



STATE OF PLAY

Kansas City

ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS



WELCOME

On behalf of the Kansas City Physical Activity Plan, the Kansas City Healthy Lifestyles Collaborative and Children's Mercy Kansas City, I am pleased to share with you "State of Play Kansas City." This report is the culmination of 12 months of work in partnership with the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, shaped by its Project Play strategic framework and driven by an advisory group of diverse Kansas City leaders representing all four major professional sports teams, parks and recreation departments, school districts, health care providers, disability advocates, transportation advocates, academic institutions, and youth sports providers.

Kansas City is many things. We are the City of Fountains.

We have an outsize love of our city and proudly wear "Kansas City" on much of our clothing. We are sports-crazed — and for good reason. We have three Super Bowl victories and a World Series win within the past decade. We are home of the world's first full-size stadium built solely for a women's pro team. And we are the Soccer Capital of America, even if that title is self-proclaimed.

Kansas City is also full of disparities. Redlining, the systematic disinvestment of some people and neighborhoods in favor of others by government and private entities, was aggressively utilized in Kansas City. Despite the policy being declared unconstitutional 50 years ago, the legacy remains today in the form of dramatic disparities in health outcomes between zip codes. Black and Latino/a residents of Kansas City live on average 18 years less than their White residents. Individuals in the formerly redlined neighborhoods face broad barriers to access health care, quality schools, healthy foods, transportation and, as demonstrated in this report, quality and affordable youth physical activity programs.

We, the members of the State of Play Kansas City Advisory Group, believe that youth sports can be one way forward to address the harmful policies of the past. Our love of sports is the reason seemingly every Kansas City resident wears red on Fridays during football season, more than 1 million people descend on downtown to celebrate Super Bowl and World Series titles, and that Kansas City will host World Cup soccer matches in 2026. We believe this love of sports can be leveraged to create safe and equitable opportunities to be active across our entire region.

This "State of Play Kansas City" report, along with the Kansas City Physical Activity Plan, is a snapshot of how we are serving our children and adolescents through sports and other forms of physical activity. It also serves as a road map to leverage our strengths in the region to address challenges. As stated in the Children's Bill of Rights in Sports (drafted by the Aspen Institute), when delivered well, sports participation is one of society's best tools for addressing a range of larger challenges — from obesity prevention to cancer risk reduction, gender equity to the social inclusion of people with disabilities, and racial bias to the restoration of civic trust across communities.

On behalf of the members of the State of Play Kansas City Advisory Group, I hope that you find value in the information provided in this report, and that you recognize your role supporting youth in our region. If you are a youth sports provider, do your policies and practices align with the Children's Bill of Rights in Sports? If you are a parent, do your children have a voice in the design of their activities by asking them what they want? If you are a child, are you able to share what matters to you with the adults shaping your activities? Working together, we can create safe, equitable and quality sports opportunities for all youth in the region.

Sincerely,



Robin Shook, PhD

Kansas City Healthy Lifestyle Collaborative, Director, Children's Mercy Kansas City

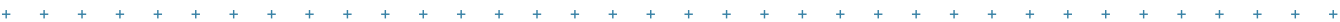
THE VISION

We aspire for every child in the Kansas City region to have the opportunity to be active through sports, play and outdoor recreation, regardless of race, gender, income or ability. We aspire for families to experience holistic health that provides for their physical, mental and social needs and a community in which active living is supported for all.

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 gleaning 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>.

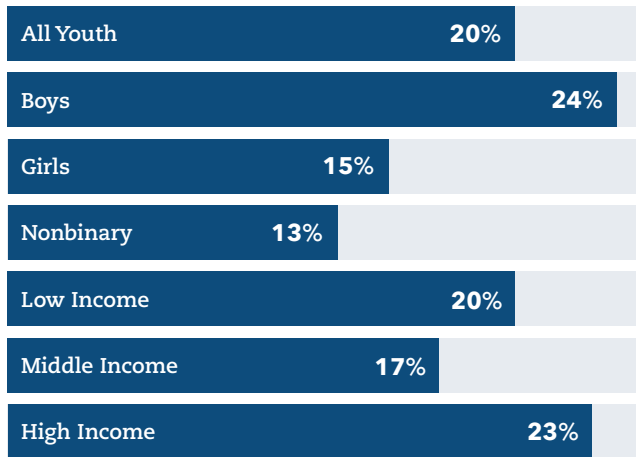
THE STATE OF PLAY IN KANSAS CITY

YOUTH SURVEY RESULTS

The Aspen Institute surveyed 4,186 children in the Kansas City region about their experiences with sports and physical activity. Surveys were distributed primarily in Clay, Jackson and Johnson counties, along with representation from Cass, Wyandotte and Platte counties.

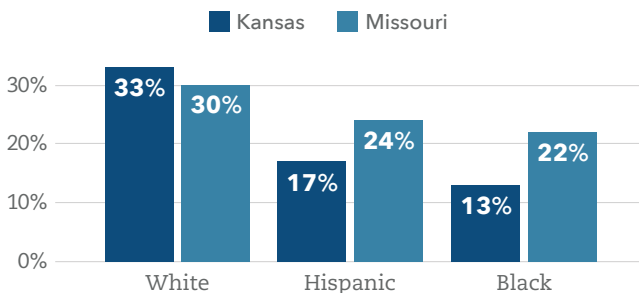
FEW YOUTH ARE ACTIVE ENOUGH

Only 20% of surveyed youth in the Kansas City region meet the CDC's recommendation of 60 minutes of physical activity daily. That's below physical activity rates for the U.S. (24%), Kansas (24%) and Missouri (26%).



