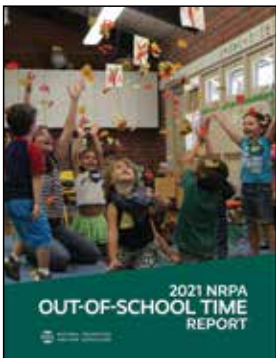




# 2021 NRPA OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME REPORT



NATIONAL RECREATION  
AND PARK ASSOCIATION



**Cover image:** Children celebrate the first day of fall at Borchard Community Center Preschool in Thousand Oaks, California. *Photo courtesy of Lori Hare.*

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PHOTO COURTESY OF RICK MANIASS

A Camp Cordova Spring Break camper plays on the swings at Hagan Community Park in Rancho Cordova, California.



# Introduction



Kids enjoy the cool water at Adventure Cove in Abilene, Texas.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALYSSA HARTLEY

Every day across the United States, park and recreation professionals make their communities better places to live, learn, work and play. Through their vast network of parkland, trails, recreation facilities, and essential programs and services, local park and recreation agencies function as community wellness hubs that benefit the lives of millions of people. They provide gathering places where family, friends and communities come together; they offer access to physical activity opportunities and the outdoors; and they connect people to vital community resources and programming that enrich their overall well-being. Park and recreation professionals are catalysts of positive change and are essential to vibrant, healthy, thriving communities.

One group that benefits particularly from the vast array of park and recreation agency services is children. Park and recreation agencies are among the largest providers of out-of-school time (OST) programs nationwide, offering safe, engaging and welcoming places to go when schools are not in session. Those hours both before and after school and the days during the summer can be challenging and potentially risky times for youth who may not be under the direct supervision of a caring adult. These timeframes also present opportunities for learning and enrichment, physical activity, environmental education and social-emotional development that open up greater possibilities for children.

Local park and recreation agencies' OST programs are leading providers of childcare in our nation. According to data published in the [2021 NRPA Agency Performance Review](#):

- 83 percent of local park and recreation agencies offer summer camps
- 67 percent of local park and recreation agencies offer programming targeted specifically to teens
- 58 percent of local park and recreation agencies offer after-school programming
- 36 percent of local park and recreation agencies offer preschool programming
- 20 percent of local park and recreation agencies offer before-school programming
- Eight percent of local park and recreation agencies offer full-time daycare

OST programs provide numerous benefits to caregivers, families and communities. They enable working guardians to continue to work, while the youth of those families receive needed services, including: academic support; mentoring; healthy meals and snacks; cultural enrichment; and opportunities to spend time in nature, play sports and enjoy unstructured play with peers. Given the impact the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had on youth — especially the disruption to learning and socialization and the direct and indirect trauma and adversity many youth have experienced — these programs are in high demand. In fact, for every one child enrolled in an after-school program there are [three children waiting to get into one](#). This is especially crucial in low-income communities and those that serve high percentages of Black and Hispanic youth where access to high-quality, affordable OST programs may be scarce.

OST programs led by park and recreation professionals have a tremendous impact on children in their communities now — and will continue to in the future. To gain a better understanding of the scopes and missions of OST programs and their greatest challenges, the Research team of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) surveyed park and recreation agencies throughout the United States. The team sent a 13-question survey to park and recreation agency directors and recreation leaders in August 2021. The survey generated 331 responses, the data from which serve as the basis of this report.



# Infographic

## Key Highlights of the 2021 NRPA Out-of-School Time Report

Out-of-school time (OST) programs serve children of all ages — from infants to teenagers who are about to graduate from high school and enter the workforce

Key benefits of OST programs include:



Childcare for working parents and/or caregivers



A safe space for children



Physical activity through play, exercise and sports



Socialization with peers

The COVID-19 pandemic led to innovations that will continue, including:



More outdoor programming



Virtual programming



Partnerships with school districts to provide learning support

# Key Findings

Children enjoy the outdoors at a Pop-Up Parks mobile recreation program hosted by the City of Las Vegas.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF LAS VEGAS PARKS AND RECREATION

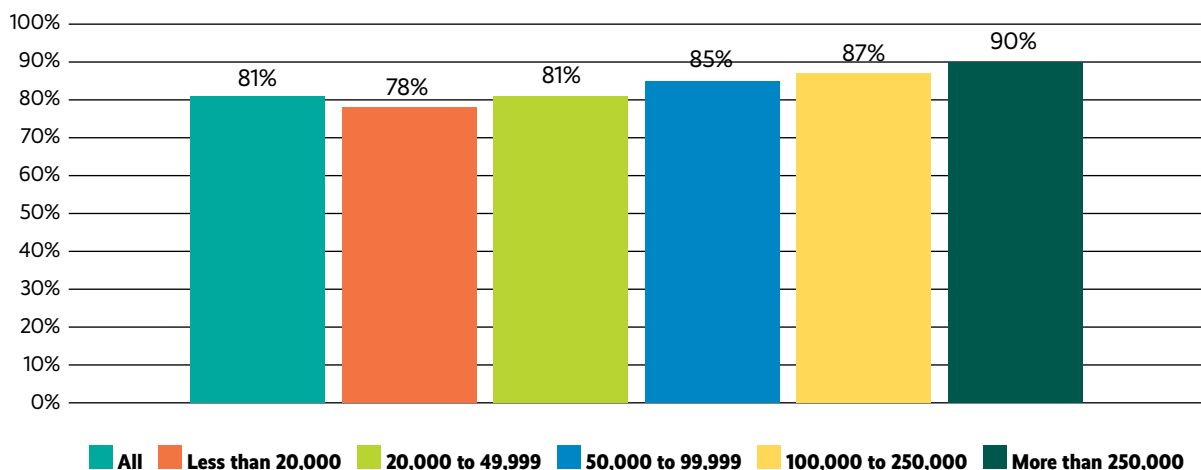
More than four in five park and recreation agencies offer out-of-school time (OST) programs that serve millions of children throughout the United States. These programs — including before-school, after-school and/or summer programs — provide mentoring, physical activity opportunities, educational support and social connections with peers.

