

Wallace's **Considerations** series invites a variety of experts to share insights based on research and theory on issues important to the fields the Foundation supports.

## Youth Perspectives on Designing Equitable Out-of-School-Time Programs

This brief is a companion to *From Access to Equity: Making Out-of-School-Time Spaces Meaningful for Teens From Marginalized Communities* and reports on the findings and ideas from youth-led research about the experiences of marginalized youth in out-of-school-time programs. The research project was designed and carried out by Deja Hoble, Helen Obuna, Jocelyne Argüelles, Connor Flick, Rebecca Vaught, Sanaa Kahloon, Spandana Pavuluri, Alannis Rodriguez, Sony Ozoria Tavarez, Syeda Tabassum, and Wendy Diaz, with guidance provided by Shane Trujillo, Daniela DiGiacomo (University of Kentucky), Sam Mejias (Parsons School of Design) and Ben Kirshner (University of Colorado, Boulder). Daniel Browne prepared the brief.

### Problems of Policy and Practice

Despite ample research evidence about the benefits of out-of-school-time (OST) programs (Hirsch, 2006; McLaughlin, 2000), recent studies have revealed an increasing gap in access to and engagement in OST between youth from working-class and middle-class backgrounds (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). This is in part due to the proliferation of privatized “pay to play” extracurricular clubs such as sports teams, test preparatory programs, and arts programming (Snellman, Silva, Frederick, & Putnam, 2015). Moreover, youth from low-income and working-class families are often not able to participate in OST programming because of responsibilities for sibling care and/or the need to seek paid work to help their family (Intrator & Siegel, 2014). There are both immediate and long-term implications of this difference in high-quality program participation, as out-of-school-time programs offer spaces for youth to develop interests, curiosity, and social connections beyond the classroom, while also providing an additional pathway or demonstration of college readiness during application processes (Afterschool Alliance, 2020).

To explore both experiences of and barriers to participation from the perspective of young people, student researchers conducted a survey and focus groups to surface young people’s reflections on and hopes for the out-of-school-time sector. The research team, which was advised by four university researchers, comprised 11 high school and college students from New York, Colorado, and Kentucky. The work was part of a larger examination of equity in out-of-school-time programming.

## Approach

This study drew on the principles of Youth Participatory Action Research, in which young people draw on their lived experience to formulate questions about an issue that affects them directly, carry out research, and recommend changes to policies and practices based on their findings (Camarrota & Fine, 2008). In fall 2020 the team conducted four online focus groups and administered an online survey to 191 young people between the ages of 14 and 19. Focus groups involved three to five students, ages 14 to 19 years old. The survey, which used peer network sampling, provides an indication of young people's views on, and experiences in, OST programs.

## Findings

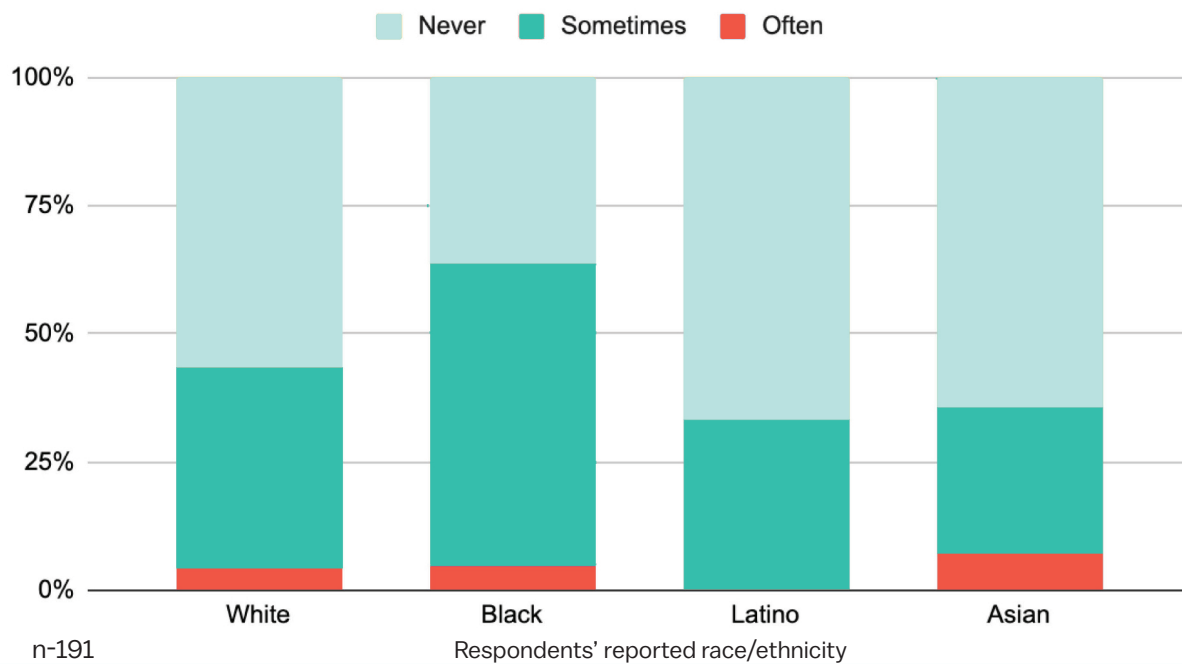
### THE TEAM'S ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO THE YOUTH SURVEY HIGHLIGHTED TWO MAIN FINDINGS:

- A majority of survey respondents had either personally faced barriers that prevented them from joining an OST program or knew of someone who had. This experience was more common for Youth of Color than for White youth.
- Approximately 45 percent of respondents said they had sometimes been treated differently than others in an OST program because of their race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, or religion. Nearly two-thirds of Black respondents said they had sometimes been treated differently.

### SEVERAL KEY THEMES EMERGED FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS, INCLUDING THE FOLLOWING:

- **Barriers to access**—Participants in the focus groups mentioned a number of factors that limit opportunities to join OST programs, including:
  - Unequal (and inequitable) distribution of programs across schools and neighborhoods;
  - Admissions criteria that exclude young people based on age or ability to pay; and
  - Adults and peers who act as gatekeepers, not sharing information about available programs with certain young people or groups of young people.
- **Sense of community**—Focus group participants indicated that an inclusive, humanizing atmosphere is a more important factor in their decision to participate in an OST program than the activities or learning opportunities the program offers. Conversely, an exclusive or cliquish atmosphere inhibits them from joining or staying in a program.
- **Demand for unique, interesting experiences and skill-building**—Focus group participants identified the opportunity to have experiences they wouldn't otherwise have (e.g., public speaking, internships, public advocacy) as a major motivator for joining an OST program. Similarly, they viewed OST programs as places where they could get better at particular skills.
- **Youth voice and leadership**—Focus group participants reported being most engaged in programs where they were able to work collaboratively with leaders and peers to shape the organization, direction, and outcomes of OST programs. Still, many focus group participants shared that adult leaders of OST programs do not treat them respectfully or acknowledge the legitimacy of their ideas.

Thinking about your experience in OST programs, have you ever felt you were treated differently due to your race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, or religion?



## Looking Ahead

Based on its findings, the youth research team made the following recommendations for OST programs and the field at large:

- **Allocate funding for increased youth outreach**, including marketing and advertising, particularly in neighborhoods and communities that typically experience barriers to participation, so young people don't have to rely on word of mouth to learn about OST opportunities.
- **Identify and eliminate behaviors within programs (by staff and participants) that mistreat and exclude racially minoritized and marginalized youth**, be it simple social exclusion or overt discrimination.
- **Provide resources to programs and students to minimize common barriers to participation**, including lack of transportation or inability to pay program fees.
- **Offer an "open door" policy**, rather than requiring a fixed amount of participation, so young people juggling multiple responsibilities can determine their own level of commitment.
- **Train program leaders and staff on topics important to students**, including anti-racism, how to connect with new people, and how to create youth-led spaces.
- **Invite young people to work alongside program staff** to make decisions about OST program content and practices.

## Note:

Although imperfect and imprecise, the term that we use, *racially minoritized*, acknowledges the ways that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Asian American youth are marginalized by structural racial oppression. We also use the term Youth of Color/People of Color. Our intention is not to erase the unique struggles of specific communities by using an umbrella term.

We use the term *marginalized* as an umbrella term in addition to *racially minoritized* to acknowledge how systems of oppression impact children and youth from low-income households and high-poverty neighborhoods, youth who identify as LGBTQIA+, youth who experience housing instability and homelessness, systems-involved youth (e.g., foster care, incarcerated), and the intersections of these identities and lived experiences of youth populations.

## References

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