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Differential Impacts of COVID-19 on Summer Activities and Environments for Children from High- and Low-Income Families

Dan Richmond
Rachel McGovern
Taylor Wycoff
Michael Froehly
Meagan Ricks
Jim Sibthorp
Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism
University of Utah

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Abstract
This study examined how the COVID-19 affected the summer activities and environments of children from high- and low-income households. Results show that children from high-income households had access to more enriching activities both before and during the pandemic, even though COVID-19 restricted access to programming for all children. While all families struggled in many ways to make the most of the pandemic summer of 2020, there were silver linings that included more family time and less hectic schedules. The paper also identifies how work-from-home arrangements and virtual programming that arose during the pandemic could help bridge the opportunity gap moving forward.

Keywords: opportunity gap, summertime, children, COVID-19, recreation

The spring 2020 arrival of COVID-19 to the United States brought uncertainty and eventual change to the summers of children across the country. The COVID-19 pandemic forced school closures and canceled activities and modified programming through the summer and beyond (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). In the United States, there remains a considerable "opportunity gap" where kids from high-income households are twice as likely to participate in out-of-school-time activities than kids from low-income households (Outley & Floyd, 2002; Snellman et al., 2015). Experts anticipated the COVID-19 pandemic to widen social inequality, as low-income households have fewer resources to compensate for a loss of available programming for their children than high-income families (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

Summertime has extraordinary potential to support positive youth development (Sepúlveda & Hutton, 2019). While school and school-related extracurricular activities dominate the rest of the year, summer provides freedom for children to explore new opportunities and interests through both structured and less-structured activities. Activities like summer camps, sports, arts and music, and family vacations can help children develop self-confidence, independence, and essential relationship skills necessary for success in school and life (Vandell et al., 2015). The pandemic affected kids from all income levels, but families with lower incomes were hit especially hard due to the cancelation of many free and low-cost summer programs (Ettekal & Agans, 2020). This study sought to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the summer activities and environments of children and families from across the United States and identify ways the pandemic differentially impacted families based on household income.

The Opportunity Gap, Summertime Experiences, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Over the last two decades, scholars have identified a significant difference in access to and participation in out-of-school-time activities between young people from high- and low-income households (Putnam et al., 2012; Snellman et al., 2015). Young people from low-income households are much less likely to participate in extracurricular activities, from sports and arts to clubs and academic enrichment, than those from high-income households, with high-income children and youth sometimes participating at twice the rate (Snellman et al., 2015). The differences in access to high-quality out-of-school-time activities between kids from high- and low-income households extend into the summer months. As Sepúlveda & Hutton (2019, p. 3) observe,

> *when schools close for the summer, children, youth, and families may lose a number of vital supports, such as access to healthy meals, access to medical care, daily supervision, and structured enrichment opportunities. These losses make summer a time of increased vulnerability for many children and youth—especially those from communities and families with fewer resources. While children from higher- and middle-income families may not be affected by these losses, many families with fewer resources cannot fill this gap*.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a compounding effect on access to developmental summer experiences, disproportionally impacting low-income families (Dunton et al., 2020; Ettekal & Agans, 2020).

Impacts of the Opportunity Gap

The term "opportunity gap" refers to how differential circumstances—such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, ZIP code, community wealth, and familial situations—affect, and often limit, one's opportunities in life. A similar term, the achievement gap, focuses on outputs like differences in average test scores. Conversely, the opportunity gap is an inputs-focused framework that calls attention to the "deficiencies in the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational—and ultimately socioeconomic—outcomes" (Carter & Welner, 2013). Young people from low-income households have less access to developmentally enriching experiences because many out-of-school-time activities bear additional costs to families (Nagaoka et al., 2015). As higher-income families have more discretionary income for these experiences, the difference in spending between families of differing socioeconomic status contributes to the opportunity gap.

Research has further demonstrated that the opportunity gap persists during the summer months when more affluent children and youth engage in enrichment activities at higher rates than their lower-income peers (Mccombs et al., 2017). A report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (Sepúlveda & Hutton, 2019) affirms that access to developmentally enriching summer experiences is often dependent on parents' financial standing. The opportunity gap also highlights environmental stressors and systemic inequities that contribute to constrained access to other developmentally enriching activities like family vacations[1] away from home.

Importance of Summertime in Youth Development

Out-of-school-time activities taking place during the summer serve multiple purposes for young people, families, and communities (Cooper et al., 2000). These activities provide a rich context for development, affecting academic, health, social and emotional, and safety outcomes for children and youth (Sepúlveda & Hutton, 2019). Attention has recently shifted to the needs of children and youth outside of school and the traditional academic calendar and the importance of summer activities and environments[2] that may affect their health, well-being, educational attainment, and future college and career readiness (Alexander et al., 2016; Sepúlveda & Hutton, 2019).

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[1] In this paper, *family vacation* refers to family time involving travel away from home.

[2] In this paper we use the terms "activities and environments" to encompass what children do during the summer and where these activities may occur. For example, summer camp is an environment with many activities and soccer is an activity that may take place in different environments or contexts.

Research has found that participation in structured out-of-school-time activities like day and overnight camps, sports, arts, and music activities contribute to positive youth development. Scholars have found connections between participation and improved social skills, independence, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, among others (e.g., Durlak et al., 2010; Henderson et al., 2007; Vandell et al., 2015). Another typical summer activity, family vacation, though less structured than organized out-of-school-time programming, is also linked to positive developmental outcomes. Family vacations away from home contribute to family bonding and communication (Jepson et al., 2019; Lehto et al., 2009). Pomfret and Varley (2019) reported positive health and personal development outcomes stemming from shared family vacation time. Summertime affords access to activities and environments that are both distinct and different from the school year for most young people, opportunities for experiential learning, and freedom of choice for both parents and children (Sepúlveda & Hutton, 2019). For children with access to quality summer activities and environments, summertime can provide opportunities for growth that can complement school-based learning.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Summertime Activities

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic reduced or eliminated access to many positive developmental summertime opportunities for children and youth during the summer of 2020, regardless of family income. Summer camps were closed, sports canceled or postponed, and leaders shut down neighborhood recreation opportunities to slow the spread of COVID-19 (Dunton et al., 2020; Ettekal & Agans, 2020). However, research highlights how the pandemic had compounding effects on families with lower incomes due to increased financial hardship and unemployment (Sharma et al., 2020), including further limiting access to community programs and other resources (Fortuna et al., 2020). Likely, the pre-pandemic pattern of high-income families having more resources than low-income families to fund more developmental opportunities for their children continued during the pandemic. However, there is only limited research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child activities, as much of the research has focused on physical activities (e.g., Dunton et al., 2020) and health outcomes of the pandemic (Millett et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2020).

