

### Introduction

On the U.S.-Canada border is Blaine County, Montana, with a population that is largely Native American (51 percent) and White (46 percent) and where the poverty rate is 30.5 percent, nearly three times higher than the national average.<sup>1</sup> Agriculture is the economic driver in Blaine County, in an area with expansive plains that also includes the Little Rocky Mountains, the Bear Pow Mountains, and both the Milk and Missouri Rivers.<sup>2</sup>

At the southern U.S.-Mexico border is Brewster County, Texas, with a county size made up largely of mountains and canyons that is roughly equal to Connecticut and where, “less than 1 percent of the land in the county is considered prime farmland.”<sup>3</sup> Here, residents are primarily White and Hispanic (50 percent and 45 percent, respectively).<sup>4</sup> Hospitality and tourism are the largest industry in the area, which has unemployment slightly below the national average, at 5 percent, but a poverty rate slightly higher than the nation, at 14 percent.<sup>5</sup>

As different as these communities are, they are both commonly classified as rural. Despite the often-monolithic view of rural America, communities that fit the Census Bureau’s definition of rural are heterogenous geographically, demographically, and economically.

Afterschool and summer programs are an invaluable resource in rural communities, with the ability to tailor their services and supports to local circumstances and specific needs of the children and families in a community, finding ways to excite children about learning and helping them explore new areas of interest, all while providing parents peace of mind that their child is in a safe space with caring and supportive adults and mentors. This is especially apparent during the coronavirus pandemic, when the afterschool field has pivoted its services to adjust to the new situation the country found itself in and better meet the needs of students and families. Through the coronavirus, programs responded to the pressing needs of their community by providing supports ranging from serving as meals sites to extending hours to provide an in-person option for students during virtual school days.

#### America After 3PM survey demographics

	Rural	National
<b>Income</b>		
Qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program	<b>47%</b>	<b>32%</b>
<b>Employment</b>		
Working at least part time*	<b>69%</b>	<b>77%</b>
Spouse working at least part time	<b>84%</b>	<b>86%</b>
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White	<b>78%</b>	<b>66%</b>
Hispanic/Latinx	<b>12%</b>	<b>18%</b>
Black/African American	<b>10%</b>	<b>14%</b>
Asian American, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander	<b>4%</b>	<b>8%</b>
Native American	<b>3%</b>	<b>2%</b>
	n= 9,690	n= 31,055

\*Employment status of individual completing the survey

This report aims to provide a current picture of the afterschool and summer program experience for children and families in rural America, using data from the most recent America After 3PM study. Building off findings from the previous 2009 and 2014 America After 3PM studies, *Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities* investigates whether the afterschool and summer landscape in rural communities has changed over time, compares and contrasts rural parents’ perceptions of afterschool programs now and then, and discusses what lessons can be drawn from the findings to help increase access to afterschool and summer programs in rural communities.

