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SPIKING DEMAND, GROWING BARRIERS: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities

Acknowledgements

The America After 3PM special report, *Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities*, is made possible with the support of the Walton Family Foundation. Data from the report is based on the 2020 America After 3PM survey, for which we extend our utmost gratitude for the generous support of the New York Life Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Altria Group, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

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 was collected between January 27 and March 17, 2020. A total of 31,055 households, including 9,690 rural households, were surveyed and answered questions regarding ways in which their child or children are cared for in the hours after school, participation in organized activities, participation in summer experiences, and key demographics. 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.

For the purposes of *Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities*, survey respondents defined as living in rural communities were those who selected that they live in a "rural area/small town" when answering a survey question related to locale. Survey respondents described as living outside a rural area were those who selected that they live in a "suburban area," an "urban area," or were unsure what community type they were living in.

All America After 3PM data and associated materials, including reports, fact sheets, news releases, and infographics, are available at: afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/.

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

Also included in this report are findings from a smaller-scale, nationally representative online survey conducted in the midst of COVID-19 and fielded October 12-29, 2020, surveying 1,202 parents of school-age children, conducted by Edge Research. Survey respondents were asked questions similar to those in America After 3PM to determine how the pandemic has or has not affected their experience with and attitudes toward afterschool and summer programs.

Photos in *Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities* include both photos taken pre-pandemic and photos taken during the pandemic.



Table of Contents

Acknowledgements and Methodology	2
Introduction	4
Key Findings and Recommendations	6
I. Rural communities see a sharp rise in unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs	12
II. Increasing barriers to participation and a growing recognition of the benefits are driving unmet demand in rural communities	16
III. Rural families prioritize safe spaces and caring adults	24
IV. The afterschool and summer experiences of rural families mirror national findings in some key respects	34
Recommendations	41
Conclusion	45

Introduction

On the U.S.-Canada border is Blaine County, Montana, with a population that is largely Native American (51 percent) and White (46 percent) and where the poverty rate is 30.5 percent, nearly three times higher than the national average.¹ Agriculture is the economic driver in Blaine County, in an area with expansive plains that also includes the Little Rocky Mountains, the Bear Paw Mountains, and both the Milk and Missouri Rivers.²

At the southern U.S.-Mexico border is Brewster County, Texas, with a county size made up largely of mountains and canyons that is roughly equal to Connecticut and where, “less than 1 percent of the land in the county is considered prime farmland.”³ Here, residents are primarily White and Hispanic (50 percent and 45 percent, respectively).⁴ Hospitality and tourism are the largest industry in the area, which has unemployment slightly below the national average, at 5 percent, but a poverty rate slightly higher than the nation, at 14 percent.⁵

As different as these communities are, they are both commonly classified as rural. Despite the often-monolithic view of rural America, communities that fit the Census Bureau’s definition of rural are heterogeneous geographically, demographically, and economically.

Accounting for more than 1 in 10 individuals in the United States, based on Census Bureau data collected prior to the pandemic, rural communities experienced a small population increase from 2018 to 2019, reaching 46.1 million persons after consecutive years of decline.⁶ More than 1 in 5 rural residents are people of color, with rural communities more racially and ethnically diverse now than they were a decade ago.⁷

Although the most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture report on rural America finds both population growth and the addition of jobs in rural communities,⁸ taken as a whole, adults and children living in rural communities continue to struggle with poverty, food insecurity, and educational achievement. While on the decline, poverty is higher in rural communities than in metro areas and is decreasing at a slower rate, leading to a wider gap between rural and non-rural communities.⁹ In addition to the higher rates of poverty in rural communities, food insecurity among rural households with and without children remains higher than in households outside of rural areas.¹⁰

Education is also an area where there is need for growth. In the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, a minority of rural students achieved proficiency in core academic subjects, with approximately 1 in 3 rural 8th graders scoring at or above proficiency in reading, math, or science. Proficiency in math and science dropped to 1 in 5 among high school seniors.¹¹ The percentage of rural youth completing an associate degree or higher increased from 2000 to 2019 (from 20.6 percent to 30.4 percent). However, the large gap between young people in rural and urban areas attaining an associate or bachelor’s degree has stayed relatively stable over the same time period, with young



America After 3PM survey demographics		
	Rural	National
INCOME		
Qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program	47%	32%
EMPLOYMENT		
Working at least part time*	69%	77%
Spouse working at least part time	84%	86%
RACE/ETHNICITY		
White	78%	66%
Hispanic/Latinx	12%	18%
Black/African American	10%	14%
Asian American, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander	4%	8%
Native American	3%	2%
n= 9,690	n= 31,055	

*Employment status of individual completing the survey

people in urban areas continuing to be much more likely to have at least an associate degree (43.2 percent vs. 30.4 percent).¹²

Within each of these issues, there are distinct differences among rural communities. For instance, rural community poverty rates in the South are much higher than in the other three regions of the U.S., and the poverty rate gap between rural and non-rural communities is greatest in the South (19.7 percent vs. 13.8 percent), whereas rural and non-rural poverty rates in the Northeast (12.9 percent vs. 12 percent) and Midwest (13.4 percent vs. 12.6 percent) are very small.¹³ Graduation rates are another example, with the graduation rate of 88.7 percent in rural high schools above the national average, yet rural high school graduation rates as low as 72.3 percent in Alaska and 76.4 percent in New Mexico.¹⁴

In the face of these challenges, afterschool and summer programs are an invaluable resource in rural communities. Afterschool and summer programs are able to tailor their services and supports to local circumstances and specific needs of the children and families in a community, finding ways to excite children about learning and helping them explore new areas of interest, all while providing parents peace of mind that

their child is in a safe space with caring and supportive adults and mentors. This is especially apparent during the coronavirus pandemic, when the afterschool field has pivoted its services to adjust to the new situation the country found itself in and better meet the needs of students and families.

At the start of the pandemic, a survey of program providers found that by early July 2020, more than half of rural program providers were serving as meals sites, delivering meals, or distributing other resources to families, and 46 percent were connecting families to community resources.¹⁵ In a summer 2021 program provider survey, 84 percent of rural program providers were physically open in at least some capacity, with more than 9 in 10 providing academic enrichment, outdoor activities, and time for students to interact with their peers; 67 percent provided their students with snacks or meals.¹⁶

This report aims to provide a current picture of the afterschool and summer program experience for children and families in rural America, using data from the most recent America After 3PM study. Building off findings from the previous 2009 and 2014 America After 3PM studies, *Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities* investigates whether the afterschool and summer landscape in rural communities has changed over time, compares and contrasts rural parents' perceptions of afterschool programs now and then, and discusses what lessons can be drawn from the findings to help increase access to afterschool and summer programs in rural communities.





Key Findings & Recommendations

Key Findings and Recommendations

Rural communities see a sharp rise in unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs

■ **Unmet demand in rural communities is higher than ever:**

There are now 4.5 million children in rural communities who are not in an afterschool program, but would be enrolled if a program were available. This is a 43 percent increase from 2014. For every rural child in an afterschool program, four more children are waiting to get in. During the 2019 summer, 2.9 million children not in a summer program would have been enrolled if one were available to them. For every rural child in a summer learning program, two more would be enrolled if a program were available.

Unmet demand for afterschool programs at the child level reached 47 percent in 2020, an increase from 39 percent in both 2014 and 2009. Similarly, unmet demand for summer programs saw gains at the household level. More than half of rural families who did not have a child in a program during the 2019 summer report that they would have liked their child to be in one (54 percent), a significant increase from 39 percent of rural families in 2008.

■ **Communities of color and families with low incomes in rural communities have the highest levels of unmet demand:**

Majorities of Black (59 percent), Latino (57 percent), and Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI)* children (57 percent), as well as children living in families with low incomes (52 percent) not enrolled in an afterschool program would be enrolled if a program were available to them, compared to 47 percent of rural children overall.[†] During the 2019 summer, at the household level, 69 percent of Latino families, 68 percent of Black families, 64 percent of Native American families, 57 percent of AANHPI families, and 59 percent of low-income families would enroll their child in a summer program if one were available, compared to 54 percent of rural families overall.

Increasing barriers to participation and a growing recognition of the benefits are driving unmet demand in rural communities

■ **Families in rural communities face increasing barriers to afterschool:**

The most common reason families living in rural communities report not enrolling their child in an afterschool program is that they prefer their child remain with them or another adult after school; however, reported barriers to participation have grown significantly. Reports of barriers to participation have increased by double-digit percentage points since 2014, including the cost of programs (40 percent vs. 55 percent), children not having a safe way to and from the afterschool program (36 percent vs. 50 percent), inconvenient program locations (31 percent vs. 47 percent), and the lack of available programs in the community (29 percent vs. 45 percent).

■ **Barriers are greater for rural families with low incomes and rural families of color:**

Rural families with low incomes and rural families of color are even more likely than rural families overall to report challenges related to the cost and availability of afterschool programs. For example, a higher percentage of rural families with low incomes report that afterschool programs are too expensive than rural families overall (59 percent vs. 55 percent). Strong majorities of AANHPI (69 percent), Black (59 percent), and Latino parents (56 percent) report that not having a safe way for their child to get to and from afterschool programs is an important reason they did not enroll their child in a program, compared to 50 percent of rural parents overall.[‡]

* This report will include findings on Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) parents, respondents who selected either "Asian" or "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander" when asked to describe themselves.

[†] "Black" and "African American" and "Hispanic," "Latino," and "Latinx" are used interchangeably throughout this report. Both "Black" and "White" are capitalized for the purposes of this report as referring to a racial and ethnic group of people.

[‡] The America After 3PM survey is of parents or guardians of school-age children. For the purposes of this report, "parents" is used to represent both parents and guardians.



■ **Barriers to summer program participation:** During the summer months, the availability and accessibility of programs remain barriers that rural parents face when looking for a structured summer experience for their child. More than 1 in 3 rural parents (35 percent) report that cost was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in a summer program and 1 in 5 rural parents say that summer programs were not available in their community. Although rural parents are less likely than parents nationally and non-rural parents to report that cost was a barrier (35 percent vs. 39 percent and 41 percent), distinct differences arise regarding summer program availability between rural and non-rural parents. Rural parents are twice as likely as parents living outside of rural areas to say that summer programs were not available to them (20 percent vs. 10 percent).

■ **Rural parents view afterschool programs as a source of support for children and families:** The latest America After 3PM study finds that an overwhelming majority of parents living in rural communities agree that afterschool programs benefit children and families, and positive attitudes toward afterschool programs have increased over time.

- **Providing important opportunities for youth to learn and grow:** An overwhelming majority of rural parents surveyed agree that afterschool programs provide opportunities for children to build life

skills (81 percent) and positive relationships with caring adults and mentors (77 percent). Following national-level trends, the percentage of rural parents agreeing that afterschool programs benefit children and families grew from 2014 to 2020, with double-digit percentage point increases in agreement that afterschool programs help children gain interest and skills in STEM (62 percent vs. 75 percent), be physically active (73 percent vs. 85 percent), and become more excited about learning (62 percent vs. 72 percent).

■ **Recognizing benefits to parents:** Rural parents with a child in an afterschool program report that programs are helping them keep their job or work more hours (74 percent) or enabling them to build skills through classes or workshops (70 percent). Rural parents—both parents with and without a child in an afterschool program—acknowledge that programs are providing working parents peace of mind knowing that their children are safe and supervised (82 percent) and helping working parents keep their jobs (79 percent), an increase from 2014 (73 percent and 72 percent, respectively).

- **Satisfaction with programs grows:** Overall satisfaction with afterschool programs serving rural families grew from 85 percent in 2014 to 92 percent in 2020, on par with national satisfaction (94 percent). Rural parents reporting that they are extremely satisfied jumped 17 percentage points, from 48 percent to 65 percent. Nine in 10 rural parents are satisfied with the safety of their child's afterschool program's environment (91 percent) and that the staff in their child's afterschool program are knowledgeable and caring (90 percent). And strong majorities of rural parents report that their child's afterschool program offers time for their child to build social skills (90 percent) and confidence (81 percent) and learn responsible decision-making (75 percent).
- **Strong support for public funding:** Rural parents' support for public funding for afterschool and summer learning opportunities has held steady and even increased across each edition of America After 3PM. Rural parent support of public funding for afterschool in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth grew from 83 percent in 2009 to 84 percent in 2014, reaching 86 percent in 2020. At the same time, support for summer learning opportunities rose from 83 percent in 2009, to 85 percent in 2014, to 86 percent in 2020.

