

Keeping Girls in the Game:

Factors that Influence
Sport Participation



Our Mission

We are the ally, advocate and catalyst for tomorrow's leaders. We exist to enable girls and women to reach their potential in sports and life.

Letter from the CEO

Founded by Billie Jean King in 1974, the Women's Sports Foundation is committed to ensuring that all girls and women have equal access to sports and physical activity and the tremendous life-long benefits they provide. While much progress has been made, there remain glaring disparities in sport participation across gender, race/ethnicity, geography, and socioeconomic status, leaving far too many girls on the sidelines. We know we can and must do better.

Keeping Girls in the Game: Factors that Influence Sports Participation, generously supported by Dick's Sporting Goods, provides new insight on how and why girls enter sports, why some girls drop out and why others persist. The report is a window into girls' lives, painting a picture of how they experience sport, including their attitudes, motivations concerns and interests. The study also includes a survey of parents to explore their perceptions around issues related to access, benefits, and impediments to their children's involvement in sports. As primary influencers and gatekeepers of their children's participation, these findings can lead to strategies that meet the needs of girls and their families more holistically.

We are continuously building a deeper understanding of how to help girls thrive in sport. With these new insights, the research can help parents, coaches, program leaders, and those working at the sport league levels to not only recruit and retain girls in sport, but also find effective ways to address disparities and forge new pathways for greater engagement.

The research also makes clear that all girls benefit from multiple champions for sport in their daily lives. Parents in particular can play a powerful role in supporting their daughters' love of sport, while also helping to break down the barriers they face. At the community level, we should continue celebrating and supporting the champion organizations that are increasing access and opportunity and ensuring that girls not only try sport, but also find joy, confidence, strength, and the sense of belonging that keeps them playing during their growing years and throughout their lifetimes.

The Women's Sports Foundation is proud to be at the forefront of research and practice, and we look forward to working with other leaders in the field to bring these new research findings into practice.



Dr. Deborah Antoine, CEO, Women's Sports Foundation

Acknowledgments

Women's Sports Foundation Acknowledgments

First, the Women's Sports Foundation is indebted to the study authors, Nicole Zarrett, Ph.D.; Phillip Veliz, Ph.D.; and Don Sabo, Ph.D. We are fortunate to be able to call upon scholars who possess the intellect and skills to ably carry out the vision for this report.

We are enormously grateful to the panel of scholars, health policy experts, youth sport leaders, and sport administrators who reviewed the findings, made important contributions to the text, and challenged us to make the report findings clear and meaningful.

Matt Breslin, *Executive Director, Winners Lacrosse*

Huayra Gomez-Garcia, *Events Senior Manager, Disabled Sports USA*

Risa Isard, *Associate Director, Thought Leadership, KaBOOM*

Deborah Slaner Larkin, *Former CEO, Women's Sports Foundation, and former member President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports*

Nicole Lavoie, *Director, The Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport, University of Minnesota*

Jennifer Brown Lerner, *Deputy Director, Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program*

Jamison Merrill, *Director, Monitoring & Evaluation, Up2Us*

Megan Morgan, *Executive Director, Girls in the Game*

Wayne B. Moss, *Executive Director, National Council of Youth Sports (NCYS)*

Theresa Roden, *Founder & Executive Director, i-tri*

Vivian Santora, *President & CEO, PowerPlay NYC*

Jamie Schmill, *Director of Research & Impact, Laureus Sport for Good USA*

Penn Sheppard, *Director of Learning, Girls Inc.*

Chris Voelz, *Executive Director, Collegiate Women Sports Awards; Founder and CEO, Athletics Plus Consulting*

Aimee Watters, *Executive Director, Dick's Sporting Goods Foundation*

We are grateful to Nicole Melton, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Sport Management, University of Massachusetts, the primary author of the recommendations, for her thoughtful and thorough development of a set of action steps that can lead to increases in participation and retention of girls in sport.

The Women's Sports Foundation thanks its National Partners Chevrolet, espnW and ESPN, Gatorade, and NBC Sports Group for their year-round support and commitment to help strengthen and expand opportunities for all girls and all women through all sports.

