The National Youth Sports Strategy
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Chapter 1. Introduction

As the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans (Physical Activity Guidelines), 2nd edition\(^1\) clearly indicate:

*Being physically active is one of the most important actions that people of all ages can take to improve their health—both today and for the future. Physically active children, in particular, have stronger muscles and bones, higher fitness, and lower body fat. They also have a better chance of having a healthier adulthood as physical activity reduces risk for many chronic diseases.*

Youth need at least 60 minutes a day of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and playing sports is one way they can get the physical activity they need.\(^1\) Playing sports allows youth to experience the connection between effort and success, and it enhances their academic, economic, and social prospects.\(^2\)

The National Youth Sports Strategy (NYSS) was developed by the U.S. Department and Human Services (HHS) to “expand children’s participation in youth sports; encourage regular physical activity, including active play; and promote good nutrition for all Americans.” The creation of the Youth Sports Strategy was directed by Presidential Executive Order 13824. The Executive Order also emphasized a need to focus attention and strategies on youth in communities with below-average sports participation and communities with limited access to athletic facilities or recreational areas.

There is no standard definition of “sports” used in national surveys on youth sports. The NYSS defines “sports” as a form of physical activity that, through recreational or competitive participation, aims to improve or maintain skills, fitness, mental well-being, and social-emotional health. While sports can be played by individuals of nearly all ages, the NYSS focuses on children and adolescents, aged 6 to 17 (referred to as “youth”).

An estimated 54 percent of high school students report participating in sports, and this estimate has remained relatively stable since 1999 (Figure 1).\(^3\) Youth sports in the United States is an estimated $15 billion industry, with an increased focus on a pay-to-play model.\(^4\) The NYSS places special emphasis on underserved populations, including girls, racial and ethnic minorities, youth from households of low socioeconomic status, youth living in rural areas, and youth with disabilities. Data indicate these groups
have lower rates of both physical activity and youth sports participation when compared to boys or youth from higher-income homes.5-7

### Figure 1. Percentage of High School Students Who Played on at Least One Sports Team

![Percentage of High School Students](chart)

**Source:** National Youth Risk Behavior Surveys, 1999-2017

**Notes:** Counting any teams run by schools or community groups, during the 12 months before the survey.

The target audience for the NYSS is policy makers and key decision makers in youth sports. Parents and coaches may also be interested in the NYSS, because it may be used as a foundation to create resources tailored for specific audiences. While the focus of the NYSS is on youth sports in the United States, much can be learned from other countries, which have an emphasis on teaching life skills through sports, rather than driving youth toward elite competition.

This NYSS is organized into eight chapters. The **Methodology** chapter follows this chapter, and the following chapters focus primarily on Federal efforts: **Federal Government Efforts in Physical Activity**, **Nutrition, and Youth Sports** and **Tracking Youth Sports Participation and Access**. The fifth chapter is entitled **Benefits and Barriers Related to Youth Sports**. The largest chapter, **Opportunities to Increase Youth Sports Participation**, is framed around a five-level social-ecological model developed to highlight specific strategies that affect youth sports participation, including individual/intrapersonal (youth), interpersonal (adults who interact with youth), organizational, community, and public policy. Next is a chapter on **Youth Sports Around the World**, which highlights models from other countries. Finally, **Next Steps for HHS Action** lists opportunities for HHS to improve the culture of youth sports.
Throughout the NYSS are six “Bright Spots,” which describe how programs have successfully and meaningfully used multiple strategies to increase youth sports participation. The program descriptions are meant to demonstrate how the strategies can be put into action, but are not meant to provide an endorsement of a specific organization by HHS.

The health benefits of regular physical activity, including sports, are indisputable. Providing more opportunities for all youth to engage in sports would go a long way toward helping them meet the Physical Activity Guidelines and support a healthier young population in the United States. However, changing the landscape of youth sports requires collaboration across many sectors, as detailed in the NYSS. HHS views the NYSS as an important first step to reorient U.S. youth sports culture around a shared vision—that one day all youth will have the opportunity, motivation, and access to play sports, regardless of their race/ethnicity, sex, ability, or zip code.

Chapter 2. Methodology

President Trump’s Executive Order 13824 tasked the Secretary of HHS to develop a National Youth Sports Strategy. The Executive Order outlined four key pillars that form the foundation and focus areas of this document:

1. Increase awareness of the benefits of participation in sports and regular physical activity, as well as the importance of good nutrition.
2. Promote private and public sector strategies to increase participation in sports, encourage regular physical activity, and improve nutrition.
3. Develop metrics that gauge youth sports participation and physical activity to inform efforts that will improve participation in sports and regular physical activity among young Americans.
4. Establish a national and local strategy to recruit volunteers who will encourage and support youth participation in sports and regular physical activity, through coaching, mentoring, teaching, or administering athletic and nutritional programs.

The Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP), within the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (OASH), led the development of the NYSS, overseeing an Executive Committee with representatives from the President’s Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition (PCSFN), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and National Institutes of Health (NIH). A larger HHS Federal Steering Committee with representatives from 17 different offices was regularly engaged throughout the National Youth Sports Strategy
process. Four Work Groups were formed, with each representing one of the pillars and each led by a
member of the Executive Committee. Work Groups also had membership from the Federal Steering
Committee.

The NYSS focuses primarily on youth sports. However, where appropriate, the NYSS also references and
incorporates recent Federal policy on healthy eating and regular physical activity, as highlighted in the
Executive Order. Both the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans,\(^8\) released in 2015, and the
Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2\(^{nd}\) edition,\(^1\) released in 2018, were informed by extensive
literature reviews. Both have associated communications campaigns My Plate
(https://www.choosemyplate.gov)\(^9\) and Move Your Way
(https://health.gov/paguidelines/moveyourway/)\(^10\) which provide excellent information and guidance to
health professionals and consumers in these areas.

The NYSS was informed by academic literature, youth sports programs and organizations, public
comments, and Federal agency input. The overall process was as follows:

1. Information was first gathered from across HHS agencies to assess current programs and efforts
related to youth sports.
2. Public comments were collected in response to a request for information (84 FR 7391)
published in the Federal Register on February 19, 2019. HHS received 130 comments.
3. HHS engaged a contractor to conduct a literature review and environmental scan.
   a. Searches were conducted in Google Scholar to identify English-language, peer-reviewed
      literature published between January 1, 2009, and December 31, 2018.
   b. Data were examined to determine whether differences existed across demographic groups
      (age, race, ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status, disability, education level, and geographic
      location). The environmental scan explored programs that aim to increase youth sports
      participation and programs that successfully recruit and retain volunteers.
4. On April 4, 2019, HHS held a public listening session\(^11-16\) to hear from 16 organizations about
   coaching recruitment and training, programming, best practices, and strategies to engage
   underserved populations (e.g., girls, racial and ethnic minorities, low socioeconomic status,
   youth living in rural areas, and youth with disabilities).

All of this information was incorporated into this draft NYSS, which has been released for public
comment in the Federal Register. A group of academic experts was also invited to provide independent
peer review on the draft NYSS. Input from public comments, peer review, and Federal agencies will be reviewed and incorporated prior to finalizing the NYSS.

Chapter 3. Federal Government Efforts in Physical Activity, Nutrition, and Youth Sports

The Federal government has done extensive work regarding the topics of physical activity and healthy eating. It has funded research, examined and graded the current literature, created policy documents, and disseminated resources and tools to a variety of audiences. Compared to other countries, however, the U.S. government has had a relatively small role in youth sports (see Chapter 7. Youth Sports Around the World).

Federal Government Work Related to Physical Activity

Most of the Federal government work on physical activity is produced by HHS, whose mission is to enhance and protect the health and well-being of all Americans by fostering advances in medicine, public health, and social services. There are a variety of initiatives, strategies, and resources, targeted to specific populations, that promote regular physical activity and aim to improve health outcomes.

Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans

In 2008, HHS released the first-ever Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans. This document provided guidance on the amounts and types of physical activity necessary to promote good health and reduce the risk of chronic diseases. In 2013, another report, Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans Midcourse Report: Strategies to Increase Physical Activity Among Youth, highlighted an array of implementation strategies to help American youth increase physical activity. Recently, HHS released the second edition of the Physical Guidelines for Americans, which highlights the many health benefits associated with physical activity. The updated Physical Activity Guidelines also delineates several evidence-based strategies that individuals, families, and communities can use to make physical activity an easy choice in all the places where people live, learn, work, and play. The Physical Activity Guidelines has a complementary communications campaign, Move Your Way, which provides tools and resources to help Americans of all ages become more physically active.

