

Lost Opportunity
Afterschool in Demand,
But Out of Reach for Many

Executive Summary

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The Afterschool Alliance's fifth edition of *America After 3PM* provides new insights about children and families during the hours of 3 to 6 p.m., when schools let out and many parents are working. Data from parents show afterschool programs remain an urgent priority in 2025, and millions of families who want to participate are missing out. As one parent put it, "If there wasn't an afterschool program, it would create challenges for our family, including finding alternative child care, adjusting work schedules, and potentially increasing stress while managing family responsibilities and daily routine."

The latest findings offer a comprehensive look at the learning opportunities programs offer, how youth and families are benefiting, and the barriers that keep so many from participating. It confirms the enormous demand for

programs: Of the nearly 30 million youth whose parents want afterschool programs, more than 3 in 4 are missing out. That's 22.6 million children whose parents would enroll them if a program were available.

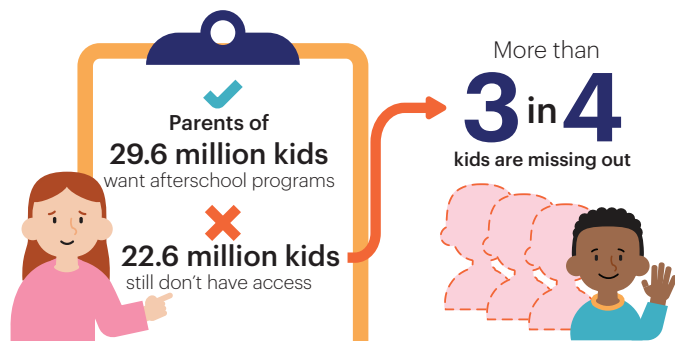
This is the first large-scale report on afterschool since the pandemic. It reflects 20 years of data, capturing parents' views in all 50 states and Washington, D.C., and includes new questions reflecting economic and societal changes, such as the increase in remote and hybrid work, the effect of inflation on households' after school options, and growing concerns about children's well-being. The constant across more than two decades is that parents need afterschool programs and want them funded.



Demand for afterschool programs is enormous

Afterschool programming remains an urgent priority for families in 2025. The new *America After 3PM* survey shows that parents of nearly 30 million children—more than half of all school-age youth—want afterschool programs for their children. This includes the approximately 7 million children who are participating and the 22.6 million children who are not, but whose parents would enroll them if a program were available to them. Concerningly, of the 29.6 million children whose parents want afterschool programs for them, more than 3 in 4 (77%) are being left behind.

Overall demand for afterschool programs is high, with more than 3 in 4 children missing out



Comparing the breakdown of overall demand for afterschool programs by income level, a clear trend appears: Low- and middle-income children are missing out. The percentage of children without access to afterschool programs is highest among low- and middle-income families (84% and 73%, respectively) and is lowest among high-income families (59%).

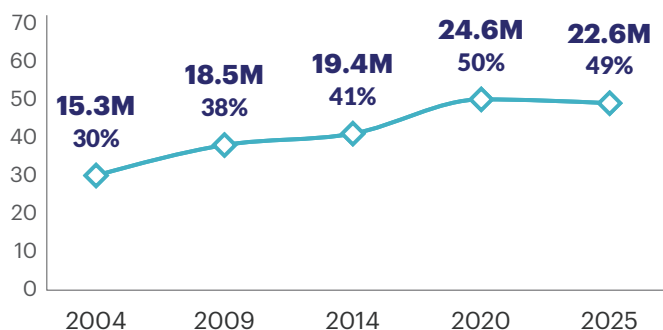
Unmet demand for afterschool programs among children not in a program

Historically, *America After 3PM* has reported out on unmet demand for afterschool programs specifically among children who are not participating in a program:

▲ **Trend data:** The current survey finds that the high level of unmet demand for afterschool programs seen in 2020—a dramatic increase from 2014—persists today (see Figure 1).

