



The Summer Struggle for Everyday Families: Affording the Opportunities Parents Want for Youth

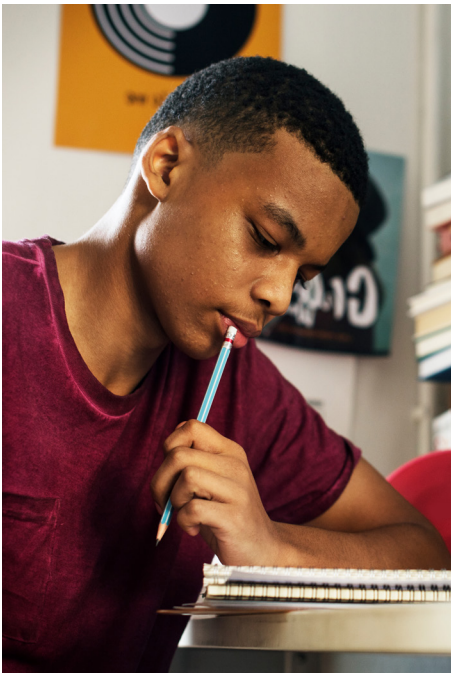
Executive Summary

MAY 2026

Introduction

Summer brings to mind images of exploration and growth—young people outside, making friends, trying new things, and rediscovering old favorites. But for many parents today, thoughts of summer bring on stress and worry: Will they be able to find and afford the kinds of summer opportunities they want for their kids?

This *America After 3PM* summer special report, “The Summer Struggle for Everyday Families: Affording the Opportunities Parents Want for Youth,” offers an in-depth view of parents’ priorities for their children’s summers and how youth actually spent the summer of 2024. The data provides insights on how and why these two visions do not align for many families: One in 2 youth are missing out on the summer programs their parents want for them. Affordability is the main challenge many families face.



Half of children whose parents want them to be in a structured summer experience are missing out, with affordability placing these experiences further out of reach for everyday families

The parents of 24.6 million children want structured summer experiences, such as a summer enrichment or sports program, summer camp, summer school, or a job or internship, for their child. Unfortunately, roughly half of these children (51%)—or 1 in 2 children—are being left out. In all, 12.6 million youth did not get to take part in a program. That's more than the total population of Ohio, the seventh most populous state in the United States.

Affordability is the most significant barrier to summer program enrollment, particularly for low- and middle-income families.

Program cost is the primary challenge families face.

- ▲ Nearly 4 in 10 families (38%) cite cost as a factor influencing their inability to enroll their child in a summer program.
- ▲ Other barriers to summer program participation include: issues with location or transportation (18%), followed by roughly 1 in 10 parents reporting difficulty finding programs (13%), summer programs are not available in their community (13%), program hours did not meet their needs (13%), and lack of open spots in programs (10%).
- ▲ Low- and middle-income families are more likely to report challenges to summer program enrollment than families with high incomes (see Figure 1). By double-digit percentage points, low- and middle-income families are more likely to say that cost was a factor in their decision not to enroll their child in a program than high-income families. Low- and middle-income families are twice as likely as high-income families to report that summer programs are not available in their community.

- ▲ Relative to household income over the summer months, low- and middle-income families are spending a greater slice of their wages on summer programs: for every \$100 earned during the summer, low-income families spend \$10 and middle-income families spend about \$5, while high-income families spend less than \$3 for every \$100 earned (see Figure 2).