Note: Kansas City survey respondents were in grades 3-12.
Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Kansas City Youth Survey

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO GET 60 MINUTES OF DAILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

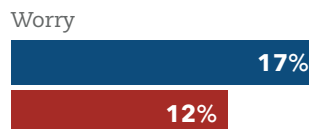
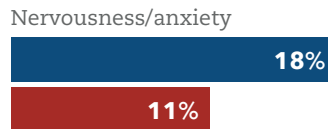
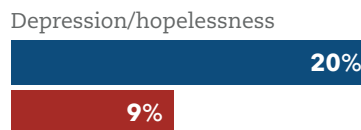


Source: 2021 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

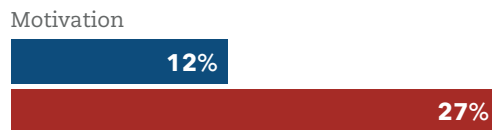
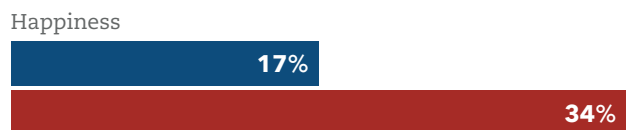
MORE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TRANSLATES TO BETTER MENTAL HEALTH

■ Inactive Youth ■ Highly Active Youth

Negative Emotion Nearly Every Day



Positive Emotion Nearly Every Day



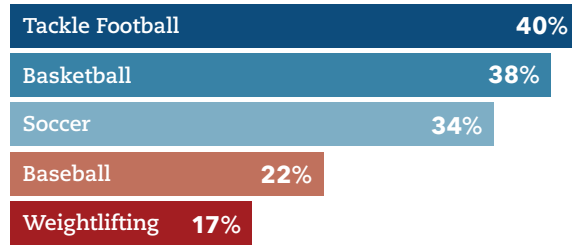
Note: Inactive Youth is defined as zero days with 60 minutes of physical activity per week. Highly Active Youth means seven days with 60 minutes of physical activity per week.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Kansas City Youth Survey

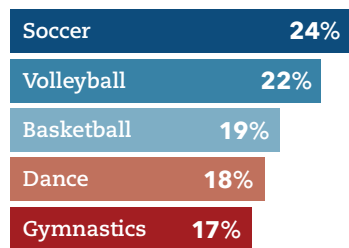
TOP SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES YOUTH REGULARLY PLAY

(Played at least 20 times in the past year on team or with friends)

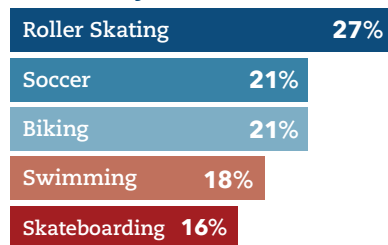
Boys



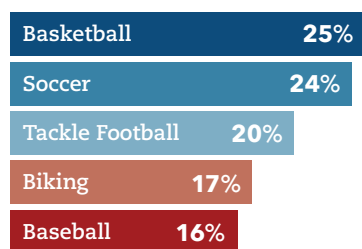
Girls



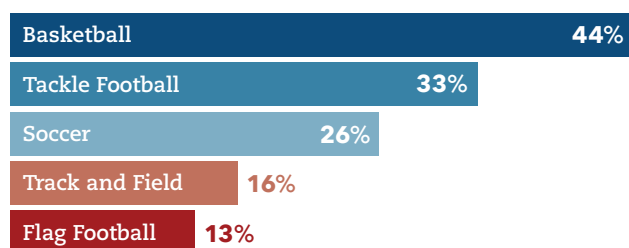
Nonbinary




White




Black




Tackle football participation in Kansas City is incredibly popular no matter the age or household income level. Only 15% of surveyed boys and 4% of girls regularly play flag football. Nationally, younger children play flag far more frequently than tackle.



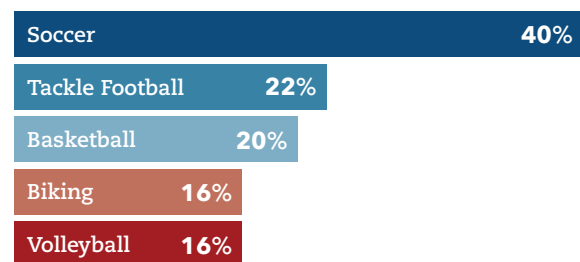
Youth who identify as nonbinary are almost two times more likely to regularly participate in roller skating than girls.



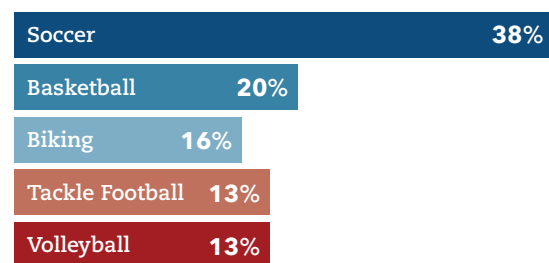
Only 6% of surveyed Black youth and 9% of Latino/a youth regularly play baseball.



Latino/a



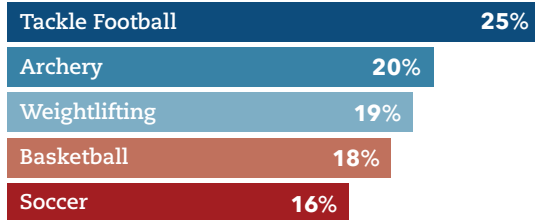
Asian



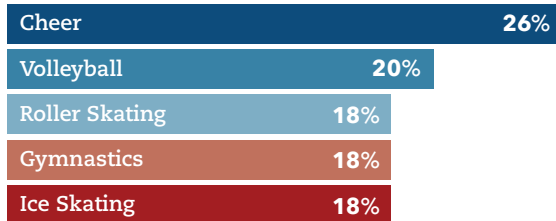
Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Kansas City Youth Survey

TOP SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES YOUTH WANT TO TRY

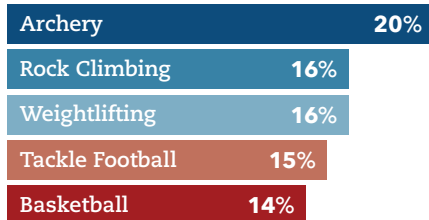
Boys



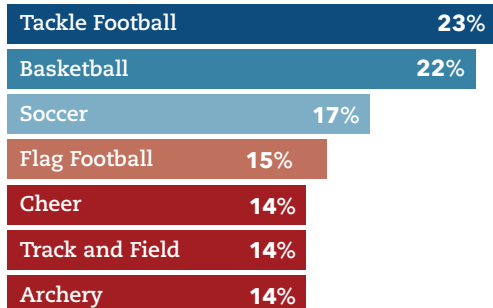
Girls



White



Black



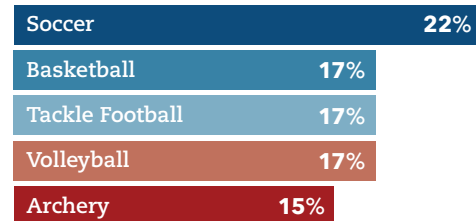
Tackle football is regularly played at nearly the same rate no matter the household income. In many other State of Play communities, low-income youth play tackle football far more than their peers.



