



# Women's Sports Foundation

## RESEARCH SERIES

# **The Women's Sports Foundation Report: Addressing the Health and Physical Activity Needs of Girls in the Boston Metropolitan Area**

**November 2007**

## **Executive Summary**

# About the Women's Sports Foundation

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Founded in 1974 by Billie Jean King, the Women's Sports Foundation is a national charitable educational organization seeking to advance the lives of girls and women through sports and physical activity. The Foundation's Participation, Education, Advocacy, Research and Leadership programs are made possible by gifts from individuals, foundations and corporations. The Foundation is located in Nassau County, N.Y. For more information, please call the Foundation at (800) 227-3988 or visit [www.WomensSportsFoundation.org](http://www.WomensSportsFoundation.org). The Foundation serves as a center for collecting and sharing information on girls and women in sports and physical activity. The Women's Sports Foundation also produces academic research on the psychological, social and physiological dimensions of sport and physical activity in the lives of girls and women.

This educational publication is made possible by the support of our members and donors. The Women's Sports Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Donations to the Foundation are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law. Please give generously to support our mission and activities.

## Authorship and Acknowledgments

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This report was authored by Donna Lopiano, Ph.D., Marjorie Snyder, Ph.D., and Lisa Zurn, Ph.D., with the assistance of advisory board members Sumru Erkut, Ph.D., Mary Jo Kane, M.B.A., Don Sabo, Ph.D., and Jane Ward, Ed.D. Special thanks to Deana Monahan for her editorial expertise and Alison Biggs, Terri Lakowski, Whitney Post, Jessica Fagen and Tuti Scott for their research assistance.

This report is a component of GoGirlGo! Boston, a demonstration community initiative to increase the physical activity participation of metro Boston girls and enhance the physical activity delivery systems of girl-serving agencies and organizations.

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# Executive Summary

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The purposes of this report are to:

1. examine the current status and raise awareness of issues surrounding:
  - ◇ sports and physical activity participation of girls in the Boston metropolitan area and how such participation is related to girls' health and health-risk behaviors,
  - ◇ girls' sports and physical activity delivery systems,
  - ◇ public policy affecting the availability of sports and physical activity for girls, and
  - ◇ adult knowledge that may influence the encouragement of girls' sports and physical activity participation; and
2. provide benchmark statistics from which the progress of the Women's Sports Foundation's GoGirlGo! Boston program and other metro Boston initiatives to increase the sports and physical activity participation of girls can be measured.

This report examines a considerable body of research that has been produced over the last decade by researchers and local, state and national agencies and relies heavily on data produced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (cited throughout as "CDC-YRBS, 2005"), considered by most to be the most accurate and consistent information on youth physical activity and health-risk behaviors.

This report prefaces the launch of GoGirlGo! Boston in November of 2007, the fourth Women's Sports Foundation community program (joining Atlanta, launched in 2004; Chicago—2005; and San Antonio—2006) targeting high-population urban centers for the purpose of increasing the participation of girls aged 8 to 18 in sports and physical activity. GoGirlGo! Boston provides a year-round program intervention consisting of cash and equipment grants and technical assistance in support of schools, recreation programs and nonprofit organizations that are the direct providers of physical activity programming to girls within the 128 Loop. In addition, GoGirlGo! Boston includes (1) a public education program aimed at parents and caring adults who have the power to influence the sports participation of girls, (2) efforts to encourage increased funding of sports and physical activity programming from the public and private sectors and (3) public policy initiatives that seek to ensure gender equity, address the under-representation of girls from racial and ethnic minority populations and those with disabilities and promote school recess and physical education requirements for all children. All of these programs are prefaced with an assessment of other available Boston-area technical assistance programs in order to provide this information to direct delivery program providers and prevent duplication or overlapping efforts. Partnerships with third-party funders and other community service programs are sought to enhance the power and reach of each of these efforts.