Park and recreation agencies serving populations greater than 100,000 residents are more likely to offer OST programming than those serving smaller communities. Eighty-seven percent of agencies located in jurisdictions of 100,000 to 250,000 residents and 90 percent of agencies serving more than 250,000 people offer OST programs to youth.

At the same time, OST programs are slightly less common in communities with significant numbers of residents living in poverty. Seventy-eight percent of park and recreation agencies located in communities that have least 15 percent of their population living under the poverty line offer OST programs. This compares to the 87 percent of agencies serving jurisdictions with less than five percent of their population living below the poverty line.

## Out-of-School Time Programs Are More Commonly Offered by Park and Recreation Agencies in Larger Cities and Towns

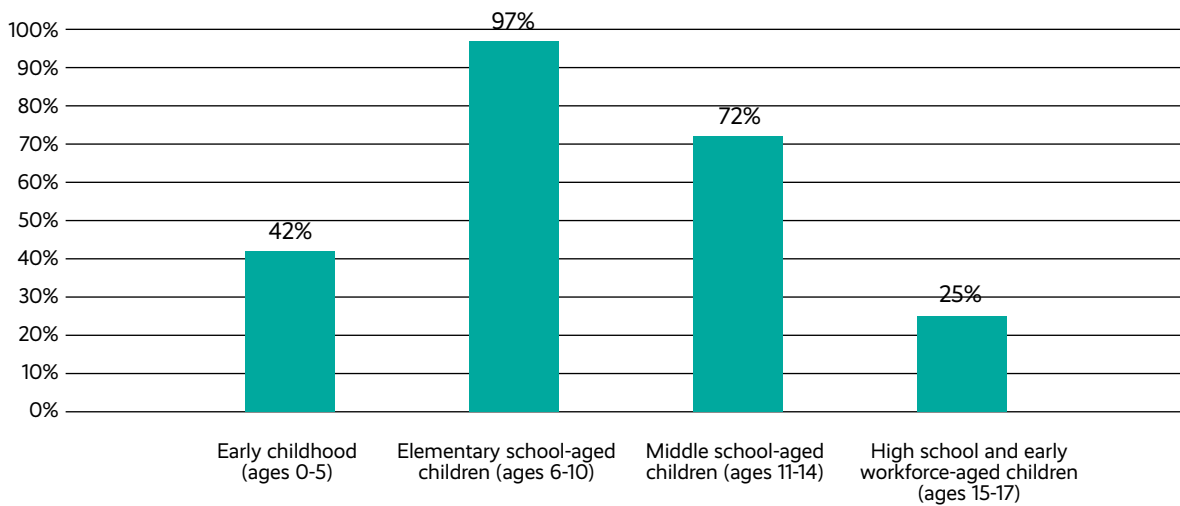
(Percent of Agencies by Jurisdiction Population)



OST programs serve children of all ages — from infants to teenagers who are about to graduate from high school and enter the workforce. Of those agencies that offer OST programming, virtually all (97 percent) offer programs geared toward elementary school children between 6 and 10 years old. Nearly three in four (72 percent) provide OST programs for middle school children ages 11 to 14, while a quarter of agencies program OST opportunities for high schoolers. Forty-two percent of agencies deliver OST offerings to the very youngest children in their communities.

## Park and Recreation Agencies Deliver Out-of-School Time Programs to Children of All Ages

(Percent of Agencies With Out-of-School Time Programs Serving Each Age Cohort)



Kids put their “game faces” on for a potato sack race at City Beach in Albert Lea, Minnesota.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNY DAVIS



OST programs provide parents and caregivers peace of mind in a safe, nurturing environment. Park and recreation OST programs give children safe places where they can learn, connect, explore and play outside of school hours while their guardians are still at work. The hours before and after school and when schools are not in session during the summer can be challenging and potentially dangerous times for kids when they are not under the supervision of a caring adult. OST programs afford youth a variety of opportunities to be physically active and to socialize with friends in settings away from traffic, violence, substance misuse and other threats while their parents or caregivers are at work.

Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents note that offering childcare for working parents and/or caregivers is a top benefit of their park and recreation agencies' OST programs. Similarly, 55 percent of park and recreation professionals report that providing safe spaces for children outside of school is a top benefit. Half of respondents identify physical activity — through play, exercise and sports — as an important OST benefit, while a similar percentage identify socialization with peers as another benefit to their communities.