The Present Study

This study team aimed to identify the differential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the summer activities and environments of children and families from different socioeconomic backgrounds in the U.S., specifically high- and low-income households. We sought to a) examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected participation in summer activities like summer camp, sports, arts and music, and family vacation during the summer of 2020 by comparing time use to the summer of 2019 and b) identify participation differences between families with higher and lower incomes. In addition, we examined how the pandemic affected typical child and family activities that can occur in or near the home during the summer, from socializing with friends and playing outside to family time and screen time. We collected rich qualitative data to help explain the quantitative findings.

Methods

We employed an explanatory sequential design to address the study aims. An explanatory sequential design has two distinct phases that interact. The first phase collects quantitative data, which serves as the primary source of information to answer the main research questions. The second phase collects qualitative data to help explain findings from the quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For this study, an early analysis of quantitative data identified patterns of time use within and between families. Researchers then developed questions for the subsequent interviews to gather qualitative data. The analysis of the qualitative data was used to provide context and explain the quantitative results.

Participant Recruitment

This study collected survey data from 325 families across the U.S. who had sent their children to camp in the summer of 2018. This sample was originally recruited for a longitudinal study on the impacts of summer camps and other summer activities on child development, but as that study was profoundly impacted by COVID-19, it became appropriate for the present study. Parents were recruited and enrolled through camps accredited by the American Camp Association (ACA) during the spring of 2018. The purposive stratified sample aimed to represent a range of camp types, geographic diversity, racial and ethnic diversity, and a mix of income levels. Demographic information was provided by the ACA. At the start of the study in 2018, children were between the ages of 9 and 11 years. Children were associated with 48 different day and residential camps from all regions of the U.S. and included for-profit and non-profit camps, agency-affiliated (e.g., YMCA, Girl Scouts), religiously affiliated, single-gender, and co-ed camps.

Survey

Drawing from the population of parents who had sent their child to camp in the summer of 2018, the present study asked parents in the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020 to complete retrospective weekly environment and activity reports (WEARs) to document their child's time use in the summers of 2019 and 2020. Researchers compared the children's 2020 WEAR with their 2019 WEAR to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on time spent in particular activities and environments. WEARs gathered information about how many weeks children spent most of their daytime hours in the following activities or environments: home, family vacation, day camp, overnight camp, sports, arts or music, and "other." The survey then asked parents to provide additional information about the child's activities when the child was at home. Questions asked parents if their child spent more or less time in various activities (e.g., spending time outside, playing sports, hanging out with family, watching TV, playing video games). Follow-up questions asked parents to evaluate whether spending more or less time in a given activity was positive or negative for their child.

Family Interviews

Following WEAR data collection periods, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with parents and children who agreed to participate in this phase of the study. We conducted 16 interviews with members of low-income households and 34 interviews with members of high-income households. The

purpose of the interviews was to learn more about summer activities and family decision-making regarding summer choices, and to identify highlights and any salient challenges from the summer. Parent interview questions included, "how did you go about selecting activities for your child for this past summer?" and, for 2020, "how did COVID-19 affect your summer plans?" Child interview questions included, "what were some highlights from your summer?" and "how did COVID-19 affect your summer as compared to previous summers?"

Data Analysis

The authors analyzed quantitative data using descriptive statistics and a mixed 3x2 MANOVA where we examined differences between the three income groups across the summers of 2019 and 2020. To categorize families into high-, medium-, and low-income groups, we used a tool by the Pew Research Center that takes into account income, family size, and ZIP code (Bennett et al., 2018). For the qualitative data, the authors chose to focus on comparisons between high- and low-income households as differences between these two groups were more notable in the quantitative data. Also, much of the existing research on the opportunity gap has focused on the differences between high- and low-income households (e.g., Mccombs et al., 2017; Snellman et al., 2015).

The researchers coded and analyzed the interviews using a systematic multi-step process that identified significant themes within the responses (Miles et al., 2014). First, four members of the research team open-coded the transcripts using In Vivo and descriptive codes. Next, the research team used more focused coding with constant comparison aided by research notes and memos. Focused coding allowed the team to collapse codes and identify themes across coders. We then worked to identify key themes, responses, and quotes that could help explain and contextualize the quantitative data within the explanatory sequential design. Finally, we identified representative interview responses and quotes to help explain the quantitative findings in the results section (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Saldana, 2013). These analyses included all interviews with low- and high-income households from families that opted into the interview process after completing their surveys during the study period.

Results

Three hundred twenty-five parents completed two retrospective WEAR time diaries, one completed in fall 2019 and the second in fall 2020. Based on household income, family size, and ZIP code, 50 households were categorized as low income, 141 were middle income, and 134 were high income. Median annual income was $40,000-$49,999 for low-income households, $100,00-$149,999 for middle-income households, and over $250,000 for high-income households. Among participating parents, 80.9% identified as White, 6.8% as Black or African-American, 4.3% as multi-racial, 4% as Latinx, 2.5% as Asian, 0.3% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 0.3% as other. However, the low-income group was 58% White and 28% Black or African-American compared to 90.3% and 0.7%, respectively, for the high-income group. Parents in the low-income group were less likely to have a four-year degree or higher (36%) than middle- (82%) and high-income parents (97%) and more likely to be single parents (60%) as compared to middle- and high-

income parents (15.6%, 3%). Additionally, parents in low-income households were more likely to be laid-off or furloughed during the pandemic (20%) than parents of middle (12.1%) and high-income households (4.5%). Households with low income were also less likely to have at least one parent able to work from home during the pandemic (28%) as compared to households in the middle-income (59.9%) and high-income groups (60.1%).

