



May 2021

# Time for a Game-Changing Summer, With Opportunity and Growth for All of America's Youth

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## Acknowledgements

The America After 3PM special report, *Time for a Game-Changing Summer, With Opportunity and Growth for All of America's Youth*, is based on research commissioned and funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its mission to foster equity and improvements in learning and enrichment for young people, and in the arts for everyone by supporting and sharing effective ideas and practices.

Data from this special report is based on the 2020 America After 3PM survey results, which would not have been possible without generous support from the New York Life Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Altria Group, and the Walton Family Foundation, as well as the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

National and state America After 3PM summer data can be found on the interactive data dashboard at: [afterschoolalliance.org/aa3pm/](https://afterschoolalliance.org/aa3pm/)

## Methodology

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

America After 3PM data included in this report was collected between January 27 and March 17, 2020. A total of 29,595 households, including 53,287 children, were surveyed and answered questions regarding ways in which their child or children were cared for during the summer of 2019. Data from

interviews are weighted on race and income within state and by state population. The overall margin of error for child-level and household-level data is +/- < 1 percent.

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

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

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



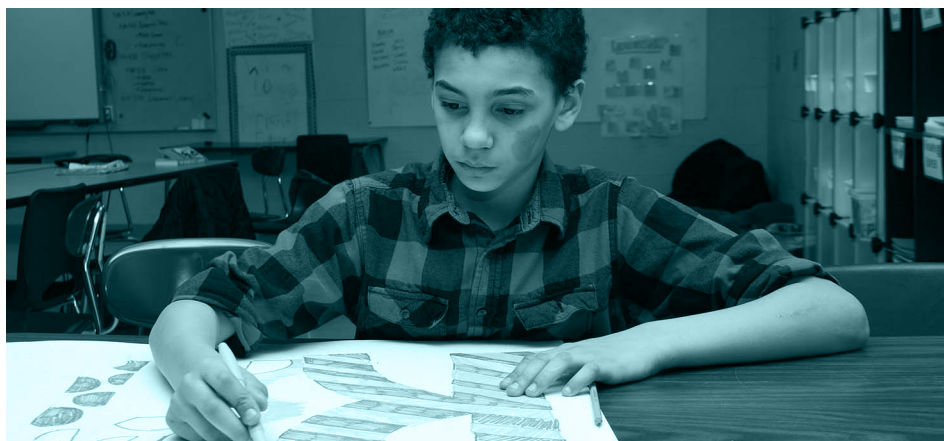
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# Introduction

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

The 2020 edition of America After 3PM is designed to build a better understanding of how young people are spending their summers and to dig deeper into the types of summer experiences children across America have. Respondents' answers to a new set of summer-specific questions provide a view of a typical summer.<sup>1</sup> First fielded in 2004, with updates in 2009, 2014, and now 2020, America After 3PM continues to chronicle how young people spend their afterschool and summer hours. This most recent national household survey of parents and guardians of school-age children includes responses from nearly 30,000 households regarding how their child or children were cared for during the summer of 2019.



With the pandemic radically changing the landscape of summer 2020, as typical summer experiences were cancelled or changed to meet health and safety protocols, the Afterschool Alliance commissioned nationally representative follow-up surveys of parents and program providers to accompany America After 3PM data in order to learn how COVID-19 changed young people's summer experiences.

*Time for a Game-Changing Summer, With Opportunity and Growth for All of America's Youth* reviews the America After 3PM summer 2019 findings, with 2020 parent and provider summer survey data included to shed light on what young people are experiencing during the pandemic. This data can be helpful as families, educators, and policymakers debate the best supports for young people after more than a year of pandemic conditions. As this report is

written, 79 percent of programs plan to offer summer enrichment in 2021. The data about what summer looked like prior to the pandemic and information about how summer program providers addressed emerging needs during the 2020 summer can inform the design of 2021 summer experiences and the funding allocated to summer programs, enabling summer providers to help all young people re-engage, recharge, and rebound from the pandemic.



<sup>1</sup> Parents surveyed were asked to report on their child's 2019 summer experiences.



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# Key Findings

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

Prior to the pandemic, participation in summer programming was on an upward trajectory. In the summer of 2019, participation in summer programming was at the highest level ever recorded by America After 3PM:

- Close to half of families (47 percent) report at least one of their children attended a summer program, an increase from 1 in 3 families during the 2013 summer (33 percent) and 1 in 4 families in the summer of 2008 (25 percent).

A new question in the America After 3PM survey allows us to project, for the first time, the number of children participating in a structured summer experience in the United States:

- 12.6 million school-aged children (22 percent) participated in a structured summer experience in 2019. Summer experiences include participation in a summer learning program, sports program, summer camp, summer school, or summer job or internship, and are different from child care.

### Types of structured summer experiences

America After 3PM examines the types of structured summer experiences young people take part in, from mandatory summer school to specialty camps to summer internships or jobs:

- Non-STEM specialty camps or programs—such as arts, sports, or drama camps or programs—are the most commonly reported summer experience, with 6.8 million children (12 percent) participating, followed by 5.4 million children (9 percent) participating in voluntary summer programs. Less commonly reported summer experiences include optional summer school classes for credit or enrichment (3 percent), STEM camps (3 percent), summer jobs or internships (3 percent), and mandatory summer school (2 percent).
- Although most parents with a child in a structured summer experience (61 percent) report that their child was involved in only one type of summer activity in 2019, roughly 1 in 5 parents had a child in two (21 percent) or three (18 percent) different types of summer activities.
- Excluding time spent in a job or internship, parents report that children spent the most time in voluntary

summer programs (5.7 hours a day for 4.6 weeks), followed by non-STEM specialty camps or programs (5.7 hours a day for 4.1 weeks), STEM camps (5.3 hours a day for 2.9 weeks), optional summer school (4.2 hours a day for 3.6 weeks), and mandatory summer school (4.5 hours a day for 3.1 weeks). Youth in a summer job or internship worked an average of 5.4 hours a day for an average of 5.1 weeks during the summer.

### Parents give summer experiences top marks

Parents overwhelmingly report that they were satisfied with their child's 2019 summer experience:

- Fully 95 percent of parents were satisfied with the structured summer experience their child attended most, and 65 percent report that they were extremely satisfied with the experience.
- Looking at specific summer experiences, 95 percent of parents with a child in a voluntary summer program, 96 percent of parents with a child in a STEM camp, and 96 percent of parents with a child in a non-STEM specialty camp or program said that they were satisfied with their child's summer program experience.





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

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

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

### Parents want summer to be different than the school year

- Parents' priorities for their children during the summer are different than their priorities during the school year, and parents are much more likely to report that factors such as opportunities to experience the outdoors (15 percentage point difference), physical activity (8 percentage point difference), a variety of activities (7 percentage point difference), and opportunities to build life skills (6 percentage point difference) were important in their decision-making process when selecting a summer program, compared to their selection of an afterschool program.

### Summer programs are a critical resource for families with low incomes

Families with low incomes are more likely than families with higher incomes to look to their child's summer experience to provide a wide range of supports:

- America After 3PM finds double-digit differentials between families with low incomes and those with higher incomes regarding factors that were extremely important in their selection of a summer activity.

Low-income parents place a greater emphasis on reducing risky behaviors (23 percentage point difference), snacks and meals (21 percentage point difference), helping prevent their child from losing academic ground (14 percentage point difference), and helping build life skills (13 percentage point difference), as well as a variety of activities (12 percentage point difference), music or arts (11 percentage point difference), and STEM learning opportunities (10 percentage point difference).

### Differences in priorities by race and ethnicity

Comparing the types of experiences and learning opportunities families regard as most important when selecting what their children do over the summer, a safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff top the list for families, regardless of race or ethnicity. However, Black, Latinx, and Native American families are much more likely than White and Asian American parents to say that a variety of activities, snacks and/or meals, physical activity, building life skills, and academic enrichment, including keeping their child from losing academic ground and STEM learning opportunities, were of extreme importance when selecting their child's summer activities.



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

Despite the increase in the number of families with a child in a summer program, America After 3PM finds high unmet demand during the 2019 summer and significant inequities, with the increase in summer program participation driven largely by families with higher incomes, while unmet demand for summer programs remains high, especially among families with low incomes:

- Nearly 1 in 3 children (31 percent) not in a program during the 2019 summer would have been enrolled in one if one were available to them, equating to 13.9 million children. For every child in a summer program, another would be enrolled if a program were available.
- Across the years, America After 3PM has tracked the percentage of families who did not have a child in a summer program, but would have liked to enroll their child if a program were available. At the household level, unmet demand for summer programs

has remained high and persistent from 2009 to 2020, (56 percent and 57 percent, respectively), with most families who did not have a child in a summer program reporting that they would have liked to enroll their child in a program.

- For families with low incomes, unmet demand for summer programs was even greater than for higher income households. More than 1 in 3 children living in households with low incomes (35 percent) would have been enrolled in a summer program if one were available to them, compared to 28 percent of children in families with higher incomes.

America After 3PM data also reveals a stark contrast between the summer experience of children from families with higher incomes and children in families with low incomes:

- Summers for children in families with higher incomes are more likely to include enrichment and family activities. Children in families with higher incomes are much more likely than children in families with low incomes to take part in a structured

summer experience (27 percent vs. 14 percent) or have regular trips to informal activities such as the library or park (15 percent vs. 12 percent). Additionally, among families who did not have a child in a structured summer experience, families with higher incomes are more likely than families with low incomes to report that lack of participation was due to the fact that they did other things together during the summer (42 percent vs. 35 percent).