Physical Activity-Related Programs and Funding

Several divisions within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) work to improve physical activity at the national, state, and local levels. The Division of Population Health, School Health Branch
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funds state education agencies to support school-based chronic disease prevention and management. The Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity supports three grant programs that award funds to states, cities, counties, tribal organizations, universities, and community and healthcare organizations to promote healthy eating and active living and prevent obesity. Additionally, CDC leads Active People, Healthy NationSM, a national initiative to help 27 million Americans become more physically active by 2027.19

NIH funds research on physical activity at many different levels. These range from physiological mechanisms, such as the Common Fund initiative MOlecular TRansducers of Physical Activity Consortium (MOTRPAC) to intervention studies with youth sports in relation to various health, development, and well-being outcomes. Other funded studies examine the effects of the built environment on active transportation.

Other agencies across the Federal government are also involved in promoting physical activity. Some examples include the Office of the Surgeon General, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Transportation, and the National Park Service. Resources include opportunities for physical activity promotion through redesigning communities to promote walking and other forms of active transportation.

A comprehensive list of government physical activity promotion initiatives and strategies can be found in Appendix 2 of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd edition.1

**Federal Government Work Related to Healthy Eating**

Similar to the Physical Activity Guidelines, HHS, along with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), plays a significant role in nutrition policy and programs. HHS and USDA jointly publish the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (Dietary Guidelines) every five years. The Dietary Guidelines is the cornerstone for Federal nutrition programs, including the school breakfast and lunch programs, and is the go-to resource for health professionals nationwide. The latest edition of the Dietary Guidelines (2015-2020)\(^8\) reflects the current body of nutrition science and serves as the science-based foundation for vital nutrition policies and programs across the United States. As such, it helps health professionals and policy makers guide Americans to make healthy food and beverage choices.

*My Plate*\(^9\) is the accompanying communications campaign to the Dietary Guidelines. It provides a visual reminder to Americans to find a healthy eating style and build on it throughout their lifetimes. A list of
government websites with science-based information and nutrition tools is in Appendix 8 of the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.8

**Federal Government Work Related to Youth Sports**

Several Federal initiatives promote youth sports. The initiatives’ activities include collecting and monitoring surveillance data, promoting youth sports through public figures, and providing grant funding. These initiatives provide a foundation to further advance the Federal government’s efforts to have a larger impact on the youth sports landscape.

**Surveillance**

The Federal government has a role in tracking and monitoring youth sports participation. Information is currently gathered through several different surveys that collect data on physical activity and sports participation from either the youth themselves or a parent proxy. Additional information about Federal surveillance of youth sports is provided in Chapter 4, Tracking Youth Sports Participation and Access.

**Tracking Health Priorities**

Healthy People is led by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) within HHS and sets a 10-year framework for public health prevention priorities and actions using science-based national objectives. An objective specific to youth sports will be added to Healthy People 2030 to “increase the proportion of children and adolescents, aged 6-17 years who participate on a sports team or take sports lessons after school or on weekends.” This data will be tracked using the National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH). Prioritizing youth sports as a national objective in Healthy People 2030 enables HHS to monitor progress toward improving participation and can help inform future Federal efforts to support the availability of fun and accessible sports opportunities for all youth.

**Using Public Figures to Convey Messages**

The President’s Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition (Council) is comprised of presidentially appointed Council members who promote youth sports through promotional and educational campaigns, initiatives, events, and public appearances. The Council is composed of athletes, chefs, physicians, fitness professionals, and educators who advise the President, through the Secretary of HHS, on issues related to physical activity, sports, and nutrition. Additionally, the National Fitness Foundation, an independent Congressionally-chartered non-profit organization, was established in 2011 to execute programs, events, and activities that further the mission of the President’s Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition.
Sports-Related Grants and Research

Several organizations within HHS offer grant funding related to youth. The NIH currently funds 13 research grants related to youth sports. These grants focus on positive youth development; physical benefits of youth sports; reduction of risky behaviors (e.g., suicide, substance use); promotion of the physical health benefits of youth sports; youth sports in low-income, minority neighborhoods; and sportsmanship to reduce injuries. One of those grants supported an April 2019 Research Summit on Youth Sports Specialization and Athlete Health and Development. CDC’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Unintentional Injury Prevention funds research on traumatic brain injury, which includes injury from sports. The CDC’s HEADS UP20 Concussion in Youth Sports initiative provides information about concussions to coaches, parents, and athletes involved in youth sports. They also have resources and information about sports safety and injury reduction.

Youth Engagement in Sports: Collaboration to Improve Adolescent Physical Activity and Nutrition

In response to the Executive Order on youth sports, HHS’ Office of Minority Health and HHS’ Office on Women’s Health [both within the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (OASH)] released a grant opportunity, Youth Engagement in Sports: Collaboration to Improve Adolescent Physical Activity and Nutrition (YES Initiative) in March 2019. The YES Initiative seeks to identify characteristics of effective collaborations that improve physical activity and nutrition via increased sports participation. This grant will fund 2-year projects that align with the Physical Activity Guidelines to increase youth participation in sports and reduce barriers to play, and will be focused on populations that include youth of racial/ethnic minorities and/or who have a socioeconomic disadvantage.

Prior Federal Efforts to Promote Youth Sports

There have also been prior Federal efforts to promote youth sports. In May 2018, The Council of Economic Advisors released The Potential for Youth Sports to Improve Childhood Outcomes.2 This report highlighted the benefits of youth sports and advocated for the creation of a well-targeted and well-defined youth sports program. An older report, Promoting Better Health for Young People Through Physical Activity and Sports, was released in 2000 by HHS and the U.S. Department of Education.21 This report stated that the “development or expansion of a broad, national coalition to promote better health through physical activity and sports is an essential first step toward collaboration and coordination.” Going back even further, the National Youth Sports Program22 was established in the late 1960s by the Johnson administration and managed through a partnership among HHS’s Administration
for Children and Families, the U.S. Department of Energy, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). It provided sporting instruction and educational activities to underserved youth ages 8 to 16 through multiple-week programs held on college and university campuses each summer. In nearly 40 years, the program expanded to over 150 cities and 44 states. Although funding expired in 2006, some universities have continued the program through self-funding.

Chapter 4. Tracking Youth Sports Participation and Access

Current Trends in Youth Sports Participation

This chapter details the current youth sports surveillance systems. Before describing the surveys, it is helpful to look at current rates of youth sports participation.

In 2017, 58 percent of youth, aged 6 to 17 years, played team sports or took sports lessons after school or on weekends (Figure 2). These rates are lower for underserved populations, including girls, racial and ethnic minorities, youth from households of low socioeconomic status, youth living in rural areas, and youth with disabilities (Figure 2 and Figure 3). According to the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 60 percent of boys and 49 percent of girls in high school report participating on at least one sports team in the past year, and participation by both girls and boys decreased as grade level increased (Figure 3).

The differences in youth sports participation among youth from families of varying socioeconomic status is notable. Seventy-six percent of children from households at 400 percent of the Federal poverty threshold participated in a sports team or lesson after school or on weekends the last 12 months, compared to less than 40 percent of children from households at less than 100 percent of the poverty threshold (Figure 2). Similarly, only 45 percent of children from households with less than a high school education participated, compared to 73 percent of children from households with a college degree or higher.
Figure 2. Participation in Sports Teams or Sports Lessons After School or on Weekends

Source: National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH), 2017

Notes: Participation in sports team or sports lessons after school or on weekends during the past 12 months. Error bars represent upper and lower bounds of the 95% confidence interval.
Figure 3. Percentage of High School Students Who Played on at Least One Sports Team

Source: National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 2017

Notes: Counting any teams run by their school or community groups, during the 12 months before the survey.

Error bars represent upper and lower bounds of the 95% confidence interval.
Surveillance Efforts

Youth sports participation and access to sports programs have been measured through Federal and non-Federal surveillance systems over the last few decades. Broadly, participation can be described by a variety of constructs, including:

- Being on a sports team,
- The number of sports played,
- Frequency of participation, and
- Type of sport(s) played.

Another useful construct is how sports are organized (e.g., interscholastic sports, intramural clubs, travel sports programs, and recreation leagues). Access to sports is generally described by the availability and cost of programs, the number of programs in a school or community, and the organizations providing the programs. A number of surveillance systems measure sports participation, and one Federal resource measures access. However, differences across systems and measures make it challenging to fully describe and understand youth sports participation and access in the United States.

This chapter details the current Federal and non-Federal surveillance systems. The systems were identified based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Nationally representative sample,
- Recurring data collection,
- Questionnaire including sports participation or access to sports facilities and programs, and
- Samples of youth under age 18 or samples of parents with youth under the age of 18.

Federal Surveillance Systems

This section discusses the Federal surveillance systems. More detailed information for each system is given in Table 1 of Appendix 1, Surveillance of Youth Sports Participation and Access. The six Federal systems discussed here are:

- American Time Use Survey (ATUS),
- National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES),
- National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH),
- Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP),
Five Federal surveillance systems collect individual-level youth sports participation data, and one collects school-level data on access to sports programs. All of the individual systems collect data from national (or nationally representative) samples of the population. Some efforts collect only youth data, while others include all members of the household. Most individual-level systems collect information using a questionnaire, but one uses an interview with 1-day activity recall. Some individual-level systems use parent reporting to collect information, while others ask youth directly, and some use a combination of the two methods. These surveillance systems gather data on demographic variables, such as sex, race/ethnicity, age, and household income. This allows for subgroup analyses and examination of differences across subgroups.