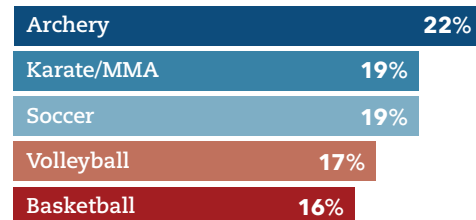
Archery and basketball are top five sports that surveyed White, Black, Latino/a and Asian children all want to try.



Latino/a

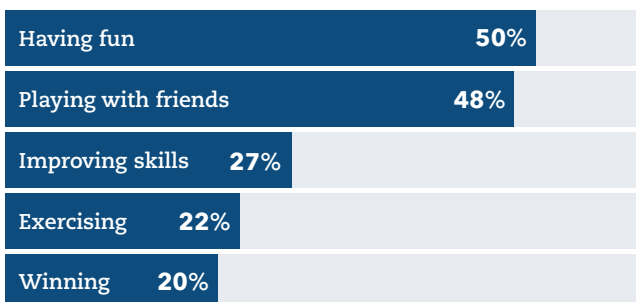


Asian



Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Kansas City Youth Survey

WHAT YOUTH LIKE MOST ABOUT PLAYING SPORTS



Earning a college scholarship ranked 11th as to why surveyed youth (8%) play sports.



Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Kansas City Youth Survey

WHY SOME YOUTH DON'T PLAY SPORTS

I don't want to get hurt	26%
No time to play due to schoolwork	25%
I'm not interested in sports	23%
I'm not good enough to play	23%
Sports are too expensive	22%

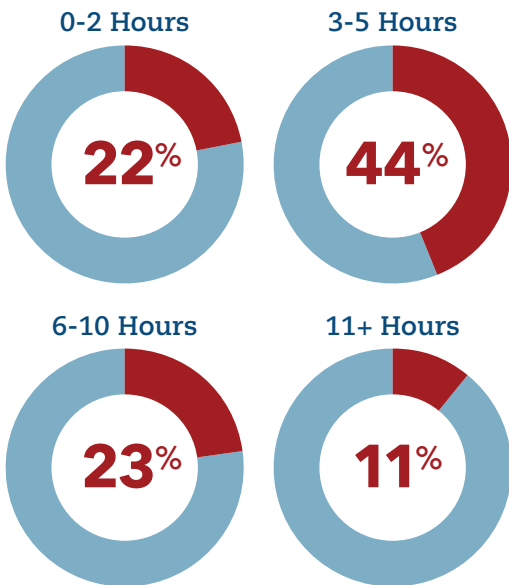
Youth with disabilities (41%) are more likely than youth without disabilities (25%) to say they do not play sports due to expenses.



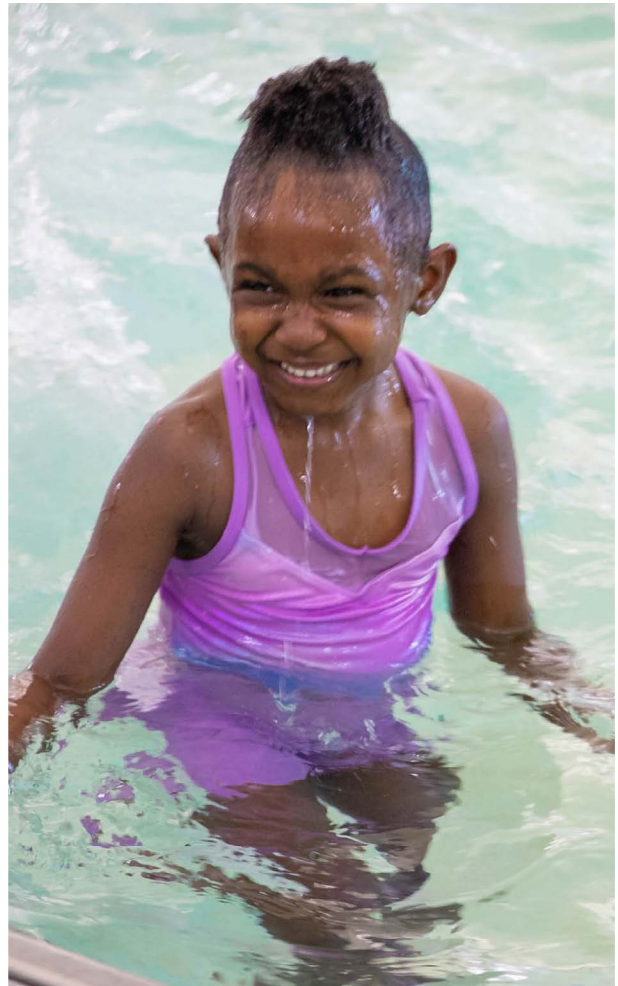
KNEE INJURY PREVENTION

Knees are the levers of life, the joints that unlock physical activity habits into adulthood. The trend in high school sports is not good: ACL injuries among high school athletes have grown 26% over 15 years, according to research developed by leading organizations in the National ACL Injury Coalition. Check out resources to help prevent knee injuries: <https://projectplay.org/resources>.

HOURS YOUTH SPENT DAILY ON SCREENS FOR FUN OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL



Black children are two times more likely to spend 11 or more hours on their screen than White youth.

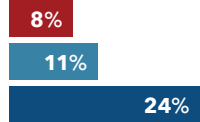


Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Kansas City Youth Survey

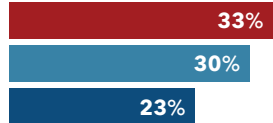
HOW MONEY IMPACTS SPORTS PARTICIPATION AND EXPERIENCES

■ Low Income ■ Medium Income ■ High Income

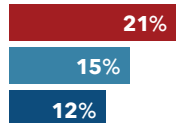
Travel Team Sports Participation



Youth Who Don't Play Sports Because It's Too Expensive



Youth Who Don't Play Sports Due to Family/Job Responsibilities



Youth Who Had Fun in Most Recent Sport Played*



Youth Who Learned More about How to Play Sports in Most Recent Sport Played*



High-income youth are two times more likely to regularly play baseball than low-income youth. That's the largest gap by income for any sport.