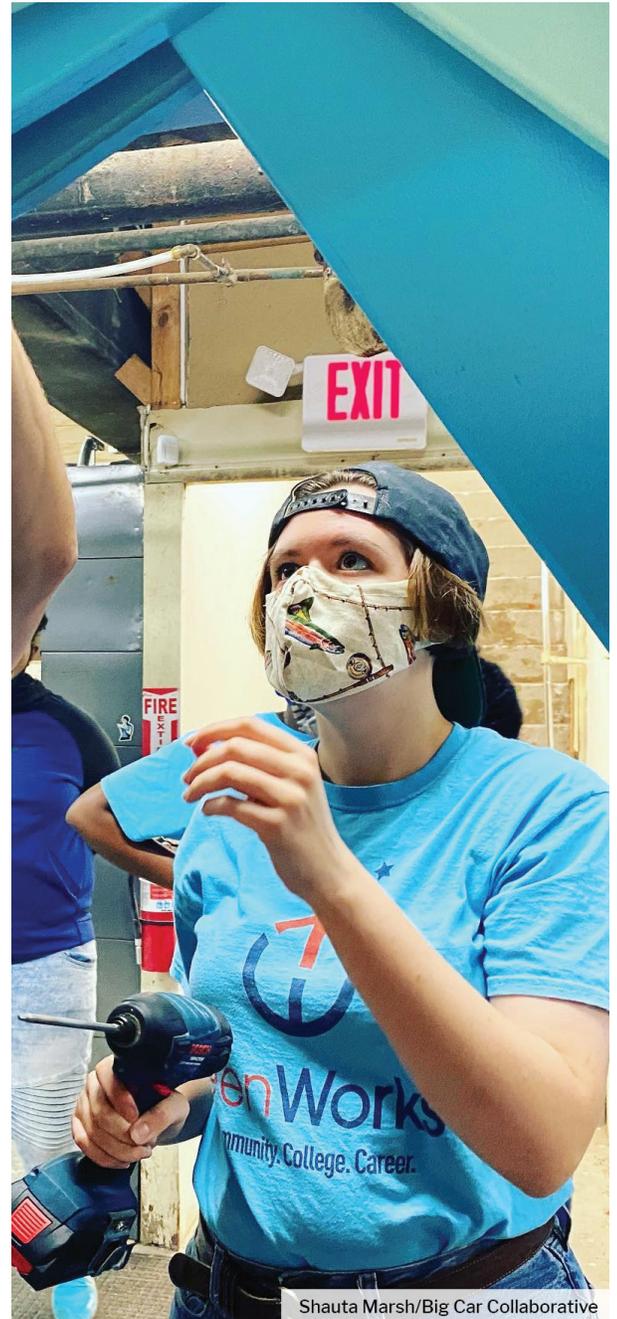
# Key Findings and Recommendations

## Rural communities see a sharp rise in unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs

- **Unmet demand in rural communities is higher than ever:** There are now 4.5 million children in rural communities who are not in an afterschool program, but would be enrolled if a program were available. This is a 43 percent increase from 2014. For every rural child in an afterschool program, four more children are waiting to get in. During the 2019 summer, 2.9 million children not in a summer program would have been enrolled if one were available to them. For every rural child in a summer learning program, two more would be enrolled if a program were available.

Unmet demand for afterschool programs at the child level reached 47 percent in 2020, an increase from 39 percent in both 2014 and 2009. Similarly, unmet demand for summer programs saw gains at the household level. More than half of rural families who did not have a child in a program during the 2019 summer report that they would have liked their child to be in one (54 percent), a significant increase from 39 percent of rural families in 2008.

- **Communities of color and families with low incomes in rural communities have the highest levels of unmet demand:** Majorities of Black (59 percent), Latino (57 percent), and Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI)\* children (57 percent), as well as children living in families with low incomes (52 percent) not enrolled in an afterschool program would be enrolled if a program were available to them, compared to 47 percent of rural children overall.† During the 2019 summer, at the household level, 69 percent of Latino families, 68 percent of Black families, 64 percent of Native American families, 57 percent of AANHPI families, and 59 percent of low-income families would enroll their child in a summer program if one were available, compared to 54 percent of rural families overall.



\* This report will include findings on Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) parents, respondents who selected either "Asian" or "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander" when asked to describe themselves.

† "Black" and "African American" and "Hispanic," "Latino," and "Latinx" are used interchangeably throughout this report. Both "Black" and "White" are capitalized for the purposes of this report as referring to a racial and ethnic group of people.