- Higher income children are nearly three times more likely to participate in a structured summer experience than children from lower income families; 9.2 million higher income children compared to 3.3 million low-income children. Approximately 3 in 4 children who were in a structured summer experience were from higher income families (74 percent), compared to 1 in 4 children from families with low incomes (26 percent).
- Comparing trend data at the household level, although the percentage of families with low incomes reporting that their child took part in a summer program increased





slightly between 2013 and 2019 (from 34 percent to 38 percent), the percentage of families with higher incomes with a child in a summer program saw much greater growth during the same time period, jumping from 33 percent to 53 percent.

### The cost of summer activities puts them out of reach for many families with low incomes

Thirty-nine percent of parents who did not have a child in a structured summer experience report that they did not enroll their child in a summer program because programs were too expensive. That ties with families having other summer plans as the most common reason for nonparticipation. For families with low incomes, the cost of programs was by far the most common reason for not enrolling their child in a summer program:

- The cost of a program was a greater barrier to children's participation in structured summer experiences for families with low incomes than for families with higher incomes (44 percent vs. 35 percent).
- The average cost of 2019 summer activities ranged from an estimated \$758 for voluntary summer programs to upwards of \$900 for STEM camps for each child during the course of a summer.

### Transportation and awareness of programs are also barriers to participation

Program location and lack of awareness about programs in the area are greater challenges to enrolling their child in a summer activity for families with low incomes than for families with higher incomes:

- Close to 1 in 4 parents with low incomes report that issues with transportation or location (23 percent) or not knowing about available programs in the area (23 percent) factored into their decision not to enroll their child in a summer program, compared to 18 percent and 16 percent of families with higher incomes.
- Parents with low incomes are also slightly more likely than parents with higher incomes to say that summer programs were not available in their community (15 percent vs. 12 percent).



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

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

- Eighty-eight percent of parents favor public funding for summer learning opportunities for students in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth, an increase from 83 percent in 2009 and 85 percent in 2014. A majority of parents (57 percent) report that they are strongly in favor of public funding.
- Overwhelming majorities of parents across zip codes and political affiliations support public funding for summer learning opportunities, demonstrating broad approval for increasing access to summer programs. For example, 92 percent of Democrats, 88 percent of Independents, and 86 percent of Republicans favor public funding for summer learning opportunities.
- Support is also particularly high among families living in an urban community (91 percent), households where both parents are working (90 percent), and Latinx parents (90 percent).



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

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

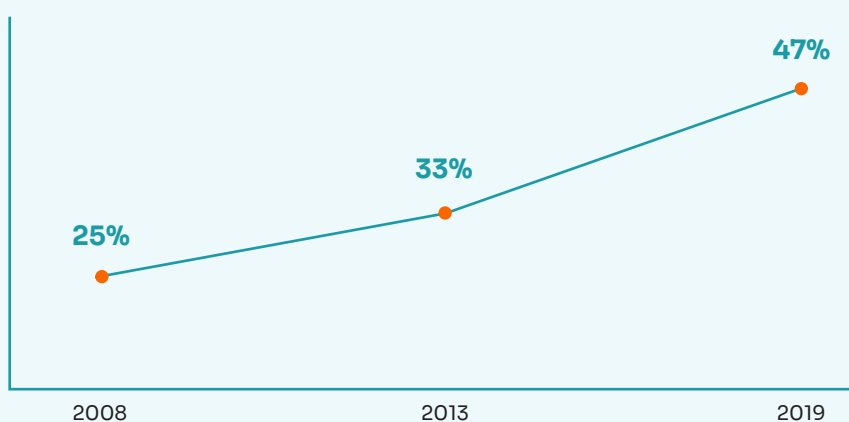
Prior to the pandemic, participation in summer programming was on an upward trajectory. In the summer of 2019, participation in summer programming was at the highest level ever recorded by America After 3PM.

In this edition of the study, close to half of families (47 percent) report at least one of their children attended a summer program,<sup>2</sup> an increase from 1 in 3 families during the 2013 summer (33 percent) and 1 in 4 families in the summer of 2008 (25 percent) (*Figure 1*).

A new question in the latest America After 3PM survey captures data about individual children in each household, making it possible to project, for the first time, the number of children participating in a structured summer experience. The new data finds that in 2019, 12.6 million children in grades K-12 were in a structured summer experience, or, 22 percent of U.S. school-age children. Summer experiences are defined in the survey to include participation in a summer learning program, sports program, summer camp, summer school, or summer job or internship, and are different from child care.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1:** Summer participation was on an upward trajectory

Percentage of families reporting at least one child attended a summer program



<sup>2</sup> In America After 3PM, a “summer program” is defined as a program that is a “safe, structured program that provided activities designed to encourage learning and development during the summer months.”

<sup>3</sup> America After 3PM defines “structured summer experiences” as those different from child care, such as summer school, summer enrichment or sports program, summer camp, or job or internship.

**Figure 2:** Participation in a structured summer experience by:

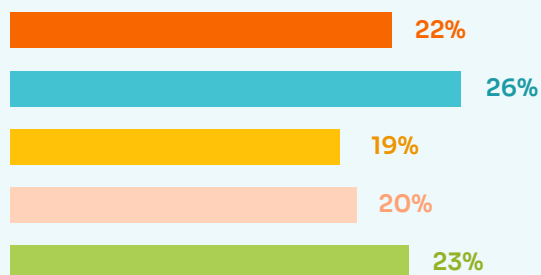
**GRADE LEVEL**

- Elementary School
- Middle School
- High School



**RACE/ETHNICITY**

- African American/Black
- Asian American
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native American
- White



Twenty-three percent of elementary schoolers, 24 percent of middle schoolers, and 19 percent of high schoolers took part in a structured experience during the 2019 summer (Figure 2). Overall, most children in a structured summer experience (53 percent) are elementary school-aged, with middle and high schoolers representing 24 percent and 23 percent of children in a structured summer experience (Figure 3).

By race and ethnicity, Asian American children are most likely to participate in a structured summer experience (26 percent), and approximately 1 in 5 White (23 percent), Black (22 percent), Native American (20 percent) and Latinx (19 percent) children participate in a summer experience (Figure 2). White children make up the largest share (69 percent) of children in a structured summer experience, followed by Latinx children (16 percent), Black children (14 percent), Asian American children (7 percent), and Native American children (2 percent) (Figure 3).<sup>4</sup>

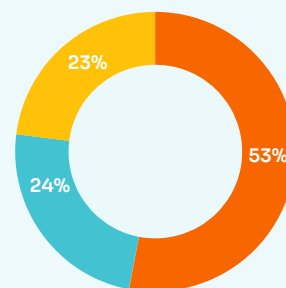
**Types of structured summer experiences**

America After 3PM includes questions that drill down into the types of structured summer experiences young people take part in, ranging from mandatory summer school to specialty camps to summer internships or jobs.<sup>5</sup> Non-STEM specialty camps or programs—such as arts,

**Figure 3:** Composition of participants in a structured summer experience by:

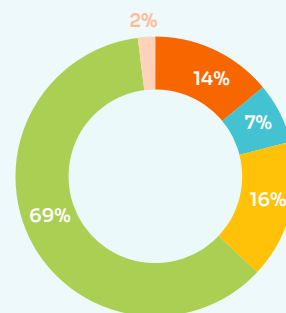
**GRADE LEVEL**

- Elementary School
- Middle School
- High School



**RACE/ETHNICITY\***

- African American/Black
- Asian American
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native American
- White



\*Totals may not add up to 100 percent as respondents were able to select all answers that apply

<sup>4</sup> “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.

<sup>5</sup> Parents reporting that their child was in a structured summer experience were then able to select all of the following experiences that applied to their child: Voluntary summer program that provides a variety of learning and enrichment activities, mandatory summer school/school credit recovery program, optional summer school classes for credit or enrichment, work/summer job/internship, STEM camp, all other specialty camps or programs (e.g., arts, sports, drama, religious), and college readiness/preparation program.

## When school is in for the summer

Summer school, which can be mandatory, for remediation, to recover school credit, or optional, with classes for enrichment, is another way for young people to spend their summer. In the America After 3PM survey, parents report that, on average, children spend less time in summer school than in voluntary summer programs and specialty camps or programs. While most families report that their child's summer school classes were held at a public or private school, other locations included a city or town facility, community-based organization, library, museum or science center, or college or university. Parent satisfaction with summer school was also high; 95 percent of parents with a child in optional summer school classes and 90 percent of parents with a child in mandatory summer school report that they were satisfied with their child's program experience.