Authors' Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the Women's Sports Foundation and its CEO, Dr. Deborah Antoine, for making this report a reality. Deep thanks to Karen Issokson-Silver, MPH, WSF Vice-President for Research and Evaluation, and Dr. Marjorie Snyder, WSF Senior Director of Research & Programs, whose vision and project management skills illuminated every step of this project. Thanks also to Deana Monahan for her editorial and graphic skills. Finally, many thanks to all the girls, boys, and parents who participated in the research, sharing their perceptions and beliefs about youth sports participation so that we could tell a compelling story about how youth, and especially girls enter, stay in or dropout of sports.

Many thanks to YouGov, who conducted the youth and parent surveys and analyzed the results, the findings from which are integrated into this report. YouGov is a leading international full-service research and consulting company and a pioneer in the use of technology to collect higher-quality, in-depth data for the world's leading businesses and institutions so that they can better serve the people that sustain them. With offices throughout the U.S., the U.K., Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, YouGov leverages its online sampling, research expertise, and consulting experience to provide clients with sophisticated market strategy, market analytics, and survey and forecasting services. www.yougov.com.

This report was made possible through a partnership between the Women's Sports Foundation® and The DICK'S Sporting Goods Foundation®.

About The DICK'S Sporting Goods Foundation

DICK'S Sporting Goods and The DICK'S Sporting Goods Foundation believe that participation in sports makes people better. Since 2014, DICK'S and The DICK'S Foundation have pledged more than \$100 million to support youth sports teams and leagues in need. Through our Sports Matter initiative we strive to increase awareness for underfunded youth athletics nationwide and provide much-needed support through equipment, uniform and monetary donations. For more information on Sports Matter, visit SportsMatter.org.



About the Women's Sports Foundation

The Women's Sports Foundation exists to enable girls and women to reach their potential in sports and life. We are an ally, an advocate, and a catalyst. Founded by Billie Jean King in 1974, we strengthen and expand participation and leadership opportunities through research, advocacy, community programming, and a wide variety of collaborative partnerships. The Women's Sports Foundation has positively shaped the lives of millions of youth, high school and collegiate student-athletes, elite athletes, and coaches. We're building a future where every girl and woman can #KeepPlaying and unlock the lifelong benefits of sport participation. All girls. All women. All sports. To learn more about the Women's Sports Foundation, please visit www.WomensSportsFoundation.org

This report may be downloaded from WomensSportsFoundation.org. This report may be reproduced and distributed only in its entirety. Any material taken from this report and published or transmitted in any form, electronic or mechanical, must be properly attributed to *Keeping Girls in the Game: Factors that Influence Sport Participation*, published by the Women's Sports Foundation.

Preferred Citation: Zarrett, N., Veliz, P.T., & Sabo, D. (2020). *Keeping Girls in the Game: Factors that Influence Sport Participation*. New York, NY: Women's Sports Foundation.

© 2020, Women's Sports Foundation, All Rights Reserved.

Executive Summary

Keeping Girls in the Game: Factors that Influence Sport Participation is one of the first studies of its kind to systematically examine social processes influencing youth entry, retention, and drop out from sports. To gain a greater understanding of these disparities in participation and drop out and identify areas to intervene, the current report explores how key characteristics of youth (intrapersonal), their social influences (e.g., interpersonal parent and peer factors), and experiences within the sport setting may vary by gender, age, race/ethnicity, family socioeconomic background, and region.

To accomplish this objective, the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) commissioned a national survey about the participation and experiences of youth in sports to identify critical factors related to youth entrance into sport and those associated with dropping out of sports. The survey was administered to a nationally representative sample of boys and girls ($N=3,041$) between the ages of 7-17 and their parents ($N=3,041$) to inquire about child-related, sport-related, and systemic factors expected to influence youth access, experiences, and motivations for initial participation (entrance) and sustained/continued participation in sport. Based on their sport participation status at the time of the survey, children were categorized into one of three groups: Currently Playing Organized Sport(s) ($n=1,207$; 43%; 539 girls, 668 boys), Dropped Out of Sport ($n=626$; 17%; 312 girls, 314 boys) and Never Played ($n=1,208$; 40%; 666 girls, 542 boys). Although "dropped out" can be defined as ending participation in a specific sport (i.e., sport-specific attrition, where youth exit one sport but opt into participation in another sport), for the current report we are most interested in complete exit from sports and, thus, define "dropped out" as those who played a sport in the past but no longer engage in any type of sport (i.e., sport-general attrition). This assessment offers important insights on critical personal, social, and sport-level supports needed to recruit and retain youth in sport, and effective ways to address disparities observed in participation and rates of drop out by gender, race/ethnicity, family income, and location/urbanicity.

