RUTGERS CHILDCARE RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE

A Look at Summer Programs in New Jersey:

Characteristics and Enrollment

AUTHORED BY
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National Institute for Early Education Research

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RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE

With funding and support from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, the Center for Women and Work, the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development and the National Institute for Early Education Research have joined together to form the Rutgers Child Care Research Collaborative for the purpose of conducting research and facilitating community conversations that develop a broad and comprehensive understanding of New Jersey's child care landscape. Our research aims to increase understanding about the needs and interests of parents in New Jersey, the supply and motivations of the child care workforce, and the capacity of the child care sector to meet demand for child care today and into to future within our diverse state.

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INTRODUCTION

Access to child care throughout the entire calendar year is essential to support working parents (RAPID Survey Project, 2025), including children under age 5 and school-age children. However, access to year-round child care can be a challenge for many families, particularly during the summer months (Lenhart, 2018) and especially for parents of school-age children who depend on their children attending school during the academic year. For parents of younger children who use non-parental child care, a recent report found that about one fifth of licensed center-based child care programs in New Jersey (NJ) only operated on an academic calendar (similar to public schools) (Stephens et al., 2026), leaving those parents to look for alternative programs for the summer. Programs for children over the summer can be expensive, short in duration (e.g., weeks or hours per day), and/or hard to access. However, there is a substantial demand for structured summer care experiences (parents of 24.6 million children nationally), with roughly half reporting they are unable to access a program (America After 3PM Summer, 2026). As a result, parents often patch together summer programs for their children, which can create inconsistency for children and burdens for parents, and can be expensive.

The current report provides an overview of the landscape of summer programs for children in NJ. Summer programs in this report are grouped into three categories:

- Traditional summer camps: Include programs run by for-profit and not-for-profit organizations that provide a variety of activities for children during the summer (e.g., sports camps, music camps, programs that offer a large variety of activities).
- Town/Municipality-run summer programs: These programs are often run by departments of recreation and utilize public local spaces and parks.
- School district Extended School Year (ESY) or Summer Enrichment programs: These programs are run by school districts and typically housed at public schools. Extended School Year programs provide special education services to children with identified needs beyond the 180 days of the traditional school year.

Summer programs in this report are limited to daytime programs, some of which also provide before- and after-care options. However, standalone before- and after-care programs are not included. Using a statewide sample of 773 summer programs, this report summarizes the characteristics, enrollment and capacity, operating schedule, staffing, as well as revenue and operating costs of summer programs that essentially serve as child care during the summer months. This survey was conducted between July 2024 and January 2025 by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). We provide descriptive results based on summer programs' survey responses, as well as results disaggregated by type of summer program:

traditional camps, municipality-run summer programs, and extended school year (ESY)/summer enrichment programs. This effort is part of a multi-center collaborative project with the Center for Women and Work and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, with support and collaboration from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (NJ DCF). This report offers insights into summer programs available to families throughout the state. These findings can be used to identify areas where families may encounter more constrained access and inform mechanisms to strengthen NJ's child care system year-round.

Key Findings

- On average, summer programs operated for 7 hours per day during a typical week (ranging from 1.5 to 14.25), 5 days per week, and 6.5 weeks per year. Traditional camps provided the most hours, days, and weeks, on average, followed by municipality summer programs, then ESY/summer enrichment programs.
- Nearly all summer programs were open between July 8 and August 2, 2024. Just over half (54%) of summer programs were open for the summer starting the week of June 23, 2024, by which time most school districts had ended the school year. Half of summer programs (50%) had their last week by August 11-17, although most schools did not reopen for another few weeks.
- Summer programs enrolled an average of 123 children in a typical week, but reported a capacity to serve 159 children.
- Nearly all summer programs served children ages 5 to 17, but less than half served children ages 2.5 to 4 (45%), and only 4% served children younger than 2.5 years.
- On average, 44% of summer programs' total enrollment was comprised of children with identified special education needs. As expected, the prevalence of children with identified needs was notably higher in ESY/summer enrichment programs (73%) than in traditional camps (24%) or municipality programs (9%). Nearly 58% of ESY/summer enrichment programs, 12.5% of traditional camps, and 7% of municipality camps enrolled only children with identified special needs.
- One-third of summer programs reported they maintain a waiting list for enrollment (33%), while 9% turned children away due to lack of space.
- On average, summer programs had a total workforce of 38 staff, of which 24 were counselors, and 15 were in a non-counselor role. On average, most staff (71%) were over the age of 18, and 29% were between 16 and 18 years of age. Summer programs averaged 6 children per counselor (including full- and part-time and those under and over age 18). There was one counselor 18 or older per 9 children, on average.
- Fifty-six percent of summer programs charged tuition but did not accept CCAP subsidies, 27% did not charge tuition or accept subsidies, and 16% charged tuition and accepted subsidies. Traditional camps were most likely to accept CCAP, while most ESY/summer enrichment programs run by school districts operated at no cost to families.
- On average, two-thirds of summer programs' total operating expenses came from staff salaries (64%).
- The most common activities reported by summer programs included arts and crafts (71%), playground (60%), and sports (56%). Among ESY/summer enrichment programs, the most frequently reported activity was academics and/or school summer learning support.

BACKGROUND

Summer programs fulfill multiple goals for families, including providing care coverage so that parents can work, particularly families of school-age children, and supporting children's development (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2019; Ozier, 2018). Summer programs can help reduce summer learning loss among children, particularly for those growing up in lower-income environments (Borman & Dowley, 2006; Harry, 2023; Lynch et al., 2022; NASEM, 2019). Summer programs, including those operated by school districts, can also reduce the risk of food insecurity for children if they also provide meals (Hopkins et al., 2023). Yet, there is limited research on summer programs across the United States and the children they serve. A comprehensive understanding of the full child care landscape must consider access to, use of subsidies for, quality of, and financial data about summer programs. Issues around access, affordability, and quality of child care affect summer programs in similar and different ways as school-year or year-round summer programs and must be understood, including the extension of federal, state, and local funding streams and subsidies into the summer (Coley et al., 2020; NASEM, 2019). Both demand for summer programs (the family perspective) and supply of summer programs (schools districts, counties, nonprofit and for-profit agencies) are important to understand in order to ensure families have access to programs and programs can stay in business. This report focuses on the supply of summer programs.

A consensus report from NASEM (2019) found that even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, "summertime experiences [were] not evenly and equitably distributed, and many children and youth lack access to quality experiences due to the challenges of availability, accessibility, and affordability" (p.xviii). That is, children who are already at heightened risk—those living in low-income households or communities, from racial, ethnic, or immigrant minority backgrounds, with disabilities or special needs, in rural areas, who identify as LGBTQ+, or who are involved with the child welfare systems—encounter the greatest barriers to accessing high-quality summer opportunities (America After 3PM Summer, 2026; NASEM, 2019). In addition, the Center for American Progress (Novoa, 2019) found that affordable summer child care is hard to obtain, forcing many parents to make employment decisions that reduce their income or undermine job stability. Specifically, three out of four parents reported at least some difficulty finding summer child care, and more than half said that cost was a major obstacle. These constraints for families may limit parents' ability to work and may force job changes due to inadequate child care (Novoa, 2019; Price & Wasserman, 2024). And, the summer child care that is available is also expensive: data from Novoa (2019) suggest that a family with two children could expect to pay more than $3,000 for summer programs in 2018 (about $4,000 in 2025 dollars or about 20% of the take-home pay for those earning the median annual income of about $80,000). Moreover, families typically accessed summer programming that covered only about half of their children's summer break. Furthermore, while CCDBG subsidies can cover summer child care, they support only about 1 in 6 eligible families. In sum, families face even more labor constraints and additional child care costs during the summer; they struggle to patch together, often expensive, summer programs (Lenhart, 2018).

The difficulties in accessing high-quality programs during the summer, together with the importance of summer experiences for children's academic, health, social-emotional, and safety outcomes (Coley et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2025; NASEM, 2019), make it critical to understand the landscape of summer programs in NJ. This report covers the different types of summer programs that currently serve young children and school-age children, as well as what they offer to families: services provided, age groups served, and hours and weeks of operation. This report is a first effort to understand the summer program landscape in NJ.

SUMMER CAMP CHILD CARE PROVIDER SURVEY

Methods and Procedures

The survey results reported here come from a larger study investigating the child care landscape in NJ. This report focuses on a survey that was distributed to summer day programs in NJ via an email campaign from NIEER. The survey was fielded via Qualtrics' platform from July 2024 to January 2025 and required active consent from summer program directors prior to accessing the survey. NIEER also sent reminder emails to summer programs to complete the survey and, in some instances, followed up with phone calls.

The survey asked summer program directors to provide detailed information about themselves, their program (including enrollment and capacity), their staff, and their revenue and costs. All participating summer program directors who submitted a complete survey received a $50 electronic gift card in appreciation for their time. The research was approved by the Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey's IRB and NJ DCF's Research Review Committee.

