



Adjusting to a New Normal

Lessons Learned From After School Matters Summer 2021 Programs

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After School Matters provides teens with opportunities to discover their potential and find their future. To learn more about After School Matters, visit www.afterschoolmatters.org.

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After School Matters is a nonprofit organization that provides afterschool 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 provide a pathway to progress in skills development and independence through project-based programs led by industry experts. 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 nearly 3 decades, After School Matters has served **more than 350,000 teens** throughout the city of Chicago.

COVID-19 pandemic and increased public attention on systemic racism have changed people's daily lives. Schools and afterschool and summer programs have both fundamentally changed. The pandemic transformed how organizations coordinate and support programs, how adult staff design and implement programs, and how young people and their families participate in and experience those programs.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, After School Matters adapted its program structure to continue providing teens with safe opportunities for summer engagement. After School Matters moved in-person summer programs online, offering **517 remote programs** 3–5 days a week to nearly **10,000 Chicago teens**. After School Matters operated programming through Google Suites to align with the Chicago Public Schools' approach, and After School Matters staff delivered individual program supply kits and tech devices directly to teens.

After School Matters also partnered with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to better contextualize and understand three key topics as they related to the unique circumstances of summer 2020: (1) teen experiences, (2) instructor experiences, and (3) how summer 2020 compared to previous years. In AIR's first analysis of the After School Matters summer programs, AIR found that while many **teens** experienced food insecurity and varying levels of stress, and **instructors** struggled with access to supports, program quality remained high, and teens and instructors reported having valuable, inspiring experiences.

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic persisted and the city of Chicago saw community-wide reopening strategies amid public vaccination efforts. After School Matters continued to prioritize providing teens with safe summer opportunities, while also considering teen and instructor comfort levels with reengaging in person. In summer 2021, After School Matters reenvisioned summer programming once again to offer multiple program format options. Over **10,000 Chicago teens** participated in more than **650 programs** through in-person and remote learning options in summer 2021. After School Matters continued its collaboration with AIR to further explore teen experiences, instructor perspectives, program quality, and how 2021 compared to prior years. Findings from AIR's analyses of After School Matters data suggest that **authentic relationship building** is important for both youth and adults and that youth have a need for more **empathy, patience, and understanding**. We also learned about the viability of offering a **variety of program formats** for educational programming. This year, we have learned that a "new normal" looks different for everyone, but that connections, supports, and flexibility can help us continue to adjust together.



What Did We Learn?

Teen Experiences

Like the past summer, teens experienced stressors related to the pandemic, including food insecurity. Despite these challenges, they also reported positive well-being and hope for their future. They shared their strategies for alleviating stress and also described additional mental health supports they would like After School Matters to provide. Teens urged adults to acknowledge their stress, mental health, and other challenges as they adjust to a new normal and asked that adults lead with patience and compassion.

With regard to programming, most teens reported making significant skills gains, having positive relationships with instructors and peers, and feeling a strong sense of belonging in their program. Teens' sense of belonging in their After School Matters program and the support they received from their instructors were positively correlated with their reports of well-being and hope for the future. In other words, teens who felt they belonged in their program or reported feeling more supported by their instructors were also more likely to report more positive well-being and feeling more hopeful about their future. This finding underscores the importance of relationships with instructors and peers as way to buffer stress and improve well-being.

Teen experiences did not significantly differ based on the mode of program delivery (in person vs. remote), with the exception of average daily attendance (ADA) rates and feelings of belonging (both of which were significantly higher for remote programs). There are several factors that might contribute to higher ADA rates for remote programs. For example, remote programs remove the barrier of transportation to the program site. Teens were also readjusting to in-person interaction in schools and program spaces, and likely faced challenges related to various COVID protocols in those spaces (e.g., missing programming due to COVID or close contacts). Possible explanations for teens in remote programs experiencing higher feelings of belonging may include increased opportunity for connection with peers (such as using the private chat feature and not being restricted by social distancing). Overall, few significant differences emerged based on the mode of program delivery, indicating that the remote model continues to provide positive experiences for teens.

Moreover, teens' experiences did not vary significantly from 2020 to 2021. However, there were some differences when comparing 2021 to the pre-pandemic summers of 2018 and 2019. Teens who participated in summer sessions during the pandemic more frequently reported positive relationships with their instructors and higher levels of gaining and strengthening skills compared to pre-pandemic summers. Conversely, teen participants from summer 2020 and 2021 reported slightly lower rates of feeling safe in their program compared to teens who participated pre-pandemic.



Instructor Experiences

Instructors reported significantly lower levels of food insecurity, perceived stress, and financial hardship in summer 2021 compared to summer 2020. That said, one in five instructors still screened positive for food insecurity and one in three instructors reported they did not have access to mental health supports to manage their stress, anxiety, or other concerns. We also found that instructors' perceived stress was positively correlated with screening positively for food insecurity and access to mental health supports.

Despite some continued challenges due to the pandemic, instructors reported positive experiences in their programs this summer. They reported being inspired by 1) teens' eagerness and enthusiastic participation in summer programming, 2) collaboration or relationships among teens, 3) teens' learning and growth during summer programming, 4) teens' motivation or perseverance, 5) teen ideas and creations, and 6) the strong relationships they developed with teens.

Instructors reported that they valued the professional development opportunities they were able to access. They reported high rates of satisfaction with the quality of training and facilitators and shared that the content was useful for their work and helped them increase their own skills. Instructors also reported they valued their interactions with other instructors and the information they received in professional development trainings on program guidelines and program modes of delivery. Looking ahead to the future, instructors requested more professional development opportunities, such as additional trainings on teen engagement, trauma-related topics, mental health resources, and self-care and community care.

Instructors also felt supported by their program specialists in multiple ways. The most common sources of support were through program specialists having a sense of the activities, goals, or intended outcomes of the programs and responding to emails or phone calls in a timely manner. Instructors also reported that After School Matters helped them to practice their use of technology and remote-access platforms and to provide training supports necessary to successfully implement their program. Further, instructors who reported they had the training supports they needed for program implementation also reported lower levels of perceived stress.

Overall, instructors' feedback on their program experiences was comparable across pandemic summers (2020 to 2021), and even higher in some instances when compared to summer 2019. In particular, this summer, a significantly higher proportion of instructors were satisfied with their experience and felt supported by their program specialist when it came to resolving problems and responding to emails and phone calls.



Program Quality

Remote programs continue to demonstrate high levels of quality based on their Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) scores. Summer 2021 remote program quality was comparable with previous remote and in-person summer sessions based on the adapted YPQA domain scores for Safe Environment and Engagement, but varied for the Supportive Environment and Interaction domains. The scores for summer 2021 were significantly higher for Supportive Environment and significantly lower for Interaction when compared to scores from the pre-pandemic summers of 2018 and 2019, which reflect entirely in-person programming. AIR found that the average scores for Active Engagement and Encouragement, both within Supportive Environment, were significantly higher in 2021 when compared to 2019 (Active Engagement, Encouragement) and 2018 (Encouragement). Conversely, average scores for Belonging, Collaboration, and Adult Partners were significantly lower than in the summers of 2019 (Belonging, Collaboration, Adult Partners) and 2018 (Collaboration, Adult Partners). A possible explanation for differing scores in these scales is the structure of programming and how it translates to traditional measures of quality. It is important to note that the YPQA is a tool historically used for assessing in-person programs. Interpreting results across differing instructional formats should be done with caution.

Looking Ahead to Inform Future Practice

AIR recommends the following next steps based on the lessons learned from the summer 2021 program session:

- Continue to expand food support for teens.
- Continue to focus on teen belonging.
- Support both instructors and teens with their mental and emotional health.
- Continue to provide professional development and support for instructors.
- Continue to offer a variety of programming formats.

Methods

After School Matters provided AIR with datasets from their summer sessions for 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. The datasets included:

- Program characteristics
- Teen characteristics
- Teen survey responses
- Instructor survey responses
- Instructor professional development survey responses
- Program Quality Assessment (PQA) data

Where applicable, AIR used five methods to analyze data:

1. **Descriptive analysis** (averages, counts, and percentages)
2. **Correlational analysis** (how two items relate to one another)
3. **Analysis of variance (ANOVA)** (whether group averages are different from each other)
4. **Geographic analysis** (whether items relate to where teens live)
5. **Qualitative analysis** (whether open-ended responses from teens and instructors have common themes)

In this report, we share findings from each analysis when the finding meets a specific threshold. For descriptive analyses, we share findings when they help to establish context, when they are considered a success (>80% agreement), and when they are considered a challenge (<80% agreement). We share correlational, ANOVA, and geographic findings when we observed statistically significant differences at the $p = .05$ level, which indicates that any observed differences are unlikely to have occurred by chance (note that statistical significance does not tell us about the magnitude of that difference). Finally, we share qualitative findings when more than 10% of survey takers conveyed similar themes in their written responses.





Teen Experiences

In this section, we highlight teen experiences in summer 2021 and how they compare to previous summers. First, we describe teens’ daily realities, including food insecurity, teen stress, mental health, well-being, and hope. We also describe teens’ readiness to return to in-person learning in the fall.

Then we describe teens’ program experiences in their After School Matters programs, including mode of program delivery, feelings of belonging in the program, relationships with instructors and peers, skill development, other program opportunities, program satisfaction, and opportunities to discuss systemic racism.

After School Matters served **10,219** teens in the summer 2021 program session. Nearly **57%** of teens identified as female, and **40%** identified as male. The remaining 3% of teens identified with another gender or chose not to identify. The majority of teens were Black or African American (**52%**), followed by Latinx (**33%**).

A total of **4,164** teens (**41%**) completed a survey to share their daily realities and program experiences. As shown in Table 1, a greater proportion of females responded to the survey than the proportion of female program participants (63% of survey respondents were female, compared with 57% of program participants).

Table 1. Teen Demographics: Program Participants and Survey Respondents

Demographic	Program Participants (n = 10,219)	Survey Respondents (n = 4,164)
Gender		
Female	57%	63% ^a
Male	40%	33% ^a
Another gender	1%	1%
Choose not to identify	2%	2%
Race and Ethnicity		
Black/African American	52%	49%
Latinx	33%	35%
Asian	6%	8%
White	5%	5%
Two or more races	3%	3%
Other races	1%	1%
Not reported	0%	<1%

Note. “Other races” refers to American Indian/Native American, Middle Eastern/Northern African, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

^a These survey respondent percentages total to greater than a ±5% difference.

Daily Realities

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way After School Matters provided programming and the way teens experienced their summers. Households faced challenges in accessing basic resources, teens missed out on typical adolescent experiences, and people's lifestyles were significantly altered. As a result of these disruptions and their unique impact on youth specifically, pediatric health experts declared a national emergency concerning teens' mental health. The U.S. Surgeon General recommended increased recognition of mental health, empowerment to recognize difficult emotions, and access to mental health resources (U.S. Health and Human Services Press Office, 2021).

Although the pandemic impacted people of all backgrounds, the virus disproportionately affected racial and ethnic minority groups (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021; Tai et al., 2021). Further, early data concerningly demonstrate that youth of color experience higher COVID-related hospitalization and mortality rates than their White peers (Tai et al., 2021). Nearly all After School Matters teens (95%) identify as youth of color. Thus, After School Matters was particularly interested in better understanding the daily realities of teens amid the pandemic. Here, we present information on teens' daily realities this summer, including their food insecurity, perceived stress, mental health, well-being, and hope for the future.

Food Insecurity

Recent data indicate that national food insecurity rates are significantly higher as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Feeding America, 2021). Food insecurity impacted about 12% of Cook County households with children before the pandemic (Gundersen et al., 2020). In 2020, Chicago food insecurity rates hovered around 19%, with even higher rates for people of color (City of Chicago, n.d.). Analysts predicted that 14% of Chicago households, and 16% of Chicago households with children, would be food insecure in 2021 (Greater Chicago Food Depository, 2021).

As the COVID-19 pandemic heightened in spring 2020, After School Matters received feedback from instructors and teens that they experienced trouble meeting basic needs, including food. As a result, After School Matters increased food distribution in targeted communities throughout the city and distributed 200,000+ meals between April 2020 and January 2022. Given the need expressed by some of their instructors and teens, After School Matters' food distribution efforts, and the rising food insecurity rates across the city and country, After School Matters included a Food Insecurity Screener in their summer survey.

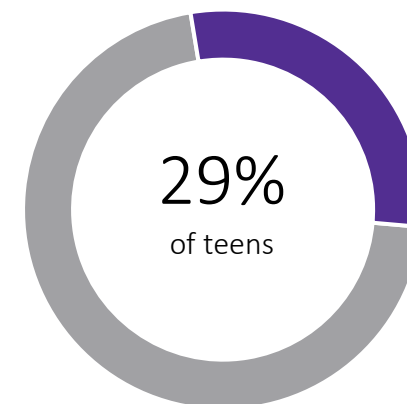
The Food Insecurity Screener is a validated two-item measure created from the United States Department of Agriculture’s Household Food Security Survey (Hager et al., 2010). This measure asks respondents to report if they worried whether food would run out before they received money to buy more, and if the food they bought would not last until they bought more. Scoring positively on either item indicates an individual is food insecure.

In the first year of analysis (2020), AIR found that a third of After School Matters teens scored positively for food insecurity. In summer 2021, AIR found food insecurity to be slightly reduced, at 29% (Figure 1). While these values decreased between years, they were not significantly different.

AIR then used geographic informational systems (GIS) to layer teens’ food insecurity scores with key, current neighborhood characteristics that may impact their daily lives. These neighborhood characteristics included the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) and Chicago COVID-19 case rates. Social vulnerability refers to the potential negative effects on communities caused by external stresses, such as natural or human-caused disasters, or disease outbreaks. For more information, please see the Center for Disease Control’s [Social Vulnerability Index](#). The AIR team used the total number of COVID-19 positive case rates by zip code from March 1, 2020, to August 28, 2021, publicly provided by the [City of Chicago Department of Public Health](#).

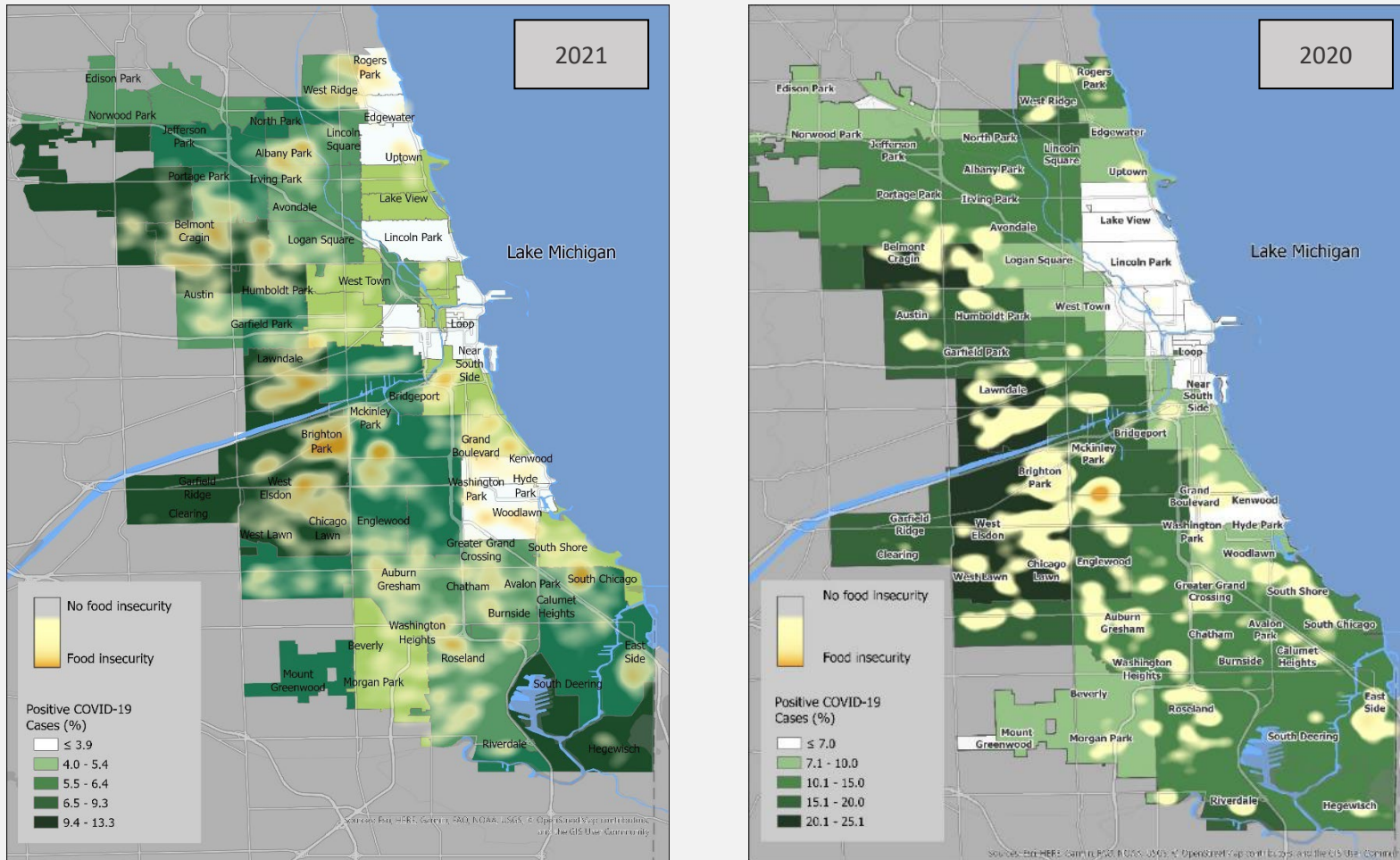
In our 2020 analysis, AIR found that teens in more vulnerable areas of the city and teens in areas with higher rates of COVID-19 were more likely to be food insecure. In response, After School Matters increased food distribution efforts in specific areas of the city. Similar to last year, AIR found that **teens are more likely to be food insecure in more vulnerable areas of the city** ($p < .001$) **and in areas where there are higher rates of positive COVID-19 cases** ($p < .05$) than in other areas of the city (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 1. Over a Quarter of Teens Screened Positively for Food Insecurity



Note. $n = 3,402$ teens.

Figure 3. Teen Food Insecurity and COVID-19 Case Rates (2021 Compared to 2020)



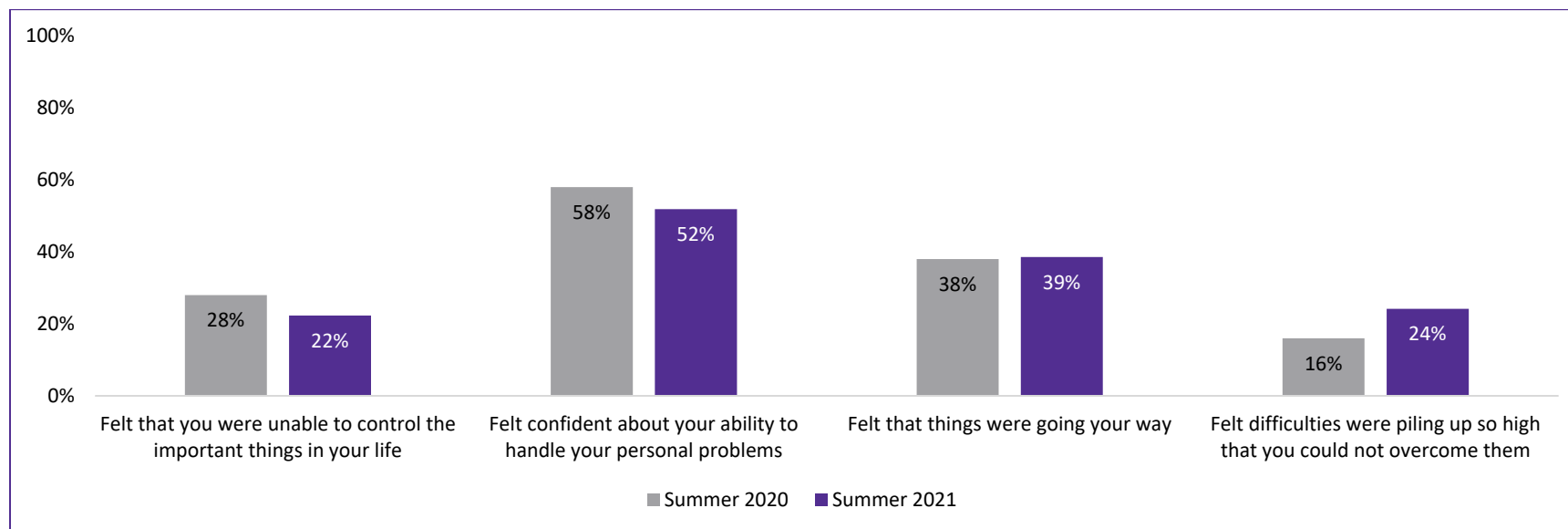
Teen Stress, Mental Health, Well-Being, and Hope

Understanding teens' current mental and emotional state is an important step in a program's ability to provide aligned supports. On this summer's teen survey, After School Matters expanded questioning on stress, mental health, well-being, and hope for the future, allowing After School Matters to gather more information on overall wellness and identify specific areas requiring targeted supports.

