

BIG IDEA 2



**YOUTH SPORTS CAN BECOME HEALTHIER,
MORE FUN, AND MORE ACCESSIBLE.**

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CONTEXT

The field of youth sports in America is at a critical juncture. A series of sport participation trends, in intersection with trailblazing research, reveal this period to be full of both promise and peril. Millions of children receive innumerable benefits from athletics, including physical, social, and psychological development. At the same time, increasing problems associated with uneven access to sports, injury, and burnout cannot be ignored. BIOS took a deep dive into Wisconsin youth sports. We learned from scholars, embedded in sports settings, and scoured the literature. Here, in *BIOS Volume 1*, we provide a brief consolidation of important trends and findings in youth sports.

YOUTH SPORTS: WHAT TO KNOW

- The “single sport vs. multi-sport” debate may be less relevant than deeper understanding of being “highly specialized.” Highly specialized = 8+ months per year on a sport.
- At least nine studies conducted since 2013 have found that highly specialized youth athletes are more likely to experience injury (up to 5.49X).
- Past injury in youth sports heightens risk of future injury in sport.
- Children should delay specialization as long as possible.
- Children should not spend more hours per week on a sport than their age.
- Children should take at least three months away from their sport each year (in at least one month intervals).
- The biggest predictor of youth sport participation is parents' income.
- Children from low-income families are half as likely to play sports as kids from upper-income homes.
- Families with higher incomes are more likely to highly specialize.
- Parental attitudes and behaviors regarding youth sports can take shape in the first 18 months of their children’s participation.
- Over 60% of parents will pay between \$1,200 to \$6,000 per year on their child’s sports, with nearly 20% of parents paying close \$12,000 per year.

YOUTH SPORTS: WHAT TO KNOW

- Parents who invest extensive time and money on youth sports commonly develop “return on investment” perspectives that endure beyond youth sport experiences.
- Parent education in youth sports tends to address expectations around their interactions with the coaches and their children, but less frequently includes research on health and wellness.
- Children who attend larger high schools are more likely to highly specialize.
- Girls are more likely to highly specialize.
- Club sports competitions commonly promote compressed schedules (e.g., “Your team is guaranteed to play at least five games before Sunday at noon!”).
- Greater spending on youth sports was found to be associated with decreased enjoyment for children.
- Noteworthy aspects of the competitive youth sport environment:
 - early professionalization/messaging;
 - detachment from school;
 - travel;
 - frequent transfers;
 - parents as negotiators/managers.
- 70% of kids drop out of organized sports by age 13.
- In 2018-19, high school sports participation in the US declined for the first time in recent memory.

YOUTH SPORTS: WHAT TO KNOW

- The Midwest experienced the highest rates of decline in high school sports participation.
- The proportion of student-athletes who are first-generation college students has decreased significantly since 2010 (including a 9% decrease in men's basketball).
- Broadly, the “effect lags” of the youth sports landscape will continue to shape the college and professional sports environments, perhaps with greater influence.
- Children from low-income households are 6X more likely to drop out of sports in adolescence than children from middle and upper-income households.
- Pandemic-era return to sport is lower for Black and Hispanic youth.
- School-based sports tend to have broader benefits than club-based sports, but school-based participation numbers are dropping in some noteworthy areas. (For example, participation in girls high school basketball participants in Wisconsin drop by over 25% between 2002 and 2019.)
- Percentages of children ages 13-17 participating in sports (2012 --> 2020):
 - Over \$100k household income: 48% --> 50%.
 - White: 44% --> 44%.
 - Black: 51% --> 41%.
 - Low-income 38% --> 28%.
 - High school teams are composed at higher than ever proportions of “early specializers.”

YOUTH SPORTS: WHAT TO KNOW

- This shrinking pool of recruitable student-athletes may already be evident at the highest levels of college sports. From the NCAA demographics database, note that between 2012 and 2020 the proportions of:
 - Student-athletes identifying as black in A5 football decreased 4%;
 - Student-athletes identifying as black in A5 WBB decreased 9%;
 - Student-athletes identifying as black in A5 MBB decreased 8%.

Primary sources:

- David Bell, Associate Professor, UW-Madison Injury in Sports Laboratory
- Travis Dorsch, Assistant Professor, Utah State Families in Sport Lab
- Peter Miller, Professor, UW-Madison Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
- Aspen Institute, Project Play
- NCAA GOALS study, 2015