Sample

For this report, we define a summer program as a program that provides child care and/or activities to children during the summer months, the 10-12 weeks when schools are not operating. Generally, licensed child care centers that operated throughout the year were not included in our sample unless they offered a specific summer program distinct from their school-year programs. Sleepaway or overnight camps were not included unless they also operated a day-camp program.[1]

New Jersey does not have a list of all summer programs in the state. Therefore, NIEER carefully curated a list of summer programs to which we distributed the survey (N=2,838). First, we obtained a list of all licensed summer camps from the NJ Department of Health. As only a subset of summer programs are required to be licensed in NJ based on specific activities proposed for children, NIEER supplemented this list using others (i.e., NJcamps.com, NJkidsonline.com, njgov.healthinspections.us). Next, we integrated summer programs run by school districts, towns, and other municipalities. We attempted to contact all departments of recreation across towns and counties in NJ. We complemented this with a Google search to contact town and municipality employees to ask if they had a summer program. Finally, we reached out to all school districts with an elementary school to gather information on any summer programs they may have offered, including both extended-year programs (typically for children with disabilities or those who need extra support) and summer enrichment programs. We contacted district personnel, including Superintendents and Directors of Special Education, as part of this effort.

Our resulting list included 2,838 summer programs, which we classified into three categories:

- Traditional summer camps: Includes programs run by for-profit and not-for-profit organizations that provide a variety of activities for children during the summer (e.g., sports camps, music camps, programs that offer a large variety of activities).
- Town/Municipality-run summer programs: These programs are often run by departments of recreation and utilize public local spaces and parks.

[1] Sleepaway and overnight camps were excluded from this study because we focused on programs that serve NJ families. Though many sleepaway and overnight camps may serve children from NJ, it is likely that a large share of children who attend these programs are from other states.

- School district Extended School Year (ESY) or Summer Enrichment programs: These programs are run by school districts and typically housed at public schools. Extended School Year programs provide special education services to children with identified needs beyond the 180 days of the traditional school year.

There were 773 unique records of summer programs with a complete, or mostly complete, survey (Table A.1). The majority of respondents (63%) were summer program directors, 3% were assistant directors, 2% were administrative assistants, and the remaining respondents indicated they were another administrator (12%) or held another role (20%). About 79% of the respondents answered questions about their race and ethnicity. Of those who responded, the large majority (80%) identified as white, and smaller proportions identified as Black (15%), Asian (3%), and other (4%).[2] About 10% of respondents who answered race and ethnicity questions identified as Hispanic/Latino. Of those who identified their gender (about 80% of the sample), about 71% identified as female, 29% as male, and 0.3% as other. On average, respondents had been in their current role for 8.0 years (standard deviation [*sd]* = 7.5, *range* = 0 – 48) and working in any summer program for 12.5 years (*sd* = 9.4, *range* = 0 – 48).

Responses on the survey were received from summer programs throughout NJ.[3] The largest share of summer programs were located in the Northern region (39%), followed by the Central region (29%), Southern region (19%), and Northeast region (13%). This distribution is generally consistent with the supply of licensed child care providers that serve young children in NJ, with 32% in the Northern region, 27% in the Central region, 18% in the South, and 24% in the Northeast.

Respondents were asked several questions about the characteristics of the summer program they worked at, including auspice, organization type, and their facilities (Table A.2). About 55% of summer programs were categorized as traditional camps, 18% as town or municipality-run summer programs, and 27% as school district-run programs, including ESY and/or summer enrichment. In terms of auspice, almost all municipalities reported themselves accordingly, and almost all ESY/summer enrichment programs reported themselves as public schools. There was more variability among traditional camps, with 42% identifying as for-profit, 54% as not-for-profit, and 4% as other (Figure 1).

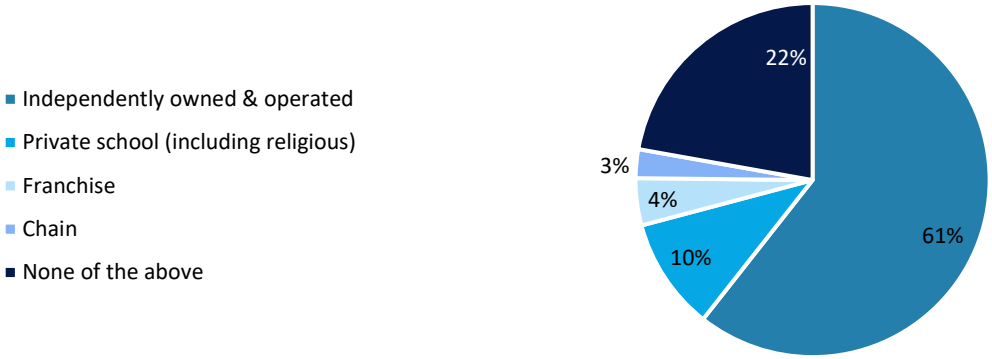
Figure 1. Auspice among traditional summer camps

Note. Figure estimates for traditional camps focus on a subsample of N = 409.

[2] The percentages add up to more than 100% because respondents could select more than one race.
[3] Counties in Northern NJ include Bergen, Hunterdon, Morris, Passaic, Sussex, Union and Warren. Counties in Central NJ include Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Ocean, and Somerset. Counties in Southern NJ include Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salam. Counties in Northeast NJ include Essex and Hudson.

Additionally, in terms of organization type, almost all municipality-run and school district-run programs did not fall into any of the categories (more than 90% reported they were "none of the above"). Among traditional camps (Figure 2), 61% of traditional camps reported being independently owned and operated, 10% were private schools, 4% were franchises, and 3% were chains. The remaining 22% of traditional camps did not fall into any of these categories; of those, almost all (91%) were not-for-profits.

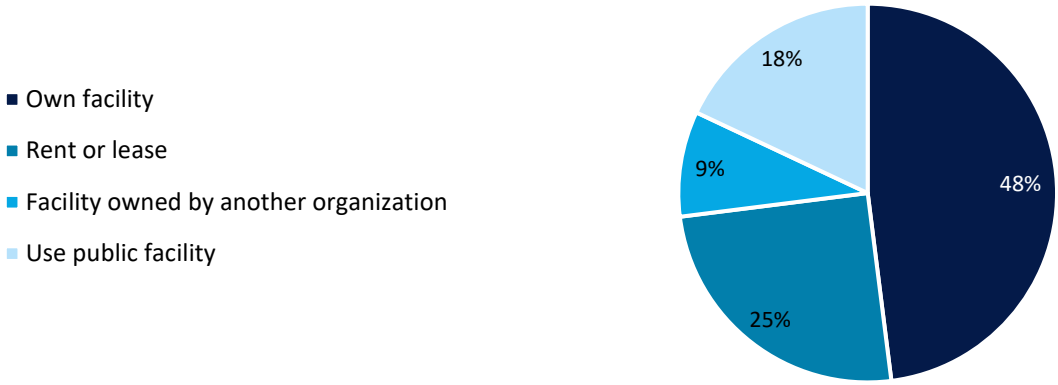
Figure 2. Organization type among traditional camps



Note. Figure estimates for traditional camps focus on a subsample of N = 419

Forty-eight percent of summer programs reported that they owned their facility, 25% reported renting or leasing their space, 9% used a facility owned by another organization, and 18% used a public facility (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Summer camp facilities



Note. Figure estimates rely on a sample of of N = 770 camps.

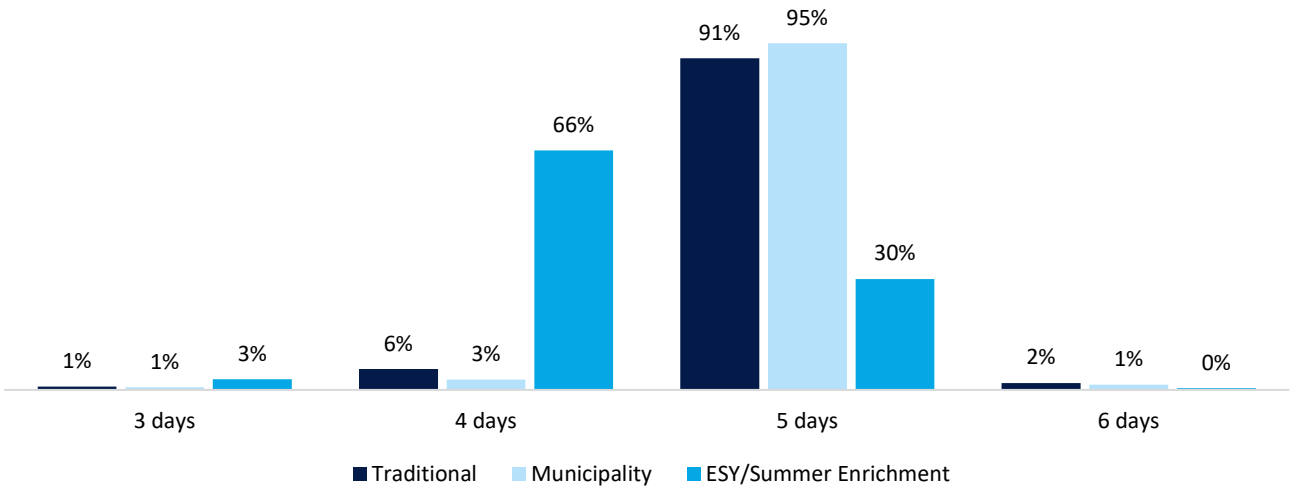
RESULTS

Days and Hours of Operation

On average, summer programs operated for 4.8 days during a typical week (sd = 0.5, range = 2-7). Most summer programs (75%) operated all five days in a typical week, and about 21% operated for only four days,

with smaller proportions operating for two, three, six, or seven days per week. As shown in Figure 4, almost all traditional camps (91%) and municipal summer programs (95%) operated five days per week, while the majority of school district programs (66%) operated four days per week.[4]