Rural families prioritize safe spaces and caring adults

- **A safe environment and knowledgeable, caring staff drive afterschool and summer program selection:** A program's safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff are the top two factors rural parents say are extremely important in selecting their child's afterschool program or summer experience, in line with parents living outside of rural areas. Roughly 8 in 10 rural and non-rural parents report that a safe environment is extremely important when deciding on their child's afterschool (79 percent and 80 percent, respectively) or summer program (83 percent and 85 percent, respectively).
- **Priorities for rural families with low incomes and rural families of color:** Across income levels and racial and ethnic groups within rural communities, a safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff are the most important factors in parents' selection of an afterschool or summer program. However, rural parents of color and rural parents with low incomes are more likely to report that academic supports, a program's ability to excite their child about learning, opportunities to build life skills, and healthy snacks or meals are extremely important in selecting an afterschool and summer program than rural parents overall. These preferences are even more pronounced among rural parents in the lowest income bracket.



The afterschool and summer experiences of rural families mirror national findings in some key respects

- **Afterschool program participation decreases, while summer program participation increases:** After a rise in afterschool program participation from 2009 to 2014, rural communities are experiencing a decline in the number of children taking part in afterschool programs. In 2009, 1.17 million rural children (11.2 percent) were enrolled in an afterschool program, growing to 1.19 million (13 percent) in 2014, and slipping back down to 10.8 percent, or 1.15 million children, in 2020. This downward trend between 2014 and 2020 mirrors the overall afterschool participation trend.

However, summer program participation grew significantly during the same timeframe. One in five rural families (20 percent) reported that they had a child who participated in a program during the summer of 2008; this grew to 28 percent during the summer of 2013 and reached 38 percent of rural families during the summer of 2019. Additionally, the most recent America After 3PM study collected data on children participating in summer programs for the first time. It found that 1.8 million rural children (17 percent of all rural children) were in a structured summer experience during the 2019 summer. Nationally, summer program participation also trended upwards, increasing from 25 percent in 2008 to 33 percent in 2013 to 47 percent in 2019.

- **The afterschool experience differs for rural families when it comes to program offerings, time, and cost:** While rural parents are just as likely as parents nationally to report that their child's afterschool program provides social and emotional supports, such as time for young people to interact with their peers and build social skills, there are distinct differences between families living in rural and non-rural communities regarding academic-related program offerings, the amount of time spent in programs, and the cost of afterschool and summer programs.

- **Program offerings:** An overwhelming majority of rural parents report that their child's afterschool program offers academically enriching activities, including homework or academic help (70 percent), STEM learning opportunities (70 percent), and time for reading or writing (66 percent). However, this is lower than parents nationally (73 percent, 73 percent, and 69 percent, respectively), with differences increasing

when compared to non-rural parents, and especially urban parents. Among the largest differences in offerings by afterschool programs reported by rural parents and parents living outside of rural areas are STEM discipline-specific activities. For example, rural parents are 8 percentage points less likely than non-rural parents to report that their child's afterschool program offers computer science activities (35 percent vs. 43 percent).

- **Rural children spend less time in, and parents spend less money on, afterschool programs:** Rural children are spending slightly less time in afterschool programs in 2020 than they did in 2014 (5.3 hours and 3.5 days per week vs. 6.5 hours and 3.5 days per week), which remains below the national average (5.6 hours and 3.7 days per week). Rural children are also more likely than children nationally to attend a program just once a week (9 percent vs. 6 percent) and less likely to attend five days a week (34 percent vs. 40 percent).

Among parents who report paying for programs, the average reported weekly cost for afterschool programs and structured summer experiences in rural areas is much lower than the national average and lower than what is reported by parents living outside of rural communities. The average weekly cost for afterschool programs as reported by rural parents is \$69.30, compared to the national average of \$99.40 and \$106.90 among parents living outside of rural communities. The cost to rural parents for their child's structured summer experiences is also appreciably lower. For example, rural parents who paid for programming report the average cost per week of their child's voluntary summer program was \$120 per week, compared to the national average of \$164.70 and \$174.90 for non-rural parents.

- **Access to STEM learning in afterschool grows:** Although STEM offerings in rural communities continue to trail the national average, the number grew from 2014 to 2020. The percentage of rural parents reporting their child's program offers STEM learning opportunities grew from 2014 (66 percent) to 2020 (70 percent). The percentage of rural parents reporting that their child's afterschool program offers STEM more than once a week saw a 10-percentage-point increase (45 percent vs. 55 percent). This increase is similar to the national average.

Recommendations

- 1 Raise public awareness about afterschool programs in rural communities:** In addition to the tremendous unmet demand for afterschool programs in rural communities, America After 3PM finds that information about afterschool programs is less readily available in rural communities. Although the percentage of rural parents agreeing that information on afterschool programs is readily available in their community grew from 2014 to 2020, rural parents remain much less likely than parents living outside of rural areas to say that this is true. Taken together with America After 3PM findings that children in rural communities are less likely to participate in afterschool programs than children nationally and agreement on the benefits of afterschool programs among rural parents is lower than their non-rural counterparts, the case can be made for efforts to broaden rural parents' awareness about afterschool programs. Strengthening partnerships between schools and afterschool programs will help increase awareness of the availability and offerings of afterschool programs, as will general public awareness campaigns on the supports that afterschool programs provide. Steps such as these will provide parents with the information they need to make the best-informed decision for their child and their family.
- 2 Improve afterschool program accessibility in rural communities:** Accessing afterschool programs is a greater barrier to afterschool program participation for rural families now than it was in 2014, and finding programs remains a greater challenge for rural parents than for parents living outside of rural areas. Increased investment in rural afterschool programs, partnerships that bring potential transportation solutions, transportation grants to rural communities, and engaging local community stakeholders to develop a vision and plan to increase afterschool program accessibility can help expand access to rural families.
- 3 Conduct research to better understand afterschool program concerns among rural families of color:** One finding of concern in America After 3PM is that rural parents of color without a child in an afterschool program are more likely to have negative perceptions of afterschool programs than rural parents overall. As unmet demand for afterschool programs is highest among rural families of color, research exploring the source of the discrepancies between afterschool program perceptions held by rural parents of color with and without a child in a program is important to increasing participation among their children.
- 4 Increase supports for rural afterschool programs:** In a July 2021 survey of program providers, nearly 1 in 3 rural program providers (31 percent) reported that they will most likely have to raise parent fees or find new sources of revenue as the impact of the pandemic continues. More than 3 in 4 (77 percent) said that they were concerned about their program's long-term funding and future. As unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs in rural communities continues to grow, and as the offerings by afterschool program providers serving rural communities is falling behind that of their non-rural counterparts, increased resources—which will take a blend of supports—are critical to help rural afterschool and summer programs meet the needs of children and families in their communities.



I

Rural communities see a sharp rise in unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs

I. Rural communities see a sharp rise in unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs

From 2014 to 2020, communities across the United States experienced a dramatic increase in the number of children who are not in an afterschool program, but would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them. Earlier America After 3PM studies found that rural communities were immune from this trend; however, the 2020 data reveals that is no longer the case. The percentage of children living in rural communities who are not currently in an afterschool program, but would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them, reached 47 percent in 2020, an increase from 39 percent in both 2014 and 2009 (*Figure 1*).

In total, 4.5 million children in rural communities who are not in an afterschool program would be enrolled if a program were available, up from 3.1 million children in 2014, an increase of 43 percent. America After 3PM finds that for every rural child in an afterschool program, four more children are waiting to get in.

Similarly, unmet demand for summer programs rose among rural families. At the household level, more than half of rural families who did not have a child

in a program during the 2019 summer report that they would have liked their child to have been in a summer program (54 percent). That marks a significant growth in unmet demand since the summer of 2008, when 39 percent of rural families reported the same (*Figure 1*). In all, according to the survey, 2.9 million children not in a program during the 2019 summer would have been enrolled if one were available to them. For every rural child in a summer learning program, two more would be enrolled if a program were available.

The surge in unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs in rural communities now puts rural unmet demand nearly on par with the national average. There is now a 3-percentage point difference in unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs between rural families and families nationally, in particular compared to a 17-percentage point difference for summer unmet demand found by the previous edition of America After 3PM.

Figure 1: An increase in likely participants for afterschool and summer learning programs in rural communities

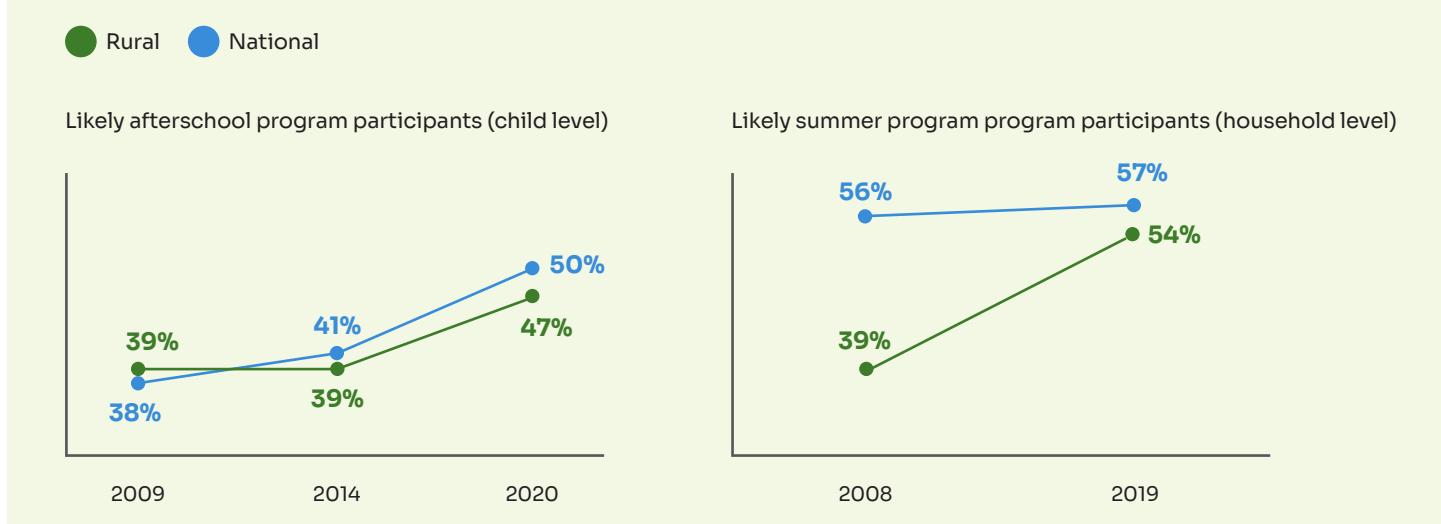




Photo Credit: Allison Shelley/
The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

AFTERSCHOOL IN THE TIME OF COVID-19:

A survey conducted during the pandemic to determine changes in the afterschool and summer landscape finds that unmet demand for afterschool programs remained high in rural communities in the midst of COVID-19. Among rural families who did not have a child in an afterschool program during the fall of 2020, nearly half (49 percent) report that they would have enrolled their child in a program if one were available.

In more recent spring and summer 2021 surveys of program providers, roughly 4 in 10 providers of rural programs that were physically open report having a waitlist (37 percent and 45 percent, respectively), demonstrating a continued demand for afterschool and summer programming.

Communities of color and families with low incomes in rural communities have the highest levels of unmet demand

Compared to rural families overall, unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs is even greater among communities of color and families with low incomes living in rural communities. Majorities of Black (59 percent); Latinx (57 percent); and Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) children (57 percent),[§] as well as children living in families with low incomes (52 percent) who are not enrolled in an afterschool

program would be enrolled in one if a program were available to them, higher than rural children overall (47 percent) (*Figure 2*).^{††} During the 2019 summer, at the household level, while the rural average for unmet demand is at 54 percent, 69 percent of Latino families, 68 percent of Black families, 64 percent of Native American families, 57 percent of AANHPI families, and 59 percent of low-income families would enroll their child in a summer program if one were available (*Figure 2*).

When reporting on the demographic composition among likely rural

afterschool and summer program participants, due to the large percentage of White children and youth who comprise rural America, White children and youth in turn constitute a larger share of likely participants. Among likely afterschool and summer program participants in rural communities, White children comprise at least 70 percent of the whole (*Figure 2*). For instance, among likely afterschool program participants, 70 percent of these children are White, 15 percent are Black, 15 percent are Latinx, 3 percent are Native American, and 2 percent AANHPI children.^{**}

[§] This report will include findings on Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) parents, respondents who selected either "Asian" or "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander" when asked to describe themselves.

^{††} "Black" and "African American" and "Hispanic," "Latino," and "Latinx" are used interchangeably throughout this report. Both "Black" and "White" are capitalized for the purposes of this report as referring to a racial and ethnic group of people.