After School Matters captured teens' stress by including the short version of the [Perceived Stress Scale \(PSS-4\)](#) in their 2020 and 2021 spring, fall, and summer teen surveys. The PSS-4 is an instrument used to measure the degree to which respondents have felt stress in their recent life experiences. Teens responded to questions regarding how overwhelmed and stressed they felt this summer.

AIR first analyzed teen responses descriptively on each of the four items of the PSS-4 (Figure 4). Here we share the proportion of teens that responded "fairly often" or "often" to each item individually. AIR found that **52%** of teens reported they felt confident about their ability to handle their personal problems, and **39%** of teens felt things were going their way. About a quarter of teens (**24%**) reported they felt difficulties were piling so high that they could not overcome them, and **22%** of teens reported they felt they were unable to control things in their life. Compared to 2020, more teens this year reported that difficulties were piling so high they could not overcome them (from **16%** to **24%**). AIR also saw a decrease in the percentage of teens who felt they were unable to control the important things in their life (**28%** to **22%**). There was also a decrease of 6 percentage points (from **58%** to **52%**) in the percentage of teens who felt confident about their ability to handle their personal problems. Teen reports that they felt things were going their way were consistent compared to 2020 (**38%** to **39%**).

Figure 4. Teen Perceived Stress Slightly Decreased From 2020 to 2021

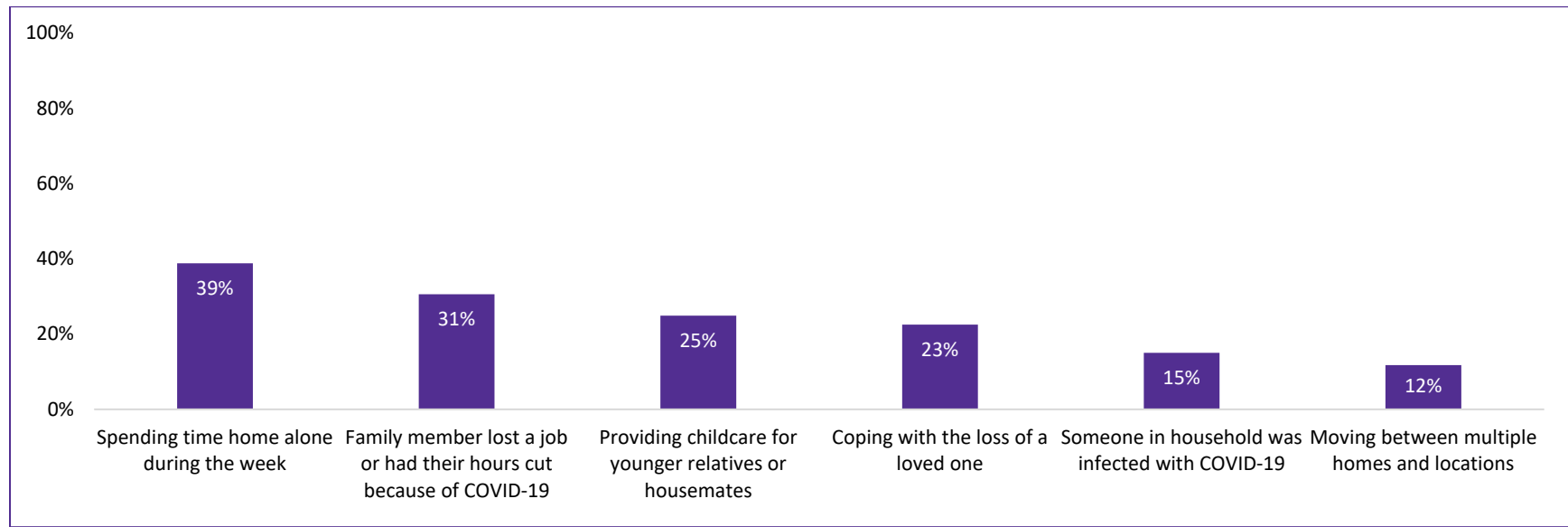


Note. The number of teen survey respondents varied across items, ranging from 3,323 to 3,337.

Then, AIR followed scoring guidance from the developers of the PSS-4 to calculate an average “perceived stress score” for each teen. Perceived stress scores for PSS-4 range from 0 to 16, with higher scores indicating more stress. On average, **After School Matters teens scored a 6.75. This score means that, on average, After School Matters teens reported a moderate level of stress.** Similarly, a majority of teens scored an 8.00. For comparison, last year, After School Matters teens scored a **7.07** on average and a majority of teens scored an 8.00. This summer’s average value is slightly lower than last summer’s, although the differences are not statistically significant.

AIR then dug deeper into factors that could contribute to teens’ stress. In the summer survey, teens reported if anyone in their family had lost their job or had their hours cut because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teens also shared additional responsibilities or stressors they commonly take on because of the pandemic. AIR found that **39%** of teens reported taking on the additional responsibilities or stressors of staying home alone during the week (Figure 5). The other most common stressors were having someone in their family lose their job or have their hours cut (**31%**), providing childcare for younger relatives (**25%**), and coping with the loss of a loved one (**23%**).

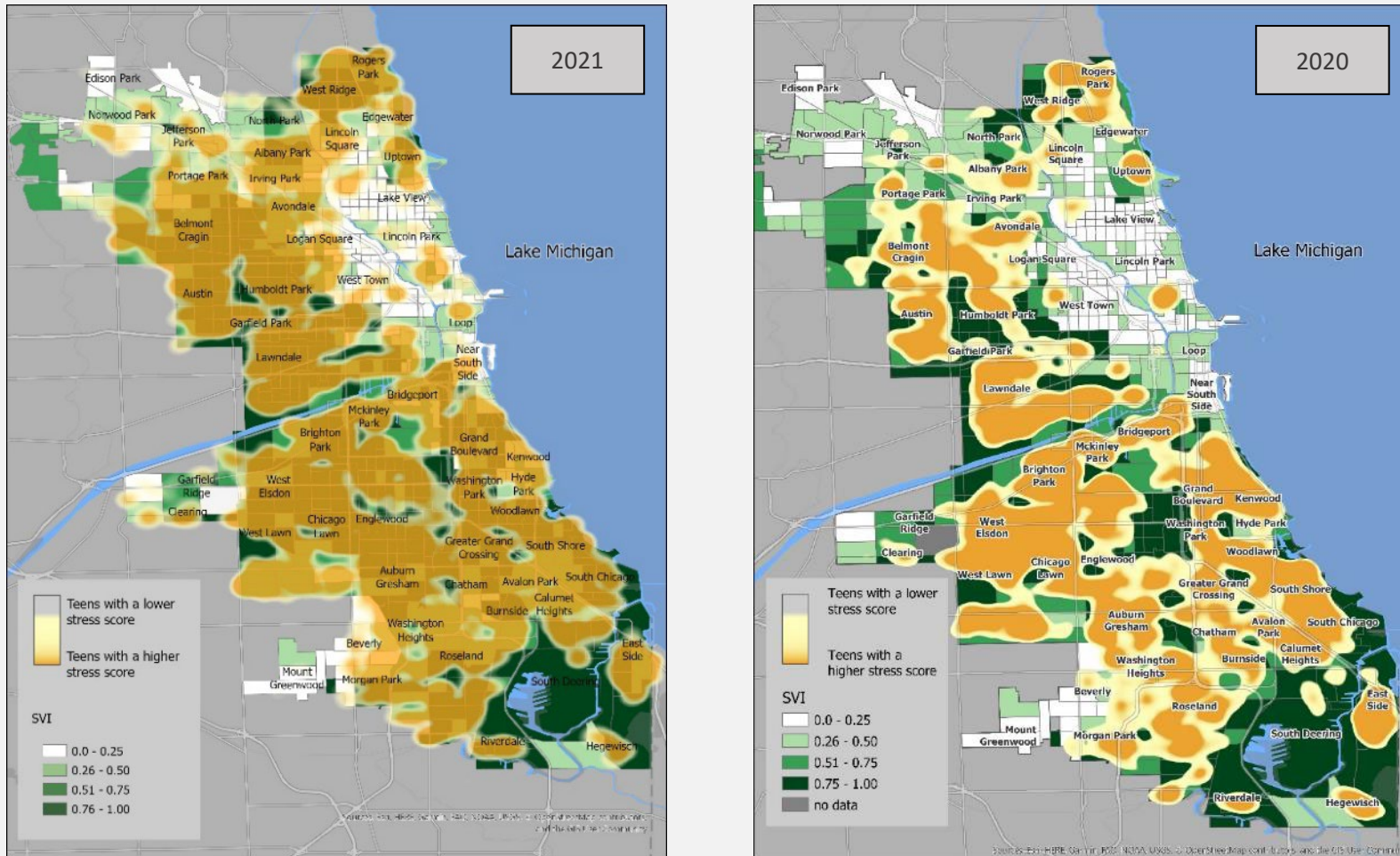
Figure 5. Teens Experienced Various Stressors Related to the Ongoing Pandemic



Note. The number of teen survey respondents was 3,283.

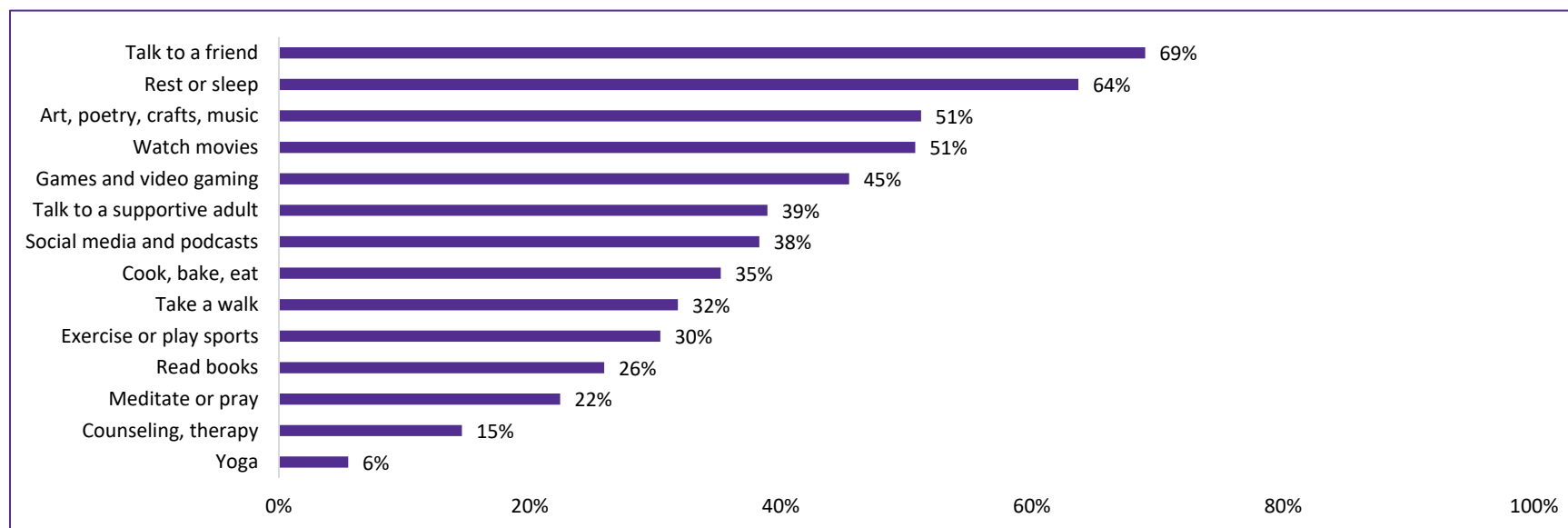
AIR then used GIS to layer teens’ perceived stress scores with [SVI](#) and [COVID-19 case rates](#). In our 2020 analysis, we found both SVI and COVID-19 case rates to be geographically correlated with teen stress, meaning teens in more vulnerable areas of the city tended to be more stressed, and teens in areas with higher COVID-19 case rates also tended to be more stressed. This year, however, AIR did not find teen stress to be geographically related to SVI, nor to COVID-19 case rates (Figures 6 and 7). One potential interpretation is that teen stress is more pervasive across the city, regardless of their community’s social vulnerability or COVID-19 case rates.

Figure 6. Teen Perceived Stress and Social Vulnerability Index (2021 Compared to 2020)



After School Matters intentionally builds opportunities for teens to de-stress into the After School Matters program design, such as connecting with supportive adults and peers, engaging in art, and playing sports. In light of the stress that teens experience, we wanted to uncover how they tend to deal with their stress, with special attention to strategies emphasized in After School Matters programming. AIR examined if teens have someone they trust to support them when they are stressed, who this person is in their life, and what other supports teens use to de-stress. AIR found that **85%** of teens report they have someone they trust to support them when they experience stress. Most often, teens reported turning to friends (**58%**), parents (**45%**), or other family members (**31%**). When teens experience stress, they reported managing it with several supports, as shown in Figure 8. In considering how After School Matters can support teen mental health, teens most often reported they would prefer to talk to a friend; rest or sleep; or do a creative activity, such as art, poetry, craft, or music.

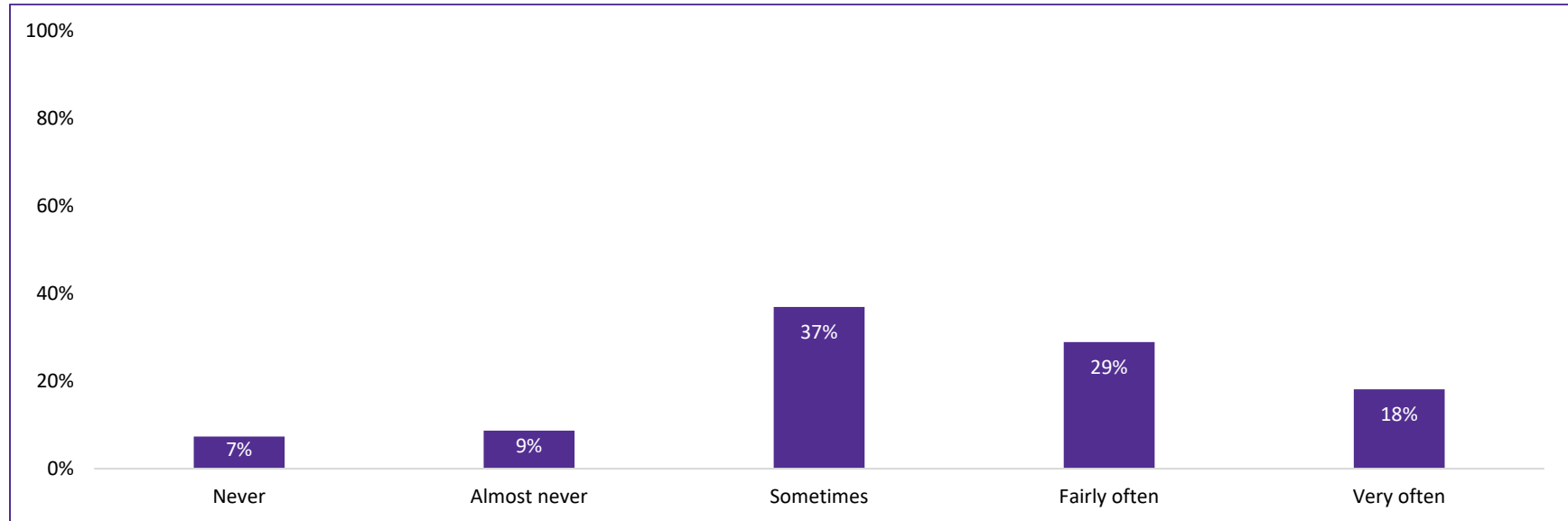
Figure 8. Teens Reported a Variety of Strategies for Managing Stress Levels



Note. The number of teen survey respondents was 3,423.

Teens also reported on how often their summer program helped them lessen or manage their stress. A majority of teens (84%) reported that their summer program helped them lessen stress at least some of the time (Figure 9). Additionally, teens shared how often they talk to others about their stress. Nearly two thirds (62%) reported talking about their stress to friends and peers sometimes, fairly often, or all the time. Fewer teens (39%) reported talking about their stress to an adult instructor as frequently (sometimes, fairly often, or all the time).

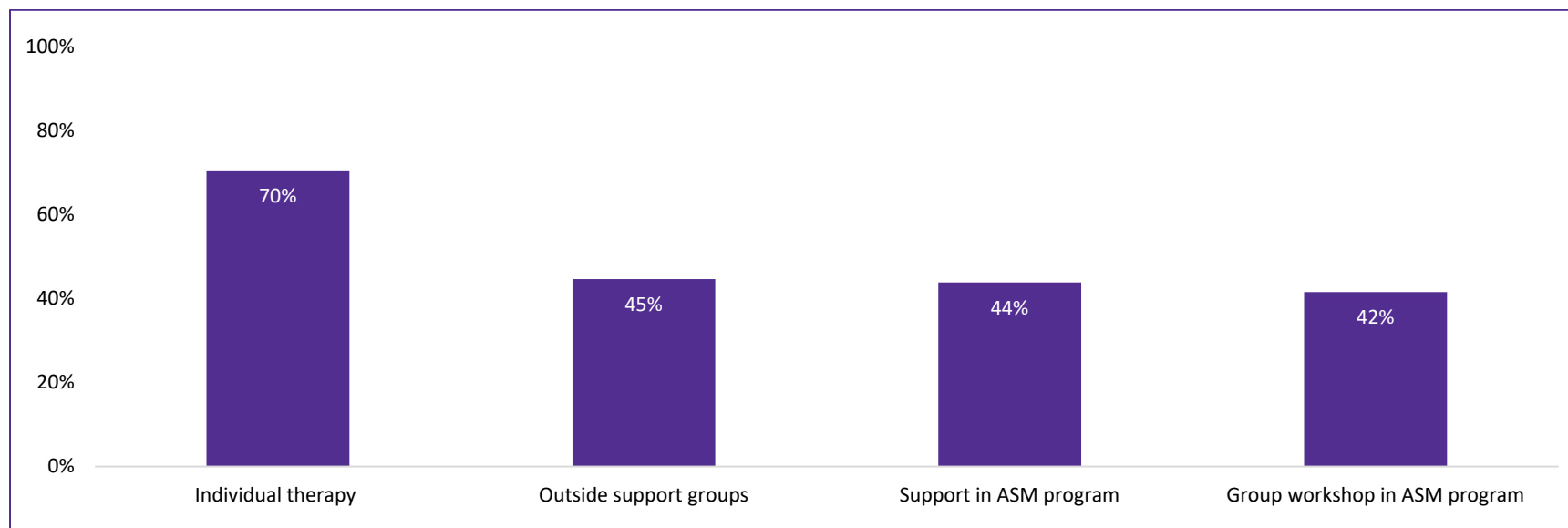
Figure 9. Most Teens Reported Their Summer Program Helped Lessen/Manage Stress



Note. The number of teen survey respondents was 3,449.