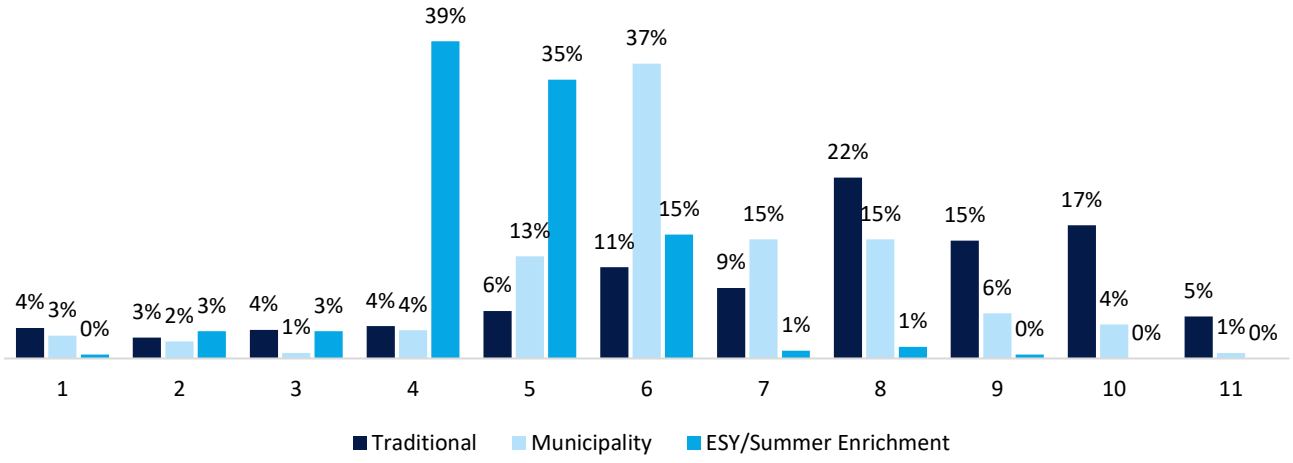
Figure 4. Number of days of operation in a typical week by summer program type



Note. Figure estimates rely on a sample of of N = 770 camps.

On average, summer programs operated for 6.5 weeks during the summer of 2024 (*sd* = 2.5). Figure 5 shows the variability in the number of weeks of operation by summer program type. Traditional camps operated on average for 7.4 weeks (*sd* = 2.6), municipality programs for 6.5 weeks (*sd* = 2.0), and school district programs for 4.7 weeks (*sd* = 1.2).[5]

Figure 5. Number of weeks of operation by summer program type



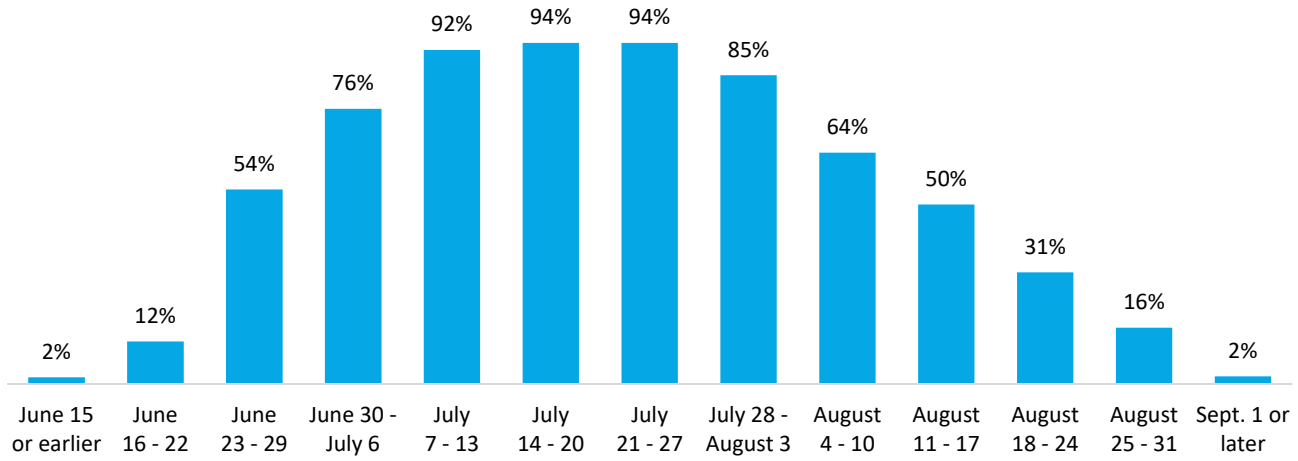
Note. Figure estimates rely on a total sample of of N = 774 camps.

[4] One school district summer program reported operating for two days per week, and two traditional summer camps reported operating for seven days per week.

[5] Four traditional camps (.95%) reported operating for 12 weeks over the summer; one traditional camp (<1%), two municipality programs (1%), and one school district program (<1%) reported operating for more than 12 weeks over the summer.

Figure 6 shows the percentage of summer programs that were open on a given week during the summer of 2024. As shown in the figure, just over half of summer programs were open by the week of June 23 (54%). Nearly all summer programs (85%-94%) were open between July 7 through August 3. Roughly two in three summer programs were still open during the week of August 4 (64%), half were still open the week of August 11 (50%), and only 1 out of 3 were still open the week of August 18 (31%). For reference, common end dates for NJ public schools were during the week of June 16th and June 23rd. And common start dates for the following school year were during the weeks of August 25th and September 1st (after Labor Day). However, many universities and colleges start earlier which could affect summer program staffing at the end of August.

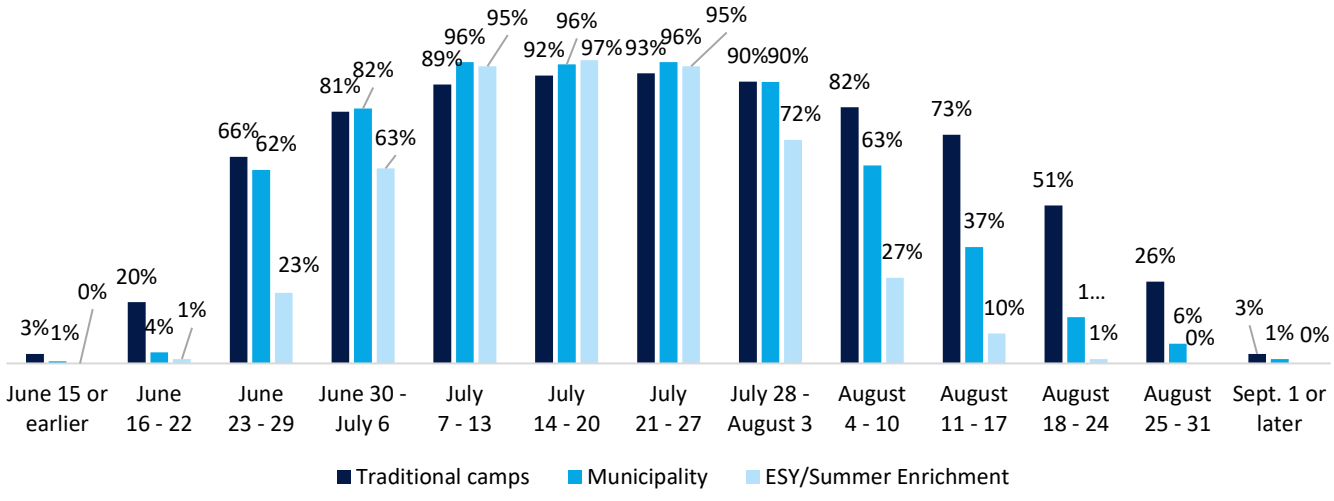
Figure 6. Percentage of summer programs that were open during each summer week



Note. Figure estimates rely on N = 733 summer programs that provided information on the date the program opened and closed for the summer.

Figure 7 shows a more detailed breakdown of the summer weeks that summer programs were open by program type. While traditional camps operated for a larger number of weeks than other types of summer programs, it is important to note that ESY and summer enrichment programs run by the school districts typically operated in July, with only 1 in 4 programs still open early August.