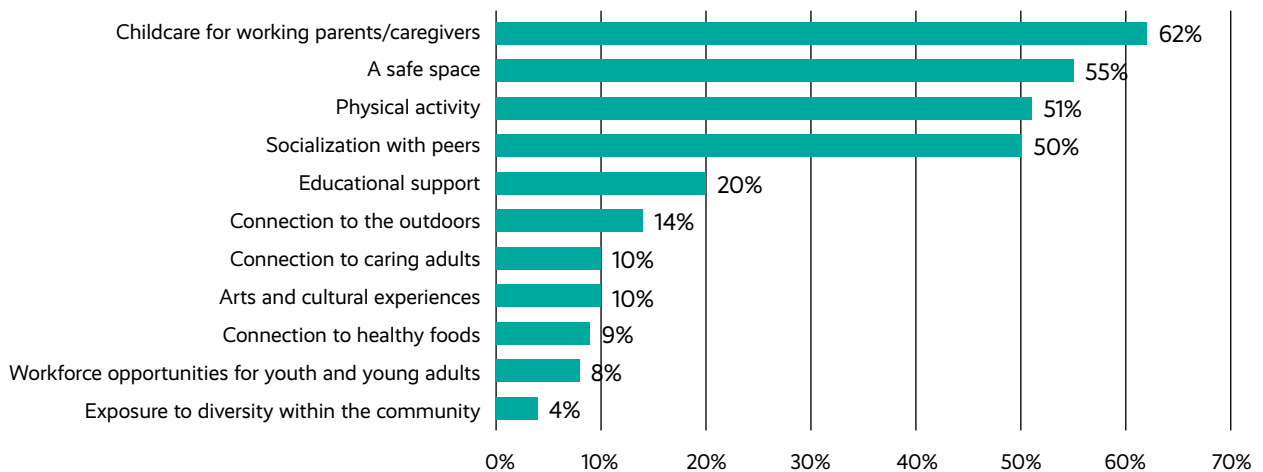
OST programs offer ways for children to grow academically. One in five park and recreation professionals indicates that their OST programs provide educational support and supplemental learning opportunities. For some children, after-school care facilities are places where they can complete homework with the support of park and recreation agency staff.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLEY HARTER

## Top Benefits Out-of-School Time Programs Provide to Their Communities

(Percent of Agencies)\*



\*Respondents permitted to select up to three choices

# Programming



Campers celebrate the last day of The Great Outdoors Camp at Riverside Park in Bay City, Texas.

OST programs are not just about providing places where children can go while their parents and caregivers are at work. Park and recreation OST programs also are broad sets of offerings and programming that support immediate needs — such as those focused on education, nutrition and physical activity — that prepare children for the future. Park and recreation agencies deliver diverse programs that range from traditional sports and classes to mentoring services that help guide youth through the many challenges of adolescence.

The vast majority of park and recreation agencies offer opportunities that encourage physical activity and exposure to arts and culture. Ninety-four percent of park and recreation agencies have OST programs tied to physical activity in the form of free play and sports sampling, while 83 percent offer organized sports or fitness classes. Seventy-four percent of agencies offer art, music and/or cultural activities as a part of their OST offerings.

OST program offerings also may include education opportunities that prepare local youth for the future and expose them to a world beyond that which they already know. Sixty-four percent of park and recreation agencies offer local programming for children that is focused on science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM). Fifty-seven percent of agencies' OST offerings encourage mindfulness and stress-reduction programs. Slightly more than one-half of agencies introduce local youth to environmental education as a part of their OST programs, while slightly less than half of agencies expose kids to nutrition/gardening education. Esports (i.e., competitive video gaming) has become increasingly popular and is a component of OST services at three in 10 agencies.

Park and recreation agencies also deliver OST programming that helps children in their communities develop social-emotional and life skills so they can better confront and cope with the many challenges that come with growing up. These programs include:



- Mentoring (provided by 37 percent of agencies)
- Social-emotional learning curriculum (35 percent)
- Workforce development (31 percent)
- Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs (30 percent)
- Youth activism opportunities (25 percent)
- Violence, gang and/or substance use prevention (20 percent)
- Counseling services (10 percent)

Many park and recreation agencies intend to expand their OST offerings in the near future. Activities that park and recreation agencies are planning to add within the next two years include:

- Esports (cited by 29 percent of agencies)
- DEI programs (26 percent)
- Environmental education (22 percent)

## **Park and Recreation Agencies Deliver a Diverse Set of Out-of-School Time Offerings**

(Percentage Distribution)

	Agency Currently Provides	Agency Plans to Add Offering Within the Next 2 Years	Agency Does Not Provide
Free play, sports sampling and physical activity	94%	3%	3%
Organized fitness/sports recreational leagues	83	5	12
Arts programs (e.g., visual and performing arts)	74	11	15
Science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM) programming	64	16	20
Mindfulness programs (e.g., meditation, arts, yoga)	57	15	28
Environmental education	51	22	27
Nutrition/Gardening education	47	19	35
Mentoring programs	37	18	45
Social-emotional learning curriculum	35	17	48
Workforce development	31	14	55
Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs	30	26	44
Esports programs	30	29	41
Youth activism opportunities	25	13	63
Violence, gang and/or substance use prevention	20	11	70
Language lessons and classes	19	11	70
Counseling services	10	11	80

While most park and recreation agencies provide programs for youth ages 5 to 18, many agencies also offer a range of services and programs for children under the age of 5. Among park and recreation agencies that provide early childhood programs in their communities, the most common offerings are enrichment programs, such as art, music, swimming, “caregiver and me” programs, and sports; 78 percent of respondents indicate their agencies offer such enrolled enrichment programs. In addition, two in five park and recreation agencies offer drop-in programs that allow flexibility as to when to participate. A third of agencies have spaces and facilities specifically designed for early childhood-aged youth, including nature-play spaces. Early childhood programs are key to helping children develop gross and fine motor skills, problem-solving abilities,

language and communication skills, and social-emotional skills. Coupling these programs in nature-based settings provides opportunities for children to be creative, experiment, take risks and learn independence. [Studies link nature play to improved cognitive development and lifelong positive attitudes about the environment.](#)