After School Matters asked teens about their interest in receiving mental health supports in the future. Half of teens (51%) indicated they would like to see After School Matters provide teens with referrals or access to mental health services. Of teens that said they would like these supports, nearly three quarters (70%) reported they would be interested in individual therapy (i.e., remote, confidential, one-on-one sessions with a therapist) (Figure 10). Forty-five percent of teens reported they would be interested in outside support groups (i.e., a therapist holds a group session outside of the program with other program participants who share a similar interest). Forty-four percent of teens said they would have interest in support within the program (i.e., a therapist visits an After School Matters program, virtually or in person, with the instructor present to provide emotional support as requested/following an issue). Finally, 42% of teens would have interest in group workshops within the program (i.e., a therapist visits an After School Matters program, virtually or in person, with the instructor present to hold a group workshop where teens can learn more about coping with stress and how to seek mental health support.)

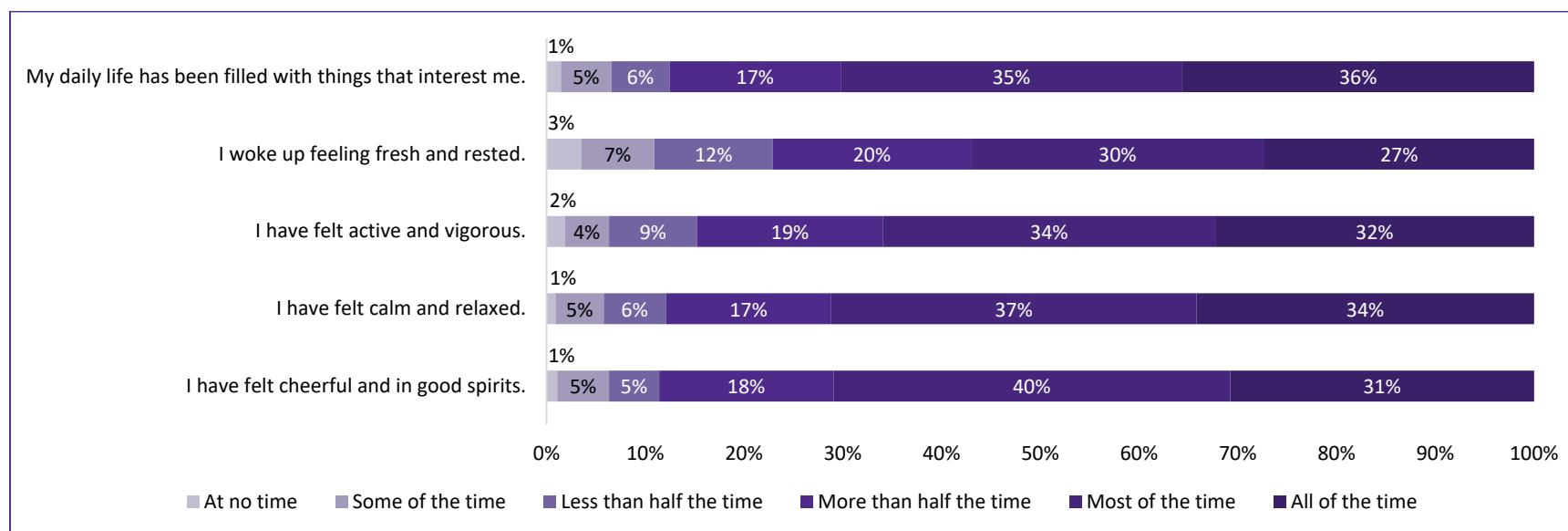
Figure 10. Teens' Interest in Future Mental Health Supports



Note. The number of teen survey respondents for this question includes teens who indicated they would like After School Matters to provide mental health services and is equal to 1,684 (51% of all teen survey respondents).

After School Matters asked teens to reflect on their current well-being and hopefulness for the future. After School Matters incorporated the [World Health Organization Well-Being Index](#) into their survey this summer to better understand teens’ current emotional state. These items asked teens to consider their feelings over the past 2 weeks, such as if they had felt in good spirits, relaxed, and rested. AIR calculated a well-being score based on guidelines from the World Health Organization. The maximum score for the well-being index is 100, with scores above 50 generally indicating positive well-being (Persson & Linden Bostrum, 2017). The average well-being score for After School Matters teens was **81**, indicating generally positive well-being. AIR also examined teens’ responses to the items that represent well-being. The majority of teens reported positive feelings about their well-being more than half of the time, most of the time, or all of the time (Figure 11).

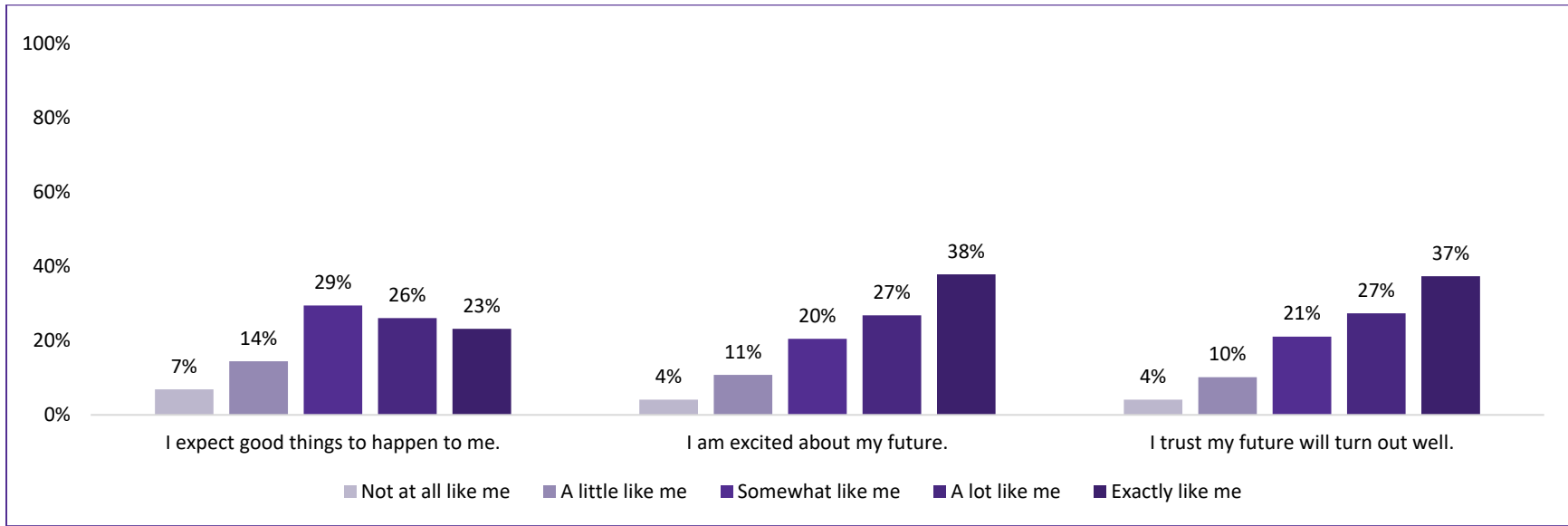
Figure 11. Teens Reported Predominantly Positive Well-Being



Note. The number of teen survey respondents varied across items, ranging from 3,494 to 3,503.

After School Matters also incorporated the [Child Trends Hope Scale](#) into the survey this summer. These items asked teens to share their agreement with statements about their expectations for their future. The average hope score for After School Matters teens was 11. For reference, the hope scale has a maximum score of 15, where higher scores indicate higher levels of hope. As with the well-being scale, we analyzed the items in the hope scale. The majority of teens reported that each of the items sounded “somewhat like me,” “a lot like me,” or “exactly like me” (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Most Teens Have Positive Sentiments About the Future



Note. The number of teen survey respondents varied across items, ranging from 3,568 to 3,585.

Teens also shared how hopeful they feel about their future as a result of participating in After School Matters this summer. As shown in Figure 13, **78%** of teens feel somewhat or very hopeful about their future.

What Made Teens More Hopeful for Their Future?

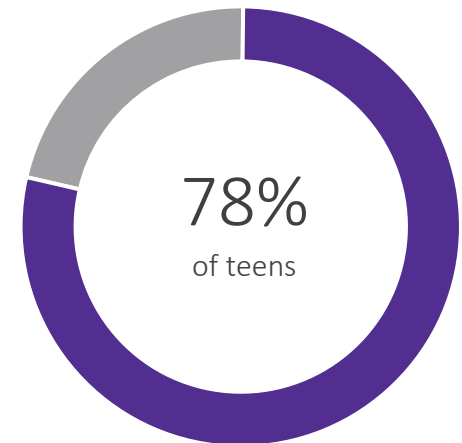
Teens contextualized their hopefulness for the future in open-ended responses. A total of 3,721 teens responded to the survey question. Teens felt more hopeful because of:

- The skills they developed ($n = 589$).
- The personal connections they developed ($n = 414$).
- Their participation in specific program activities or the overall program ($n = 259$).
- Their better view of their future ($n = 224$).

“BEING IN A GROUP OF PEOPLE THAT SHARED MY INTERESTS AND SEEING THAT THERE ARE PLENTY OF PEOPLE EVEN JUST IN A PROGRAM LIKE THIS THAT ARE ACCEPTING, GOOD PEOPLE THAT ARE IN LIFE. I AM HOPEFUL TO MEET MORE PEOPLE LIKE THEM AND FIND A SIMILAR SPACE FOR MYSELF IN THE FUTURE.”

—AFTER SCHOOL MATTERS TEEN

Figure 13. Many Teens Feel Hopeful About Their Future After Participating in ASM



Note. $n = 3,532$ teens.

Preparing for the Fall

Many school districts, including Chicago Public Schools, where most After School Matters teens attend, had offered mostly remote learning since the COVID-19 pandemic began. After School Matters wanted to understand how teens felt about this learning environment and the challenges that come with it. After School Matters asked teens how ready they are to return to in-person schooling in the fall of 2021. Of those that were planning to return to in-person schools in fall 2021, **49%** of teens said they are somewhat ready, and **37%** said they are very ready. Conversely, **14%** of teens said they are not at all ready.

What Is Important for Program Instructors and Teachers to Know in Order to Support Teens During the School Year?

Teens shared how program instructors and teachers could better support them in the upcoming school year in their open-ended responses. A total of 2,242 teens responded to the survey question.



Recognize teens' challenges and mental health ($n = 603$). The challenges teens described include difficulty readjusting to school, high stress levels, and balancing multiple responsibilities. For example, one teen shared, "We need to adjust back to in-person learning, just like we needed to adjust to virtual learning. Covid has increased many mental health issues in many people, so being able to keep that in mind and have resources to support us is important so we can continue to learn."



Have compassion and patience for teens ($n = 573$). One teen shared, "I think it's important for the teachers to know that a lot of teens are going to be not very engaged or happy most of the time and they shouldn't think it's because they are lazy[,] but the teachers should be understanding and willing to talk to the students about problems they have at home or other things. They should also not give students a hard time especially since a lot of teens have had problems such as losing a loved one or parents losing jobs and it would be even worse if the problems continued into school."

Key Takeaways: *Teen Daily Realities*

Teens are still experiencing stress and stressors related to the pandemic, including food insecurity. They shared their strategies for alleviating stress and additional supports for their mental health that they would like After School Matters to provide. Teens urged adults to acknowledge their stress, mental health, and other challenges as we adjust to a new normal and asked that adults lead with patience and compassion. Despite the stress and struggles teens report, they also report positive well-being and hope for their future. From teens' open-ended responses, it is evident that some of these positive sentiments derive from being in their programs at After School Matters (e.g., programming made them more hopeful and helped to lessen their stress or helped them manage it).

Program Experiences

In summer 2021, After School Matters adapted their program structure by reintroducing in-person programs while continuing to also offer remote program opportunities. Two thirds of program offerings were remote (67%), with 33% in person. Most teens (75%) chose to participate in remote programs, leaving one quarter of teens participating in person. Considering these shifts in programing and in teens' daily lives during the second year of the pandemic, After School Matters was interested in understanding teen's experiences in remote and in-person program spaces. AIR analyzed teens' reports of how they perceived their program experience, including feelings of belonging, relationships with peers and instructors, skills gained, program opportunities, program satisfaction, and opportunities to discuss systemic racism. Finally, we compared teens' experiences across different modes of program delivery.

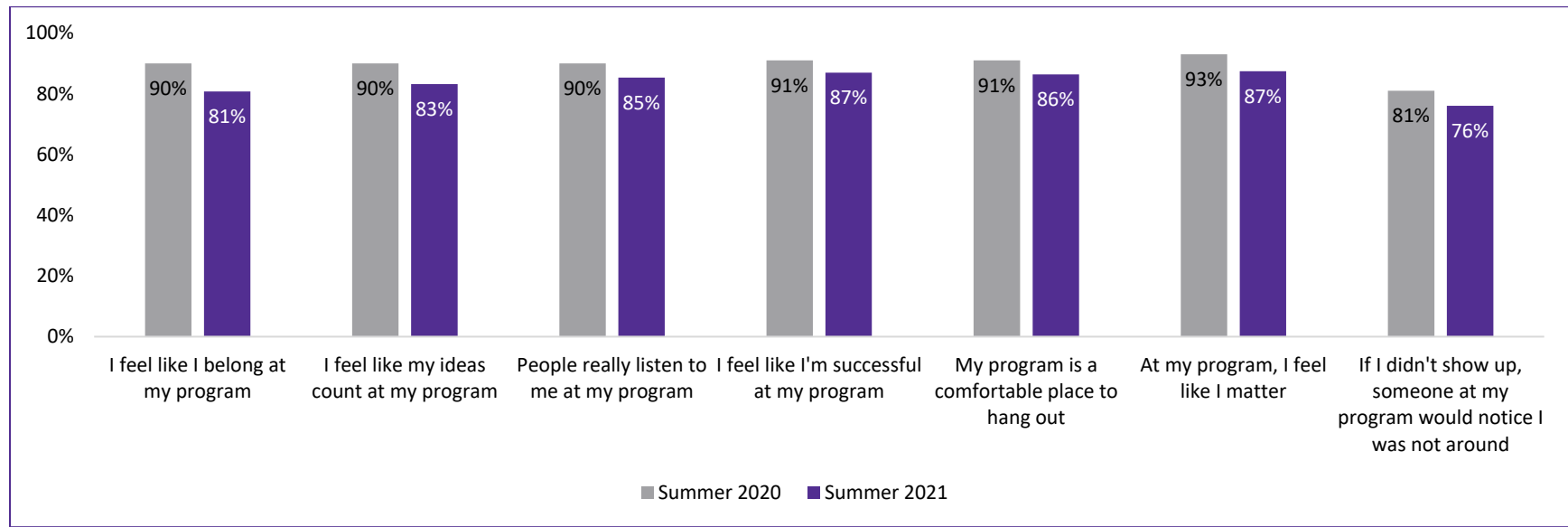
Belonging

After School Matters used a scale on [Belonging](#) to get a sense of how teens feel as a member of their program. Teens responded to seven items related to how they feel about their interactions with and membership in the program. As shown in Figure 14, most teens agreed with each statement "Most of the time" or "Always." AIR followed guidance from the instrument's developer to calculate one Belonging score for each teen. A higher Belonging score indicates a greater sense of belonging. Belonging scores for After School Matters teens ranged from 1 to 4, with an average of 3.37. **This average represents a high Belonging score among teens.**

Looking from 2020 to 2021, teens' sense of belonging dropped from 3.53 in 2020 to 3.37 in 2021, which represents a statistically significant change. Additionally, the percentage of teens who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement dropped across all seven questions. The biggest decreases were in whether teens felt like their ideas counted at their program and that people really listened to them at their program.

Because program formats changed between 2020 and 2021 from entirely remote to both remote and in person, AIR dug deeper into the belonging score in 2021 by comparing in-person and remote programs. AIR found that **remote programs reported significantly higher rates of belonging (3.38 for remote, compared to 3.31 for in person).**

Figure 14. Belonging Decreased From 2020 to 2021



Note. The number of teen survey respondents varied across items, ranging from 3,509 to 3,522.

Additionally, AIR examined how Belonging scores were related to other areas of feedback. Teens who reported **more support from their instructor also reported a greater sense of belonging**. Further, teens who reported **a greater sense of belonging also reported more positive well-being and greater hope for the future** ($p < .001$ for all correlations).

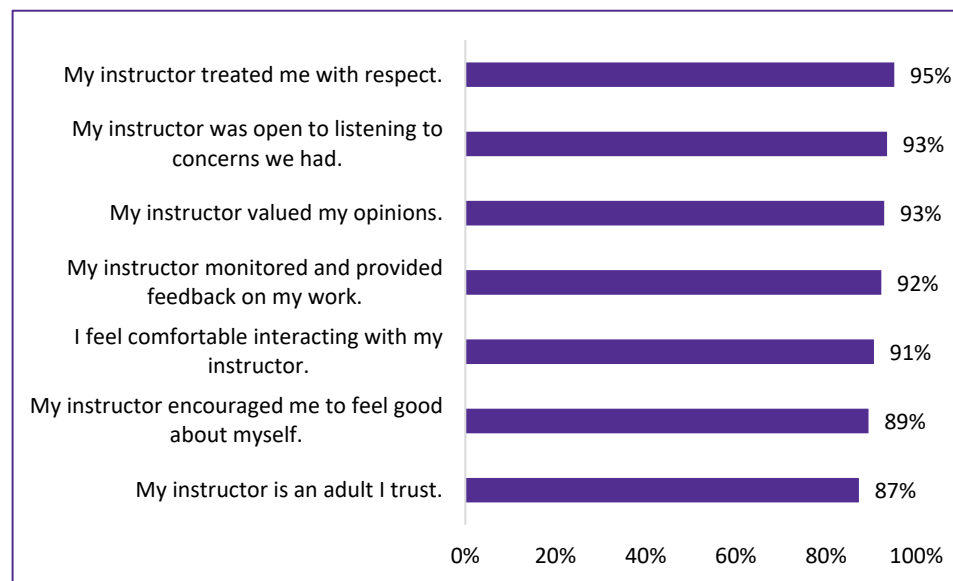
Supportive Relationships With Instructors and Peers

After School Matters instructors serve not only as program leads but also as mentors to help guide teens on a path to success each session. Teens responded to survey questions about their relationships with their instructors, such as whether the instructor was a respectful, caring adult whom the teens trusted. In Figure 15, we highlight the percentage of teens who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about their relationships with their instructors.

Teen survey responses highlighted **positive, strong relationships with their instructors**. More than **90%** of teens reported that their instructor treated them with respect, was open to listening to concerns, valued their opinions, and provided feedback on their work, and reported that they felt comfortable interacting with their instructor. Over **80%** of teens reported that their instructor encouraged them to feel good about themselves and was an adult they trusted.

Teens who reported **more support from their instructor also reported a greater sense of belonging** (as noted previously). Further, teens who reported **more support from their instructor also reported more positive well-being and greater hope for the future** ($p < .001$ for all correlations).