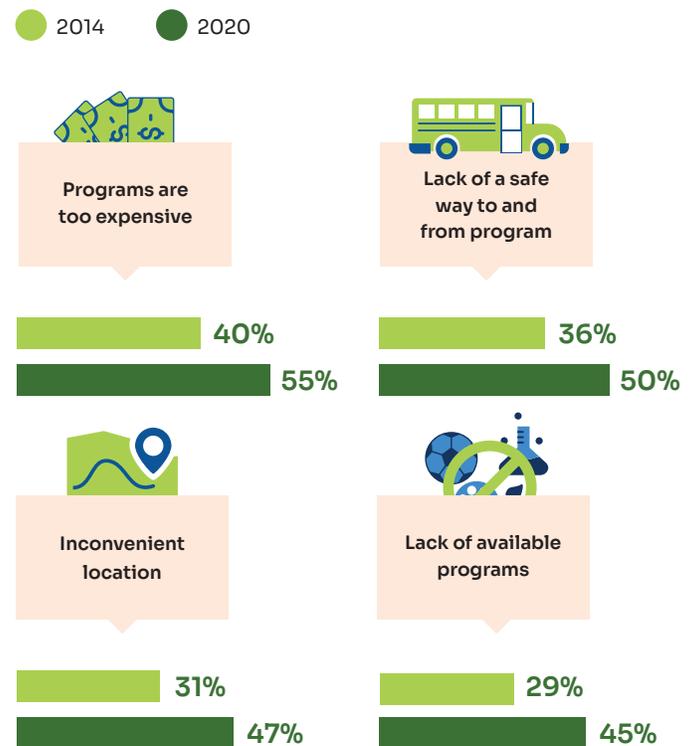
## Increasing barriers to participation and a growing recognition of the benefits are driving unmet demand in rural communities

■ **Families in rural communities face increasing barriers to afterschool:** Reports of barriers to participation have increased by double-digit percentage points since 2014, including the cost of programs (40 percent vs. 55 percent), children not having a safe way to and from the afterschool program (36 percent vs. 50 percent), inconvenient program locations (31 percent vs. 47 percent), and the lack of available programs in the community (29 percent vs. 45 percent).

■ **Barriers are greater for rural families with low incomes and rural families of color:** Rural families with low incomes and rural families of color are even more likely than rural families overall to report challenges related to the cost and availability of afterschool programs. For example, a higher percentage of rural families with low incomes report that afterschool programs are too expensive than rural families overall (59 percent vs. 55 percent). Strong majorities of AANHPI (69 percent), Black (59 percent), and Latino parents (56 percent) report that not having a safe way for their child to get to and from afterschool programs is an important reason they did not enroll their child in a program, compared to 50 percent of rural parents overall.

■ **Barriers to summer program participation:** During the summer months, the availability and accessibility of programs remain barriers that rural parents face when looking for a structured summer experience for their child. More than 1 in 3 rural parents (35 percent) report that cost was an important factor in their decision not to enroll their child in a summer program and 1 in 5 rural parents say that summer programs were not available in their community. Although rural parents are less likely than parents nationally and non-rural parents to report that cost was a barrier (35 percent vs. 39 percent and 41 percent), rural parents are twice as likely as parents living outside of rural areas to say that summer programs were not available to them (20 percent vs. 10 percent).

Rural parents reporting that cost and access are barriers to afterschool program participation has increased by double-digit percentage points since 2014.