Time Use Data: Weekly Environments and Activities Reports

Data from the weekly environments and activities reports (WEARs) for the summer of 2019 (pre-pandemic) reveals significant differences in time use across income groups. Our initial 3x2 MANOVA indicated a significant interaction effect (*Pillai's Trace* = .144, $F_{(16,632)}$ = 3.1, $p < .001$, *partial η2* = .07) as well as significant main effects for income level (*Pillai's Trace* = .141, $F_{(16,632)}$ = 3.0, $p < .001$, *partial η2* = .07) and time (*Pillai's Trace* = .557, $F_{(8,315)}$ = 49.4, $p < .001$, *partial η2* = .56). We followed up these significant effects using Bonferroni corrected 2x3 ANOVAs and post hoc tests.

While the time effect indicated the largest effect size, we first examined the interaction effects to see how income level moderated the effects of time during the study period, which includes non-COVID (2019) and COVID (2020) summers. Using Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons, only the ANOVA's examining weeks spent at overnight camp ($F_{(2,322)}$ = 8.4, $p < .001$, *partial η2* = .05) and home ($F_{(2,322)}$ = 9.7, $p < .001$, *partial η2* = .06) were significant. Post hoc comparisons indicated that high-income families used overnight camp for more weeks than low- or middle-income families in 2019, but these differences in overnight camp attendance did not differ significantly by income group in 2020.

As expected, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of income, children were home for more weeks in 2020 than in 2019. ANOVAs examining time effects, showed that declines in day camp attendance ($F_{(1,322)}$ = 91.2, $p < .001$, *partial η2* = .22) and family vacation ($F_{(1,322)}$ = 11.2, $p < .001$, *partial η2* = .03) regardless of family income. Weeks spent at overnight camp ($F_{(1,322)}$ = 137, $p < .001$, *partial η2* = .30) significantly decreased between 2019 and 2020 and weeks spend at home ($F_{(1,322)}$ = 166, $p < .001$, *partial η2* = .34) significantly increased; however income somewhat moderated these effects, as indicated by the significant interaction terms.

Testing the main effect of income group alone, only weeks of family vacation varied significantly by income group ($F_{(2,322)}$ = 5.6, $p = .004$, *partial η2* = .03), with higher-income families reporting more weeks of family vacation across both times compared to middle- and low-income families. While weeks spent at overnight camp and home also varied as main effects of income group, given the significant interaction terms (time and income) and modest, small effect sizes of income group alone (*partial η2* < .04), these effects are best interpreted as interactions rather than main effects. See Table 1 for a comparison of means by activity/setting.

Table 1. Average weeks in activity/setting for summer 2019 and summer 2020 by income group

	Summer 2019			Summer 2020		
Activity	Low-Income (n=50)	Middle-Income (n=141)	High-Income (n=134)	Low-Income (n=50)	Middle-Income (n=141)	High-Income (n=134)
School	1.13	1.16	1.43	1.38	0.61	0.77
Family Vacation[2]	1.19	1.54	1.97[3]	0.87	1.17	1.36[3]
Day Camp[2]	1.94	2.56	2.67	0.60	0.53	0.31
Overnight Camp[2]	1.29	1.58	2.44[1]	0.41	0.23	0.37
Sports	0.21	0.80	0.91	0.44	1.18	1.07
Arts or Music	0.28	0.16	0.21	0.22	0.44	0.27
Home[2]	6.20	4.73	2.97[1]	8.34	8.57	8.43
Childcare	0.12	0.24	0.14	0.72	0.24	0.21
Other	0.64	0.23	0.25	0.02	0.04	0.22
Total Weeks	*13.00*	*13.00*	*13.00*	*13.00*	*13.00*	*13.00*
Weeks at Camp, Family Vacation, Sports, Arts, Music	*4.91*	*6.64*	*8.20*	*2.54*	*3.54*	*3.37*

Notes: 1) High-income families report that their child spent more weeks at overnight camp and less time at home in 2019 than middle- and low-income families. These differences diminished in 2020. 2) Between the 2019 and 2020 summers, all families reported fewer weeks of family vacation, day camp, and overnight camp, and more weeks at home. 3) High-income families reported more weeks of summer vacation than low-income families during both summers. Summer weeks were reported based on a 13-week summer between June 1 and August 31.

Insights from Family Interviews on Summer Activities and Environments

We followed up with families using semi-structured interviews to better understand our quantitative findings. One parent from the low-income group aptly summarized the unprecedented situation brought on by the pandemic, explaining that "it was a summer full of planning and rearranging finances and figuring out what was going to happen and... what was open and what wasn't open and how to pull things off when the world was shutting down."

Replacing Summer Activities Lost during the Summer of 2020

Parents across income groups discussed their disappointment at the loss of so many summer opportunities for their child and the need to replace many activities from 2019. For some, this meant taking day trips to local sites or visiting family. One parent from the low-income group in upstate New York explained, "my parents live about two miles down the road, so we did get to spend a lot of time on the lake [where they live]." Similarly, a low-income parent from Philadelphia talked about replacing trips to the park and the beach with cook-outs with nearby extended family. In some cases, visiting family and taking trips looked much different when comparing income groups. Several high-income families talked about taking extended road trips across the country to visit family or experience novelty. One high-income family from Chicago spent several weeks in a Colorado ski town where they enjoyed outdoor family recreation while the parents were able to work remotely.