## A look at summer school by the numbers:

| Mandatory                           | Optional   |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>3.1</b><br>Average weeks         | <b>3.6</b><br>Average weeks  |
| <b>4.5</b><br>Average hours per day | <b>4.2</b><br>Average hours per day  |
| <b>N/A</b><br>Average cost per week | <b>\$174.60</b><br>Average cost per week*<br><small>*Among parents who report paying for classes</small> |



## Schools were the most common location for summer school, but other organizations, including community-based organizations and libraries, held classes

Percentage of parents reporting where their child's mandatory or optional summer school classes were held:

|                              | Mandatory  | Optional   |
|------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Public or private school     | <b>63%</b> | <b>68%</b> |
| City or town facility        | <b>19%</b> | <b>15%</b> |
| Community-based organization | <b>11%</b> | <b>14%</b> |
| Library                      | <b>6%</b>  | <b>10%</b> |
| College or university        | <b>8%</b>  | <b>8%</b>  |
| Museum or science center     | <b>6%</b>  | <b>8%</b>  |
| Religious organization       | <b>9%</b>  | <b>5%</b>  |

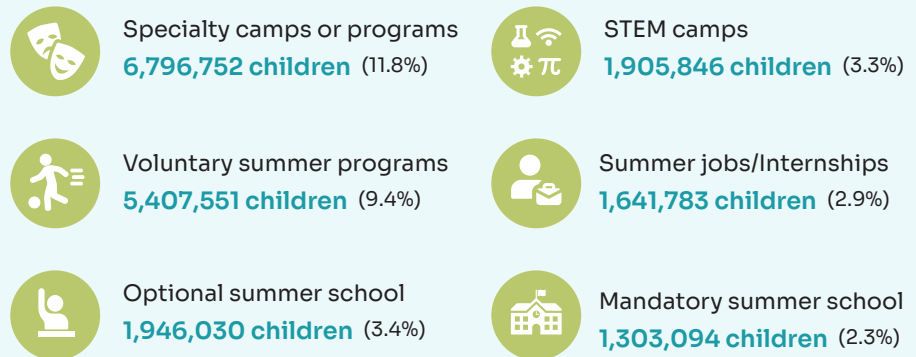


sports, or drama camps or programs—are the most commonly reported summer experience, with 6.8 million children (12 percent) participating, followed by 5.4 million children (9 percent) participating in voluntary summer programs. Less commonly reported summer experiences include optional summer school classes for credit or enrichment (3 percent), STEM camps (3 percent), summer jobs or internships (3 percent), and mandatory summer school (2 percent) (Figure 4).

At the household level, among families with a child in a structured summer experience, an overwhelming majority, 88 percent, report participation in a voluntary summer program, a STEM camp, or another specialty camp or program. While most parents with a child in a summer experience report that their child was involved in only one type of summer activity in 2019 (61 percent), roughly 1 in 5 parents had a child in two (21 percent) or three (18 percent) different types of summer activities.

Focusing on the non-summer school or work-related activities, on average during the 2019 summer, children participated in summer activities close to six hours a day for four weeks during the summer, spending the most time in voluntary summer programs (5.7 hours a day for 4.6 weeks), non-STEM specialty camps or programs (5.7 hours a day for 4.1 weeks), and STEM camps (5.3 hours a day for 2.9 weeks). Youth in a summer job or internship worked an average of 5.4 hours a day for an average of 5.1 weeks during the summer.

**Figure 4:** During the 2019 summer, young people took part in a wide range of structured summer experiences. Among all U.S. school-age children, the percentage and number taking part in various structured summer experiences



Schools, community-based organizations, and city or town facilities including parks and recreation departments are the most common providers of voluntary summer programs and non-STEM specialty camps or programs. Parents are most likely to report that their child's STEM camp or college readiness program was held at a school, college, or university (Figure 5).

### Parents give summer experiences top marks

To better understand the quality of the various structured activities available to children during the summer, America After 3PM asked parents about their overall level of satisfaction with their child's summer activity. Parents overwhelmingly

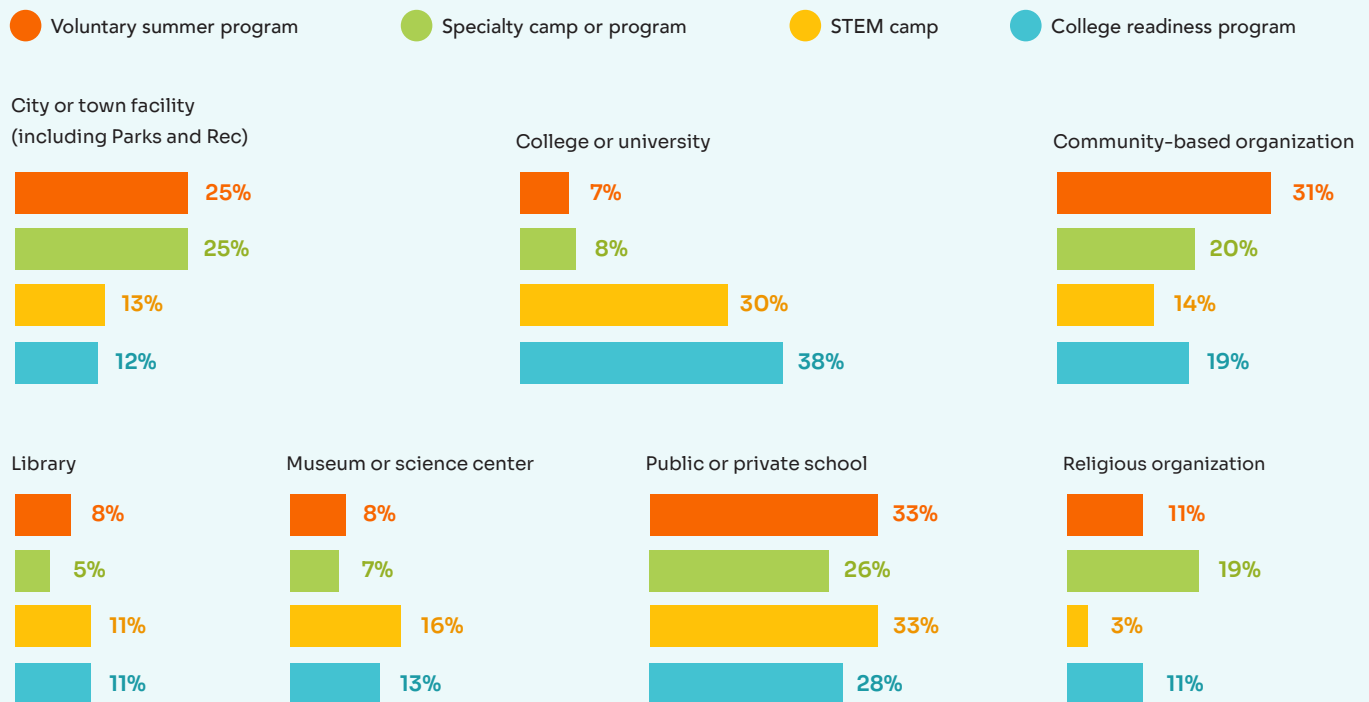
report they were satisfied with their child's summer experience in 2019: 95 percent report that they were satisfied with the structured summer experience their child attended most. Close to 2 in 3 parents (65 percent) report that they were extremely satisfied with the experience.

Satisfaction with summer experiences in 2019 crossed all age groups, with more than 9 in 10 parents with an elementary schooler (95 percent), middle schooler (96 percent), or high schooler (96 percent) in a summer program happy with their child's summer experience, and at least 9 in 10 parents across demographics, including income level, race, and ethnicity, reporting satisfaction (Figure 6). Examining the

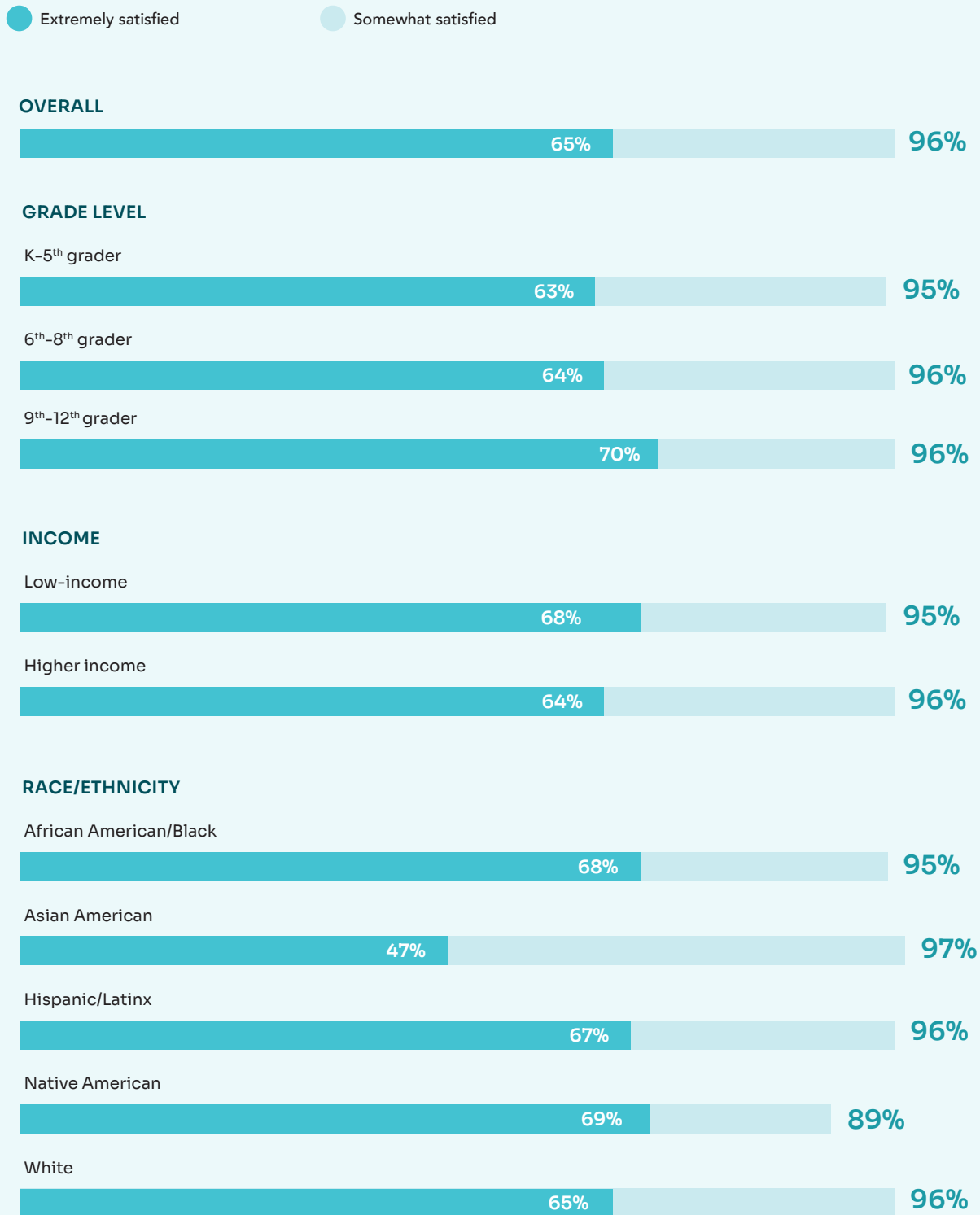
findings by state reveals that in every state in the union, at least 5 in 6 parents were satisfied with their child's structured summer experience, ranging from 86 percent reporting satisfaction in North Dakota to 100 percent in Illinois (Figure 7).

