning and development during the summer months."

[‡] Parents reporting that their child was in a structured summer experience were then able to select all of the following experiences that applied to their child: Voluntary summer program that provides a variety of learning and enrichment activities, mandatory summer school/school credit recovery program, optional summer school classes for credit or enrichment, work/summer job/internship, STEM camp, and all other specialty camps or programs (e.g., arts, sports, drama, religious).



- **Parents want summer to be different than the school year:** Parents are much more likely to report that factors such as opportunities to experience the outdoors, physical activity, a variety of activities, and opportunities to build life skills were important in their decision-making process when selecting a summer program, compared to their selection of an afterschool program.

- **Summer programs are a critical resource for families with low incomes:** Families with low incomes are more likely than families with higher incomes to look to their child's summer experience to provide a wide range of supports. Parents with low incomes place a greater emphasis on reducing risky behaviors (23 percentage point difference), snacks and meals (21 percentage point difference), helping prevent their child from losing academic ground (14 percentage point difference), and helping build life skills (13 percentage point difference), as well as a variety of activities (12 percentage point difference), music or arts (11 percentage point difference), and STEM learning opportunities (10 percentage point difference), compared to parents with higher incomes.

III. A summer divided: A need for more summer opportunities

Despite the increase in the number of families with a child in a summer program, America After 3PM finds high unmet demand during the 2019 summer and significant inequities, including the increase in summer program participation driven largely by families with higher incomes.

- **Unmet demand for summer:** Nearly 1 in 3 children (31 percent) not in a program during the 2019 summer would have been enrolled in one if one were available to them, equating to 13.9 million children. For every child in a summer program, another would be enrolled if a program were available. Among families who did not have a child in a summer program, but would have liked to enroll their child if a program were available, unmet demand for summer programs has remained high, with most families who did not have a child in a summer program reporting that they would have liked to enroll their child in a program in 2020 (57 percent), up slightly from 2009 (56 percent).
- **Higher unmet demand and lower summer participation among families with low incomes:** More than 1 in 3 children living in households with low incomes (35 percent) would have been enrolled in a summer program if one were available to them, compared to 28 percent of children in families with higher incomes. At the same time, children from families with higher incomes are nearly three times more likely to participate in a structured summer experience than children from families with lower incomes; 9.2 million children with higher incomes compared to 3.3 million children with low incomes. Comparing trend data at

the household level, the percentage of families with higher incomes with a child in a summer program saw a significant increase between 2013 and 2019, jumping from 33 percent to 53 percent, whereas families with low incomes saw a small increase from 34 percent to 38 percent.

- **The cost of summer activities a greater barrier for families with low incomes:** For families with low incomes, the cost of programs was by far the most common reason for not enrolling their child in a summer program. Families with low incomes were also more likely to report that cost was a barrier compared to their higher income counterparts (44 percent vs. 35 percent).
- **Transportation and awareness of programs are also barriers to participation:** Close to 1 in 4 parents with low incomes report that issues with transportation or location (23 percent) or not knowing about available programs in the area (23 percent) factored into their decision not to enroll their child in a summer program, compared to 18 percent and 16 percent of families with higher incomes.

IV. More parents than ever before support public funding for summer programs

The 2020 edition of America After 3PM finds that support for public investment in summer learning opportunities continues to grow.

- **National:** Eighty-eight percent of parents favor public funding for summer learning opportunities for students in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth, an increase from 83 percent in 2009 and 85 percent in 2014. A majority of parents (57 percent) report that they are strongly in favor of public funding.
- **State:** Across states, there is broad approval for increasing access to summer programs, ranging from 94 percent in New Mexico to 81 percent in North Dakota and Wyoming.
- **Political affiliation:** Overwhelming majorities of parents across political affiliations support public funding for summer learning opportunities, with 92 percent of Democrats, 88 percent of Independents, and 86 percent of Republicans in favor of public funding for summer learning opportunities.



SUMMER IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Families continued to need summer programming during the pandemic

Unsurprisingly, participation in summer programs was down in 2020 as programs closed or cut back during the pandemic. Still, 1 in 3 families (34 percent) report that their child participated in a structured summer experience, which included voluntary summer programs, summer school classes, specialty camps or programs, or summer jobs or internships in 2020. Among families with a child in a structured summer experience in 2020, 37 percent report that the experience was virtual, 36 percent report that it was in person, and 26 percent report a hybrid model. Satisfaction with summer offerings also remained high despite the pandemic, with 9 in 10 parents reporting that they were satisfied with their child’s summer program.

Opportunities for social interaction and physical activity remain important to parents

Similar to the 2019 findings in America After 3PM, a safe environment (90 percent) and knowledgeable and caring staff (88 percent) are the top two factors parents say were important when choosing their

child’s activities for the 2020 summer, followed closely by opportunities to build life skills (85 percent), and time for their children to interact with peers and supportive staff (84 percent). Roughly 4 in 5 parents report that physical activity (80 percent), a variety of activities (79 percent), STEM learning opportunities (79 percent), and helping keep their child from losing academic ground over the summer (78 percent) were important in selecting their child’s summer experiences. Eighty-six percent of parents say safety and cleaning precautions against COVID-19 were important in their choice.