High-income parents were also more likely to have their children participate in traveling club sports—teams that come with considerable participation fees. Several families from the Chicago metro area described talked about how their child's club soccer, baseball, or softball could practice locally and then compete in Indiana, where there were fewer COVID-19 restrictions for youth sports. Conversely, many low-cost youth leagues run by city parks and recreation departments shut down, leaving many families with limited resources without options for their kids.

Other high-income families reported participation in soccer and baseball camps, horse riding lessons, and socially distanced dance classes. One parent expressed gratitude for other parents in the community who decided to run informal tennis or golf camps to "provide some type of physical and social activities for the kids, which really helped out a lot." However, these stories of in-person opportunities were rare in interviews with families in both high- and low-income groups.

Some children could still attend in-person summer camps, though this was rare among all income groups. Even if summer camps were open, however, some parents made the difficult decision to not send their child. One high-income father living in Texas explained that he had the option to send his 12-year-old daughter to her regular overnight camp, but chose not to send her. He felt that camp was not worth the additional expense because the children would not fully enjoy their time at camp due to onerous COVID-19 restrictions that required masks and limited social interaction.

Adapting to Virtual Activities

It was more common for children to participate in virtual activities during the summer of 2020 if they participated in any activities at all. Sports teams offered virtual practices focusing on skills and conditioning using Zoom meetings. A girl from a high-income household in Illinois who played soccer talked about doing drills in her backyard alone but accompanied by her coaches and teammates by video on her phone. Another young woman from a high-income household in San Francisco talked about attending rehearsals for a play using Zoom before coming together at the end of the summer for an outside performance. She also spoke of taking several improvisation workshops online that she might not have been able to do in person due to the travel time to and from the activity. Football players from both high- and low-income households talked about how they had virtual training during the summer before convening in the fall for in-person practices in states and municipalities that allowed it.

Several families talked about finding virtual summer camps for their children to replace canceled summer camps. For example, a high-income parent explained how she enrolled her daughter in five different virtual camps as she "tried to fill in some time so [her daughter] wouldn't get bored." Yet, virtual programming fell flat for some parents and their kids. A low-income parent lamented that the virtual classes available for her child still cost as much as in-person programming, which was not worth it to her. A high-income parent explained how she decided her daughter's

virtual guitar lessons were not of the same quality as an in-person lesson and decided to cancel them.

Parental Work Arrangements

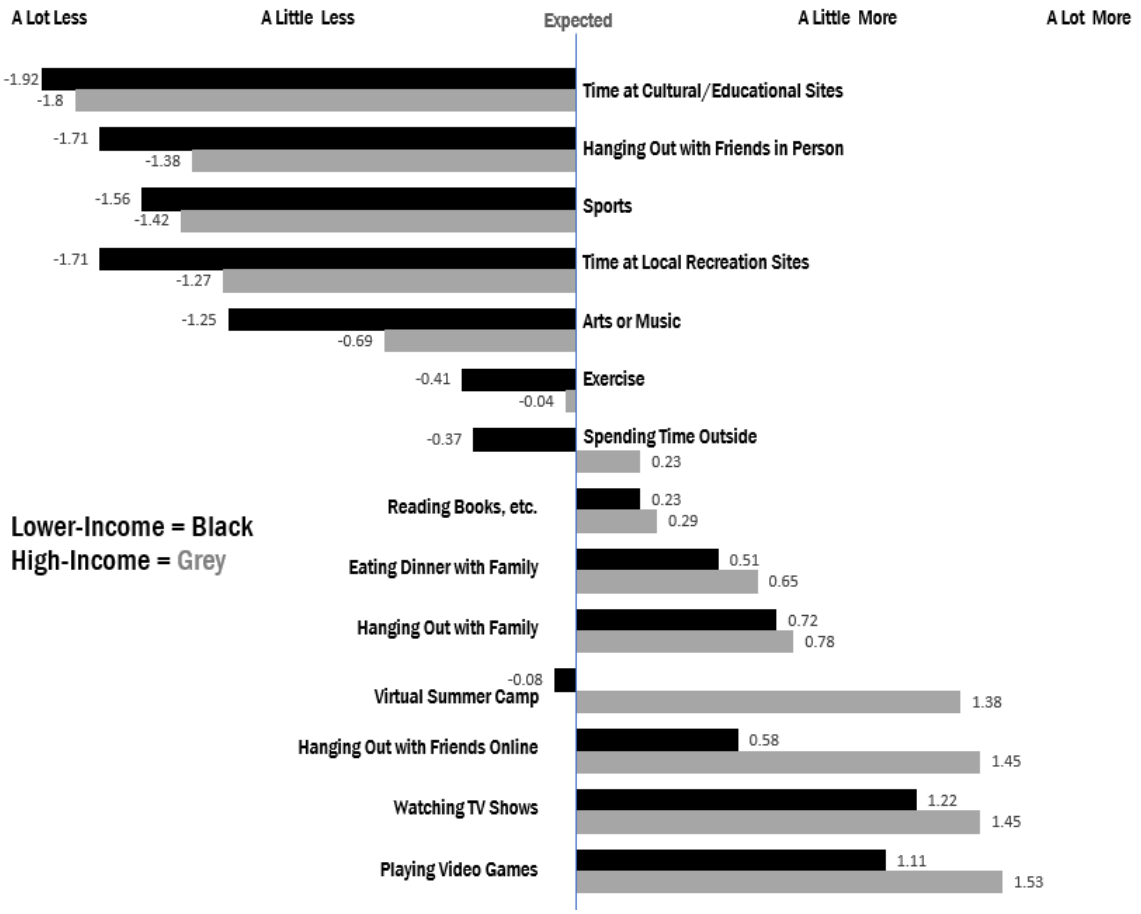
While financial resources contributed to differences in where children spent their time during the summer of 2020, so did parents' work situations. High-income parents were more likely to hold jobs that allowed them to work remotely. In contrast, parents from low-income households were much more likely to be "essential workers," working in health care professions or in service-industry jobs that would not allow for remote work. Differences between parents who worked at home and those that could not helped determine if families were financially stressed and if kids from these families could participate in activities like family vacation and sports. For example, one high-income parent explained that "a work schedule where I could work from anywhere just really made it a lot easier to spend time with my family [in another state], which was great." Few parents from low-income households reported opportunities to work remotely, which afforded fewer travel opportunities.