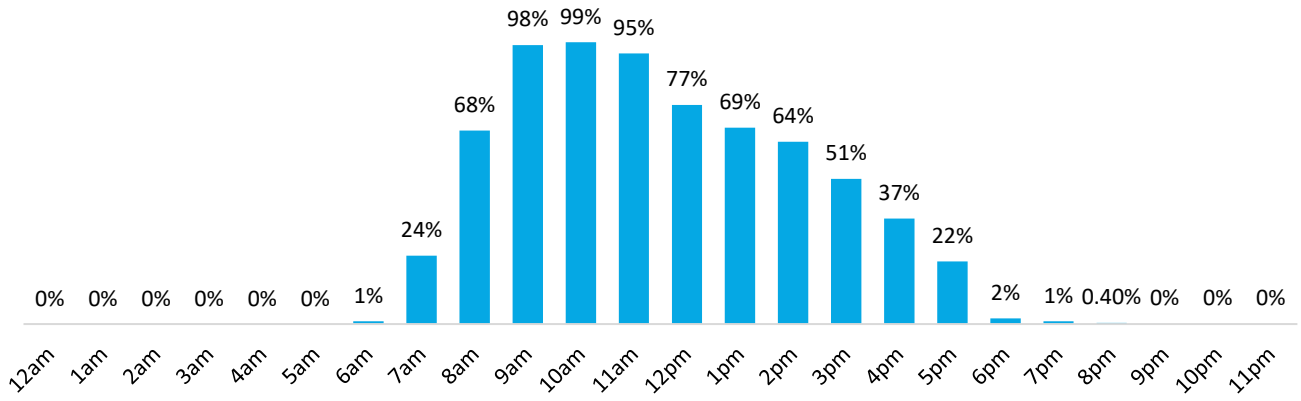
Figure 7. Percentage of summer programs that were open each summer week, by summer program type



Note. Percentages indicate the share of responding providers that operated during any days during a given week.

Summer program responses about daily opening and closing times were used to determine the hours each day that programs operated. As shown in Figure 8, nearly all summer programs (95% or greater) were open between 9 – 11am. No summer programs reported opening before 6am, 1% opened at 6am, 24% were open at 7am, and 68% at 8am, leaving limited options for families in need of early morning care during the summer. In the afternoon, a majority of summer programs were open during the hours between 12pm to 3pm (51- 77%), and smaller proportions were open later than 4pm (37% at 4pm, 22% at 5pm, 2% at 6pm, 1% at 7pm, and <1% at 8pm). Nearly all summer programs were closed by 6pm, and none reported being open at or after 9 pm. Relative to the hours of operation provided by child care programs throughout the year (see Stephens et al., 2026), the hours of operation for summer programs are more limited, particularly in the early morning, late afternoon, and evening.

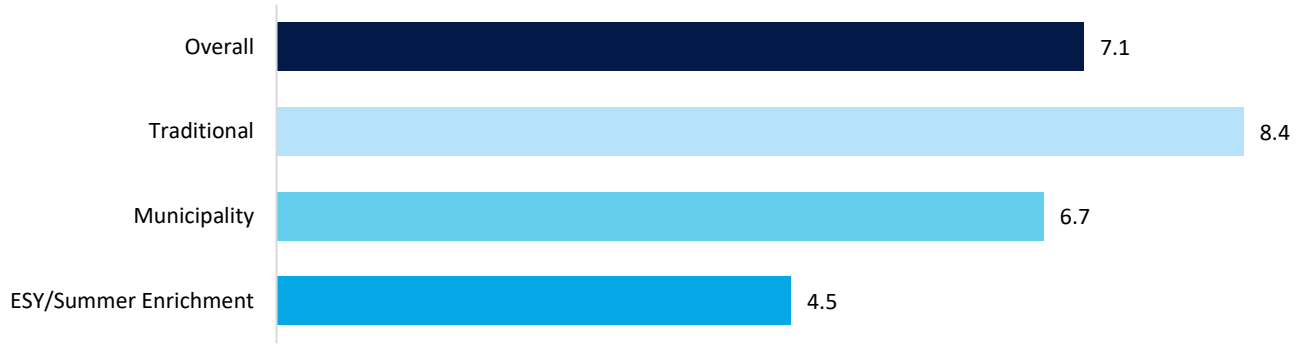
Figure 8. Percentage of summer programs that were open each hour of the day



Note. Figure estimates rely on a sample of of N = 757 camps. Percentages indicate the share of responding providers that reported operating any amount of time during a given hour.

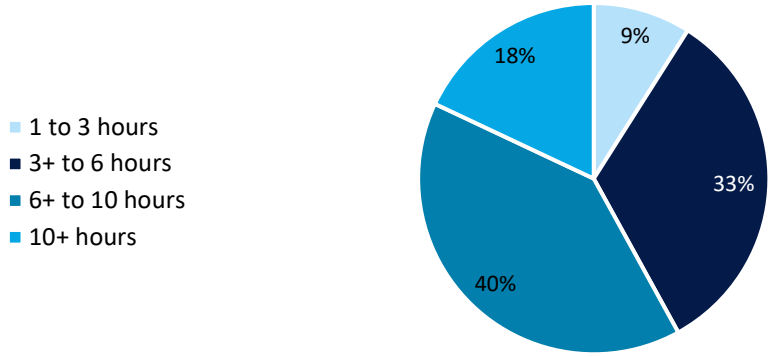
On average, summer programs were open for about 7 hours per day (*sd* = 2.8, *range* = 1.5 – 14.25), though Figure 9 shows variability in hours per day by summer program type, with traditional camps open for an average of 8.4 hours per day, municipality programs for 6.7 hours per day, and school district programs for 4.5 hours per day. As shown in Figure 10, the largest proportion of summer programs (40%) were open for 6 to 10 hours per day, 33% for 3 to 6 hours, 18% for 10 or more hours, and 9% for 1 to 3 hours per day. Relative to average hours of operation for child care programs in NJ (10 hours, Stephens et al., 2026), summer programs, on average, operated fewer hours per day.

Figure 9. Average number of hours per day summer programs operated, by program type



Note. Figure estimates rely on a sample of of N = 756 camps.

Figure 10. Percentage of summer programs by number of operating hours category



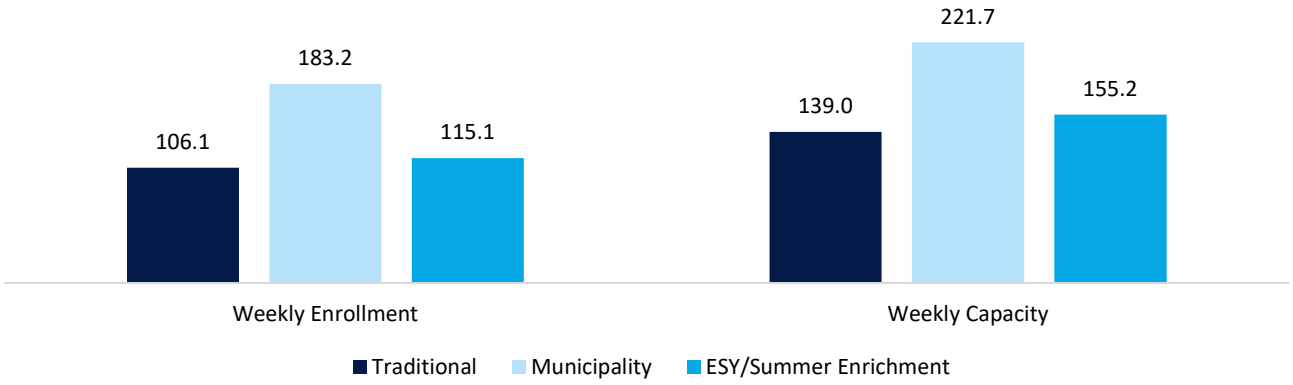
Note. Figure estimates rely on a sample of of N = 756 camps.

Summer Program Enrollment and Staffing

Enrollment

Summer programs reported information on the number of children who were enrolled during a typical week by age range and by special education needs, as well as weekly capacity (Table A.3). On average, summer programs reported enrolling 122.7 children in a typical week (*sd* = 176.6, *range* = 4 – 2700). This enrollment is lower than the average weekly capacity reported, 158.7 children (*sd* = 206.3, *range* = 5 – 2700). As seen in Figure 11, traditional camps reported the lowest enrollment and capacity in a typical week, and municipality summer programs reported a much higher capacity (See Appendix Table A.3). On average, programs reported enrollment at 76.3% of their overall capacity.