The level of detail and type of information obtained by the individual-level systems varies. The type of sports youth participate in is captured in two systems (ATUS and NHANES), while only one (ATUS) assesses the type and time spent participating in sports. Both the NSCH and SIPP include a yes/no question about sports participation, and the YRBS includes a question on the number of sports teams the individual participates in. Three systems (NHANES, NSCH, and YRBS) have a question about overall physical activity that can include examples, such as exercise, recreation/leisure, play, and sports participation. For example, the NSCH 2016-2017 asked parents to report the number of days their child exercised, played a sport, or participated in physical activity for at least 60 minutes per day. It separately asks about sports participation in after-school time during the last 12 months. The YRBS 2005-2017 asked high school students questions about the number of days they were active for at least 60 minutes and the number of sports teams (school or community sponsored) they played on during the past 12 months.

The only Federal school- or community-level surveillance system that measures youth sports is the SHPPS, which focuses on school systems (e.g., classroom, school, school district, state level) for kindergarten through twelfth grade. The SHPPS district-level survey includes questions that address the following:

- Whether the district requires or recommends that elementary, middle, and high schools provide opportunities for physical activity (including intramural and interscholastic sports) before and after school;
Whether policies exist for students to wear protective gear for interscholastic and intramural sports; and

Policies related to coaching interscholastic sports.

The SHPPS school-level questionnaire has questions that provide insight about what sports-related opportunities schools offer students. The SHPPS includes broad questions, such as “does your school offer opportunities for students to participate in physical activity clubs or intramural sports?” and “what activity/sport is offered?” It also has more specific questions about the programs, such as whether the programs are offered to just boys or girls or both and whether the school provides transportation home for students who participate.

Non-Federal Surveillance Systems

This section discusses non-Federal surveillance systems that collect data on youth sports participation. More detailed information for each system is given in Table 2 of Appendix 1. Surveillance of Youth Sports Participation and Access. The non-Federal systems discussed here are

- Monitoring the Future (MTF),
- National Federation of State High School Associations Participation Survey (NFHS),
- National Sporting Goods Association Sports Participation (NSGA), and
- Physical Activity Council Survey (PACS).

Three of these systems (MTF, NSGA, and PACS) provide public access to the methodology, but comprehensive results from PACS and NSGA are only available to the public for a fee.

The systems collect data from different youth age groups. MTF collects information directly from approximately 50,000 eighth-, tenth-, and twelfth-grade students each year. NSGA collects information from youth seven years and older (approximate sample size of 34,000 in 2018). Lastly, PACS collects information from youth six years and older (sample size of 20,069 in 2018).

All three of these systems also collect demographic information, including sex, race/ethnicity, and age/grade in school. MTF asks youth about overall participation in physical activity (e.g., vigorous exercise, such as jogging, calisthenics, or other active sports). MTF also has a separate question about participation in sports, athletics, or exercise and participation in a list of 21 competitive sports during the last 12 months (including school, community, or other organized sports). This is followed by a question about the frequency of participation in the selected sport(s). Possible answers include the
NSGA asks about frequency of participation in a large variety (56 total) of each sport/recreational activity. PACS asks about the type of sport (from a list of 124 activities), frequency of participation for each sport in the last 12 months, participation location, and if it was the first time playing the specific sport(s).

**Similarities, Differences, and Gaps for Surveillance**

Although a comprehensive picture of youth sports may be constructed piecemeal from the data from various surveillance systems, there is a distinct lack of a single comprehensive data source. No single system, Federal or non-Federal, measures all aspects of sports participation, including who is participating (e.g., sex, race/ethnicity, age); frequency of participation; number of sports teams; time spent playing sports; type(s) of sports; and location of participation (e.g., school, recreational facility). NHANES measured most of these constructs from 1999 to 2006. However, this approach was discontinued in 2007, when a new physical activity questionnaire was adopted. Having a comprehensive understanding about the type of sports youth participate in would allow programs to be developed that meet the needs and interests of youth. It would help identify trends, such as increases or decreases in participation rates for specific sports; identify gaps; and help to support policies and programs to increase participation.

**Limited Measurement of Type of Sport**

Data on the type of sports youth are participating in is also confused by varying data collection methods. The type of sport that youth participate in is currently measured in only one Federal surveillance system (ATUS, ≥15 years of age) and three non-Federal systems (MTF, NSGA, and PACS). Each system asks youth to report in different ways on the type of sport and frequency or time spent in each sport. For example, MTF contains a predetermined list of sports for youth to select from (for historic 12-month participation). On the other hand, ATUS gathers verbatim data through interviews. It collects information on all activities adolescents participated in during the day prior to the interview. Interviewers then assign activity codes based on a classification system. The PACS asks youth to report the types of sports (from a list of 124 types), frequency of participation in the sports, and participation location.

**Difficult Analysis of Trends and Comparisons**

The use of different questions and methods to assess youth sports participation creates a challenge to identifying trends and comparing data across systems and time periods. For example, in the 2017 YRBS, high school students were asked to respond to the following question: “During the past 12 months, on
how many sports teams did you play? (Count any teams run by your school or community groups).” The 2017 YRBS results indicated that 54 percent of ninth- to twelfth-grade students reported participating on at least one sports team during the past 12 months. The NSCH asks parents of 6- to 17-year-olds, “during the past 12 months, did this child participate in a sports team or did he or she take sports lessons after school or on weekends?” The 2017 NSCH showed that 58 percent of 6- to 17-year-old youth participated on a sports team or sports lessons after school or on the weekend in the last 12 months. The non-Federal 2018 MTF asks students, “how often do you do each of the following: Actively participate in sports, athletics, or exercising?” Results were reported by eighth and tenth grade combined (51% “Almost daily”) and twelfth grade (43% “Almost daily”). While the results are similar, these examples show both the variation of how questions are asked and the corresponding participation rates they elicit. Because of the different questions in each of these systems, it can be challenging to interpret differences across systems.

**System Reliance on Parent Reporting**

Across all surveillance systems, younger youth (ages 6 to 11) generally do not report on their own sports participation because they cannot reliably remember it. Therefore, parent reports are used to determine sports participation. There are drawbacks, as parents may not be fully aware of their child’s participation or might over-report activity. However, to collect data from large, nationally representative samples of younger children, using parents as a proxy is necessary. Four systems rely on parent proxy, but none of the surveys use the same question about sports participation.

**Limited Ability to Differentiate Sports Participation from Other Physical Activities**

Another limitation of data from existing surveillance systems is that there is little distinction between sports and other physical activities. As noted in Chapter 1, Introduction, the NYSS defines “sports” as a form of physical activity that, through recreational or competitive participation, aims to improve or maintain skills, fitness, mental well-being, and social-emotional health. This definition indicates that sports is one way to be physically active.

Most of the surveillance systems have a broad question to determine overall participation in physical activity. Some of these include sports within the broad physical activity question, while others ask a separate sports-participation question. Both of these approaches limit the opportunity to analyze how sports participation contributes to overall physical activity. It is not analytically possible to determine what portion of a youth’s overall physical activity was sports participation when sports is only one example of the types of activity queried. For example, respondents of the ATUS report time spent in all
activities for one specific day, while the MTF asks respondents to identify (from a list of 21 competitive sports) which school, community, or other organized sports they participated in during the last 12 months.

**Limited Measurement of Availability and Accessibility**

Access to sports programs and facilities has been measured only through the SHPPS, which asks only about school district and school-level policies and practices related to sports. Unfortunately, SHPPS was discontinued after the 2016 cycle, and there are no plans to restart it. Currently, no national, Federal, or non-Federal system asks questions about community-based programs that would help identify access and opportunities for youth to participate in sports. Community-based programs, such as the YMCA and the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA), collect information from their local programs about the types and number of sports, as well as participation numbers. However, those data are not publicly available.