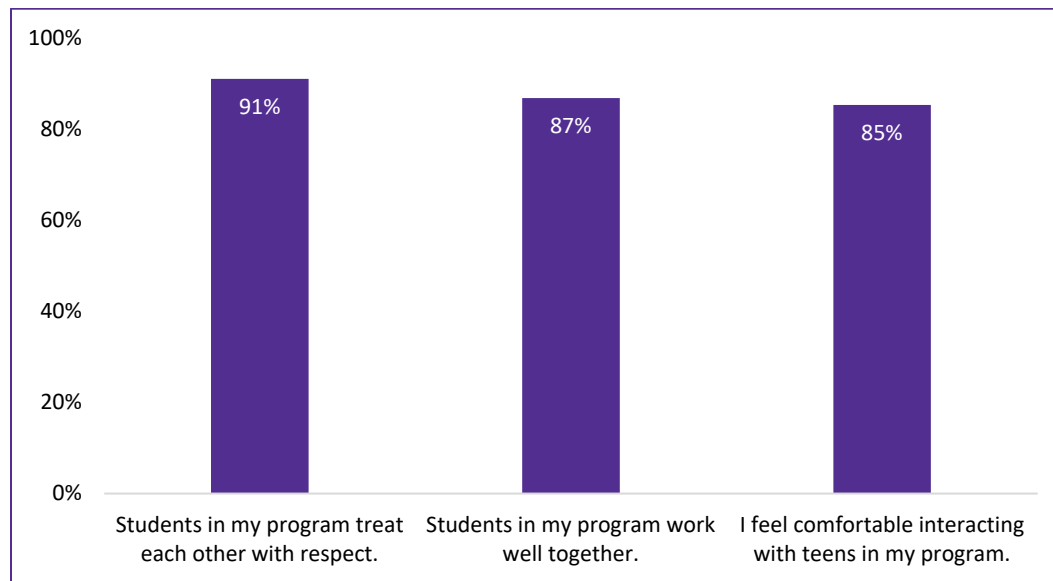
Figure 15. Teens Reported Supportive Relationships With Their Instructor



Note. The number of teen survey respondents varied across items, ranging from 3,445 to 3,588.

Teens also shared feedback on their relationships with their peers (Figure 16). The majority of teens reported students in the program treated each other with respect (91%) and worked well together (87%). Teens also reported feeling comfortable during interactions with their peers (85%).

Figure 16. The Vast Majority of Teens Reported Positive Relationships With Their Peers



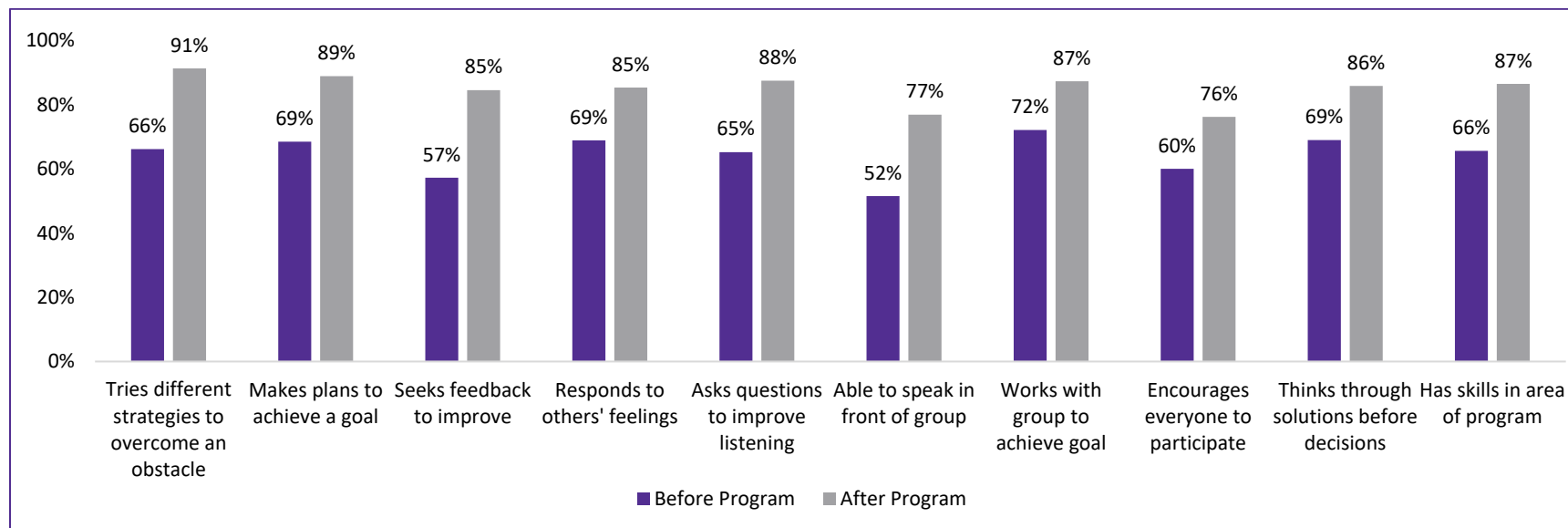
Note. The number of teen survey respondents varied across items, ranging from 3,448 to 3,529.

Skill Development

A key component of the After School Matters program model is engaging teens in skill development for work and higher education. On the summer survey, teens reflected on the 21st century (e.g., communication, leadership, teamwork) and content area (e.g., arts, sports) skills they had before starting the program and how they felt about their abilities in these same skills at the end of program. In Figure 17, we highlight the percentage of teens who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about the skills they possessed at both the beginning and end of their program.

Although all differences in skill abilities were significantly different from the beginning to end of programming, teens reported the largest gains in their ability to seek feedback, try different strategies to overcome an obstacle, and speak in front of a group.

Figure 17. Teens Reported High Level of Skills After Participating in Their Programs



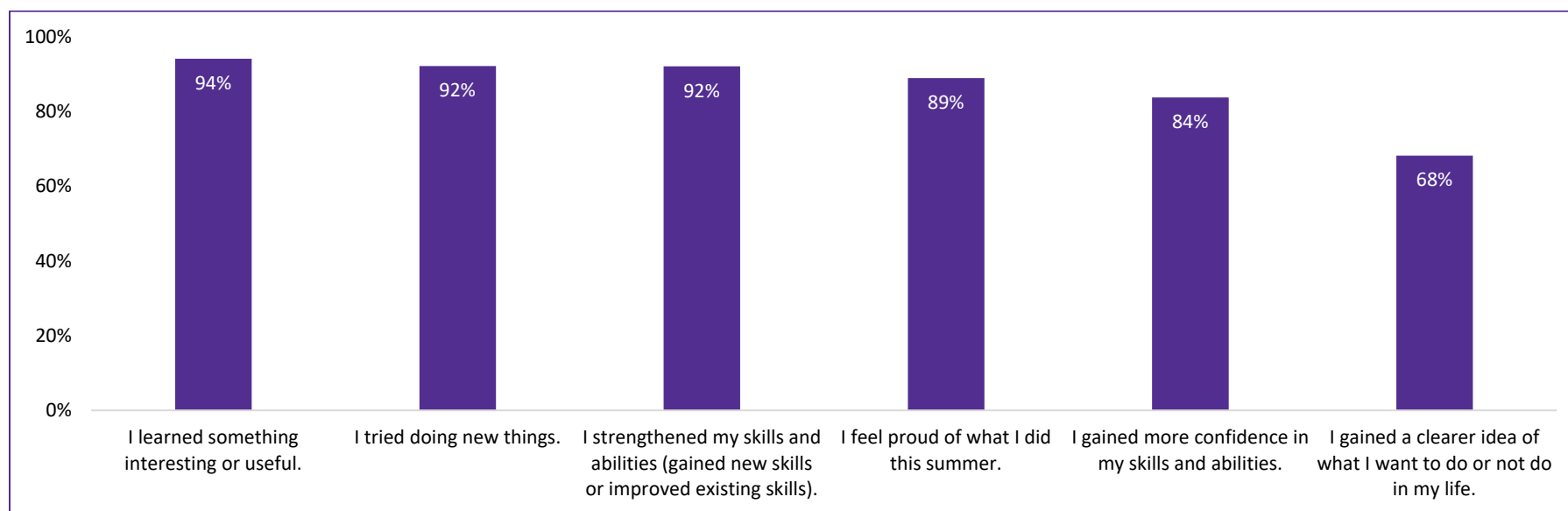
Note. All items were significant at $p < .001$. The number of teen survey respondents varied across items, ranging from 3,549 to 3,615.

Program Opportunities

The After School Matters program model is also designed to build opportunities for teens. On the summer survey, teens described the opportunities their program afforded them, such as having fun, trying new things, and meeting new people. In Figures 18 and 19, we highlight the percentage of teens who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about opportunities they had in their program.

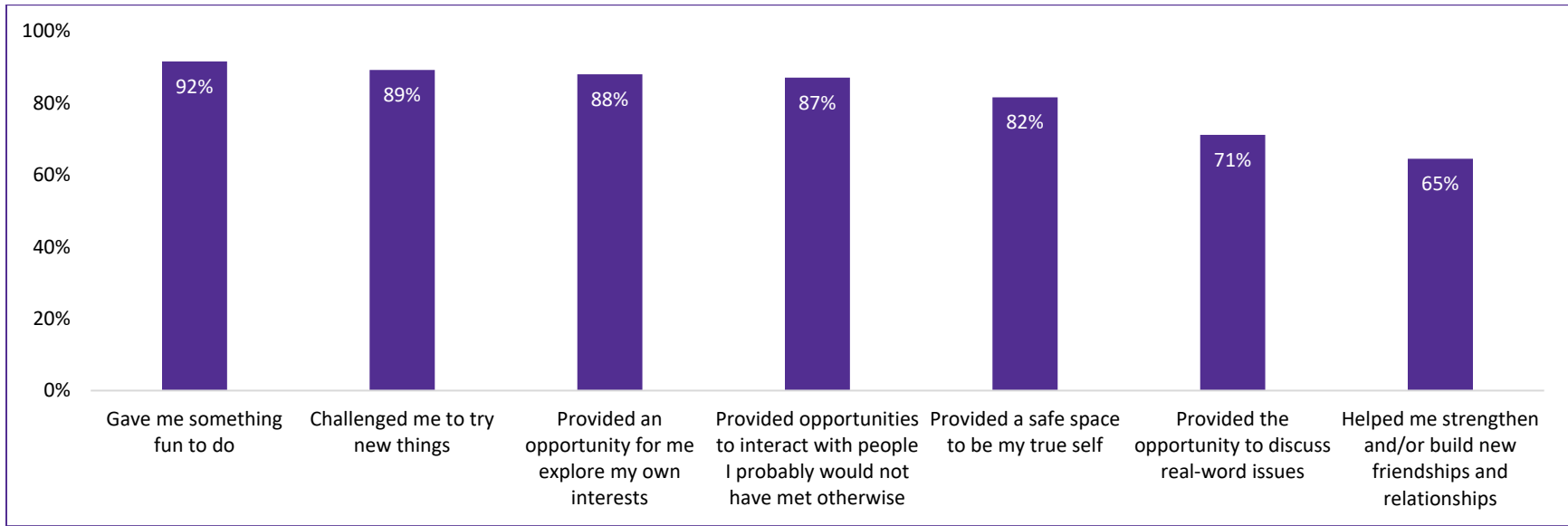
More than **90%** of teens reported that **they learned something interesting or useful in their program, tried doing new things, and strengthened their skills and abilities, and that their program gave them something fun to do**. Two thirds (**68%**) of teens reported that their program helped them gain a clearer idea of what they wanted or did not want to do in life.

Figure 18. Teens Mostly Shared Positive Feedback About the Opportunities Their Program Provided



Note. n = 3,939.

Figure 19. Teens Mostly Shared Positive Feedback About Their General Program Experience



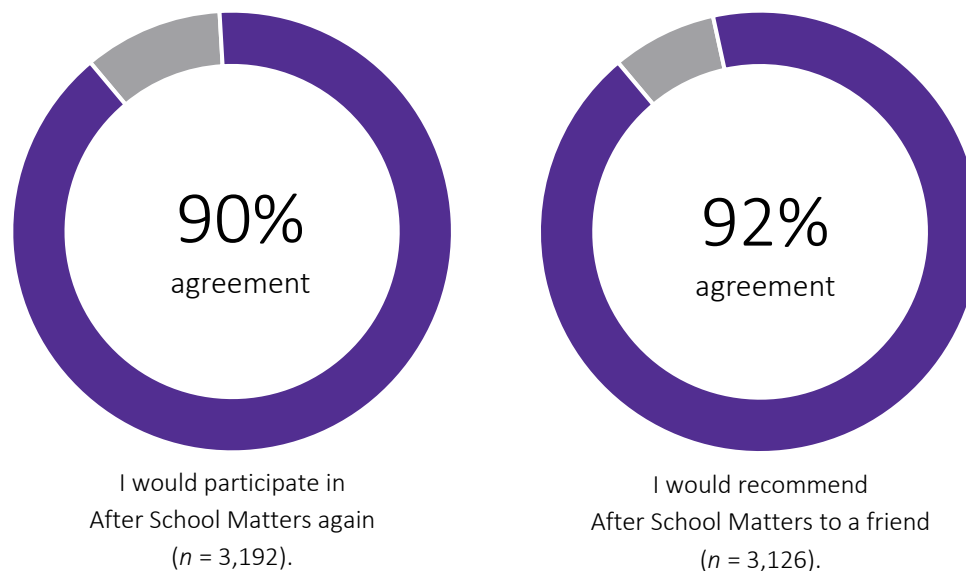
Note. *n* = 3,939.

Program Satisfaction

After School Matters has found that teens who participate in more program sessions experience more successful outcomes (Goerge et al., 2007). Measuring program satisfaction can be a helpful way to gauge whether teens might return to programs in the future. Teens shared their satisfaction with the program by reporting whether they would participate in After School Matters again and whether they would recommend After School Matters to a friend. A vast majority of teens said they would participate in After School Matters again (90%) and would recommend After School Matters to a friend (92%) (Figure 20).

AIR then dug deeper into the program satisfaction score by analyzing whether any other survey items related to teen satisfaction with programming. AIR found the survey items with the strongest relationships with program satisfaction to be items related to a sense of belonging, instructor support, comfort with their program, having something fun to do, and learning something from the program. In other words, **the more that teens felt they belonged, their instructors supported them, their program gave them a comfortable place to hang out and have fun, and they learned something from the program, the more satisfied teens were with their program** (all at $p < .001$).

Figure 20. Most Teens Reported High Levels of Program Satisfaction



What Did Teens Value About Their Programs?

Teens also shared through open-ended survey responses what they valued most about their programs. A total of 2,535 teens responded to the survey item. Teens valued the:

- Personal connections they developed ($n = 872$).
- Learning and skills they developed ($n = 589$).
- Activities and assignments of the program ($n = 357$).

Opportunities to Discuss Systemic Racism

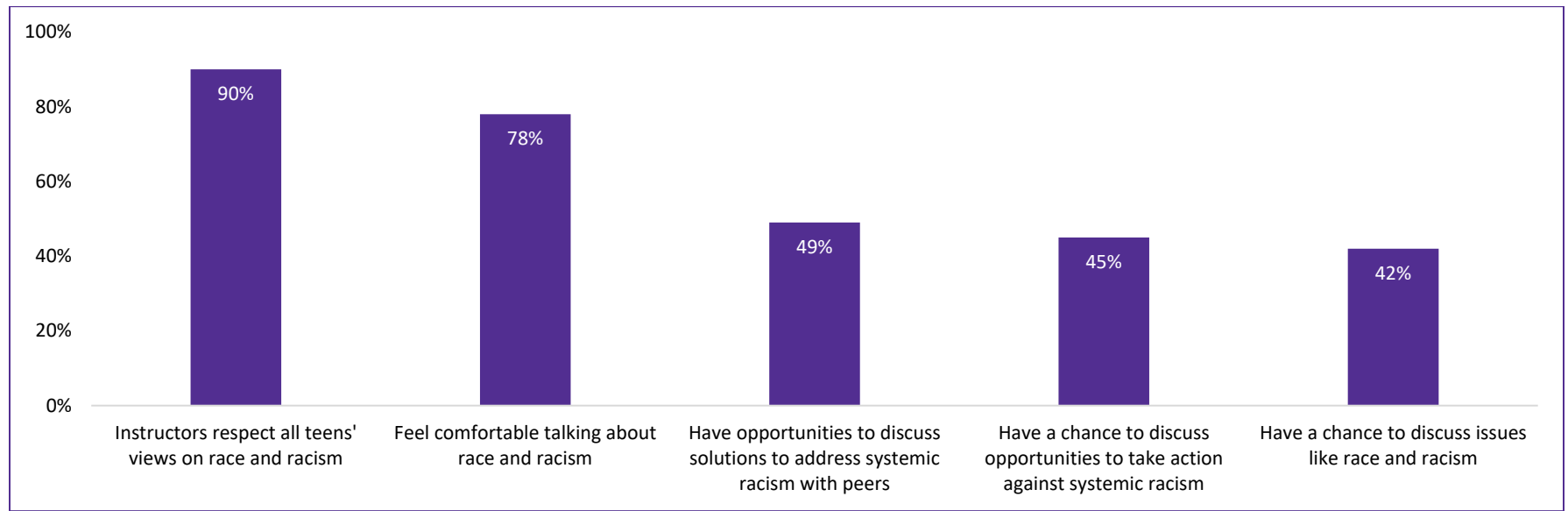
Over the last 2 years, issues of systemic racism gained wider public attention. After School Matters sought to understand teen perspectives on how programs and schools engage with these issues. AIR examined teen reports of how often they discussed topics of systemic racism in their program (Figure 21). We also explored if teens felt their school should spend more time teaching and talking about systemic racism.

Most teens reported their instructors respected all teens' views on race and racism (90%) and that they felt comfortable talking about race and racism (78%). Although it was not the explicit focus or goal across the majority of After School Matters programs, half (49%) of all responding teens felt they had opportunities to discuss solutions to address systemic racism with their peers, and a substantial minority of teens reported they had a chance to discuss opportunities to take action against systemic racism (45%) and issues like race and racism (41%).

“WHAT I VALUED THE MOST ABOUT MY SUMMER PROGRAM EXPERIENCE WAS THE INTERACTIONS WITH MANY SKILLED AND TALENTED TEENS, AS WELL AS MY VERY AMAZING AND TALENTED INSTRUCTORS.”

—AFTER SCHOOL MATTERS TEEN

Figure 21. Teens Had Opportunities to Discuss Race and Racism in Programs



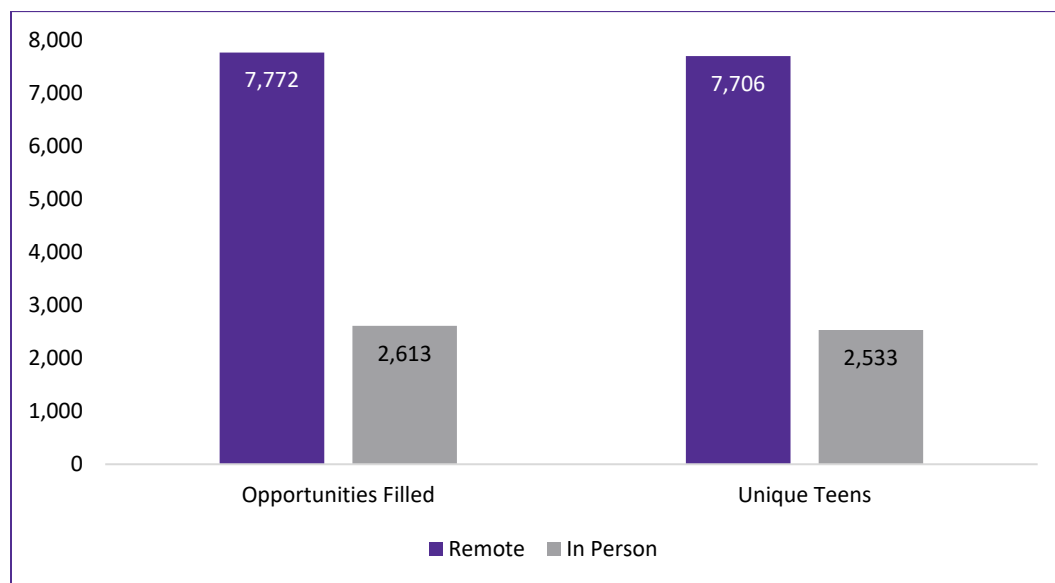
Note. *n* varies between 3,334 and 3,338 for each question.