Figure 11. Average weekly enrollment and capacity of summer programs

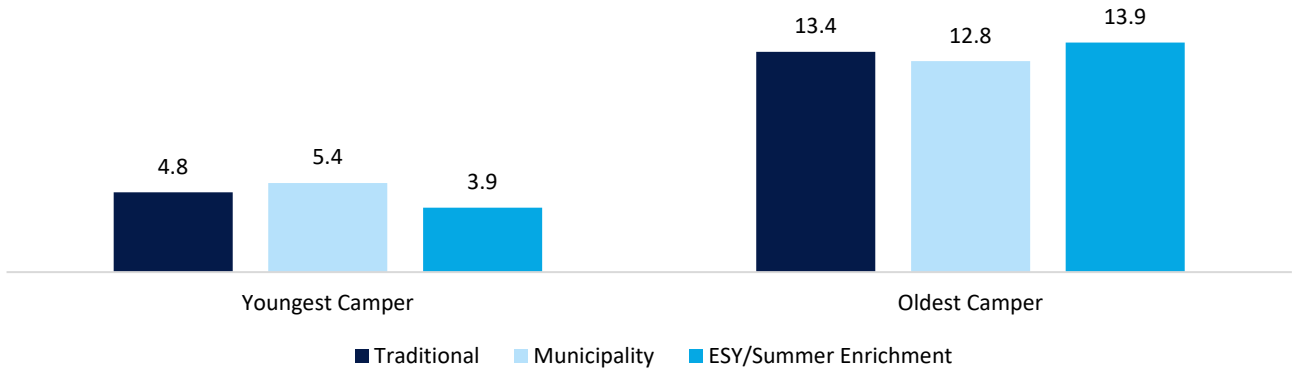


Note. Figure estimates rely on summer programs that provided information on weekly enrollment (N = 747) and capacity (N = 681).

Summer program providers also reported enrollment by age range, as well as the youngest and oldest ages of the children who were enrolled. On average, programs reported their youngest camper was 4.7 years old (*sd* = 1.9, *range* = 6 weeks – 16 years) and their oldest camper was 13.4 years old (*sd* = 2.4, *range* = 3.5 – 17 years). Figure 12 shows the average youngest and oldest ages of children enrolled, by summer program type. Nearly all summer programs (98%) that provided enrollment information reported enrolling children ages 5 to 17, 45% reported enrolling children ages 2.5 to 4, and only 4% reported enrolling children ages birth to 2.5

years. About half of summer programs (57%) only enrolled one of these age groups, 40% enrolled two of these age groups (typically 2.5 through 17 year olds), and only 4% of summer programs reported enrolling children across all three age groups (birth – 17 years).

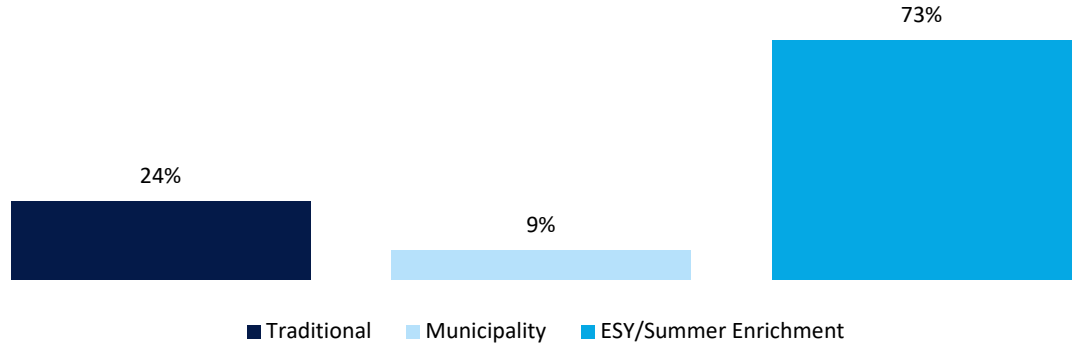
Figure 12. Average youngest and oldest ages (in years) of campers served



Note. Figure estimates rely on summer programs that provided information on their youngest (N = 770) and oldest (N = 768) camper enrolled.

Additionally, about half of the responding summer programs (*n* = 384) provided information on the total number of children with identified special education needs enrolled in a typical week. Figure 13 shows that municipality programs, on average, served a small percentage of students with special education needs (9%) and traditional camps served a larger proportion of students with special education needs (24%). School district programs served, on average, the highest percentage (73%) of children with special education needs. This is not surprising since many school district programs (particularly ESY programs) are specifically for children with special education needs. Moreover, traditional and municipality programs may not require or request documentation for children's individualized education program (IEP) or 504 plan. Notably, 1 out of 3 summer programs reported that 100% of their total enrollment was comprised of children with special education needs (32%). This also varied by program type, with 13% of traditional camps, 3% of municipality programs, and 58% of ESY programs enrolling only children with special needs. Among those summer programs with less than 100% enrollment of children with special needs, the average proportion of children with special needs was 18% overall, 13% among traditional camps, 3% among municipality programs, and 58% among school district programs.

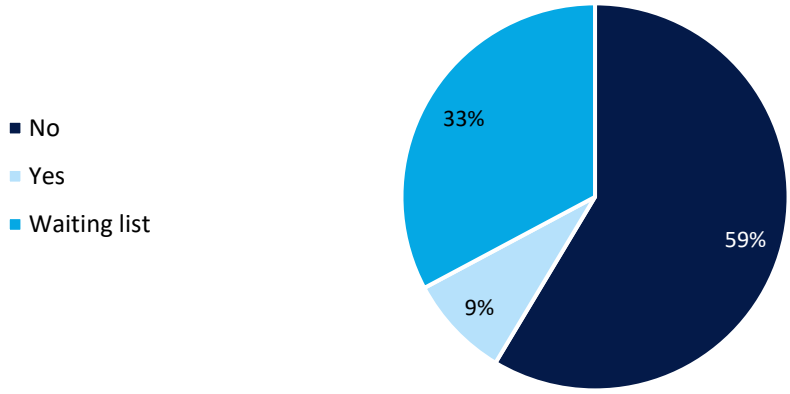
Figure 13. Average percentage of children with identified special education needs enrolled in summer programs



Note: Of all responding programs, N=175 traditional camps, N=37 municipality programs, and N=171 school district (ESY/Enrichment) programs had available information on the percentage of children enrolled with an IEP. Only N=16 summer programs reported that zero children with an IEP were enrolled, which are included in these estimates.

As seen in Figure 14, the majority of summer programs (59%) did not report having to turn children away who wanted to enroll because a slot was not available. However, about a third of summer programs (33%) reported placing children on a waiting list, and 9% reported turning children away due to lack of availability. Notably, this varied slightly according to summer program type. Roughly half of traditional camps (48%) and municipality programs (45%) reported not having to turn children away, a small share (10-11% reported they had turned away children due a lack of availanility, and between 41-45% had a waiting list. However, the large majority of ESY programs reported not turning away any children (88%), 4% had turned children away, and 8% had placed children on a waiting list).

Figure 14. Percent of summer programs turning away children due to lack of availability



Note. Figure estimates rely on a sample of of N = 626 camps that provided this information.

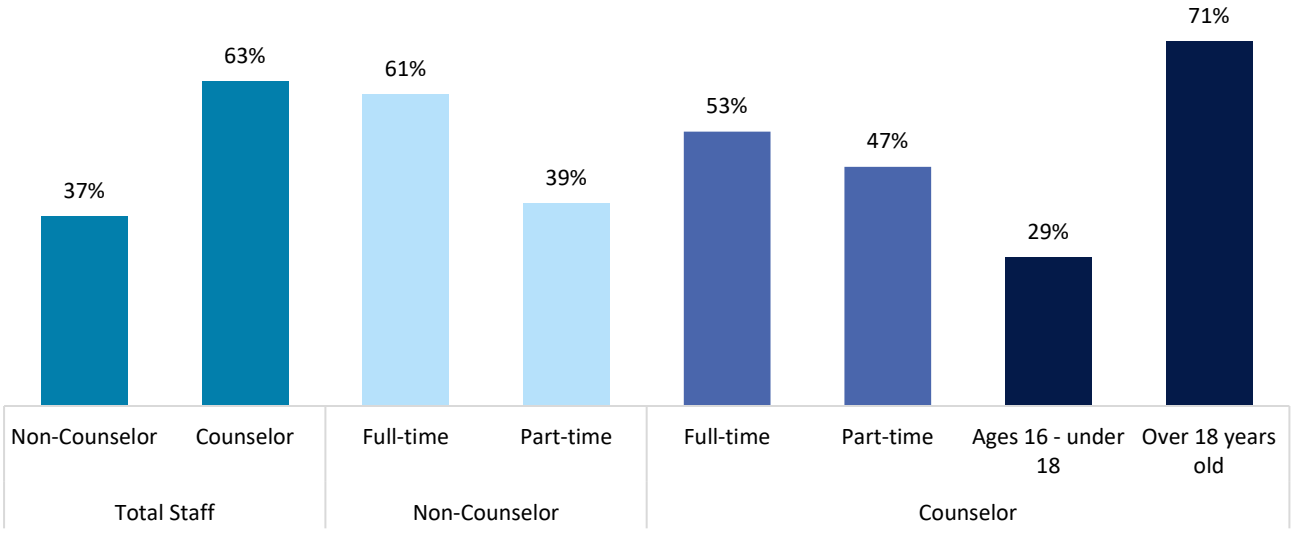
Staffing

Summer programs answered questions about the total number of non-counselor staff (e.g., director, lifeguards, bus drivers) and counselor staff they employed during the summer of 2024 (Table A.4). On average, summer programs reported employing 38.3 staff members (*sd* = 58.4, *range* = 1 – 600), with an average of 14.8 non-counselor staff (*sd* = 36.0, *range* = 0 – 501) and 24.2 counselor staff (*sd* = 34.9, *range* = 0 – 500). As shown in Figure 15, summer programs employed higher proportions of counselors (63%) than non-counselor staff (37%), full-time non-counselors (61%) than part-time non-counselors (39%), and full-time counselors (53%) than part-time counselors (47%). They also employed a higher proportion of counselors over age 18 (71%) than counselors ages 16 to 18 (29%), although the latter encompassed about a third of their counselor staff.[6] See Table A.4 for more information on staffing by summer program type.