Looking at specific summer experiences, 95 percent of parents with a child in a voluntary summer program, 96 percent of parents with a child in a STEM camp, and 96 percent of parents with a child in a non-STEM specialty camp say that they were satisfied with their child's summer program experience.

**Figure 5:** The most common locations where structured summer experiences take place vary by activity type  
Percentage of parents reporting where their child's structured summer experience was held

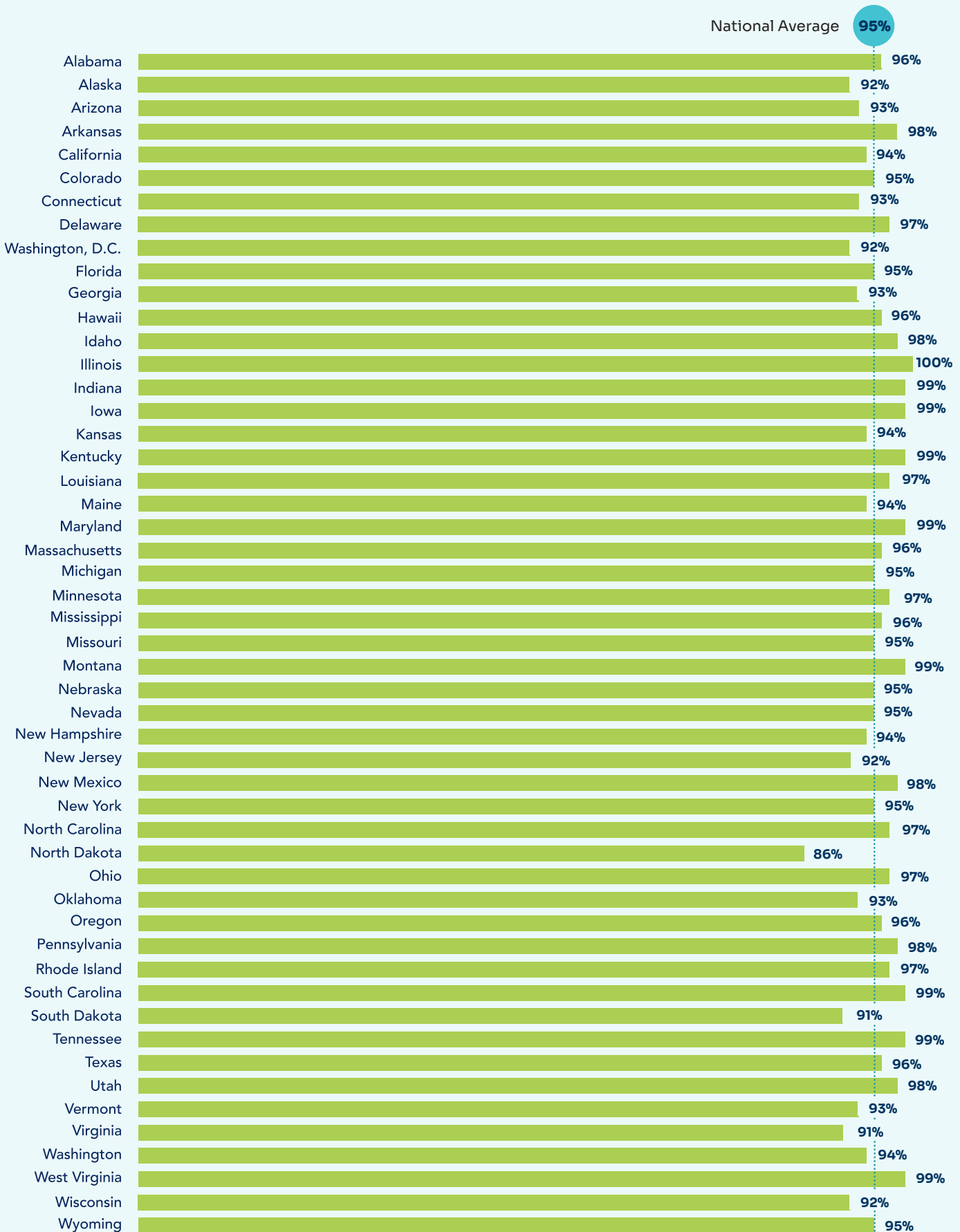


**Figure 6:** Parents across the board are satisfied with the summer experience their child is in  
 Percent of parents reporting that they extremely or somewhat satisfied with the structured summer experience their child attended the most





**Figure 7:** Nationwide, at least 5 in 6 parents in every state reported satisfaction with their child’s structured summer experience  
 Percent of parents reporting that they are extremely or somewhat satisfied with the structured summer experience their child attended the most





## SUMMER IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: Families continued to need summer programming during the pandemic

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



|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>5.2</b><br/>Average weeks during the summer</p>   | <p><b>4.5</b><br/>Average hours per day</p>  |
| <p><b>\$119.90</b><br/>Average cost per week*<br/><small>*Among parents who report paying for their child's summer experience</small></p> | <p><b>48%</b><br/>Percent of parents reporting that their child's summer experience was of no cost to them</p> |

### Children participated in structured summer experiences located in:

|                                 |            |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| ◆ Schools                       | <b>30%</b> |
| ◆ Community-based organizations | <b>23%</b> |
| ◆ City or town facilities       | <b>21%</b> |
| ◆ Child care centers            | <b>15%</b> |
| ◆ Museum or science centers     | <b>13%</b> |
| ◆ Libraries                     | <b>12%</b> |
| ◆ Religious organizations       | <b>12%</b> |
| ◆ Colleges or universities      | <b>9%</b>  |



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

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

A safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff are far and away the driving forces behind parents' decisions regarding what their child did during the 2019 summer.

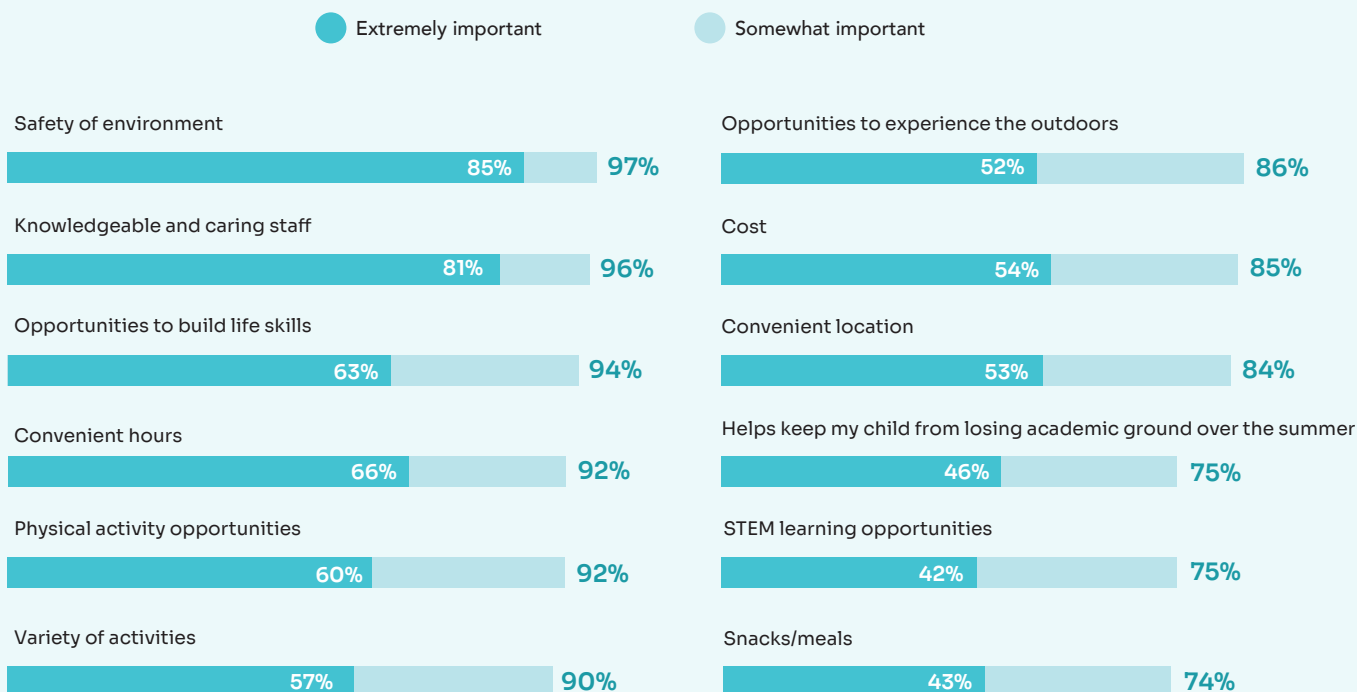
Nearly all parents report that safety (97 percent) and a knowledgeable and caring staff (96 percent) were important in their selection of their child's summer activities; more than 4 in 5 parents say that those factors were extremely important (85 percent and 81 percent, respectively) (*Figure 8*).