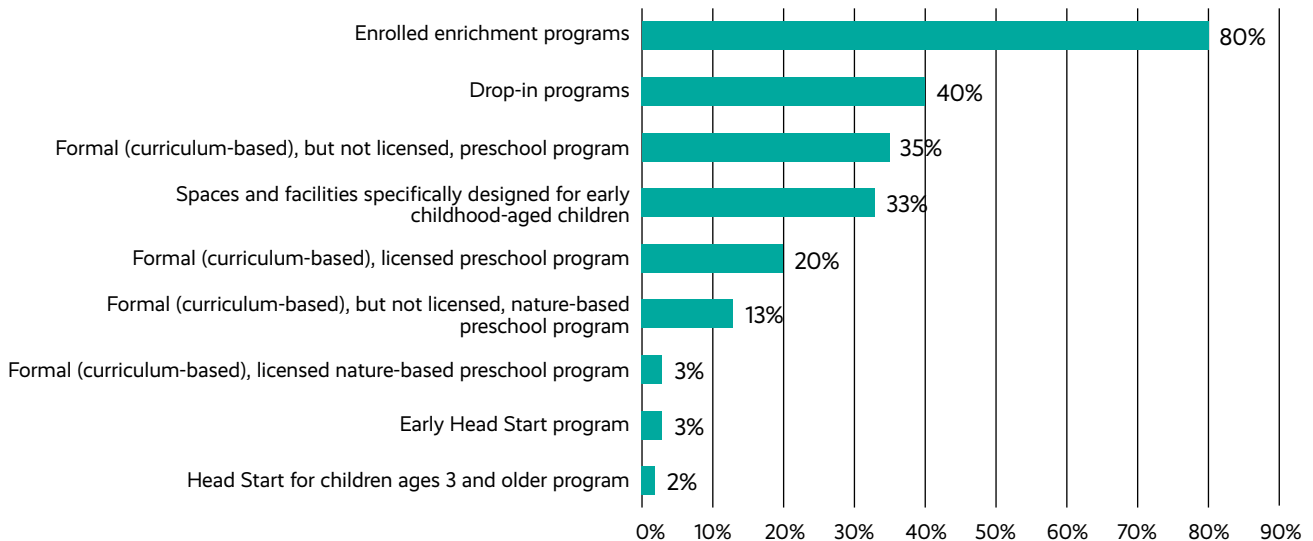
Many agencies also provide formal, curriculum-based preschool programs for young children in their communities. These include:

- General programs (not licensed) (provided by 35 percent of agencies)
- General programs (licensed) (20 percent)
- Nature-based programs (not licensed) (13 percent)
- Nature-based programs (licensed) (three percent)

While 35 percent of agencies operate curriculum-based half-day and full-day preschool programs, only 20 percent of agencies operate licensed programs; the lack of a license can be a barrier in accessing federal, state and local funding to support these programs. The administrative, logistical and programmatic aspects of operating these programs also can be complex and require a significant amount of staff time, personnel and other resources. There is, however, a need and growing momentum for universal access to such early childhood programs, and park and recreation agencies could have a more expansive role to play in the future.

## Parks and Recreation Offers Multiple Early Childhood Programs

(Percent of Agencies Providing Early Childhood Programs)



Parks and recreation is a staple in the lives of many people in the United States — a fact reaffirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic when parks, trails and open spaces served as vital respites and agency professionals delivered emergency services to their communities. At the start of the pandemic, most agencies canceled their slate of in-person OST offerings — with the exception of providing childcare for medical/healthcare workers and other first responders. In response, parks and recreation pivoted to deliver youth-oriented programming virtually. As the country slowly reopened, park and recreation professionals redesigned and adapted in-person OST programs to meet public health recommendations and the public’s sense of comfort and safety.

As the pandemic wanes, many of the innovations developed in response to COVID-19 will continue. For example, 63 percent of park and recreation agencies will maintain some programming previously held indoors at their current outside locations. Virtual OST programming offerings will remain a part of many agencies’ portfolios, including virtual programming for youth (50 percent) and families (32 percent). Further, 45 percent of agencies will continue their partnerships with school districts to provide academic/continued learning support post-pandemic.





Kids participate in a “Pedal the Prairie” youth trail exploration class in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.