## Findings

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### 1. Sports Team Participation

- ◆ Boston female athletes participation on high school teams is lower than that of Boston male athletes and female athletes nationwide. Just 36.1% of Boston female high school students (compared to 57.6% of Boston male students) participate on one or more sports teams inside or outside of school, compared with the national average of 50.2% for females (61.8% for U.S. males).
- ◆ Black and Hispanic female athletes participation on high school teams in Boston is lower than that of black and Hispanic female athletes nationwide. Among black high school girls in Boston, only 35.8% are athletes (compared to 43.6% in the United States) and only 24.8% of Boston high school females who are Hispanic are athletes (compared to 43.8% in the United States).

## **2. Vigorous Physical Activity**

- ◆ Fewer Boston females meet recommended physical activity standards than the national average. Only 50.9% of Boston females participate in sufficient vigorous physical activity each week, compared with the national average of 61.5%.
- ◆ Black, non-Hispanic and Hispanic females in Boston are less likely to meet the previously recommended level of physical activity than all female race/ethnic categories nationally.

## **3. Physical Education Class Attendance**

- ◆ There is poor female PE class attendance in Boston. Only 34.5% of female students in Boston participate in physical education one or more days a week, compared to 42.3% of Boston male students and 59.5% of Massachusetts female students.
- ◆ PE participation declines significantly as Boston girls get older. Boston males are significantly more likely than Boston female students to attend PE classes in all high school grade levels and 12th-grade females participate at the dismally low level of 23.2%, declining every year from a ninth-grade rate of 47.8%.

## **4. Sports Participation vs. Exercise**

- ◆ Sports participation carries significant benefits in reducing health risks. With the only exception being dietary behaviors (eating recommended fruits and vegetables), moderately and highly involved athletes were less likely to experience health problems or engage in risky health behaviors than non-athletes.
- ◆ Health-risk behavior outcomes are not as clearly positive for Boston female exercisers as they are for athletes.
- ◆ There are greater health benefits for Boston black and Hispanic girls who participate in sports and physical activity. Even when there were no overall significant differences between all athletes and non-athletes or levels of all exercisers, in many cases, significant sports or exercise participation benefits for race/ethnicity groups were revealed on the variables of overweight, obesity, fasting and use of diet pills/products for weight loss and television viewing.

## **5. Overweight and Obesity**

- ◆ Boston females are more overweight than U.S. females. Female high school students in Boston (20.6%) are more likely to be overweight than the national average (15.5%).
- ◆ Boston females are more obese than U.S. females. Female high school students in Boston (11.2%) are more likely to be obese than the national average (10%).
- ◆ Boston black and Hispanic females are at greater risk for being overweight and obese than Boston white females. Mirroring a national trend, black and Hispanic females in Boston are more likely to be overweight and obese than Boston white females.

## **6. Other Health and Health-Risk Behavior Factors:**

- ◆ Boston females fare worse than the U.S. average on some key health-risk behaviors. Boston females are more likely than U.S. females to have asthma, engage in excessive television viewing, engage in sexual intercourse, experience teen pregnancy and use marijuana (see Figures 1 and 2).
- ◆ Boston females fare better than the U.S. average on some key health-risk behaviors. Boston females are less likely than U.S. females to engage in unhealthy weight control, be depressed, have made a suicide plan, smoke cigarettes, use alcohol, engage in binge drinking, use steroids and use cocaine (see Figures 1 and 2).

## **7. Access to Sports and Physical Activity Opportunities**

- ◆ Boston schools are not providing equal opportunities and treatment for female athletes.
- ◆ There are serious physical education deficiencies for Boston girls. The current PE curriculum requirement of 90 hours per year does not meet national standards. Between 1996 (when existing but still not sufficient standards were lowered) and 2007, Boston female PE class attendance has plummeted from 69% to 35%. Required physical education represents the most efficient physical activity delivery system (lowest cost/greatest reach) and is being underutilized.