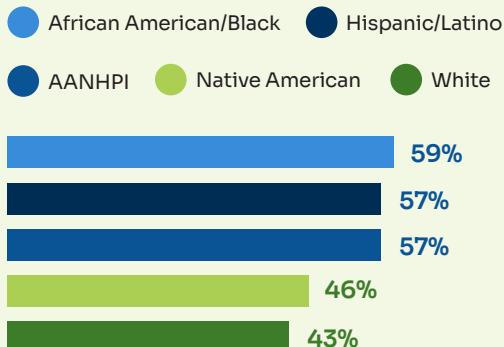
^{**} Totals may not add up to 100 percent as respondents were able to select all race and ethnicity options that apply to them.

Figure 2: Unmet demand for afterschool and summer learning programs in rural communities by select demographics

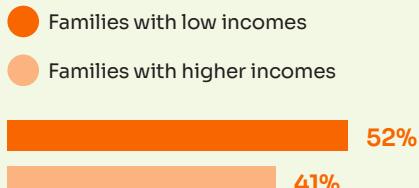
AFTERSCHOOL

Percentage of non-participant children likely to participate in an afterschool program by:

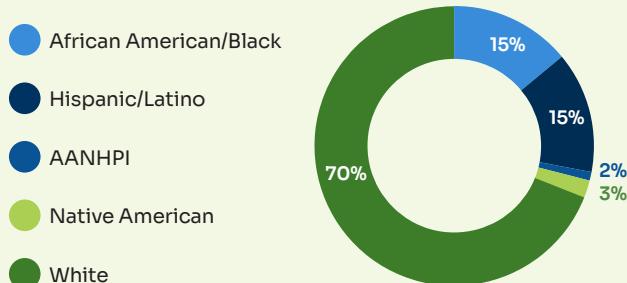
RACE/ETHNICITY



INCOME LEVEL



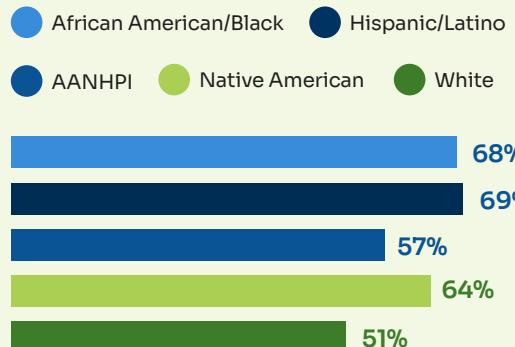
Composition of likely afterschool program participants by race and ethnicity*



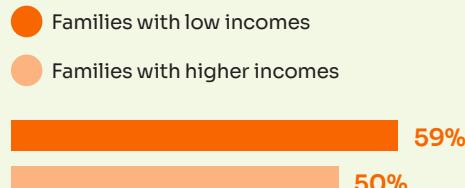
SUMMER

Percentage of households without a child in a summer program who would likely enroll by:

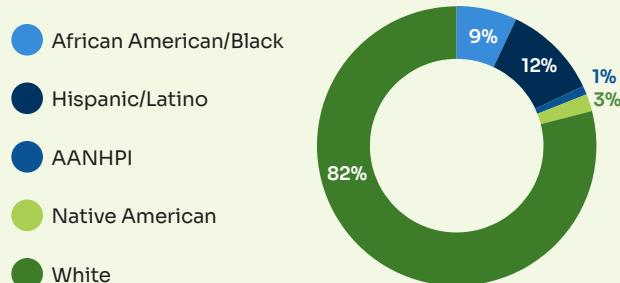
RACE/ETHNICITY



INCOME LEVEL



Composition of likely summer program participants by race and ethnicity (at child level)*



*Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding



Photo Credit: Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

II

Increasing barriers to participation and a growing recognition of the benefits are driving unmet demand in rural communities

II. Increasing barriers to participation and a growing recognition of the benefits are driving unmet demand in rural communities

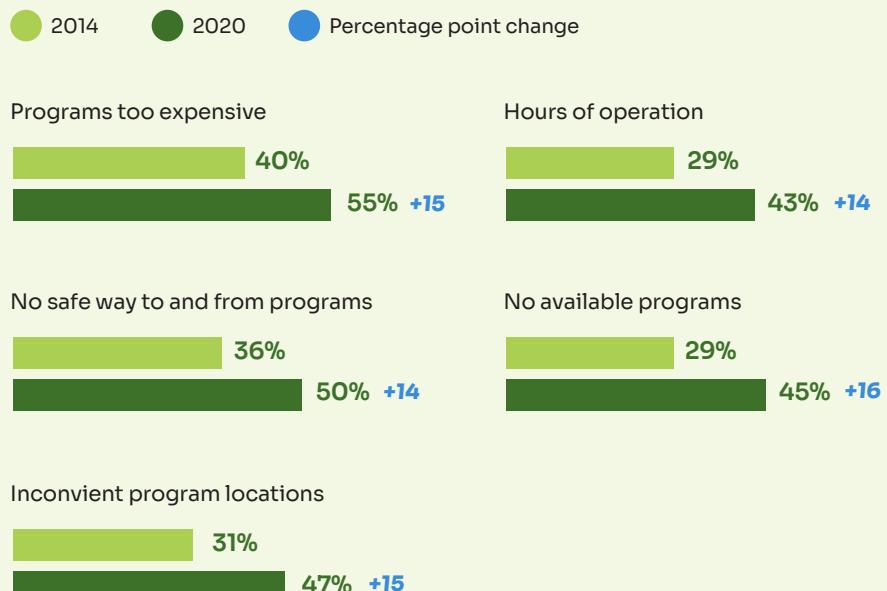
To help inform a conversation about the significant increase in the number of children in rural communities who are not in an afterschool program, but would be enrolled in a program if one were available, this report more closely examines the reasons parents chose not to enroll their child in a program, as well as parental perceptions of the value of afterschool programs. Collectively, these factors can help to piece together a picture of the primary drivers of unmet demand.

Families in rural communities face increasing barriers to afterschool

In 2020, the most common reason families living in rural communities report not enrolling their child in an afterschool program is that they prefer their child remain with them or another adult after school (60 percent). However, the percentage of rural parents who report that cost and access are barriers to participation has increased by double-digit percentage points since 2014 (Figure 3). The percentage of rural parents reporting that cost was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in an afterschool program rose from 40 percent in 2014 to 55 percent in 2020 (15 percentage point difference), children not having a safe way to and from the afterschool program increased from 36 percent to 50 percent (14 percentage point difference), and inconvenient program locations increased from 31 percent to 47 percent in 2020 (15 percentage point difference). A lack of available programs saw the largest increase among barriers reported by rural families, rising from 29 percent in 2014 to 45 percent in 2020. Program unavailability is also

Figure 3: The affordability and availability of afterschool programs increase as barriers for rural parents

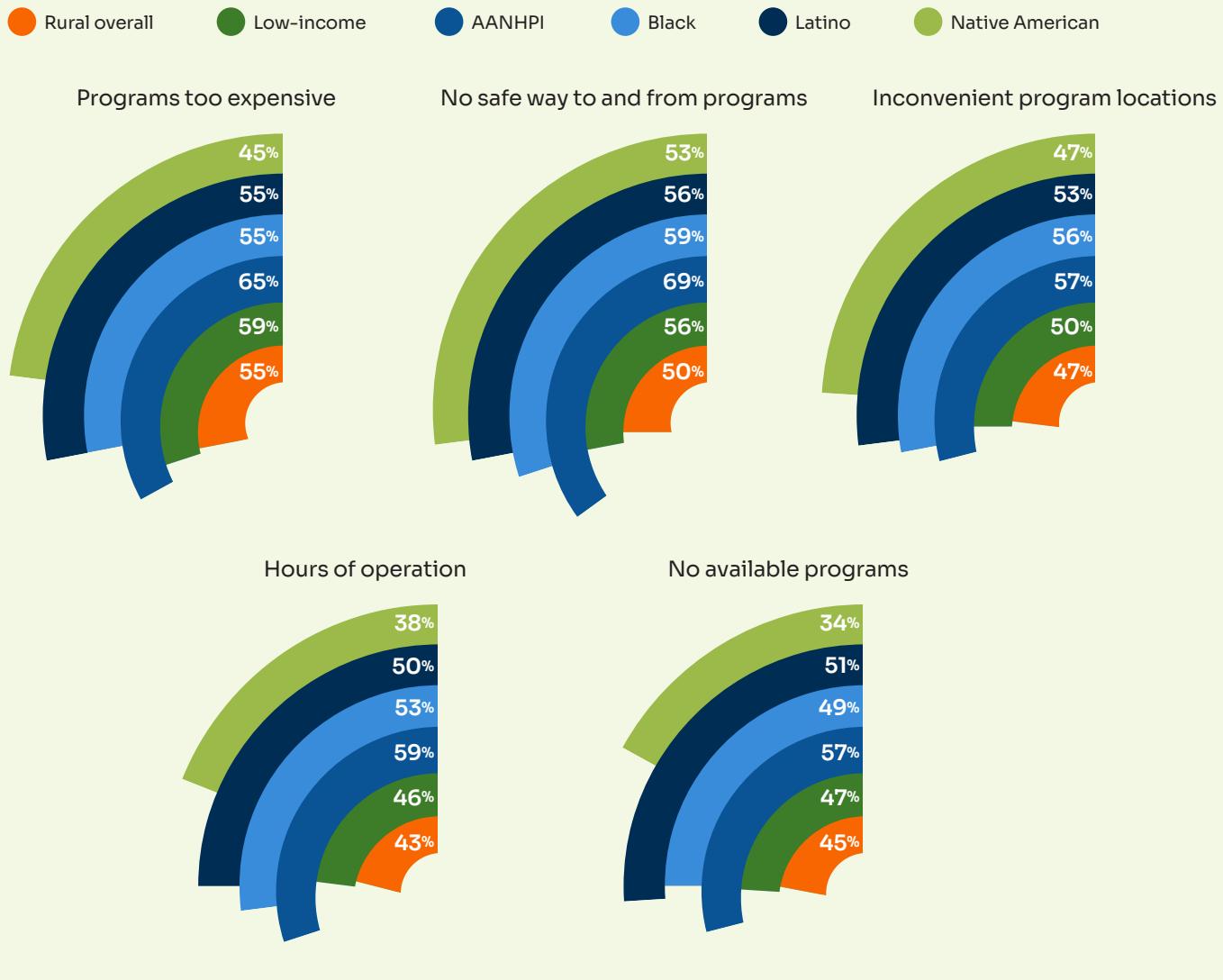
Percentage of rural families reporting the following were an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in an afterschool program



the one barrier that rural families were more likely to report was a challenge than reported by parents nationally (42 percent) and parents living in non-rural areas (40 percent).

Figure 4: Barriers are greater for rural families with low incomes and rural families of color

Percentage of rural parents reporting that the following were important factors in their decision not to enroll their child in an afterschool program



Barriers are greater for rural families with low incomes and rural families of color

Rural families with low incomes and rural families of color are even more likely than rural families overall to report challenges related to the cost and availability of afterschool programs (Figure 4). Examining differences by income level within rural communities, a higher percentage of rural families with low incomes report that afterschool programs are too expensive (59 percent), there is

not a safe way for their child to get to and from programs (56 percent), program locations are inconvenient (50 percent), and there are not programs available to them in their community (47 percent).

There are also differences by race and ethnicity within rural communities. Overall, rural parents of color are much more likely than rural parents on average to report that lack of a safe way to and from afterschool programs, inconvenient program locations, programs' hours of operation, and a lack of programs

available in their community are important factors preventing them from enrolling their child in an afterschool program. For instance, 69 percent of rural AANHPI parents, 59 percent of rural Black parents, and 56 percent of rural Latino parents report that not having a safe way for their child to get to and from afterschool programs is an important reason they did not enroll their child in a program, compared to 50 percent of rural parents overall (Figure 4). This is in line with priorities

for Black and Latino parents with a child in an afterschool program, with most Black and Latino parents with a child in afterschool program reporting that a convenient location was important in their selection of an afterschool program (81 percent and 86 percent, respectively), and majorities reporting that it was extremely important (57 percent and 59 percent, respectively).

For rural Black and Hispanic parents, cost as a barrier to their child's participation in an afterschool program is on par with rural parents overall (55 percent, all), but for AANHPI parents, 65 percent report that cost was an important reason they chose not to enroll their child in an afterschool program.

While fewer Native American parents living in rural communities reported barriers to afterschool program participation than rural parents overall, lack of a safe way to and from programs was an important factor for a majority of Native American parents without a child in an afterschool program. For example, although Native American parents were much less likely than rural parents overall to say that the cost of afterschool programs was an important factor behind their decision not to enroll their child (45 percent vs. 55 percent), Native American parents were more likely than rural parents overall to report that the lack of a safe way to and from programs factored into their decision-making process (53 percent vs. 50 percent).