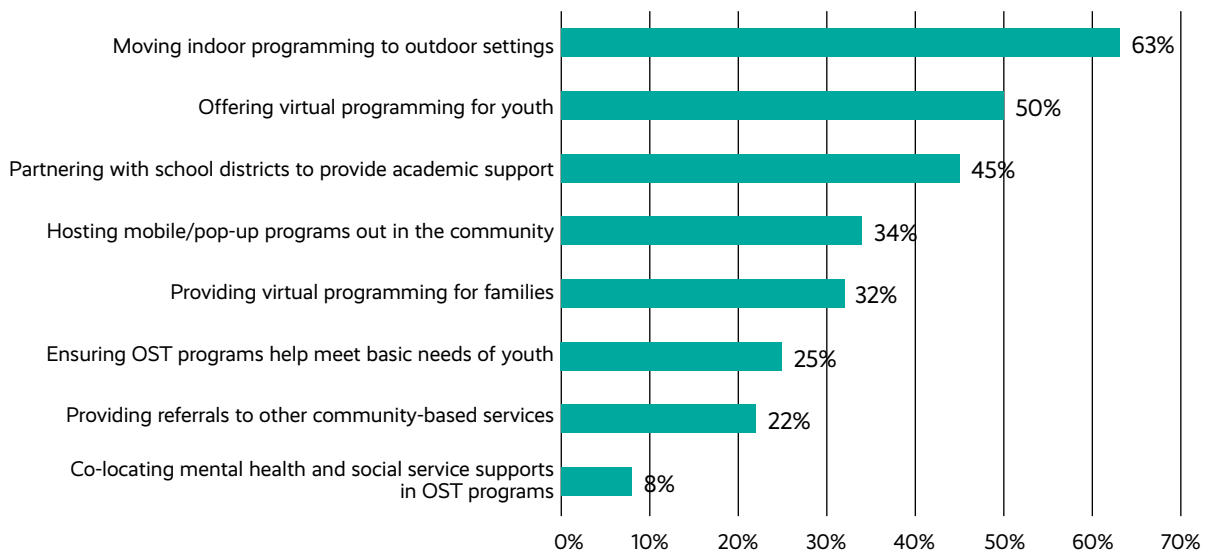
PHOTO COURTESY OF CHAD SHELTON

Additional innovative OST programs developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that will continue include:

- Hosting mobile/pop-up programs out in the community (cited by 34 percent of respondents)
- Ensuring OST programs help meet basic needs of youth (e.g., food, clothing) (25 percent)
- Providing referrals to other community-based services (22 percent)
- Co-locating mental health and social service supports in OST programs (eight percent)

## 94 Percent of Park and Recreation Agencies Will Maintain Out-of-School Time Innovations Developed in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

(Percent of Agencies)





# Challenges Facing Today's Youth and Barriers to Ensuring All May Access OST Programs



A child challenges himself on the swinging bridge at the Elizabeth Porter Park in Marietta, Georgia.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KELLY J. HUFF

Youth face a number of challenges, both at home and school, that can put intense pressure on their physical and mental development. Fifty-six percent of park and recreation professionals report that they have children participating in their OST programs who live in households facing significant financial challenges. These financial challenges manifest themselves in the form of food insecurity, homelessness and an inability to pay OST program fees. In the case of the first, 12 percent of park and recreation professionals indicate that some of their agencies' OST participants come to their programs hungry.

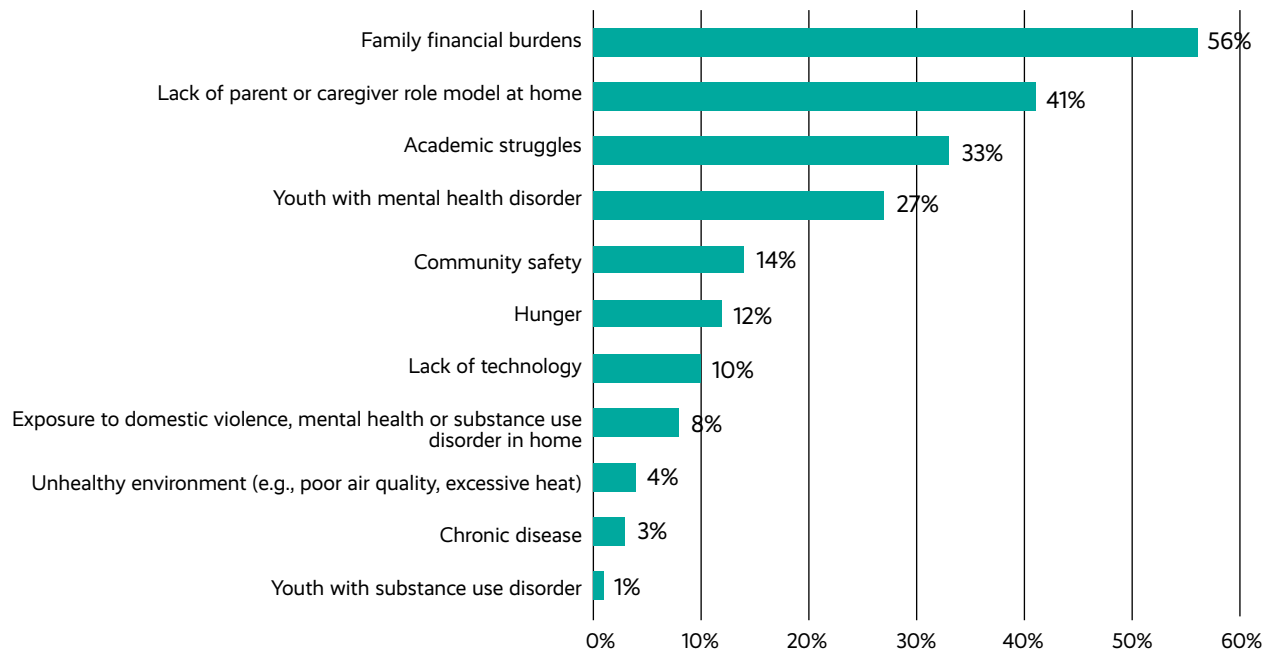
There are many other challenges facing youth participating in OST programs, including:

- Lack of a parent or caregiver role model at home (reported by 41 percent of survey respondents)
- Academic struggles, including chronic absenteeism and high drop-out rates (33 percent)
- Mental health disorders, including depression, social struggles, peer pressure and violence (27 percent)
- Community safety fears (14 percent)
- Lack of access to technology (10 percent)



# Financial Burdens and Lack of a Role Model at Home Are Top Challenges Faced by Youth Participating in Out-of-School Time Programs

(Percent of Agencies)\*



\*Respondents permitted to select up to three choices

Park and recreation OST programs can deliver vital services to youth and young adults in every community. Unfortunately, park and recreation agencies struggle to fully deliver on this promise. Most park and recreation professionals report that their agencies face significant challenges in their efforts to ensure all youth can fairly access and participate in these programs.

