

Demand Grows, Opportunity Shrinks

Executive Summary

Introduction

Halie, the daughter of a single parent, first joined the Eldon Learning Enriched Afterschool Program (LEAP) when she was in middle school growing up in rural Missouri. During middle school and through high school, while her dad worked on a turkey farm, Halie learned how to play the recorder, took part in software coding lessons, received help with homework, played sports, and ate a healthy snack and meal every day after school. Now 18 years old, Halie's experience in her afterschool program inspired a career pathway toward teaching special education, after a mentor gave her the opportunity to volunteer in a LEAP classroom.



This story provides a window into the kinds of opportunities afterschool programs provide to young people and the aspirations they fuel. During this turbulent year, which brought a devastating pandemic, a national awakening about systemic racism sparked by the murders of George Floyd and other people of color, and a divisive, polarizing election, afterschool programs are even more critical to help children stay strong, resilient, and hopeful.

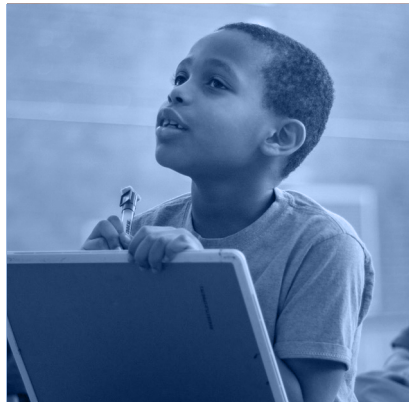
The Afterschool Alliance's fourth edition of America After 3PM provides a detailed accounting of the circumstances and conditions of U.S. children during the hours of 3 to 6 p.m. and compares afterschool program participation and unmet demand statistics for 2020 with results from 2004, 2009, and 2014. Through careful examination of the data we get a complete picture of afterschool programs: the experiences and opportunities they provide, and who is missing out.

I. Unmet demand for afterschool is at an all time high

Over the years, the America After 3PM study has captured a continuously upward trend in the number of children who are not in an afterschool program but who would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them. The 2020 America After 3PM report finds a particularly dramatic escalation in the unmet demand for afterschool programs since the last survey, with nearly 25 million children who would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them. Now, for every child in an afterschool program, there are three more children waiting to get in.

- **National:** Unmet demand for afterschool programs has grown from 15.3 million children (30 percent) in 2004, to 18.5 million children (38 percent) in 2009, to 19.4 million children (41 percent) in 2014, to 24.6 million children (50 percent) in 2020. That is an increase of 60 percent over the years this study has been conducted.
- **State:** From 2014 to 2020, all but six states and Washington, D.C. saw an increase in unmet demand for afterschool programs, with nearly half of states experiencing a double-digit percentage point increase in unmet demand.

- **Children alone and unsupervised after school:** The number of children alone and unsupervised after school has continued to decline, reaching its lowest level of 7.7 million children (13 percent) in 2020, from the peak of 15.1 million children in 2009. However, while the number of middle and high school students on their own after school decreased from 2014, the number of elementary school students increased slightly, and is now at more than 850,000.
- **Traditionally underserved communities:** Unmet demand is highest among traditionally underserved communities. More than half of Black (58 percent) and Latinx children (55 percent) who are not in an afterschool program would be enrolled in a program if one were available. That compares to 46 percent of White children.*



II. Demand surges as parents give programs high marks, recognize wide-ranging benefits

Combining the number of children already in an afterschool program with the number who would enroll in one if a program were available to them provides a measure of the overall demand for afterschool: 32.4 million children (56 percent of all children). Based on parent responses, the growing demand reflects positive experiences with afterschool programs and growing appreciation of the supports programs provide among parents with a child in an afterschool program, as well as parents of nonparticipants.[†]

- **Growth in parent satisfaction:** Satisfaction with programs is the highest it has ever been; 94 percent of parents report that they are satisfied with their child's afterschool program overall, an increase from 89 percent in 2014. The intensity of satisfaction has also increased, with the number of parents reporting being extremely satisfied increasing from 50 percent to 60 percent.
- **Growing recognition of benefits:** In 2020, even more parents recognize the benefits afterschool programs afford. For example, agreement that afterschool programs help children gain interest and skills related to science, technology,

* "Black" and "African American" and "Hispanic" 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-aged children. For the purposes of this report, "parents" is used to represent both parents and guardians.

engineering, and math (STEM) jumped 11 percentage points, from 65 percent in 2014 to 76 percent in 2020, and agreement that afterschool programs give working parents peace of mind grew 8 percentage points, from 75 percent to 83 percent.