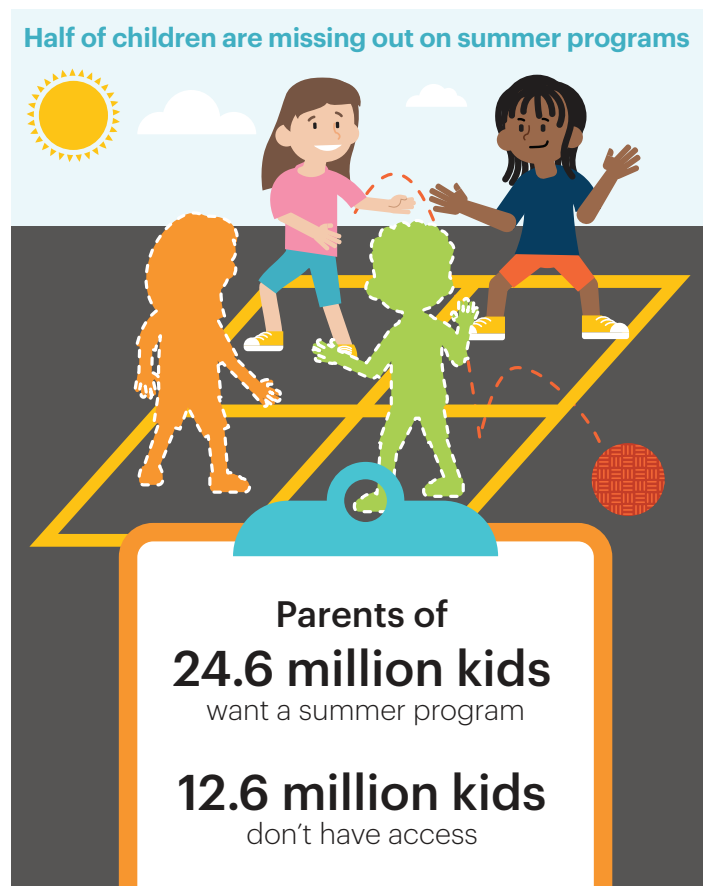


Figure 1. Low- and middle-income families are more likely to face barriers to summer program enrollment than high-income families

Percentage of parents reporting that the following factors influenced their decision not to have their child attend a summer program:

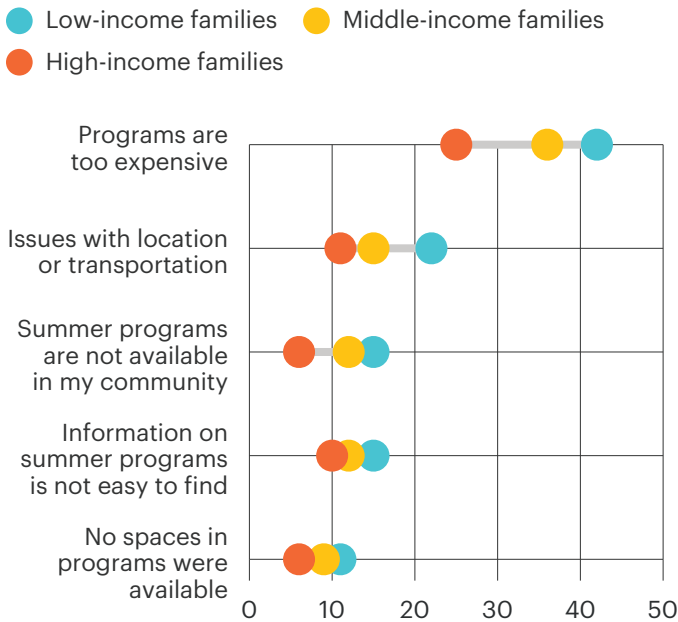
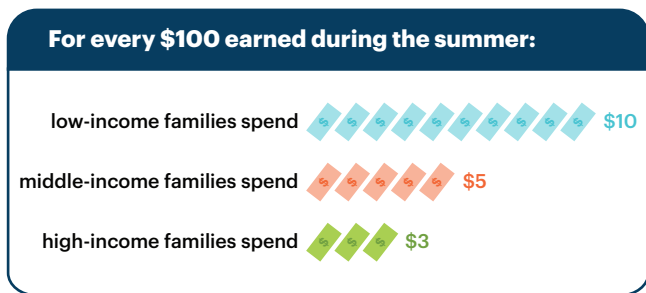


Figure 2. Relative to household income over the summer months, low- and middle-income families are spending a greater portion of their income on summer programs



Structured summer experiences out of reach for many everyday families

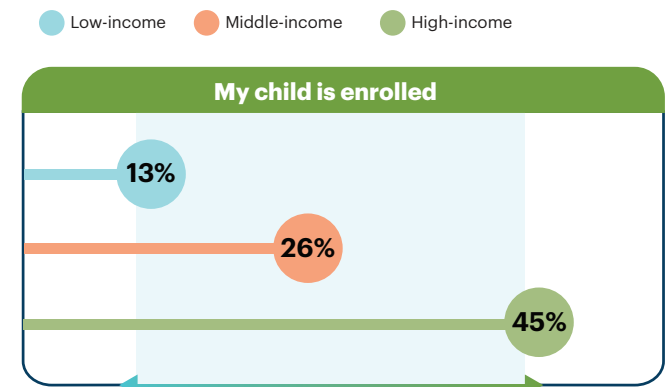
Nearly 1 in 4 children (23%)—or approximately 12 million children—took part in a structured summer experience in 2024. However, summers for children in low- and middle-income families look different than those of their higher-income peers.

