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# What Are Kids Getting Into These Days?

## Demographic Differences in Youth Out-of School Time Participation

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

This research brief distills findings from the first phase of the study, which examines demographic differences in youth's OST participation rates. It first provides information on current demographic differences in OST participation rates and then looks at whether there is any evidence that such differences have changed in recent years. The brief concludes with implications for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.



Harvard Family Research Project

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## Executive Summary

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Out-of-school time (OST) programs and activities constitute a vital set of complementary learning supports—that is, nonschool supports for children and families that can enhance and promote learning and development by complementing school-day efforts.<sup>1</sup> Research demonstrates that participation in various structured OST contexts benefits youth socially, emotionally, and academically<sup>2</sup> and may have the most positive effects for youth who are most at risk.<sup>3</sup> As a result, attention to measuring and promoting participation in these OST contexts has grown among a broad range of stakeholders. However, little research has explored the questions of who participates and why. This research is crucial in order to address issues of access and equity, to document service gaps, and to target resources accordingly.

This *Research Snapshot* provides reliable estimates of the numbers and characteristics of youth across the country who participate in structured OST programs and activities. It uses two nationally representative data sets, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics—Child Development Supplement and the National Survey of American Families, to examine whether there are differences in participation in a variety of OST contexts among youth from varying family income levels and youth from varying racial and ethnic groups. It also examines whether any such differences have changed over recent years. It considers participation in *any* structured OST context, including before and after school programs, other structured OST programs (e.g., community programs and recreation programs), and other structured OST activities (e.g., school-based extracurricular activities and religious clubs and activities).

### Key Findings

- **Across virtually all OST contexts, youth from higher income families were more likely to participate than youth from lower income families. This held for before and after school programs, other OST programs, and other OST activities.** This finding suggests a continuing need to target nonschool resources to the most disadvantaged youth. This is particularly important given that our results show that these youth are also far less likely to participate in other OST activities, such as lessons, clubs, and sports. Given evidence of unmet demand for OST programs among disadvantaged families,<sup>4</sup> there remains a clear need to target resources toward recruiting and retaining these youth in OST programs and activities.
- **For tutoring programs, however, 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 are limiting their ability to participate in other 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 types of programs and activities, Latino youth are consistently underrepresented, and White youth are consistently overrepresented, with Black youth somewhere in between.** These differences may be generated by the same factors driving socioeconomic gaps, though some factors specific to different racial and ethnic groups may also be at work. For example, Latino youth's low participation levels may

also be partially driven by linguistic and cultural differences between families, youth, and activity providers. This evidence indicates a continuing need to focus resources on recruitment of minority youth in a variety of OST contexts, with a particular need to concentrate resources on serving underserved Latino youth.

- **Black youth, however, showed particularly high participation rates in some OST contexts, such as before and after school programs and summer camps.** Many after school and summer programs specifically target minority youth, which may help explain why Black youth participate at relatively high rates in these types of programs.
- **The historical analysis revealed a general pattern of stability in demographic differences in participation rates over the late 1990s.** This finding indicates a continuing challenge to practitioners and policymakers to assist in closing gaps in youth OST participation rates.
- **For before and after school programs, however, there have been increases over time in participation rates at every level of family income, but the increase was greatest among the lowest income youth, resulting in a narrowing of the gap between youth from low-income families and youth from 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 has been the rapid increase in funding for the federal 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers program.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Weiss, H. B., Coffman, J., Post, M., Bouffard, S., & Little, P. M. D. (2005). Beyond the classroom: Complementary learning to improve achievement outcomes. *Evaluation Exchange*, 11(1), 2–6, 17. Available at [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue29/theory.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue29/theory.html).

<sup>2</sup> Eccles, J., & Barber, B. L. (1999). Student council, volunteering, basketball, or marching band: What kind of extracurricular participation matters? *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 14(1), 10–43; Mahoney, J. L., Larson, R. W., Eccles, J. S., & Lord, H. (2005). Organized activities as development contexts for children and adolescents. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development* (pp. 3–22). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; Simpkins Chaput, S., Little, P. M. D., & Weiss, H. B. (2004). *Understanding and measuring attendance in out-of-school time programs*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Available at [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief7.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief7.html).

<sup>3</sup> Mahoney, J. L. (2000). School extracurricular activity participation as a moderator in the development of antisocial patterns. *Child Development*, 71, 502–516; Roeser, R. W., & Peck, S. C. (2003). Patterns and pathways of educational achievement across adolescence: A holistic-developmental perspective. In S. C. Peck & R. W. Roeser (Eds.), *Person-centered approaches to studying development in context* (pp. 39–62). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>4</sup> 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.