



America After 3PM for Middle School Youth

DECEMBER 2025

In California, middle schoolers in City Surf Project's afterschool program not only learn to surf, but also to build their confidence and self-esteem as they step out of their comfort zones and into the ocean. On the opposite coast, Bronx Lacrosse pairs academics and sports, helping middle school students improve academic outcomes, stay active, and learn to be a part of a team. Throughout the nation, afterschool programs serve as a place where middle school youth explore new areas of interest, find their passions, connect with their peers, and develop skills, such as leadership, teamwork, and communication, which will help them in the transition to high school.

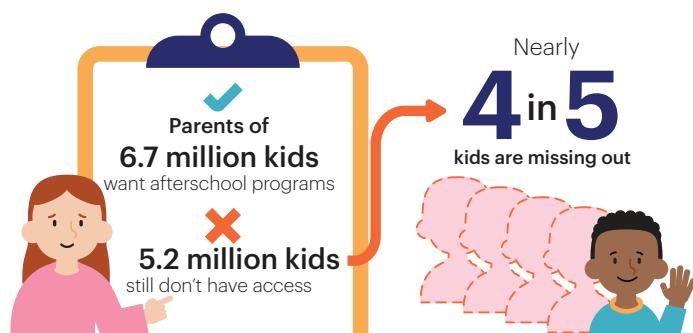
Afterschool Alliance's fifth edition of *America After 3PM* finds that afterschool programs continue to be in demand for families with a middle school student, as parent satisfaction with their middle schoolers' afterschool program reaches an all-time high. However, more middle school students are being left behind as parents report facing challenges to enrollment, including the affordability, accessibility, and availability of programs.

Unmet demand for afterschool programs among middle school youth reaches new high

In 2025, unmet demand for afterschool programs among middle schoolers is higher than ever. The percentage of middle school youth who are not in an afterschool program, but who would be enrolled by their parents if a program were available, is the highest it has been since *America After 3PM* first reported on unmet demand among middle schoolers in 2009 (see Figure 1). Currently, nearly half of middle school students not in an afterschool program would be enrolled by their parents if one were available (49%), a 36% increase since 2004. This translates to 5.2 million middle schoolers who are not in an afterschool program, but whose parents want them to be.

At the same time, middle school youth participating in an afterschool program continues to trend downward after a steady rise between 2004 and 2014. Despite this decrease, middle schoolers' participation in afterschool programs is two times as high as it was in 2004 (see Figure 2).

Overall demand for afterschool programs is high, with nearly 4 in 5 middle schoolers missing out



For middle school youth, unmet demand for afterschool programs is highest among middle schoolers of color, those in low- and middle-income families, and middle school youth living in urban communities (see Figure 3).

Nearly 6.7 million middle schoolers have parents who want afterschool programs for them, including middle school youth already in an afterschool program and those who are not in a program but who would like to be. Of these young people, nearly 4 in 5 (78%) are being left behind.

MIDDLE SCHOOLERS AT HOME ALONE AND UNSUPERVISED CONTINUES TO FALL

Since *America After 3PM* first asked parents in 2004 if their children spend any time between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m. looking after themselves without adult supervision, the number of middle school children alone and unsupervised after school has decreased. In 2025, there are approximately 2 million fewer middle school students on their own after school compared to the two previous decades.

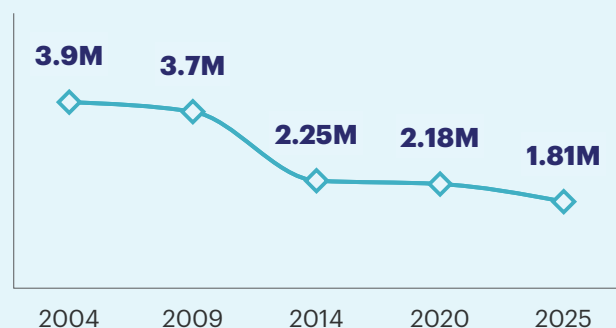


Figure 1. Unmet demand for afterschool programs continues to grow

Percentage of middle school youth not in an afterschool program, but would be enrolled if one were available:

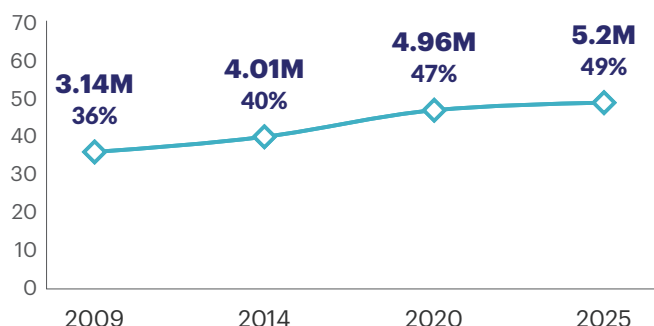


Figure 2. Afterschool program participation declines

Percentage of middle school youth participating in an afterschool program:

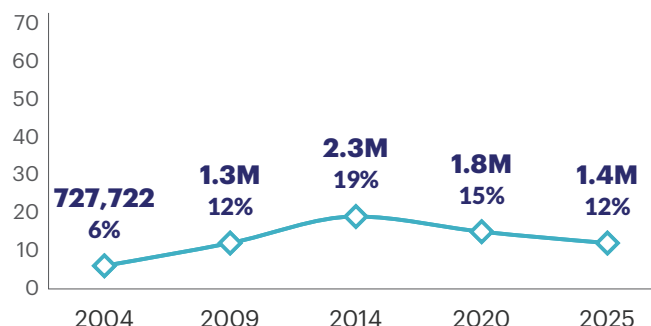
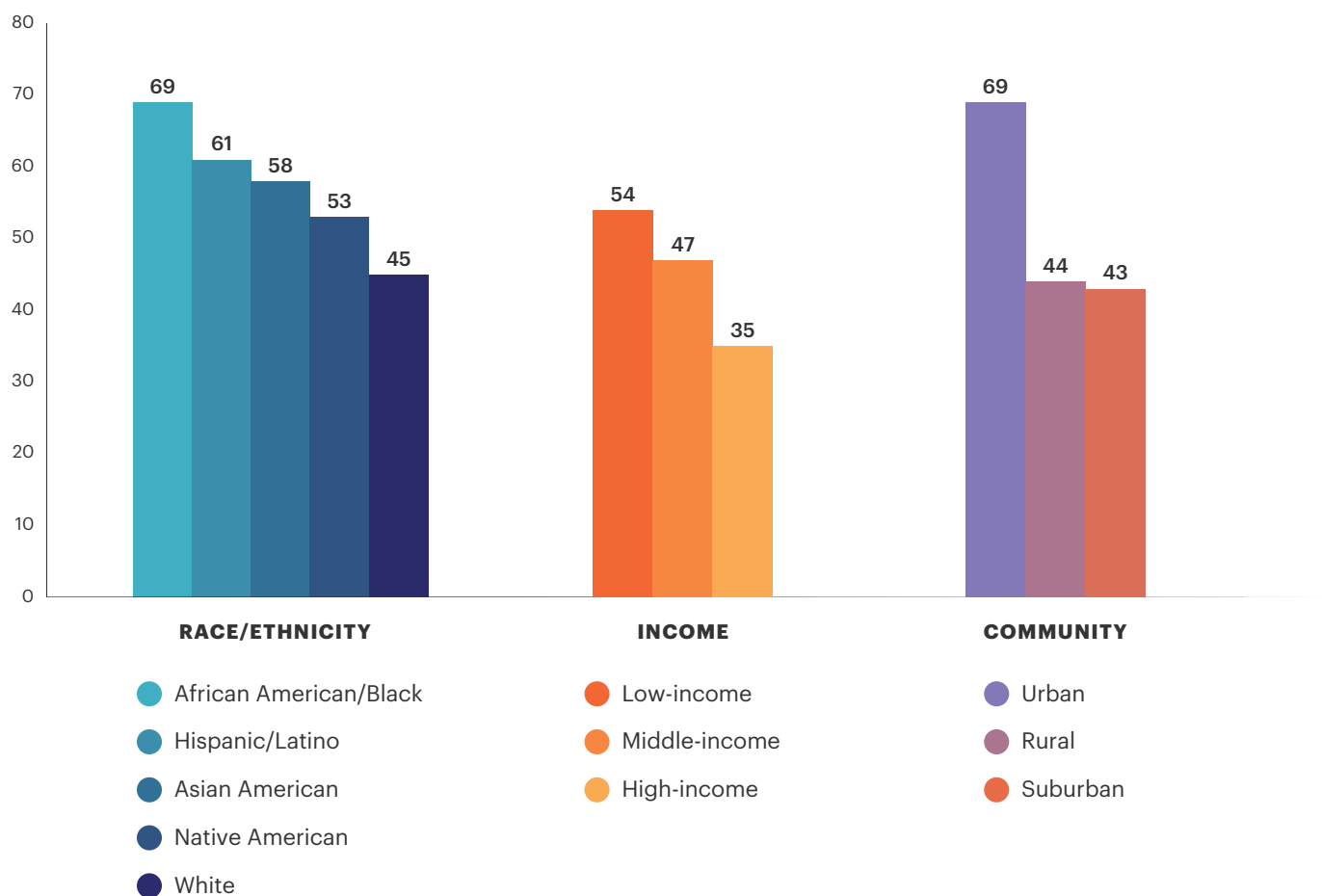