- High-income families are more than three times as likely as low-income families to have their child in a summer program and nearly two times as likely as middle-income families (see Figure 3).
- A majority of high-income families enrolled their child in more than one structured summer experience, while low- and middle-income families are most likely to enroll in a singular structured experience over the summer.

At the same time, unmet demand for summer programs is greater among low- and middle-income parents than high-income parents.

- Thirty-seven percent of children in low-income families would be enrolled if a program was available, as would 27% of children in middle-income families, compared to 18% of children in families with high incomes.
- High-income families are more likely to say that they did not enroll their child in a summer program because their family does other things together over the summer than low- and middle-income families (49% vs. 37% and 43%, respectively).

Figure 3. Children in families with high incomes are most likely to be in a summer program



Children in high-income families are **3x more** likely to be enrolled in a summer program than children in low-income families

Parents want children to be safe, active, and engaged, with programs offering fun, educational activities; caring and knowledgeable staff; opportunities to develop key skills; and time to be social, active, and off screens

Safety and program staff are by far the two most important factors for parents when selecting what their child does over the summer. However, also top of mind for parents are factors relating to the program's environment, offerings, and developmental supports for their children:

- ▲ **Environment:** Eighty percent of parents say safety is extremely important. Knowledgeable and caring staff is extremely important for 73% of parents. Additionally, a majority of parents say opportunities to develop a sense of belonging (59%), convenient hours (59%), location (53%), and getting their child excited about learning (52%) are extremely important.
- ▲ **Program offerings:** Sixty-seven percent of parents say time for fun and educational activities and less time on screens is extremely important. Opportunities for physical activities (61%), experiencing the outdoors (56%), and having a variety of activities (56%) are extremely important to parents as well.
- ▲ **Youth development supports:** Roughly two-thirds of parents cite opportunities to build confidence (66%), supporting their child's mental health and well-being (65%), and interacting with other children to build social skills (65%) as extremely important, and about 6 in 10 parents report that developing positive relationships

with other kids in the program (63%), building skills such as teamwork and critical thinking (60%), and time for their child to learn responsible decision making (57%) are extremely important when selecting their child's summer activities.

Parents want different things for their children over the summer versus the school year. Time outdoors, being active, less time on screens, opportunities to build confidence, and participation in a variety of activities are higher on the summer list of priorities.

Parents' priorities for summer programs align in many ways with their priorities for afterschool programs. For both afterschool and summer, safety of environment and staff are the two most important factors for parents. Youth developmental supports, such as supporting their child's mental health and well-being and helping their child interact with their peers and build positive relationships, are also priorities across both time periods.

However, parents' primary considerations for the summer diverge from priorities during the school year in a number of areas, with time outdoors being the largest shift in importance (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Parents value factors such as time outdoors, fun, and physical activity more for their child's summer experience

Percentage of parents reporting the following factors were extremely important when selecting what their child does over the summer and their afterschool program:*

● Summer ● Afterschool

Opportunities to experience the outdoors



Opportunities to build confidence



Opportunities to spend more time on fun and educational activities; less time on screens



Program cost



Physical activity



Variety of activities



*Percentage point differences may not add up due to rounding



Families fortunate enough to have their child in a summer program rate it highly

Parents of the 12 million children taking part in a structured summer experience in 2024 report being pleased with their child's experience and have greater confidence in their child being prepared for the next school year.

- ▲ Ninety-six percent of parents report that they were satisfied with their child's structured summer experience overall, with a strong majority expressing extreme satisfaction (63%). Adjusting results to a score on a scale from 1 to 5, parents' average score for program satisfaction is 4.57.
- ▲ Half of parents with a child in a summer program say that they are extremely confident that their child will be well prepared for the upcoming school year. Parents with a child in a summer program are more likely than parents whose child is not in a program to say that they are extremely confident in their child's readiness for the next school year (50% vs. 43%).



Parents give summer programs high marks

 96%

Satisfaction



A variety of community partners offer structured summer experiences. Children are most likely to participate in specialty camps or programs and voluntary learning and enrichment summer programs.

