

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **New Research Confirms Teenagers Facing Serious, Adult-Like Challenges During Pandemic**

*Findings from new analysis by the American Institutes for Research and After School Matters illustrate the stressors Chicago teens are facing: elevated food insecurity, increased financial hardship, persistent technology gaps, and more*

*Most teens reported a sense of belonging, hopefulness about the future after participating in supportive out-of-school-time programs*

**CHICAGO**—After School Matters, Chicago’s largest and a leading national provider of out-of-school-time programs for high school teens, published new research findings by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) about the lived-experience of Chicago teens and program instructors during the pandemic. The report, [Summer Learning from Screen to Screen](#), was released today, and finds teens are facing significant challenges during the pandemic, including food insecurity, economic concerns and gaps in technology.

“We have all seen and heard about the extremely difficult challenges facing our young people due to the ongoing pandemic, and this new data confirms it: teens are dealing with serious, adult-like stressors and need our collective support,” said Dr. Mary Ellen Caron, CEO of After School Matters. “A close examination of the real-life experiences of Chicago teens in this pandemic had yet to be done, and it was critical to us, as a service provider, to have that insight so we can tailor our programs and services to meet the needs of teens during these challenging times and do our best to mitigate learning loss.”

In response to the pandemic, After School Matters re-envisioned its 30-year-old in-person program delivery model for the summer 2020 session to provide more than 500 remote learning programs to nearly 10,000 teens in the city of Chicago. After School Matters partnered with AIR to better contextualize and understand teen and instructor experience in Chicago during the pandemic, as well as assess its remote program quality, and gain actionable learnings. Nearly 4,000 After School Matters teens and 370 instructors from across the city participated in this research to share their daily realities and program experiences.

Importantly, the summer 2020 findings from AIR are similar and consistent with After School Matters’ own ongoing internal surveying, indicating challenges faced by teens and instructors during this pandemic persist. Furthermore, it’s important to note After School Matters teens are predominantly Black and Latinx, and more than 82 percent live in high-poverty community areas.

A selection of key findings follows. For the full report and findings, visit [afterschoolmatters.org/AIRreport](https://afterschoolmatters.org/AIRreport).

Teen experience during the pandemic:

- **Food insecurity is widespread across Chicago’s communities.** One in three teens reported experiencing food insecurity—nearly three times higher than the most recently estimated child food insecurity rate in Cook County of 12 percent.<sup>1</sup>
- **Teens and their families are experiencing considerable financial hardship.** Forty percent of teens reported they or someone in their family had lost a job or had their hours cut due to the pandemic.
- **Teens are stressed, likely due to economic hardships at home, COVID-19 and food insecurity.** Teen stress varied, but teens in more vulnerable areas of the city, specifically the South and West sides, and in areas with higher COVID-19 case rates were more likely to report higher levels of stress and be food insecure.
- **Technology and internet access gaps remain.** Teens highlighted challenges with technology and internet services as barriers for participating in remote learning programs, such as After School Matters.

Despite the considerable challenges faced by these teens, many reported feeling positive, engaged, and hopeful after participating in supportive out-of-school time programs.

- **Most teens are hopeful about their future.** More than three in four teens (78 percent) shared they felt more hopeful about their future after participating in their program.
- **Teens developed strong connections with their instructors and peers, which helped them cope with considerable hardships and stress.** Nine in 10 teens reported a strong sense of belonging in their program (90 percent), and teens who reported a greater sense of belonging reported significantly lower stress.
- **Teens reported significant gains in skills.** Teens reported stronger content skills (e.g., coding, dance) and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (e.g., communication, problem-solving) after participating in their program. Teens also reported greater skills development than in past summers, indicating remote learning can still provide critical opportunities for teens to learn and practice skills.
- **Teens participated at high rates.** Average daily attendance remained high (90 percent). This was likely due, in part, to the stipend that After School Matters provides teens to reduce financial barriers and reinforce the value of their time and efforts.

The report findings also provide important insight into instructor experience during the pandemic, including:

- **Food insecurity and stress are impacting instructors too, as is access to mental health supports.** Nearly one in four instructors (24 percent) screened positively for food insecurity. This rate is more than double the most recently available estimate for Cook County as a whole (10 percent).<sup>2</sup> Instructors also reported higher levels of stress if they had less access to mental health supports.

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1 & 2 Gundersen, C., Dewey, A., Engelhard, E., Strayer, M., & Lapinski, L. (2020). Map the Meal Gap 2020: A report on county and congressional district food insecurity and county food cost in the United States in 2018. Feeding America.

<https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/child/illinois/county/cook>

- **A steady paycheck mattered.** Three in four instructors (75 percent) reported After School Matters provided them with a reliable income. And, 61 percent of instructors reported that they or someone they live with lost a job or had their hours cut as a result of the pandemic.

“The staff and young people from After School Matters offered insights on the importance of supportive relationships between youth and adults and meaningful opportunities for teens to develop skills and have fun,” said Deborah Moroney, an AIR vice president. “These relationships and opportunities mattered before the pandemic, and they matter even more now as schools, out-of-school time providers, and other community stakeholders come together to support young people’s learning, development, and well-being in reopening and re-engagement efforts.”

Noticing these trends before this AIR data was available, After School Matters started providing meals to teens, families and instructors, partnered with Adler University to provide mental health supports and resources, provided technology to teens who needed it, and more. Based on these data and insights, After School Matters is expanding upon those supports to focus on four key areas to improve the spring program session and services for teens, instructors, and communities, including:

- **Continue to support basic needs** of teens and instructors to address food insecurity, technology gaps, and financial needs.
- **Support the mental and emotional health** of teens and instructors.
- **Provide training and resources for instructors** on facilitating interaction in a remote learning environment and fostering belonging to help buffer teen stress.
- **Continue to collect information about teen and instructor experiences**, program quality, and the remote learning program model.

Dr. Caron added, “While the pandemic has been difficult for everyone in countless ways, it has negatively and disproportionately impacted teens of color, and Chicago’s recovery from the pandemic requires an equitable response plan that targets supports and services to teens of color and to the hardest hit communities. We’ve reflected on the data and insights, and After School Matters is already acting on them to inform plans for the spring program session, and beyond, to continue to support teens and our communities as we collectively recover from the devastation of the ongoing pandemic.”

For more information about After School Matters, and how you can support Chicago teens, visit [afterschoolmatters.org](https://afterschoolmatters.org).

### **About After School Matters**

After School Matters is a nonprofit organization that provides after-school and summer opportunities to Chicago public high school teens to explore their passions and develop their talents, while gaining critical skills for work, college, and beyond. After School Matters programs are project-based, led by industry experts, and provide a pathway to progress in skills development and independence. Teens earn a stipend while participating in programs in the arts, communications and leadership, sports, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Over the span of three decades, After School Matters has engaged more than 350,000 teens throughout the city of Chicago.

[www.afterschoolmatters.org](https://www.afterschoolmatters.org)