- **Rural parents view afterschool programs as a source of support for children and families:** The latest America After 3PM study finds that an overwhelming majority of parents living in rural communities agree that afterschool programs benefit children and families, and positive attitudes toward afterschool programs have increased over time.
  - *Providing important opportunities for youth to learn and grow:* An overwhelming majority of rural parents surveyed agree that afterschool programs provide opportunities for children to build life skills (81 percent) and positive relationships with caring adults and mentors (77 percent). Following national-level trends, the percentage of rural parents agreeing that afterschool programs benefit children and families grew from 2014 to 2020, including double-digit percentage point increases in agreement that afterschool programs help children gain interest and skills in STEM (62 percent vs. 75 percent) and become more excited about learning (62 percent vs. 72 percent).
  - *Recognizing benefits to parents:* Rural parents with a child in an afterschool program report that programs are helping them keep their job or work more hours (74 percent) or enabling them to build skills through classes or workshops (70 percent). Rural parents—both parents with and without a child in an afterschool program—acknowledge that programs are providing working parents peace of mind knowing that their children are safe and supervised (82 percent) and helping working parents keep their jobs (79 percent), an increase from 2014 (73 percent and 72 percent, respectively).
  - *Satisfaction with programs grows:* Overall satisfaction with afterschool programs serving rural families grew from 85 percent in 2014 to 92 percent in 2020. Rural parents reporting that they are extremely satisfied jumped 17 percentage points, from 48 percent to 65 percent. Nine in 10 rural parents are satisfied with the safety of their child’s afterschool program’s environment (91 percent) and that the staff in their child’s afterschool program are knowledgeable and caring (90 percent). And strong majorities of rural parents report that their child’s afterschool program offers time for their child to build social skills (90 percent) and confidence (81 percent) and learn responsible decision-making (75 percent).
  - *Strong support for public funding:* Rural parent support of public funding for afterschool in communities that have few opportunities for children and youth grew from 83 percent in 2009 to 84 percent in 2014, reaching 86 percent in 2020. At the same time, support for summer learning opportunities rose from 83 percent in 2009, to 85 percent in 2014, to 86 percent in 2020.

## Rural families prioritize safe spaces and caring adults

- **A safe environment and knowledgeable, caring staff drive afterschool and summer program selection:** A program's safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff are the top two factors rural parents say are extremely important in selecting their child's afterschool program or summer experience, in line with parents living outside of rural areas. Roughly 8 in 10 rural and non-rural parents report that a safe environment is extremely important when deciding on their child's afterschool (79 percent and 80 percent, respectively) or summer program (83 percent and 85 percent, respectively).
- **Priorities for rural families with low incomes and rural families of color:** Across income levels and racial and ethnic groups within rural communities, a safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff are the most important factors in parents' selection of an afterschool or summer program. However, rural parents of color and rural parents with low incomes are more likely to report that academic supports, a program's ability to excite their child about learning, opportunities to build life skills, and healthy snacks or meals are extremely important in selecting an afterschool and summer program than rural parents overall. These preferences are even more pronounced among rural parents in the lowest income bracket.



## The afterschool and summer experiences of rural families mirror national findings in some key respects



- **Afterschool program participation decreases, while summer program participation increases:** After a rise in afterschool program participation from 2009 to 2014, rural communities are experiencing a decline in the number of children taking part in afterschool programs. In 2009, 1.17 million rural children (11.2 percent) were enrolled in an afterschool program, growing to 1.19 million (13 percent) in 2014, and slipping back down to 1.15 million children (10.8 percent) in 2020. This downward trend between 2014 and 2020 mirrors the overall afterschool participation trend.

However, summer program participation grew significantly during the same timeframe. One in five rural families (20 percent) reported that they had a child who participated in a program during the summer of 2008; this grew to 28 percent during the summer of 2013 and reached 38 percent of rural families during the summer of 2019. Additionally, the most recent America After 3PM study collected data on children participating in summer programs for the first time. It found that 1.8 million rural children (17 percent of all rural children) were in a structured summer experience during the 2019 summer.

■ **The afterschool experience differs for rural families when it comes to program offerings, time, and cost:**

While rural parents are just as likely as parents nationally to report that their child's afterschool program provides social and emotional supports, such as time for young people to interact with their peers and build social skills, there are distinct differences between families living in rural and non-rural communities regarding academic-related program offerings, the amount of time spent in programs, and the cost of afterschool and summer programs.

- *Program offerings:* An overwhelming majority of rural parents report that their child's afterschool program offers academically enriching activities, including homework or academic help (70 percent), STEM learning opportunities (70 percent), and time for reading or writing (66 percent). However, this is lower than parents nationally (73 percent, 73 percent, and 69 percent, respectively), with differences increasing when compared to non-rural parents, and especially urban parents.
- *Rural children spend less time in, and parents spend less money on, afterschool programs:* Rural children are spending slightly less time in afterschool programs in 2020 than they did in 2014 (5.3 hours and 3.5 days per week vs. 6.5 hours and 3.5 days per week), which remains below the national average (5.6 hours and 3.7 days per week).