- ▲ Specialty camps or programs, including arts, drama, sports, religious or STEM camps or programs, and voluntary learning and enrichment summer programs are the most commonly reported activities children took part in during the summer of 2024 (see Figure 5).
- ▲ Optional summer school, work or an internship, a college readiness or preparation program, mandatory summer school, and counselor-in-training programs were less common.

Summer experiences occur across a variety of community settings with a range of community partners—including community-based organizations, schools, city or town facilities, museums or science centers, libraries, colleges or universities, and religious organizations—offering different types of programs.

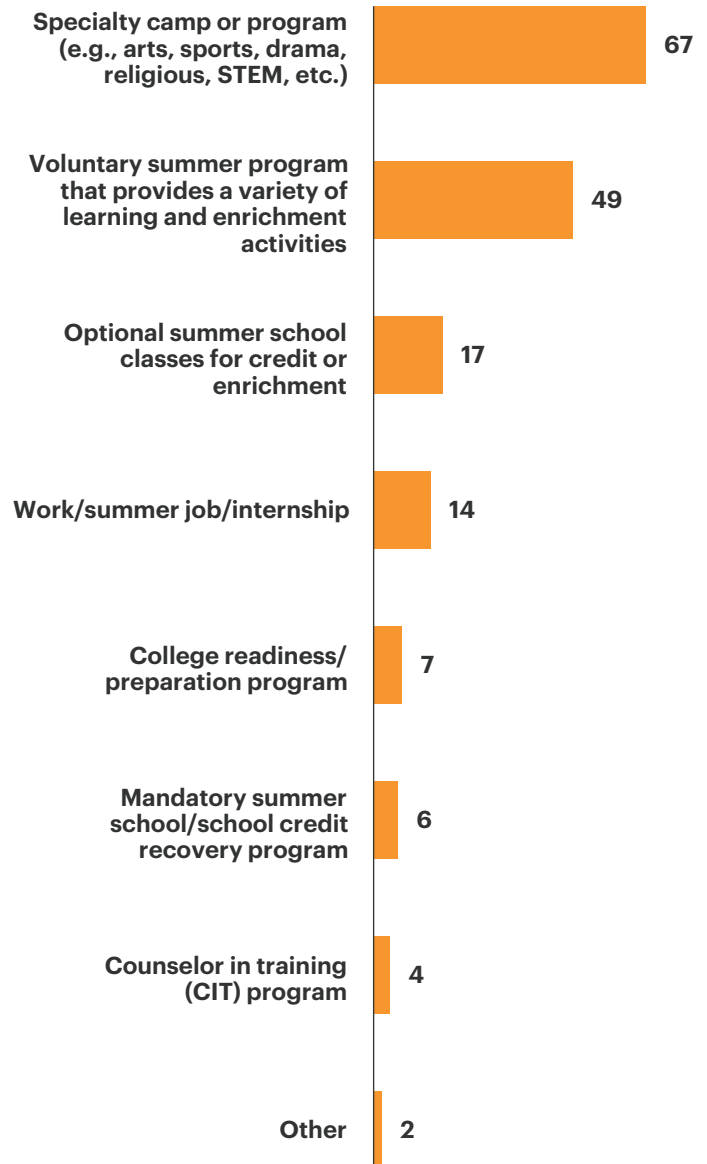
- ▲ Voluntary learning and enrichment summer programs are most often provided by community-based organizations (34%), city or town facilities (32%), and schools (32%).
- ▲ Specialty camps or programs are most likely to be held at city or town facilities and community-based organizations (28%, all).
- ▲ Summer school is most commonly in a school building (64%) but also takes place at community-based organizations (24%), city or town facilities (18%), and libraries (17%).

Community partners power summer programs



Figure 5. Specialty camps or programs were the most commonly reported summer experience, followed by voluntary summer programs

Percentage of parents with a child in a structured summer experience reporting that their child takes part in a:



Parents of every background want summer opportunities for all children and support public funding for programs

Parents are in full support of summer opportunities for young people.

