



Harvard Family Research Project
Harvard Graduate School of Education

Demographic Differences in Youth Out-of-School Time Participation: A Research Summary

With support from the William T. Grant Foundation, Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) conducted a research study on the factors associated with whether youth participate in organized out-of-school time (OST) programs and activities. Building on our previous work, we used national data to examine the many factors and contexts in children's lives that predict their participation.

This research summary synthesizes findings from two publications examining demographic differences in children's OST participation. We looked at differences in children's overall OST participation, in their participation over time, and in various dimensions of their participation, such as intensity and breadth of participation.¹ This summary presents key findings on differences in the multiple dimensions of participation in a range of OST activities among youth from varying family income levels and racial and ethnic groups.

Youth from higher income families were more likely to participate in virtually all OST programs and activities than youth from lower income families.

This held true for before and after school programs, other OST programs, and other OST activities. 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,² there exists a clear need to direct 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; they 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.³ 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 also 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.⁴ If youth lack access to a diverse array of OST opportunities, they may miss opportunities to engage in enriching contexts. OST stakeholders should strive to ensure that disadvantaged youth have the chance to engage in a variety of beneficial programs and activities in the nonschool hours.

For tutoring programs, youth from lower income families were *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 valuable types of enrichment activities and programs. Youth with academic deficits should continue to be a focus for youth workers and other OST stakeholders.

Across most programs and activities, Latino youth are underrepresented, White youth are overrepresented, and Black youth are somewhere in between.

These differences may result from the same factors driving socioeconomic gaps, as well as from 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 indicates a continuing need to focus resources on recruiting minority youth—particularly underserved Latino youth.

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, however, the increase in participation was greatest among the lowest income youth—resulting in a narrowing of the gap between youth from *low-income and higher income families*.

The 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. A key component of this recent attention to disadvantaged youth is the rapid increase in funding for the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program.

For more information about this research study, visit our website at 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.

¹ Wimer, C., Bouffard, S. M., & Caronongan, P., Dearing, E., Simpkins, S. D., Little, P. M. D., & Weiss, H. B. (2005). *What are kids getting into these days? Demographic differences in youth out-of-school time participation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project; and Bouffard, S. M., Wimer, C., Caronongan, P., Little, P. M. D., Dearing, E., & Simpkins, S. D. (2006). Demographic differences in patterns of youth out-of-school time activity participation. *Journal of Youth Development*, 1(1).

² Duffet, A., Johnson, J., Farkas, S., Kung, S., & Ott, A. (2004). *All work and no play? Listening to what kids and parents really want from out-of-school time*. New York: Public Agenda.

³ Marsh, H. W., & Kleitman, S. (2002). Extracurricular school activities: The good, the bad, and the nonlinear. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72, 464–514; Posner, J. K., & Vandell, D. L. (1999). After-school activities and the development of low-income urban children: A longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology*, 35(3), 868–879.

⁴ Vandell, D. L., Reisner, E. R., Pierce, K. M., Brown, B. B., Lee, D., Bolt, D., & Pechman, E. M. (2006). *The study of promising after-school programs: Examination of longer term outcomes after two years of program experiences*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research.