■ **Multitude of benefits associated with afterschool programs:**

Parents agree that afterschool programs provide time for kids to engage with their peers and reduce unproductive screen time (85 percent), get kids more excited about learning and interested in school (74 percent), and reduce the likelihood that youth will use drugs or engage in other risky behaviors (75 percent).

- **An increasingly positive view of afterschool programs among parents without a child in a program:** Comparing 2014 to 2020, parents of non-participants are now more likely to agree that afterschool programs help children be physically active (73 percent vs. 83 percent), provide access to caring adults and mentors (67 percent vs. 74 percent), and provide opportunities to gain skills related to STEM (61 percent vs. 75 percent).

- **Helping families and children in need:** Three-quarters of low-income families report that the availability of snacks and meals

was important in their selection of their child's afterschool program, 76 percent report that their child's afterschool program offers classes or workshops, and 64 percent report that their child's afterschool program connects them with community resources.

III. **The opportunity gap is evident**

Children in low-income families have more limited learning opportunities outside of school compared to their higher income peers, including access to afterschool programs.

- In 2020, America After 3PM found that families in the highest income bracket spend more than five times as much on out-of-school time activities per year than families in the lowest income bracket, spending roughly \$3,600 annually versus \$700.
- 9 in 10 parents in the highest income bracket (89 percent) report that their child participates in at least one out-of-school time experience, compared to 6 in 10 parents in the lowest income bracket.

IV. **Cost and access top the list of roadblocks to afterschool participation**

In this year's America After 3PM survey, which gathered data before the pandemic, a greater percentage of parents report challenges related

to affordability and availability of afterschool programs compared to parents in 2014.

- **National:** There were double-digit percentage point increases in parents reporting that cost (increasing from 43 percent to 57 percent), lack of available programs (increasing from 29 percent to 42 percent), and a lack of a safe way for their children to get to and come back from programs (increasing from 39 percent to 53 percent) prevented them from enrolling their child in an afterschool program.
- **More barriers for low-income families and families of color:** The barriers to enrolling children in an afterschool program increased among low-income families and are more prevalent among low-income families than their higher income peers. Among low-income parents, the percentage of parents who report that cost was a barrier increased 11 percentage points, from 50 percent in 2014 to 61 percent in 2020. Compared to higher income families, low-income families were more likely to report that cost and issues related to access, such as the lack of a safe way for their children to get to and from the program and lack of available afterschool programs in the area, as reasons they did not enroll their child in an afterschool program.

While the majority of parents across groups report that cost was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in an afterschool program, African American and Hispanic parents are more likely than White parents to say that their children did not have a safe way to get to and from afterschool programs and that programs' hours of operation and location presented challenges.

Additionally, accessibility was a greater barrier for low-income parents of color than low-income White parents. African American and Hispanic parents who are low-income (62 percent, both) were much more likely than White parents who are low-income (54 percent) to say that an important reason they did not enroll their child in an afterschool program was a lack of a safe way to get to and come home from the program.

V. Afterschool participation falls; inequities prominent

For the first time in America After 3PM's 16-year history, afterschool program participation has decreased. As a result, for every child in an afterschool program, three more children who want to participate in a program are unable to do so.

- **National:** In all, 7.8 million children (14 percent) are currently enrolled

in programs and benefiting from the offerings and supports they provide, compared to 10.2 million children (18 percent) in 2014, 8.4 million children (15 percent) in 2009, and 6.5 million (11 percent) in 2004.

- **Demographics:** Elementary school students continue to comprise the largest age group in afterschool programs (60 percent), followed by middle school students (21 percent), and high school students (19 percent). As in previous editions of America After 3PM, White children make up the overwhelming majority of afterschool program participants (60 percent). However, 2020 saw change in the overall composition of afterschool program participants, and children of color now make up 40 percent of afterschool program participants. Children in higher income families comprise the majority of afterschool program participants (66 percent), compared to 34 percent of children living in low-income households.

- **Drop in afterschool program participation largely seen among children living in low-income households:** While there is an overall drop in access to afterschool opportunities for all young people, the America After 3PM survey found that the young people most affected are those

from low-income households. The number of children in low-income households in afterschool fell from 4.6 million in 2014 to 2.7 million in 2020. Meanwhile the number of higher-income children in afterschool decreased by a fraction of that amount; 446,000 over that same time period.

Based on responses from families with low income who do not have a child in an afterschool program, cost is a major driver behind the decline in participation among low-income families, and points to a lack of available affordable programs nationwide. However, public investments in afterschool programs—which help to make programs affordable for families—have not kept up with growing demand since 2014. For instance, in spite of the increases in funding since 2014 for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC), the only federal funding stream dedicated exclusively to afterschool, before-school, and summer learning programs, has lagged behind the rate of inflation between 2014 and 2020 and is now \$10 million lower in inflation-adjusted terms.

