

Organized youth sports are increasingly for the privileged: Study finds generational shifts in who plays

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A sweeping study of U.S. youth sports participation over the past 60 years has found that there has been a significant increase over time in

kids playing organized sports—but particularly among more privileged, educated families.

A [national survey](#) found that about 70% of Americans born in the '90s and reaching age 18 by 2015–16 said they took part in organized sports through recreational, school, or club teams. This finding showed a rather steady increase in organized [sports participation](#) across generations. Slightly more than half of those born in the '50s reported participating in organized [youth sports](#).

But there were also significant generational variations in who took part in organized sports, the study found.

For kids born in the '50s, there were essentially no class differences in who played organized sports. But for kids born in the '90s, the share of those who played organized sports grew to be 24 percentage points higher when they had a college-educated parent, compared to not having had a college-educated parent.

"Childhood social class matters when it comes to whether you have the opportunity to participate in organized sports, something which is a relatively recent development," said Chris Knoester, lead author of the study and professor of sociology at The Ohio State University. "We found that privileged families seem to be leveraging their advantages to strategically and intentionally invest in organized sports participation. That can give their children big benefits."

Knoester conducted the study with Chris Bjork, professor of education at Vassar. Their results were [published](#) recently in the journal *Leisure/Loisir*.

A major contribution of the study is providing an in-depth review of how patterns of youth sports participation have changed over the past 60

years, something that hasn't been done before, Knoester said.

The study used data from the National Sports and Society Survey, conducted in 2018 and 2019 by Ohio State. It included a sample of 3,935 adults from across the country who answered questions about their sports participation as children.

The finding that youth from privileged families are increasingly dominating organized sports speaks to the increased privatization of the youth sports industry, enhanced reliance on parents' involvement, and huge growth of club sports, according to the researchers.

"There has been a dramatic decrease in [public support](#) for extracurricular activities in schools that started in the '80s, including sports," Bjork said.

"One result has been the growth of club sports, which can be very expensive, and not all parents are in the position to afford that for their kids."

The average family paid \$883 annually for one child's primary sport in 2022, according to Project Play by the Aspen Institute.

For many privileged parents, organized and especially private club sports are seen as a way to help their kids excel in a sport, potentially setting them up for college scholarships and a springboard to success in life, Knoester said.

The fact that fewer families have access to this because of the expense is concerning, he said.

One positive trend the study documented was the growth of girls participating in youth sports, Knoester said.

Among kids born in the 50's and growing up throughout the '60s, only about 45% of girls took part in organized sports, way behind boys. But by the '90s, about 70% of girls were out on the fields and courts, right on par with boys.

A lot of that had to do with Title IX, a federal law passed in 1972 that prohibited schools from sex-based discrimination, including in sports.

"It resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of girls taking part in sports," Knoester said.

Americans saw one outcome of that in the recent Olympic games in Paris.

The U.S. won 126 medals, the most of any country—and women won 67 of them, Knoester noted. In fact, if the U.S. women had been their own nation, they would have placed third in the overall medal count, behind only the U.S. and China.

"Title IX and the increase in girls playing sports really set the stage for what we saw in Paris this summer, with the domination of U.S. women," Knoester said.

Another key finding of the study was that while sports participation has increased over the generations, there has also been a concerning rise in the proportion of kids who start playing, but then drop out.

For those born in the '50s, just over 50% of those who started playing organized sports as children dropped out before they turned 18. But for those born in the '90s, over 70% of those who started playing organized sports dropped out before they reached adulthood. It is now much more common for children to play sports and drop out than to play continually or to never play while growing up.

A [previous study](#) by Knoester and colleagues showed that many kids who drop out do it because they were not having fun, or felt they were not a good enough player. This study suggests that the problem has been getting worse for recent generations of kids, Knoester said.

The issue of more youth dropping out of sports may be connected to the growth of club sports and the pressures kids feel to excel, the researchers said.

"Underlying all of this is the dramatic shift from sports being seen as a way to have fun and make friends and learn life lessons to sports being a way to get ahead in life," Bjork said.

There's a need to return to the promise of youth sports as a positive and inclusive force in society, and a way to help all kids meet health goals, make friends and learn how to work together, Knoester said.

"We need to find ways to keep kids involved and positive on the fields and courts, without the hyper-competitive, high-pressure, expensive culture that seems to predominate today," he said.

More information: Chris Knoester et al, U.S. youth sports participation: analyzing the implications of generation, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family and community sport cultures, *Leisure/Loisir* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/14927713.2024.2366177](https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2024.2366177)

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