On average, summer programs employed one counselor per 6 children enrolled, on average (SD = 6.7, range of 0.27 – 60), including full- and part-time counselors and counselors age 16 to 18 and 18 and older. There was an average of one counselor 18 or older per 9 children enrolled (SD = 9.0, range of 0.27 – 60). Counselor-to-camper ratios did vary by summer program type. School district summer programs averaged 8 children per any couselor and 9 children per counselors 18 or older (as most “counselors” in school district summer programs were 18 or older). The patterns were similar for traditional camps and municipality camps where there was one counselor for every 6 children, on average, and one counselor 18 and older for every 15 children.

[6] Data is not available on Counselor In Training positions.

Figure 15. Percentages of summer program staff by type and age group



Note: Figure estimates rely on a sample of of N = 740 camps. Average total number of non-counselors = 15 (e.g., directors, assistant directors, administrative staff, health-related staff, lifegaurds, activity specialists, etc.); counselors = 24.

Revenue and Expenses

Summer programs were asked about their revenue and expenses, but only a small portion of programs provided this fiscal information (Table A.5). On any given question on these topics, there were responses from up to 477 summer programs (or 62% of the sample), with some questions responded to by as few as 15 programs.

Revenue

Summer programs reported an average total revenue of $160, 941 (*sd* = $469,710), and this varied according to program type and weekly enrollment size. Average revenue was highest among traditional programs ($257,052), followed by municipality programs ($117,213), then ESY/summer enrichment programs ($47,401). As expected, average revenue was higher among programs with a large enrollment size ($351,693; more than 100 children on a weekly basis), than medium-size programs ($79,312; between 35–100 children), and small programs ($28,648; fewer than 35 children).

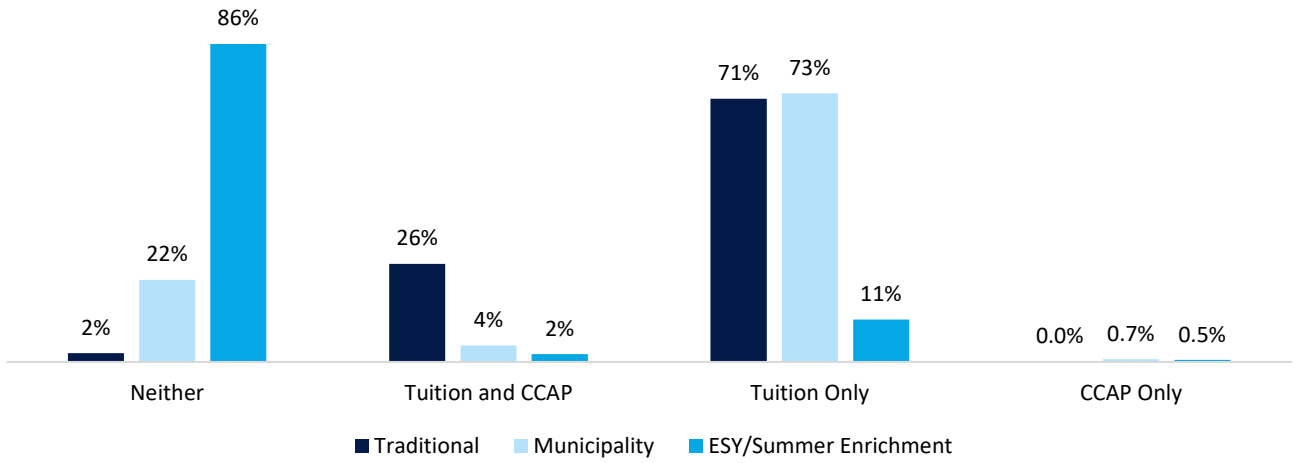
Summer programs reported whether or not they participated in the New Jersey Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)[7] and/or whether they received tuition from families. Overall, a little over half of summer programs (56%) charged tuition and did not accept CCAP subsidies, 27% did not charge tuition nor accept subsidies, and 16% charged tuition and also accepted subsidies. Just two summer programs (<1%) accepted only CCAP subsidies, but not tuition. Of summer programs that accepted CCAP subsidies, just 2% reported limiting the number of children with subsidies enrolled at any one time.

Figure 16 shows how subsidies and tuition varied across summer program type, with the majority of both traditional camps and municipality programs charging tuition, while most school district summer programs,

[7] In additional to revenue summer programs may receive from tuition and CCAP payments, programs may also receive donations or have scholarship funds to help families with enrollment costs.

as expected, did not charge tuition nor did they have a need for CCAP subsidies, as they were offered without any cost to families. See Table A.5 for more information on revenue by summer program type.

Figure 16. Percentage of summer programs accepting CCAP and/or tuition

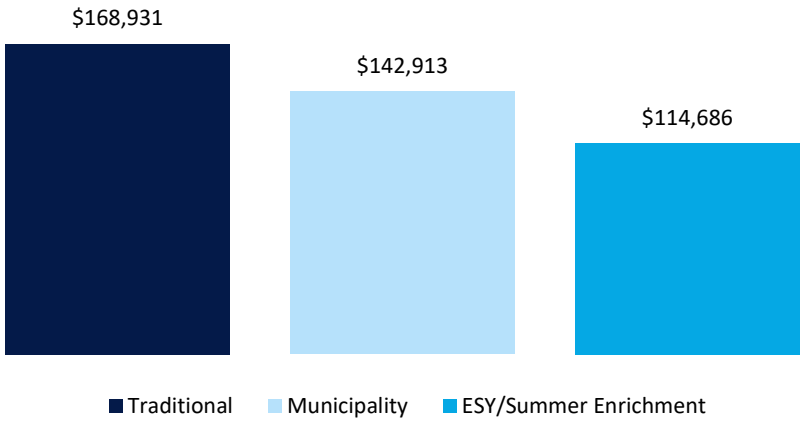


Note: Figure estimates rely on a sample of of N = 770 camps.

Expenses

On average, summer programs reported $148,508 of anticipated total operating expenses for the summer of 2024 (*sd* = $348,737), and this varied according to summer program type and weekly enrollment size. Figure 17 shows variation by summer program type, with traditional camps reporting the highest anticipated expenses and school district summer programs reporting the lowest. Additionally, on average, camp expenditures were higher among those with a large weekly enrollment size ($311,518; more than 100 children on a weekly basis), relative to medium-size programs ($81,576; between 35–100 children), and small programs ($28,732; fewer than 35 children). Notably, camps reported that, on average, 63.6% of their anticipated total expenses were used for staff salaries (see Table A.5 for more information).

Figure 17. Average anticipated total expenses by summer program type

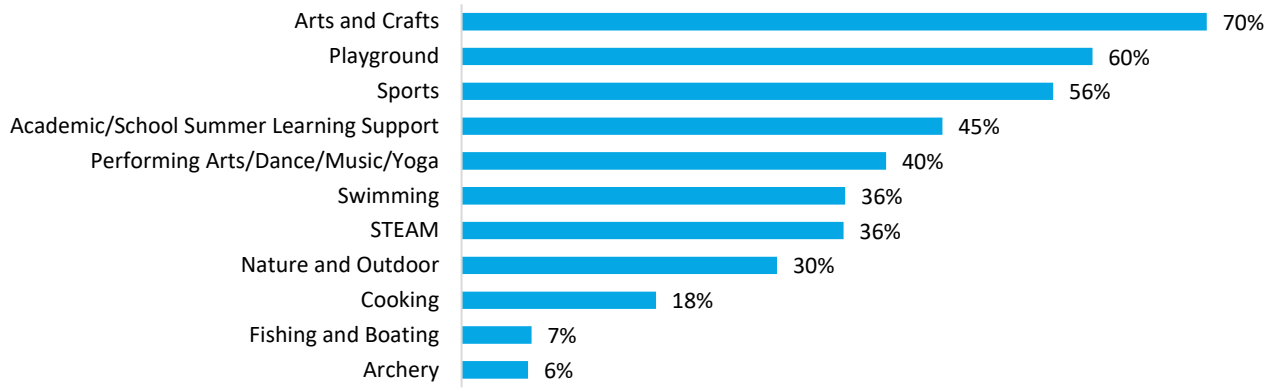


Note: Figure estimates rely on a sample of of N = 420 camps that provided this information.

Nature of the Summer Experience

Summer programs reported the types of activities offered (Table A.6). As shown in Figure 18, the most popular activities offered were arts and crafts (70%), playground (60%), and sports (56%). Fewer summer programs offered activities such as cooking (18%), archery (6%), and fishing and boating (7%).

