
Pay-to-Play: Socioeconomic Inequalities in Youth Sports

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Problem Definition

The U.S. youth sports system has shifted from a community-based model to a privatized “**pay-to-play**” structure, where **participation increasingly depends on a family’s financial resources**. Costs for fees, equipment, travel, and specialized training have created significant barriers for low-income and underprivileged youth.



As public schools raise athletic fees and reduce investment in sports programs, **families are expected to cover expenses** such as league fees, equipment costs, travel expenses and private coaching. At the same time, the rise of costly travel teams has **redirected competitive development** away from school and community programs toward private, elite pathways accessible primarily to wealthier families.



As a result, low-income youth, who often rely on sports as a pathway to scholarships, college access, and upward mobility, are **systematically excluded from opportunities that could support their advancement**.

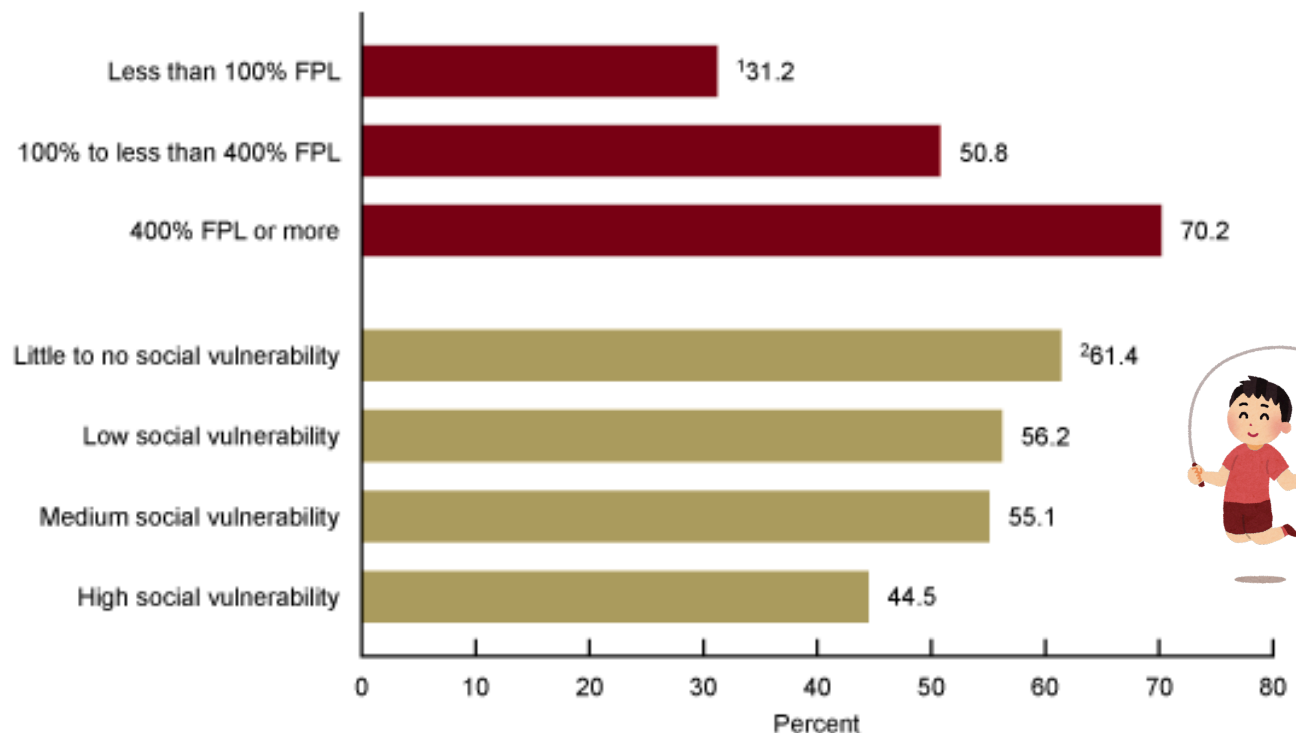
Scope of the Problem

Participation in **youth sports provides several benefits**. It serves an effective way for children and adolescents to meet physical activity guidelines, develop important life skills, and create opportunities for collegiate and professional athletics. Participation in youth sports has been linked to lower rates of depression, increased self-esteem, improved cognitive function, and better academic outcomes.