- ▲ Eighty-seven percent of parents agree that all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs, including overwhelming majorities of parents across political parties, communities, regions, and race and ethnicity.
 - **Political affiliation:** At least 5 in 6 parents who identify as Democrat (92%), Independent (85%), or Republican (85%) are in agreement.
 - **Community type:** Most parents living in rural (85%), suburban (88%), or urban communities (88%) agree.
 - **Region:** Parents living in the Northeast (90%), Midwest (87%), South (87%), or West (87%) also agree with this statement.
 - **Race/ethnicity:** Nearly 9 in 10 Asian American (88%), Black (88%), Hispanic (88%), and White parents (87%) also believe that all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs, as do 86% of Native American parents.
- ▲ Eighty-nine percent of parents are in favor of public funding for summer learning opportunities, including a majority (55%) who are strongly in favor.
 - Support has continued to trend upward, increasing from 83% in 2009, to 85% in 2014, to 88% in 2020, and now reaching 89%.
- ▲ Parents in favor of public funding for summer learning opportunities remains strong across demographics.
 - 94% of Democrat, 89% of Independent, and 87% of Republican parents support funding.
 - 87% of parents in rural communities, 89% of parents in suburban communities, and 93% of parents in urban communities are in favor of public funding.

Parents want summer programs



89% of parents favor public funding for summer learning opportunities

Support is strong and bipartisan



94%

Democrats



89%

Independents



87%

Republicans

Policy recommendations and opportunities

Too many young people are missing out on the transformative experiences summer programs provide—where they are able to explore, be creative, form long-term friendships, and build their confidence. Expanding summer opportunities can be achieved by advancing the following policy recommendations.

Increase investment in summer programs.

With 1 in 2 children—or 12.6 million—whose parents want them to be in a structured summer experience missing out, communities across the country need additional resources to create more quality, affordable summer learning programs. Both parents and programs are experiencing an affordability squeeze: *America After 3PM* finds that 38% of families report that cost is an important reason they did not enroll their child in a summer program. And in a 2025 survey, 45% of summer providers said that their program's cost-per-child per week rose over the past year, citing staffing, inflation, and the cost of supplies and food as primary reasons for the increase.¹

The affordability challenge that both families and summer programs are grappling with underscores the urgent need for greater public and private investments in summer learning programs at the national, state, and local levels.

Models to look at:

- ▲ The Summer for All Act:** This proposed legislation would create a new competitive grant program for quality summer enrichment programming, prioritizing programs that: serve rural and underserved communities; reach at-risk students, including those who are chronically absent; and/or provide services and transportation free of charge to children from families with low incomes.²

- ▲ Oregon's Summer Learning Grants:** In Oregon, the legislature allocates state funding to award grants for summer learning programs. Priority points are given in specific areas, including programs serving students experiencing poverty and those in rural communities, with allowable uses including but not limited to, transportation, nutritious snacks and meals, and removing barriers to participation.³

21ST CENTURY COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTERS SUPPORTING STUDENTS DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS

21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative is the only federal funding stream dedicated exclusively to before school, afterschool, and summer learning programs. Every state and Washington, D.C., receives funding based on its share of funding for students from low-income families and supports programs serving students attending high-poverty, low-performing schools. According to the most recent U.S. Department of Education annual report on 21st CCLC programs, nearly 200,000 students in grades K-12 participated in 21st CCLC summer programming and more than 37,000 family members were served.⁶ Students attending 21st CCLC summer programs made gains in their math and reading and language arts assessments and teachers reported students improved their engagement in learning.

Funding for 21st CCLC has largely remained flat over the past decade. After adjusting for inflation, the current funding level is more than \$234 million below the 2015 level.



Target barriers to participation.

Reducing barriers that prevent young people from participating in summer learning programs is a complex challenge with family circumstances—where they live, income, work hours, transportation options, and time and resources available to search for summer options—all having an impact. But, there are a number of steps communities can take to improve access to summer programs.

For example, if families struggle to find a safe way for their child to get to and home from a summer program, grants that cover transportation costs, or grants specifically for transportation, can help programs decrease access challenges for families. If families do not know where to find information on summer programs, schools, community partners, and local leaders can collaborate to create and promote a resource with options for families. One example is in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, where the county’s Department of Children’s Initiatives created an out-of-school time dashboard listing every afterschool, summer, and year-round program in the county.⁴ Programs are displayed on a clickable map, where selecting a site shows the program’s location, hours of operation, ages served, and if available, notes on program fees, if meals are provided, capacity, and transportation.

Create more summer programs that align with parents’ and young people’s priorities.