Slightly more than half of teens (52%) reported they were interested in learning more about afterschool programs that offer activities or opportunities to learn about and address systemic racism. **Sixty percent** of teens felt their school should spend more time teaching and talking about systemic racism.

Mode of Program Delivery

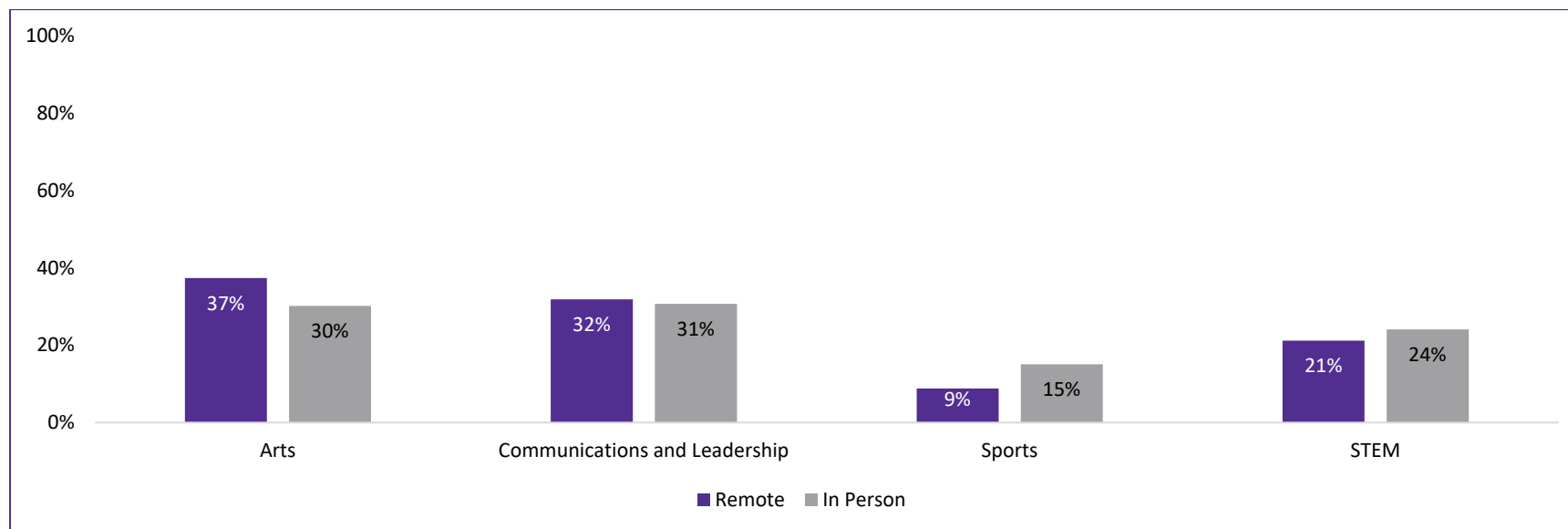
Because this was the first summer After School Matters offered both remote and in-person programs, After School Matters was interested in understanding how in-person and remote programs compared. To begin, AIR compared the number of opportunities filled and unique teen participants for remote and in-person programs. The majority of teens participated in remote programs (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Teen Participation by Mode of Program Delivery



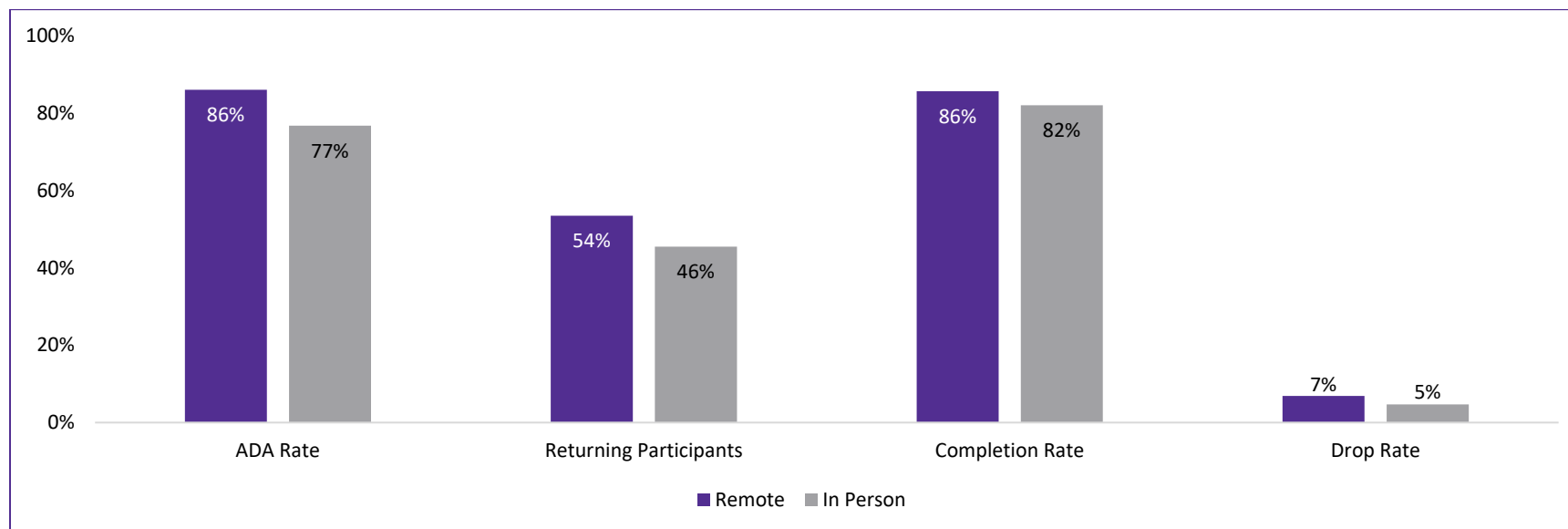
AIR also examined the percentage of programs that ran remotely or in person across After School Matters content areas (Figure 23). Programs were offered in both formats across the content areas. After School Matters offered a similar proportion of remote and in-person programs in communications and leadership and STEM. A higher proportion of After School Matters programs in the arts ran remotely (37% remote, compared to 30% in person), whereas a higher proportion of sports programs ran in person (15% in person, compared to 9% remote).

Figure 23. Content Area by Mode of Program Delivery



It is often said that “teens vote with their feet,” meaning they demonstrate preferences for activities based on how often they show up for programming. We compared After School Matters participation metrics by mode of program delivery. **The average daily attendance (ADA) rate was significantly higher for remote programs (86% compared to 77%).** A possible explanation for this is that teens who participate remotely have fewer barriers to attendance, since they do not need to follow After School Matters’ COVID protocols or dedicate additional travel time and resources to participate in the program. A larger proportion of returning teens participated in programs remotely (54% compared to 46%). Both completion rates and drop rates were higher for remote programs (Figure 24). Some of the differences in participation metrics might be due to the majority of programs running remotely in the summer 2021 session.

Figure 24. Participation Metrics by Mode of Program Delivery



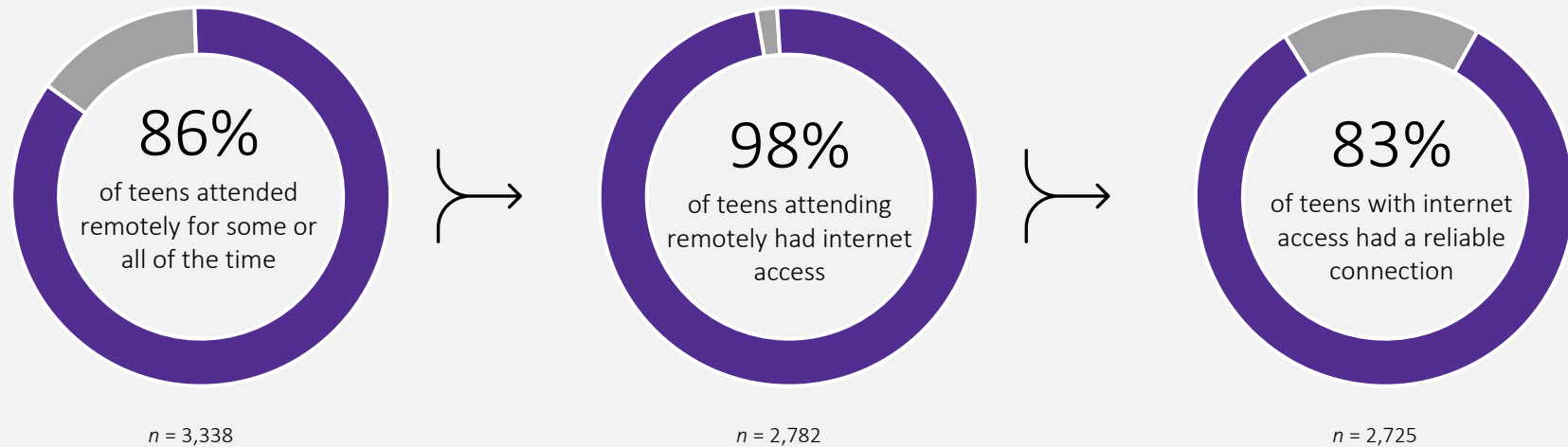
Beyond participation metrics, we were also interested in exploring how teen and instructor feedback differed by mode of program delivery. Across a majority of topics, **AIR did not find significant, meaningful differences in survey responses between remote and in-person participants, suggesting minimal differences in experiences between modes of delivery.** The only topic for which we found significant differences between in-person and remote responses was teen belonging, which we highlight above.

At the onset of the pandemic, the city of Chicago, Chicago Public Schools, and After School Matters prioritized providing Chicago teens with access to devices and high-speed internet as education and enrichment opportunities moved to virtual platforms. Therefore, After School Matters was also interested in gaining a better understanding of teens internet access at home.

Because a majority of teens attend programs remotely for some portion of summer 2021 programming, AIR explored teen reports of internet access in their home. This included if they had internet access and how often the internet was fast enough to join online activities. Finally, we examined if teens would prefer to attend future programs online or in person.

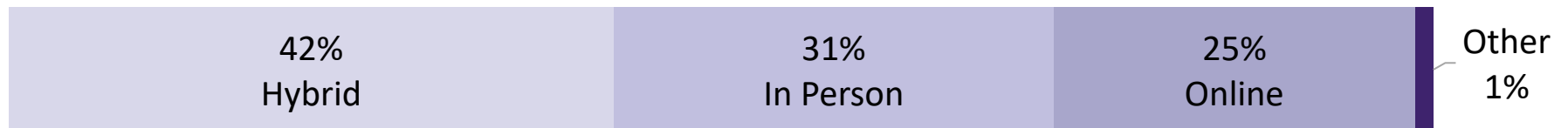
As shown in Figure 25, AIR found that nearly all teens (**98%**) who attended programming online had internet access in their home. Of these teens with internet in their home, **83%** reported having fast enough internet to join online program activities most or all of the time.

Figure 25. Teen Mode of Delivery and Access to Internet



In considering future program participation, 42% of teens reported they would prefer a hybrid (mix of in-person and online) program next year (Figure 26). Almost a third would prefer an in-person program, and just a quarter would prefer online all of the time. Few teens wrote in other responses, such as that they “weren’t sure” or the format “didn’t matter” to them.

Figure 26. Teen Preference for Future Program Participation



Note. n = 3,295

Key Takeaways: *Teen Program Experiences*

Teens' sense of belonging in their After School Matters program and the support they received from their instructors were positively correlated with their reports of well-being and hope for the future. In other words, teens who felt they belonged in their program or reported feeling more supported by their instructors were also more likely to report more positive well-being and feeling more hopeful about their future. This finding underscores the importance of relationships with instructors and peers as way to buffer stress and improve well-being.

Teen experiences did not significantly differ based on the mode of program delivery (in person vs. remote), with the exception of average daily attendance (ADA) rates and feelings of belonging (both of which were significantly higher for remote programs). There are several factors that might contribute to higher ADA rates for remote programs. For example, remote programs remove the barrier of transportation to the program site. Teens were also readjusting to in-person interaction in schools and program spaces, and likely faced challenges related to various COVID protocols in those spaces (e.g., missing programming due to COVID or close contacts). Possible explanations for teens in remote programs experiencing higher feelings of belonging may include increased opportunity for connection with peers (such as using the private chat feature and not being restricted by social distancing). Overall, few significant differences emerged based on the mode of program delivery, indicating that the remote model continues to provide positive experiences for teens.

Comparison Across Summer Sessions

AIR compared teen survey responses and average daily attendance (ADA) rates for the following summer sessions: 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021.

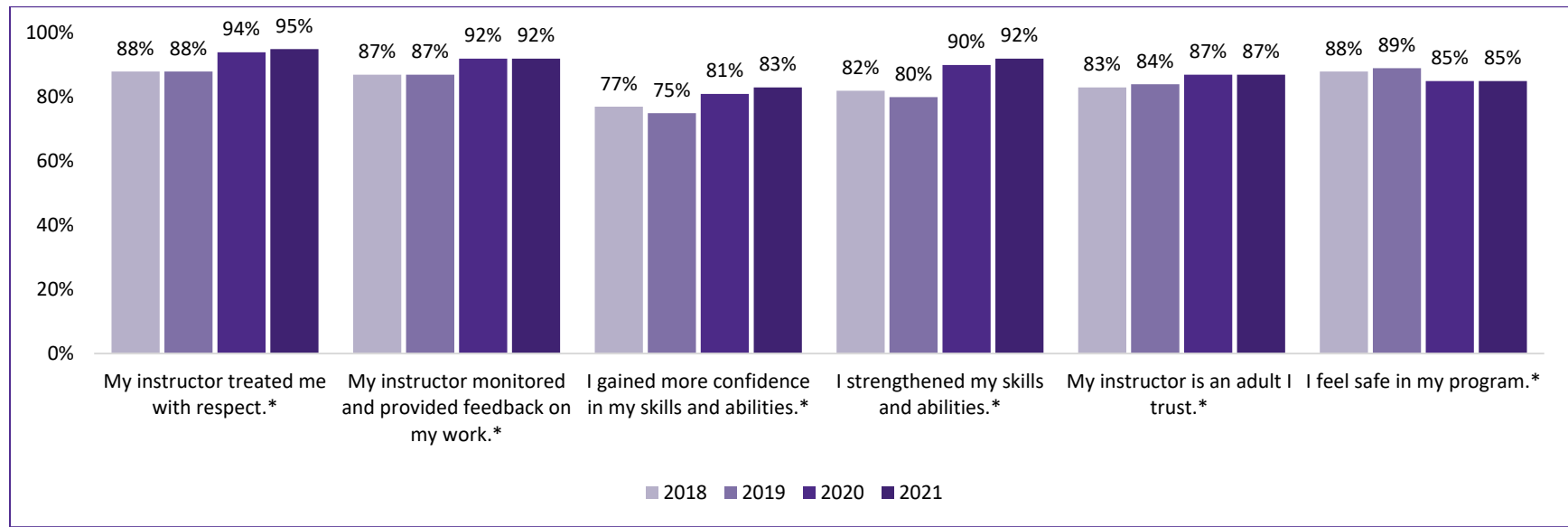
Program Experience

AIR compared teen responses on the After School Matters' teen summer survey across 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 (Figure 27). Teen survey questions vary for each session depending on special initiatives or specific research questions. AIR conducted analyses on items that were consistent across all four summers. AIR also analyzed items that were major findings from 2020 to examine if there had been a change since the prior year. Numbers represent the percentage of teens who agreed or strongly agreed with each question.

Although AIR did not find statistically significant differences when comparing responses from 2020 to 2021, some significant differences emerged when comparing teen responses in pre-pandemic summer sessions (2018 and 2019) to summer sessions that occurred amid the pandemic (2020 and 2021). Teens who participated in summer sessions during the pandemic reported more positive relationships with their instructors and higher levels of gaining and strengthening skills compared to pre-pandemic summers. Conversely, teen participants from Summer 2020 and 2021 reported slightly lower rates of feeling safe in their program compared to teens who participated pre-pandemic.

These findings suggest that After School Matters' focus on providing intentional resources and program supports during the pandemic may have enabled instructors to create supportive and engaging remote program spaces, which improved instructors' relationships with teens, as well as teen skill development. A possible interpretation for lower reports of feeling safe in the program is that After School Matters has less control over the program environment, since most teens participate remotely.

Figure 27. Teen Survey Feedback Varied Slightly Across Summer Sessions

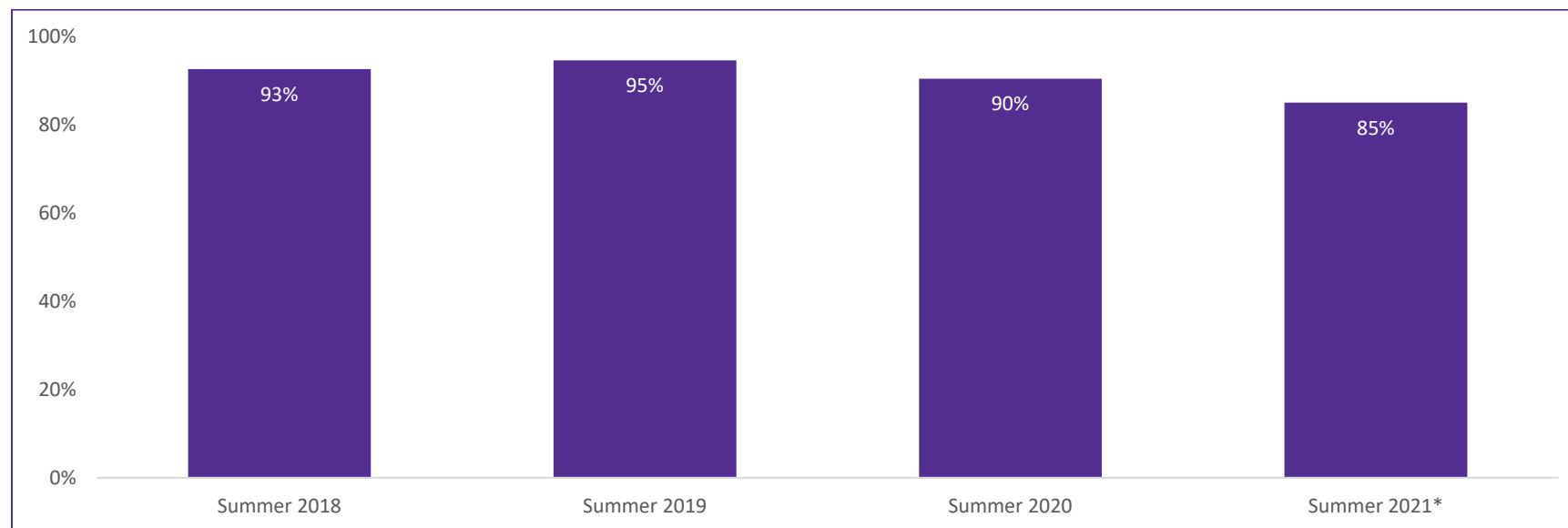


Note. Items marked with an asterisk (*) were statistically significant at $p = .001$. The number of teen survey responses varied across summer sessions: 9,495 in 2018, 8,875 in 2019, 3,999 in 2020, and 3,721 in 2021.

Average Daily Attendance Rates

After School Matters regularly monitors average daily attendance (ADA) rates to gauge teen engagement in programs. The ADA rate for summer 2021 was significantly lower than for previous summer sessions (Figure 28). Though After School Matters provided both remote and in-person programs, most programs remained remote. Both teens and instructors reported that teens are feeling fatigued after a year of online learning. This fatigue may have contributed to lower attendance rates. At the same time, 85% is a relatively high ADA rate, and indicates that despite feelings of screen fatigue, teens are still participating in the After School Matters programs at high rates. After School Matters provides teens with a stipend to participate in programs, which likely contributes to the high ADA rate as it removes potential barriers and incentivizes participation.