Key Findings

- 1. Disparities persist.** Disparities in participation and in dropout by gender, race/ethnicity, household income, and urbanicity persist. Aligned with national participation statistics, girls in the study sample were more likely to have never played (43.1% girls vs. 34.5% boys) and less likely to be currently playing sports (36.4% girls vs. 45.6% boys) compared to boys, and sport drop-out rates within the sample were significantly higher among girls than boys (36% girls vs. 30% boys). African American youth and youth from low-income households were least likely to be current players and most likely to have never played sports compared to others, and these observed disparities were especially prominent for the girls within low-income homes and/or African American families. Likewise, sport drop-out rates were higher among youth from low-income households (\$0-\$49,999; 39.9%) compared to families of higher income (\$100,000 or higher; 29%).
- 2. Parents play multiple roles in supporting or hindering their girls' participation in sport.** Improving parents' engagement and support in their girls' sports participation can help reduce girls' higher rates of dropout in sport. Parents support children's participation in sport through imparting/relaying key beliefs and attitudes about sport to their youth, including that they are capable and belong in sport, providing exposure to role models that resonate with youth, and through direct provision of their children's sports experiences, including emotional supports (e.g., attending games, practicing with their child) and tangible supports (e.g., buying equipment, providing transportation). For boys, parent support does not vary much between current players and dropouts. However, for girls, parents of current athletes tend to provide greater supports across the majority of ways parents can be involved in their child's sports involvement, with particularly higher involvement in providing transportation, attending games, buying equipment, providing food for games, paying for opportunities to play throughout the year, and taking their daughters to watch sporting events, compared to parents of girls who have dropped out.
- 3. Gender stereotypes in sport prevail.** Despite the powerful influence that parents and peers can play in supporting youth sports participation, gendered stereotypes about sports that inhibit girls' participation are still prominent. Alarming, a third of parents (32.2%) endorsed the belief that boys are better at sports than girls, and this does not vary by youth sport status. Parents of youth who have never played sports were also more likely than other parents to endorse that girls are not as competitive as boys and that sports are more important to boys than girls. Getting teased by peers, including being made fun of or made to feel uncomfortable while



Bridge the Gap

they play sport, was also a prominent issue identified by youth who dropped out of sport. However, even among current players, almost one-third reported experiencing being made fun of while playing sports. Although both boys and girls equally reported being teased, boys were more likely to experience this during the younger childhood years, whereas girls were increasingly more likely to experience this through the adolescent years during a peak time when we observe girls dropping out of sport.

The lack of support and teasing girls endure from their peers can result in heightened awareness of appearance and self-consciousness while playing sport. In the current study, girls who have dropped out of sport were significantly more likely to report being self-conscious about playing sports (e.g., they don't like the way they look in the uniforms) and were twice as likely to say they don't like playing sports because they don't like to get sweaty. Performance worries, such as not playing well, messing up during a game/competition, and losing, were also all significantly more prevalent concerns among girls who dropped out of sport than among current female athletes.

4. **"If you can see it, you can be it."** The provision of role models is particularly important for girls and other underrepresented youth in sport, acting as a powerful force to help youth see individuals like themselves in and around the game, that directly understand the unique experiences and challenges that they face in sport, and that they can aspire to become. Despite the importance of role models for girls and other underrepresented youth in sport, there continues to be a shortage of females on the coaching staffs as well as in other prominent administrative roles within

sport organizations. Two-thirds of current players and two-thirds of youth who have dropped out of sport in the current study have or had a male coach, and male assistant coaches were equally as prominent as male head coaches. Disparities in parents' provision of role modeling opportunities was also evident. Overall, parents provided minimal encouragement to their child to follow sports figures in the media (only 15% of parents of current players and 12% of those who dropped out), with parents of boys, as well as Hispanic and Black parents, more likely to provide this support. Likewise, only a third of parents of current players (and 26% of those who dropped out) reported they take their children to watch sporting events, and this was disproportionately a resource provided to youth from middle- to higher-income households, especially boys.