Based on findings from *America After 3PM*, programs are delivering strong results, with strong parent support and satisfaction. Parents unequivocally want a summer experience where their child will become more confident,

connect with peers, be active, and develop foundational skills such as the ability to communicate, work in teams, think critically, be a leader, and make responsible decisions. They want their children to be safe, in the care of knowledgeable staff, and having fun while learning and being off screens. Summer is a time when children can explore areas of interest, work on passion projects, learn new skills, practice a new sport, and make new friends. Public and private entities can design funding opportunities to align with what parents and young people want in their summer program, ensuring that summer programming is comprehensive and that young people’s summers are spent engaged, excited, and having fun while learning and growing.

Lower barriers to including snacks and meals at comprehensive summer programs.

During the summer months, millions of children lose access to the breakfasts and lunches they receive at school during the school year.⁵ Additionally, 3 in 4 parents report that access to healthy snacks or meals is extremely important when selecting what their child does during the summer.

However, summer programs face multiple challenges to providing snacks and meals, including lack of resources and bureaucratic hurdles. In addition to increasing investment in summer programs, which would help program providers deal with rising food costs, reducing duplicative paperwork and allowing programs to offer more meals may encourage more summer program providers to apply for funding.

Conclusion

This fifth edition of *America After 3PM* shines a light on the painful reality that, while families want a summer where their children can have fun; be engaged in learning and off screens; be active; connect with peers; build their confidence and ability to work in teams; and learn critical thinking and leadership skills, 12.6 million young people are missing out. Summer is a time of possibility and potential for children—highlighted in the full report are examples of students learning to code, getting connected to mentors in a career field of interest to them, visiting museums and science centers to bring lessons to life, and engaging in projects designed to spark curiosity and new interests. At the same time, barriers prevent many young people from accessing a broad range of summer experiences, create a summer of struggle for families, and result in missed opportunities and unrealized potential for young people that can hinder their success in school and life for years. Public support for funding summer learning programs is overwhelming because parents want the nation’s young people to have access to quality summer programs. It

is evident that public will is behind helping more young people take part in enriching, engaging structured opportunities during the summer. Now it’s time to make that wish our nation’s reality.

Endnotes

- ¹ Afterschool Alliance. (2026). *Uncertain Times for Afterschool Programs: Concerns Over Sustainability, Students’ Well-Being, and Federal Actions Top of Mind*. <https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/Uncertain-Times-for-Afterschool-Programs-Wave-12.pdf>
- ² National Summer Learning Association. (n.d.). Summer for All Act. <https://www.summerlearning.org/summerforall/>
- ³ H.B. 2007, 83rd Or. Leg. Assemb., 2025 Reg. Sess. (2025). <https://olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2025R1/Downloads/MeasureDocument/HB2007/Enrolled>
- ⁴ <https://alcogis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/a7c664ec0cf643a793c95b8c166d4354>
- ⁵ Food Research & Action Center. (2025). National School Lunch Program. <https://frac.org/programs/national-school-lunch-program#:~:text=Quick%20Facts,the%202022%E2%80%932023%20school%20year>; Food Research & Action Center. (2024). *Hunger Doesn’t Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report*. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Summer-Report-2024.pdf>
- ⁶ U.S. Department of Education. (2024). 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) analytic support for evaluation and program monitoring: An overview of the 21st CCLC performance data: 2022-2023 (19th report).

To access the full report and methodology, visit aa3pm.co

About the Survey

America After 3PM is a national online survey of parents or guardians of school-aged children, with supplemental interviews conducted by telephone. Data were collected by Edge Research on behalf of the Afterschool Alliance. The fifth edition of *America After 3PM* surveyed 30,515 U.S. parents or guardians with a school-age child living in their household, completing at least 200 interviews in all 50 states and Washington, D.C., between January 31 and April 21, 2025. The overall margin of error for the child- and household-level data is +/- < 1%. Projections for child-level data represent school-age children in the United States, based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s October 2022 Current Population Survey.

The *America After 3PM* special report, “The Summer Struggle for Everyday Families: Affording the Opportunities Parents Want for Youth,” is based on research funded by The Wallace Foundation, which seeks to help all communities build a more vibrant and just future by fostering advances in the arts, education leadership, and youth development.

About the Afterschool Alliance

The Afterschool Alliance is working to ensure that all children have access to affordable, quality afterschool programs. Learn more at afterschoolalliance.org