* Responded "Almost always" or "Frequently"

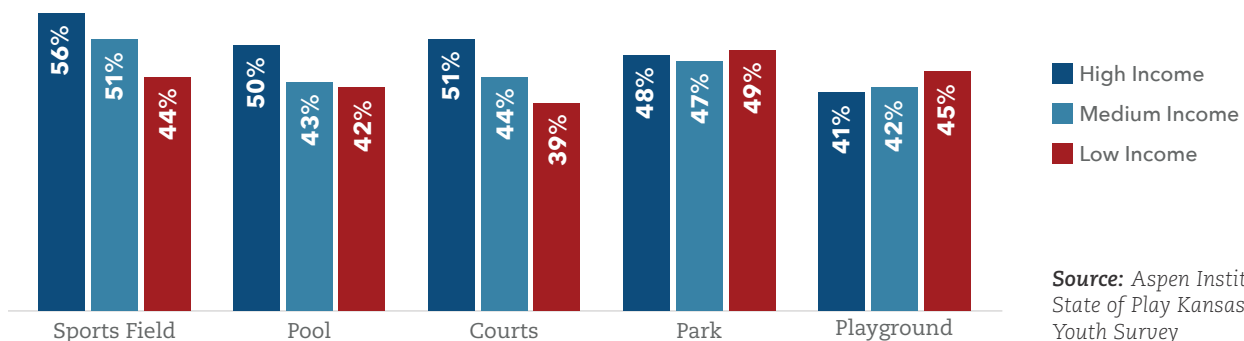
Note: Family affluence was assessed through proxy questions for family household income.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Kansas City Youth Survey



QUALITY OF PLAY AND SPORTS FACILITIES

Youth who rated the spaces where they play as "great" or "good" based on their family's household income.

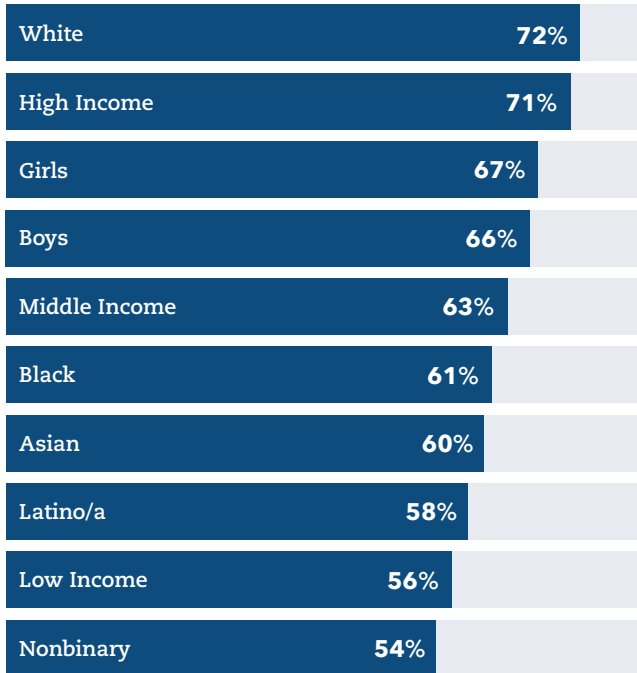


Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Kansas City Youth Survey

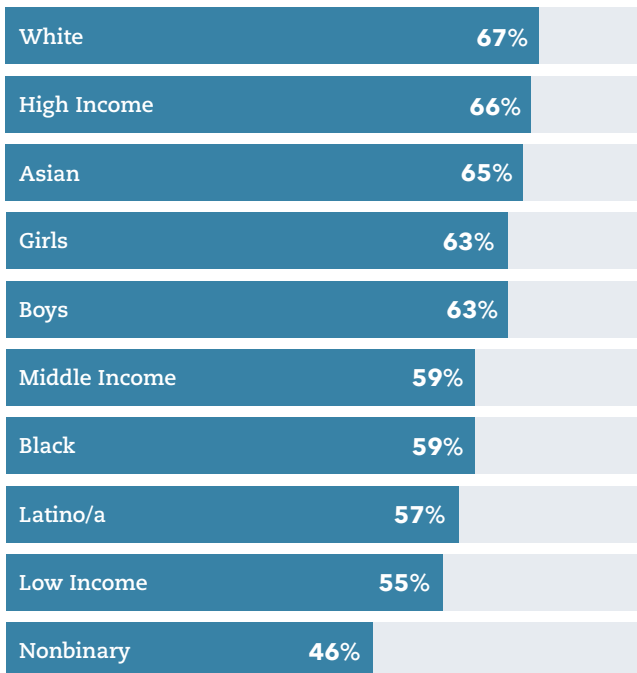
YOUTH PERCEPTION OF COACHES

(Responded “Almost always true” or “Frequently true”)

Coach Encouraged Me to Learn New Skills



Coach Told Us We’re All Important to Team Success



Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Kansas City Youth Survey



Youth who are Latino/a, Asian or Black reported more negative perceptions of their coaches than White children.



PROJECT PLAY FRAMEWORKS

Three frameworks guide Project Play’s work to increase sports participation and physical activity among young people.

YOUTH SPORTS PLAYBOOK

Released in 2015, the report is a unifying model for action to increase youth sports participation and is anchored in the values of health, equity and inclusion. Project Play offers eight strategies for the eight sectors that touch the lives of children, aggregating the most promising ideas that emerged from two years of roundtables with more than 250 thought leaders.

- [Ask Kids What They Want](#)
- [Revitalize In-Town Leagues](#)
- [Train All Coaches](#)
- [Reintroduce Free Play](#)
- [Think Small](#)
- [Emphasize Prevention](#)
- [Encourage Sport Sampling](#)
- [Design for Development](#)

For more on the framework of each play, see the full report at projectplay.org/youth-sports/playbook.





SCHOOL SPORTS PLAYBOOK

Developed in 2022, [this report](#) recognizes that students need more options for physical activity, whether through community partnerships, intramurals, student-led clubs or other innovations that supplement the standard menu of interscholastic teams. The playbook is a product of two years of research with input from more than 60 experts. Project Play offers eight strategies to help principals and school leaders update the traditional high school sports model.

- [Align School Sports with School Mission](#)
- [Understand Your Student Population](#)
- [Create Personal Activity Plans](#)
- [Introduce Other Forms of Play](#)
- [Develop Community Partnerships](#)
- [Bolster Coaching Education](#)
- [Prioritize Health and Safety](#)
- [Measure and Evaluate Programs](#)

For more on the framework of each play, see the full report at as.pn/playbook.

CHILDREN'S BILL OF RIGHTS IN SPORTS

Built in 2021, the [Children's Bill of Rights in Sports](#) creates a shared cultural understanding that all youth should have the opportunity to develop as people through sports. Every child has the right to play sports, and when in the care of adults, the human rights they are born with need to be respected. Developed by Project Play, with a working group of human rights and sports policy experts, the Children's Bill of Rights in Sports identifies eight rights.