Parents are much more likely to report that they wanted activities that were engaging, offered choice, and kept their child active and outside than activities that focused on academics. While 3 in 4 parents (75 percent) say that it was important to them that a summer experience helped keep their child from

losing academic ground over the summer, even more parents say that opportunities to build life skills (94 percent), physical activity (92 percent), the variety of activities in a program (90 percent), and opportunities to experience the outdoors (86 percent) were important when choosing their child's summer activities.

**Figure 8:** Safety and staff quality are key drivers in summer program selection, but opportunities to build life skills, physical activity, and a variety of activities are also priorities for parents

Percentage of parents reporting the select following items were important in choosing what their child does over the summer



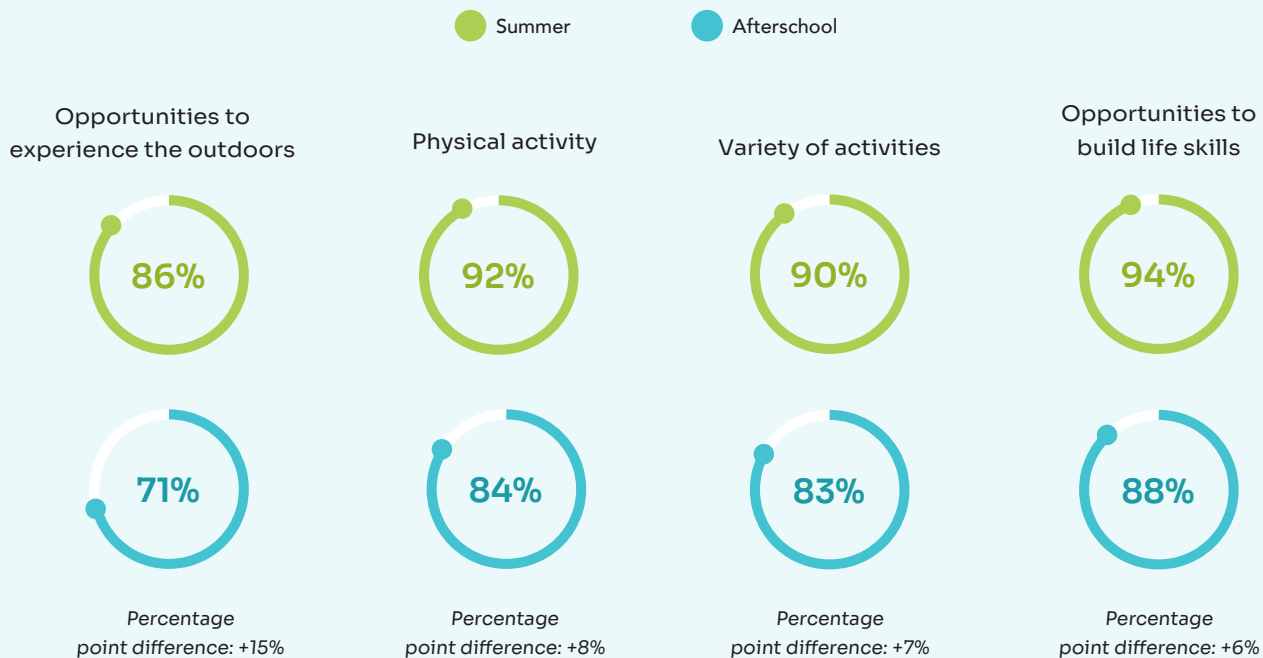
## Parents want summer to be different than the school year

Results from America After 3PM reveal differences in parents' priorities for their children during the summer compared to the school year. A program's safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff are of most importance to parents when selecting their child's afterschool program, which is similar to parents' priorities for their child's summer plans. However, parents are more likely to report that factors such as opportunities to experience the outdoors (15 percentage point difference), physical activity (8 percentage point difference), a variety of activities (7 percentage point difference), and opportunities to build life skills (6 percentage point difference) were important in their decision-making process when selecting a summer program than when selecting an afterschool program (*Figure 9*).



**Figure 9: Parents' priorities for the summer look different than the school year**

Percentage of parents reporting the following items were important in choosing what their child does over the summer and percentage of parents reporting that the items were important in the selection of their child's afterschool program





## SUMMER IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: Opportunities for social interaction and physical activity remain important to parents

Similar to the 2019 findings in America After 3PM, a safe environment (90 percent) and knowledgeable and caring staff (88 percent) are the top two factors parents say were important when choosing their child's activities for the 2020 summer, followed closely by opportunities to build life skills (85 percent), and time for their children to interact with peers and supportive staff (84 percent). Roughly 4 in 5 parents report that physical activity (80 percent), a variety of activities (79 percent), STEM learning opportunities (79 percent), and helping keep their child from losing academic ground over the summer (78 percent) were important in selecting their child's summer experiences. Eighty-six percent of parents say safety and cleaning precautions against COVID-19 were important in their choice.

### Top 10 activities and supports parents report as important in selecting their child's summer experience during the pandemic:

|    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 1  | Safe environment  | 90% |
| 2  | Knowledgeable and caring staff                                    | 88% |
| 3  | Safety and cleaning precautions against the coronavirus           | 86% |
| 4  | Opportunities to build life skills                                | 85% |
| 5  | Opportunities for social connections with peers and caring adults | 84% |
| 6  | Physical activity opportunities                                   | 80% |
| 7  | Variety of activities   | 79% |
| 8  | STEM learning opportunities                                       | 79% |
| 9  | Helps keep my child from losing academic ground over the summer   | 78% |
| 10 | What my child has enjoyed before                                  | 77% |

### Summer programs are a critical resource for families with low incomes

Families with low incomes are more likely than families with higher incomes to look to their child's summer experience to provide a wide range of supports. Although families with low and higher incomes are similarly likely to report that a safe environment (86 percent and 85 percent, respectively) was extremely important in selecting their child's summer experience, parents with low incomes are much more likely to report that other activities and supports are of extreme importance to them. For example, double-digit differentials distinguish the value that low- and high-income families place on programming to reduce risky behaviors (23 percentage point difference), snacks and meals (21 percentage point difference), preventing their child from losing academic ground (14 percentage point difference), and helping build life skills (13 percentage point difference), as well as programs providing a variety of activities (12 percentage point difference), music or arts (11 percentage point difference), or STEM learning opportunities (10 percentage point difference) (*Figure 10*).

**Figure 10:** Parents with low incomes were more likely to report activities and supports of extreme importance in selecting their child’s summer experience\*

Percentage of parents reporting the following items were extremely important in choosing what their child did over the summer



\*Percentage point calculations may be different due to rounding



## SUMMER IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: Addressing summer hunger

For many families, access to nutritious meals is a critical challenge during the summer, when schools are closed and millions of children from families with low incomes lose access to the school breakfasts, lunches, and afterschool meals they receive during the regular school year. Such concerns were all the more pressing in the summer of 2020 because of the pandemic. More than 3 in 4 parents with low incomes (77 percent) report that providing snacks and meals was important in their selection of a summer program, with 51 percent reporting that it was extremely important.

At the same time, summer program providers with more than 75 percent of students from low-income families express concern that their students experienced food insecurity (93 percent), and a majority (55 percent) report that they expanded their program offerings and served as a meals distribution site or delivered meals to families of students during the 2020 summer. For example, in Charlotte, North Carolina, our BRIDGE for KIDS, which serves K-8<sup>th</sup> grade students from families with low incomes who represent 22 different cultures and more than 80 percent of whom are English language learners, distributed tens of thousands of meals to local immigrant and refugee families throughout the pandemic. The program also kept students engaged in learning, and served as a liaison between schools and families, checking in with students whose teachers noticed were missing online sessions and translating materials from the school for parents.