**Figure 1: Status of Female Youth Physical Activity and Health in Boston Compared with U.S. Averages**

|               | Community and H.S. Sports Team Participation | Vigorous Physical Activity | Phys. Ed. Class Attendance | Overweight: At Risk for Obesity | Obesity* | Unhealthy Weight Control | Asthma | Physical Disability | Depression | Made Suicide Plan | Attempted Suicide |
|---------------|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|----------|--------------------------|--------|---------------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Boston</b> | 👎  | 👎                          | 👎                          | 👎                               | 👎        | 👎                        | 👎      | no data             | =          | 👎                 | =                 |

👍 = Better than U.S. Average  
 👎 = Worse than U.S. Average  
 = = Same as U.S. Average

\* Black and Hispanic youth are significantly more at risk for obesity than white youth

**Figure 2: Status of Female Health-Risk Behaviors in Boston Compared with U.S. Averages**

|               | 3+ Hours TV on Average Day | Smoke Cigarettes | Had Sexual Intercourse | Teen Pregnancy | Current Alcohol Use | Binge Drinking | Steroid Use | Marijuana Use | Cocaine Use |
|---------------|----------------------------|------------------|------------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| <b>Boston</b> | 👎                          | 👍                | 👎                      | 👎              | 👎                   | 👎              | 👎           | 👎             | 👎           |

👍 = Better than U.S. Average  
 👎 = Worse than U.S. Average

- ◆ Boston needs more sports facilities for its youth. Boston has 60% of the sports and recreation facilities of middle- and upper-income suburbs, which limits the availability of sports and physical activity programming for boys and girls.
- ◆ Girls and boys with disabilities are underserved when it comes to sports and physical activity opportunities in Boston. No clear regulations that specify equal treatment of individuals with disabilities in school and college physical activity settings, including physical education, school recess and club, intramural and varsity sports programs, exist. No Boston data on sports and physical activity opportunities for girls or boys with disabilities exists.

**8. Support of Youth and Girl-Serving Organizations (GSOs) Delivering Sports and Physical Activity Programs for Girls**

- ◆ Boston GSOs are carrying a disproportionate burden in the delivery of sports and physical activity programs for girls. Safety concerns, failure of schools to meet sports and physical education needs of girls and “No Child Left Behind” mandates consuming the focus and resources of public schools have relegated major responsibility for delivering after-school adult supervised sports and physical activity programs to GSOs that do not enjoy the public’s financial support, easy access to use of school or park facilities or highly qualified professional expertise in the execution and evaluation of their programs.

- ◆ Male-focused organizations are shortchanging Boston's girls. Many GSOs are coed and male-dominated in terms of participants and adult leadership, which results in girls feeling marginalized and being underserved. GSOs need specialized knowledge to remedy this culture and create programs that appeal to girls who want to play.
- ◆ There is a lack of knowledge of how to engage Boston's sedentary girls in physical activity. Few GSOs understand how to capture sedentary girls who need special outreach and programming environments to engage in sports and physical activities.

## 9. Adult Knowledge and Influence

- ◆ There is a need for more public education and promotion around Boston girls' physical activity. Encouragement on the part of parents is effective in increasing their daughters' physical activity. Public education is required in Boston.
  - ◇ While many metro Boston residents believe that when it comes to sports, girls in Boston are not offered the same opportunities or attention as boys, males, blacks and Hispanics; and younger residents ages 18-39 were less knowledgeable about the benefits of physical activity for girls.
  - ◇ Women (69%), more so than men (56%), place more importance on girls being a healthy weight.
- ◆ Boston residents are ready to help get girls physically active. Boston residents appear motivated to join in the cause to get girls physically fit and are already heading in the right direction, with many saying they are likely to participate in a mentoring activity aimed at encouraging physical activity among girls over the next year.
  - ◇ Specifically, many Boston adults expect to participate in a physical activity with a girl (39%), speak to a girl about the importance of physical activity (39%) and/or make a commitment to get one or more girls they know involved in physical activity (30%).
  - ◇ Those who feel less equipped to help a girl get more physically active are more likely to be males (40%) rather than females (24%), younger residents aged 18-39 (37%) rather than older residents aged 40+ (26%) and those who have less interaction (38%) with girls than those who have more interaction (24%).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

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It is clear from the current research that girls, especially black and Hispanic girls, in the Boston area do not get enough physical activity in their daily lives. This trend is highlighted by low participation rates in school and non-school sports and physical education and lack of vigorous physical activity and lower participation levels as girls get older. Efforts to address these deficiencies should focus on capturing sedentary black and Hispanic girls.

