



# STATE OF PLAY

## Kansas City

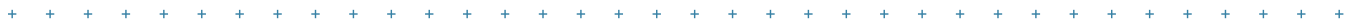
ANALYSIS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“State of Play Kansas City” builds on the [Kansas City Physical Activity Plan](#). With this report, the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program analyzed the state of youth sports and play in the Kansas City region through elevating the voices and experiences of youth as well as gleaned ideas and insights from the community. “Sports” refers to all forms of physical activity that, through organized or casual play, aims to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being.

Findings for this report came through multiple methods: individual interviews with key stakeholders and community members whose work touches the lives of children; discussions with community members at the State of Play Kansas City Summit in April 2024; focus group discussions with young people, coaches, sports administrators and parents; surveys conducted of more than 4,000 youth in the region; media accounts; and existing reports and public data collected by the Aspen Institute. Research occurred from August 2023 to July 2024.



## Some key findings in the report:

- Only 20% of surveyed youth in the Kansas City region receive 60 minutes of physical activity daily as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That’s below physical activity rates for the U.S. (24%), Kansas (24%) and Missouri (26%).
- Within the Kansas City region, highly active children were two times less likely to report feeling depressed nearly every day than inactive youth. Children who received at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily also expressed less anxiety, worry and nervousness more happiness and motivation nearly every day than their peers who reported no physical activity over the course of a week.
- Household income factors into the quality of sports experiences. Surveyed children from low-income households were three times less likely to play on traveling teams than those from high-income homes. Low-income children were less likely to “almost always” or “frequently” have fun in sports (56%) than high-income youth were (72%). Low-income children less frequently reported gaining sports knowledge from their most recent sports experience (56%) than the wealthiest youth (71%).
- Family affluence also impacts the quality of some, but not all, sports and physical activity facilities as perceived by youth. High-income children rated their sports fields, pools and courts more favorably than low-income youth did. Low-income youth had slightly higher perceptions of parks and playgrounds as “good” or “great” compared to high-income youth.
- Having fun (50%) and playing with friends (48%) were the top reasons why all children said they play sports. Winning games (20%) and trying to earn a college scholarship (8%) ranked much lower.

- Schoolwork, fear of injuries, lack of interest in sports, lack of self-confidence in their ability to play sports, and the costs of playing were the top reasons some young people said they don't participate in sports.
- Soccer and basketball are the most popular sports played in the Kansas City region, followed by tackle football, biking, volleyball and baseball. Boys most often want to try tackle football, archery, weightlifting, basketball and soccer. Girls most often desire cheer, volleyball, roller skating, gymnastics and ice skating.

Based on interviews with key stakeholders, this report outlines several key themes as barriers for children to play: transportation to organized activities and play spaces; lack of infrastructure to support youth with disabilities; lack of rec and school sports opportunities, especially for older youth; and mental health struggles.

A key overarching theme we heard in the Kansas City region is that while many quality sports programs exist, the area lacks systems to connect the silos. There aren't enough intentional ways to bring together families, schools, sports providers and government to build collaborative

solutions. Given this challenge, "State of Play Kansas City" makes one recommendation in each for these five important stakeholders in the region (see page 22 for more information):

- **Community sports organizations:** Start a coalition of smaller nonprofits to build sports capacity and advocate for funding.
- **Schools:** Create adaptive sports leagues with disabled and nondisabled athletes.
- **Cities/counties:** Establish local athletic councils to coordinate how sports are offered.
- **States:** Pass state laws requiring coach training and conduct policies in youth sports.
- **Region:** Create a recognition program informed by the Children's Bill of Rights in Sports, which acknowledges that every child has the right to play sports and that the human rights they are born with need to be respected by adults.

There's not a one-size, fits-all answer in Kansas City, or any community, to solve the challenges outlined in this report. And every sector can play a role in developing and implementing solutions. With a passionate sports culture, Kansas City can act and provide more equitable and quality access to sports activities for all children.



**"State of Play Kansas City"** is the Aspen Institute's 14th community report. The Aspen Institute has produced county reports on Tacoma-Pierce County, Washington, Seattle-King County, Washington, and Mobile County, Alabama; a state report on Hawai'i; regional reports on Aspen to Parachute, Colorado, Southeast Michigan, Western New York, Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes, and Central Ohio; and local reports on Oakland, Baltimore, Harlem (New York), and Camden, New Jersey. Stakeholders in those communities have taken actions based on the recommendations and are seeing results. Learn more about State of Play communities: <https://projectplay.org/communities/overview>.