5. **Celebrate being strong: Sport can help build positive body image.** The majority of parents (across youth status) endorsed that sports promote positive body image, with parents of current players especially likely to endorse this belief and current players benefiting from sport in this way. Current players were much more likely than those who dropped out or those who have never played to say they feel confident about their bodies and that their bodies are getting healthier. They were also more likely to report feeling they are the right height and size, and most likely to perceive themselves as really coordinated. Ironically, poor body image can inhibit youth from participating in sport, with dropouts and those who have never played more likely to report feeling awkward about their bodies and not liking the way their bodies look. These differences were equivalent for boys and girls and were greatest among older youth. Moreover, when asked what they like about playing sports, current players were more likely than dropouts to report "being strong" (i.e., celebrating the capabilities of their bodies) as something they enjoy, while "losing or maintaining weight or to look better," a more appearance-based focus, was more of a factor for sport dropouts, especially older girls. Although poor body image appears to affect both boys' and girls' participation equally, appearance-related motivations for participation may be particularly detrimental to youth's continued participation, especially for females.
6. **Coaches shape the sport experience.** Coaches play a central role in getting and keeping youth involved in sports. Similarly, for both boys and girls, current players reported liking their coach more than sport dropouts do, and dropouts were more likely to have liked their coach only "a little" or "not at all." Parent evaluations of the coach also reflected these differences, with parents of current players more likely to report that their child's coach is excellent, and parents of sport dropouts more likely

to rate the coach less positively. Several coaching qualities differentiated current players' coaches from the coaches of those who dropped out of sport. Interestingly, in the current study, we found coaches of current players are slightly more competitive in nature than coaches of sport dropouts, with playing time more commonly determined by youth effort and skill than just equally distributed across players. Coaches of current players were also more likely to have an equal focus on both winning and having fun (not just having fun). Additionally, current players were more likely than dropouts to have a coach that sets team and individual goals. Together, these qualities may help impart/reinforce to players that their playing matters, that their efforts are paying off, and that the coach cares about their growth as athletes (i.e., takes it seriously).

7. **Some girls live for the competition, and some girls are in it for the fun.** The desire for competition among current players increased with age, especially for girls, so that "competing" was identified as a critical component of enjoyment for older current players for both genders. However, for some youth, "too much" competitiveness (or a sole focus on winning without a focus on fun and skill development) may undermine youth motivations to participate in sport, with "too competitive an environment" making the top 10 reported reasons for dropping out or never playing sport for both boys and girls. Likewise, being a top player on the team (i.e., a major contributor) for current players was defined similarly for boys and girls and included some competitive goals such as being excited about making the winning play and being better than one's teammates. Youth who dropped out of sports were significantly less excited than current players about these goals, and this was especially true for girls who dropped out. Rather, the social experience of "being someone the team can rely on" was the only goal that girl dropouts were equally as excited about as boy dropouts. Multiple types of sport options need to be available, accessible, equally advertised and equally valued as competitive options in order to meet the needs of youth who have other motivations for playing. Additionally, developing strategies (e.g., marketing, information sessions, etc.) to help parents navigate these differing sport programs and identify the best match for their own child also would help support these efforts.
8. **Cost, transportation, and lack of access keep youth out.** Some of the social inequalities observed in sport result simply from the costs that participation can incur. Among families with low household income and Hispanic families, cost of participating was identified as a primary barrier for why their child dropped out of sport, especially for Hispanic girls.

Cost also was provided as a cause for dropping out among working-class families, but only for girls who dropped out. For urban parents, a lack of access to programming and difficulty getting their child to practice were identified as key barriers. Likewise, youth from low-income households who never played sports identified the cost of sports, inability to get to practice (i.e., transportation), and safety, as the key deterrents to participation, with cost of sport disproportionately of greater concern to African American and Hispanic families. These findings not only support previous research that has shown money is a primary driver of entrance into sport but also emphasize the need to address the cost of sport to support retention in sport (prevent dropout). These efforts may be particularly fruitful for supporting the continued participation of African American and Hispanic girls, and girls from low-income and working-class families for which cultural assumptions intersect with race/ethnicity and social class to magnify these existing environmental barriers that these girls face in accessing sports.