Figure 3. Unmet demand among middle school youth, demographic breaks

Percentage of non-participant children likely to participate in an afterschool program by:



Barriers to afterschool program participation include affordability, accessibility, and availability

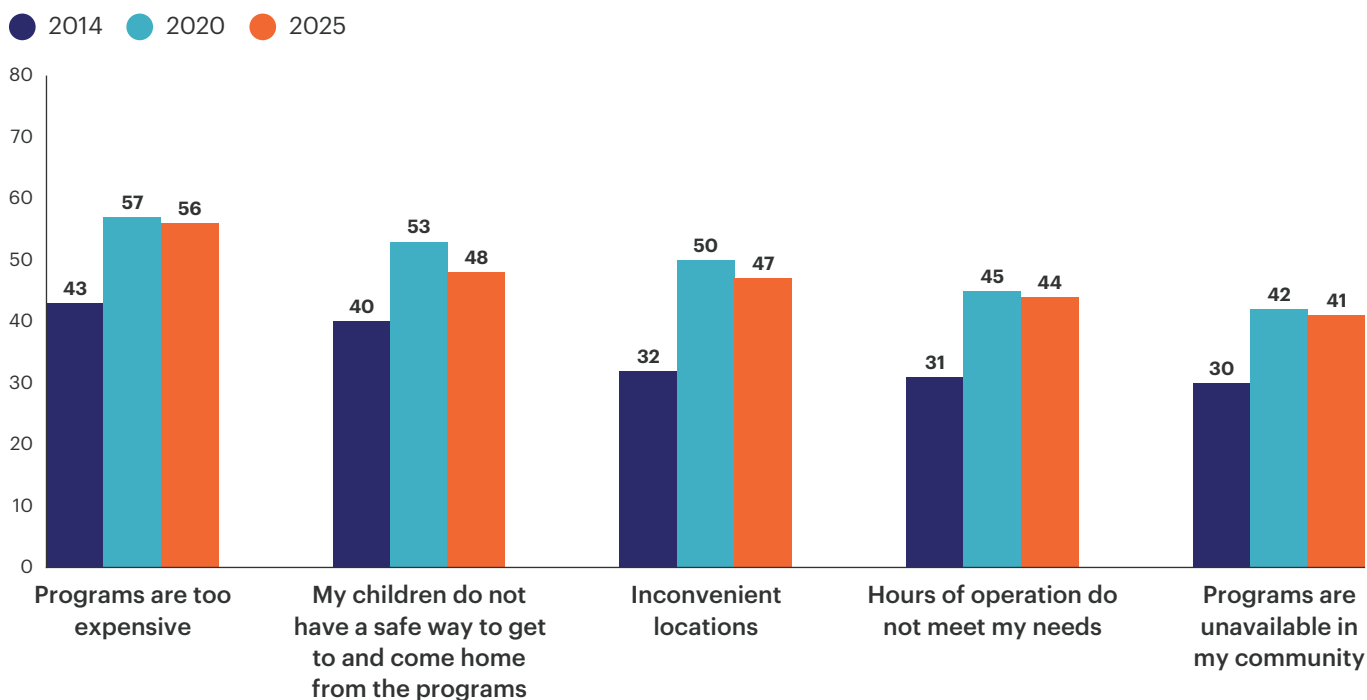
Similar to parents overall, cost, access, and program availability are barriers that parents of middle school youth report facing when considering enrolling their child in a program. A majority of parents of a middle schooler (56%) say that cost is an important factor for why they did not enroll their child in a program, and nearly half report challenges such as their children not having a safe way to get to and come home from programs (48%) or inconvenient program locations (47%). Additionally, 41% report that programs are not available in their community.