21st CCLC and state-funded program participation data suggest that our nation's publicly funded programs have been a backbone of support for many low-income young people and that

without access to these programs, a significant number of low-income young people are being denied the opportunity to participate in afterschool programs.

- **State:** Reflecting the national trend, all but four states saw a decline in afterschool program participation between 2014 and 2020, with an average of a 3.6 percentage point decrease.



VI. Benefits are significant for children and families fortunate enough to participate

America After 3PM finds that children in afterschool programs have access to activities that complement school day learning as well as keep them active, build their life skills, and connect them to the community.

- **Program offerings:** The overwhelming majority of parents report that their child's afterschool program offers the chance to build social and emotional skills

and competencies (96 percent), make time for physical activity (85 percent), receive homework help (73 percent), take advantage of STEM learning opportunities (73 percent), and practice reading or writing (69 percent).

- **Parent satisfaction:** Parents report high levels of satisfaction with the activities and supports offered by programs. A majority of parents report satisfaction with each of the aspects of their child's afterschool program the America After 3PM survey asked about, including 94 percent of parents reporting overall satisfaction with their child's experience in their primary afterschool program. Other high-scoring areas are parents satisfied with program staff (89 percent) and the program offering opportunities to build life skills (84 percent).
- **Supports for families:** When asked about supports they receive from programs, 78 percent of parents with a child enrolled in afterschool report that programs help them keep their jobs, and 71 percent say that programs allow them to build their skills through classes or workshops offered.

VII. Support for increased investment in afterschool is greater than ever

Today, most parents (84 percent) agree that all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs. Support for public funding for afterschool programs has reached an all-time high.

- **National:** Overall, 87 percent of parents are in favor of public funding for programs that provide afterschool opportunities to students in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth, up from 84 percent in 2014 and 83 percent in 2009.
- **Community-type:** More than 5 in 6 rural (86 percent), suburban (87 percent), and urban parents (90 percent) support public funding for afterschool programs.
- **Political affiliation:** Support for public funding of afterschool programs is strong across political parties, with 91 percent of parents who identify as Democrat, 87 percent of parents who identify as Independent, and 85 percent of parents who identify as Republican, in favor of such support.

Conclusion

With more families struggling to afford and access an afterschool program, unmet demand hitting an all-time high, and parents with a child in an afterschool program reporting high levels of satisfaction with activities and supports offered by programs, it is clear there is a compelling need to increase access to afterschool programs. The opportunity to participate in programs is shrinking, as cost and lack of affordable afterschool opportunities are denying a significant number of low-income young people access to afterschool programs.

Public funding for afterschool programs helps provide affordable, quality programs for millions of children nationwide. Since the last edition of America After 3PM in 2014, public investments in afterschool programs have largely stalled. For instance, funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers, the only federal funding stream dedicated exclusively to afterschool, before-school and summer learning programs, has not kept up with the cost of inflation, increasing less than 9 percent between 2014 and 2020. In spite of the increases in the 21st CCLC investment since 2014, the current funding level is \$10 million below the 2014 level. This backbone of support is critical, but it is not meeting the need. A multi-faceted approach, with investments at the local, state, and federal levels of government, is necessary in order to create quality, affordable afterschool opportunities.

The need for increased investment in afterschool is especially urgent with the coronavirus pandemic forcing many schools to move to a distance-learning model or operate on a hybrid schedule of in-person and virtual classes. An October 2020 survey of parents found that more than 3 in 4 agree that Congress should provide additional funding for afterschool programs to help provide a supervised, enriching environment during virtual school days.

If our country aims to give all children and youth the best chance to succeed in school and in life, and to provide equal opportunities for all young people, we must do much more to make quality, affordable afterschool programs available to all.

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

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

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. For the 2020 wave of America After 3PM, interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish.

America After 3PM data included in this report were collected between January 27 and March 17, 2020. A total of 31,055 households were surveyed and answered questions regarding ways in which their child or children are cared for in the hours after school. A subset of households, 14,391 respondents, answered a series of follow up questions regarding afterschool experiences or barriers to participation in afterschool, and perceptions of afterschool programs. The overall margin of error for child-level and household-level data is +/- < 1 percent.

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

The October 2020 survey of parents was conducted by Edge Research and is a nationally representative online survey fielded October 12-29, 2020, of 1,202 parents of school-aged children.

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