Barriers to summer program participation

Lack of availability and accessibility of programs remain barriers rural parents face when looking for a structured summer experience for their child. More than 1 in 3 rural parents (35 percent) report that cost was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in a summer program and 1 in 5 rural parents say that summer programs were not available in their community. Although rural parents are less likely than non-rural parents to report that cost was a barrier (35 percent vs. 41 percent), they are twice as likely to say that programs were not available (20 percent vs. 10 percent). Rural parents are also more likely than non-rural parents to report that there were not programs or spaces available in programs relevant to their child's needs (20 percent vs. 16 percent) and that they did not know what programs were available for their child (21 percent vs. 18 percent).

Native American families living in rural communities are even more likely than others to report that summer programs were not available in their community (29 percent). Cost is also a greater barrier for rural Native American families and families with low incomes (40 percent, all) than for rural families overall.



AFTERSCHOOL IN THE TIME OF COVID-19:

Concerns about the coronavirus are the most common reason rural parents report that they did not enroll their child in an afterschool program during the fall of 2020. However, roughly half report that factors such as cost and accessibility were barriers to participation, and 2 in 5 reported issues of availability.

Percentage of rural parents reporting the following were important factors in their decision not to enroll their child in a program during the fall of 2020:

Too expensive	52%
Hours do not meet needs	49%
Locations are not convenient	46%
Programs not available in my community	42%



Perceptions of afterschool programs among rural families of color

While 9 in 10 Black and Latino rural parents are satisfied with their child's afterschool program, on par with rural parents overall (92 percent), and are more likely than rural parents overall to report satisfaction with a number of aspects of their child's afterschool program, rural parents of color without a child in an afterschool program are more likely to hold negative perceptions of afterschool programs when compared to rural parents overall. For instance, approximately 8 in 10 Black and Latino rural parents report that they are satisfied with the opportunities for reading or writing in their child's afterschool program (79 percent, all), compared to 73 percent of rural parents overall. Moreover, overwhelming majorities of Black and Latino rural parents report satisfaction with their child's afterschool program providing supports including a safe environment (87 percent and 90 percent, respectively), knowledgeable and caring staff (94 percent and 91 percent, respectively), and opportunities to build life skills (83 percent and 87 percent, respectively). Rural parents of color are also more likely to agree on the benefits children experience in afterschool programs than rural parents overall. For instance, roughly 7 in 10 rural Black (71 percent), Latino (68 percent), and AANHPI parents (68 percent) agree that afterschool programs

help parents build connections to their child's school day education, compared to 62 percent of rural parents and 59 percent of rural White parents.

However, America After 3PM finds that among families of color without a child in an afterschool program, there are concerns regarding programs' settings. One example is majorities of rural AANHPI (60 percent), Black (59 percent), and Latino parents (58 percent) report concerns that afterschool programs would expose their child to negative influences as an important reason they chose not to enroll their child in a program, at least 10 percentage points higher than rural parents overall (48 percent) and rural White parents (46 percent). Another example is that rural parents of color are more likely to say that an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in a program is that afterschool programs do not address the special needs of their child, with 49 percent of rural Black parents, 44 percent of rural AANHPI parents, and 39 percent of rural Latino parents reporting this as true, compared to 34 percent of rural parents overall and 31 percent of rural White parents.

Rural parents view afterschool programs as a source of support for children and families

The latest America After 3PM study also finds that an overwhelming majority of parents living in rural communities agree that afterschool programs benefit children and families, and that positive attitudes toward afterschool programs have increased over time (*Figure 5*). For example, most rural parents surveyed agree that afterschool programs provide supports ranging from opportunities for children to build life skills (81 percent) to helping them build positive relationships with caring adults and mentors (77 percent), and from providing working parents peace of mind (82 percent) to helping working parents keep their jobs (79 percent).

Moreover, consistent with trends among all parents surveyed, the percentage of rural parents agreeing that afterschool programs benefit children and families grew from 2014 to 2020, with double-digit percentage point increases in agreement that afterschool programs

help children gain interest and skills in STEM (from 62 percent in 2014 to 75 percent in 2020), be physically active (from 73 percent to 85 percent), and become more excited about learning (from 62 percent to 72 percent). A greater percentage of rural parents now also agree that afterschool programs help working parents keep their jobs (from 72 percent to 79 percent) and provide working parents peace of mind knowing that their children are safe and supervised (from 73 percent to 82 percent).

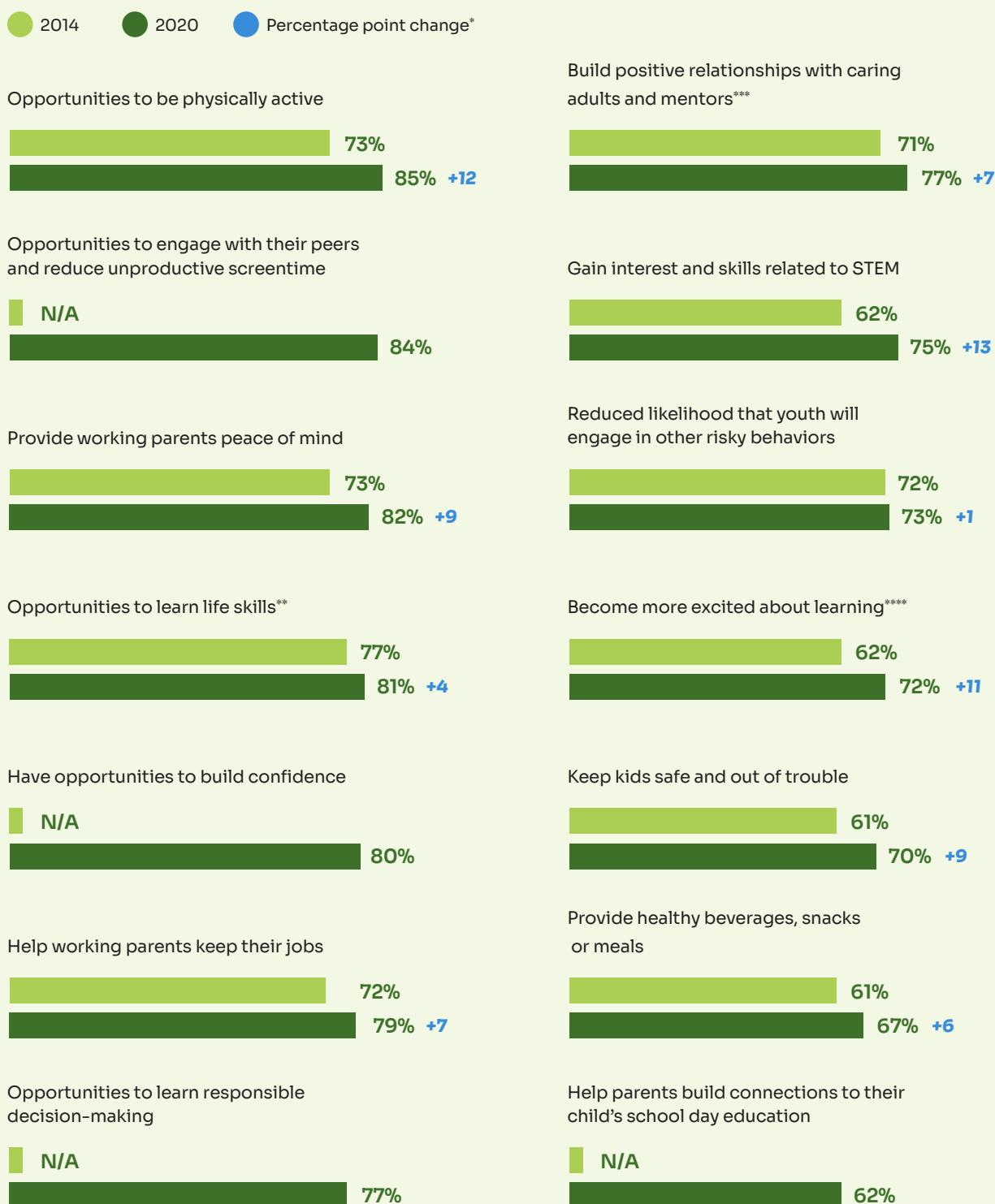
Turning our attention to rural families with a child in an afterschool program, these respondents also agree that programs are helping them to keep their job, build skills, and connect to community resources. Approximately 7 in 10 rural parents report that their child's afterschool program helps them keep their job or work more hours (74 percent) or enables them to build skills through classes or workshops (70 percent). Additionally, more than half agree that the program connects them with community resources (53 percent). On the whole, rural parents of color and rural parents with low

incomes are more likely to agree that their child's afterschool program provides these supports, with the largest difference being the connection to community resources. Roughly 2 in 3 Black parents (67 percent) and parents with low incomes (64 percent), as well as 62 percent of Hispanic parents, report that their child's program connects them with community resources, compared to 53 percent of rural parents with a child in an afterschool program overall (*Figure 6*).

Rural parent satisfaction with afterschool programs serving their children runs very high, with more than 9 in 10 rural parents (92 percent) reporting that they are satisfied with their child's afterschool program. That is very similar to the satisfaction rates for all parents (94 percent). Significantly, rural parents are more likely to report satisfaction in this year's study than they were in 2014 (85 percent), and parents' reporting that they are extremely satisfied increased by 17 percentage points, from 48 percent to 65 percent.

Figure 5: Agreement on the supports and benefits of afterschool programs has increased among rural parents

Percentage of rural parents that agree afterschool programs provide the following supports and benefits to children or their parents



* Percentage point calculations may be different due to rounding.

** The 2014 America After 3PM survey asked about "develop social skills through interaction w/ peers," while the 2020 survey asked about "opportunities to learn life skills."

*** The 2014 America After 3PM survey asked about "access to caring adults and mentors," while the 2020 survey asked about "build[ing] positive relationships with caring adults and mentors."

**** The 2014 America After 3PM survey asked about "excitement about learning," while the 2020 survey asked about becoming "more excited about learning and interested in school, helping [children] improve their attendance in and attitude toward school."

Figure 6: Rural parents of color and rural parents with low incomes are more likely to agree that their child's afterschool program provides them with supports

Percentage of rural parents that agree their child's afterschool program does the following

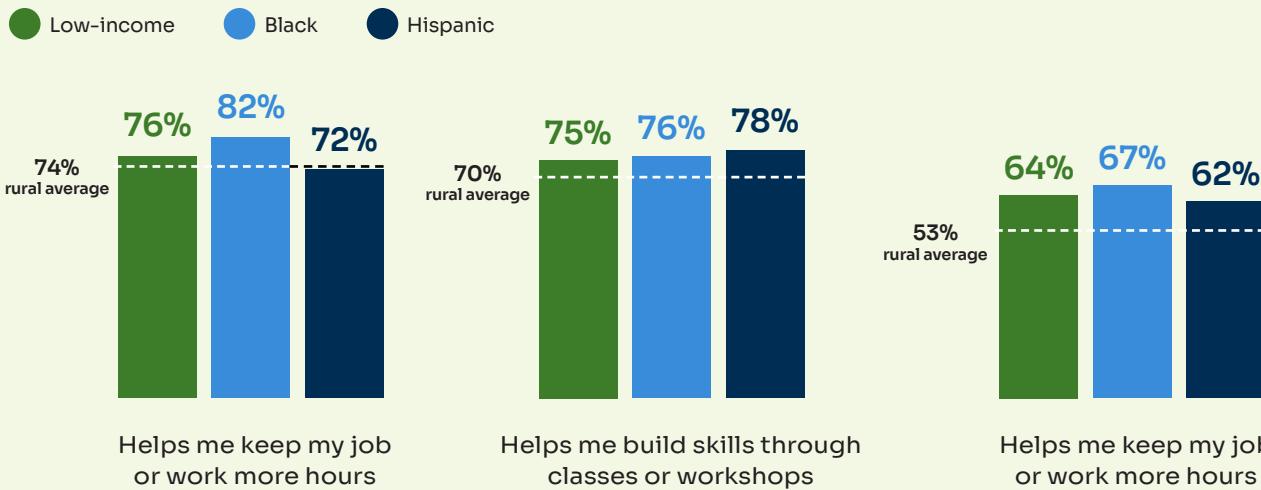


Figure 7: Rural parents largely satisfied with qualities of afterschool programs that are important to them

Percentage of rural parents reporting that a factor is important to them and that they are satisfied

	Important	Satisfied
Knowledgeable and caring staff	92%	90%
Safety of environment	91%	91%
Convenient hours	88%	89%
Opportunities to build life skills	86%	84%
Convenient location	86%	79%
Physical activity opportunities	81%	80%
Homework or academic help	76%	72%
Opportunities for reading or writing	74%	73%
Program costs	71%	78%
Snacks/meals including healthy options	69%	72%
STEM learning opportunities	67%	64%

Nine in 10 rural parents are satisfied with the safety in their child's afterschool program environment (91 percent), and say that the staff in their child's afterschool program are knowledgeable and caring (90 percent), roughly the same as parents nationally (92 percent and 89 percent, respectively). Comparing rural parents' satisfaction with the various offerings of their child's afterschool program in 2020 to their satisfaction in 2014, satisfaction remained high among the activities and supports they report are of most importance to them, including safety of environment (91 percent vs. 89 percent) and knowledgeable and caring staff (90 percent vs. 89 percent) (Figure 7).