- ▲ **Income level:** Approximately half of children in low- and middle-income families not in an afterschool program would be enrolled if a program were available to them (53% and 48%, respectively), compared to 37% of children in high-income families.
- ▲ **Grade level:** More than half the elementary schoolers who are not in an afterschool program (58%) would be enrolled by their parents if a program were available. Nearly half of middle school students and close to 2 in 5 high school students not in an afterschool program would be enrolled if one were available (49% and 38%, respectively).
- ▲ **Community type:** Across community types, unmet demand for afterschool programs is highest in urban areas. Nearly two-thirds of urban children not in an afterschool program would be enrolled in one if available (65%), compared to 45% of children living in a suburban community and 43% of children living in a rural community.
- ▲ **Race and ethnicity:** Parents of a majority of children of color not enrolled in an afterschool program would enroll them if a program were available. This includes 65% of Black children, 60% of Hispanic children, 55% of Asian American children, and 53% of Native American children not currently enrolled. Forty-six percent of White children not in an afterschool program would be enrolled if one were available.

Figure 1. Unmet demand remains at a high level



The percentage of parents reporting on the positive benefits of afterschool programs is largely trending upward over time. For example, agreement that afterschool programs keep kids safe and out of trouble was 66% in 2014 and is currently at a high of 78%. At the same time, belief that programs provide children opportunities to be physically active increased 12 percentage points from 2014 to 2025 and is now at 87%.

Following benefits:*	2025
Opportunities to be physically active	87%
More time doing fun and educational activities and less time on their phones and other screens	86%
Opportunities to learn life skills, like interacting with peers, developing social skills, and responsible decision making	85%
Opportunities to develop skills like teamwork, critical thinking, and leadership	83%
Support mental health and well-being	79%
Keep kids safe and out of trouble	78%
Reduce likelihood that youth will use drugs or engage in other risky behaviors	76%
Excites them about learning, helping improve attendance and attitude toward school	75%

**The full list of benefits can be found in the report at aa3pm.co*



Afterschool programs help parents keep their jobs, be more productive, and feel less stressed

Parents overwhelmingly say that afterschool programs support working families:

- More than 4 in 5 parents (84%) report that afterschool programs help working parents keep their jobs.
- Additionally, 85% report that programs provide working parents peace of mind knowing their children are safe and supervised.
- Agreement is on the rise for both of these findings; each increased 10 percentage points from 2014 to 2025.

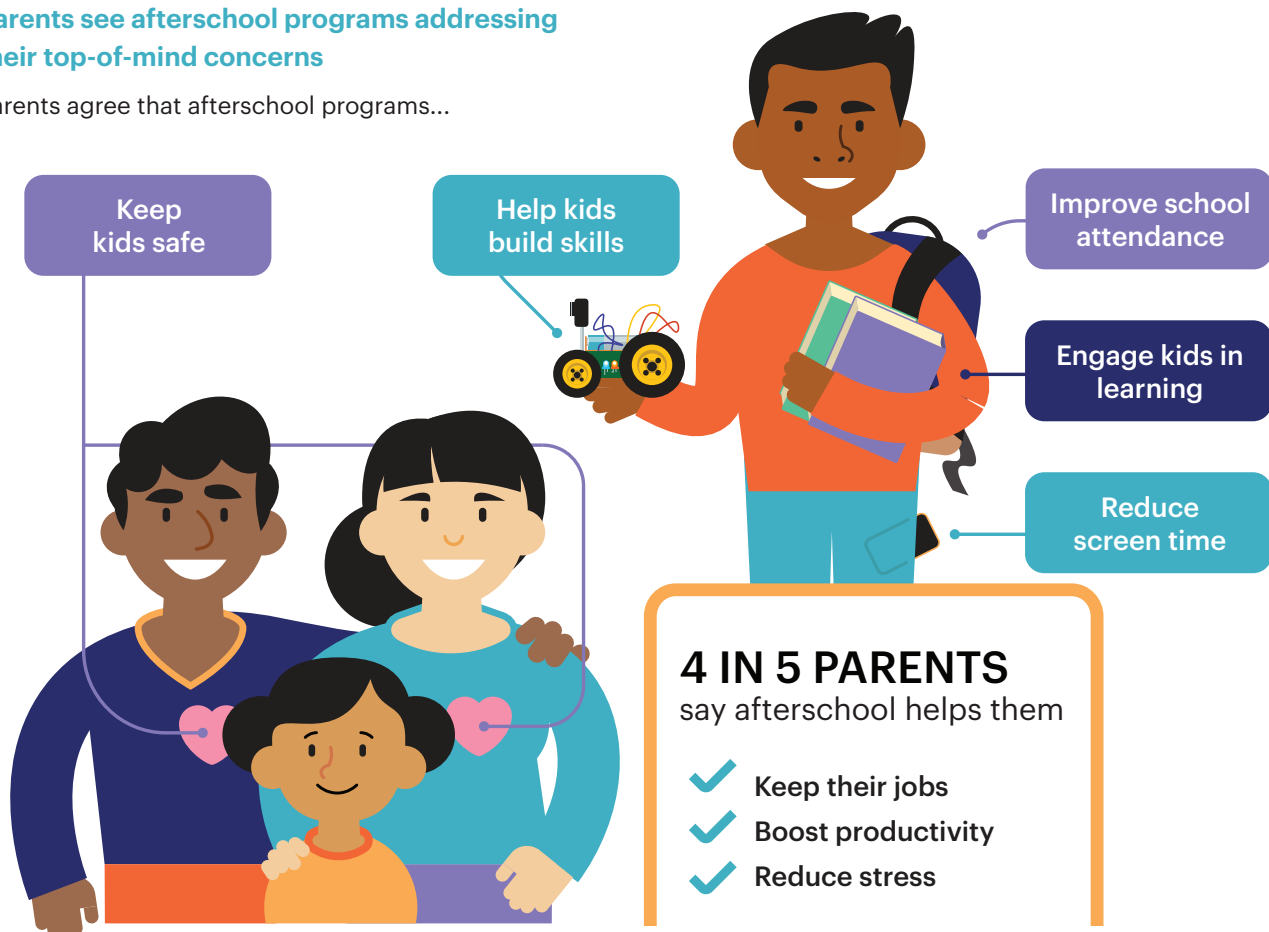
Parents with a child in an afterschool program feel the benefits for themselves:

- More than 9 in 10 parents of afterschool program participants (92%) report that their afterschool programs help them feel less stressed because they know their children are safe.

- Eighty-two percent agree that afterschool programs allow them to keep their jobs or work more hours.
- Similarly, a strong majority of parents with a child in an afterschool program say that their child care arrangements after school positively impact their levels of stress (83%), productivity at work (88%), and their overall well-being (90%).
- Parents with a child in an afterschool program are significantly more likely to report that their child care arrangements after school positively impact their productivity at work, their levels of stress, and their overall well-being than parents whose children are not in a program, with double-digit percentage point differences for each.

Parents see afterschool programs addressing their top-of-mind concerns

Parents agree that afterschool programs...



Program affordability, accessibility, and availability limit participation, with choice most limited for low- and middle-income families

The *America After 3PM* survey finds that cost is the greatest barrier for families who do not have a child in an afterschool program. Accessibility and program availability follow:

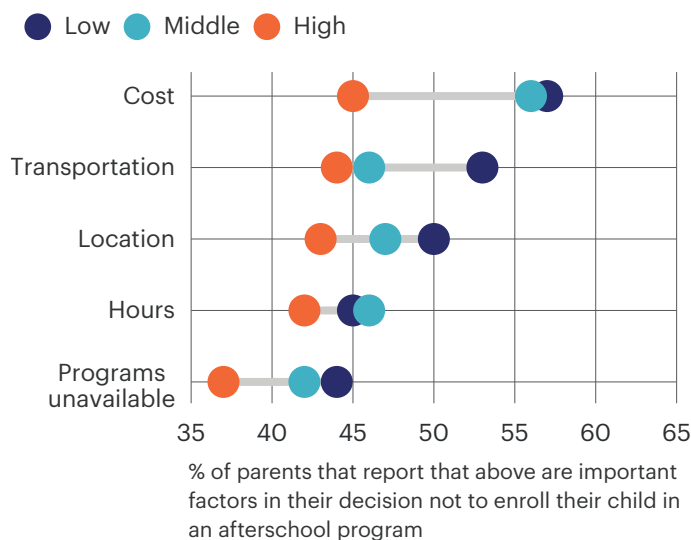
- ▲ **Affordability:** A majority of parents (56%) report that cost is an important factor preventing them from enrolling their child in an afterschool program.
- ▲ **Accessibility:** Nearly half of parents report that their child does not have a safe way to get to and come home from afterschool programs (49%) or that afterschool programs' locations are inconvenient (48%).
- ▲ **Availability:** Availability affects 42% of parents, who report that a lack of programs in their community is an important factor affecting their ability to enroll their child.

For families who were able to enroll their child in an afterschool program, cost and program availability were also challenges. Half of parents agree that it is difficult to afford afterschool programs (50%), and nearly 1 in 4 parents (24%) report that their child was on a waitlist prior to enrollment. Among these parents, 63% said that their child was on a waitlist for more than a month.