Figure 28. Programs Maintained High ADA Rates



Note. The number of programs varied across summer sessions 724 in 2018, 735 in 2019, 518 in 2020, and 626 in 2021.

* $p < .001$.

Key Takeaways: *Comparison Across Summer Sessions*

Teens' experiences did not vary significantly from 2020 to 2021. Differences were only seen when comparing 2021 to the pre-pandemic summers of 2018 and 2019. These findings suggest that the introduction of intentionally planned remote programs and supports for instructors amid the pandemic enhanced teens' relationships with instructors and enabled them to continue building important skills during a global crisis. Conversely, 2021 revealed lower feelings of safety as compared to before the pandemic. A possible explanation for this is less control over the program environment.

The ADA rate for summer 2021 was significantly lower than for previous summer sessions. Though After School Matters provided both remote and in-person programs, most programs remained remote. Both teens and instructors reported that teens are feeling fatigued after a year of online learning. This fatigue may have contributed to lower attendance rates. At the same time, 85% is still a relatively high ADA rate, and indicates that despite feelings of screen fatigue, teens are still participating at high rates in the After School Matters programs. After School Matters provides teens with a stipend to participate in programs, which is likely a contributor to the high ADA rate, as it removes potential barriers and incentivizes for participation.



Instructor Experiences

In this section, we highlight instructor experiences in summer 2021. We describe instructors' daily realities, including job loss and security due to the pandemic, stress, and food insecurity. We also describe instructors' experiences implementing their After School Matters programs, including program satisfaction, inspirational stories, challenges, and professional development and supports they received from After School Matters.

After School Matters worked with 729 instructors in the summer 2021 program session. A total of 247 instructors (34%) completed a survey to share their daily realities and program experiences. Demographic data were not available for instructors.

Daily Realities

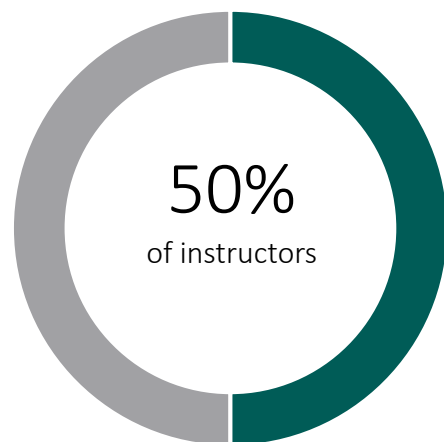
The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the U.S. workforce. The pandemic increased household demands for many adults, such as managing their own health and well-being, supporting the health and well-being of family and loved ones, and caring for and educating children at home. In addition to these added stressors, unemployment rates remain substantially higher than before the pandemic began (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). High unemployment rates raised concerns about financial strain on adults and families. When the pandemic began, many afterschool and summer providers were laid off or furloughed (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). As the pandemic continued, increased public attention was given to the difficult working conditions and low wages of afterschool and summer providers, which were causing many to leave the field. A national survey of afterschool and summer program providers revealed that many providers were concerned about finding staff to hire and staffing shortages (Afterschool Alliance, 2021). Struggles recruiting program staff can increase strain on those still in the field. After School Matters sought to better understand the experiences of instructors this summer by including questions on the instructor survey regarding job loss, food insecurity, and perceived stress.

Job Loss and Security

At the start of the pandemic, After School Matters made an intentional decision to keep instructors employed at pre-pandemic levels and to not reduce instructor hours. However, recognizing the potential impacts of the pandemic on job security, After School Matters was interested in understanding instructors' experiences with job loss as the result of the pandemic.

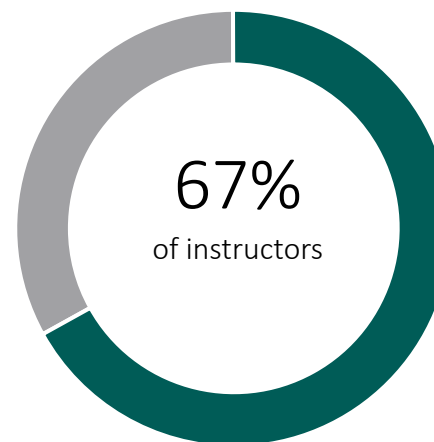
Half of instructors reported they live with someone who lost a job or had their hours cut as a result of the pandemic (Figure 29). This value represents a significant decrease from 2020 reports (61% in 2020 to 50% in 2021, $p < .05$). On a more promising note, two in three instructors reported that After School Matters provided them a reliable source of income (Figure 30).

Figure 29. Many Instructors Live in a Household Where Someone Lost Their Job or Had Their Hours Cut Because of COVID-19



Note. $n = 188$ instructors.

Figure 30. The Majority of Instructors Reported After School Matters Provided Them With a Reliable Income

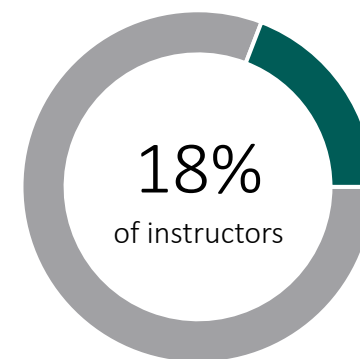


Note. $n = 188$ instructors.

Food Insecurity

As noted earlier, After School Matters included a validated Food Insecurity Screener in the teen and instructor surveys. This measure asks respondents to report if they worried whether food would run out before they received money to buy more and if the food they bought would not last until they bought more. Scoring positively on either item indicates an individual is food insecure. AIR found that **around one in five instructors screened positively for food insecurity** (Figure 31), compared to **24%** in 2020. This was a significant decrease in food insecurity for instructors. However, this still represents a food insecurity rate higher than the overall food insecurity rate in 2018 for Cook County, which was 10.1% (Gundersen et al., 2020).

Figure 31. One in Five Instructors Screened Positively for Food Insecurity



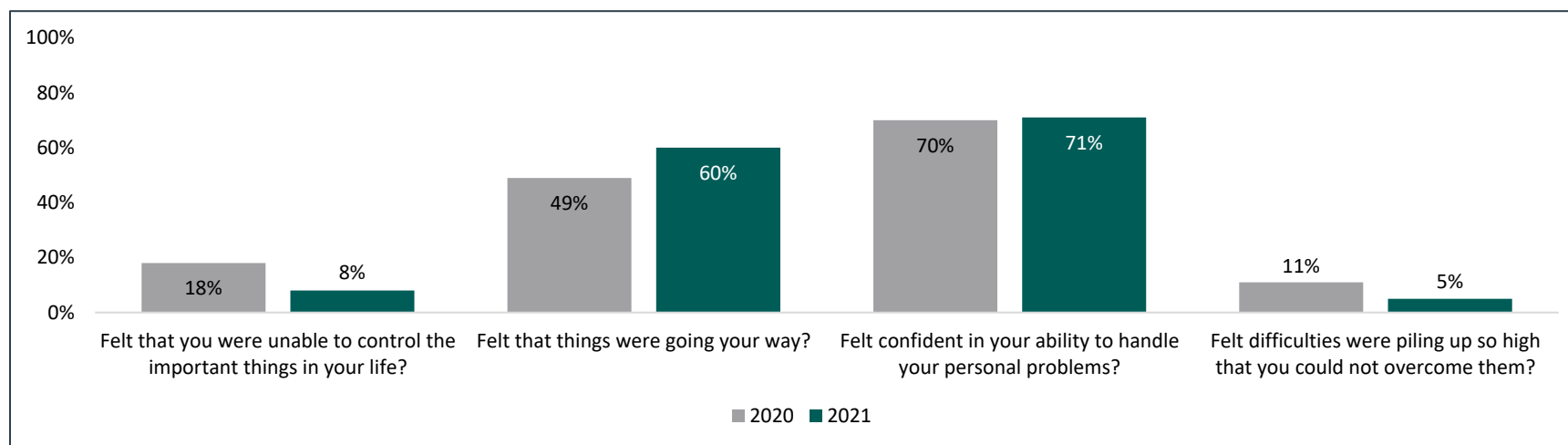
Note. $n = 186$ instructors.

Instructor Stress, Mental Health, and Well-Being

After School Matters captured instructors' stress by including the short version of the [Perceived Stress Scale \(PSS-4\)](#) in their 2020 and 2021 summer instructor survey. AIR followed scoring guidance from the developers of the PSS-4 to calculate an average "perceived stress score" for each instructor. Perceived stress scores can range from 0 to 16, with higher scores indicating more stress. No instructors scored above a 14 this summer. On average, **After School Matters instructors scored 4.58 for perceived stress, indicating a relatively low level of stress.**¹

Summer 2021 instructors reported significantly less perceived stress than instructors in summer 2020. In summer 2021, instructors' average perceived stress score was **4.58**, as compared to **5.23** in summer 2020. Figure 32 shows instructor reports of experiencing the following stress indicators "fairly often" or "often" in the summer of 2021. The percentage of instructors who felt things were going their way significantly increased (from **49%** to **60%**), while the percentage decreased for instructors who felt they were unable to control the important things in life (**18%** to **8%**) and that difficulties were piling up so high that they could not overcome them (**11%** to **5%**).

Figure 32. Instructor Perceived Stress Decreased From 2020 to 2021

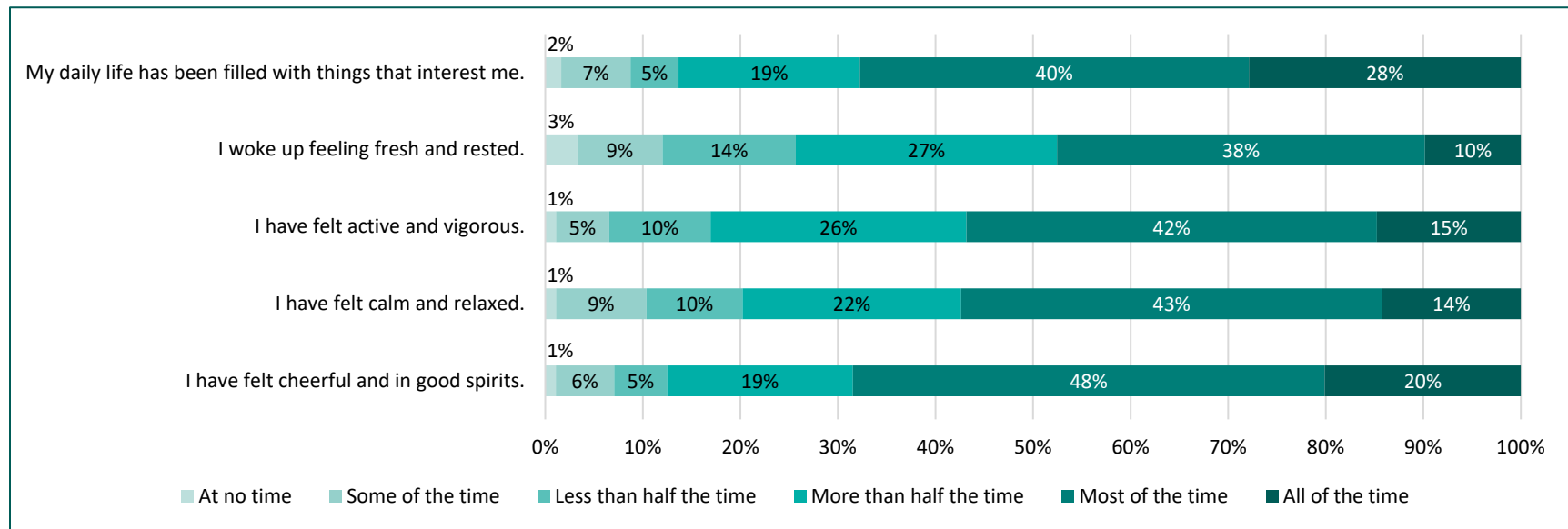


Note. The number of instructor survey responses varied across summer sessions: 370 in 2020 and 247 in 2021.

¹ For reference, recent studies have reported that mean scores on the PSS-4 vary quite a bit, ranging from 5.43 to 6.11 among representative population-based samples of adults (Lesage et al., 2012; Vallejo et al., 2018; Warttig et al., 2013).

After School Matters asked instructors to report on their present well-being (e.g., active, vigorous, calm, relaxed) using the [World Health Organization Well-Being Index](#). These items asked instructors to consider their feelings over the past 2 weeks, such as if they have felt in good spirits, relaxed, and rested. AIR calculated a well-being score based on guidelines from the World Health Organization. The average well-being score for After Schools Matters instructors was 70. The maximum score for the well-being index is 100, with scores above 50 generally indicating positive well-being (Persson & Linden Bostrum, 2017). AIR also examined instructors' responses to the items that represent well-being. The majority of instructors reported positive feelings about their well-being more than half of the time, most of the time, or all of the time (Figure 33).

Figure 33. Instructors Reported Predominantly Positive Well-Being



Note. The number of instructor survey respondents varied across items, ranging from 183 to 184.

After School Matters was also interested in learning about supports in place for instructors that can mediate stress. Many instructors reported that they had access to mental health supports (68%) and took time for their own self-care (73%; Figure 34). However, this leaves nearly **one in three instructors who did not have access to mental health supports**, and **one in four instructors who did not take time for their own self-care**. This important finding may have implications as educator burnout increases in prevalence amid the pandemic (Afterschool Alliance, 2022).

AIR then examined instructors' reported stress in relation to other survey scales to understand what factors may relate to their stress. AIR observed that instructors' perceived stress was positively correlated to food insecurity. In other words, **those with greater food insecurity were more stressed** ($p < .001$).

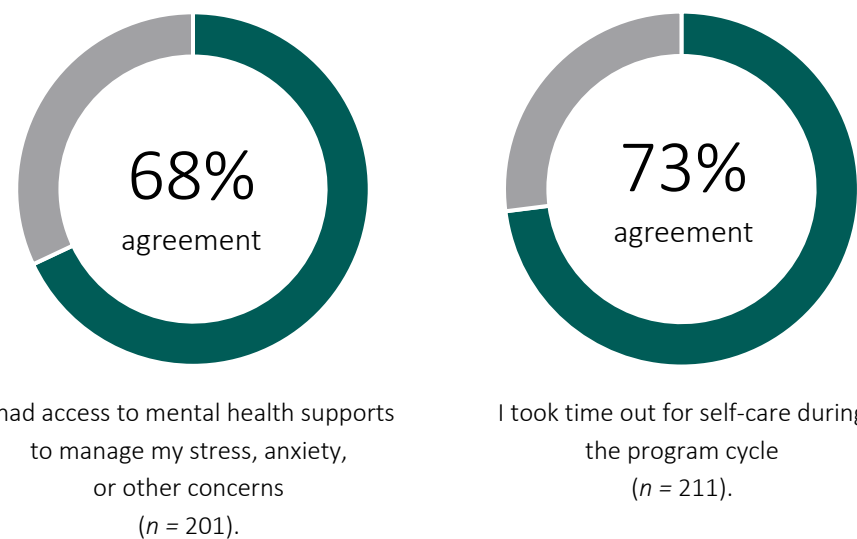
AIR also found that perceived stress was negatively correlated with well-being, meaning instructors who reported greater well-being reported less stress ($p < .001$). Relatedly, instructors who reported having access to mental health supports ($p < .01$) and taking time out of the program cycle for self-care reported feeling less stress ($p < .001$).

Furthermore, several survey items were negatively related to instructors' perceived stress:

- I had the training supports I needed to successfully implement my program ($p < .001$)
- I was able to find joy leading the program even when it was really hard at times ($p < .01$)
- I feel proud of what I achieved with my youth this summer ($p < .001$)

Overall, these findings indicate that instructors who reported more positive experiences in their program this summer and having more training supports from After School Matters reported lower levels of perceived stress.

Figure 34. Most Instructors Felt They Had Access to Mental Health Supports and Took Time Out for Self-Care



Key Takeaways: *Instructor Daily Realities*

Instructors reported significantly lower levels of food insecurity, perceived stress, and financial hardship in summer 2021 compared to summer 2020. That said, one in five instructors still screened positive for food insecurity and one in three instructors reported they did not have access to mental health supports to manage their stress, anxiety, or other concerns. We also found that instructors' perceived stress was positively correlated with screening positively for food insecurity and access to mental health supports.

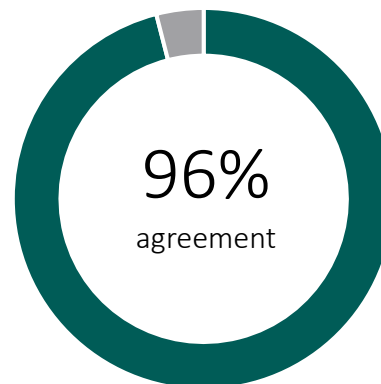
Program Experience

As noted above, during the summer 2021 session, 67% of programs remained remote, while 33% offered in-person programming. On the instructor survey, instructors who ran programs in both formats shared their experiences. AIR examined their reported successes, challenges, and feedback. **Throughout all topic areas, we did not find significant differences between remote and in-person instruction.**

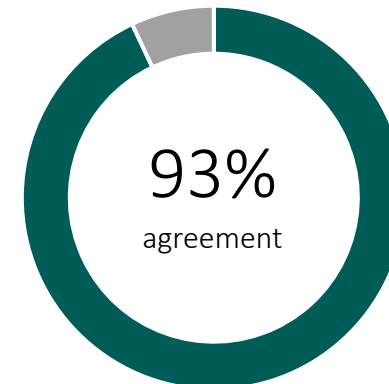
Program Satisfaction

Instructors shared feedback related to the outcomes of the summer and their satisfaction as an instructor. As shown in Figure 35, **nearly all instructors were proud of what they achieved with youth this summer.** In addition, **most respondents said they found joy leading the program, would consider being an instructor again, and were satisfied with their experience as an After School Matters instructor.**

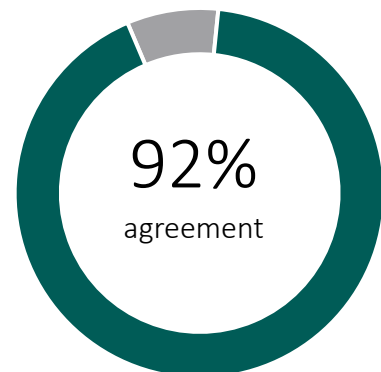
Figure 35. Most Instructors Found Success During This Summer Program Session



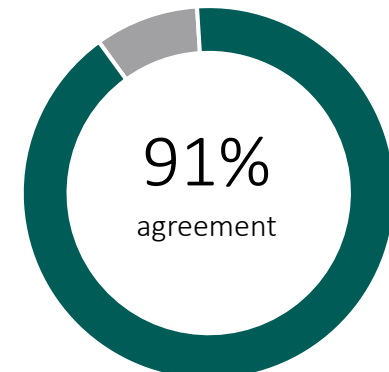
I feel proud of what I achieved with my youth this summer
(n = 216).



I was able to find joy leading the program even when it was really hard at times
(n = 214).



If possible, I would consider being an instructor again
(n = 190).



I'm satisfied with my experience as an ASM instructor
(n = 190).

Inspirational Stories

To elaborate on successes of the summer, many instructors shared stories about teens that inspired them. A total of 165 instructors responded.

Instructors felt inspired by:



Teens' eagerness and enthusiastic participation in summer programming ($n = 37$). Instructors most frequently cited teen engagement in their program as inspiring. One instructor said, "My general experience as an instructor with this program was great. Youth were mostly engaged and eager to learn, build, and grow together. We had many intriguing conversations and I learned so much about what youth were thinking, how they moved through the world, and where they wanted to go next."



Collaboration or relationships among teens ($n = 33$). One instructor reported being inspired by "the commitment of teens to uplift each other," elaborating on this by saying, "Despite the pandemic burnout, they make space for each other, share their vulnerabilities, and uplift each other's work during crits."