- To play sports
- To safe and healthy environments
- To qualified program leaders
- To developmentally appropriate play
- To share in the planning and delivery of their activities
- To an equal opportunity for personal growth
- To be treated with dignity
- To enjoy themselves

Learn more at as.pn/childrensrights.

Key Barriers to Sports Activity

To assess what factors prevent Kansas City-area children from accessing sports and physical activity, the Aspen Institute spoke with many stakeholders — including focus groups with young people — and reviewed existing research within the region. Four key themes emerged.

Transportation

Connecting youth with programs and facilities can be challenging given limited public transportation in the region and safety fears. Most fields are on the outskirts in the Kansas City suburbs, making it challenging for inner-city children to access them. Public transportation is more centrally located in the region, including the free streetcar system.

Even within some local neighborhoods, accessing sports can be difficult. Some communities don't have sidewalks, or children don't feel safe walking to and from play areas. Among surveyed children who indicated they don't visit parks and green spaces as often as they would like, 12% said that's because the walk there is not safe. Kansas City has the country's highest percentage of chronically homeless people who can't find shelter, [according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#). Gun-related injuries among youth are on pace to be higher in 2024 than in 2023, which was Kansas City's deadliest year ever recorded, [according to the Kansas City Star](#).



Transportation is definitely a hindrance here for after-school sports.”

“Transportation is definitely a hindrance here for after-school sports,” said the parent of a

14-year-old girl. “Lots of people are working more in the evenings. Unless you have a mature teenager who can figure out how to get home or they feel safe walking, a lot of parents can't get transportation, so their child is missing out on an activity. We see more of our youth engaged in the wrong things because they can't get somewhere.”

Our survey showed 77% of youth have a family member who usually drives them to play spaces, practices or games. Children from low-income households (61%) are far less likely to use family members for transportation than those from middle-income homes (76%) and high-income homes (83%). Only 1% of all surveyed youth said they use public transportation to reach play spaces and sports activities.

Kansas City, Missouri, is the only local jurisdiction with a dedicated transit tax. In 2020, before the pandemic, Kansas City became the first major U.S. city to offer free buses, subsidizing the program from its half-cent public transit sales tax. Suburbs that also contract with the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority did the same.

The city then diverted \$22 million from sales tax revenues that would have supported the bus system — the equivalent of more than two years of the subsidized fares — to instead pay for new LED streetlights. The Kansas City Transportation Authority made up for lost sales tax revenue with COVID-19 federal relief dollars that were held in reserve and are now running out, [according to NPR](#).

Buses will stay free at least through April 2025 after the Kansas City Council renewed its annual contract with KCTA. But cuts in future service are possible as the agency examines an alternative called “functional free fare,” which could reimpose fares for some riders and keep it free for others for financial and operational reasons.

Given security issues that have occurred on buses, KCTA is considering whether free riders might need to carry a personalized bus pass that could be withdrawn if they cause trouble for other riders or bus drivers.

Increasing the region's use of buses is a goal some leaders hope to begin accomplishing through Kansas City hosting the FIFA men's World Cup in 2026.

"As the largest sporting event in the history of the world, the 2026 FIFA World Cup is poised to generate an unprecedented influx of visitors, and transportation — specifically safe, low-carbon transit options — is top of mind as we prepare for both visitors and the local community," said Adam Lewis, who is leading human rights, social impact and sustainability work for Kansas City's World Cup efforts. "This also serves as an incredible opportunity to build our capacity and comfort using mass transit options to reach vital community services — including access to play. We're leveraging the ongoing investments to public transit — increased bus lines and the KC Streetcar — to generate a ton of data around where an expanded transit system could benefit the community the most."

The Children's Mercy Kansas City 2022-25 [community health needs implementation strategy](#) identified the need to improve the community's built environment to impact a person's ability to be physically active. Whether someone goes on a bicycle ride or walks to the grocery store, infrastructure can encourage or limit physical activity.

Strategies to improve infrastructure were identified in the [Kansas City Physical Activity Plan](#). Released in 2020 to create a culture of active living with the region, the plan gave the area grades of F for active transportation and C- for community and built environment.

Community-Led Solutions

Given the transportation challenges, some program providers buy vans to transport children to activities. For instance, Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Kansas City is trying to create a partnership with AARP for retirees to volunteer and drive children home after practices and games. Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Kansas City has vans but lacks drivers. "There are a lot of parents who don't have the option to pick up their child later," said Waymond King, senior director of healthy lifestyle for Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Kansas City. "We run routes at the end of the day to make sure kids get home, but it's not consistent in every club because we don't have staff available to run those routes. We could possibly tap into AARP with people who are active and receive a license to drive these routes."

Another potential local resource is [Uncover KC](#), which could help connect smaller sports nonprofits with each other and recruit volunteers to assist in various duties, including serving as coaches or supporting transportation needs. Uncover KC identifies communities with the most need and connects them with individuals and organizations best suited to serve them. Uncover KC has a [sports and recreation category](#) in its directory that includes 17 such organizations, including KC Marathon, Kansas City Royals Urban Youth Academy and Girls on the Run.

Lack of Infrastructure to Support Youth with Disabilities

Brinley Hutson's inspiring story of how she thrives as an Olathe East High School athlete with a prosthetic leg is well-documented in [local media](#). What's less known is how fortunate Hutson was to connect with the right organizations to keep playing sports six months after a life-saving leg amputation. Kim Hutson, Brinley's mom, said a friend forwarded a random Facebook post advertising a track and field clinic for people with disabilities, connecting the family to [The Whole Person](#), an organization that helps people with disabilities live independent lives.

"It was a challenge at first to connect with the right organizations to provide support," Kim Hutson said. "We knew about some organizations that were helpful with grants, but adaptive sports were a very new concept for us, and we really didn't know what that looked like. Getting connected with The Whole Person was huge for Brinley to really realize what else is out there."

We heard that learning about diverse sports opportunities is a problem for all youth. This gap gets magnified for children with disabilities.

Even though several Kansas City organizations make an impact in the disability sports space, information often gets shared by word of mouth rather than systematic methods that could increase the number of participants. Only 2% of regional sports and physical activity providers focus on serving people with developmental or physical disabilities, according to preliminary research by the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

In our youth survey, children with disabilities were more likely than their peers to say they do not play sports due to costs. Finding accessible facilities to play sports can be challenging too. Consider the case of the Kansas City Kings wheelchair basketball team, which practices at Kemper Arena and Lee's Summit schools. "A lot of venues you can't get into unless you're booked years in advance," said Matt Bollig, the Kings' founder. "Kemper is a mecca for youth sports tournaments on weekends, but we run into problems where we can't get in line to book it and only one elevator works there, so hosting tournaments is not possible."