Low- and middle-income families face the biggest barriers to accessing afterschool programs

Household income plays a major role in determining whether families can access an afterschool program. Families with low incomes and middle-class families are more likely than high-income families to cite challenges such as cost and program availability (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Low- and middle-income families most likely to face barriers to participation



Higher-income households are investing more heavily in out-of-school time activities, and spending on these activities increased significantly over the past five years

It is not a groundbreaking finding that families' choices for care after school are largely shaped by household income. Yet the growing gap between what families with high incomes are able to spend on their children's out-of-school time activities and the breadth of activities that children in high-income families are able to experience compared to children in families with low incomes, and even their middle-class peers, is troubling.

In 2020, *America After 3PM* found that families in the highest income bracket spent more than five times as much on out-of-school time¹ activities for one child annually than families in the lowest income bracket.² In 2025, families in the highest income bracket now spend approximately nine times as much per year on out-of-school time activities as families in the lowest income bracket: \$6,588 compared to \$734. After adjusting for inflation, spending by families in

The gap between spending by families with high and low incomes has grown



Families with high income spend 9x more on out-of-school time activities than families with low income (\$6,588 vs \$734)

the lowest income bracket decreased, while spending by families in the highest income bracket grew by more than \$2,000. Related, families in the highest income bracket are significantly more likely than families in the lowest income bracket to report that their child takes part in an out-of-school time activity. Ninety-six percent of families in the highest income bracket say that their child is involved in an activity outside of school, 30 percentage points higher than families in the lowest income bracket.

1 Out-of-school time activities includes afterschool program participation, as well as involvement in activities after school such as organized sports, special lessons, clubs, scouting, study groups or tutoring, community service, religious activities, and work.

2 The analysis reviewed *America After 3PM* respondents by household income percentiles/quintiles, with slightly different income breaks in 2020 and 2025: 20th percentile (under \$25,000/under \$30,000), 40th percentile (\$25,000 to just under \$50,000/\$30,000 to just under \$60,000), 60th percentile (\$50,000 to just under \$75,000/\$60,000 to just under \$95,000), 80th percentile (\$75,000 to just under \$100,000/\$95,000 to just under \$150,000), 90th percentile (\$100,000 to just under \$200,000/\$150,000 to just under \$200,000), 90th+ percentile (\$200,000 or more/\$200,000 or more).

Parents with a child in an afterschool program say afterschool programs provide a wide range of benefits

Parents are highly satisfied with their child's afterschool program overall and value the opportunities programs provide:

- Quality and overall satisfaction:** More than 8 in 10 parents (85%) rate the quality of their child's afterschool program as "excellent" or "very good." Ninety-five percent report satisfaction overall with their child's afterschool program, including 60% who are extremely satisfied. When scored on a scale from 1 to 5, parents' average score is 4.23 for program quality and 4.53 for program satisfaction.

Programs earn high marks



- Activities and supports:** A majority of parents are happy with the activities and assistance afterschool programs provide, including physical activity (85%), opportunities for reading or writing (77%), time to experience the outdoors (77%), healthy snacks and meals (75%), and homework help (72%).
- Building foundational skills:** Most parents also report satisfaction with the afterschool program helping their child develop social skills (90%); work on communication, teamwork, critical thinking, leadership, and entrepreneurship skills (82%); learn responsible decision-making (82%); and build their confidence (86%).

- College and career readiness:** Afterschool programs provide opportunities for young people to think about future plans and explore choices for college and career, including work-based learning experiences. Roughly two-thirds of parents of middle and high school students report being satisfied with the college or career exploration opportunities (68%) and work-based learning experiences for their child (64%). Satisfaction is even greater among parents of high schoolers; 77% of parents with a high schooler in an afterschool program are satisfied with the college or career exploration opportunities offered, and 71% are happy with programs' work-based learning experiences, including internships and apprenticeships.



Policy implications and opportunities

The consensus is clear—families need and want more afterschool programs. Fortunately, there are steps that national, state, and local policymakers and others can take to ensure that all families who want their child to take part in a quality afterschool program can do so.

Increase funding for afterschool programs

A majority of families without a child in an afterschool program say that cost was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in a program, with low- and middle-income families most likely to cite cost as a barrier. Greater investment in afterschool programs from the public and private sectors can help increase program availability and access for more families.