9. **Maintaining a love of sport (overcoming competing interests) is key to continued participation.** Current athletes reported a love for their sport, with significantly more teen girls endorsing this love of sports compared to boys (72% girls vs. 54.8% boys). Maintaining a love of sport is critical, especially in the face of multiple competing interests. Sport dropouts reported a loss of interest in sport and preference for other activities, especially increased interest in one's social life as they get older, as primary reasons for no longer participating in sport. Fostering youths' continued love of sport through building confidence, a sense of mastery, and connection to one's



WSF Founder Billie Jean King

teammates is critical. Additionally, building the sport experience to include community outreach, character education, academic supports, and other positive social experiences can help meet youths' varied developmental needs.

10. **There is a need to educate parents about the academic benefits of participation.** Sports participation has been consistently shown to support all aspects of academic achievement, including positive academic self-concepts, a positive attitude towards schoolwork, improved academic performance and higher grades, and higher educational aspirations and attainment. However, despite substantial evidence of the positive impact of sports participation on academics, the demands of academics ranked among the top five barriers to sports participation for both youth who never played and those who have dropped out of sport, with 30% of youth and their parents reporting a need to focus more on studying and grades as a primary reason to dropping out of sports, and well over half of sport dropouts and three-quarters of their parents indicating that sports can get in the way of academics. Academic demands were disproportionately an issue for older youth and an especially prominent deterrent for Hispanic youth and teen girls' participation. The more deliberate coupling of sport experiences with academic supports, especially as youth get older, can further bolster the academic benefits youth gain for their participation and help impart/reinforce to youth and their parents that sports is complimentary/supportive of youth academic achievement (not an antithesis to it).

Findings from this report provide important insights into the gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic disparities found in sports participation and dropout, and identify critical areas to intervene. First and foremost, more work needs to be done to improve access and inclusion in sport: an alarming 40% of girls and one-third of boys reported having never played sport in our sample, and over one-third dropped out of sport. The cost of sport not only remains a primary determinant of youth entrance into sport, but also plays a major role in determining who can stay in sport, disproportionately affecting girls' participation, especially girls of color.

Along with systemic issues concerning access, several social influences were also associated with these disparities, functioning to either support or deter girls' (and other under represented youth's) participation in sport. In particular, gendered cultural norms remain a major barrier for girls' participation in sport, influencing all aspects of girls' experiences in sport. Parents' socialization behaviors and stereotyped beliefs favor boys in sports, there is still a lack of female presence on the coaching staff and in other prominent administrative roles within sport organizations, and teen girls reported

experiencing greater amounts of teasing and bullying from peers while participating in sport. Together these social factors espouse messages to girls that they do not belong in sport and can lead to performance worries/ anxiety and heightened awareness of appearance and self-consciousness when playing sports that put girls at greater risk of dropping out.

The report indicates a number of strategies that can be implemented to reduce the disproportionate drop-out rates among girls in sports. For girls and other underrepresented youth in sport, having multiple champions in their daily lives can be particularly beneficial, helping to counter the cultural and social barriers that they face in playing sport (e.g., teasing, exclusion, inequality, feeling less valued). Parent education and intervention to improve parental engagement and support in their girls' sports participation is needed to significantly reduce girls' higher rates of dropout in sport. There also needs to be increased resources allocated towards encouraging women to coach and widely accessibility training programs and clinics for coaches that address effective coaching strategies for recruitment and retention of girls. Additionally, tailoring the sport setting in various ways to nurture youth's varied development needs will help foster a continued love for sport. This may entail ensuring access to multiple types of sport options that map on to youth motivations for playing. These efforts will help us reach our ultimate goal of developing inclusive and safe sport settings for all youth.



Girls in the Game



Find us here

Women's Sports Foundation
247 W 30th Street, 5th Floor
New York, NY 10001
800.227.3988

WomensSportsFoundation.org

Keep being inspired

