

NEWS RELEASE



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New Findings Shed Light on Continued Pandemic Challenges Faced by Chicago Teenagers

Analysis from the American Institutes for Research illustrate teens facing adult-like challenges and responsibilities: stress, continued food insecurity, financial hardship, and more

Despite circumstances, Chicago teens overwhelmingly shared hopefulness about their future, the importance of peer and mentor relationships, and learned social, emotional and 21st century skills in their programs

CHICAGO—After School Matters, Chicago’s largest and a leading national provider of out-of-school-time programs for high school teens, for the second year in a row has published new analysis by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) about the lived-experience of Chicago teens and program instructors during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The report, [Adjusting to a New Normal: Lessons Learned from After School Matters Summer 2021 Programs](#), was released today, and finds Chicago teens in its program (nearly 9 in 10 of whom are Black or Latinx) continue to face significant, adult-like challenges and responsibilities during the pandemic, including stress, food insecurity, economic concerns and more.

“Understanding the mental health crisis facing our young people today, these findings affirm what we are seeing and hearing on the ground in our programs: Chicago teens are facing serious stressors, and need more support,” said Mary Ellen Caron, CEO of After School Matters. “We’re heartened to learn that in the face of these challenges, teens are overwhelmingly hopeful and positive, and these findings from our partners at AIR will guide our continued efforts to support Chicago teens – and our communities – to the best of our abilities as we collectively continue to recover from the pandemic.”

When the pandemic began in 2020, After School Matters adapted its program structure to provide teens with safe, remote opportunities for summer engagement. In Summer 2021, After School Matters re-envisioned its program model once again to provide 600+ remote and in-person programs, hosted by 700+ instructors, to more than 10,000 teens across Chicago.

During this time, After School Matters established a multi-year research partnership with AIR to explore teen experiences, instructor perspectives, and program quality during the pandemic. Nearly 4,000 After School Matters teens and 370 instructors from across the city participated in this most recent survey (from summer 2021) to share their daily realities and program experiences.

A selection of key findings follows. For the full report and findings, visit afterschoolmatters.org/AIRreport.

Teens continue to deal with adult-like challenges and responsibilities: stress, food insecurity, financial hardship, and more.

- Nearly 1 in 3 teens are experiencing food insecurity (as compared with 1 in 8 children estimated to be food insecure in Cook County).^[1]
- 31% of teens say they or someone in their family lost a job or had hours cut due to the pandemic.
- Teens report taking on additional adult-like responsibilities and stressors due to the pandemic – for instance, 25% of teens are providing childcare in their household.

Despite facing ongoing challenges related to the pandemic, teens are positive, hopeful, and engaged in their programs.

- 78% of teens feel more hopeful about their future after participating in an After School Matters program.
- 82% of teens say their program provided a safe space for them to be their true self and 87% of teens feel like they matter in their program.

Teens developed strong connections with their instructors and peers, and these relationships helped to buffer the stress they are experiencing.

- 84% of teens report their program helps them reduce or manage stress. As they continue adjusting to a new normal, teens urged adults to acknowledge their stress, mental health, and other challenges and asked that adults lead with patience and compassion.

Teens reported significant gains in their skills, including stronger content skills (e.g., coding, dance) and 21st century skills (e.g., communication, problem-solving) after participating in their program, demonstrating that both remote and in-person learning provide critical opportunities for teens to learn and practice skills.

- 65% of teens had content and 21st century skills before their program started, and 85% of teens have skills after participating in their program.

“Participants in After School Matters programs offered important insights on how adults can best support them as they navigate the unique challenges they are facing after the pandemic and in other social contexts. Teens urged adults to acknowledge their stress, mental health, and

other challenges, and lead with patience and compassion,” said Jill Young, the AIR senior researcher who led the project. “For all organizations—especially those that serve youth—the insights and feedback of stakeholders is an important part of building and maintaining effective programs and ensuring they are getting the best outcomes.”

After School Matters is using these results to inform its continued efforts to provide targeted support and services to Chicago teens and communities this summer and beyond. In particular:

Mental and emotional health supports for teens and instructors: After School Matters began a partnership with Adler Community Health Services (ACHS) in 2020. In its first year alone, the partnership engaged more than 800 youth and instructors through free services like telehealth counseling, workshops, trainings and more. This report affirms the importance of continuing to build on the access to services for teens and instructors.

Food support for teens: Pre-pandemic, After School Matters did not traditionally provide meals for participating teens. Since the pandemic began, the organization has provided more than 200,000 meals to teens and the surrounding community to combat widespread food insecurity. This summer, After School Matters is continuing to partner with local organizations to provide meals to teens participating in programming at sites across the city.

Offering a variety of program formats for accessibility: While After School Matters has transitioned back to offer a majority of program opportunities in person this summer, the organization is continuing to offer remote programming for teens that prefer an online setting.

Supporting teen belonging: After School Matters continues to emphasize the importance of designing program spaces that foster authentic relationships and support teens’ wellbeing. The organization is also offering professional development opportunities to help instructors better connect with teens to build empowering relationships.

“Through this program, I met new people who are now my closest friends and they care deeply about me... If I hadn’t met them, I would have never met some of my other friends. If I didn’t, I think I would still be lost and not as open as I am right now... They give me hope,” shared one After School Matters teen who participated in a summer program and the AIR survey.

Caron added, “These are the voices that drive us. While the pandemic continues to present new challenges for all of us, high-quality programming is still possible and provides vital social, emotional and mental health support to teens disproportionately impacted by the effects of COVID-19. These new findings are motivating to continue to do our very best to serve local teens and communities for a bright and healthy future.”

For more information about After School Matters, and how you can support Chicago teens, visit 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