Changes to Normal Summer Activities at Home

Parents also reported how activities that generally occur at or near home changed during the summer of 2020 due to the cancellation of organized activities outside the home. Parents from all income groups said their child spent less time in normal activities like visiting cultural and educational sites, hanging out with friends in person, playing sports, spending time at local recreation facilities, and participating in arts and music activities.

Rather, parents reported that their children spent more time playing video games, watching shows on TV or online, and hanging out with friends online. Most families also spent more time hanging out with family and eating dinner with family. There were a few differences between high- and low-income groups, with high-income families reporting that their child spent a little more time in virtual summer camp and spent more time outside. In comparison, low-income families spent less time than families expected in these activities. Figure 1 presents the actual time versus anticipated time for each activity by family income group, emphasizing differences between high- and low-income households.

Figure 1. Actual time in activities vs. families' expected time in activities during the summer of 2020 by income group



Note: -2 = a lot less time than expected, -1= a little less time than expected, 0 = about the amount of time expected, 1 = a little more time than expected, and 2 = a lot more time than expected.

Considerable Unstructured Time for Children

Interviews gave us additional insight into how children spent their time during the summer of 2020. A mom from the high-income group reported that she could not schedule any out-of-home activities for her children's days because she and her husband were so busy working from home. This mom explained she "left it up to [the kids] to decide what they wanted to do, whether it was video games, sleeping in, or time with the dog." The child, when asked to describe his summer, replied,

> *My summer was twelve hours of the day on the iPad and 3 hours on Xbox. Ninety-five percent of my iPad battery was spent on YouTube and Disney plus. I pretty much watched YouTube and streamed stuff and only played FIFA on my Xbox. Normally, I would spend much less time on video games, more time in the park, and a month at sleep-away camp.*

Considerable downtime at home was typical for families from both high- and low-income groups. The father from the high-income household in Texas quoted above

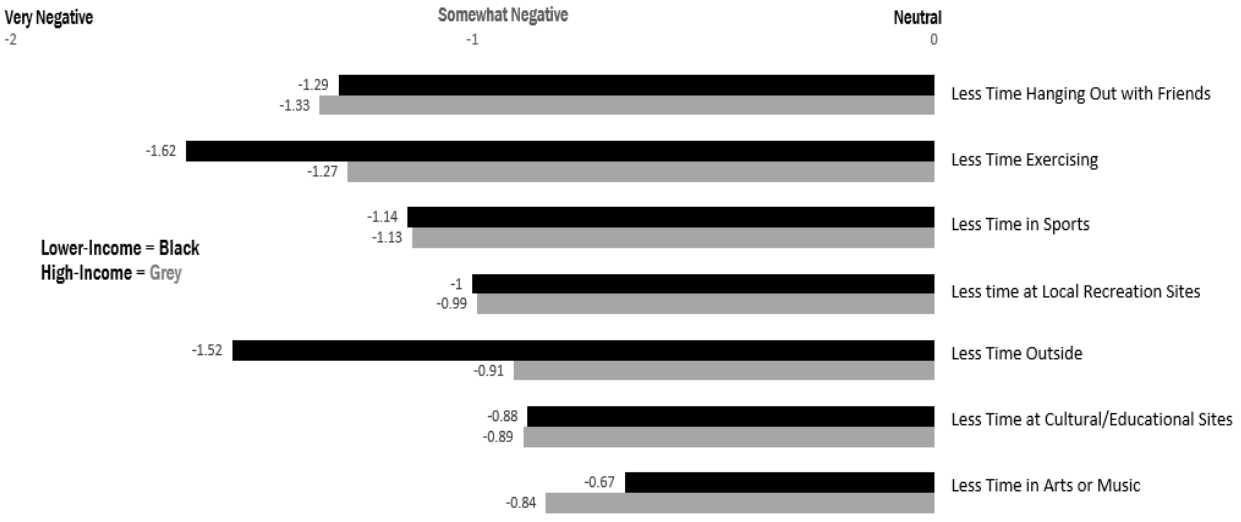
talked about how his kids did "absolutely nothing" during the summer of 2020, explaining that the family was extra-cautious during the pandemic. Parents in low-income households reported that having to work in person limited what their kids could do, particularly with local COVID-19-related restrictions and no organized programming in the neighborhood.

Several high-income families living in suburban areas described their strategies for letting their children continue to play with friends. Sometimes, families would create a "pod" with another family that had kids the same age. In most cases, children were limited to play with one or two other children in the neighborhood. These children often spent time playing outside, riding bikes, hiking on nearby trails, and hanging out in the backyard. Another parent explained, "We wanted the kids to be outside and active. A lot of walking and bike riding, no buses. Hike to [the] reservoir and play. We had a pretty good summer." The child of this parent, describing his summer experience, explained, "I played outside with my brother. We came up with new games. We played card games." There were fewer stories about low-income families creating contained social groups with other families and kids, with many low-income households limiting contact to just family members. However, children from across income groups reported working on projects at home, getting a first pet, or spending time training and playing with an existing pet to fill the unstructured time.

Parent Perceptions of Child Time Use during Summer 2020

Parents reported that spending less time in normal activities was generally negative for their child. Having their child spend less time with friends in person and less exercising were reported as having the greatest negative impact. Figure 2 presents how having their child spend less time in normal activities was viewed by parents.

Figure 2. Parent perceptions of their child spending less time in everyday activities during the summer of 2020



"How Do We Keep the Kids Happy?"