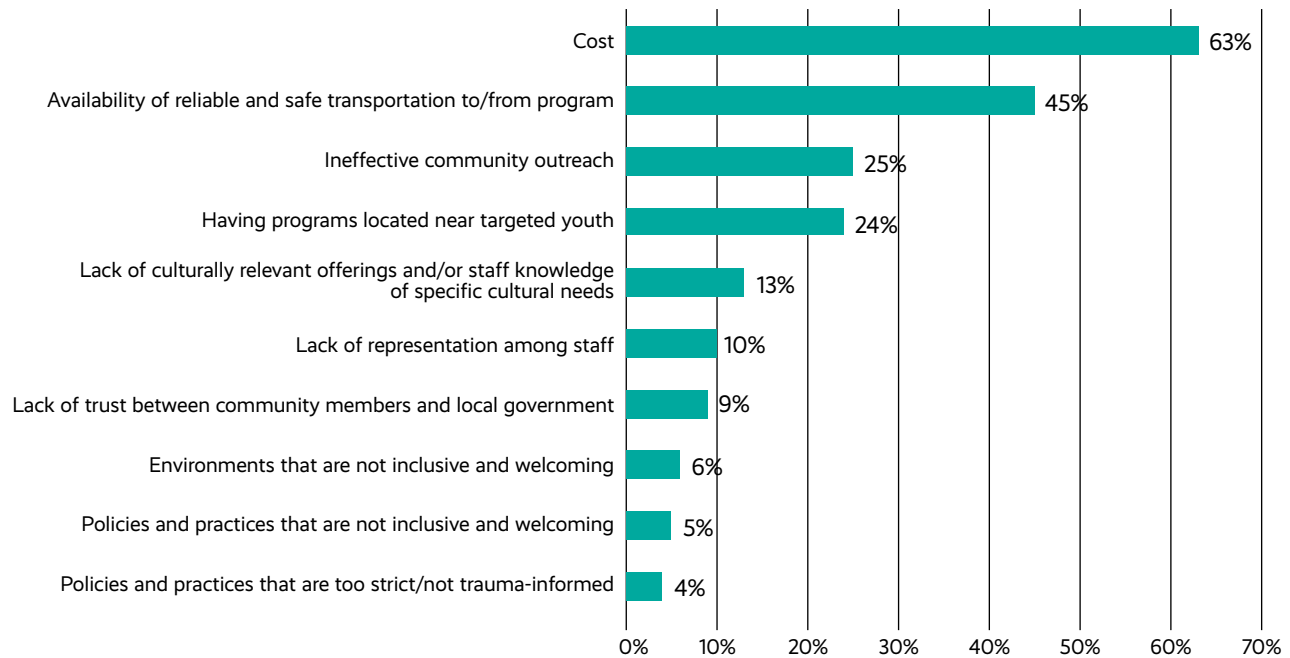
The biggest challenges focus on finances and transportation. Sixty-three percent of park and recreation professionals indicate that cost is a major challenge in ensuring equitable access to their agencies' OST programs. Forty-five percent of agencies note that youth in their community lack safe and reliable transportation to OST programs. In addition, nearly one in four agencies note problems with locating relevant OST programs near targeted youth.

Additional challenges that park and recreation agencies face in ensuring all youth in the community can fairly access and participate in OST programs include:

- Ineffective community outreach (cited by 25 percent of respondents)
- Lack of culturally relevant offerings and/or staff knowledge of specific cultural needs (13 percent)
- Lack of representation among staff (10 percent)
- Lack of trust between community members and local government (nine percent)
- Environments that are not inclusive and welcoming (e.g., language, gender-neutral restrooms) (six percent)
- Policies and practices that are not inclusive and welcoming (e.g., language, applications that do not ask for gender pronouns) (five percent)
- Policies and practices that are too strict/not trauma-informed (e.g., does not take into consideration lived experience) (four percent)

# Cost and Transportation Are Key Challenges to Ensuring All Youth Can Fairly Access and Participate in Out-of-School Time Programs

(Percent of Agencies)



Successful park and recreation programs and services are those that are in tune with a community’s needs and desires. This is no less true for OST programs. Park and recreation leaders deploy multiple strategies to ensure their OST programs reflect the needs and desires of those they serve. One major approach, employed by 62 percent of agencies, is working with outside organizations that serve youth.

Many strategies involve engaging directly with youth to inform program selection and design. Sixty-two percent consult with youth who already are participating in programs for input on current and future OST programs. Slightly more than a quarter of agencies give youth a chance to contribute to program design and outreach, while 17 percent of agencies have youth advisory boards with decision-making power. Fifteen percent of agencies place importance on creating space and a platform for youth to address and discuss social issues.