After more parents of middle schoolers reported issues of cost, transportation, and availability in 2020 compared to

2014, parents saying program affordability and availability are barriers to afterschool program enrollment in 2025 remains stable. Fewer parents of middle school students say lack of a safe way to and from programs and inconvenient program locations are challenges compared to 2020. However, reported barriers still remain much higher than they were in 2014 (see Figure 4). For example, 48% of parents of middle school students report that their children do not have a safe way to get to and come home from programs, down from 53% in 2020, but still 8 percentage points higher than in 2014 (40%).

Figure 4. Barriers to participation remain high for parents of middle school students:

Percent of parents with a child in middle school reporting the following are barriers to enrolling their child in an afterschool program:



Parents of middle school students value afterschool programs

From keeping young people safe to helping them build life skills like the ability to work with others and responsible decision-making, parents of middle school students—both those with and without a child in an afterschool program—agree on the benefits programs provide to children and youth:

- ▲ **Safety:** Approximately 3 in 4 parents of middle school students say that afterschool programs help keep kids safe (77%) and reduce the likelihood that they will engage in risky behaviors (73%).
- ▲ **Skill building:** An overwhelming majority of parents of middle school students also believe that afterschool programs help children learn life skills (85%); develop teamwork, critical thinking, and leadership skills (82%); and gain interest in and skills related to STEM (76%).
- ▲ **Engagement in learning:** Fully 86% of parents acknowledge that programs allow children to spend more time doing fun and educational activities and encourage less time on screens, and 73% say programs get children more excited about learning and interested in school, helping them improve their attendance and attitude toward school.
- ▲ **Well-being:** Seventy-eight percent of parents say programs support children's mental health and well-being, and 83% agree that programs allow kids to develop positive relationships with other students.

Parents of middle school students also strongly agree on the supports programs provide working families. For parents with a middle schooler in an afterschool program, they report that programs help them with their work, stress, and overall well-being.

- ▲ **Helping working families:** More than 5 in 6 parents of middle schoolers agree that afterschool programs provide working parents peace of mind knowing that their children are safe and supervised (85%) and help working parents keep their jobs (84%).
- ▲ **Positively impacting stress, productivity, and well-being:** More than 8 in 10 parents with a middle schooler in an afterschool program report that their child's after school child care arrangements positively impact their stress level (82%), productivity at work (87%), and overall well-being (88%), higher than middle school parents overall by double-digit percentage points (71%, 72%, and 74%, respectively).