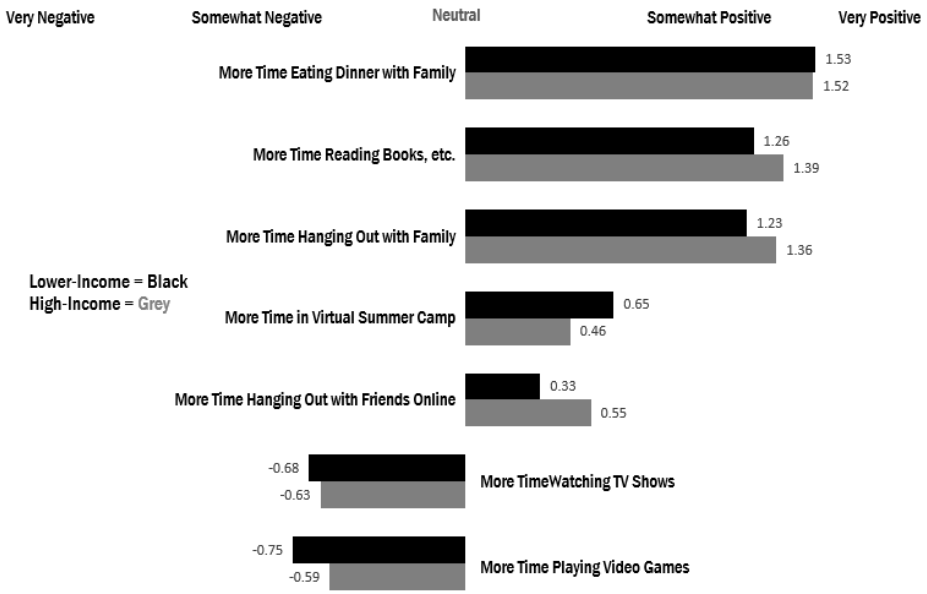
Parents and children who participated in the interviews tended to express disappointment at being restricted from spending time with friends and participating in everyday activities. One parent from a high-income household explained, "I think the biggest challenge for us was how do we keep the kids happy this summer and occupied when the two of us still have to work?" Another parent from a high-income household lamented, "there was no joy at all and if there's no joy, and there's nothing on the horizon and nothing to look forward to, it's just a real grind." One low-income parent described how depressed her daughter became over the summer from being kept away from friends and social activities. This sense of isolation was common among many children in the study across all income groups. As one high-income parent explained,

> *there's just such a lack of novelty in our lives these days because you can't really go out and do things that you would normally have done, and [our daughter] can't really be independent the way I would expect a 7th grader to be, you know? I think those are things that lead to growth, and so that's too bad.*

Looking for Silver Linings during the Pandemic

When reflecting on activities in which their child spent more time than expected during the summer of 2020, parents reported that more time eating dinner with family, hanging out with family, reading, participating in virtual summer camp, and hanging out with friends online were generally positive. Conversely, parents rated more time watching TV shows and playing video games as somewhat negative. Figure 3 compares parental evaluations of their children spending more time in particular activities during the summer of 2020.

Figure 3. Parent perceptions of their child spending more time in everyday activities during the summer of 2020



Across income groups, parents we interviewed expressed joy at spending more time with family. For example, a parent from the high-income group shared the following sentiment:

> *[We spent] lots of home time together with the four of us, which ended up being really nice. Like no plans on that Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. It really just forced us to spend time together, which is probably better for me and my husband than it was for the kids. I really enjoyed it. Lots of time in the backyard. Like that's the most time we've ever spent in the backyard and the pool and the couch outside. We got a ping pong table which my husband and [my son] really love playing together. The best part of the summer was dinners together every night.*

Similarly, another high-income parent explained, "This was the first summer where I actually got to spend time with the boys. This was the first summer that my boys actually got to do what they wanted to do. It was just lovely." That parent's child shared that "it was really nice just to be at home." Several children we spoke with talked about how nice it was to hang out at home and not have their days filled with activities. Some even expressed they were happy that their summer camps were canceled.

While most parents expressed disappointment at the amount of time their children spent watching television and playing video games, some acknowledged screen time was a necessary distraction for their children. And in some cases, time playing video and computer games turned out to be very positive. For example, one child met a new friend during a virtual camp and spent the rest of summer playing computer games long-distance with the friend until they could finally meet in person at the end of summer. Children from both high- and low-income households said that online video chats, social media, and playing multi-player video games online helped them stay connected with their friends. One child from a low-income household explained how having an iPad allowed her to pursue her newfound passion for digital art. Other parents and children across income groups mentioned how they looked forward to weekly movie nights as a way to combat the monotony of quarantine. Unsurprisingly, several children were pleased with the opportunity to spend more time with their video games and other technologies.

Identifying "silver linings" resulting from the pandemic was an important approach for parents from both high- and low-income groups trying to make the best of the time available during the summer of 2020. For example, one low-income parent explained, "we tried to make the best of anything we did—going for walks, playing games—any little thing we did we just tried to enjoy it." And a high-income parent expressed, "a lot of time together was really fun for us… We were really lucky. God was good to us during the pandemic." Similarly, another high-income parent explained, "the year has shown us how privileged we are," even though this family missed seeing family and had to cancel a trip to Europe.

Several parents expressed how nice it was to simplify their lives and not have to worry about scheduling and shuttling their kids to and from multiple activities,

lessons, and friends' homes. Reduced travel to and from activities opened up time for both children and parents.

Seeking Normalcy during the Pandemic

In addition to looking for "silver linings" during the pandemic, a few parents across income groups made efforts to create as much normalcy as possible for their families. As one low-income parent described,

> *It was really important for me to maintain some of the normal childhood [things] during this experience. I didn't want this to be a time that they looked back on and remembered being sad or depressed or stuck in the house. So I was seeking out any type of… normal activities that we could.*

Some households were better situated to provide typical summer experiences for their families. For example, one high-income parent explained that even though her child's activities were canceled, she found ways to fill their summer with alternatives. These alternatives included soccer camps, a personal trainer, and art classes, even though they had to leave the city to find some of these opportunities. Another high-income parent described the process of figuring out which activities were safe enough for her child and ended up signing him up for horse riding lessons. A parent from a different high-income family talked about her desire to keep putting activities on the calendar "so [her children] would have something to look forward to." Many families in the study could still plan short vacations and take day trips or visit extended family—outings that made summer seem a bit more normal. A mom from a low-income household arranged a short trip with two other families, staying at a rental house in another state. She explained that she was "really seeking out any type of normal activities we could do."