When Bollig moved to Kansas City around 2016, he noticed the region basically had no adaptive team sports programs for children. He got permission to start wheelchair basketball with Midwest Adaptive Sports, a Kansas City-based nonprofit established in 2011 for skiing and swimming. By 2024, about 55 children played in the basketball program. Additional kids play tennis, rugby, football and softball through Midwest Adaptive Sports, which also works in some local schools to promote sports through P.E. classes.

To help alleviate costs, Variety KC provides wheelchairs for most children who participate in an organized sports program through one of its partners (Kansas City Kings, Midwest Adaptive Sports and Bloc Life for weightlifting). Children with disabilities can apply for a sports gift at varietykc.org/get-help/sports-application. Established in 1934, Variety KC provides mobility and communications equipment to children with all types of disabilities (physical or cognitive). YMCA of Greater Kansas City also provides adaptive equipment through its Challenger program.

While these opportunities benefit some children, Bollig worries most about what he calls the “hidden minority” among young people. “They may have a missing foot or ankle area, and those are the athletes we miss a lot because they think they’re not eligible to play since they don’t use a wheelchair daily,” he said. “It would be a huge opportunity for our program to reach more of those people.”

As impactful as Midwest Adaptive Sports is, there are limitations since it’s a volunteer-based organization. The Kansas City Kings are building a pipeline of future coaches — including five players now playing wheelchair basketball in college — but the program predominantly serves only Lee’s Summit and the southeast part of the Kansas City region.

“Where we struggle is inner-city schools and when all kids get older,” Bollig said. “When you get to the high school level, there’s not much here.”

Community-Led Solutions

Bollig, the Kansas City Kings founder, suggested the region could take a page from the Chicago area’s promising recreational model to build better infrastructure to support youth with disabilities. Since 1976, the Lincolnway Special Recreation Association (LWSRA) has provided recreation services for individuals with disabilities through cooperative agreements with its eight member park districts in metro Chicago.

LWSRA serves over 400 individuals through more than 200 programs annually. Participants range from preschool through adults who have recreation needs that are not met by traditional park district programs. LWSRA programs include participation in Special Olympics Illinois, Paralympic sports, social programs, trips, special events, summer camps, after-school care and adult daytime activities. Learn more at lwsra.org.

Lack of Rec and School Sports Opportunities, Especially for Older Youth

The Kansas City region is populated with travel sports providers and elite academies that contribute to America's highly commercialized youth sports landscape. One example locally is Homefield Kansas City, which was founded in 2019. Homefield has state-of-the-art indoor facilities in Olathe; Kansas City, Missouri; and Kansas City, Kansas.

Opened in 2024, Homefield's 150,000-square-foot Kansas City, Kansas, indoor sports arena includes 12 volleyball courts that convert to 10 basketball courts, a physical therapy center, a parents' lounge, a restaurant/bar with food made onsite, and high-definition cameras suspended from the ceiling so families can watch games from afar. It's elite sports dollars at work.

State and local tax incentives designed to attract tourists from outside Kansas helped pay for the project, [according to The Kansas City Star](#). Homefield has so far received \$116 million in STAR bonds, a program that redirects sales taxes to help offset the cost of major projects. Also, the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas, approved the creation of a Community Improvement District, adding an extra 2% sales tax for visitors. Every school district in Wyandotte County has access to run programming at Homefield facilities with their coaches at no cost, said Dustin Lewis, president of Homefield Kansas City.

Homefield's stated objective is "for kids to practice and play like professionals." Except they're children, not professionals. Our survey of Kansas City-area youth found that having fun (50%) and playing with friends (48%) are the most important reasons children play sports. Improving skills (27%), winning games (22%) and chasing college scholarships (8%) rank much lower.

Like many communities around the country, Kansas City's youth sports ecosystem often caters quality experiences and facilities to a smaller number of well-resourced families. Our survey shows that only 17% of local children have played sports on a travel team. Far more children have played sports at schools, recreation centers and playgrounds. Children from high-income households are three times more likely to play travel sports than those from low-income homes and twice as likely than kids from medium-income homes.



There's a huge need for more courts and fields here."

"There's a huge need for more courts and fields here," said a father in Kansas City, Kansas. "Homefield looks amazing, but the costs may be difficult for us. I don't think it will help people around here. The one in Olathe is not feasible for families."

Playing on a team at Homefield can cost several hundred dollars a month. Lewis said Homefield's foundation has raised about \$140,000 for need-based aid to help some children access its programs. And he noted that the newest Homefield facility has a bus stop in front of it, meaning children have an opportunity to travel there for free using RideKC.

"I grew up in a poor, rural area of Missouri, and there's no way I could have afforded this," Lewis said. "I am that kid. I played two sports in college, and it changed my life. I agree there's a host of things we can be doing to improve our rec programs and access to our facilities."

As more travel teams and elite academies have been created in the region, fewer opportunities exist for quality, affordable, community-based sports programming.

Adults who can most support rec sports often take their time and money to travel sports. Some children never get exposed to sports at young ages, putting them far behind to later make school teams.



Competitive sports here are about prestige and they're out of control."

"Competitive sports here are about prestige and they're out of control," said the father of a 14-year-old who plays multiple sports. "Kids are burned out because they're playing the same sport all year. I told my son's coach, 'Listen, my son is playing every sport, so we'll be there when we can,' and he basically got penalized at age 9. I think he's in a better spot now because he's playing with friends and just playing rec ball, but those options disappear as you get older."

Some parents said they have a negative connotation about the quality of rec sports, so much so that Jeff Sopha, amateur development

liaison for the Royals Amateur Development System, uses the terms "house ball" or "town ball" instead of "rec ball." Sopha believes the region must elevate the quality of coaching, especially providing more knowledge to first-time volunteer coaches. The Royals provide curriculum and trainings to coaches.

There's also a feeling among some Kansas City-area coaches that information that could improve the quality of rec sports does not get disseminated. The theory is that's because commercialized sports providers with better coaches want to control competition by not sharing their sport knowledge with others.

"Somewhere there's a middle ground between crazy people who want to play every weekend at ages 9 to 11 versus just wanting my kid to play rec ball 12 games per season and be done," said a father who coaches travel hockey and baseball. "The middle ground is where the development of players occurs and people enjoy it. But the system keeps pushing people upward because it's this race to nowhere. Who can put a barrier on that and, at the same time, push people back to the middle?"