The current youth sports system is moving away from community-based programs to a privatized pay-to-play model. Since 2019, the average amount of money a family spends on their child's primary sport has increased by 46%.

The **rising financial burden** of youth sports has created a **significant participation gap** between children from low-income and higher-income families. Children of families with an income of at least 400% above the federal poverty line have a **70.2% participation rate** in youth sports compared to **31.2%** of children with a family income of less than 100% of the



Policy Context

These trends indicate that youth sports are becoming **increasingly segregated by socioeconomic status**. Policy intervention is needed to prevent rising costs of participation in privatized youth sports systems from **limiting access for children from low-income families** from receiving the physical and mental health benefits of sports and open pathways for athletic scholarships and education opportunities.

The shift toward a pay-to-play youth sports model has **implications that extend beyond athletics**. Unequal access to youth sports affects public health, social mobility, educational opportunity, and youth mental health, making it a policy issue rather than simply a recreational concern.



Policy Implications

Public Health

Youth sports participation is strongly associated with higher levels of physical activity and **improved long-term health outcomes**. Organized sports help children develop lifelong habits of physical activity and are linked to lower risks of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular illness (Simoni 2025; CDC 2022). Research also shows that increasing youth participation in sports could significantly reduce long-term healthcare costs by improving population health outcomes (CUNY School of Public Health 2024).



However, participation in youth sports increasingly depends on family income. Rising costs associated with travel teams, private coaching, and tournament participation create barriers that disproportionately affect low-income families (Forward Pathway 2024). When youth sports become less accessible, **disparities in physical activity rates may widen across socioeconomic groups**.

Expanding access to youth sports programs can therefore function as a **preventive public health investment**, encouraging consistent physical activity and healthier lifestyles among young people.

Educational Opportunity

Participation in sports is also linked to positive educational outcomes, including increased school engagement, stronger mentorship relationships with coaches, and improved academic persistence. For many students, **athletics provides an additional pathway to higher education** through recruitment and scholarship opportunities.

However, resource disparities between school districts can create uneven access to competitive athletic programs. Majority-white suburban districts often have better-funded athletic infrastructure and stronger connections to club teams, while urban and rural districts may have fewer resources and fewer opportunities for exposure to recruiters. Addressing disparities in youth sports access is therefore not only a matter of fairness in athletics but also part of a broader effort to **expand educational opportunity and reduce structural inequality**.

Social Development and Mental Health

In addition to physical health benefits, youth sports play an important role in social development and emotional well-being. Participation in organized sports helps young people develop **interpersonal skills** such as teamwork, leadership, communication, and conflict resolution. These experiences can foster confidence and **strengthen a sense of belonging within a community**.



Sports participation has also been associated with **improved mental health outcomes**, including lower rates of anxiety and depression and stronger emotional resilience (Simoni 2025). Team environments often provide **mentorship** relationships with coaches and peers that support young people during key stages of development.

When access to these programs becomes limited by cost, marginalized youth may lose opportunities to build these **support systems and social networks**. As a result, inequalities in youth sports participation may contribute to broader disparities in youth development and mental health outcomes.

Social Mobility

Youth sports have historically served as a pathway to educational and economic mobility, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. **Athletic scholarships** and recruitment opportunities can help students **access higher education institutions** that might otherwise be financially inaccessible.

However, the increasing prominence of travel teams and elite club leagues has **reshaped the recruitment pipeline**. Many collegiate programs now recruit primarily through these privately funded leagues, which often require substantial financial investment from families (Forward Pathway 2024). As a result, athletes who cannot afford participation in elite programs may be excluded from opportunities for exposure to recruiters.

The growing commercialization of youth sports risks transforming athletics from a potential equalizer into a system that reproduces existing socioeconomic inequalities (Gemar 2024).

Stakeholders

Due to the fact that youth sports influence public health, educational access, and social mobility, a wide range of stakeholders are affected by inequities within the pay-to-play model.