Teens' learning and growth during summer programming ($n = 31$). An instructor shared, "What inspires me the most is when I asked the young people to reflect back on the program highlights and what they learned, they were able to tell me that they learned valuable skills from things we talked about[,] i[.]e[.] peace starts within and that you have to set goals to achieve success in your life."



Teens' motivation or perseverance ($n = 24$). One instructor reported, "Many of our teens are exhibiting signs of virtual burn-out after having been on virtual programming and school for well over a year. I am so inspired by my teens that continue to not only show up but ask for additional resources to forward their learning and growth. They continue to work hard and want to learn."



Teen ideas or creations ($n = 24$). One instructor stated, "By virtue of being virtual, I had to be more hands off than I tend to be. This was a blessing. As the final project rolled in from students, I was able to see work that they completed truly independently, and the results were incredible! It was a great reminder for me to stay out of their way and let the students work!"



The strong relationships they developed with teens ($n = 17$). Similar to teen reports, instructors highlighted the positive relationships they had with teens in their program as inspiring. An instructor shared, "I had the great opportunity of getting to know each teen personally which help[ed] establish trust and conversation throughout the program."

Program Challenges

Instructors also shared the greatest challenges they experienced this summer. A total of 180 instructors responded.



Teens' engagement or participation ($n = 51$). While instructors were inspired by teens' engagement or participation, it was also the program challenge they most frequently cited. One instructor shared, "The greatest challenge this semester was keeping up engagement with teens who still seemed burnt out from the school year. At this point they seem to have a lot of remote learning fatigue and it showed, especially compared to last summer."



Teens' camera use ($n = 23$). Instructors indicated that it was challenging to have teens use their cameras for the program. One instructor said, "Lack of camera participation from students ... [made] it ... so difficult for students to get to know each other to the fullest extent possible and even harder to tell who was having tech issues vs. just not being a responsive participant/small group member."

Key Takeaways: *Instructor Program Experiences*

Instructors reported positive experiences in their programs this summer across both remote and in-person program formats. They reported high rates of satisfaction and interest in serving as an instructor again in the future. Further, they expressed pride in what they achieved with youth, and reported that they found joy in being an instructor for the program. Instructors shared that they were inspired by 1) teens' eagerness and enthusiastic participation in summer programming, 2) collaboration or relationships among teens, 3) teens' learning and growth during summer programming, 4) teens' motivation or perseverance, 5) teen ideas and creations, and 6) the strong relationships they developed with teens. Additionally, instructors shared the challenges they faced during summer programming, highlighting 1) teens' engagement and participation, and 2) teens' camera use.

Professional Development and Support

After School Matters instructors have opportunities to participate in professional development and to receive instructional supports. In this section, we highlight instructor feedback on professional development opportunities provided as well as supports received from After School Matters.

Professional Development

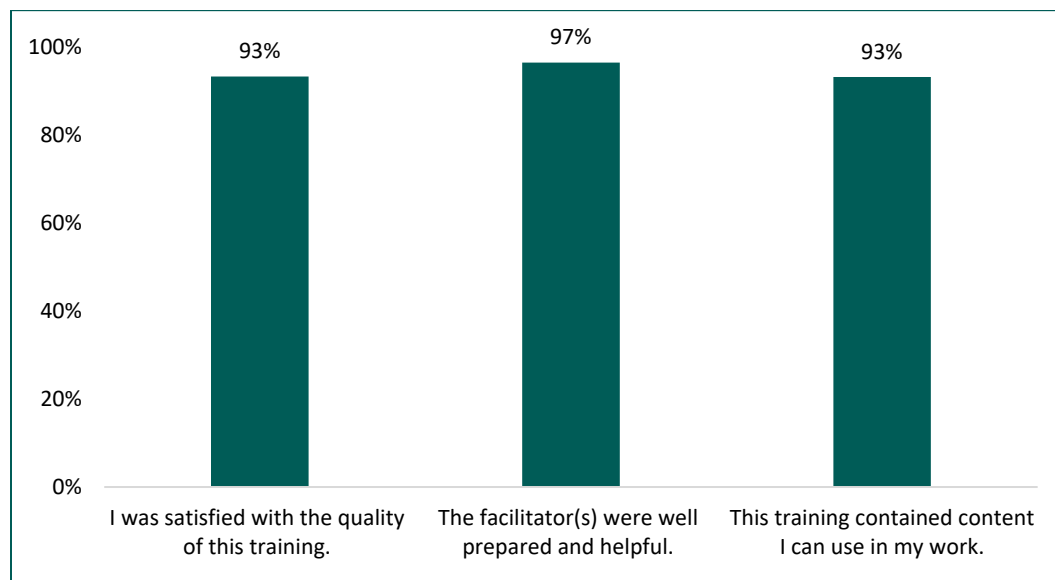
After School Matters supports instructors each session through professional development offerings covering a variety of topics. These development opportunities focus on pedagogical support and providing communities of care for instructors. In summer 2021, After School Matters offered a variety of remote professional development opportunities to instructors throughout the program session. Instructors had the opportunity to attend up to 8 hours of professional development trainings. While some trainings were required or strongly encouraged based on whether an instructor was new or a program was moving from remote to in-person engagement (i.e., New Instructor Institute, In-Person Orientation), instructors were generally free to choose whichever sessions were most interesting to them or would be most beneficial to their work as an instructor.

Professional development sessions offered in summer 2021 included:

- ComEd
- Connect and Reflect – Community Care Happy Hour
- Creating a Joyful, Caring Program Culture
- Intro to Race Equity
- Peacemakers
- Trauma and Mental Health Supports
- Youth Panel – Centering Youth Changemakers
- Tech Talk
- Healing as Resistance
- Culture Identity and Affirmation
- In-Person Orientation for Lutz, Gately, and Millennium Tent Instructors
- New Instructor Institute
- Instructor Town Hall
- Community of Practice
- New Instructor Tech Talk
- Community-Based Organization Town Hall
- In-Person Orientation for All Other Sites

The majority of instructors agreed that they increased their professional skills as a result of being an After School Matters instructor (89%). In professional development exit surveys, instructors reported they were satisfied with the training (93%), the facilitators were well prepared and helpful (97%), and the training contained content they could use in their work (93%) (Figure 36).

Figure 36. Instructors Rated Professional Development Sessions Positively



Instructors also shared what they found most valuable about the professional development sessions. There were a total of 1,428 responses to this survey item from 423 instructors (instructors provided feedback for every professional development session they attended). Instructors valued:

- Interactions with other instructors ($n = 262$).
- Program guidelines and logistics ($n = 129$).
- Information and resources shared during workshops ($n = 105$).
- Information about program modes of delivery ($n = 87$).
- Supports for technology ($n = 78$).
- Student supports ($n = 47$).
- Information about showcases and final projects ($n = 46$).
- Training facilitators and After School Matters staff ($n = 45$).
- Icebreakers and community-building ideas ($n = 45$).

“THE MOST VALUABLE [ASPECT] WAS TO HEAR SOME GUIDANCE ON HOW TO INTERACT WITH TEENS, HOW TO BE MYSELF, AND HOW TO JUST MAKE THE PROGRAM AS ENJOYABLE TO THE TEENS AS IT WOULD BE FOR ME. THINGS GO BOTH WAYS.”

—AFTER SCHOOL MATTERS INSTRUCTOR

Looking toward future professional development sessions, instructors were fairly divided in their preferences for in-person versus online sessions. About half (47%) indicated that some sort of hybrid would be their preference. Fewer preferred going to either an entirely in-person format (28%) or an exclusively online format (18%).

Instructors also reported which training supports they would like to see in future sessions. Some of the most requested offerings focused on tools for engagement, trauma-informed approaches to programming, mental health resources, self-care, and building relationships (Figure 37). These topics are aligned with the program challenges instructors experienced, as well as teen requests for further support in mental health, counseling, and trauma.

Figure 37. Program Training Requests for Next Session



Note. $n = 186$ instructors.

Instructors also shared topics they would like to see addressed in upcoming trainings in open-ended responses on professional development exit surveys. Instructors could leave as many topic suggestions as they wished. There were a total of 914 responses to this survey item from 319 instructors. Instructors shared that they would like to see more trainings on:

- Information on overall ASM program guidelines and logistics, such as CitySpan; recruitment, enrollment, and attendance; and instructor and teen pay ($n = 69$).
- Policies or best practices corresponding to the different modes of program delivery addressed in upcoming trainings ($n = 50$).
- Opportunities to interact with other instructors in upcoming trainings ($n = 47$).

- Supports for technology in upcoming trainings, such as how to better navigate platforms and integrate technology into their program ($n = 41$). The platforms instructors discussed include Google Classroom, Flipgrid, and Jamboard.
- Techniques for student engagement addressed in upcoming trainings ($n = 38$).

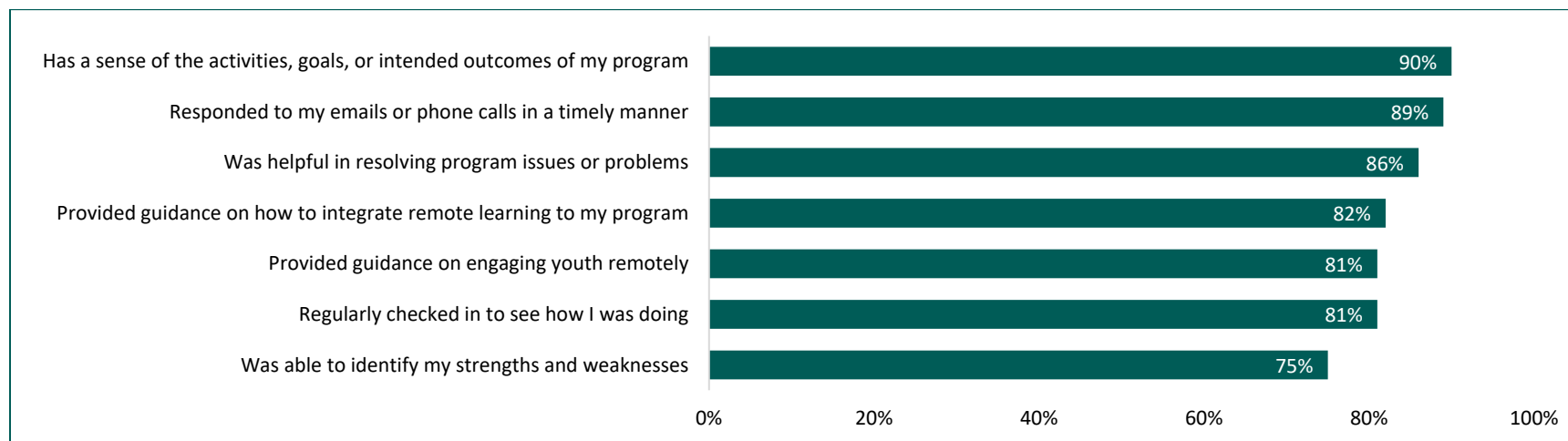
Instructors also shared in professional development exit surveys how professional development opportunities can be improved. There were a total of 1,428 responses to this survey item from 423 instructors (note that instructors completed exit surveys for each professional development opportunity they attended). The majority indicated that they did not have suggestions to improve training. A small group of instructors ($n = 51$) shared that the **technology for the training could be improved**. Instructors described the challenges they experienced with technology, their preferred platforms for the trainings, a need for usable links, and areas where they would like additional tech support. One instructor shared, “It was also hard navigating Zoom after a year with [Google Meet]. I wish ASM would pick one platform that works well. It gives the impression that breakout groups are important for PD but not important for our programs.”

Support From After School Matters

Instructors reported how supported they felt by both the organization and their program specialist, who is their main point of contact at After School Matters. In Figures 38 and 39, we highlight the percentage of instructors who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about supports that were helpful during their program session.

As shown in Figure 38, most instructors felt supported by their program specialists in multiple ways. The most common sources of support were through program specialists having a sense of the activities, goals, or intended outcomes of the programs and responding to emails or phone calls in a timely manner.

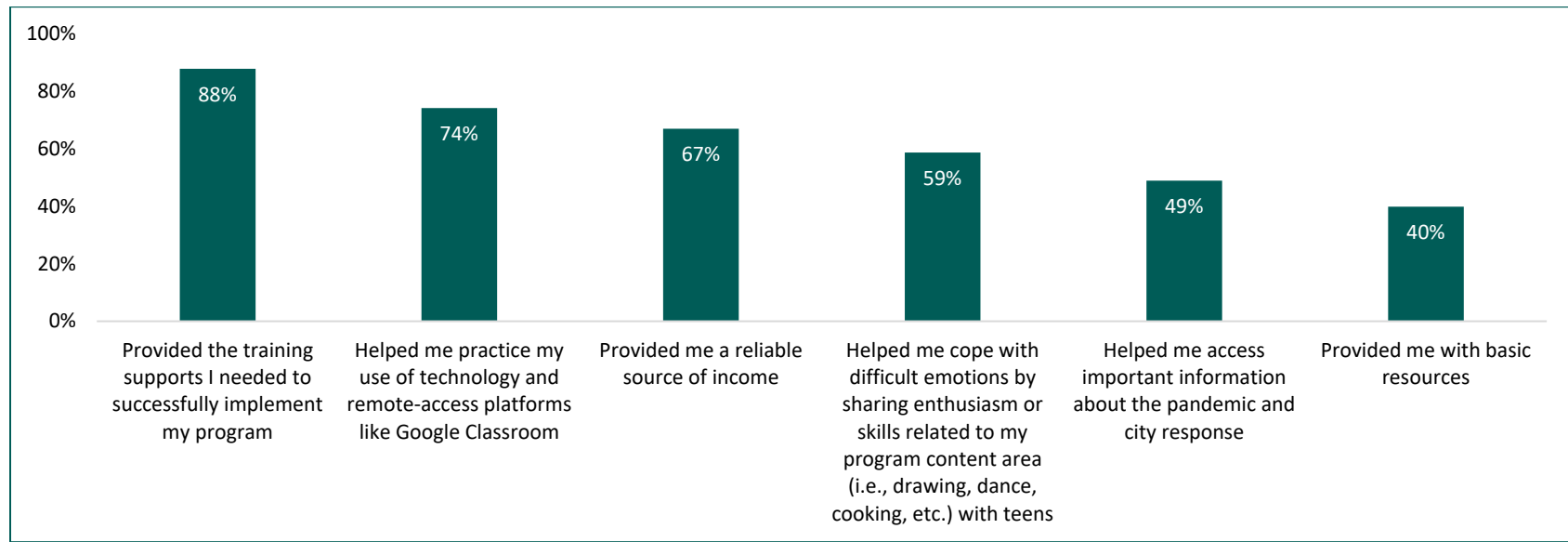
Figure 38. Instructors Reported Positive Feedback About the Supports They Received From Their Program Specialist



Note. The number of instructor survey respondents varied across items, ranging from 169 to 214.

Instructors also shared the ways in which the program session helped them this summer. As shown in Figure 39, instructors felt strongest that After School Matters helped them to **provided training supports necessary to successfully implement their program and practice their use of technology and remote-access platforms and After School Matters**. Less than half of the respondents felt that After School Matters helped them to access important basic resources this summer. A potential explanation for this is that instructors may have accessed information and important resources elsewhere and did not require After School Matters' assistance.

Figure 39. After School Matters Supports for Instructors



Note. The number of instructor survey respondents varied across items, ranging from 188 to 190.

Key Takeaways: *Professional Development and Support From After School Matters*

Instructors reported that they valued the professional development opportunities they were able to access. They reported high rates of satisfaction with the quality of training and facilitators and shared that the content was useful for their work and helped them increase their own skills. Instructors also reported they valued their interactions with other instructors and the information they received in professional development trainings on program guidelines and program modes of delivery. Looking ahead to the future, instructors requested more professional development opportunities, such as additional trainings on teen engagement, trauma-related topics, mental health resources, and self-care and community care.

Instructors also felt supported by their program specialists in multiple ways. The most common sources of support were through program specialists having a sense of the activities, goals, or intended outcomes of the programs and responding to emails or phone calls in a timely manner. Instructors also reported that After School Matters helped them to practice their use of technology and remote-access platforms and to provide training supports necessary to successfully implement their program. Further, instructors who reported they had the training supports they needed for program implementation also reported lower levels of perceived stress.

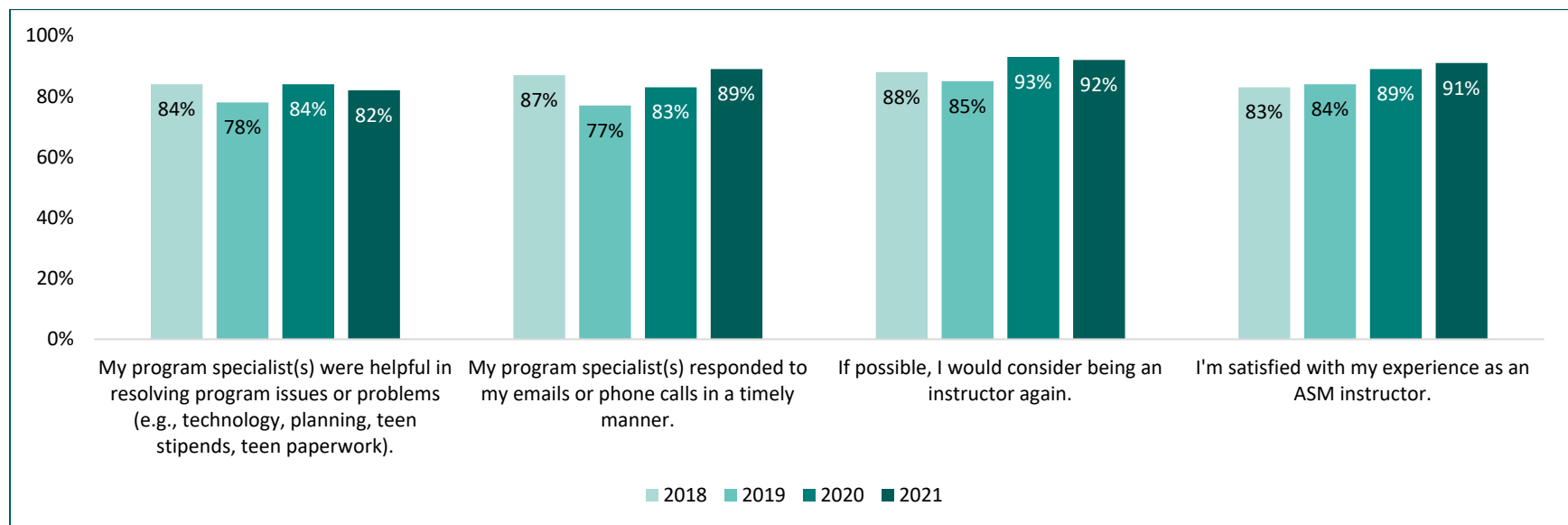
Program Experience Compared Across Summer Sessions

AIR compared instructor responses on the After School Matters instructor summer survey across 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 (Figure 40).

Instructor survey questions vary for each session, depending on special initiatives or specific research questions. AIR conducted analyses on items that were consistent across all four summers. AIR also analyzed items that were major findings from 2020 to examine if there had been a change since the prior year. Numbers represent the percentage of instructors who agreed or strongly agreed with each question.

AIR did not find statistically significant differences when comparing responses from 2020 to 2021. When comparing compared instructor responses in pre-pandemic summer sessions (2018 and 2019) to summer sessions that occurred amid the pandemic (2020 and 2021), we found instructors responded more favorably during the pandemic about their satisfaction as an instructor and their willingness to be an instructor again in the future. Instructor feedback on program specialist support and responsiveness varied across summer sessions, with summer 2021 being similar to summers 2018 and 2020, and more positive than summer 2019, though none of these differences were significant.

Figure 40. Instructor Survey Feedback Varied Across Summer Sessions



Note. The number of instructor survey responses varied across summer sessions: 260 in 2018, 357 in 2019, 370 in 2020, and 247 in 2021.