"You're not going to convince people one path is right and one path is wrong," added the father. "But you can at least start a discussion. People listen to whatever message is out there, and right now there is no message other than, 'Pay your

money and what works for me (the travel sports provider) is what I want you to think works for you.' The only access being shared is from people who can benefit from that message."

Community-Led Solutions

The **Royals Amateur Development System** created an eight-team baseball league for players cut by their high school teams in north Kansas City and the south side of Johnson County. Clubs and academies take on the additional players in their programs (with reduced fees) just for 12 to 14 games. Instead of these cut players only working on hitting during the high school season, they participate in meaningful games. Some receive quality coaching for the first time and improve skills. The top teams from the north and south play in a championship game.

With younger girls playing flag football more, the **Kansas City Chiefs** are trying to encourage more high schools to sponsor the sport by making it as easy as possible to start flag programs. The Chiefs provide \$6,000 for each school and connect teams with USA Football equipment kits, grant opportunities for Nike jerseys, and resources for coaches including the rule book, practice plans and additional grant possibilities. Missouri has 20 high school flag programs and needs 30 more to make it a state-sanctioned sport. Kansas only has two schools with flag and needs 28 more. "Many coaches in other sports are worried we're taking their athletes away," said Sheila Sickau, youth marketing manager for the Chiefs. "The reality is we're creating more opportunities for those five girls who got cut from the soccer team and need somewhere to play sports."

Mental Health Struggles

At one of our focus groups, we posed a question about what adults should know about children's experiences with sports and physical activity that might help more kids move their bodies. A teenage boy flipped the question around in his answer.

"I feel like it's more powerful if other kids tell kids how it helps with your mental health," the boy said. "That will motivate a kid more than if it's coming from an adult. How is being on your phone and playing video games going to help you in 20 years compared to going outside, playing more and being more productive? How is it going to help you feel OK now?"

The mental health struggles for children are real. So is the value of physical activity. When sports activities are delivered properly, children in Kansas City told us they receive immense benefits, such as joy, distractions from problems at home and school, and a sense of freedom.

In our youth survey, highly active children were two times less likely to report feeling depressed than inactive youth. Children who received at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily also expressed less anxiety, worry and nervousness and more happiness and motivation nearly every day than their peers who reported no physical activity over the course of a week.

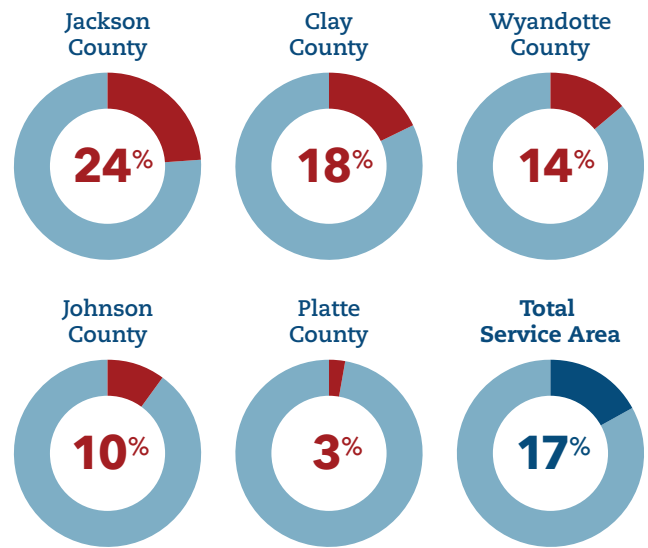
Separate studies show social media has emerged as an important contributor to the mental health crisis among young people. Adolescents (ages 12-15) who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the [risk](#) of anxiety and depression symptoms, and the average daily use in this age group, as of the summer of 2023, was [4.8 hours](#). Additionally, [nearly half of adolescents](#) say social media makes them feel worse about their bodies. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called for [a warning label on social media platforms](#), citing evidence from tobacco studies that warning labels can increase awareness and change behavior.

About 14% of Kansas City-area parents believe that their school-age child’s mental health is “fair” or “poor,” according to a [2022 community health needs assessment of children’s health](#) by Children’s Mercy Kansas City. That rate is well above the national average and marks a statistically significant increase for the region since 2012.

Clay County (17%) had the highest percentage of local parents reporting “fair” or “poor” mental health in their children. About 12% of parents in the region indicated their children show signs of depression — more than double the U.S. average of 5%. Depression rates were unfavorably high in Clay, Jackson and Wyandotte counties. Nearly half of children in the Kansas City region (47%) had at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), meaning encountering a stressful or traumatic event such as growing up around violence, abuse, neglect, parental abandonment, a parent with a mental health condition, and substance abuse problems in the home.

Given the mental health benefits associated with physical activity, schools are a valuable location for children to be active. More Kansas City-area children play sports in P.E. (59%) than any other location except at home (62%), according to our youth survey. Yet the amount of physical

3+ ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES IN KANSAS CITY REGION



Source: 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment, Children’s Mercy Kansas City

activity that children obtain at school can vary drastically depending on the school. In our survey, children from low-income homes were two times more likely to have no P.E. class each week than their peers from middle- and high-income households.

In focus groups with middle school P.E. teachers from Kansas City, Kansas, public schools, teachers stressed that students are increasingly less motivated to be physically active in P.E. class. “You’ll have a percentage of students who don’t even want to walk,” a teacher said. “You tell them they can listen to their own music or read a book while walking, and they still won’t be motivated to do it.”

Several teachers said they would love to organize classes differently to motivate individual students, such as offering personal fitness plans, but increasingly larger class sizes combined with small gyms and weight rooms can make such efforts very difficult.

Teachers said that successful P.E. classes involve providing a variety of sports and teaching skills through creative games that students may enjoy. More than half of surveyed Kansas City-area youth (56%) said adults never or rarely ask them what they want to do in P.E. or sports practices.