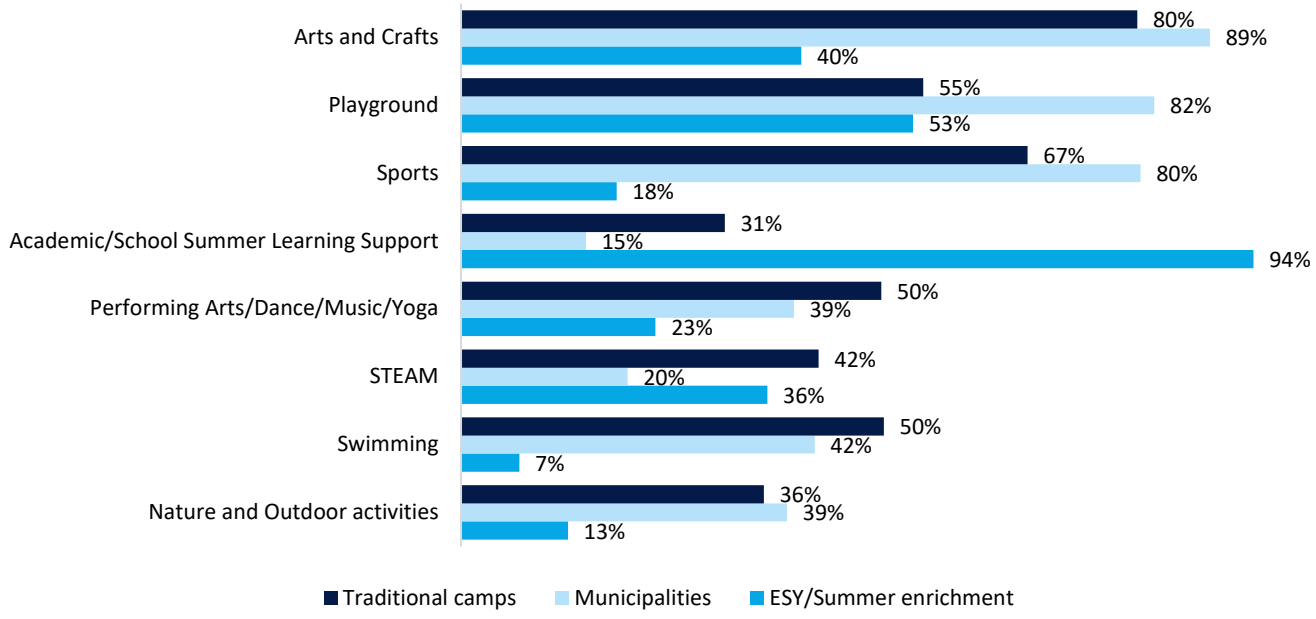
Figure 18. Percentage of summer programs offering various activities



Note. STEAM refers to activities related to science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics.

The types of activities are closely related to the type of summer program, as shown in Figure 19. Traditional camps offered a larger variety of activities; municipal summer programs tended to offer activities such as arts and crafts, playground, and sports; school district ESY and enrichment programs focused on academic or school learning support. See Table A.6 for more details on activities by summer program type.

Figure 19. Percentage of summer programs offering various activities, by summer program type



Note. STEAM refers to activities related to science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics.

DISCUSSION

Summer programs play a critical role in supporting both family employment and child development and well-being, yet access to these programs remains uneven and insufficiently understood nationally and in New Jersey specifically. Prior research shows that summer programs help families maintain care coverage during summer school breaks, facilitate parents' ability to work, promote children's learning, development, and social skills, reduce summer learning loss, and mitigate food insecurity (NASEM, 2019). At the same time, longstanding inequities in availability, affordability, and accessibility mean that the children and families who stand to benefit most—particularly those from lower-income households and other historically marginalized groups—face the greatest barriers to participation (America After 3pm Summer, 2026; Novoa, 2019). Families often must piece together fragmented and costly care arrangements, which can affect parents' employment stability, and is also stressful and time-consuming for parents. Against this backdrop, this study's findings on summer program availability underscore the importance of understanding the scope, structure, and reach of summer programs in New Jersey as a necessary step toward more equitable and effective summer opportunities for children and families.

This report is a first effort toward understanding the characteristics of summer programs throughout NJ, including operating schedule, enrollment, staffing, revenue and expenses, and activities offered. Overall, we find that summer programming in New Jersey varied substantially by program type in terms of operating schedule, population served, financing structure, and activities offered.

Summer programs operated 4 to 5 days per week for 6.5 weeks over the summer, with traditional camps offering more weeks and longer daily hours than municipality-run or school district programs. A small portion of summer programs operated in June, and the supply of summer programs peaked in July, with a decline by mid-August. Importantly, this suggests that a large share of summer programs had not yet opened for the season several weeks after common end dates for NJ public schools (which vary by district), or were closed, several weeks before common start dates. One factor that may contribute to this truncated operating schedule is limited availability of staff (e.g., counselors) who might be returning to other work, college, or school during the academic year by the end of August. Average daily hours for summer programs -- about seven hours per day -- were more limited than those reported by year-round child care programs in New Jersey (10 hours, Stephens et al., 2026). School district ESY/summer enrichment programs tended to operate for fewer hours and weeks than traditional camps and municipality-run programs. School district-run programs are often those that are free or lowest cost to families. The more limited hours and weeks of these programs are problematic for NJ families that depend on no- or low-cost summer options. However, some school district programs my contract with other programs to provide before and after care, which was not captured in this data.

Nearly all summer programs served children ages 5 to 17, while fewer enrolled younger children, indicating that the data on summer programs in this report primarily illustrates the supply of summer care for school-age children. It is likely that families of younger children who need summer care can continue using their year-round child care provider, though this may not always be possible. Data on those programs are found in Stephens et al., 2026.

School district ESY/summer enrichment programs enrolled a high proportion of children with identified special education needs, consistent with the focus of ESY programs. While school district-run summer programs do provide a care option for children with special needs, their more limited operating schedule

(fewer weeks and hours) may present challenges for families of children with special needs in balancing work and care hours. There were also a few traditional camps that predominantly enrolled children with disabilities. Overall findings align with prior, pre-COVID, research in terms of access to summer opportunities for more disadvantaged families (NASEM, 2019).

Revenue structures also differed across summer program types. The majority of traditional camps charged tuition but did not accept CCAP subsidies. In contrast, school district programs typically operated at no cost to families. National estimates of the cost of summer programs and limited subsidy availability (Novoa, 2019; Price & Wasserman, 2024), indicate that while public school district summer programs are critically important to ensure equitable access to summer programs, there is significant potential for public subsidies to be further integrated across a larger portion of summer programs. On the expenditure side, staff salaries accounted for nearly two-thirds of costs.

Staffing patterns reflected a substantial share of counselors under age 18 – nearly one third. On one hand, summer programs provided teenagers with employment and experience working with younger children. On the other hand, these young counselors need adequate training and supervision in order to provide safe and quality experiences for the children enrolled.

Finally, the nature of children's summer experiences differed by summer program type. Traditional camps reported offering a broad array of activities; municipality programs most frequently offered arts and crafts, playground, and sports; and school district ESY/summer enrichment programs emphasized academic or school learning support. Prior literature has linked summer programming to children's academic, developmental, and health outcomes (Coley et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2025; NASEM, 2019).

Taken together, these findings align with national evidence pointing to challenges in the affordability and accessibility of summer programs (America After 3PM Summer, 2026; NASEM, 2019), and can be considered a baseline for understanding NJ's summer program landscape. Future research can explore access, participation, alignment with family needs, and affordability from the perspective of families, including surveys and interviews with families about summer care choices. Additionally, understanding barriers to summer programs accepting subsidies could inform ways to increase summer program access and affordability for low-income families.

In addition, information about quality of summer programs in NJ would be integral to fully understanding the summer care landscape, but was not the focus of this work. While licensed child care in NJ can participate in quality improvement efforts such as Grow New Jersey Kids, no similar system exists for summer programs. Similarly, while all center-based child care in NJ is required to be licensed, and schools also have to meet certain standards, only a fraction of NJ summer camps are required to be licensed. Future research to understand summer program quality, its impact on children's development, and parents' perspectives on summer program access and affordability is needed in NJ.