Key Takeaways: Comparison Across Summer Sessions

AIR found no significant differences in instructors' feedback on their program experiences when comparing summer 2021 and summer 2020. A significantly larger percentage of summer 2021 instructors reported that their program specialist was helpful in resolving program issues and responding to emails compared to summer 2019. Similarly, summer 2021 instructors were also more likely to report satisfaction with their experience as an instructor and agree that they would consider being an instructor again as compared to pre-pandemic summers (2018 and 2019). Taken together, it is clear that instructors continued to feel supported this summer and valued their time as an instructor.



Program Quality

After School Matters uses the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) as part of the organization’s continuous quality improvement process. The YPQA is a validated instrument used to measure the quality of youth programs and identify staff training needs. It includes four domains of program quality: Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interaction, and Engagement. Each domain includes several items in which observers score as a 1, 3, or 5, where 5 represents best practice.

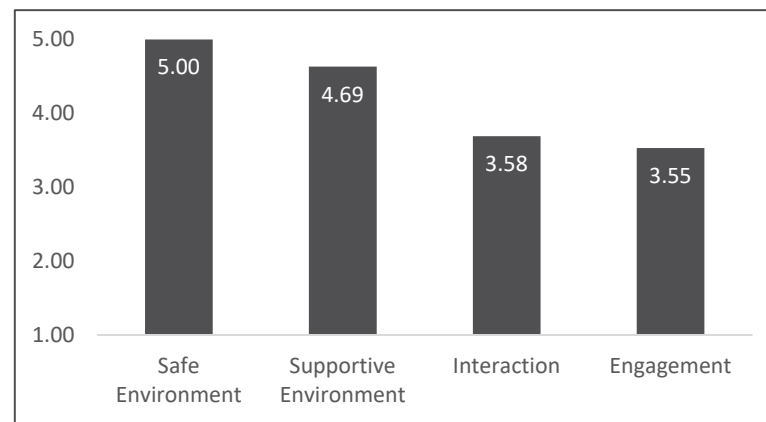
In both 2020 and 2021, After School Matters modified the YPQA to better assess the remote learning environment. This process included removing items used on the traditional YPQA that were not relevant to online learning. Assessors certified in the YPQA observed recorded sessions from a sample of 94 programs. Assessors then scored the program using an adapted version of the YPQA tailored for the remote environment. Although in-person programs were reintroduced in summer 2021, After School Matters continued to only evaluate remote programs in an effort to limit the number of external adults entering the program space and ensure the health and safety of their teens and instructors.

The distribution of program characteristics (Program Branch, Model, and Content Area) for programs observed by using the YPQA varied slightly from the distribution of all summer 2021 programs. The observed programs represented a smaller proportion of programs than the programs as a whole for citywide programs (Program Branch), advanced apprenticeships (Program Model), and communications and leadership (Content Area).

After School Matters programs demonstrated high quality. Figure 41 indicates After School Matters programs scored highest in Safe Environment, followed by Supportive Environment, Interaction, and Engagement.

AIR found no significant differences in the average scores for each of the four domains across program content areas (arts, communications and leadership, sports, and STEM) for summer 2021. This further supports findings from summer 2020—that high quality is possible in remote learning programs, regardless of content area.

Figure 41. Remote Programs Demonstrated High Quality Across Domains



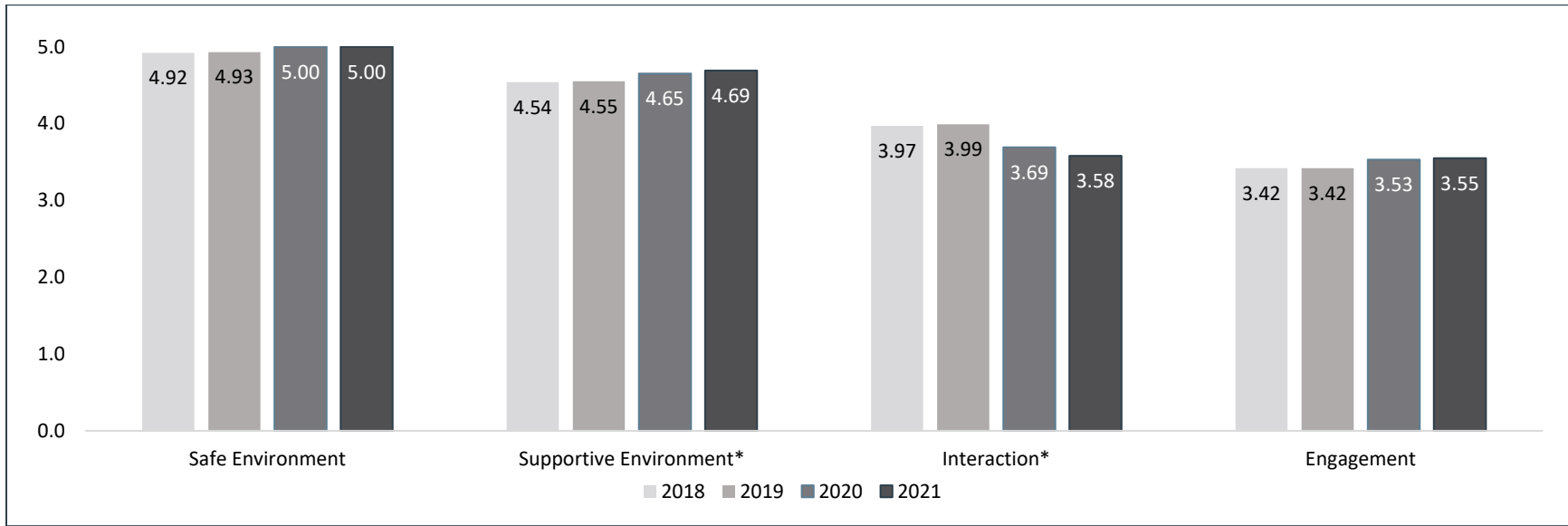
Note. *n* = 94 programs

Program Quality Across Summer Sessions

As noted previously, After School Matters modified the YPQA in conversation with the developer to better assess the remote learning environment in 2020 and 2021. This included removing items used on the traditional YPQA that were not relevant to online learning (e.g., adequate ventilation and lighting, accessible safety equipment). To compare data across summer sessions, AIR recalculated YPQA domain scores for summer 2018 and 2019, which represent in-person programs, to remove excluded items on the adapted YPQA.

Summer 2021 program quality was similar to previous remote and in-person summer sessions based on the adapted YPQA domain scores for the Safe and Engagement domains, but varied for the Supportive Environment and Interaction domains (as seen in Figure 42). The scores for summer 2021 were significantly higher for Supportive Environment and significantly lower for Interaction when compared to scores from the summers of 2018 and 2019. The Supportive Environment items reflect staff practices that promote session flow of the program, active engagement, skill building, encouragement, and reframing conflict. Interaction items reflect staff practices that promote belonging in the program, collaboration among teens, youth leadership, and partnerships between adults and teens. The lower Interaction scores for 2021 could be influenced by more limited opportunities for instructors to promote peer-to-peer relationships and for youth to collaborate together. Additionally, program participants may have experienced a more general pandemic or “screen fatigue,” brought on by the virtual environment for program delivery.

Figure 42. Summer 2021 Program Quality Was Comparable With Previous Years on Two of the Four Quality Domains

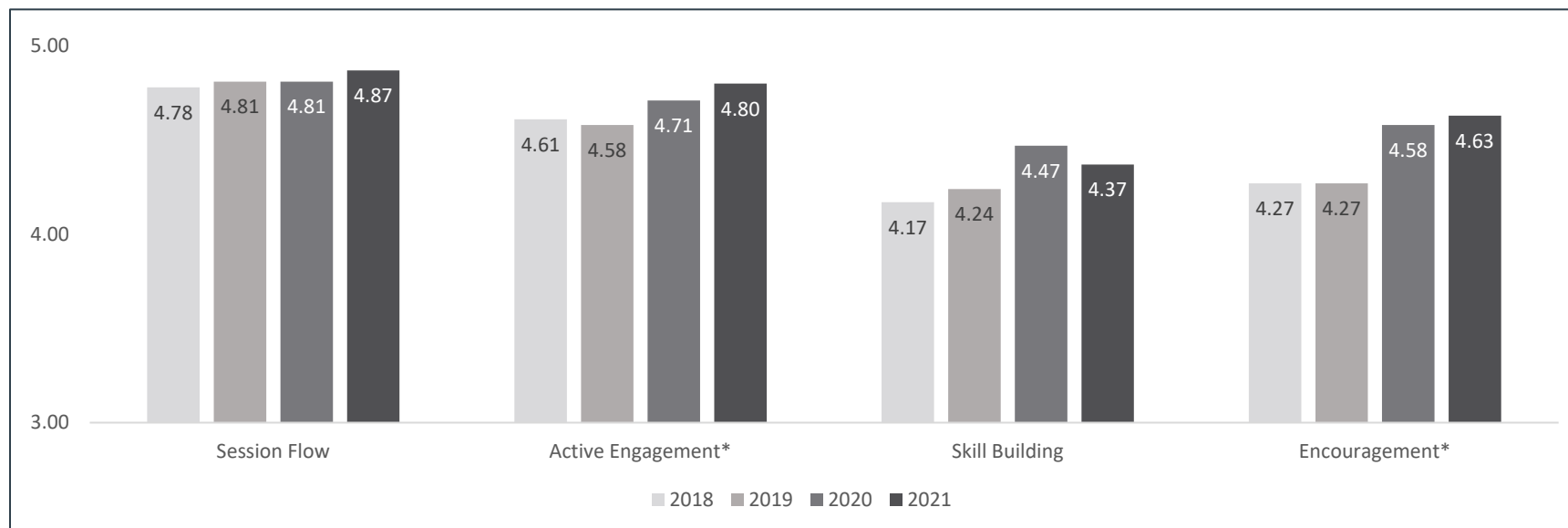


Note. The number of assessments varied across summer sessions: 379 in 2018, 408 in 2019, 101 in 2020, and 94 in 2021.

* $p < .001$.

AIR then examined the scales within both Supportive Environment and Interaction to learn more about changes in these domains across years. AIR found that the average scores for Active Engagement and Encouragement, both within Supportive Environment, were **significantly higher** in 2021, when compared to 2019 (Active Engagement, Encouragement) and 2018 (Encouragement) (Figure 43).

Figure 43. Active Engagement and Encouragement Scale Scores Were Significantly Higher in 2021 Than in Other Years

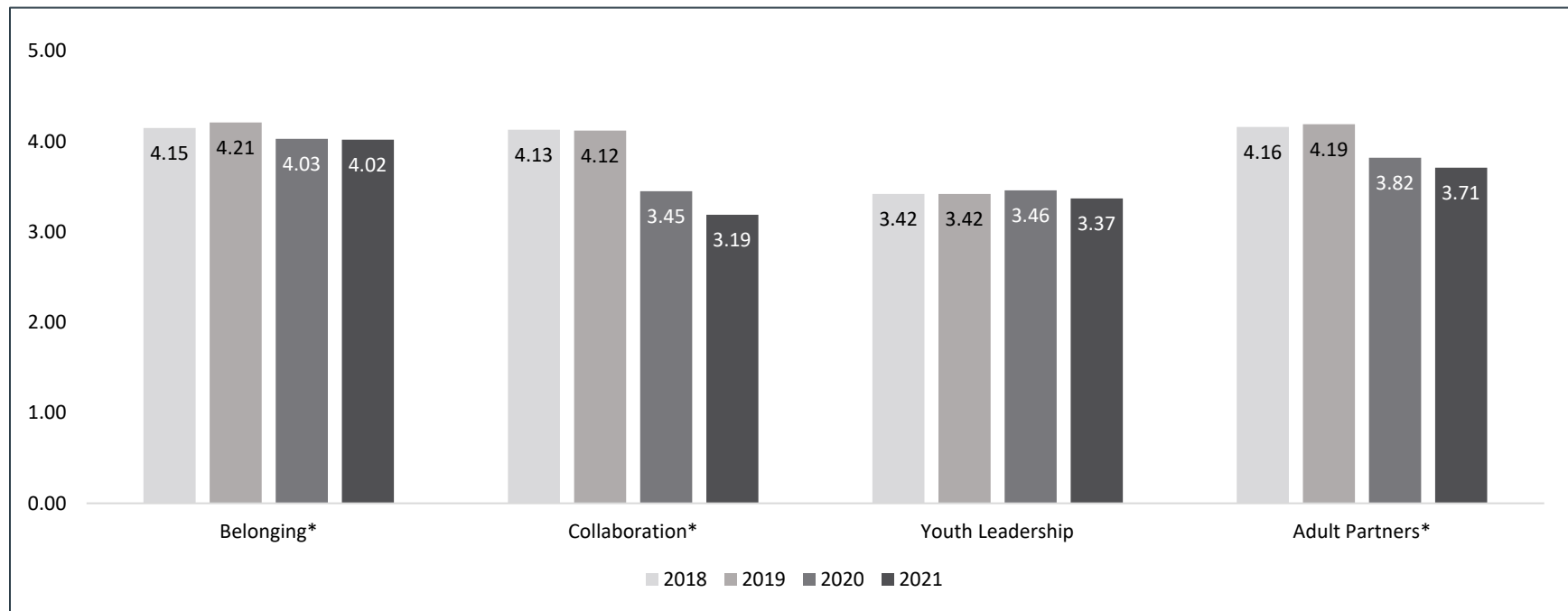


Note. The number of assessments varied across summer sessions: 379 in 2018, 408 in 2019, 101 in 2020, and 94 in 2021. There were no data for the Reframing Conflict Scale in 2021.

* $p < .05$.

For the scales within Interaction, AIR found that average scores for Belonging, Collaboration, and Adult Partners were significantly lower in 2021 when compared to the summers of 2019 (Belonging, Collaboration, Adult Partners) and 2018 (Collaboration, Adult Partners) (Figure 44).

Figure 44. Belonging, Collaboration, and Adult Partners Scale Scores Were Significantly Lower in Summer 2021 Than in Other Years



Note. The number of assessments varied across summer sessions: 379 in 2018, 408 in 2019, 101 in 2020, and 94 in 2021.

* $p < .05$.

Key Takeaways: *Program Quality*

Remote programs continue to demonstrate high quality based on their YPQA scores. Summer 2021 remote program quality was comparable with previous remote and in-person summer sessions based on the adapted YPQA domain scores for the Safe Environment and Engagement domains, but varied for the Supportive Environment and Interaction domains. The scores for summer 2021 were significantly higher for Supportive Environment and significantly lower for Interaction when compared to scores from the summers of 2018 and 2019, which represent in-person programs. AIR found that the average scores for Active Engagement and Encouragement, both within Supportive Environment, were significantly higher in 2021 when compared to 2019 (Active Engagement, Encouragement) and 2018 (Encouragement). AIR found that average scores for Belonging, Collaboration, and Adult Partners were significantly lower than other summer sessions. A possible explanation for differing scores in these scales is the structure of programming and how it translates to traditional measures of quality. In addition, the broader environment for summer 2021, which included a second year of programming in the pandemic, increased fatigue, and continuous changes to Covid-19 guidelines, may have contributed to these lower scale scores as well. It is important to note that the YPQA is a tool historically used for assessing in-person programs. Interpreting results across differing instructional formats should be done with caution.



Looking Ahead to Inform Future Practice

In this section, AIR provides recommendations for future summer learning program sessions and discusses implications for the youth development and broader education field.

Recommendations for After School Matters

AIR recommends the following next steps based on the lessons learned from the summer 2021 program session:

Expand mental and emotional health supports for both instructors and teens. At the outset of the pandemic, After School Matters established new partnerships that allowed them to offer increased supports to teens and instructors related to mental health. AIR recommends that After School Matters continue to expand these efforts, as it is clear there is still a strong need for additional mental health resources among both teens and instructors. Nearly one third of instructors did not feel like they had access to mental health supports this summer. These findings indicate instructors may need more support from After School Matters to take care of their own mental health. Additionally, 78% of teens felt hopeful about their future, but only half of teens reported feeling in good spirits for a majority of the time. As burnout and fatigue become increasingly prevalent among both educators and youth, targeted supports for all stakeholders are more important than ever. After School Matters may consider expanding existing partnerships with mental health providers, and offering more specific program offerings focused on well-being to help address instructor and teen needs. Additionally, After School Matters may consider incorporating more open dialogue about mental health among instructors and teens, as both groups report experiencing challenges.

Continue offering a variety of program formats. This summer was the first in which After School Matters offered programming in a variety of formats. Teen reports on their preferences varied, with some saying they wanted to be in person and others saying they wanted to be online. Analyses did not reveal widespread differences between the remote and in-person learning formats, suggesting both formats as viable program options. After School Matters may consider continuing to offer a variety of program formats so that teens and instructors may participate in the format in which they feel most comfortable.

Continue to focus on teen sense of belonging. Teens continued to report high levels of belonging this summer. However, while belonging scores were still high, teens' sense of belonging was slightly lower in summer 2021 than summer 2020. Additionally, teens who participated in person had a lower sense of belonging than those who participated remotely. Further, teens reported less comfort with their peers as compared to their instructors. After School Matters may consider how teens are relating with one another, and what is working well in remote programs that relates to increased sense of belonging. After identifying these areas of strength, explore how promising practices can be similarly incorporated into in-person programs.

Expand food supports for teens. While food insecurity among teens lessened this year, their food insecurity remains more than twice as high as it was for youth in Cook County before the pandemic. Additionally, teens in more vulnerable areas of the city and in areas of the city with higher COVID-19

case rates are more likely to be food insecure. After School Matters may consider prioritizing these areas of the city for future food distribution efforts. Expanded services, such as food pantries, lengthened meals, and more food options, could improve teens' food security.

Continue to provide relevant professional development and support for instructors. Instructors shared positive feedback about After School Matters professional development opportunities, other supports they received from After School Matters, and their program specialist. They highlighted the connections they were able to make with other instructors and the information and resources shared during sessions. They requested more of these opportunities in the future. They also requested additional professional development and resources related to engagement tools, trauma, and mental health.

Implications for the Field

Findings from AIR's analyses of After School Matters data have broader implications for the education field. First, these findings underscore the importance of authentic relationship building for both youth and adult participants. This year, among the challenges of the pandemic and increased public attention to racial inequities, we faced more community-wide stressors than ever before. Both teens and instructors felt challenged this year, but were inspired, empowered, and motivated by their relationships and connections with one another. Teen and instructor relationships can significantly contribute to teens' sense of well-being and hopefulness. For important context, creating intentional opportunities for belonging has always been an essential component of After School Matters' program model, and in recent years, it has also been a key focus of their professional development offerings and continuous quality improvement processes. Overall, these positive results from the After School Matters summer programming underscore how important it is for the field to continue providing authentic opportunities for teens and instructors to form meaningful relationships.

Second, as teens adapt to their changing learning environments, it is important that the adults in their lives practice patience and understanding with them. The entirety of most teens' adolescence has been taken place in the pandemic. Teens are staying home more often, taking on more responsibilities, missing out on common teen experiences, and seeing their friends and family less, all while navigating frequent changes to their learning environment. Consistency is important for positive youth development, yet difficult to achieve in the current context. Teens shared that more empathy, patience, and understanding from the adults in their lives would help them as they continually readjust to their ever-changing environments.

Finally, as the pandemic enters its third year, education programs continue to pivot to meet the needs of youth and instructors. As we seek to identify the "new normal," we find there is no one right answer. Youth and instructors have varied comfort levels in returning to in-person activities. Some would prefer to learn in person, while others would prefer to stay online. We did not find widespread statistical differences between remote and in-person instruction, suggesting that either option could be viable for future program efforts. Educational environments may consider offering a variety of program formats, if feasible, so that youth and adults can continue to learn and develop in whatever environment best fits their own personal "new normal."

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