When Normalcy Was Hard to Find, Endure

Unfortunately, some parents felt getting through the summer was a matter of enduring. For example, when asked what they did to create a high-quality summer for their child, one parent from the high-income group expressed a sense of defeat. "I would say survival is the better word than trying to imagine that we could have created a very high-quality summer," she lamented. A low-income parent explained it was more important for her family to stay healthy than to try to plan a summer, so they quarantined through the summer. She explained, "there's been kind of a like a PTSD sort of thing that's happened. So we are more comfortable being homebound right now." A different high-income parent, although positive, described her strategy to make do and get through the summer: "We all knew this was the best we could do... When you work from home, video games it is. We're doing the best we can. And this summer, it was like, 'well, this is it.'"

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the differential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the summer activities and environments of children from high- and low-income households. We were particularly interested in learning how the cancellation of summer programs and the need for COVID-19 precautions changed how children spent their time during the summer of 2020 compared to the pre-

pandemic summer of 2019. Data from 2019 revealed a clear opportunity gap between children from high- and low-income households, with high-income children spending over three weeks more than their lower-income peers in developmental activities and environments like summer camp, family vacation, sports, arts, and music. The COVID-19 pandemic limited options for all children in 2020, with children from high- and low-income groups spending more than eight weeks at home during a 13-week summer; yet, children from high-income households were still able to spend significantly more time on family vacations and playing sports. However, what may be most interesting was how families from both high- and low-income groups navigated the challenges posed by the pandemic and what this may mean for families and summer youth programs when summer activities return to normal. In particular, the pandemic revealed the importance of access to resources beyond financial resources, including job flexibility for parents, access to technology for young people, access to family and social networks, and access to neighborhood and community resources.

The Importance of Resources to Child Participation in Summer Activities

A straightforward interpretation of the findings reveals that families with more financial resources could have their children involved in more developmentally enriching activities during the summer than families with lower incomes, both before the pandemic and during the pandemic when summertime options were more limited. This opportunity gap among families in this study may not be surprising due to the considerable amount of literature that links household income to child and youth participation in out-of-school-time activities (e.g., Mccombs et al., 2017; Nagaoka et al., 2015; Outley & Floyd, 2002; Putnam et al., 2012; Snellman et al., 2015). While money matters to child participation in activities, access to other resources matters as well.

Job Flexibility for Parents

Interviews with families in this study showed that how and where parents worked during the pandemic influenced children's summers. Parents with jobs that allowed them to work from home often had more flexibility with their work schedules allowing for more family time and opportunities to work while also taking children on a family vacation. Parents from high-income households were more likely to be able to work from home. These income-differentiated patterns of adults working from home parallel other national findings on work during the pandemic (Parker et al., 2020). Yet, it is important to note that parents from low-income households able to work from home saw some of the same benefits as their high-income peers, like spending more time with their children and making time for activities outside the home.

In the post-pandemic United States, workers will increasingly have the option to work from home, at least for some of the workweek (Lund et al., 2021). Scholars have noted that for some industries, having employees work from home did not affect productivity negatively and that there are many benefits to having a remote workforce (Gaskell, 2020). These benefits included reduced commute times and lower overhead costs related to maintaining a shared workspace. This study revealed that there are clear advantages to working from home for families and

children. The main benefit is time—time to be with family, time to take children to out-of-school-time activities, and time flexible enough to mix work with vacation. Unfortunately, many parents from low-income households work in industries like manufacturing, retail, construction, hospitality, and health care where working from home is not an option (Lund et al., 2021). This fact underscores the many challenges that face families with low incomes, even in non-pandemic times. Not only do these families make less money, but they also have less job flexibility resulting in less time for their children, particularly during the summer when school is out of session. Without the "luxury" of time, many parents from low-income households are unable to have their kids involved in certain activities, especially those like highly competitive sports that require shuttling kids to and from multiple practices and games, and vacations that require taking time off work.

Indeed, many parents who worked from home during the pandemic struggled to provide a summer filled with developmental opportunities for their children. The demands of work paired with the cancelation of most organized out-of-school-time programs limited options for all families. However, as the pandemic recedes, it will be crucial to follow how work-from-home opportunities may disproportionally benefit families with high incomes, potentially widening the already substantial opportunity gap.

Access to Technology for Children

Children from all household income groups spent more time with technology during the pandemic. While parents noted that more screen time watching shows or playing video games was mostly negative, there were some positive outcomes related to having access to technology. Social media, video calls, texting, and socializing while playing video games provided opportunities for young people to connect with friends. Some out-of-school-time activities, from summer camps and sports to theater and other arts and science opportunities, moved online, taking advantage of interactive video technology. Time in these virtual environments cannot capture all the advantages of hosting activities in person, but some benefits may carry over into a post-pandemic world.

For example, in this study, many parents and children mentioned that less travel time to and from activities was a silver lining of the pandemic. Parents talked about the stress of transporting their children to and from activities during a regular year. Virtual activities eliminated the need for travel while also giving children the chance to interact with their peers and stay engaged in activities that they found meaningful. For example, kids involved in theater groups could rehearse using video calls, and those in sports could work on physical conditioning and skills remotely. When it was safe to convene in person, programs could build on what occurred in the virtual environment. Out-of-school-time programs may want to consider continuing or creating hybrid models that could reduce barriers to child participation. Travel to and from activities is a significant constraint for parents, especially in households with lower incomes (Lee et al., 2001; Stodolska et al., 2011). As a result, parents often choose to keep their children out of certain activities requiring extensive transportation. However, if some activities move online, transportation to fewer in-person meetings might be more manageable. For

example, a theater group could hold some auditions and rehearsals remotely and then meet every other week in person. Such an arrangement could mean the difference between participation and non-participation for children with parents unable to arrange transportation to and from activities multiple times per week. Of course, this can only help address the opportunity gap if all children have access to the technology needed to participate in virtual activities.

