

# The Slow Drip of Football's Youth Participation Decline Continues Apace

[Bob Cook](#) 3:44 pm

A few state legislators, [despite a lack of success anywhere so far](#), are still pushing to institute bans on children younger than 12 playing tackle football, something that [football's governing body in Canada has just instituted in that country](#). The most notable effort currently is in Massachusetts, home to Boston University and its [researchers preaching](#) taking kids out of [tackle football because of concussions](#), and where the sport's supporters in mid-April held a rally outside the state capitol building to [speak out against the bill](#).

But as I've [previously pointed out](#), youth football participation is falling even without state legislators demanding it be so, and more numbers are coming out showing that parents' discomfort with the sport is hardly slowing down — to the point where many are just fine if their state public servants legislate football out of pre-teens' lives.

In April, University of Washington School of Medicine researchers released a survey of 1,025 parents (55 percent of them mothers, 45 percent fathers) nationwide finding 61 percent of parents supported bans on youth tackle football. (Meanwhile, a survey by [WBUR radio in Boston found large majorities supporting the proposed ban in Massachusetts](#).)



One factor in these numbers is that parents might be overestimating the concussion risk of football. The lead researcher for this study, Sara P.D. Chrisman, assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington School of Medicine, also conducted an earlier study of parents' attitudes toward football. [From the Seattle Post-Intelligencer:](#)

How dangerous are concussions to youth athletes? [Another recent study](#) led by Chrisman followed 863 youth football players over two 10-week fall seasons and showed a 5.1% confirmed concussion incident rate per season with 51 total sustained football-related concussions over two years.

The risk is lower than what [most surveyed parents perceived](#); 83% thought over 10 of 100 athletes suffered a concussion per year and 25% thought over 50 out of 100 athletes were affected.

There are a lot of studies out there measuring concussion risk for youth in football, but the growing consensus is the earlier you start playing tackle football, and the longer you play it, [the more you're at risk for long-term brain damage](#).

In the absence of a law, parents are implementing their own tackle football bans. The Sports and Fitness Industry Association, a trade group, recently reported [further declines in youth football participation](#):

In team sports, tackle football participation [in 2018] was down 1.3

percent overall [from 2017] with a 5.8 percent drop in core participation (26+ times a year). In the key playing age group of 6 to 17, core participation was down 3.0 percent and is now off 1.9 percent on average over the last five years.

Meanwhile, the National Federation of High School Associations has reported the number of 11-player football participants is down 6.5 percent from its 2009-10 peak. That's still more than 1 million participants, making it the most popular sport played by high school boys, so football is a long way from dead. But the declines are getting to be big enough to be noticeable at some schools, [even those that are traditional football powers](#).

Concussion fears aren't the only reason for football's decline. For example, parents are putting their kids in sports like lacrosse that still carry a high risk of concussions relative to say, track, but that are also perceived as [aspirational activities for more well-heeled families](#).

But concussions have gotten this ball rolling, and absent a test that can diagnose CTE and brain damage before an autopsy — technology that currently does not exist — all indications are that more parents are going to decide the risk of head injury is too much for their kids. And given how kids are specializing in sports in earlier ages, once football loses these parents and kids, they're never coming back.

A youth sports blog written by Bob Cook. He's contributed to NBCSports.com, or MSNBC.com, if you prefer. He's delivered sports commentaries for All Things Considered. For...**Read More**