5.2 Average weeks during the summer	4.5 Average hours per day
\$119.90 Average cost per week* <small>*Among parents who report paying for their child’s summer experience</small>	90% Percent of parents reporting that they were satisfied with their child’s summer program

Unmet demand for summer programming remains high

Although lower than in 2019, nearly half of families without a child in a summer program (48 percent) in 2020 would have enrolled their child if a program were available. Concerns about COVID-19 were a factor behind a majority of parents’ choice to not enroll their child in a summer program (51 percent) in 2020. However, 41 percent of parents reported that the unavailability of summer programs in their community factored into their decision as well.

A 2020 survey of program providers found that, on average, summer programs served approximately half as many children in 2020 as they served in 2019 due to social distancing guidelines and reduced student-to-staff ratios. Among program providers serving students in person, 40 percent reported having a waitlist for their summer program in 2020.

In a February/March 2021 survey of program providers, most providers (79 percent) report that they plan to provide programming during the 2021 summer, and more than one-third (36 percent) say that they are most concerned about their ability to meet the demand from families.

Conclusion

A 2019 report by the National Academies of Science’s Committee on Summertime Experiences and Child and Adolescent Education, Health, and Safety stated, “The summer months present youth with opportunities for academic, physical, and social and emotional growth but also the possibility of stagnation or decline.”¹ America After 3PM confirms the need for enriching, engaging summer choices, both prior to and during the pandemic. The relatively low levels of participation in summer activities, together with the barriers to participation and the large unmet demand this new study finds, demonstrate that more work must be done to give young people, in particular those in underserved communities, the opportunity to take part in summer experiences that will support their learning, development, health, and overall wellness.

The disparity in opportunities extends beyond the summer months. Families with higher incomes are much more likely than families with low incomes to report that their children are involved in afterschool programs and extracurricular activities, as well as summer programs, and spend more than five times as much on out-of-school time activities.

In March 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate passed, and President Joe Biden signed into law, the American Rescue Plan. Among its many provisions is significant one-time funding for afterschool and summer learning programs that support students’ academic, social, and emotional needs. The new law designates more than \$1 billion for summer enrichment activities and allows state and local education agencies to target billions of additional dollars to summer learning programs to help our students recover from the pandemic. With these funds comes the opportunity to listen to parents and youth and design summer learning programs and experiences that meet their needs. State education agencies and school districts now have the resources to work with community-based organizations and reach many of the children and youth who were unable to attend summer programs in the past because of cost barriers. With the stimulus dollars, the country can come closer than ever before to providing every young person with a holistic set of supports during the summer months to help them re-engage, recharge, and rebound from the pandemic.

For more information about the national and state-specific America After 3PM survey findings, visit <http://afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM>.

The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit public awareness and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool programs. More information is available at www.afterschoolalliance.org.

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). Shaping Summertime Experiences: Opportunities to Promote Healthy Development and Well-Being for Children and Youth. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/summertime-experiences-and-child-and-adolescent-education-health-and-safety>

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Methodology

America After 3PM is a nationally representative survey of randomly selected adults who live in the United States and are the parent or guardian of a school-age child who lives in their household. The survey was conducted using a blend of national consumer panels, with the goal of completing at least 200 interviews in every state and Washington, D.C. In states where this goal could not be reached using online panels, supplementary telephone interviews were conducted. This is the second wave of America After 3PM to be carried out using an online survey and supplementary telephone interviews, after the 2004 and 2009 waves were conducted using paper surveys distributed through the U.S. mail and using random-digit telephone dialing. For the 2020 wave of America After 3PM, interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish.

America After 3PM data included in this report was collected between January 27 and March 17, 2020. A total of 29,595 households, including 53,287 children, were surveyed and answered questions regarding ways in which their child or children were cared for during the summer of 2019. Data from interviews are weighted on race and income within state and by state population. The overall margin of error for child-level and household-level data is +/- < 1 percent.

Projections for child-level data represent the 57.4 million children and youth in the United States based on numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau's October 2018 Current Population Survey.

Also included throughout this report are findings from parent and program provider surveys: two nationally representative online surveys of parents, one fielded August 4-18, 2020 of 1,071 parents of school-aged children and the other fielded October 12-29, 2020 of 1,202 parents of school-aged children; and three online program provider surveys, a survey of 1,047 afterschool and summer learning program providers, conducted July 20-August 31, 2020, a survey of 1,445 program providers conducted between September 28-October 27, 2020, and a survey of 1,235 program providers conducted February 19-March 15, 2021. All surveys were conducted by Edge Research.