**Opportunities to Improve Youth Sports Surveillance Systems**

Efficient surveillance systems assist in creating metrics, guidelines, and strategies for high-quality youth sports programs. Assessment of community-based programs and facilities is critical for understanding what is being offered and where gaps exist across communities. While ongoing dissemination of the results from Federal surveillance systems can raise awareness about the importance and benefits of youth sports participation, more can be done. The following actions could improve the United States’ current surveillance systems for youth sports:

- Determine the essential constructs of both sports participation and access to sports.
- Ask questions about overall physical activity (including sports as an example). Then use follow-up questions about sports participation specifically, to include number of sports, types of sports, frequency of sports participation within a specified time frame (e.g., past 12 months), and time spent playing sports.
  - Identify one to two main surveillance systems to ask questions.
  - Develop a bank of standard questions that can be used across national, state, and local surveillance systems.
- Employ innovative analytic methods to create mapping of the availability of sports programs. This will help to identify geographic distribution of sports participation and availability and access to sports programs. Researchers, sport program providers, and policy makers could then
identify where the highest and lowest participation rates exist, where access and availability of
programs and facilities are limited, and what disparities exist for both participation and access.
• Establish a surveillance system that assesses school- and community-based programs and
practices for youth sports. Because SHPPS has been discontinued, no Federal surveillance
system comprehensively measures school-based policies, programs, facilities, and practices
related to youth sports.
• Regularly interpret, report, and disseminate youth sports surveillance data.
• Establish public-private partnerships and collaborative efforts that involve:
  o Data-sharing agreements that would enable private surveillance system data to be
    used and reported by other entities, including government organizations;
  o Sharing technical expertise between private and public entities to improve survey
    methods and data collection; and
  o Development of a state-of-the-art, online data repository that would allow for the
    aggregation of data at state and Federal levels. Such a repository would allow
    national, state, and local programs to submit information about the number and
    type of sports programs being provided/offered and the total number of
    participants in each sport.

Chapter 5. Benefits and Barriers Related to Youth Sports

Youth ages 6 to 17 should get at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity each day, but
yet only 20 percent of adolescents meet this recommendation. As noted in Chapter 1. Introduction,
Federal data indicates that less than 60 percent of youth participated in youth sports in 2017. This
number varies based on a several factors. While there is some uncertainty in drawing a direct
connection between physical activity and sports, it is clear that too few youth are meeting the daily
physical activity requirements and are therefore missing out on the important health benefits. Sports
provides one way for youth to meet those activity requirements. This chapter provides information on
the health benefits of sports participation, explains sports participation in relation to the Physical
Activity Guidelines, and addresses barriers to youth sports participation. Much of the research about
barriers and factors related to dropout is conducted in adolescent populations. Factors influencing
elementary-school youth and their parents may be similar, but less research is available.
Health Benefits of Youth Sports Participation

Health Benefits of Physical Activity

The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd edition\(^1\) highlights many health benefits associated with physical activity for youth. Compared to their less active peers, youth who engage in regular physical activity have improved bone health, weight status, cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness, cardiometabolic health, and cognition, as well as a reduced risk of depression.\(^1\) In short, youth who are physically active tend to be healthier, have less body fat, and live more active lifestyles. Since the NYSS defines “sports” as a form of physical activity that, through recreational or competitive participation, aims to improve or maintain skills, fitness, mental well-being, and social-emotional health, it is expected the health benefits of physical activity can come from participation in sports. In addition, youth sports participation provides many benefits beyond those associated with physical activity, including benefits to psychosocial health and academic achievement.

Psychosocial Health Benefits of Sports

Youth who participate in sports enjoy psychosocial health benefits beyond those gained from other forms of leisure-time physical activity. Psychological health benefits include higher levels of perceived competence, confidence, and self-esteem; reduced risk of suicide and suicidal thoughts and tendencies; and improved life skills, such as goal setting, time management, and development of a strong work ethic.\(^6,28-31\) Sports participation also provides youth with the opportunity to develop social and interpersonal skills, such as teamwork, leadership, and relationship building. It also allows youth to benefit from the community aspect of team sports.\(^28,29\) It should be noted that these benefits do not come automatically from participation in sports alone. Coaching and program design affect these outcomes, and these are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. Opportunities to Increase Youth Sports Participation.

Academic Achievement Benefits of Sports

Participation in physical activity and recreational and competitive sports is related to various indicators of academic achievement, including cognitive skills and attitudes (e.g., attention, memory, executive functioning), academic behaviors (e.g., school attendance), and academic performance (e.g., GPA/grades).\(^6,31-34\)
Youth Sports and the Physical Activity Guidelines

Playing sports can contribute moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, which counts toward meeting the 60 minutes per day recommendation for youth. Sports often include vigorous-intensity aerobic activity, muscle-strengthening activity, and bone-strengthening activity, which are part of the key guidelines for youth in the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*. The amount of time spent in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity varies by the type of sport, sex of the player, style of the coach, level of competition, and whether it is a practice or a game. Some sports, such as soccer or basketball, may include more physically active time than other sports, such as baseball or softball. However, many sports can be modified to incorporate more physical activity, either during practices or games, by altering the number of youth on the field or court or by adjusting drills to limit standing time.

Increasing the number of youth who regularly play sports could increase the number of youth meeting the Physical Activity Guidelines. Being physically active in childhood can lead to a healthier adulthood, and research suggests that playing youth sports can translate into being physically active in adulthood, either through sports or through other activities.

Inequities in Sports Participation

As described in *Chapter 4. Tracking Youth Sports Participation and Access*, sports participation rates vary across demographic group. For example, girls consistently report lower levels of sports participation than their male peers. Moreover, youth living in more affluent households, or in households with higher levels of education, are more likely to participate than those living below the Federal poverty line, or in households with less than a high school education. Youth with special health care needs also report lower rates of participation than their peers without special health care needs. The presence of disparities contributes to unequal access to the health, psychosocial, and academic benefits tied to sports participation discussed above. Although all youth face barriers to sports participation, barriers can be exacerbated in certain demographic groups, and these are discussed in further detail below.

Barriers to Initial Participation and Continued Involvement

Sports afford many physical health, psychosocial, and academic benefits. However, barriers to entry and retention influence youth’s ability to participate in sports. These barriers can be even greater for
youth in certain demographic groups, including girls, racial and ethnic minorities, youth with disabilities, youth from low socioeconomic status, and youth living in rural areas. The next chapter, Chapter 6, Opportunities to Increase Youth Sports Participation, outlines a model for increasing sports participation despite common barriers, while this chapter discusses known barriers to entry and retention.

**Barriers to Entry**

Reasons for not participating in sports can differ from individual to individual. Research shows common barriers to entry include accessibility, cost, social factors, lack of interest and knowledge, psychological factors, and time and competing demands. Accessibility

Without safe, accessible places to play and methods of transportation to reach them, many youth struggle to participate in sports. Accessibility can be an especially big barrier for youth from households with low socioeconomic status and youth with disabilities.

Cost

Many sports programs require fees for participation, or use try-outs to fill a limited number of available spots. This professionalization and pay-to-play system disproportionally excludes youth from lower socioeconomic status, youth with lower levels of fitness, and youth who are overweight or obese.

Social Factors

Social factors – such as whether a youth’s friends participate in sports, or having other youth to play with – can also function as a barrier to entry. Girls tend to respond well to activities that include their friends or peers.

Lack of Interest or Knowledge

Youth and their adult caregivers must be aware of the opportunities to play sports in their community and the benefits of doing so, and must be interested in participating.

Time and Competing Demands

Time can serve as a barrier for both youth and their adult caregivers. Balancing sports commitments with other youth activities, parent employment, and familial responsibilities can limit entry for some individuals.
Barriers to Retention

Improving sports participation does not end by improving the number of youth entering sports. Lack of sustained participation and sports dropout can have a large impact the number of American youth participating in sports. Like participation rates, sports attrition also varies across demographic group. Research shows that girls drop out of sports at a much higher rate than their male peers, at a rate as much as 3 times higher, according to some research. Although some barriers to retention may be similar to barriers to entry, it is important to consider barriers to retention independently when developing strategies for increasing sports participation. Barriers to retention include cost, lack of enjoyment, lack of physical literacy, pressure from others, physical factors, and time constraints.

Cost

The costs associated with ongoing participation in sports is a barrier to many families. Cost of equipment, and the need to purchase new equipment as youth grow and develop, create additional financial strain. Costs also tend to increase as the competition level increases, due to increased travel requirements.

Lack of Enjoyment or Fun

Enjoyment or fun is one of the top motivators for youth who participate in sports, and one of the most frequent reasons given for dropping out. Having fun has been associated with intrinsic factors such as being a good sport, trying hard, and learning and improving, as well as external factors, such as positive coaching and parenting, game time support, games, practices, team friendships, team rituals, and swag.

Lack of Physical Literacy

It is important that youth participants feel confident in their ability to participate and improve. Physical literacy is the ability to move with competence and confidence in a variety of physical activities in multiple environments that benefit the healthy development of the whole person. Research indicates that lack of physical competence, a key component of physical literacy, is an important factor in attrition.

Pressure from Others

Pressure from coaches, peers, and family members can have a positive or negative impact on a youth’s perceptions of sports. For example, research shows a correlation between the amount of money spent
on sports by parents and the pressure to perform felt by youth athletes.\textsuperscript{56} Increased pressure can result in youth disengaging from sports, as they may lose enjoyment and feel less committed to their sport.\textsuperscript{56} 

**Physical Factors**

Physical factors – such as injury, changes in physical stature, or becoming too old to participate – can cause impact retention rates, especially as children move into adolescence.\textsuperscript{51, 57} For example, many leagues have age cut-offs at which the competition level changes in order to continue playing on the team.