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Appendix

Descriptive Statistics of Respondents

Table A.1. Respondent Characteristics

Demographics	Sample	
	N	%
TOTAL	**773**	**100%**
Gender is female (*n* = 619)	438	70.8
Race/Ethnicity (*n* = 612)		
White	491	80.2
Black	92	15.0
Asian	19	3.1
Other race	23	3.8
Hispanic	64	10.4
Role at summer program		
Director	487	63.0
Assistant Director	20	2.6
Administrative Assistant	18	2.3
Other Administrator	96	12.4
Other Role	152	19.7
Average years of experience in current role at summer program [mean, sd; range 0-48]	8.0	7.5
Avg. years of experience among directors/assistant directors	8.6	7.9
Average years of experience in any summer program [mean, sd; range 0-48]	12.5	9.4
Avg. years of experience among directors/assistant directors	13.7	9.5
Weekly program enrollment size		
Small (<35 children)	185	24.8
Medium (35-100 children)	295	39.4
Large (>100 children)	267	35.7

Table A.2. Summer Program Characteristics

		All Summer Programs (N = 773)		Traditional Camps (n = 423)		Municipalities (n = 142)		ESY/Summer Enrichment (n = 208)	
		N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Auspice (*n* = 756)	For profit	173	22.9	171	41.8	2	1.4	0	0.0
	Not for profit	227	30.0	222	54.3	3	2.1	2	1.0
	Public school	202	26.7	1	0.2	0	0.0	201	98.1
	Municipality	123	16.3	0	0.0	121	85.2	2	1.0
	Other government agency	14	1.9	0	0.0	14	9.9	0	0.0
	Other non-government agency	17	2.3	15	3.7	2	1.4	0	0.0
Organization type (*n* = 765)	Independently owned & operated	267	34.9	254	60.6	5	3.5	8	3.9
	Private school (including religious)	47	6.1	43	10.3	3	2.1	1	0.5
	Franchise	18	2.4	18	4.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Chain	11	1.4	11	2.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
	None of the above	422	55.2	93	22.2	134	94.4	195	95.6
Facility type (*n* = 770)	Owns facility	373	48.4	178	42.2	34	23.9	161	78.2
	Rents or leases facility	194	25.2	179	42.4	7	4.9	8	3.9
	Uses facility owned by another organization	66	8.6	37	8.8	24	16.9	5	2.4
	Uses public facility	137	17.8	28	6.6	77	54.2	32	15.5

Table A.3. Enrollment and Capacity

		All Summer Programs (N = 747)		Traditional Camps (n = 411)		Municipalities (n = 138)		ESY/Summer Enrichment (n = 198)	
		Mean / %	*SD*	*Mean / %*	*SD*	*Mean / %*	*SD*	*Mean / %*	*SD*
Enrollment and Capacity in a Typical Week	Overall Across Ages								
	Number	122.7	176.6	106.1	160.2	183.2	263.3	115.1	115.0
	Capacity[1]	158.7	206.3	139.0	189.6	221.7	276.6	155.2	167.9
	Proportion with Identified Special Education Needs[2]	0.44	0.42	0.24	0.33	0.09	0.16	0.73	0.37
	Percent with 100% enrollment of Identified Special Education Needs	31.8%		12.5%		2.7%		57.9%	
	Proportion with Identified Special Education Needs (not including those with 100% enrollment)	0.18	0.23	0.13	0.18	0.07	0.06	0.35	0.29
	Serves birth to 2.5 years	4.1%		7.0%		0.7%		0.5%	
	Number	26.4	35.8	26.9	36.9	-[4]	-	-	-
	Capacity	37.1	38.3	38.5	39.5	-	-	-	-
	Serves over 2.5 - 4 years	44.5%		39.6%		21.7%		70.2%	
	Number	27.8	50.9	27.3	46.1	46.4	109.7	24.3	33.6
	Capacity	46.5	79.1	48.6	75.5	59.6	114.9	40.7	73.2
	Serves ages 5 - 17 years	98.3%		98.1%		98.6%		98.5%	
	Number	110.6	167.4	95.0	146.0	175.6	260.4	97.7	105.8
	Capacity	143.0	201.1	127.9	191.3	209.4	274.8	126.1	136.4
Turning away children due to lack of availability[3]	Yes	8.6%		10.8%		9.8%		3.9%	
	No	58.6%		48.0%		44.7%		87.6%	
	Waiting List	32.8%		41.2%		45.5%		8.4%	

Note. Number and capacity for each age group are only calculated for summer programs serving that group. [1]Ns for Capacity are as follows: Overall (N = 681); Traditional (n = 384); Municipality (n = 129); ESY/Summer Enrichment (n = 168). [2]Ns for Proportion Enrolled with Identified Special Education Needs are as follows: Overall (N = 384); Traditional (n = 176); Municipality (n = 37); ESY/Summer Enrichment (n = 171). [3]Ns for Turning away children are as follows: Overall (N = 626); Traditional (n = 325); Municipality (n = 123); ESY/Summer Enrichment (n = 178). [4]Only 1 Municipality and 1 ESY/Summer Enrichment camp reported enrolling children birth to 2.5 years.

Table A.4. Staffing

		All Summer Programs (N = 740)		Traditional Camps (n = 413)		Municipalities (n = 135)		ESY/Summer Enrichment (n = 192)	
		Mean / %	*SD*	*Mean / %*	*SD*	*Mean / %*	*SD*	*Mean / %*	*SD*
Staffing Numbers	Total Number of Staff	38.3	58.4	34.6	57.7	46.0	62.0	40.6	56.8
	Non-Counselor	14.8	36.0	12.8	32.1	11.2	17.8	21.5	50.0
	Full-time	8.1	26.0	7.9	26.2	4.2	8.9	11.4	32.6
	Part-time	6.6	25.0	4.9	17.1	7.0	14.9	10.0	40.0
	Counselor	24.2	34.9	22.3	31.3	35.1	50.4	20.3	26.3
	Full-time ages 16 - 18	3.8	12.0	4.4	13.9	6.2	12.2	0.7	4.5
	Part-time ages 16 - 18	4.4	15.0	3.1	10.9	12.4	26.8	1.4	6.9
	Full-time over 18	9.0	16.9	9.2	14.6	6.8	13.6	10.2	22.7
	Part-time over 18	7.0	16.2	5.7	11.6	9.7	25.0	8.0	16.7
Staffing Proportions	Total Staff								
	Non-Counselor	36.8%		34.2%		25.2%		50.7%	
	Counselor	63.2%		65.8%		74.8%		49.3%	
	Non-Counselor								
	Full-time	60.6%		66.2%		45.9%		58.8%	
	Part-time	39.4%		33.8%		54.1%		41.2%	
	Counselor								
	Full-time	53.4%		59.3%		39.9%		49.8%	
	Part-time	46.6%		40.7%		60.1%		50.2%	
	Ages 16 - 18	29.0%		28.1%		51.9%		11.1%	
	Over 18 years old	71.0%		71.9%		48.1%		88.9%	

Table A.5. Revenue

		All Summer Programs (N = 740)			Traditional Camps (n = 413)			Municipalities (n = 135)			ESY/Summer Enrichment (n = 192)		
		N	*Mean / %*	*SD*	*N*	*Mean / %*	*SD*	*N*	*Mean / %*	*SD*	*N*	*Mean / %*	*SD*
Participation in Tuition and CCAP Subsidies	Neither	205	27.3%		10	2.4%		30	22.2%		165	85.9%	
	Both	122	16.3%		112	26.5%		6	4.4%		4	2.1%	
	Tuition only	421	56.1%		301	71.2%		98	72.6%		22	11.5%	
	CCAP only	2	0.3%		0	0.0%		1	0.7%		1	0.5%	
Revenue	Anticipated total revenue summer 2024[1]	477	$160,941	$469,710	224	$257,052	$650,257	103	$117,273	$175,164	150	$47,401	$151,017
	Funding from CCAP	56	$46,006	$70,715	47	$46,178	$71,039	-[2]	-	-	-	-	-
	Funding from tuition	450	$121,599	$370,132	222	$188,584	$499,988	96	$100,125	$152,816	132	$24,558	$115,996
	In-kind monetary donations	46	$17,177	$56,405	34	$10,097	$18,508	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Revenue from DOA Summer Lunch Program	14	$22,886	$46,406	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Expenses	Anticipated total expenses summer 2024	420	$148,508	$348,737	214	$168,931	$443,673	92	$142,913	$253,969	114	$114,686	$161,230
	Percentage for staff salaries	464	63.6%		231	57.2%		101	57.7%		132	79.3%	

Note. [1]Revenue from summer 2023 was used for camps that did not provide anticipated summer 2024 revenue but did provide 2023 revenue. [2]Means and SDs are not provided for categories with 10 or fewer summer programs.

Table A.6. Activities

	All Summer Programs (N = 620)		Traditional Camps (n = 324)		Municipalities (n = 122)		ESY/Summer Enrichment (n = 174)	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Fishing and Boating	41	6.6%	29	9.0%	10	8.2%	2	1.1%
Archery	39	6.3%	35	10.8%	4	3.3%	0	0.0%
Cooking	114	18.4%	81	25.0%	10	8.2%	23	13.2%
Nature and Outdoor Activities	185	29.8%	116	35.8%	47	38.5%	22	12.6%
Swimming	225	36.3%	162	50.0%	51	41.8%	12	6.9%
STEAM	224	36.1%	137	42.3%	24	19.7%	63	36.2%
Performing Arts/Dance/Music/Yoga	249	40.2%	161	49.7%	48	39.3%	40	23.0%
Academic/School Summer Learning Support	282	45.5%	101	31.2%	18	14.8%	163	93.7%
Sports	347	56.0%	217	67.0%	98	80.3%	32	18.4%
Playground	370	59.7%	177	54.6%	100	82.0%	93	53.4%
Arts and Crafts	437	70.5%	259	79.9%	108	88.5%	70	40.2%