Family and Social Connections

Families and social connections were also critical resources to parents and children who navigated a summer during the pandemic. There is extensive research on the importance of these connections for adults' quality of life and children's positive development (Levula, 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Extended family members provided vital support for many families during the pandemic, affording needed social interactions when connecting with non-family members was not possible. Social connections played a similar role for some families as parents and kids could create a "pod" with a limited group of others. Such arrangements provided much-needed social interaction while also limiting exposure risk to COVID-19. Our interview data showed a range of interactions between families in the study and their extended families and non-family social networks. Family and social connections afford opportunities for socialization, recreation, and play in normal times (Graber et al., 2020), and the pandemic only underscored the value of these networks.

It is unclear how the use of family and social networks during the pandemic will influence access to summertime opportunities for young people in the future. However, it might be possible for practitioners of youth programming to help parents be more creative in providing positive experiences for kids when they are not in formal programming during the summer. For example, summer camps and local youth organizations could share resources and activities with families so that a collective of parents could facilitate fun and developmentally appropriate activities for kids in the neighborhood. These neighborhood activities could help build a sense of community that may have emerged in "pods" of kids and families during the pandemic. Such collaboration between youth organizations and communities, neighborhoods, and families is often noted as essential for supporting lasting developmental outcomes for children and youth (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

The Impact of Where Families Live on Summertime Opportunities

Finally, the pandemic brought attention to the impact of where families live on available summertime opportunities. In the summer of 2020, access to camps, sports, arts, and music near home often depended on where families lived. Some states and municipalities were more restrictive on youth activities than others. In this study, there was also a clear difference in access to outdoor recreation opportunities between families living in urban areas and those living in suburban and more rural areas, favoring families in wealthier, non-urban communities in this study. In youth development literature, access to community resources like parks, playgrounds, pools, and recreation centers plays an essential role in supporting healthy child socialization and overall development (Crozier Kegler et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2016). The pandemic once again brought attention to disparities

between neighborhoods, with high-income communities having considerably more resources, natural or otherwise, than low-income areas. Moving forward, policy-makers and city planners will need to continue to push for more equitable access to recreational and community resources for communities where families have limited incomes.

Addressing the Opportunity Gap: Future Research and Study Limitations

Thus far, the discussion has sought to paint a nuanced picture of how access to resources affects access to summertime developmental opportunities for children. Job flexibility for parents, access to technology, family and social connections, and community resources all contribute to whether or not young people can participate in particular activities. Ideally, access to these resources would be available for all families, regardless of income. Unfortunately, higher-income families often have more and better access to these resources. While we have tried to offer some insights for researchers and practitioners of summertime youth programming, bridging the opportunity gap between young people from high- and low-income households will remain a challenge.

Future research should examine the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on access to opportunities for children from different income groups. It is not yet clear whether high- and low-income households will rebound from the pandemic at a similar rate. It may take longer for children from low-income households to have access to opportunities that were available before COVID-19 spread worldwide. Additional research can also help provide a fuller picture of the impact of access to resources on the opportunity gap than could be provided in this research.

This study had several limitations. First, this study used a purposive stratified sample of parents that had previously sent their kids to summer camp, which required parents to opt into the study. This sample is likely not representative of all families in the United States. Second, the study gathered WEARs time-use data at the end of the summers of 2019 and 2020. This process was necessary to minimize the burden on family responses. However, the survey did not collect detailed information about how children spent their days, and such retrospective designs can be susceptible to non-response and recall bias. Future studies may want to collect data daily or weekly instead of at the end of the summer to gather more timely data about child activities. Third, although efforts were made to ensure the integrity and trustworthiness of qualitative data analysis, interpretations of interview data from parents and children were subject to the research team's perspectives and biases.

Conclusion

The summer of 2020 will remain indelibly etched into the minds of parents and children across the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic changed everyday life. Some families saw the worst of the pandemic through illness or the loss of family and friends from the virus. Other families saw parents lose employment or income. However, for many children, the impacts of the pandemic were less direct, as governments, communities, and their families eliminated traditional summertime opportunities. These children played more video games, consumed increased

amounts of digital media, and were less able to participate in activities outside their home environments. They also spent more time with their families and turned to technology for socializing with their friends and peers.

As parents struggled to navigate this pandemic summer, many came to realize the limits of their resources. Income and financial resources helped families adjust, especially for high-income households, but so did access to extended family, proximity to outdoor environments, access to technology, and the ability to work from home. While in some ways COVID-19 expanded the opportunity gap between young people from high- and low-income households, in other ways it brought attention to these other resources that contribute to whether a child has access to developmental activities during the summer. It is impossible to predict where the United States will head as the pandemic recedes. It is very likely that children from high-income households will once again have access to more out-of-school-time activities than their low-income peers. However, there remains an opportunity to bridge the opportunity gap through innovative thinking as leaders and policy makers consider how to leverage lessons from the pandemic and ameliorate disparities among children and families.

Dan Richmond *is a post-doctoral research associate in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah. His research interests include youth development, out-of-school-time, opportunity gaps, outdoor recreation, and college pathway programs.*

Rachel McGovern *is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah. Her research interests include families and leisure, youth development, and qualitative research.*

Taylor Wycoff *completed her master's degree in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah. Her research interests include youth development, leisure constraints, out-of-school time, and social justice.*

Michael Froehly *is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah. His research interests include youth development, staff development, out-of-school-time, and social justice.*

Meagan Ricks *is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah. Her research interests include LGBTQ youth, youth development, qualitative research, out-of-school-time, and social justice.*

Jim Sibthorp *is a professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah. His research interests include youth development, summer camps, and outdoor adventure education.*

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