**Stress and Burnout**

Intrinsic pressures, such as stress and burnout, are often identified by youth as reasons for sports dropout.\textsuperscript{51} Early sports specialization is also linked to increased instances of burnout.\textsuperscript{58}

**Time Constraints and Other Priorities**

Time is an important barrier to continued youth sports participation. Time often includes traveling to and from practice and games, the length of practice and games, and balancing competing demands (such as education and employment for adolescents).\textsuperscript{51} Other researchers have also noted that youth struggle to balance and prioritize sports participation with school, work, and friends.\textsuperscript{59}

**Chapter 6. Opportunities to Increase Youth Sports Participation**

In developing the NYSS, HHS used the social-ecological model below (Figure 4) as a framework to identify factors that impact youth sports participation at multiple levels:

- Individual/intrapersonal;
- Interpersonal and primary groups;
- Organizational;
- Community; and
- Public policy.

The first level addresses youth directly, and the remaining levels address youth indirectly, by targeting adults who interact with them. Many adults are involved in youth sports in some capacity—as a parent, coach, official, spectator, or former participant. As a result, adults can influence the youth sports experience through their actions and behaviors at multiple levels. Each level of the model is discussed in greater detail in the following sections. The end of each section concludes with a list of opportunities.
and action items that can improve youth sports participation at that level. As described in Chapter 1. Introduction, access to and participation in youth sports does not occur equitably among youth. Therefore, equity and inclusion need to be addressed at every level – from the individual to public policy. Thus, equity and inclusion form an overarching foundation of the social-ecological model (Figure 4). If consideration of inclusion does not happen at every level, underserved populations will continue to be left out of youth sports.

Limited academic literature exists on specific strategies to increase participation in youth sports that have been tested through traditional research. Most of the best practices and successful strategies for implementation have been compiled by large organizations rather than research trials comparing tactics. Therefore, the social-ecological model (Figure 4) was developed using findings summarized from academic literature, public comments, and other sources detailed in Chapter 2. Methodology. In particular, four documents stood out as recent high-level reports from national conveners.

- The Aspen Institute’s Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game. Released in 2015, this playbook includes eight high-level plays, or strategies, for improving youth sports participation in America.  
- The National Physical Activity Plan. Released in 2016, this plan outlines a comprehensive set of policies, programs, and initiatives designed to increase physical activity for all Americans, including many strategies and tactics related to sports participation.
- The Women’s Sports Foundation’s Teen Sport in America: Why Participation Matters. This 2018 research report outlines strategies to improve sports participation, specifically among teen girls.
- Designed to Move. This 2012 report developed by Nike, the American College of Sports Medicine, the International Council of Science & Physical Education and several other expert organizations, discusses an action plan to reverse the epidemic of physical inactivity. Emphasis is placed on youth under age 10.
Level 1: Individual or Intrapersonal

The individual or intrapersonal level of the social-ecological model focuses on youth and the factors affecting their participation in sports. The primary factors are:

- Awareness, knowledge, and beliefs;
- Personal growth;
- Physical literacy; and
- Sport sampling.

**Awareness, Knowledge, and Beliefs**

Youth are motivated to participate in sports to improve skills, be with friends, have fun, get fit, and to challenge themselves.\(^{52,61,62}\) To increase interest and participation rates, youth need to be aware of available sporting opportunities, know the benefits of sports participation, and believe that these
opportunities and benefits apply to them. However, the awareness and availability of programs, knowledge of benefits, and beliefs related to participation can vary across demographic groups, especially for groups that have been historically left out of sports programs. For some, participation in sports may introduce or reinforce positive cultural identities and norms. For example, American Indian or Alaska Native youth who participate in tribal games or youth with disabilities who participate in adaptive sports programs may receive positive reinforcement for their sports participation.

**Personal Growth**

Sports can provide a path for personal growth and psychosocial development. Participating in youth sports can positively affect feelings of enjoyment, perceived competence, confidence, and self-esteem, and can provide an avenue for the development of social skills, teamwork, leadership, and life skills. Youth can be engaged in the decision-making process, creating opportunities for them to share their opinions and voices. Engaged youth tend to feel empowered to make decisions in the actions they take and behaviors they exhibit.

**Physical Literacy**

Physical literacy includes development of basic movement skills, as well as sports skills, and can also provide youth with the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life. Physical literacy and sports skills development (throwing, catching, etc.) can be enhanced when youth try and learn a variety of sports.

**Sport Sampling**

Sport sampling means participating in multiple sport and recreational activities, with no one sport engaged in exclusively for more than 10 months during the year. By participating in a variety of sports, youth have the opportunity to explore many different types of movement, develop a wide array of physical skills, and avoid negative effects such as injury and burnout. The United States Olympic Committee, the Aspen Institute, and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend youth under age 12 participate in sport sampling. If youth participate in a variety of sports, they are more likely to avoid negative outcomes, such as injury, unnecessary stress, and burnout, compared to youth who engage in only one sport.

**Opportunities and Action Items for the Individual or Interpersonal Level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth can:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learn about the benefits of playing sports, as well as opportunities to play.</td>
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• Ask parents or caregivers to sign them up for sports teams or activities.
• Play a variety of sports to build physical literacy and find enjoyable activities.

Level 2: Interpersonal

The interpersonal level of the social-ecological model examines factors related to adults who directly interact with and influence youth participating in sports. Adult influencers include parents and caregivers, coaches and mentors, athletic trainers, teachers, and health care providers (including, but not limited to, school nurses, physical therapists, or pediatricians). The focus is on adults since they have the agency to affect these factors. Factors at this level include:

- Awareness, knowledge, and beliefs;
- Informal sports play;
- Injury and abuse prevention;
- Physical literacy;
- Positive coaching skills;
- Positive role modeling and mentoring; and

Peer influence or interactions between team members are not discussed in this section since they are covered through the benefits of youth sports discussed in Chapter 5. Benefits and Barriers Related to Youth Sports.

Awareness, Knowledge, and Beliefs

Adults’ awareness, knowledge, and beliefs about sports influences their behavior and attitudes with and towards youth, and this has an impact on youths’ beliefs and behaviors sports.67,68 Perceptions of both the benefits and detriments of sports participation can be influenced by race, ethnicity, and cultural norms. For example, Hispanic mothers may need to be convinced of the benefits of sports for their daughters, especially in first-generation immigrant communities.69

Informal Sports Play

Adults can provide environments and opportunities for unorganized or unstructured sport activities at home, in neighborhoods and communities, and at school, which can positively impact youths’ physical activity behaviors.18,70 Informal sports, such as pick-up games where youth pick teams, make the rules,
etc. can also provide opportunities for them to develop interpersonal skills, such as conflict resolution and negotiation.

**Injury and Abuse Prevention**

Participating in youth sports comes with an inherent risk. All adults interacting with youth athletes must have the basic knowledge and skills to protect them (from both injury and abuse) and to promote healthy behavior.

Over 2.6 million youth each year suffer injuries from sports or other recreational activities that require treatment in an emergency room. Overall injury rates are even higher if self-treated injuries and injuries that do not result in hospitalization are included. Injury rates vary by sport, with football, basketball, and soccer among the most common for sports-related injuries. Some injuries, such as concussions, may have harmful long-term effects. The CDC HEADS UP program provides resources to help recognize, respond, and minimize the risk of concussion or other serious brain injury, including a free online concussion training course. The Physical Activity Guideline’s Key Guidelines for Safe Physical Activity also apply for youth sports:

- Use appropriate gear and sports equipment;
- Choose safe environments;
- Follow rules and policies; and
- Make sensible choices about when, where, and how to be active.

In addition to preventing physical injury, adults must protect the well-being of youth by ensuring sports are free from bullying, hazing, sexual misconduct, or any form of abuse (e.g., emotional, physical).

Adults can acquire the necessary knowledge and skills through training programs and by partnering with experts. For example, coaches and parents can work alongside athletic trainers, school nurses, physical therapists, pediatricians, social workers, school counselors, and other health care providers to ensure they are using the best practices related to safe sports participation.

**Physical Literacy**

Adults play an important role in the development of a child’s physical literacy, both inside and outside of the sports environment. Fundamental movement skills and sports skills do not simply occur with participation in sports or physical activity – they must be taught. When youth begin to play sports, the development of physical literacy helps to support their ability, confidence, and desire to continue...
Research shows that without the development of critical movement skills, it is unlikely that children will experience sports success or develop movement competence, which are both important for long-term motivation and participation.

**Positive Coaching Skills**

Coaches have a tremendous influence over the quality of a youth’s sporting experience. Quality coaches improve participation rates, health behaviors and outcomes, youth perceptions, and retention rates. Additionally, coaches who are well trained and equipped understand best practices in safety, sport and physical skill development, psychosocial development, and cultural competency. Quality coaches provide developmental and age-appropriate activities and skills training to participants and understand how feedback and reinforcement can shape behavior. Quality coach training can also help reduce barriers and help youth use sports for future health benefits. Rather than focusing solely on winning, quality coaches create a climate focused on developing skills, improving performance, and achieving goals.