Among parents who report paying for programs, the average reported weekly cost for afterschool programs and structured summer experiences in rural areas is much lower than the national average and lower than what is reported by parents living outside of rural communities. The average weekly cost for afterschool programs as reported by rural parents is \$69.30, compared to the national average of \$99.40 and \$106.90 among parents living outside of rural communities. The cost to rural parents for their child's structured summer experiences is also appreciably lower. For example, rural parents who paid for programming report the average cost of their child's voluntary summer program was \$120 per week, compared to the national average of \$164.70 and \$174.90 for non-rural parents.

- **Access to STEM learning in afterschool grows:** Although STEM offerings in rural communities continue to trail the national average, the number grew from 2014 to 2020. The percentage of rural parents reporting their child's program offers STEM learning opportunities grew from 2014 (66 percent) to 2020 (70 percent). The percentage of rural parents reporting that their child's afterschool program offers STEM more than once a week saw a 10-percentage-point increase (45 percent vs. 55 percent).



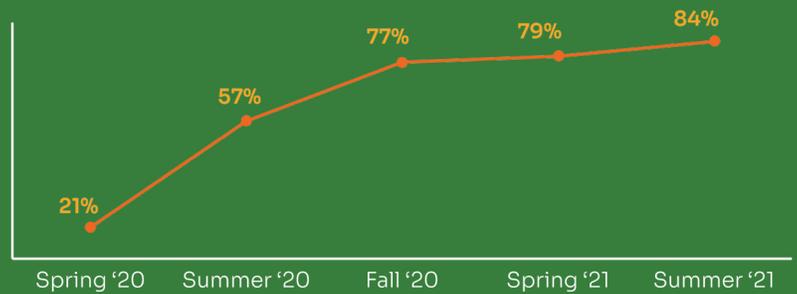
# Rural communities in the time of COVID-19

A survey conducted during the pandemic to determine changes in the afterschool and summer landscape finds that unmet demand for afterschool programs remained high in rural communities in the midst of COVID-19. Among rural families who did not have a child in an afterschool program during the fall of 2020, nearly half (49 percent) report that they would have enrolled their child in a program if one were available.

Throughout the pandemic, rural program providers increasingly opened their doors and expanded their services to provide supports to their students and families, ranging from academic help to making sure their students felt safe and supported during the turbulent time of the pandemic. However, in more recent spring and summer 2021 surveys of program providers, roughly 4 in 10 providers of rural programs that were physically open report having a waitlist (37 percent and 45 percent, respectively), demonstrating a continued demand for afterschool and summer programming.



## Percentage of rural program providers physically open in some capacity:



## Program providers reporting providing the following services during the Spring of 2021:

Homework or academic help	87%
Time to interact with peers	86%
Physical activity opportunities	85%
STEM learning opportunities	81%
Time for reading or writing	79%
Opportunities for students to talk about their feelings and emotions	78%
Serving as a meals site or distributing meals or other resources to families	56%
Connecting families with community resources	51%