Park and recreation agencies are the source of first jobs for many young people. Thirty-four percent of agencies provide youth with opportunities to gain valuable work and leadership experience (e.g., pay, reference letters). A quarter of agencies provide youth with opportunities that let them earn school credit or service hours.

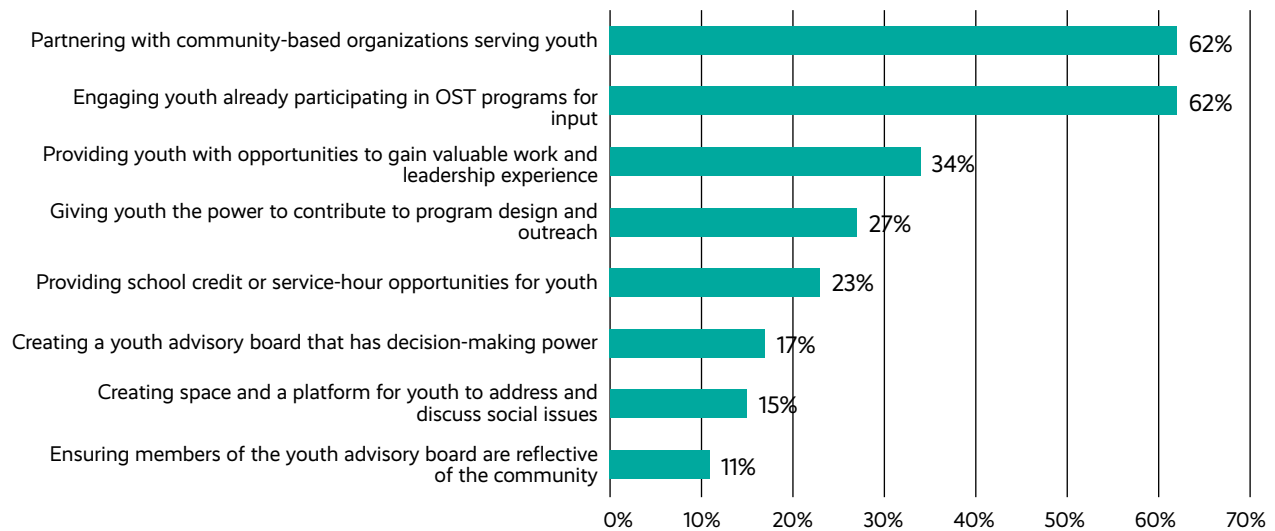


PHOTO COURTESY OF RICK MANESS



## Park and Recreation Agencies Engage With Youth and Outside Organizations to Ensure Their Out-of-School Time Programming Is Responsive to Needs and Desires

(Percent of Agencies)



OST programs are vital to communities. While there is a persistent, unmet demand for OST programs across all demographics, stark inequities remain across income, race and ethnicity with the greatest gaps in access among youth of color. [The Afterschool Alliance reports](#) that 58 percent of Black children and 55 percent of Hispanic children not enrolled in an after-school program would be in one if such a program were available, accessible and affordable. Park and recreation agencies are taking steps to close these gaps and ensure programs meet the unique needs and desires of their communities.

Nine in 10 park and recreation agencies take steps to ensure OST programs and services are equitable, inclusive and meet the needs of all youth in their communities. Fifty-six percent of survey respondents note their agencies offer their OST staff training on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) principles and competencies. Half of agencies work to ensure program practices and policies are equitable and inclusive (e.g., engaging with the local community on needs and desires).

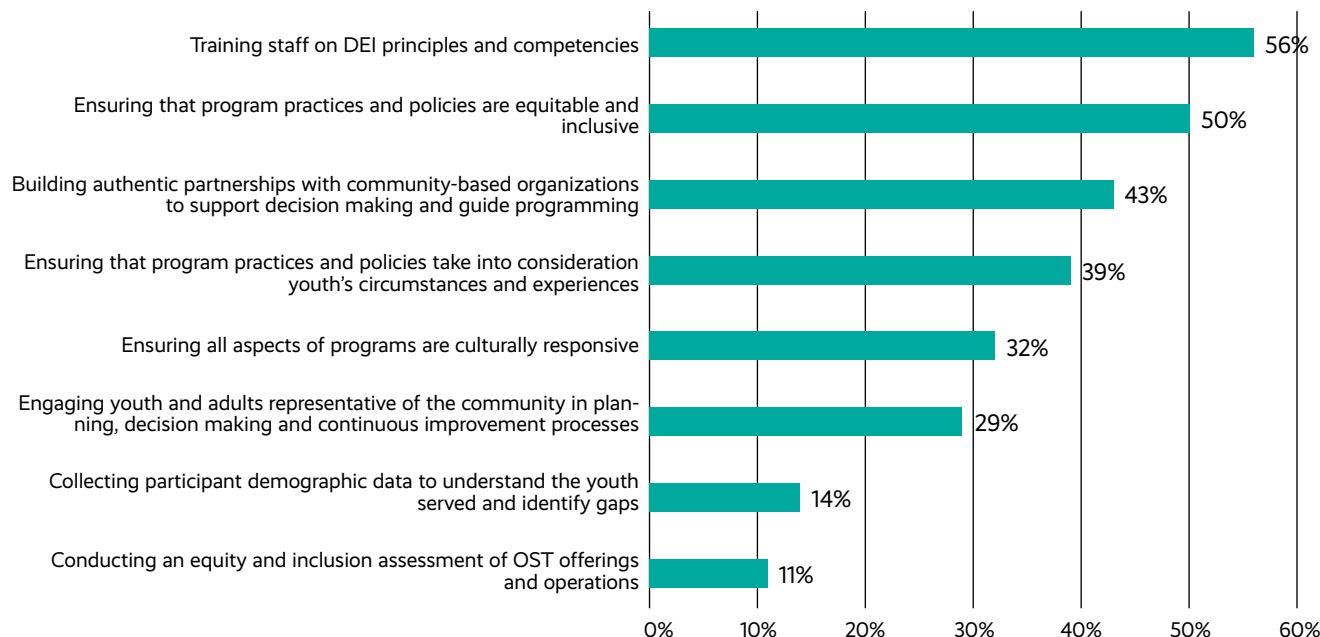
Engaging closely with the community is a critical part of agencies' strategies to ensure OST program offerings are equitable and inclusive. Forty-three percent of respondents note their agencies have developed partnerships with community-based organizations to support decision making and guide programming. Thirty-nine percent work to ensure program practices and policies take into consideration youth's circumstances and experiences.