Youth athletes

Youth athletes are the **most directly impacted**. When participation opportunities depend on family income, many young people, especially those from marginalized communities, **may lose access to the physical, social, and educational benefits** associated with sports participation.

Public School Districts

Schools often serve as providers of the **most accessible youth sports opportunities**, particularly in under-resourced communities. However, limited funding and **competing educational priorities** can limit the quality of school-based athletic programs.



Collegiate athletic programs

Collegiate athletic programs influence the structure of youth sports through recruitment practices. As **college recruitment increasingly occurs through elite travel teams and club leagues**, athletes without access to these networks may face disadvantages in the recruitment process.

Private Youth Sports Organizations

Travel teams and private youth sports organizations have become influential actors in the youth sports landscape. While these organizations often provide **high-level competition** and exposure to recruiters, their **fee-based structure can reinforce inequalities** in access to athletic opportunities.

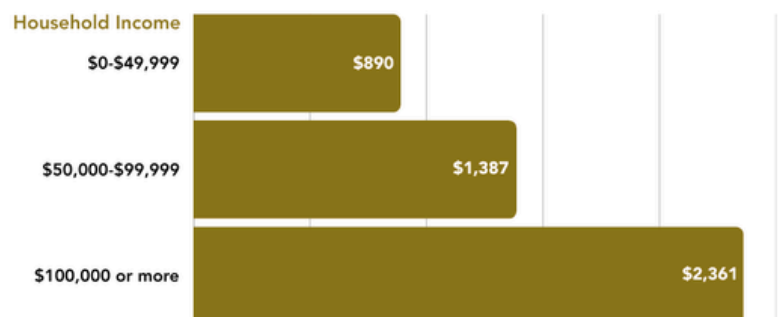
Families

Families must navigate the increasing **financial burden of youth sports participation**.

Costs associated with travel teams, equipment, and tournament participation have increased significantly in recent years, **placing pressure on household budgets** and limiting participation for lower-income families (Forward Pathway 2024).

Annual Family Youth Sports Spending – Income

Average amount spent in past year for all of child's sports



Policy Recommendations

Addressing inequities in youth sports participation requires policies that expand access to affordable programs while ensuring that disadvantaged athletes can benefit from educational and developmental opportunities sports provide.

Public-Private Partnerships for Youth Sports Funding

Local governments and school districts could partner with **local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and community foundations** to support public youth sports programs. Sponsorships and grants could help cover the costs of equipment, facilities, league fees, and travel expenses for school-based teams.



These partnerships allow communities to **expand youth sports access while reducing the financial burden** on school districts and families. Businesses can also benefit from community recognition and marketing opportunities associated with sponsoring youth athletics.

Programs that expand access to sports for marginalized youth have been shown to **improve participation rates and reduce barriers** related to cost and transportation (Carter 2025).

Investment in College Preparation and Recruitment Support

School boards could allocate additional funding toward **college preparation and recruitment support services for student-athletes**. These programs could include mentorship opportunities, recruitment workshops, and guidance on navigating the collegiate athletic recruitment process.

Providing institutional support within schools would help ensure that talented athletes who participate primarily in school-based programs—rather than expensive travel teams—still **receive guidance and exposure in the recruitment pipeline**.



Expanded Public Recreation Programs

Local governments could also **increase funding for municipal recreation departments and public sports infrastructure**. Community recreation leagues and public parks provide accessible spaces where youth can participate in sports at little or no cost.

Public recreation programs play a significant role in promoting community health, social engagement, and youth development (NRPA; CDC Active People, Healthy Nation). Expanding these programs would **reduce reliance on privatized youth sports leagues** while ensuring that young people from all socioeconomic backgrounds have **access to athletic opportunities**.



Conclusion

Youth sports in the United States continue to shift towards a **“pay-to-play” model**, creating an increasing gap in **participation based on family income levels**. The financial burdens of league fees, equipment cost, and travel fees prevent children from low-income families from reaping the benefits of youth sports.

Without policy intervention, we risk having a permanent athletic divide, which has serious consequences for public health, mental health, social mobility, and educational opportunity. Addressing these policy issues at the state and local level by providing a higher quality and quantity of public opportunities for **youth sport participation ensures a healthier and more equitable community**.



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