



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, the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) conducted a research study on the factors associated with whether youth participate in out-of-school time (OST) programs and activities. Building on our previous work, we use national data to examine the many factors and contexts in children's lives that predict participation. This *Research Summary* synthesizes findings from two publications examining demographic differences in children's OST participation, in their overall participation, changes in participation over time, and differences in different dimensions of participation (intensity, breadth).¹ Using three nationally representative data sets, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics—Child Development Supplement, the National Education Longitudinal Survey, and the National Survey of American Families, this summary presents key findings on differences in multiple dimensions of youth's participation in a variety of OST contexts amongst youth from varying family income levels and youth from varying racial and ethnic groups.

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,² 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.
- **Youth from higher income families not only participated more overall in school extracurricular activities and sports/recreation programs, they did so with more frequency.** Thus, high income families not only get youth “in the door,” but keep them involved with a consistent level of intensity. This is important because research shows

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.

that youth who participate more frequently and for a longer period of time are more likely to benefit from OST opportunities.³ OST stakeholders should focus not only on successful *recruitment* of at-risk youth, but also on *retention* once youth are enrolled.

- **Youth from higher income and more highly educated families were also more likely to participate in a greater number of OST activities than youth from lower income and less educated families.** For some youth, particularly middle school youth, participation in multiple OST contexts may be beneficial for their development.⁴ If access to a diverse array of OST opportunities are limited, or if low-income youth are unable to participate in various activities, their development may be compromised. Thus, OST stakeholders should strive to ensure that low-income youth are provided with opportunities to engage in a variety of beneficial OST contexts to keep them occupied and thriving in the nonschool hours.
- **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.
- **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 21st Century Community Learning Centers program.

For more information about this research study visit our website at:

http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/ost_participation.html.

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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.