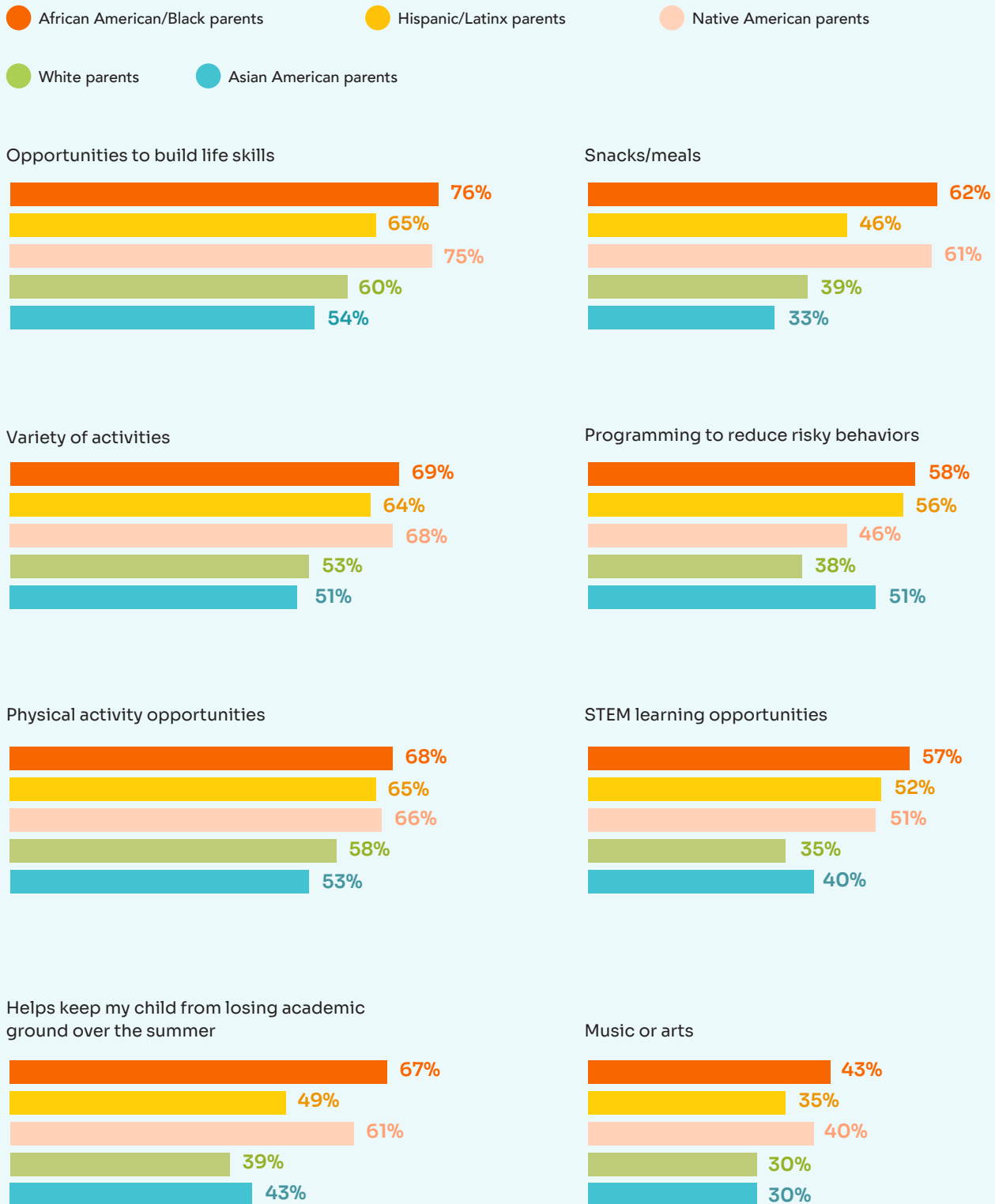
### Differences in priorities by race and ethnicity

A safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff top the list of experiences and learning opportunities families, regardless of race or ethnicity, say are most important. However, African American, Hispanic, and Native American parents are much more likely than White and Asian American parents to say that a variety of activities, snacks and/or meals, physical activity, building life skills, and academic enrichment, including keeping their child from losing academic ground and STEM learning opportunities, were extremely important to them when selecting their child's summer activities. For example, 69 percent of African American parents, 68 percent of Native American parents, and 64 percent of Hispanic parents report that a variety of activities was extremely important in their selection, compared to 53 percent of White parents and 51 percent of Asian American parents. The biggest differences in priorities emerges between African American and Native American parents reporting the importance of keeping their child from losing academic ground compared to White parents (a 28 and 21 percentage point difference, respectively), the availability of snacks and/or meals (a 23 and 22 percentage point difference, respectively), and STEM learning opportunities (a 22 and 16 percentage point difference, respectively) (*Figure 11*).



**Figure 11: Parents' priorities for the summer differ by race and ethnicity**

Percentage of parents reporting the select following items were extremely important in choosing what their child does over the summer, by race and ethnicity





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## **A summer divided: The need for more summer opportunities**

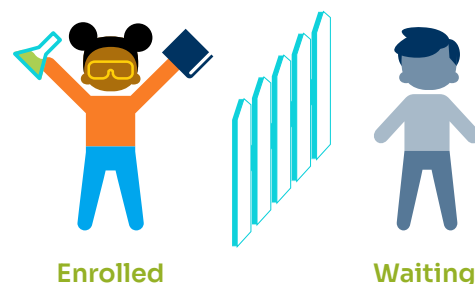
# A summer divided: The need for more summer opportunities

Despite the increase in the number of families with a child in a summer program, America After 3PM finds that the increase in summer program participation is driven largely by families with higher incomes, and unmet demand for summer programs is high, especially among families with low incomes.

Overall, 13.9 million children, nearly 1 in 3 (31 percent), not in a program during the 2019 summer would have been enrolled in one. Measuring participation in a summer program against unmet demand, for every child in a summer program, another would have been enrolled in a program if one were available. Across the years, America After 3PM has tracked the percentage of families who did not have a child in a summer program, but would have liked to enroll their child if a program were available. At the household level, unmet demand for summer programs has remained high and persistent from 2009 to 2020, (56 percent and 57 percent, respectively), with most families who did not have a child in a summer program reporting that they would have liked to enroll their child in a program.<sup>6</sup>

For families with low incomes, at both the child and household levels, unmet demand for summer programs is greater than for households with higher incomes. More than 1 in 3 children living in households with low incomes (35 percent) would have been enrolled in a summer program if one were available to them compared to 28 percent of children in families with higher incomes. Sixty-two percent of families with low incomes report that they have a child they would have liked to enroll in a summer program, compared to 53 percent of families with higher incomes.

For every child in a summer program, **one more child** would have been enrolled in a program if one were available.

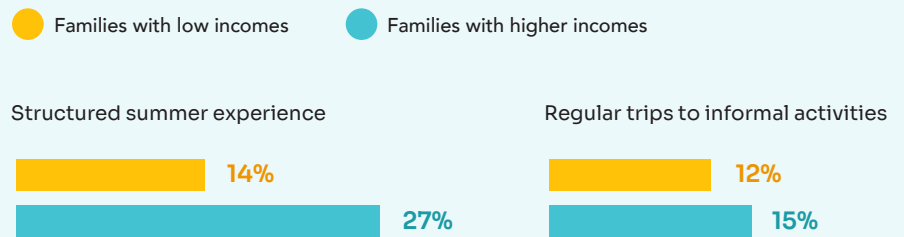


<sup>6</sup> In 2014, the survey questionnaire was updated to ask the question in a different manner. All respondents surveyed were asked, “During the 2014 summer, do you want any of your children to participate in a summer learning program—that is, a safe, structured program that provides a variety of activities designed to encourage learning and development during the summer months,” with 51 percent of families responding in the affirmative.

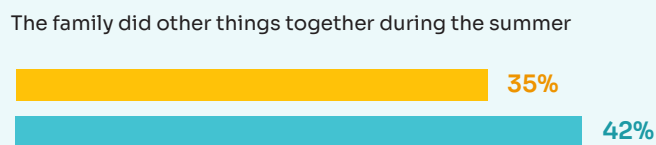
America After 3PM data also reveals a stark contrast between the summer experiences of children depending on their families' income level. Summers for children in families with higher incomes are more likely to include enrichment and family activities, with children in families with higher incomes much more likely to take part in a structured summer experience (27 percent vs. 14 percent) or have regular trips to informal activities such as the library or park (15 percent vs. 12 percent) (**Figure 12**). Moreover, among families without a child in a structured summer experience, families with higher incomes are more likely than families with low incomes to report that it was owing to the fact that they did other things together during the summer (42 percent vs. 35 percent).

**Figure 12:** Summer experiences for children in low-income and in higher income families

Percentage of children participating in the following summer experiences



**Among families without a child in a summer program, percentage reporting:**



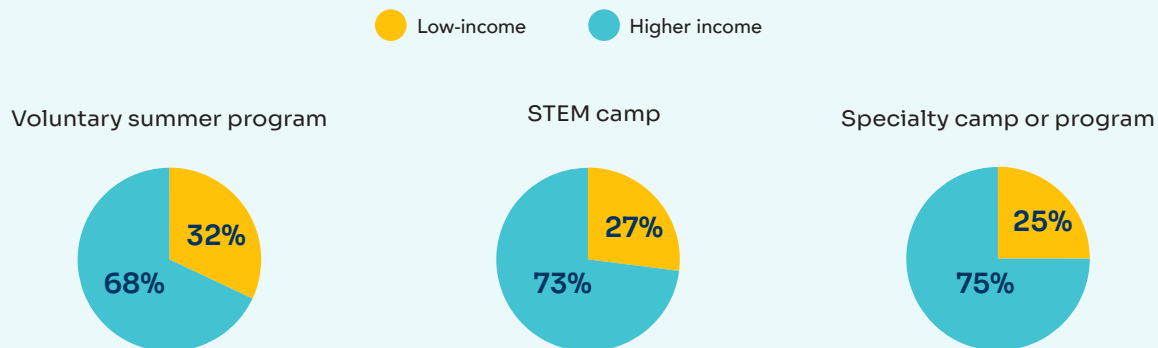
Within the universe of children participating in a structured summer experience, differences by income level can also be seen. For example, higher income children are nearly three times more likely to participate in a structured summer experience than children from lower income families; 9.2 million higher income children compared to 3.3 million low-income children. Approximately 3 in 4 children who were in a structured

summer experience were in families with higher incomes (74 percent), compared to 1 in 4 children from families with low incomes (26 percent). While children in families with low incomes comprise a slightly larger share of children in voluntary summer programs (33 percent), they only account for a quarter of children participating in STEM camps (27 percent) and specialty camps or programs (25 percent) (**Figure 13**).