Rural parents agree that afterschool programs help their children build social and emotional skills and competencies (Figure 8). Overwhelming majorities of rural parents report that their child's afterschool program offers time for their child to build social skills (90 percent) and confidence (81 percent), as well as learn responsible decision-making (75 percent), rates that are on par

with parents nationally (90 percent, 82 percent, and 73 percent, respectively). Similarly, 2 in 3 rural parents (67 percent) and parents nationally (68 percent) report that their child is building life skills in their afterschool program, and 84 percent of rural parents and parents nationally are satisfied with the opportunities for their child to build life skills in their afterschool program (*Figure 7*).

Lastly, rural parents' support for public funding for afterschool and summer learning opportunities has held steady and even increased across each edition of America After 3PM (*Figure 9*). Rural parent support for public funding for afterschool in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth grew from 83 percent in 2009 to 84 percent in 2014, reaching 86 percent in 2020. At the

same time, support for summer learning opportunities rose from 83 percent in 2009, to 85 percent in 2014, to 86 percent in 2020.

Figure 8: Comparable afterschool program offerings as reported by rural and non-rural parents

Percentage of parents reporting their child has the opportunity for the following in their afterschool program

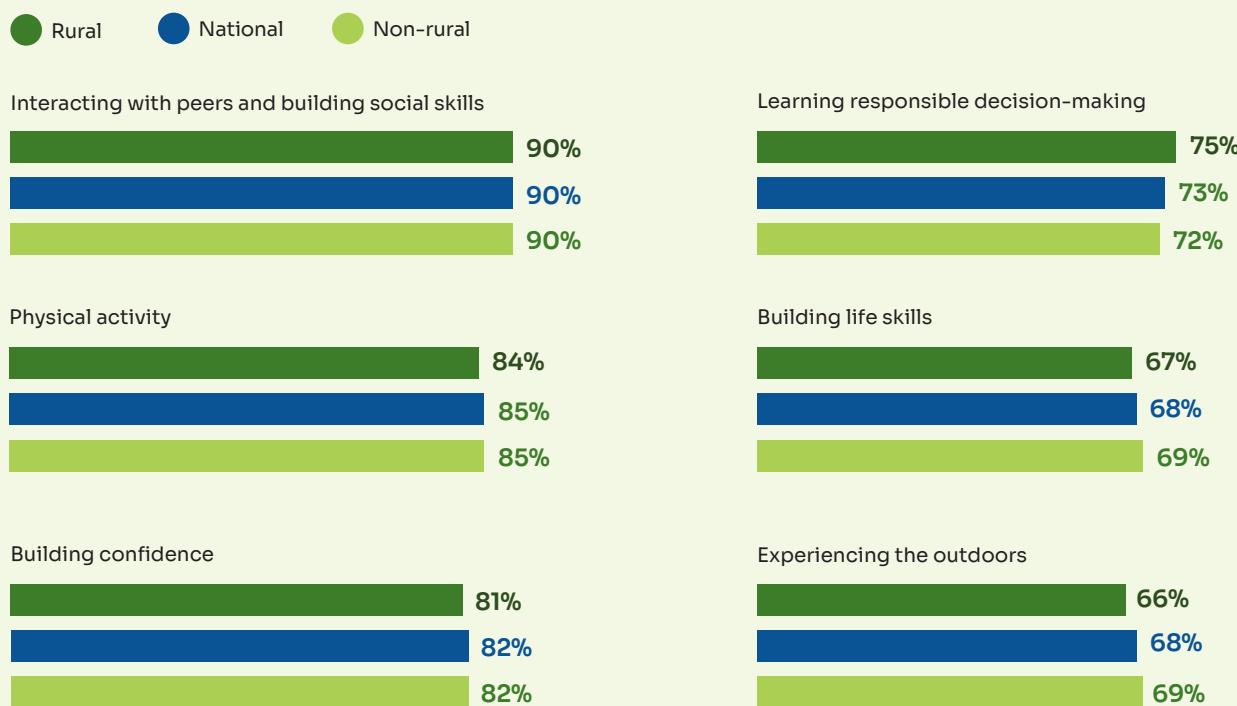
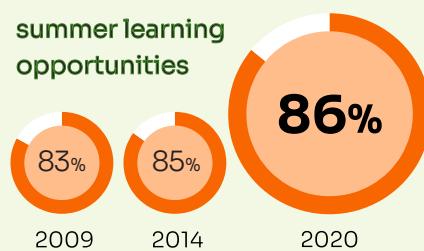
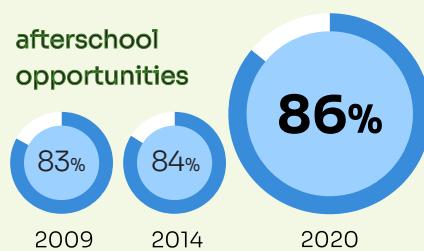
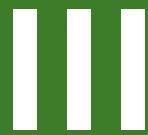


Figure 9: Public funding for afterschool and summer learning opportunities remains strong

Percentage of rural parents in favor of public funding for:





Rural families prioritize safe spaces and caring adults

III. Rural families prioritize safe spaces and caring adults

A safe environment and quality staff are the clear motivating factors for rural parents when deciding which afterschool or summer program their child should attend. More than 9 in 10 rural parents report that a safe environment or knowledgeable and caring staff are at least somewhat important in their choice of their child's primary afterschool program (91 percent and 92 percent, respectively) or summer experience (95 percent and 96 percent, respectively), with roughly 8 in 10 reporting that these factors are extremely important when choosing what their child does afterschool (79 percent and 77 percent, respectively) or during the summer (83 percent and 81 percent, respectively).

Other factors that top the list of priorities for rural parents include program convenience, opportunities to build life skills, exciting their child about learning, homework or academic help, and physical activity, with majorities of rural parents reporting that these aspects of afterschool programs are

extremely important in their decision-making process. Opportunities to build life skills, physical activity, a variety of activities, and opportunities to experience the outdoors rose in importance for rural families when selecting what their child did during the summer (*Figure 10*). For example,

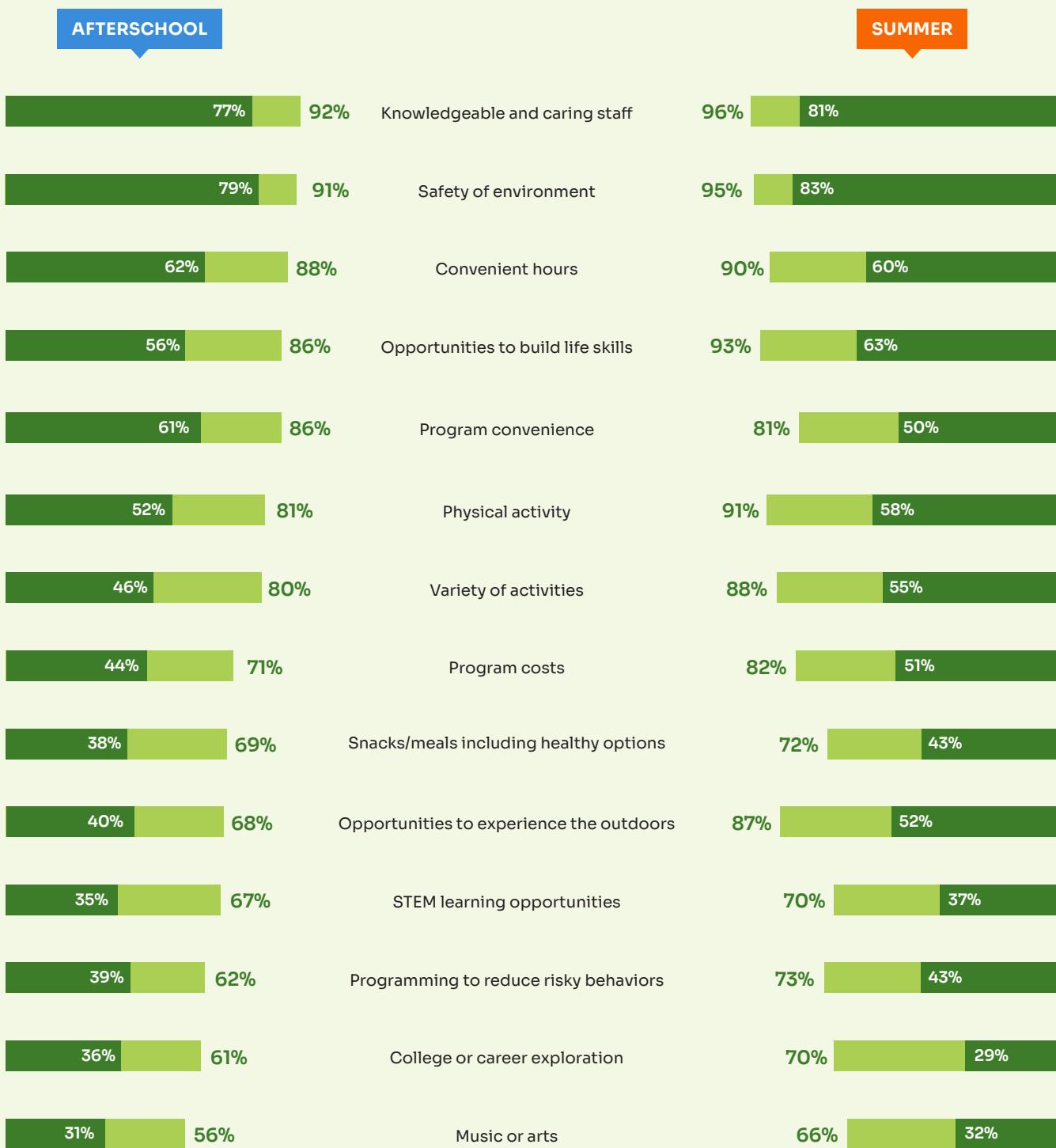
56 percent of rural parents report that opportunities for their child to build life skills was extremely important in their selection of an afterschool program, and 63 percent of parents report the same when asked about choosing their child's summer activities.



Figure 10: Comparing rural parents' priorities for afterschool and summer programs

Percentage of rural parents reporting the following were important in the selection of their child's afterschool and summer program

 Total  Extremely





AFTERSCHOOL IN THE TIME OF COVID-19:

An overwhelming majority of rural parents report that they were concerned about their child staying on track in school and their social and emotional well-being during the pandemic.

Percentage of rural parents reporting concerns about the following for their child:

Social and emotional well-being	85%
Staying on track in school	85%
Having friendships and personal connections	82%
Regular physical activity	79%

However, throughout the pandemic, rural program providers increasingly opened their doors and expanded their services to provide supports to their students and families, ranging from academic help to making sure their students felt safe and supported during the turbulent time of the pandemic.

Percentage of rural program providers physically open in some capacity:



Program providers reporting providing the following services during the spring of 2021:

Homework or academic help	87%
Time to interact with peers	86%
Physical activity opportunities	85%
STEM learning opportunities	81%
Time for reading or writing	79%
Opportunities for students to talk about their feelings and emotions	78%
Serving as a meals site or distributing meals or other resources to families	56%
Connecting families with community resources	51%



(Figure 11). Differences in priorities are even greater between parents living in urban and rural communities, with the largest differences being in STEM learning opportunities (50 percent vs. 35 percent), programming to reduce risky behaviors (52 percent vs. 39 percent), and opportunities for reading or writing (57 percent vs. 46 percent).

For parents living in and outside of rural areas, leading priorities regarding summer experiences are largely comparable. However, as with the above afterschool-related findings, rural parents were less likely than non-rural parents to report that most activities were of extreme importance in selecting their child's summer experience, and much less likely than urban parents, with

the exception of the safety of a program and quality of staff (Figure 12). Urban parents were more likely to say that all aspects asked about were extremely important compared to rural parents. For instance, 37 percent of rural parents report opportunities for STEM learning was extremely important when selecting what their child did over the summer. That figure increases to 43 percent among parents living outside of rural areas and jumps to more than half of parents living in urban communities (54 percent). College or career exploration is another area where significant differences between parents emerge, with 29 percent of rural, 42 percent of non-rural, and 51 percent of urban parents reporting the offerings to be extremely important.

