

Game over: Middle-class and poor kids are ditching youth sports

Updated on: August 15, 2019 / 12:35 PM

By Aimee Picchi

- Youth sports in the U.S. are diverging according to income -- more middle- and lower-income students quitting athletics while participation among wealthier children is rising.
- The typical family with kids who play sports spends about \$700 a year on fees, equipment and more, but some spend up to \$35,000.
- More public schools are also charging "pay-to-play" fees, pricing out some families.
- Wealthier families often spend more on kids' sports in hopes of securing college admissions for their children.

From Little League to the ubiquitous suburban soccer field, youth sports in the U.S. have long been considered an important part of growing up. But the rising cost of playing sports, coupled with rising economic inequality, is increasingly leading poor and even middle-class families to hang up their cleats.

That trend is being fueled by the growth in "pay-to-play" sports, which is making organized athletics prohibitively expensive for many households. Participation in sports among families earning less than \$75,000 has dropped since 2011, according to The Aspen Institute's Project Play.

By contrast, children from better off families are participating in ever great numbers. About 7 of 10 children from families that earn more than \$100,000 play sports, compared with 3 in 10 from families earning less than \$25,000, the non-profit think tank found in a 2018 [report](#).

The typical American family spends about \$700 per year on their child's sports activities, but some parents shell out as much as [\\$35,000](#) annually to pay for lessons, camps, school sports fees, equipment, travel and more, according to Project Play. Even public schools are increasingly charging for sports due to budget cuts, data from the Rand Corporation [shows](#).

Families earning \$50,000 or less -- or middle- and lower-income households -- cited cost as the top reason their kids don't participate in organized sports, the Rand study noted.

The biggest predictor of sport participation is the parents' income. Only 27.5 percent of children from homes with incomes under \$25,000 a year play sports compared to the 45.5 percent of kids from homes with incomes greater than \$100,000 a year, via [@AspenInstitute pic.twitter.com/w7cGSoCccE](#)

— Dr. Lynne Kenney (@DrLynneKenney) [August 12, 2019](#)

"We have a system that is based on the concept of 'up or out,' like we have in a lot of corporate America, except it's not merit-based," said Tom Farrey, executive director of The Aspen Institute's Sports & Society program. "It's disproportionately based on whether you come from a family with money or if you are that child who is simply an early bloomer."

Winning the college game

This represents a massive shift within a single generation, Farrey said. In earlier decades, children played in local team sports, rarely traveling outside their local areas for games.

But that's changed, he said, partly due to the pressure from college-minded families to help their children earn athletic scholarships and admission to elite colleges. To make sure their children stand out, they are opening up their wallets for lessons, camps, expensive club teams that travel for tournaments and more.

"Youth sports has been transformed by the chase for the athletic scholarship and the preferential admission to highly selective colleges," he said. "A recruited athlete has a greater advantage than a legacy or a minority or any other population."

That change in the environment for youth sports was evident in the [college admissions scandal](#) that tarnished actresses Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman as well as dozens of other parents. Some parents spent millions to bribe college athletics officials, who then offered their children a spot on a college team -- securing them admission to Yale and other prestigious schools. In some cases, the students didn't even play the sport.

Kids are dropping out of youth sports at an alarming rate. That's why [@AspenInstSports](#) started [#DontRetireKid](#). There needs to be a sports system that's for all kids, regardless of zip code or talent. <https://t.co/DuWzALbPtx>
[pic.twitter.com/qtDSpB7V8D](https://t.co/DuWzALbPtx)

— The Aspen Institute (@AspenInstitute) [August 6, 2019](#)

Of course, most families are simply spending money to further their children's athletic abilities, often with the goal of securing a college scholarship. One in 5 parents with a kid in sports believe it will lead to

a college athletic scholarship. That's almost certainly wishful thinking: Only 1 in 10 young people who play sports ever get a sports scholarship, a recent TD Ameritrade study [found](#).

"When you have that kind of system, parents start spending a lot of money," Farrey said. "That's where you get them on the right club teams, hiring private trainers and doing whatever it takes -- buying them the \$300 special bat -- to have them succeed at sports."

He added, "It effectively pushes aside a lot of kids on the lower end of the income distribution."

Public schools losing out

Some public schools are adding pay-to-play fees due to shrinking or stagnant sports budgets. In some cases, it's due to caps on property taxes that's making it tougher to find resources for schools or financial struggles.

That pattern can be seen in Ohio, where families in one school district may pay up to \$1,000 to enroll their kids in sports, while a family in a nearby district may pay nothing, [according](#) to the Dayton Daily News. Some schools charge sports fees because it helps them avoid making cuts; others pared back the charges in order to increase sports participation, the paper noted.

Here is more evidence of how we are pricing poor kids out of sports. Sports are one of the best ways for young people develop the character and grit skills it takes to succeed in life.

National Youth Sport Survey — The Aspen Institute Project Play

<https://t.co/u6FIMrgExC>

— Jon Husted (@JonHusted) [August 7, 2019](#)

Meanwhile, poor students face a host of issues that wealthier children don't that can deter them from playing sports, said Mara Mazza of the [Kings County Tennis League](#), a non-profit that teaches tennis to low-income children in Brooklyn. "There are a variety of reasons why kids don't participate in sports. Some of it is access, some of it is transportation and some of it is safety," she said.

The bigger picture, according to the Aspen Institute's Farrey: Middle-class and poor children who can't afford to play sports may be at a distinct disadvantage compared with kids from affluent families.

"The research shows physically active kids are less likely to be obese, more likely to get a college degree, less likely to suffer chronic illnesses including cancer and more likely to be active as adults, and twice as likely to have active children," he said. "Everyone will pay price if we don't get them off the couch."

First published on August 15, 2019 / 9:49 AM

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