Coaching skills can be further enhanced through training in cultural competency, successful practices for inclusion of all, and trauma-informed approaches to working with youth. These skills are critical for working with America’s diverse young populations, including youth with disabilities; youth for whom English is not their primary language; and youth who are exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as chronic stress, poverty, adversity, and/or trauma. It is important to note that research has found that youth sports participants benefit from coaches who share similar characteristics with them. For example, girls benefit when they have coaches who are women, and youth benefit when they have coaches of the same race and/or ethnicity as they are. Quality coaches can represent a consistent, positive presence in a young athlete’s life, and this can have a lasting impact on healthy development into adulthood.

**Positive Role Modeling and Mentoring**

Adults interacting with youth through sports should exhibit positive role modeling and mentoring. The Physical Activity Guidelines recommends that adults model and encourage an active lifestyle as a way to help youth get enough daily physical activity. Playing sports together is a great way for adults to model and encourage physical activity and positive sports involvement. It can also be beneficial for youth to see adults, such as their parents or caregivers, having fun while playing sports. Positive role modeling is
not just about demonstrating healthy behaviors. It is also important to consider the impact of adult engagement, positive parental behavior on the sidelines, and postgame debriefing between parents and youth. Adults play a key role in helping youth focus on the big picture, celebrate effort, and learn from their sports experiences through reflection and reinforcement. Parents, coaches, and officials who work to develop supportive and respectful partnerships create more positive sporting environments; however parental over-involvement and pressure can lead to heightened anxiety and burnout in youth.

Opportunities and Action Items for the Interpersonal Level

**Adults can:**

- Make having fun a primary focus of sports activities.
- Encourage sports sampling (playing more than one sport throughout the year).
- Create environments that support informal sports play.
- Promote physical literacy (the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life) as a foundation for sports programs.
- Sign up as a coach, official, or volunteer in local youth sports programming.
- Participate in training or certification programs to acquire, develop, and maintain skills for engaging with youth sports participants.
- Emphasize skill development rather than competition and scoring outcomes.
- Adapt or modify sport activities and ensure access to equipment that meet the needs of youth of all abilities.
- Structure practices and games to provide youth with more time engaged in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity to meet the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*.
- Model good sporting behavior by interacting with other parents, coaches, volunteers, referees, and sporting officials in a positive manner.
- Establish and enforce appropriate safety practices and protocols, and ensure that appropriate safety equipment is accessible.

**Level 3: Organizational**

The organizational level of the social-ecological model addresses factors related to organizations that influence youth sports, like schools and non-profits. Factors in the organizational level of the social-ecological model include:

- Coach and volunteer recruitment, training, and retention;
- Funding;
- High-quality sports programming;
- Partnerships and community engagement; and
Coach and Volunteer Recruitment, Training, and Retention

Coaches have influence over the day-to-day experience of youth in sports programming, potentially shaping youth perceptions and health behaviors. Organizations that focus on coach and volunteer recruitment, training, and retention tend to be successful at providing high-quality youth sports programming.

Recruitment

Establishing expectations early helps organizations recruit volunteers who are more likely to fulfill their service commitments. Organizations should practice culturally relevant recruiting by looking for individuals who already live in the communities of interest and share racial/ethnic characteristics with the youth sports participants. Clear, targeted messages and personal outreach can help attract the desired type of volunteers. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), there are over 460,000 student-athletes each year, suggesting a huge resource of potential coaches who already know their sport well.

Training

Training helps drive fidelity and quality in programs and aims to increase positive cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development of youth. Quality training equips coaches and volunteers to confidently deliver youth sports programming and includes sports-specific, safety, and positive youth development principles. Training may include the following components:

- Conflict management;
- Concussion awareness;
- CPR/AED/basic first aid;
- Emergency management;
- Healthy competition and good sporting behavior;
- Inclusion of underserved or vulnerable populations, including youth with disabilities;
- Group management;
- Mental and physical benefits of sports participation;
- Parental interaction and engagement;
- Program- and site-specific policies and practices;
- Recognition and reporting of child abuse (emotional, physical, and/or sexual);
Training for coaches can be facilitated in a variety of formats, including: online; in person via intensive workshops or short, periodic sessions; or mentoring on the field. Offering ongoing training opportunities through different formats allows coaches to continue to build and improve skills and confidence. To ensure quality coaching, programs may want to consider certification or licensing of coaches. Training also has additional benefits beyond those experienced by youth participants. Programs that provide initial training as well as ongoing support, supervision, and mentoring tend to be more successful at retaining volunteers.

Retention
Organizations that emphasize recruitment activities and quality training for coaches are more likely to retain those coaches. Coach retention is important for establishing, building, and strengthening interpersonal relationships between athletes and coaches. Successful retention strategies can include:

- Providing volunteers with the resources and equipment necessary to deliver sports programming with fidelity and to feel supported by the organization;
- Reinforcing the benefits of volunteering with the program;
- Offering incentives and rewards for service; and
- Providing alternate ways for a volunteer to serve if the initial opportunity does not turn out to be the right fit.

Retaining quality coaches and volunteers allows youth sports organizations to execute their programs effectively and provides them with the capacity to grow and strengthen the youth sports experience.

Funding
Organizations creating, supporting, and/or implementing youth sports programs need to consider the organizational costs and how to support youth participants. Organizations should consider partnerships, such as those with local businesses, to provide financial support to teams (e.g., sponsoring uniforms or equipment, or defraying travel costs).
Participation costs continue to be a major barrier for many American families. However, such costs can be mitigated through stipends, scholarships, fee waivers, or sponsorships. Organizations can also explore public or private grants which can support program costs or provide direct aid to families to allow their children to participate. Additionally, organizations can think creatively to support opportunities for more youth to participate (e.g., reduce field size or practice space to allow more games or practices to occur simultaneously, or pool resources from several organizations to cover a larger group of program participants).

**High-Quality Sports Programming**

High-quality sports programs create a focus on individual and team development through skill building, cooperation, learning, participation, and effort. High-quality sports programming typically utilizes one of two approaches: either sports are the primary focus (American Development Model) or sports are secondary to developing life skills (Sports-Based Youth Development). Both approaches are discussed below.

**American Development Model**

Many traditional youth sports programs in the United States incorporate strategies of the American Development Model. This framework was developed in 2014 by the United States Olympic Committee and its 48 affiliated sport-specific National Governing Bodies with a goal to help all American youth use sports as a path toward an active and healthy lifestyle. The model supports athlete development, encouraging youth to have fun and improve all-around athleticism through sport-sampling and physical literacy development. As a child grow and mature, programs progress to include sport-specific skill development and competition. The American Development Model is composed of five age-specific stages designed to create a positive sports experience for youth across all levels of sports, using long-term athlete development and quality coaching concepts to promote sustained physical activity, athlete safety, and age-appropriate skill development. The model outlines best practices for athletes, coaches, parents, sports club administrations, and National Governing Bodies. Key principles include:

- Universal access to create opportunity for all youth;
- Developmentally appropriate activities that emphasize motor and foundational skills;
- Multisport participation;
- Fun, engaging, and progressively challenging atmospheres; and
- Quality coaching at all age levels.
Sports-Based Youth Development Programs

Sports-based youth development programs provide a holistic approach, using sports as a mechanism to engage youth and promote positive youth development. While sports-based youth development programs may provide youth with a substantial amount of physical activity, sports skills development is secondary to helping youth develop life skills and experiences. These programs often create opportunities for youth to connect to others, develop a variety of skills, and use those skills to contribute to their communities. When youth work collectively to achieve a common goal, they also practice problem solving and decision-making. Such opportunities build cognitive and social competencies that youth can apply to other areas of their lives. Sports-based youth development programs share three common components:

- Provide opportunities that nurture positive peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult relationships;
- Use teaching methods and activities linked to target knowledge, skills, and competencies for youth; and
- Tailor methods to meet the needs of youth.

Partnerships and Community Engagement

Successful organizations know the value of successful partnerships to share resources, build capacity, and evaluate programs. Sports organizations have partnered with police and law enforcement, public health departments, hospitals, universities, and schools. Other partnerships may come from local businesses, technology companies, and social media ambassadors. Community needs assessments can help identify gaps where partnerships could be beneficial.

Program evaluation is important to help organizations identify best practices and areas for improvement. Public health departments and academic institutions can provide expertise and support in conducting evaluations. Partnerships should be specific to the community and organization where the sports program takes place.

Transportation

In communities with limited access to safe modes of transportation, interested youth may be unable to participate in available sports programming. Organizations need to understand the communities they
serve and create strategies to overcome transportation barriers, such as locating sports programs at
schools or in locations with safe and inclusive access for walking and biking.