Regarding accessibility, although a majority of rural parents report that a convenient program location (61 percent) is extremely important when selecting their child's afterschool program, they are less likely than parents living outside of a rural area (67 percent) or parents living in urban communities (69 percent) to report this as a priority (Figure 11). Similarly, when asked about the summer, half of rural parents (50 percent) report that program convenience was extremely important, compared to 54 percent of non-rural parents. Urban parents were even more likely to report that program convenience was of importance (62 percent) (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Percentage of parents reporting the following were extremely important in selecting their child's afterschool program

Rural Non-rural Urban

Safety of environment



Physical activity opportunities



Knowledgeable and caring staff



Variety of activities



Convenient hours



Opportunities for reading or writing



Convenient location



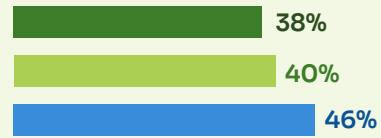
Programming to reduce risky behaviors



Opportunities to build life skills



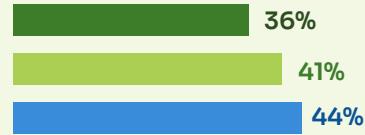
Snacks/meals including healthy options



Exciting my child about learning



College or career exploration



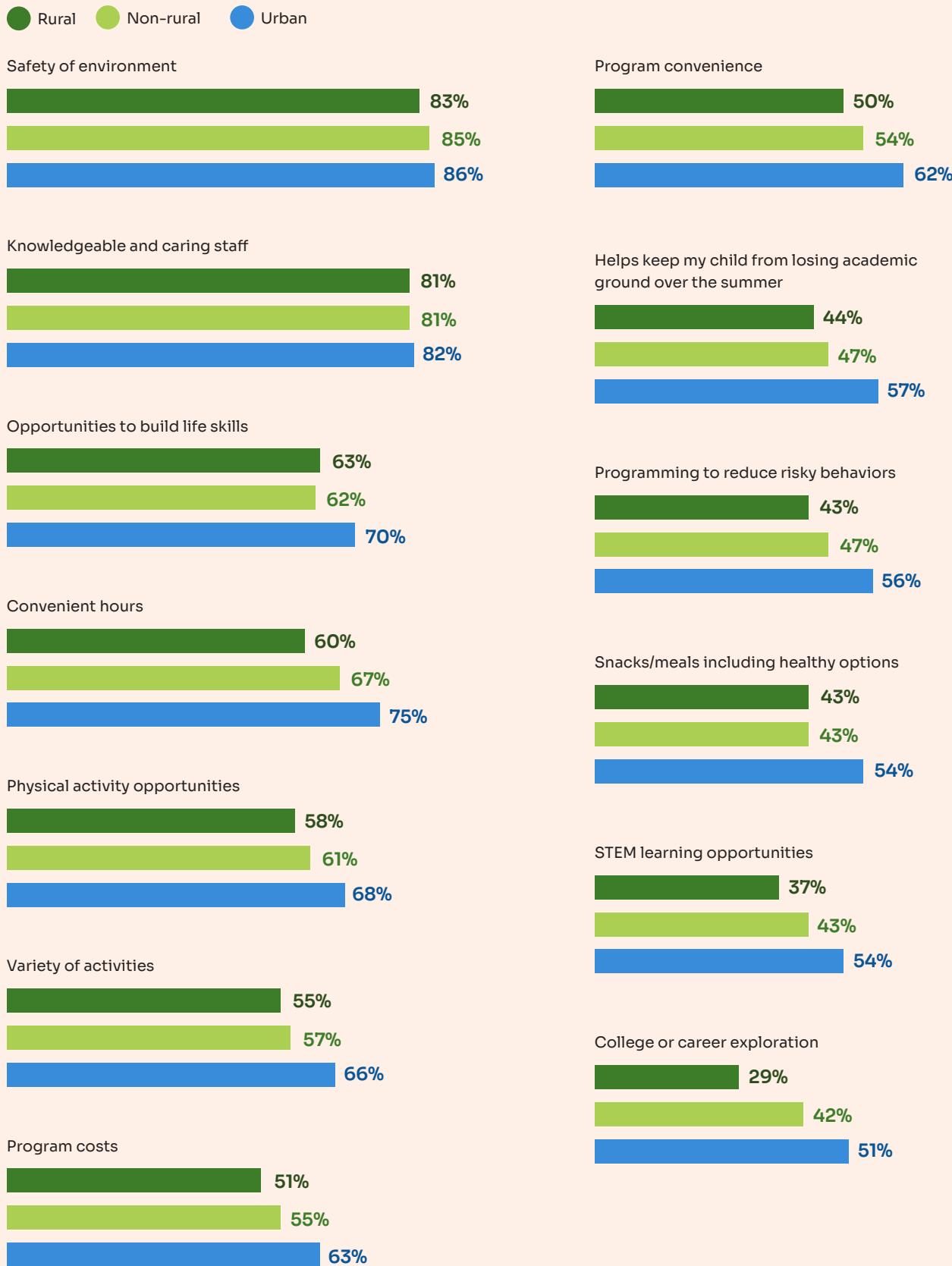
Homework or academic help



STEM learning opportunities



Figure 12: Percent of parents reporting the following were extremely important in selecting their child's summer experience



Priorities for rural families with low incomes and rural families of color

Across income levels and racial and ethnic groups within rural communities, a safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff drive parents' selection of an afterschool or summer program. However, rural parents of color and rural parents with low incomes are more likely to report that academic supports, a program's ability to excite their child about learning, opportunities to build life skills, and healthy snacks or meals are extremely important in selecting an afterschool and summer program compared to rural parents overall. These preferences are even more pronounced among rural parents in the lowest income bracket.[#]

For example, while a majority of rural parents report that homework or academic help (53 percent), a program that excites their child about learning (56 percent), and opportunities to build life skills (56 percent) are extremely important in selecting an afterschool program, those numbers increase to more than 6 in 10 Black parents (66

percent, 64 percent, and 64 percent, respectively) and Hispanic parents (65 percent, 63 percent, and 61 percent) (*Figure 13*). Roughly 6 in 10 rural parents with low incomes report the above are of extreme importance (59 percent, 61 percent, and 59 percent, respectively), with rural parents in the lowest income bracket even more likely to say that homework help, exciting their child about learning, and building life skills are extremely important (60 percent, 67 percent, and 64 percent, respectively).

When asked which factors were extremely important in selecting what their child did during the summer, once again rural Black and Hispanic parents, and rural parents with low incomes reported that academic-related programming is of greater importance. Differences reach as high as 21 percentage points when comparing responses related to preventing their child from losing academic ground over the summer and STEM learning opportunities (*Figure 14*). Compared to rural parents overall, programs offering snacks and/or meals and opportunities to build life skills are extremely important to a greater

percentage of rural Black parents and rural parents with low incomes, while a variety of activities and programming to reduce risky behaviors were much more important to Hispanic parents and parents with low incomes.

Of particular note is that access to healthy snacks or meals rises in importance during the summer months for rural Black families and those with the lowest incomes. Fifty-one percent of rural families in the lowest income bracket and 46 percent of Black parents say that snacks or meals are extremely important in their selection of their child's afterschool program, 13 and 8 percentage points higher than rural families overall. When asked what was extremely important to them in selecting a summer program, 65 percent of Black parents identified snacks and meals as extremely important, while 67 percent of families in the lowest income bracket reported the same, reflecting 22 and 25 percentage point differences, respectively, by comparison to the rural average.

[#] For the purposes of America After 3PM, households in the lowest income bracket are those in the 20th percentile, respondents reporting an annual household income under \$25,000.



Figure 13: Percentage of parents reporting factors were extremely important in the selection of their child's afterschool program, by income level and race and ethnicity

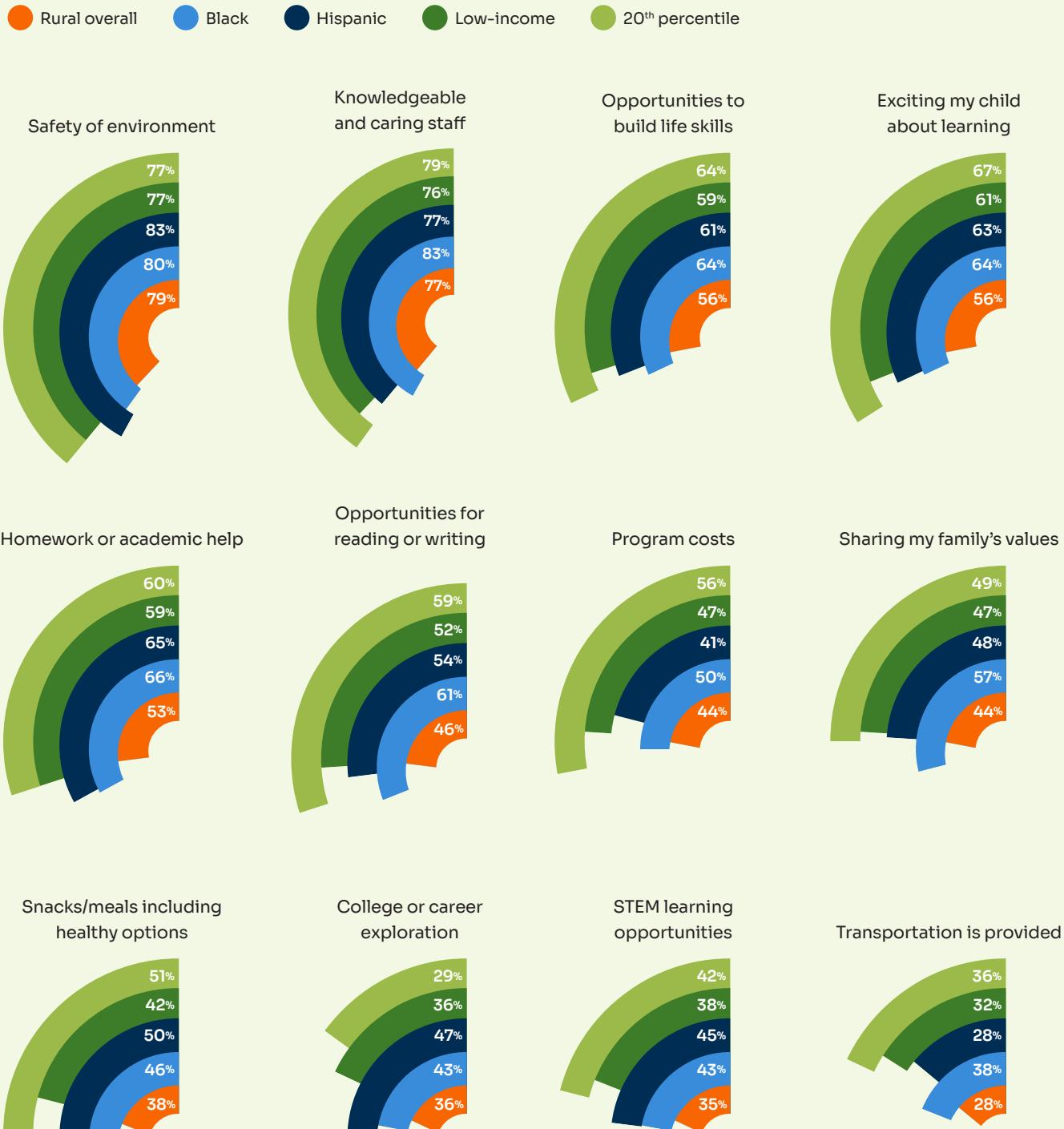
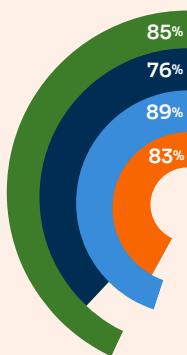


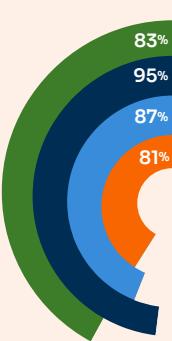
Figure 14: Percentage of parents reporting factors were extremely important in the selection of their child's summer program, by income level and race and ethnicity

Rural Black Hispanic Low-income

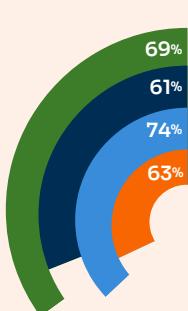
Safety of environment



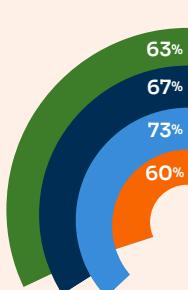
Knowledgeable and caring staff



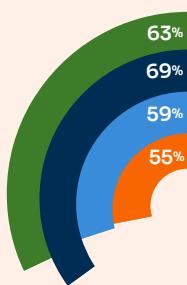
Opportunities to build life skills



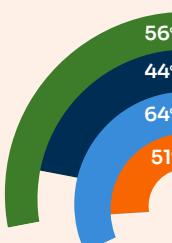
Convenient hours



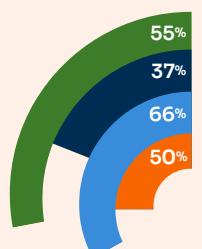
Variety of activities



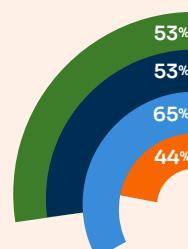
Program costs



Program convenience



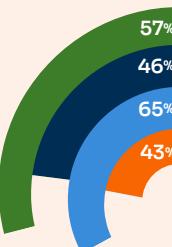
Helps keep my child from losing academic ground over the summer



