



Harvard Family Research Project  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

## Findings From HFRP's Study of Predictors of Participation in Out-of-School Time Activities: Fact Sheet

Participation in various structured out-of-school time (OST) activities benefits youth socially, emotionally, and academically and may have the most positive effects for youth who are most at risk. Little research, however, has explored the questions of who participates in OST activities and why. With funding from the W. T. Grant Foundation, Harvard Family Research Project examined the factors associated with whether youth—particularly disadvantaged youth—participate in organized out-of-school time (OST) programs and activities. Our Study of Predictors of Participation in Out-of-School Time Activities used national data sets that provided valuable information about the child, family, school, and neighborhood predictors of OST participation.

Below, we highlight key findings for OST practitioners and policymakers as they work to address issues of access and equity, document service gaps, and target resources accordingly.

### Do family income and ethnicity predict participation in OST activities?

Yes. With a few exceptions, children from lower income families and from ethnic minority backgrounds participate less in structured OST activities than their higher income and White counterparts.

- **Youth from higher income families are more likely to participate *overall* than youth from lower income families.** This holds true for before and after school programs, other OST programs, and other OST activities, such as lessons, clubs, and sports. This finding suggests a continued need to target nonschool resources to the most disadvantaged youth—who are far less likely to participate in OST activities such as lessons, clubs, and sports. Given the evidence of an unmet demand for OST programs among disadvantaged families, there remains a clear need to target resources toward recruiting and retaining these youth.
- **Youth from higher income families not only participated more overall in school extracurricular activities and sports/recreation programs but did so with *greater frequency*.** Research shows that youth who participate more frequently and for longer periods of time are more likely to benefit from OST opportunities. Therefore, OST stakeholders should focus not only on *recruiting* at-risk youth, but also on *retaining* them once they are enrolled.
- **Youth from higher income and more highly educated families were more likely to participate in a *greater number* of OST activities.** Particularly for middle school youth, participation in multiple OST contexts may be beneficial for development. If youth lack access to a diverse array of OST opportunities, their development may be compromised. OST stakeholders should strive to ensure that low-income youth are provided with

opportunities to engage in a variety of beneficial programs and activities in the nonschool hours.

- **For tutoring programs, youth from lower income families are *more likely to participate than youth from higher income families.*** This finding may indicate that the academic deficits of disadvantaged youth keep them from participating in other enriching programs and activities. Youth with academic deficits should continue to be a focus for youth workers and other OST stakeholders.
- **Across most types of programs and activities, Latino youth are underrepresented, White youth are overrepresented, and Black youth are somewhere in between.** These differences may be generated by the same factors driving socioeconomic gaps, as well as from other factors specific to different racial and ethnic groups. For example, Latino youth's low participation levels may result in part from linguistic and cultural differences between families, youth, and activity providers. This evidence indicates a continuing need to focus resources on recruiting minority youth—particularly underserved Latino youth.
- **Black youth show high participation rates in some OST contexts, such as before and after school programs and summer camps.** Many of these programs specifically target minority youth, which may help explain why Black youth participate at relatively high rates in these types of programs. This finding suggests that specifically targeting particular groups of underserved youth may be a strategy that works to increase participation.

### **What other factors predict participation in OST activities?**

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Youth's family lives, neighborhoods, and personal backgrounds are also important predictors of their OST participation.

- **Adolescents with disengaged or restrictive parents are less likely to participate.** Disengaged parents are unlikely to engage in supportive behaviors such as being involved in their children's schools and setting rules for their children, while restrictive parents are characterized by setting many rules but not providing academic or other forms of support. These findings suggest that adolescents who have less enriching home environments are the *least* likely to participate in organized OST activities. Practitioners should focus on engaging with families in order to keep youth participating consistently in adolescence and to ensure support for adolescents' learning and development.
- **For younger youth, the neighborhood environment may limit OST participation.** Higher family income is associated with living in more affluent neighborhoods, which in turn is associated with OST participation—especially for athletic programs and for younger children, who are still constrained by geographic boundaries of their neighborhoods. In other words, living in poor and dangerous neighborhoods leads to less OST participation, both because of unequal access to safe, high-quality OST offerings and because parents in poorer and more dangerous environments are more likely to restrict their children's activities to the home. Policymakers should strive to ensure that safe, high-quality OST programs and activities are available in all neighborhoods. Stakeholders must also pay attention to general issues of neighborhood poverty and

safety—such as safe transportation—so that parents can be confident in allowing their children to participate.

- **Youth who were behind academically and socially in 1997 were less likely to participate in a variety of OST programs and activities five years later during middle and high school.** This suggests a strong need to reach out to troubled youth, who could most benefit from participation in OST settings. As noted above, engaging these youth's families may be critical to getting them "in the door" and participating consistently in positive, structured programs and activities.
- **For costly OST activities, like athletics and lessons, low-income youth were unlikely to participate regardless of their academic or social abilities or positive parenting.** In other words, low-income children may be less likely to participate simply because these activities are cost-prohibitive to their parents. Practitioners and policymakers should consider providing enriching activities like sports and lessons *free of charge* to low-income youth. Scholarships and sliding-scale fees based on family income may also help ensure that all youth have access to enriching opportunities.

### In recent years, has participation among disadvantaged youth increased?

Yes and no.

- **A historical analysis revealed a general pattern of stability in demographic differences in participation rates over the late 1990s.** In other words, the gap in OST participation rates between lower income and higher income youth and between ethnic minority and majority youth has stayed the same. This finding indicates that practitioners and policymakers continue to face a challenge in closing gaps in youth OST participation rates.
- **For before and after school programs, participation rates at every level of family income have increased over time—with the greatest increase among the lowest income youth.** This has resulted in a narrowing of the participation gap between youth from low-income families and youth from higher income families. An increasing policy emphasis on OST programs, especially for disadvantaged youth, is a likely contributor to the declining socioeconomic gap in before and after school program participation. One key component of this recent attention to disadvantaged youth is the rapid increase in funding for the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. Policymakers and the public should continue to attend to issues of equity, so that this positive trend will be sustained over time.

For more information about this research study, visit our website at [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/ost\\_participation.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/ost_participation.html) or contact Priscilla Little, associate director of Harvard Family Research Project, at [littlepr@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:littlepr@gse.harvard.edu).

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