Comparing trend data at the household level, although the percentage of families with low incomes reporting that their child took part in a summer program increased slightly between 2013 and 2019 (34 percent vs. 38 percent), the percentage of families with higher incomes reporting that their child was in a summer program jumped from 33 percent in 2014 to 53 percent in 2019.

**Figure 13:** Summer experiences for children in low-income and in higher income families

Percentage of children participating in the following summer experiences



**Figure 14:** Top five reasons families reported why they chose not to enroll their child in a summer program

**Low-income families**

|   |   |     |
|---|---|-----|
| 1 | Programs too expensive  | 44% |
| 2 | Family does other things over the summer  | 35% |
| 3 | Issues with location or transportation  | 23% |
| 4 | I don't know what programs are available for my child   | 23% |
| 5 | No programs, or spaces in programs, were available relevant to my children's needs or interests | 17% |

**Higher income families**

|   |   |     |
|---|---|-----|
| 1 | Family does other things over the summer  | 42% |
| 2 | Programs too expensive  | 35% |
| 3 | Issues with location or transportation  | 18% |
| 4 | No programs, or spaces in programs, were available relevant to my children's needs or interests | 18% |
| 5 | I don't know what programs are available for my child   | 16% |

Children in families with low incomes were much more likely to spend their summers in the care of family members than children in families with higher incomes. At the household level, children in families with low incomes were more likely than their peers with higher incomes to be in the care of a parent or guardian (76 percent vs. 65 percent), a grandparent (26 percent vs. 22 percent), or a sibling (16 percent vs. 11 percent) during the summer. At the same time, children in families with low incomes were less likely to look after themselves than children in families with higher incomes (17 percent vs. 22 percent).

**The cost of summer activities puts them out of reach for many families with low incomes**

For families who did not have a child in a summer program, the cost of summer programs and families having other summer plans were tied as the primary reasons why parents chose not to enroll their child in programs (39 percent, all).

However, for families with low incomes, the cost of programs was by far the most common reason for not enrolling their child in a summer program.

The cost of a program was a greater barrier to children's participation in structured summer experiences for families with low incomes than for families with higher incomes (44 percent vs. 35 percent) (Figure 14). Cost was also a higher priority for low-income families with a child in a structured summer experience; 65 percent of families with low incomes report that program costs were extremely important in their decision regarding what their child did over the summer, compared to 50 percent of higher income families with a child in a structured summer experience.

An examination of the average cost of summer programming for families during the 2019 summer, among families who paid for their child to take part in summer activities, offers a window into why some families with low incomes

may view structured summer activities for their children as cost-prohibitive. Parents identified the average costs of 2019 summer activities as ranging from an estimated \$758 for voluntary summer programs to upwards of \$900 for STEM camps per child during the course of a summer.<sup>7</sup> The reported cost of camps and specialty programs was higher than voluntary summer programs, with parents spending an average of \$920 on STEM camps and \$886 on specialty camps or programs during the 2019 summer. Additionally, more than 1 in 3 parents (35 percent) report paying on average more than \$200 a week for their child's STEM camp, and 1 in 4 parents (26 percent) report paying on average more than \$200 a week for a specialty camp or program.

Moreover, the data reveals an inverse relationship between the cost of programs and the types of experiences families with low incomes enroll their child in. Among families with low incomes, participation in voluntary summer programs is both the

<sup>7</sup> The average cost of summer activities is based on a calculation using the average cost per week of summer programs and the average number of weeks children attended summer programs, as reported by parents.

highest reported summer experience and the experience with the lowest reported average cost per week. At the other end of the spectrum, participation in college readiness programs is the lowest reported summer experience among families with low incomes and has the highest reported cost (Figure 15).

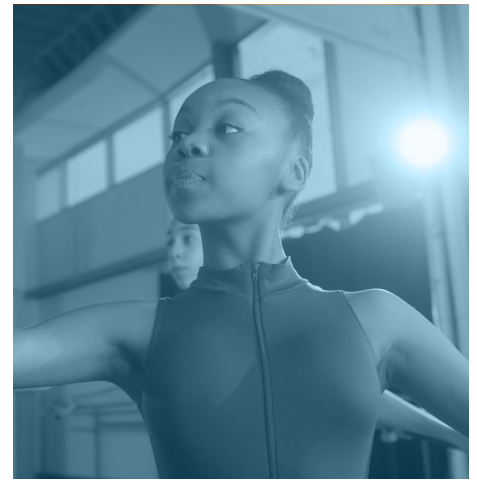
**Transportation and knowledge about programs are also barriers to participation**

More families with low incomes report that location and lack of awareness of programs in the area were challenges to enrolling their child in a summer activity than families with higher incomes. Close to 1 in 4 parents with low incomes

report that issues with transportation or location (23 percent) or not knowing about available programs in the area (23 percent) factored into their decision not to enroll their child in a summer program, compared to 18 percent and 16 percent of families with higher incomes, respectively. Parents with low incomes are also slightly more likely than parents with higher incomes to say that summer programs were not available in their community (15 percent vs. 12 percent).

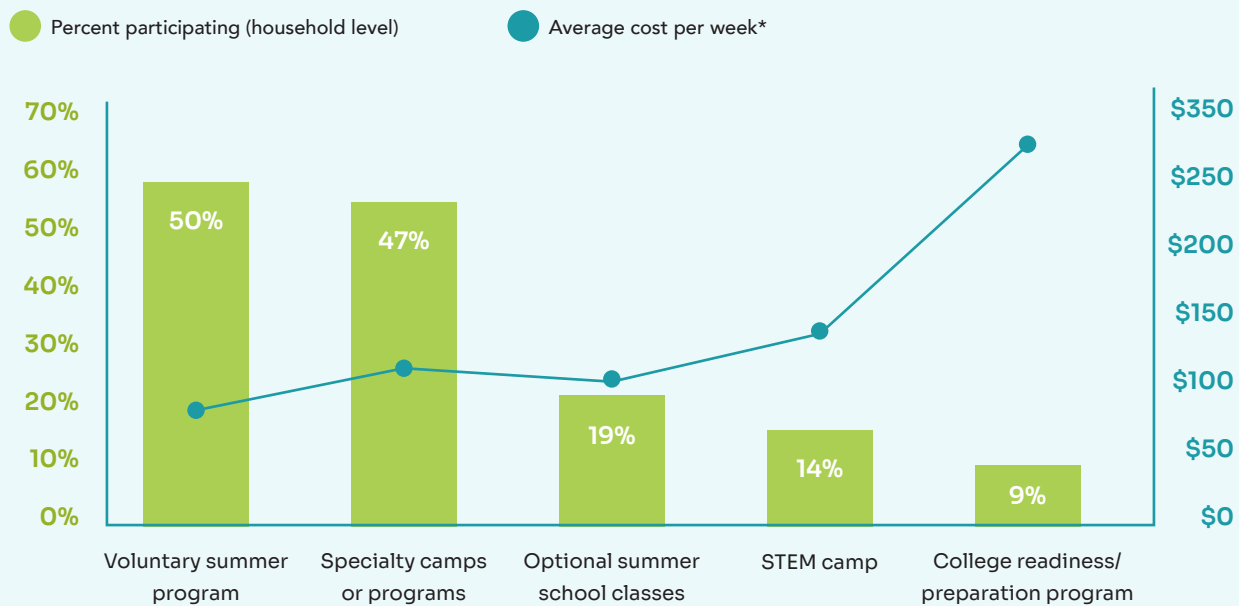
Along similar lines, families with low incomes with a child in a structured summer experience are much more likely than families with higher incomes to report that program convenience, such as location or transportation provided by the program (62 percent vs. 50 percent), and

the program being the same one that their child participated in during the school year (33 percent vs. 22 percent), were extremely important in the decision about their child's summer activity.



**Figure 15:** Families with low incomes were the most likely to report their child participating in voluntary summer programs, which also had the lowest reported average cost among structured summer activities with associated costs

Percentage of parents with low incomes reporting they had a child participating in the following activities and the average reported cost of programs by low-income families



\*Among families reporting paying for programming



## SUMMER IN THE TIME OF COVID-19:

### Unmet demand for summer programming remains high

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

A 2020 summer survey of program providers found that, on average, summer programs served approximately half as many children in 2020 as they

served in 2019 due to social distancing guidelines and reduced student-to-staff ratios. Among program providers serving students in person, 40 percent reported having a waitlist for their summer program in 2020.

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

## The Evidence Base for Summer Programming

Dozens of evaluations have documented the positive benefits for children who participate in summer learning programs. Below are examples of the evidence base behind summer programming:

### **Every Summer Counts: A Longitudinal Analysis of Outcomes from the National Summer Learning Project**

A five-year study conducted by RAND following close to 6,000 students in five school districts—Boston; Dallas; Pittsburgh; Rochester, New York; and Duval County, Florida—found positive academic gains among randomly assigned program participants compared to the control group. Students who attended summer learning programs for two consecutive summers outperformed control group students in math, language arts, and social and emotional skills.

### **Investing in Successful Summer Programs: A Review of Evidence Under the Every Student Succeeds Act**

In this review, RAND highlights 43 summer programs that meet the criteria for the Every Student Succeeds Act's three tiers of evidence—strong, moderate, and promising evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of a program. For example, the report describes Higher Achievement Summer Academy, a six-week, school-based summer program for underserved students that includes academic instruction, electives such as sculpture and martial arts, and weekly field trips. A randomized control trial found that students in the program reported a greater enjoyment of learning and higher likelihood of wanting to attend a competitive high school than their non-participating peers.

**Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success, 2nd Edition**—This report takes lessons about implementation learned from the National Summer Learning Project—a long-term study of voluntary summer programs that included 900 interviews and observed more than 2,000 hours of classroom and enrichment activities—and distills the data gathered into guidance on how to develop high-quality summer programs.



# IV

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**More parents than ever before  
support public funding for  
summer programs**



# More parents than ever before support public funding for summer programs

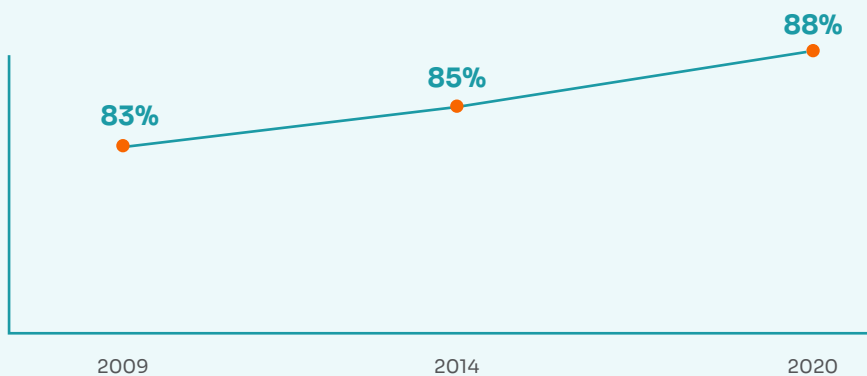
The 2020 edition of America After 3PM finds that support for public investment in summer learning opportunities continues to grow.

America After 3PM gauges the level of support for investment in summer learning, asking parents if they favor or oppose public funding for summer learning opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Eighty-eight percent of parents are in favor of public funding for summer learning opportunities for students in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth, an increase from 83 percent in 2009 and 85 percent in 2014. A majority of parents (57 percent) are strongly in favor of public funding (*Figure 16*).

Overwhelming majorities of parents across zip codes and political affiliations support public funding for summer learning opportunities, demonstrating broad approval of increasing access to summer programs. For example, 92 percent of Democrats, 88 percent of Independents, and 86 percent of Republicans are in favor of public funding for summer learning opportunities. Examined with a state-by-state lens, support is consistently strong, ranging from 94 percent in New Mexico to 81 percent in North Dakota and Wyoming (*Figure 17*).

Support is particularly high among families living in urban communities (91 percent), households where both parents are working (90 percent), and Hispanic parents (90 percent).

**Figure 16:** Support for summer learning opportunities continues to grow  
Percentage of parents reporting they are in favor of public funding for summer learning opportunities



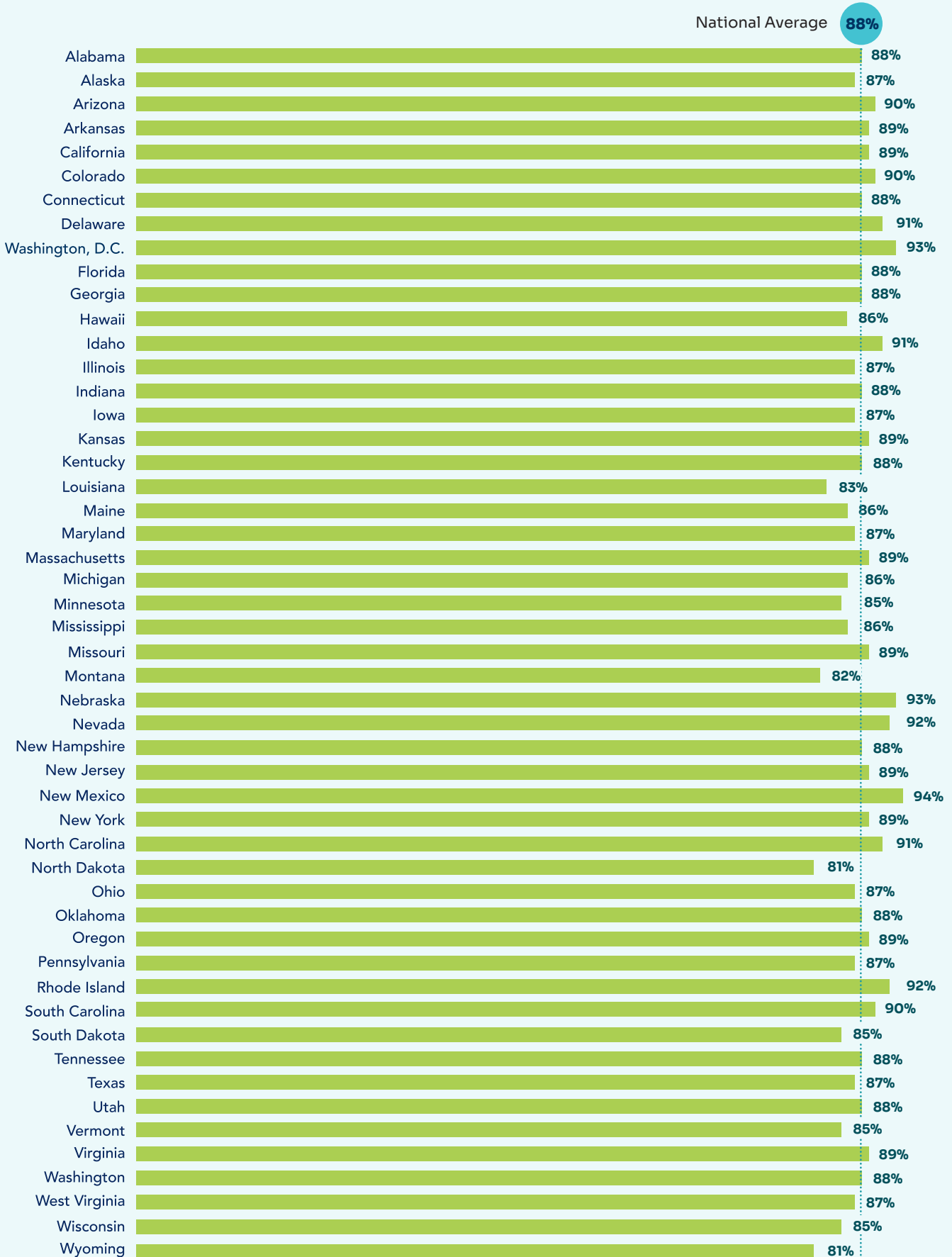
## SUMMER IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: 5 in 6 parents support public funding of summer learning opportunities

In an October 2020 nationwide survey of parents, 84 percent report that they are in favor of public funding for summer learning opportunities for students in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth, demonstrating that public support for summer programming remains high during the pandemic. The same survey finds that approximately 4 in 5 parents (79 percent) agree with the statement that, “all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs.”

<sup>8</sup> The 2014 and 2020 editions of America After 3PM asked about “summer learning opportunities,” whereas the 2009 edition of America After 3PM asked about “afterschool and summer learning opportunities”.

**Figure 17:** Nationwide, parents are in favor of public funding for summer programs

Percent of parents in favor of public funding for summer programs





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# Conclusion

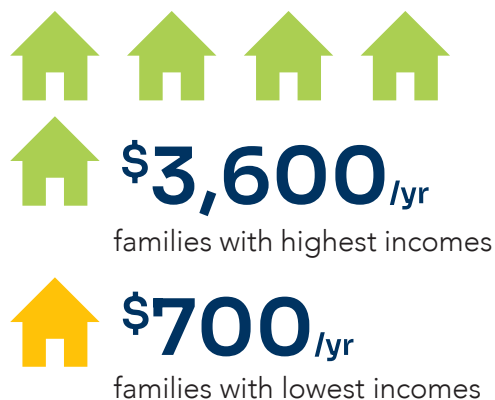
# Conclusion

A 2019 report by the National Academies of Science's Committee on Summertime Experiences and Child and Adolescent Education, Health, and Safety stated, "The summer months present youth with opportunities for academic, physical, and social and emotional growth but also the possibility of stagnation or decline."<sup>9</sup> *Time for a Game-Changing Summer* confirms the need for enriching, engaging summer choices, both prior to and during the pandemic. The relatively low levels of participation in summer activities, together with the barriers to participation and the large unmet demand this new study finds, demonstrate that more work must be done to give young people, in particular those in underserved communities, the opportunity to take part in summer experiences that will support their learning, development, health, and overall wellness. Students in families with low incomes are 13 percentage points less likely than their peers in families with higher incomes to take part in a summer program and less likely to take part in summer activities that carry greater costs, including STEM camps and other specialty camps and programs.

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

In March 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate passed, and President Joe Biden signed into law, the American Rescue Plan. Among its many provisions is significant one-time funding for afterschool and summer learning programs that support students' academic, social, and emotional needs. The new law designates more than \$1 billion for summer enrichment

Families in the highest-income bracket spend **5x** more on out-of-school time activities each year than families in the lowest-income bracket



activities and allows state and local education agencies to target billions of additional dollars to summer learning programs to help our students recover from the pandemic. With these funds comes the opportunity to listen to parents and youth and design summer learning programs and experiences that meet their needs. State education agencies and school districts now have the resources to work with community-based organizations and reach many of the children and youth who were unable to attend summer programs in the past because of cost barriers. With the stimulus dollars, the country can come closer than ever before to providing every young person with a holistic set of supports during the summer months to help them re-engage, recharge, and rebound from the pandemic.

<sup>9</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). *Shaping Summertime Experiences: Opportunities to Promote Healthy Development and Well-Being for Children and Youth*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/summertime-experiences-and-child-and-adolescent-education-health-and-safety>

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