Sports participation carries significant benefits in reducing health risks. With few exceptions athletes are less likely to experience health problems or engage in risky health behaviors than non-athletes. Even when there were no significant differences between all athletes and non-athletes or levels of all exercisers on specific health or health-risk variables, in many cases, significant benefits were revealed for race/ethnicity groups. Furthermore, participation in one or more sports appears to be greater than the impact of moderate and high levels of vigorous physical activity.

Female high school students in Boston are more likely to be overweight and obese than girls nationally. Mirroring a national trend, black and Hispanic females in Boston are more likely to be overweight and obese than Boston white females. Boston females are also more likely than U.S. females to be have asthma, engage in excessive television viewing, engage in sexual intercourse, experience teen pregnancy, use alcohol, engage in heavy drinking, use marijuana or have insufficient dietary intake of fruits and vegetables. However, Boston females are less likely than U.S. females to engage in unhealthy weight control, be depressed, have made a suicide plan, use steroids or use cocaine.

With regard to public policy, Boston schools are not providing equal opportunities and treatment for female athletes, a requirement of Title IX, a federal gender equity law. More needs to be done to educate girls, their parents and their advocates about the importance of girls' participation in sports and their right to be free from

discrimination. Technical assistance should be provided to schools as a means to ensure gender equity in their athletics programs.

There are serious physical education opportunity deficiencies affecting girls and the current Massachusetts PE curriculum requirement does not meet national standards. Required physical education represents the most efficient physical activity delivery system (lowest cost/greatest reach) and is being underutilized. There are no clear guidelines that specify equal treatment of individuals with disabilities in school and college physical activity settings, including physical education, school recess and in club, intramural and varsity sports programs. Boston has 60% of the sports and recreation facilities of middle- and upper-income suburbs, which limits the availability of sports and physical activity programming for boys and girls. Public officials should advance appropriations initiatives to address this deficiency.

Safety concerns, the failure of schools to meet sports and physical education needs of girls and “No Child Left Behind” mandates are consuming the focus and resources of public schools. This situation has relegated major responsibility for delivering adult-supervised sports and physical activity programs to youth sport and girl-serving organizations (GSOs) that do not enjoy the public’s financial support, easy access to school or park facilities or highly qualified professional expertise in the execution and evaluation of their programs. Most GSOs are coed and male-dominated in terms of participants and adult leadership, which results in girls feeling marginalized and being underserved. All GSOs need specialized knowledge to remedy this culture and create programs that appeal to girls who want to play. Few GSOs understand how to capture sedentary girls who need special outreach and programming environments to engage in sports and physical activities. Technical assistance to GSOs is required to meet these needs.

There is a pressing need for public education around the importance of girls’ participation in physical activity, the disparities between boys’ and girls’ participation in athletics, girls’ rights to equality in school-sponsored athletics, and the available avenues for enforcement of these rights. Because girls of color participate in physical activity at consistently lower rates than their white peers, it is critical that these public educational efforts contain a specific focus on girls of color that highlight their particularly low participation rates. All educational materials must be culturally sensitive, and specific outreach should be targeted at communities of color. These educational efforts should reach all relevant constituencies, including students, parents, advocates, health providers and sports providers.

Many Boston residents may be willing to make a commitment to the cause of getting more girls physically active, but they need to know how to get started. There appears to be a strong opportunity to educate Boston residents, especially men, younger residents and those who have less interaction with girls, on the programs that they can help and empower them to affect change.

The health and economic costs of not addressing these concerns are considerable. The future health and well-being of Boston’s girls will depend on a strategic and far-reaching effort to meet their needs.



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