- ▲ For example, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative is a federal funding stream that supports afterschool and summer programs, targeting schools and communities where at least 40% of children live in families with low incomes. A 2024 U.S. Department of Education report found that nearly 1.4 million students in close to 10,000 communities participated in 21st CCLC funded afterschool programs.
- ▲ Other federal investments that support afterschool programs include the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) (which can be used for school-age children 5 to 13 and supports approximately 600,000 school-age children each month) and AmeriCorps grant funding (which can support local afterschool programs by providing trained staff members).
- ▲ In addition to support at the federal level, increased funding at the state and local levels can help more children take part in an afterschool program.

Support for public funding for afterschool programs is at an all-time high. Nearly 9 in 10 parents (89%) favor public funding for programs that provide afterschool opportunities to students in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth. This is a steady increase from 83% in 2009, 84% in 2014, and 87% in 2020. Support for public funding is strong across community types, including parents living in rural (87%), suburban (88%), and urban communities (92%), as well as across political affiliations. Ninety-three percent of parents who say that they are Democrat, 89% of parents who are Independent, and 87% of parents who are Republican favor public funding for afterschool programs.

Remove barriers that prevent children from participating in afterschool programs

America After 3PM finds that many families face barriers, such as cost and transportation, when attempting to enroll their child in an afterschool program. Funders can help address accessibility issues through public and private afterschool grants that include transportation as an allowable use, allow programs to braid multiple funding streams as well as assist them in doing so, and incentivize schools to improve families' access to afterschool programs. Specific strategies such as shared use agreements for low- or no-cost space and bussing for programs operated by community-based providers, can lower or remove the barriers to participation that many children and families face.



Invest in afterschool program staff

Parents recognize that the adult staff who interact with their children and other youth in afterschool programs are fundamentally important. More than 9 in 10 parents report that knowledgeable and caring staff in their child's afterschool program was an important reason for choosing their program, including 70% who said it was "extremely important." Providing support to bolster programs' staff recruitment and retention efforts can increase programs' capacity and reduce waitlists, as well as help ensure that the afterschool programs young people participate in are of high quality.

However, surveys of afterschool program providers show that most are concerned about their ability to find or retain staff, as well as their ability to pay staff a livable wage and benefits. Afterschool program providers need additional help to attract and retain a qualified and caring workforce who will serve as role models for students, offer positive and meaningful connections, and create a safe and supportive environment where young people are encouraged to flourish. Strategies could include incentivizing livable and competitive wages, promoting and enhancing professional development, and establishing or supporting more robust career pathways to enter into and grow within the afterschool field.

Align afterschool programs with parents' priorities

According to parents, a program's environment, accessibility, and activities that support their child's well-being are among the most important factors when selecting an afterschool program. Quality afterschool programs are flexible, enabling them to be responsive to the specific needs and interests of their students and families.

When creating afterschool program-related policies and programming, policymakers and education and program leaders should consider strategies that best align with the priorities of parents and the needs of young people served. This could include surveying parents and students, conducting a community needs assessment, or instituting other steps to best align with the priorities of parents and the needs of young people served.

Build afterschool programs' capacity

Providing support for intermediary organizations, such as city and county systems and collaboratives and statewide afterschool networks, can build the capacity of the afterschool field and help providers make programs more accessible for families. Strategies for supporting intermediary organizations include:

- ▲ Strengthening professional development.
- ▲ Providing support for evaluation.
- ▲ Helping programs become sustainable.
- ▲ Providing support for data collection and analysis—such as mapping a state's afterschool programs to determine where there are communities that either do not have an afterschool program provider or do not have an adequate number of programs to meet the demand.

Conclusion

The 2025 *America After 3PM* data make it clear that the task before the nation is even greater than it was just five years ago. However, we also have a strong foundation to build upon. Parents want afterschool opportunities for their kids. Parents and voters support greater public investment to help make that happen. A growing number of state governments are investing in afterschool activities, and there are strong national, state, and city-level intermediaries that can help build the capacity of afterschool programs.

To meet the need for afterschool programs that families across the country are calling for will require concerted support from the public and private sectors, federal, state, and local levels, and the public at large. Our country will be stronger and more successful when all children, regardless of their economic circumstances, can take advantage of all that afterschool programs have to offer—but, sadly, we're nowhere near reaching that goal today.



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.

America After 3PM 2025 is made possible through our partnership with the New York Life Foundation.

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