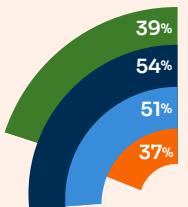
Programming to reduce risky behaviors



Snacks/meals including healthy options



STEM learning opportunities



College or career exploration





IV

The afterschool and summer experiences of rural families mirror national findings in some key respects

IV. The afterschool and summer experiences of rural families mirror national findings in some key respects

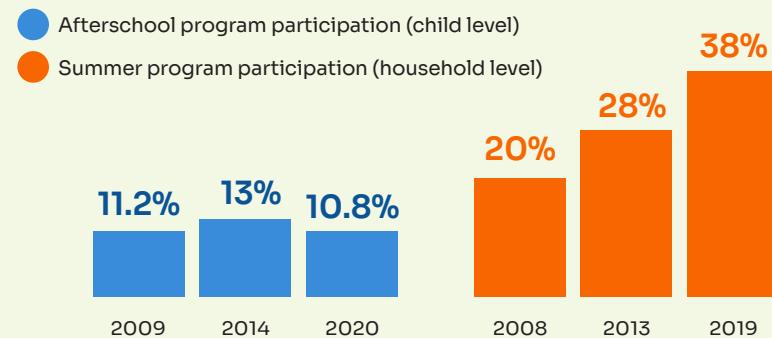
Even as a growing number of rural families express appreciation for the valuable opportunities afterschool programs afford and even as parents' satisfaction with their child's afterschool program reaches a high among rural parents, the number of children in rural communities in programs has dropped. Moreover, while summer program participation in rural communities has increased since 2014, rural participation in both summer and afterschool programs remains lower than the national average. While the benefits to children in rural communities who participate in programs are evident from parents' responses, key differences between the rural afterschool experience and that of the rest of the nation persist.

Afterschool program participation decreases, while summer program participation increases

After a rise in afterschool program participation from 2009 to 2014, rural communities are following the national trend, with a decrease in the number of children taking part in afterschool programs in 2020, dropping back down to 2009 levels (*Figure 15*). In 2009, 1.17 million rural children (11.2 percent) were enrolled in an afterschool program, growing to 1.19 million (13 percent) children in 2014. In 2020, the percentage of children in rural communities slipped back down to 10.8 percent, or 1.15 million children.

However, summer program participation grew significantly during the same timeframe (*Figure 15*). One in five rural families (20 percent) reported that they had a child who participated in a program during the summer of 2008; 28 percent said the same about the summer of 2013, and 38 percent

Figure 15: Participation in afterschool program decreases; summer program participation increases



of rural families said they had a child participating in a program during the summer of 2019. The percentage of participating rural families demonstrates a nearly doubling of summer participation in the span of just over a decade. But even with that significant growth, summer participation among rural families remains lower than the national average (47 percent), and even lower among non-rural families (51 percent). It is lower still than the percentage of urban families reporting

that they had a child participating in a program during the 2019 summer (58 percent).

Additionally, in the most recent America After 3PM study, researchers collected data allowing for projections of the number of children participating in summer programs—as opposed to simply the number of households with at least one participating child—for the first time.^{§§} The survey found that 1.8 million rural children (17 percent of all

^{§§} The 2009, 2014, and 2020 America After 3PM surveys asked respondents a single-select question about whether they had a child who participated in a summer program. From this, the percentage of households with a child in a summer program is determined. In addition to asking this question, the 2020 American After 3PM survey includes a follow-up question, asking respondents to report on the types of care each one of their children were in during the 2019 summer daytime hours, approximately 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. This produces the America After 3PM 2020 child-level estimate for summer preparticipation.



AFTERSCHOOL IN THE TIME OF COVID-19:

During the fall of 2020, 2 in 5 rural parents with a child in an afterschool program (42 percent) reported that their child attended their program in person, while 1 in 3 reported that their child attended both in person and virtually. Rural parents were much less likely than non-rural parents to report that their child attended their afterschool program virtually (21 percent vs. 34 percent).

rural children) were in a structured summer experience during the 2019 summer. Here, too, the figure lags behind the national average (22 percent), and it also trails comparable figures for children living outside of rural areas (24 percent), and children living in urban communities (22 percent). Rural children were also less likely than children nationally, as well as their non-rural and urban peers, to take part in a voluntary summer program, specialty camp or program, or STEM camp, while they were more likely to be in the care of a parent or guardian (*Figure 16*).

The afterschool experience differs for rural families when it comes to program offerings, time, and cost

While rural parents are just as likely as parents nationally to report that their child's afterschool program provides social and emotional supports, such as time for young people to interact with their peers and build social skills, distinct differences arise between families living in rural and non-rural communities when looking at academic-related program offerings, the amount of time spent in programs, and the cost of afterschool and summer programs.

Program offerings

Most rural parents report that their child's afterschool program offers academically enriching activities, including homework or academic help (70 percent), STEM learning opportunities (70 percent), and time for reading or writing (66 percent). Strong as

Figure 16: The percentage of children in various types of care during the 2019 summer, by community type

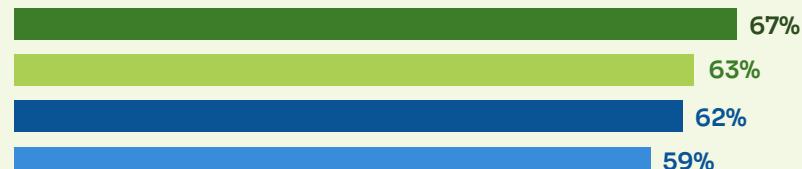
Rural

National

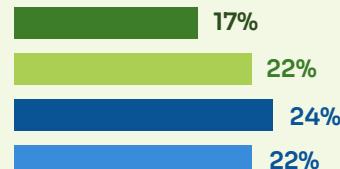
Non-rural

Urban

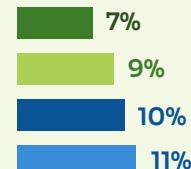
Care of a parent or guardian



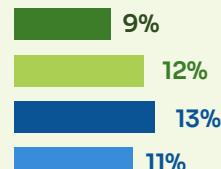
Structured summer experience



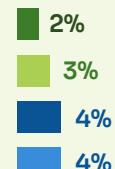
Voluntary summer program



Specialty camp or program



STEM camp



they are, these numbers are lower than for parents nationally (73 percent, 73 percent, and 69 percent, respectively), with differences growing larger when compared to non-rural parents, and especially urban parents (*Figure 17*).

Among the largest differences in offerings are STEM discipline-specific activities. Rural parents are less likely than non-rural parents to report that their child's afterschool program offers math activities (57 percent vs. 63 percent), science learning opportunities (44 percent vs. 50 percent), computer science activities (35 percent vs. 43 percent), and technology and engineering activities (34 percent vs. 41 percent). Differences grow to the double digits when comparing the availability of STEM discipline-specific offerings reported by rural and urban parents. While most rural parents say that their child's afterschool program offers STEM more than once a week (55 percent), this is lower than parents living in non-rural (61 percent) and urban communities (65 percent).

Program dosage

Rural children are spending slightly less time in afterschool programs in 2020 than they did in 2014, which also continues to be slightly lower than the national average and the average for children living outside of rural areas. In both 2014 and 2020, rural children spent an average of 3.5 days per week in an afterschool program, however, the average hours per week in a program decreased from 6.5 to 5.3 hours per week, lower than the reported figures for time children nationally are reported to spend in afterschool programs (5.6 hours, 3.7 days per week) and the time that non-rural children spend in programs (5.7 hours, 3.8 days). Rural children are more likely than children nationally and children living outside of rural areas to attend a program once a week and less likely to attend programs five days a week. Close to 1 in 10 rural children attend an afterschool program once a week (9 percent), compared to 6 percent of

AFTERSCHOOL IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Parents reporting satisfaction **92%**

Top 3 providers

Public schools	51%
City or towns, including Parks and Recreation Departments	12%
Boys & Girls Clubs	12%

Average time in afterschool

5.3 hours per week

3.5 days per week

Average weekly cost

\$69.30*

*Among parents who report paying a fee

SUMMER IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Parents reporting satisfaction **96%**

Voluntary summer programs

4.3 weeks **5.3** hours/day **\$120**/week*

Specialty camps

3.6 weeks **5.7** hours/day **\$62.60***

STEM camps

1.8 weeks **5.1** hours/day **\$162.40***

Mandatory summer school

2.9 weeks **4.5** hours/day

Optional summer school

3.5 weeks **3.9** hours/day **\$162.40***

*Among parents who report paying a fee

Figure 17: Percentage of parents reporting their child has the opportunity for the following in their afterschool program

Rural National Non-rural Urban

STEM learning opportunities



Science learning opportunities



Homework or academic help



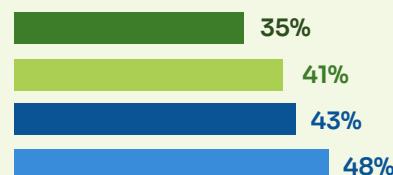
College or career exploration



Reading or writing time



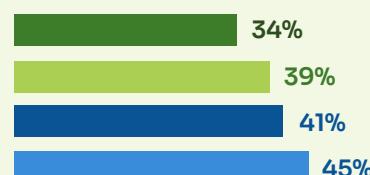
Computer science activities



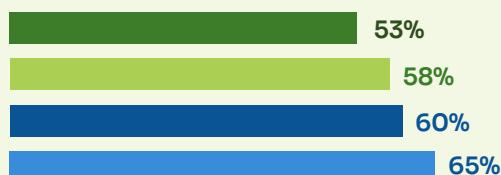
Math activities



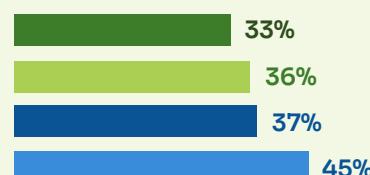
Technology and engineering activities



Music or arts



Service learning or community service



Access to STEM learning in afterschool grows

In the 2014 America After 3PM study, the availability of STEM learning opportunities was noted as an area for improvement for rural afterschool programs, with rural parents less likely than non-rural and urban parents to report that their child's afterschool program offered STEM, as well as reporting lower frequency of offerings. The 2020 edition of America After 3PM finds that parents living in rural communities reported decreases in nearly all afterschool program offerings from 2014 to 2020, however, STEM learning was an area where gains were made. Still, STEM offerings in rural communities continue to trail the national average.

In 2020, the percentage of rural parents reporting that their child's afterschool program offers STEM learning opportunities increased to 70 percent, from 66 percent in 2014; the percentage of rural parents reporting that their child's afterschool program offers STEM more than once a week saw a 10-percentage-point increase (45 percent vs. 55 percent). Within the specific STEM disciplines, rural parents reporting that their child's afterschool program offers technology and engineering saw the largest increase, growing from 21 percent in 2014 to 34 percent in 2020. Parents living in rural communities reporting that their child's afterschool program offers math activities also increased from 55 percent to 57 percent. Opportunities for science learning decreased, with 44 percent of rural parents reporting that their child's afterschool program offers it in 2020, compared to 49 percent in 2014. In a new question on computer science activities, more than 1 in 3 rural parents (35 percent) report that their child's afterschool program offers it.

Percentage of parents reporting that their child's afterschool program offers STEM learning opportunities

	2014	2020
Rural	66%	70%
National	69%	73%
Suburban	63%	72%
Urban	77%	79%

children nationally and 5 percent of non-rural children, and 34 percent of rural children attend programs five days a week compared to 40 percent of children nationally and 42 percent of children living outside of rural areas.

Program cost

The cost of afterschool and structured summer activities is another area where the experience of parents living in and outside of rural communities diverges. Over the 11-year course of our America After 3PM research examining rural communities, the average weekly cost for afterschool programs reported by rural parents has fluctuated, nearly doubling from \$51.86 in 2009 to \$95.80 in 2014 and dropping back down to \$69.30 in 2020. However, what remains constant is that rural parents' reported costs continue to be below that of families living in non-rural communities. Among parents who report paying for programs, the average reported weekly cost for afterschool programs and structured summer experiences in rural areas is much lower than the national average and what is reported by parents living outside of rural areas.