# Recommendations

- 1. Raise public awareness about afterschool programs in rural communities:** In addition to the tremendous unmet demand for afterschool programs in rural communities, America After 3PM finds that information about afterschool programs is less readily available in rural communities. Strengthening partnerships between schools and afterschool programs will help increase awareness of the availability and offerings of afterschool programs, as will general public awareness campaigns on the supports that afterschool programs provide. Steps such as these will provide parents with the information they need to make the best-informed decision for their child and their family.
- 2. Improve afterschool program accessibility in rural communities:** Accessing afterschool programs is a greater barrier to afterschool program participation for rural families now than it was in 2014, and finding programs remains a greater challenge for rural parents than for parents living outside of rural areas. Increased investment in rural afterschool programs, partnerships that bring potential transportation solutions, transportation grants to rural communities, and engaging local community stakeholders to develop a vision and plan to increase afterschool program accessibility can help expand access to rural families.
- 3. Conduct research to better understand afterschool program concerns among rural families of color:** One finding of concern in America After 3PM is that rural parents of color without a child in an afterschool program are more likely to have negative perceptions of afterschool programs than rural parents overall. As unmet demand for afterschool programs is highest among rural families of color, research exploring the source of the discrepancies between afterschool program perceptions held by rural parents of color with and without a child in a program is important to increasing participation among their children.
- 4. Increase supports for rural afterschool programs:** In a July 2021 survey of program providers, more than 3 in 4 rural program providers (77 percent) said that they were concerned about their program's long-term funding and future. As unmet demand for afterschool and summer programs in rural communities continues to grow, and as the offerings by afterschool program providers serving rural communities is falling behind that of their non-rural counterparts, increased resources—including greater investments at the federal, state, and local levels—are critical to help rural afterschool and summer programs meet the needs of children and families in their communities.



# Conclusion

In rural America, demand for afterschool and summer learning programs is higher than it has been since America After 3PM first reported on rural communities in 2009, and rural families are increasingly reporting challenges accessing afterschool programs. The country is falling short in creating opportunities for more children to take part in afterschool programs that help them engage in hands-on, academically enriching activities and participate in summer learning programs where they can learn, meet new friends, and explore new interests. Eighty-three percent of rural parents agree that all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs, yet for every rural child in an afterschool program, four more children are waiting to get in. And during the summer, for every rural child in a summer program, two more would have been enrolled if a program were available.

As different as rural communities are from one another, what *Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities* reveals is shared sentiment across rural communities about the invaluable nature of afterschool and summer programs. The pandemic underscored how important these programs are in providing an enriching learning environment for children while assisting families with matters ranging from food to access to technology. As the country emerges from the pandemic, the role of afterschool and summer programs will be even more critical to ensure that children living in rural, urban, and suburban communities receive the supports they need to learn, feel safe and cared for, and are equipped with the tools to grow into the best versions of themselves.



For more information about America After 3PM survey findings, visit [afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM](https://afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM).

The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit public awareness and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool programs. More information is available at [afterschoolalliance.org](https://afterschoolalliance.org).

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# Acknowledgements

The America After 3PM special report, *Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities*, is made possible with the support of the Walton Family Foundation. Data from the report is based on the 2020 America After 3PM survey, for which we extend our utmost gratitude for the generous support of the New York Life Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Altria Group, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

# Methodology

America After 3PM is a nationally representative survey of randomly selected adults who live in the United States and are the parent or guardian of a school-age child who lives in their household. The survey was conducted using a blend of national consumer panels, with the goal of completing at least 200 interviews in every state and Washington, D.C. In states where this goal could not be reached using online panels, supplementary telephone interviews were conducted. This is the second wave of America After 3PM to be carried out using an online survey and supplementary telephone interviews, after the 2004 and 2009 waves were conducted using paper surveys distributed through the U.S. mail and using random-digit telephone dialing. For the 2020 wave of America After 3PM, interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish.

America After 3PM data was collected between January 27 and March 17, 2020. A total of 31,055 households, including 9,690 rural households, were surveyed and answered questions regarding ways in which their child or children are cared for in the hours after school, participation in organized activities, participation in summer experiences, and key demographics. Data from interviews are weighted on race and income within state and by state population. The overall margin of error for child-level and household-level data is +/- < 1 percent.

For the purposes of *Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers*, survey respondents defined as living in rural communities were those who selected that they live in a "rural area/small town" when answering a survey question related to locale. Survey respondents described as living outside a rural area were those who selected that they live in a "suburban area," an "urban area," or were unsure what community type they were living in.

Projections for child-level data included in this report are based on numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau's October 2018 Current Population Survey and represent the 57.4 million children and youth in the United States.