**Opportunities and Action Items for the Organizational Level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizations can:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Make having fun a primary focus of sports programs.</td>
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</table>
| • Embrace a sports-for-all mentality and offer programs that are inclusive, culturally
  appropriate, and accessible to all youth.                                       |
| • Promote the benefits of and access to sports opportunities to youth and their families. |
| • Recruit coaches who reflect the demographics of the community.                  |
| • Reduce barriers for individuals who wish to become a coach or volunteer, such as using an online platform to recruit, register, train, schedule, and provide incentives. |
| • Require and provide background checks for coaches and volunteers.                |
| • Require and provide access to training or certification programs for all coaches and
  volunteers.                                                                     |
| • Provide adequate equipment and other necessary resources to adapt or modify sport
  activities to meet the needs of youth of all abilities.                           |
| • Implement the principles of the American Development Model (universal access;
  developmentally appropriate activities; multisport participation; fun, engaging, and
  progressively challenging atmospheres; and quality coaching) within youth sports programs. |
| • Promote physical literacy (the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life) as a foundation for sports programs. |
| • Encourage sports sampling (playing more than one sport throughout the year).     |
| • Structure practices and games to provide youth with more time engaged in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity to meet the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*. |
| • Establish and enforce appropriate safety practices and protocols, and ensure that appropriate safety equipment is accessible. |
| • Develop partnerships across a variety of sectors, including education, faith-based, media,
  technology, community recreation, government, public health, and business.         |
| • Partner with academic institutions or public health organizations to evaluate programs. |
| • Include information about sports programs in hospital Community Needs Assessments. |
| • Consider the location of sports programs and transportation options to ensure safe and inclusive access. |

**Level 4: Community**

The community level of the social-ecological model includes factors related to youth sports activities implemented in the community. The factors can vary depending on community characteristics but may include:

• Access to play spaces;
• Awareness, knowledge, and beliefs;
• Capacity building;
• Resources; and
• Transportation.

Access to Play Spaces

Access to indoor and outdoor facilities for free play, practices, and games is vital to sustainable sports participation. Spaces to play—courts, fields, pools, tracks—need to be physically located and accessible in the communities where youth live, learn, and play. These spaces need to be available on days of the week, and during times of the day, when youth are available for sports participation. An important element to ensuring access is universal design, which is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Sports facilities using universal design principles are the first step to providing accessible sporting experiences for all youth, coaches, officials, and parents.

Awareness, Knowledge, and Beliefs

Community or societal awareness, knowledge, and beliefs related to youth sports participation can have an impact on participation rates. The public’s understanding and perception of youth sports, coaching, and sports more generally are influenced by how these are represented in the news and on social media. Media representations of specific athletes (including athletes of color, female athletes, athletes with disabilities, and athletes across the competition spectrum) and sporting events influence the social norms surrounding sports. For example, research indicates the exposure to media coverage of men’s sports is large and growing, while coverage of women’s sports remains low. This discrepancy in coverage can convey the message to the public that sport continues to be by, for, and about men.

Capacity Building

Programs may not have the organizational capacity to support high-quality youth sports programs. Developing community-wide partnerships, across societal sectors, can help to support capacity building within organizations involved in youth sports. These collaborations help create sustainable funding streams or provide services that the primary organization does not have the capacity to provide—such as community outreach or program evaluation.
Prioritizing improvement in community-wide youth sports requires prioritizing investment in the programs, infrastructure, and human capital needed to provide quality opportunities. Communities can also play a key role funding youth sports programs with support from many societal sectors. For example, local businesses often choose to sponsor youth sports programs or provide grants to local schools. Additionally, faith-based organizations can create low-cost sports programming for constituents and community members.

Communities play a role in facilitating transportation to and from sporting programs and opportunities because reliable, safe, accessible, and affordable public transportation can increase access to sports. However, despite the fact that transportation can take many forms, including active transportation (walking, cycling, etc.), public transportation, car, or school-sponsored, transportation continues to be a barrier. If working parents are not available to transport youth to activities after school, and if the sports locations are not within a safe walking/biking distance, then youth cannot participate. In addition, communities need to consider the accessibility of sidewalks and bike lanes in the local area.

Communities can:

- Ensure play spaces are easily accessible for all youth.
- Promote the benefits of and access to sports opportunities to youth and their families.
- Promote and encourage partnerships across a variety of sectors, including education, faith-based, media, technology, community recreation, government, public health, and business.
- Collaborate with academic institutions or public health organizations to evaluate programs.
- Partner with national or local volunteer organizations (such as the Corporation for National and Community Service) to recruit coaches and volunteers to support youth sports programs.
- Develop shared-use agreements to increase access to sports facilities at schools and within the community.
- Locate sports facilities in areas that are safe and accessible via multiple transportation options, including walking, biking, and public transportation.

The last level of the social-ecological model focuses on the impact of public policy. Policies can be enacted, interpreted, implemented, and reinforced at a variety of different levels, including within an organization or community. Policies within specific organizations or sectors can also influence access to...
key resources. For example, shared-use agreements may provide access to public or private play spaces outside the hours reserved for primary use. Other policies may authorize access to background checks and investigative information designed to protect youth against ill-intentioned coaches or program staff.

The majority of this section focuses on policies at the local, state, tribal, and Federal level. These factors include:

- Legislation and policy;
- Proclamations, awareness, and other media; and
- Research, Funding, and Surveillance.

**Legislation and Policy**

**Local Legislation and Policy**

At the local level, policies implemented in schools and school districts have the ability to impact sporting opportunities and development of physical literacy. The *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd edition*, includes several evidence-based practices for increasing physical activity in youth, including the use of a well-designed curriculum and appropriately trained teaching staff to improve physical education. These policies can also support sports participation because quality physical education provides a unique way to increase awareness and interest in sports and develop physical literacy in a positive, accessible environment.

**State Legislation and Policy**

Just over a third of states have legislation governing school sports participation fees. These laws vary from state to state but can dictate whether or not schools can implement participation fees for school sports, what (if any) waiver programs are allowed for students unable to pay, and what the disclosure requirements are for districts implementing these fees. Some states including guidance on the purpose, and appropriate amounts, of these fees, while others outline the tax implications of enacting fees.

**Federal Legislation and Policy**

One of the most influential legislative actions related to sports participation in the United States was the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments in 1972 which increased sporting opportunities for females in kindergarten through college. In the early 1970s, less than 10 percent of all high school sports participants were girls. By the late 1990s, this had risen to 40 percent, and the number of females
who received college sport scholarships increased dramatically. Increasing opportunities for girls in school sports has also spurred demand for opportunities for girls outside of school.

The Amateur Sports Act, enacted in 1978, gave the United States Olympic Committee the authority to coordinate participation in international athletic competition and to authorize National Governing Bodies for individual sports. The Amateur Sports Act also instructs the United States Olympic Committee and National Governing Bodies to build sports performance by supporting nationwide sports participation and sports research.

More recently, the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act (Safe Sport Authorization Act), enacted in 2017, included a variety of amendments to the Amateur Sports Act related to athlete safety and abuse-reporting requirements at all levels of sports participation. The Safe Sport Authorization Act requires the United States Center for SafeSport to develop policies and procedures that prevent the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of amateur athletes.

In addition to legislative actions from Congress, Executive Orders have had an impact on government efforts related to sports. For example, President Eisenhower’s 1956 Executive Order 10673 established the President’s Council on Youth Fitness, and Executive Order 13824 prompted the development of the NYSS.

Proclamations, Awareness, and Other Media

Proclamations and public-facing campaigns can influence youth sports and physical activity levels. Proclamations from government officials, such as the long-standing Presidential Proclamation for National Physical Fitness and Sports Month each May, as well as gubernatorial/mayoral proclamations, use the energy of government organizations and community groups to raise awareness around a specific issue. However, public emphasis is not limited to government leaders. Other high-profile individuals, including famous professional athletes and coaches, can also influence public perception of an issue. The President’s Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition has long used the popularity of famous athletes and notable figures to promote health messages focused on physical activity, sports, and healthy eating.

Community-wide campaigns, including messages delivered across multiple channels, such as television, radio, and written or social media, can also influence physical activity behavior. Media campaigns, like the CDC’s VERB™ campaign, can be targeted specifically to youth to influence physical activity behaviors.
The Move Your Way campaign, released in late 2018, targets individuals who do not meet the Physical Activity Guidelines and encourages them to find enjoyable activities (including sports) so they can get the benefits of regular physical activity.

**Research, Funding, and Surveillance**

The Federal government, along with local and state governments, plays a large role in the development of national research priorities, funding mechanisms, and public health surveillance systems. Additional details related to Federal efforts are described in *Chapter 3. Federal Government Efforts in Physical Activity, Nutrition, and Youth Sports* and *Chapter 4. Tracking Youth Sports Participation and Access*.

Policy documents and public health reports issued at the Federal or State level can serve important roles to outline future directions for research. For example, HHS has twice convened a Federal Advisory Committee to examine the scientific evidence on physical activity (including sports) and health and to identify research gaps. This work was translated into the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*.