Satisfaction with afterschool programs is high

For middle school students who are able to take part in an afterschool program, their parents are highly satisfied with the programs and their offerings.

▲ **Overall satisfaction and quality:** Satisfaction has reached an all-time high, with 95% of parents satisfied with their middle schooler's afterschool program. This is an increase from 93% in 2020, 89% in 2014, and 88% in 2009. A majority of parents (58%) are extremely satisfied. Additionally, more than 8 in 10 parents (84%) rate the quality of the program as "excellent" or "very good." Including parents who rate the quality as "good," this increases to 97%.

▲ **Program activities:** In addition to getting their middle schooler excited about learning (80%) and providing learning activities not offered during the school day (78%), a strong majority of parents report satisfaction with their middle schoolers' program providing opportunities for physical activity (83%), time outdoors (77%), reading and writing (75%), homework help (74%), music or arts (70%), and science (68%) and engineering activities (60%).

▲ **Building foundational skills:** Approximately 9 in 10 parents say that they are satisfied with their middle schoolers' opportunities to interact with their peers and build social skills (90%) and develop positive relationships with other students in the program (88%). And more than 4 in 5 are happy with the program helping build their middle schoolers' confidence (85%), supporting their mental health and well-being (84%), and developing their teamwork, critical thinking, leadership, and entrepreneurship skills (82%). Parents are also satisfied that their middle schoolers' programs are providing opportunities to learn responsible decision-

making (81%).

For parents of middle school students, a program's safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff are most important, followed by supports for their child's mental health and well-being and developing their confidence; ability to get along with others; and communication, critical thinking, leadership, and entrepreneurship skills. Building skills like communication, critical thinking, leadership, and entrepreneurship is of more import to parents of middle schoolers than parents overall. When juxtaposing parents' priorities for their middle schooler and their satisfaction with their afterschool program's ability to provide them, *America After 3PM* finds that an overwhelming majority of parents are happy with the qualities that are most important to them (see Figure 5).

While parents' satisfaction with factors such as knowledgeable and caring staff and safety of environment stayed relatively stable from 2020 to 2025 (90% vs. 91% and 91% vs. 89%, respectively), a greater percentage of parents report that they are happy with programs providing opportunities for physical activity (78% vs. 83%), time to experience the outdoors (69% vs. 77%), healthy snacks and meals (69% vs. 75%), music or arts (62% vs. 70%), and addressing their child's special needs (52% vs. 61%).

When asked about the supports their middle schooler's afterschool program provides to them as parents, 89% say that their child's afterschool program helps them be less stressed because they know that their child is safe, 80% agree that the program helps them keep their job or work more hours, and 78% say it helps connect them with other families in the community.

Figure 5. Parents of middle schoolers are highly satisfied with the factors that are extremely important in the selection of their child's afterschool program

Percentage of parents reporting a factor is extremely important in selecting an afterschool program and percentage of parents reporting satisfaction with each:

● Extremely Important ● Satisfied

Safe environment



Knowledgeable and caring staff



Supporting my child's mental health and well-being



Opportunities to build confidence



Opportunities to develop positive relationships with other kids in the program



Opportunities to develop skills like communication, teamwork, critical thinking, leadership, and entrepreneurship



Opportunities to interact with peers and build social skills



Conclusion

Considering the broad range of supports afterschool programs offer, including the skill building and positive youth development supports that parents of middle school students prioritize, it's not surprising that 87% of middle school parents agree that all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs. This is an increase from 84% of parents of middle schoolers in 2020. Moreover, 88% of parents of middle school youth are in favor of public funding for afterschool programs.

Despite the high level of support for increased access to afterschool programs, of the middle school students whose parents want afterschool program for them, 5.2 million are being left behind.



Learn how public and private sector leaders can help make afterschool available for every young person who wants to participate: 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, including 10,072 households with a child in middle school, between January 31 and April 21, 2025. 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