Additional measures taken by park and recreation professionals to ensure OST programs and services are equitable, inclusive and meet the needs of all youth include:

- Ensuring all aspects of programs are culturally responsive (e.g., inclusive language in marketing, outreach, policies, registration forms) (cited by 32 percent of respondents)
- Engaging youth and adults representative of the community in planning, decision making and continuous improvement processes (29 percent)
- Collecting participant data (e.g., race, ethnicity, income, gender identity) to understand the youth served and identify gaps (14 percent)
- Conducting an equity and inclusion assessment of OST offerings and operations (11 percent)

# Park and Recreation Agencies Deploy Many Strategies to Ensure Out-of-School Time Programs Are Equitable, Inclusive and Meet the Needs of All Youth in Their Communities

(Percent of Agencies)



Skilled and passionate park and recreation professionals are critical to successful OST programming. But a tight labor market, combined with people out of the labor market directly or indirectly due to the pandemic, has made it more difficult than ever to recruit and retain needed workers. Ninety-six percent of survey respondents indicate their agencies are currently facing recruitment and retention challenges.

Sixty-three percent of park and recreation professionals note non-competitive pay is making it difficult to recruit and retain their OST workforce. Fifty-six percent of respondents indicate a lack of full-time positions (relative to part-time opportunities) adds to their agency's OST workforce woes.

Other challenges to park and recreation agency efforts to recruit and retain OST workers include:

- Burnout/Discomfort among existing staff (cited by 33 percent of respondents)
- Lack of growth/career advancement opportunities (32 percent)
- Lack of interest in parks and recreation as a career pathway (32 percent)
- Hiring freezes or budgetary constraints (30 percent)
- Lack of awareness of job opportunities (24 percent)
- Need for training and skill development (24 percent)





Summer camp participants look at dragonfly legs, camellia pollen, butterfly wings and honeybee wings under a microscope at the Environmental Education Pavilion in Durham, North Carolina.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DURHAM PARKS AND RECREATION

## Pay and a Lack of Available Full-Time Positions Are Key Barriers to Recruiting and Retaining an Out-of-School Time Workforce

(Percent of Agencies)





# Conclusions



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF LAS VEGAS PARKS AND RECREATION

A soccer player goes for the goal during a game at All American Park in Las Vegas.

Out-of-school time (OST) programs offered through local park and recreation agencies are essential to thriving, equitable communities. These services provide social, physical, intellectual, emotional, environmental and economic benefits for youth and their families.

For many years, parks and recreation has played a major role in delivering high-quality OST services, and it will continue to do so in the future. Looking ahead to the next few years, the survey findings demonstrate that park and recreation professionals will continue to offer a wide variety of enrichment activities to youth of all ages, with new opportunities emerging focused on early childhood programming and integrating DEI-focused activities, mindfulness, social-emotional learning, esports, STEAM, environmental education and more into existing programs. Park and recreation professionals also will continue to expand efforts to partner with community-based organizations to improve the quality and cultural relevancy of their OST offerings, and they will embed a greater focus on advancing equitable access to these programs and ensuring they are inclusive through practice and policy changes.

Given the numerous health and socioeconomic benefits of these programs — along with the great need to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic — it is imperative that all youth and families have fair access to these critical OST services that the nation's park and recreation agencies provide.

# Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the park and recreation professionals and their agencies that completed the survey, providing the data that served as the basis of this report. Thank you to Kevin Roth, Melissa May, Gina Mullins-Cohen, Lindsay Hogeboom, Vitisia Paynich, Jennifer Nguyen, Kim Mabon and Kate Anderson for making this report possible. Thank you also to the many park and recreation agencies who contributed the images featured throughout this report.

## About NRPA

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this vision by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being.

NRPA brings strength to our message by partnering with like-minded organizations, including those in the federal government, nonprofits and commercial enterprises. Funded through dues, grants, registrations and charitable contributions, NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives for our members that ultimately enrich the communities they serve.

NRPA places immense importance on research and data to raise the status of parks and recreation. We conduct research with two goals: First, NRPA creates and analyzes data to help park and recreation agencies make optimal decisions on operations, programming and spending. Second, NRPA develops data and insights that support park and recreation professionals making the case for greater and more stable funding to policymakers, key stakeholders, the media and the general public. The NRPA Research team works closely with internal subject matter experts, respected industry consultants and the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at [nrpa.org/Research](https://nrpa.org/Research).





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