The average weekly cost for afterschool programs as reported by rural parents is \$69.30, compared to the national average of \$99.40 and \$106.90 among parents living outside of rural communities. Rural parents are also slightly more likely than parents nationally to report that they receive government assistance with the cost of their child's afterschool programs (17 percent vs. 15 percent), receiving an average of \$93.30 per week, compared to \$97.40 nationally.

The cost to rural parents for their child's structured summer experiences follows the pattern of afterschool program costs. Rural parents report an average weekly cost that is lower than parents nationally and much lower than parents living in non-rural communities. For example, rural parents who paid for programming report the average cost per week of their child's voluntary summer program was \$120 per week, compared to the national average of \$164.70 and \$174.90 for non-rural parents.

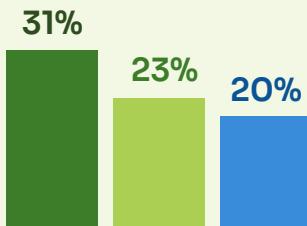
Rural parents are also more likely than their non-rural counterparts to report that their child's afterschool program or summer experience was free or at no cost to them (*Figure 18*). Nearly one-third of rural parents with a child in an afterschool program (31 percent) report that their child's afterschool program was free or at no cost to them, significantly higher than parents nationally (23 percent) and parents living outside of rural communities (20 percent). This is an 8-percentage-point increase*** for rural families from 2014 (31 percent vs. 24 percent), while there was very little change for parents nationally (23 percent vs. 24 percent). When asked about summer program expenses, rural parents with a child in a voluntary summer program were more likely to report that the program was free or at no cost to them than parents nationally (28 percent vs. 16 percent) and more than twice as likely than parents living outside of rural areas (12 percent) to report that there was not a cost associated for the program.

*** Amounts may not add up due to rounding.

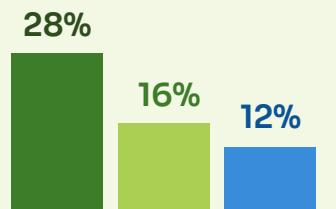
Figure 18: Rural parents most likely to report no cost associated with afterschool or summer programs

Percentage of parents reporting that the following was free or of no cost to them, by community type

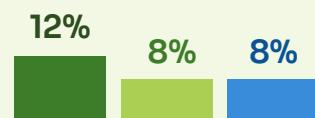
Rural National Non-rural



Afterschool program



Voluntary summer program



Specialty camp or program

Who is offering afterschool and summer programming in rural communities?

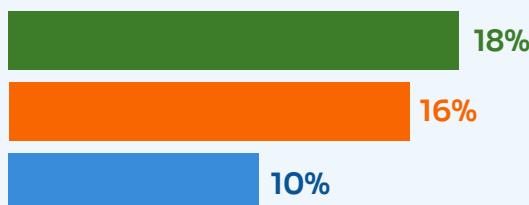
Overall, afterschool program providers and the location of summer activities are largely similar in rural and non-rural communities. For example, roughly 3 in 4 parents living in rural communities (78 percent), nationally (76 percent), and living outside of rural areas (75 percent) report that their child's afterschool program is physically located in a public school, and regardless of community type—rural, suburban, or urban—public schools are by far the most commonly reported afterschool program provider (51 percent, 52 percent, and 46 percent, respectively). During the summer, although differing in order, the top three most common locations for voluntary summer programs or camps for parents living in rural, suburban, and rural areas were schools, community-based organizations, and city or town facilities.

However, rural parents are more likely than parents in suburban and urban areas to report that their child is in a voluntary summer program or camp run by a provider that was not listed in the options provided, and twice as likely to say that their child's afterschool program provider was not listed. Rural parents are also much less likely than parents in suburban and urban areas to report that their child's summer program or camp took place at a museum or science center (4 percent vs. 8 percent and 13 percent, respectively), and less likely to report that their child attends an afterschool program run by a private school (9 percent vs. 15 percent and 16 percent, respectively).

Percentage of parents reporting that their child is in the following:

Rural Suburban Urban

Voluntary summer program or camp run
by a provider not listed



Afterschool program provider not listed

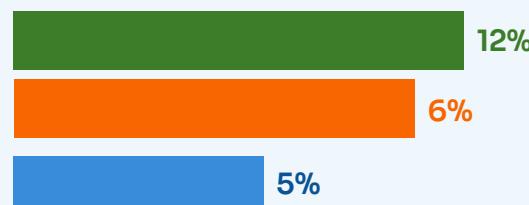




Photo Credit: Alison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

IV

Recommendations

Recommendations

The afterschool program landscape in rural communities is one in which children who are able to participate in programs see positive benefits, including gaining self-confidence, building such life skills as communication and collaboration, and taking part in academically enriching activities. At the same time, America After 3PM reveals aspects of afterschool in rural America where gaps persist between rural communities and the nation as a whole, from afterschool program availability to types of programming offered. Below are four strategies to address challenges rural communities face, with the goal of improving the availability and quality of afterschool in rural America.

Raise public awareness about afterschool programs in rural communities

In addition to the tremendous unmet demand for afterschool programs in rural communities, America After 3PM finds that there is a need for greater information about afterschool programs in rural communities. Although the percentage of rural parents agreeing that information on afterschool programs is readily available grew from 2014 to 2020 (47 percent vs. 52 percent), rural parents remain much less likely than parents living outside of rural areas to say that this is true. Nearly two-thirds of non-rural parents (64 percent) agree that information on afterschool programs is readily available, 12 percentage points higher than rural parents. Conversely, a higher percentage of rural parents disagree that information on afterschool programs is readily available, with more than 1 in 5 rural parents disagreeing with the statement compared to 14 percent of non-rural parents.

Taken together with the America After 3PM finding that children in rural communities are less likely to participate in afterschool programs than children nationally and rural parents' agreement on the benefits of afterschool programs running slightly lower than their non-rural counterparts, it is clear that there is a need to increase awareness of afterschool programs in rural communities. Such outreach could include information about available afterschool program providers in the area; the variety of activities available through programs; or the academic, social, and emotional benefits of afterschool programs.

Such outreach would be particularly important given that America After 3PM finds that in rural communities, parents with a child already in an afterschool program are most familiar with the benefits of programs. Although parents living outside of rural areas are more likely than rural parents to report positive views of afterschool programs, these differences largely disappear when comparing the responses of parents with a child in an afterschool program, regardless of where they live. For example, rural parents overall are 6 percentage points less likely than urban parents to agree that children in afterschool programs have opportunities to learn responsible decision-making (77 percent vs. 83 percent). However, among parents with a child in an afterschool program, in addition to the difference between rural and urban parents decreasing to 1 percentage point, the percentage of parents in agreement grows to 9 in 10 parents (90 percent and 91 percent, respectively). Efforts to broaden rural parents' awareness about afterschool programs, ranging from strengthening partnerships between schools and afterschool programs to increase awareness of the availability and offerings of programs to general public awareness campaigns on the supports that afterschool programs provide, can help equip parents with the information necessary to make the best-informed decision for their child and their family.



Photo Credit: Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages



Improve afterschool program accessibility in rural communities

America After 3PM finds that access to afterschool programs is a greater barrier to program participation for rural families now than it was in 2014, and the availability of programs remains a greater challenge for rural parents than for parents living outside of rural areas. Moreover, among rural parents who would have enrolled their child in an afterschool program if one were available, 6 in 10 report the lack of a safe way for their child to get to and from a program (64 percent), inconvenient program locations (61 percent), and no available programs in the area (60 percent) were important factors in their decision not to enroll their child in a program. For rural parents with a child in an afterschool program, a convenient location was also extremely important when selecting an afterschool program, occupying the fourth spot in the list of criteria parents want in a program, falling just below convenient program hours (61 percent vs. 62 percent). Although rural families' reported challenges with accessibility were in many instances below that of families living outside of rural areas, access to afterschool programs is a significant issue for many rural parents.

Increased investment in rural afterschool programs; partnerships that bring potential transportation solutions, such as shared vehicles or space in schools to remove additional transportation requirements; putting in place policies that would provide transportation grants to rural communities; and engaging local community stakeholders to develop a vision and plan to increase afterschool program accessibility are a few examples of ways to help expand access to rural families.

Conduct research to better understand afterschool program concerns among rural families of color

One finding of concern in America After 3PM is that rural parents of color without a child in an afterschool program are more likely to have negative perceptions of afterschool programs compared to rural parents overall. At the same time, rural parents of color are more likely to agree on the benefits children experience in afterschool programs than rural parents overall. Research exploring the discrepancies between afterschool program perceptions held by rural parents of color with and without a child in a program can help determine if there are issues of program quality rural parents of color are facing, if there is a lack of information on afterschool programs in rural communities of color, or if there are other challenges rural parents of color experience when looking for an afterschool program. As unmet demand for afterschool programs is highest among rural families of color, deciphering the source of why rural parents without a child in an afterschool program are also most likely to hold these negative perceptions of programs is important to increasing participation among all children and families living in rural communities.



Increase supports for rural afterschool programs

In a July 2021 survey of program providers, nearly 1 in 3 rural program providers (31 percent) reported that they will most likely have to raise parent fees or find new sources of revenue as the impact of the pandemic continues and more than 3 in 4 (77 percent) said that they were concerned about the long-term funding and future of their program. As unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs in rural communities continues to grow, and the offerings by afterschool program providers serving rural communities falls behind that of their non-rural counterparts, increased resources are critical to help rural afterschool and summer programs meet the needs of children and families in their communities.

For instance, while majorities of rural parents report that their child's afterschool program provides a range of activities and supports—from academic enrichment to keeping kids active—in many areas, rural parents are less likely to report that their child's afterschool program offers activities compared to what was reported in 2014. For example, 66 percent of rural parents report that their child's afterschool program offers time for reading or writing, a drop from 75 percent in 2014.

Moreover, rural afterschool programs lost ground in areas where they were performing above that of programs serving parents living outside of rural communities, based on parent responses. In the last edition of America After 3PM, rural parents were more likely than their non-rural counterparts to report that their child's afterschool program provided parent and family activities and offered healthy snacks and/or meals. However, in the current survey, rural parents are less likely than they were in 2014 to report that their child's afterschool program offers snacks or meals with healthy options (68 percent vs. 77 percent) or parent/family activities (43 percent vs. 54 percent), a 9- and 11-percentage-point drop, and now on par with non-rural families.

Another area for potential for growth is the variety of activities offered in rural afterschool programs. Again, although most rural parents report that their child has access to diverse programming, rural parents were less likely to report that their child's afterschool program offered activities such as music or arts, college or career exploration, or STEM learning opportunities. America After 3PM also finds that rural parents are less likely to report satisfaction with these offerings than their non-rural counterparts. For instance, based on parent responses, rural afterschool programs are much less likely than afterschool programs in non-rural and urban communities to offer technology and engineering activities (34 percent vs. 41 percent and 45 percent, respectively), and less likely to report satisfaction with their afterschool program's opportunities for STEM learning (64 percent vs. 68 percent and 73 percent, respectively). Rural programs also appear to lag behind their non-rural and urban counterparts in offering music or art (53 percent, 60 percent, and 65 percent, respectively), falling further behind than where they were in 2014 (58 percent, 63 percent, and 66 percent, respectively).

These findings point to the need for increased supports to expand access to rural afterschool programs and expand rural afterschool programs' offerings. It will take a blend of supports to address the challenges rural program providers and rural families face. Greater public and private investment in afterschool and summer programs at the federal, state, and local levels is one strategy that would enable programs to open their doors to more children, enhance their programming, and better serve their community. Increased partnerships between afterschool programs and schools, businesses, libraries, and other afterschool programs is another way for programs to build capacity, expand programming, receive financial and in-kind support, and leverage the strong bonds within rural communities to make certain that all children, regardless of their zip code, are afforded the same opportunities.





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Conclusion

Conclusion

In rural America, demand for afterschool and summer learning programs is higher than it has been since America After 3PM first reported on rural communities in 2009, and rural families are increasingly reporting challenges accessing afterschool programs. The country is falling short in creating opportunities for more children to take part in afterschool programs that help them engage in hands-on, academically enriching activities and participate in summer learning programs where they can learn, meet new friends, and explore new interests. Eighty-three percent of rural parents agree that all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs, yet for every rural child in an afterschool program, four more children are waiting to get in. And during the summer, for every rural child in a summer program, two more would have been enrolled if a program were available.

As different as rural communities are from one another, what *Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities* reveals is shared sentiment across rural communities about the invaluable nature of afterschool and summer programs. The pandemic underscored how important these programs are in providing an enriching learning environment for children while assisting families with matters ranging from food to access to technology. As the country emerges from the pandemic, the role of afterschool and summer programs will be even more critical to ensure that children living in rural, urban, and suburban communities receive the supports they need to learn, feel safe and cared for, and are equipped with the tools to grow into the best versions of themselves.



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