Grants can be awarded for individual research studies and for community-level programs. Surveillance data can identify the burden, monitor trends over time, describe disparities (e.g., by age, sex, race/ethnicity, income level), and help to identify policy or program strategies. Ongoing measurement increases understanding about if and how often youth participate in sports and what types of sports they are selecting. Measurement can also provide information about the contribution of sports participation to overall physical activity levels.

**Opportunities and Action Items for the Public Policy Level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public agencies can:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Support an entity with the responsibility to organize and coordinate efforts within and across levels to foster and expand youth sports participation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Support shared-use agreements to increase access to sports facilities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Seek out and support public and private sector partnerships.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Promote collaboration across all levels, including neighborhoods, communities, tribal areas, cities, and states, to increase and expand youth sports participation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Disseminate messaging about the benefits of youth sports and availability of opportunities to play sports through a variety of platforms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coordinate data collection by standardizing questions so that data can be compared across Federal, state, and/or local levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identify and provide grants, funding opportunities, and other resources to support youth sports programs.</td>
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Chapter 7. Youth Sports Around the World

Many countries around the world have a robust interest in sports participation and have Ministries of Sport or federally-funded national organizations that support the country’s sports system. HHS received feedback at the Public Listening Session\textsuperscript{12-16} and through public comments suggesting the United States follow this model and assign a Federal position or office to oversee youth sports. Below are descriptions from Australia, Canada, Norway, and the United Kingdom, which could be used as examples for how to create a sports-focused environment and thus a more active country.

Youth Sports in Various Countries

\textbf{Australia}

The government of Australia is committed to promoting participation in sports to improve physical and mental health. In 2018, the government released \textit{Sport 2030}, the nation’s sports plan to get Australians more active and strengthen the sports industry.\textsuperscript{118} Australia’s Department of Health works closely with states and territories, the Australian Sports Commission, and other key national sporting organizations to develop, implement, and promote policies and strategies to support participation, achievement, and integrity in Australian sports.\textsuperscript{119} One initiative, \textit{Sporting Schools}, supports integration of sports into schools. Regular meetings of the Commonwealth, State, and Territory Ministers responsible for sports and recreation foster collaboration and coordination of sports and recreation opportunities across Australia. This group of Sport Ministers released a \textit{National Sport and Active Recreation Policy Framework} in 2011 to guide future sports and recreation policy development.\textsuperscript{120}

\textbf{Canada}

Canada has a Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities, who, in line with the \textit{Physical Activity and Sport Act} of 2003, establishes regulations that ensure access to safe, inclusive, culturally relevant sport and recreation opportunities for all ages.\textsuperscript{18,121} The \textit{Canadian Sport Policy}, released in 2012, sets the direction for all governments, institutions, and organizations in Canada to ensure sports has a positive impact on the lives of Canadians.\textsuperscript{19,122} As a result of the national policy, regional policies have been developed. Sport Canada, a government entity, exists to invest financial and policy resources into the Canadian sports system.\textsuperscript{22,123} Provincial and territorial governments, as well as the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors, also provide programs and funding that support participation and excellence in sport.
**Norway**

Norway’s Ministry of Culture handles sports policy in Norway. Norway funds physical activity and sports with revenue generated through the national lottery and gaming provider. This revenue is used for sports facilities, special sporting activities (e.g., inclusive sports teams and programming for youth), grants to the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Federation of Sports, and grants to local teams and sports associations. Much of the work in youth sports is led by the Federation of Sports. In 2007, the Federation of Sports released *Children’s Rights in Sport and Provisions on Children’s Sport.* This policy was updated in 2015 and focuses on individualizing the youth sports experience for each child in Norway, while simultaneously building community through shared activity. The rights portion of the report outlines the values the country would like to have as the foundation for youth sports in Norway—safety, fun, competency, and agency. A plan for physical literacy and skill development is outlined by age. The provisions portion of the report outlines rules that youth sports organizations must comply with and enforce to run programming. Because of the focus on creating a positive sports experience for every youth, 8 out of 10 youth in Norway participate in sports.

**The United Kingdom**

The United Kingdom (UK) has a Department of Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport, led by its Secretary of State. In the UK, gambling and sport are under the same department. Therefore, Sport England, a non-departmental public body, is funded through national lottery revenue, similar to Norway’s sport funding. To coincide with the 2012 London Olympic Games, Sport England released a youth sports strategy, *Creating a Sporting Habit for Life – A New Youth Sport Strategy,* aimed at inspiring young people to participate in sports as a habit for life. Additionally, the Youth Sport Trust, an external organization similar in structure to the U.S.-based *National Physical Activity Plan* Alliance, released *Strategy 2018-2022: Believing in Every Child’s Future,* outlining the path toward a future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits that come from play and sports.

**Sports for Diplomacy and Development**

Sports can bring people together and can be used as a form of diplomacy to build and strengthen relationships between nations. The U.S. Department of State has a number of programs and initiatives to increase dialogue and cultural understanding between people around the world through sports. Other countries also use sports as a diplomatic tool.
Sports also bridge social divides and can bring about positive change in the lives of people and communities, domestically and internationally. The term “sport for development” refers to the use of sports to provide opportunities for personal, social, and economic development. Recognizing this power, the United Nations commissioned a report on sports as a means to promote education, health, development, and peace. Additionally, the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti developed *Getting into the Game: Understanding the evidence for child-focused sport for development*, a report on how sports for development programs across the globe have an impact on youth. This report features research and data from more than 300 sport for development programs in 100 countries. The benefits of physical activity and sport participation also create human capital that can positively influence economies.

### Chapter 8. Next Steps for HHS Action

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and non-federal organizations, including those at the state and local level, have many opportunities to take action to shift the culture of youth sports and to embrace and acknowledge that all American youth should have the opportunity to play sports. At HHS, our goal is to get as many youth as possible moving and meeting the Physical Activity Guidelines and that 100% of American youth have the ability to experience the benefits of playing sports. In order to move toward this goal, HHS will focus implementation of this National Youth Sports Strategy (NYSS) around four key areas:

- Federal Government Coordination,
- Partnership and Stakeholder Coordination,
- Communication and Promotion of Youth Sports, and
- Measurement of Youth Sports.

The examples below represent general components of HHS’ implementation plan; they suggest how HHS can be involved to support efforts at the interpersonal, organization, community, and public policy level. We also need effort at each level of the social-ecological model. Adults, organizations, communities, and local, state, and tribal governments can use the strategies from *Chapter 6, Opportunities to Increase Youth Sports Participation*. Together, we can create a culture where sports are fun, inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and accessible for all American youth.
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Opportunities

**Federal Government Coordination**

- Identify an existing Federal staff office, perhaps the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion and the President’s Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition, to elevate youth sports. This office can coordinate Federal efforts on youth sports to ensure consistent messaging and further the government’s engagement in youth sports.

- Collaborate with agencies within HHS and with departments across the Federal government. Coordination across the government allows for dissemination of the NYSS and identification of opportunities for alignment with existing grants, programs, or initiatives, such as CDC’s Active People, Healthy Nation℠.

**Partnership and Stakeholder Coordination**

- Partner with the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). As the lead Federal agency for elevating service and volunteering in America, CNCS can engage National Service participants (AmeriCorps or Senior Corps) in both capacity-building and direct service to youth sports programs.

- Collaborate and engage with the National Fitness Foundation. This congressionally chartered non-profit foundation can amplify the NYSS and support youth sports participation through programs, grants, and initiatives.

- Consider reinstating the Science Board of the President’s Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition. This subcommittee of academic experts can support the amplification of the NYSS through identification, translation, and dissemination of youth sports research to key stakeholder groups.

**Communication and Promotion of Youth Sports**

- Engage members of the President’s Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition to disseminate and promote messages to support the NYSS. The Council is composed of athletes, chefs, physicians, fitness professionals, and educators. They serve as spokespeople to promote youth sports through promotional and educational campaigns, initiatives, events, and public appearances.

- Create new resources for the Move Your Way communications campaign to encourage youth sports participation. Move Your Way was developed to motivate Americans to be more physically active and to meet the Physical Activity Guidelines. Additional resources can be created to focus on physical literacy and sports sampling to help raise awareness about the benefits of youth sports.
**Measuring Youth Sports Participation**

- Develop standardized surveillance questions to measure youth sports participation. These questions can be disseminated and used for local- and state-level surveys to track and compare data at various levels.

- Add youth sports participation as a Healthy People 2030 objective. Prioritizing youth sports as a national objective in *Healthy People 2030* enables HHS to track and monitor progress toward improving participation.
Note Appendix information will be added for the final version.

Appendix 1. Surveillance of Youth Sports Participation and Access

Table 1. Federal Data Sources with Measures Related to Youth Sports Participation and Access

Table 2. Non-Federal Data Sources with Measures Related to Youth Sports Participation
References


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