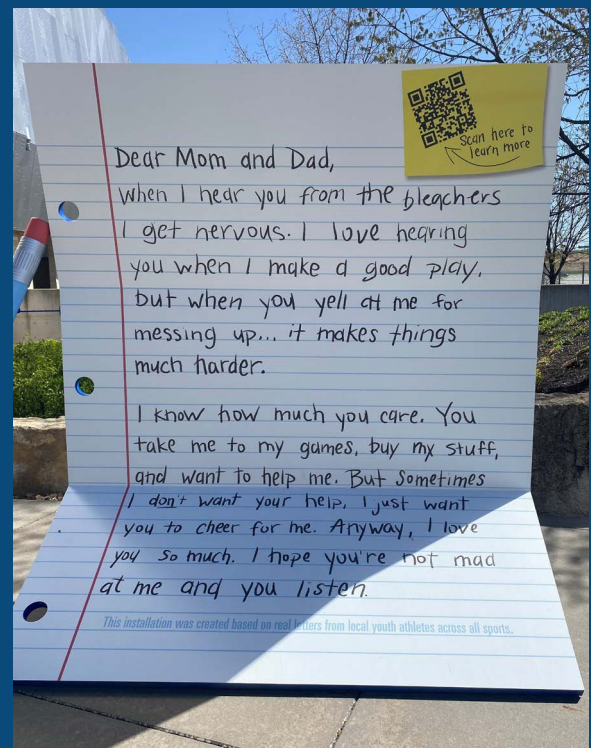
“Communication is important,” said one P.E. teacher. “Explain to students why things are

scheduled the way they are. Teachers need to have energy. You can’t ask students to do things you won’t do. Pump them up a little. Hold their hand sometimes. Give them hugs. It’s us sometimes. When kids are demotivated, sometimes it’s purely my fault.”

Community-Led Solutions

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas City and the Kansas City Royals are partnering on a public campaign called **Shut Out the Stigma**. As part of the initiative, they produced a documentary called “Not Good Enough” that challenges parents and coaches to think about how their actions can negatively affect the mental health of youth athletes. There’s also a **free online course** for parents and coaches to learn how to balance constructive feedback with encouragement and support. Additional resources, such as **parent checklists**, could help. Shut Out the Stigma shared open letters from young athletes written to their parents about the pressures they feel in sports to be perfect. The Royals enlarged the letters and shared them around town.

Children’s Mercy Kansas City announced a comprehensive initiative to illuminate and address the mental health needs of children and teens in the community—four strategies, 14 projects and a new \$150 million investment impacting more than 80,000 kids. It’s the largest-of-its-kind in the region. Learn more at www.childrensmercy.org/illuminate.





Recommendations

The Aspen Institute recommendations are made with the intent to identify systemic changes that can grow quality access to sports and physical activity for children, especially underrepresented populations identified in this report. Recommendations are based on conversations we had with stakeholders in the region, including attendees at our State of Play Kansas City Summit in April 2024, and models that other communities in the U.S. are trying.

One important theme we heard in the Kansas City region is that while many quality sports programs exist, the area lacks systems. There aren't enough intentional ways to connect families, schools, sports providers and governments together to build collaborative solutions.

“Organizations are working in silos, not sharing resources, and essentially fighting for the same children to keep them,” said Jesus Perez, who runs a free soccer and youth development program through Guadalupe Centers for Latino/a children in Kansas City. “(Top) players in the metro area are being pulled out to play in suburban leagues, where costs are extremely high and not accessible for everybody. There’s not a coalition to bring together like-minded individuals serving these communities with sports as a driver for youth development.”

Given this challenge, we framed our recommendations around five key stakeholder groups: community sports organizations, schools, city and county governments, state governments and the broader Kansas City region. We made one recommendation for each stakeholder group.

Community Sports Organizations

Start a coalition of smaller nonprofits to build capacity and advocate for funding.

A significant development happened in 2024 for children in northeast Kansas City, Missouri, when the City Council approved \$3 million for upgrades at the popular 9th and Van Brunt soccer fields. The journey to passage over 15 years was a contentious one, pitting neighborhoods against club and pay-to-play leagues that often dominated the park during peak hours, [according to the Northeast News](#). At one point in 2023, as progress was being made, a city council member redirected \$2.75 million in improvement funding for the soccer park to the Bartle Hall convention center for new carpeting.

The community was upset. About 700 residents signed a petition demanding money for 9th and Van Brunt to fund new turf for the existing field and to create a second turf field and futsal courts. Latino children from the Royogoku Soccer Academy testified before the City Council to plead for better fields than the damaged turf currently there.

While success stories like this exist, they are rare and illustrate a broader concern. One frustration we heard in the Kansas City area is that the Black and Latino/a communities do not receive enough funding and do not have quality facilities for smaller organizations to help underserved children access sports and other forms of physical activity.

“It’s not rocket science to know which kids need help the most,” said the leader of a nonprofit that serves inner-city children. “We have a lot of ground to make up, but the major funders in Kansas City don’t have relationships with people on the ground. It’s frustrating to hear them say they don’t know what to do to grow access. Relationships have to be developed.”



Kansas City needs more bridges between funders and boots-on-the-ground community leaders to directly build relationships that can serve neighborhoods’ needs. Smaller nonprofits would benefit from collaborating to form their own voice. Instead of waiting 15 years for improvements to soccer fields, local nonprofits could create a coalition to advocate for funding of youth sports programming and facilities in inner-city neighborhoods — money that too often slips through the cracks. Local nonprofits could apply a regional needs assessment to ensure areas in need are being served and build measurements for success to tell their story.

Sports providers in Kansas City find that very few donors support sports for the sake of sports anymore. The coalition would have to demonstrate how sports can provide physical, social, emotional, behavioral and academic benefits. Sports providers who intentionally commit to developing children as citizens, not just athletes, are more likely to be funded.



A coalition would allow funders to see strength in numbers — a wider number of kids and families impacted by our collective services.”

“A coalition would allow funders to see strength in numbers — a wider number of kids and families impacted by our collective services,” said Adrion Roberson, co-founder of the KC United! Youth/Family Sports & Education Initiative in Wyandotte County. “If we can show data with increased sports participation while math or reading levels are up or behavior improvements, that will show why we need more funding in these communities.”

The coalition would have to do more than ask for money. It would need to develop a plan for how its organizations would spend the money and create benchmarks that evaluate the effectiveness of programming.

Over time, a Kansas City coalition could create peer-to-peer networking with shared resources and exchanges of ideas. It could deliver programming and strengthen organizational infrastructure. It could generate local research and aggregate the impact of organizations. And it could raise public awareness of neighborhood needs and drive public policy changes.

Cataloging who’s providing sports and physical activity would be important for a consortium. For instance, the City of Boston recently published a [youth sports online directory](#) to help identify neighborhood sports programming and facilities. Users can search by specific sports, seasonal availability, gender accommodations, language, age group, and costs for each program. The

Boston mayor’s office has started offering up to \$5,000 in grants per organization to nonprofits aiming to eliminate barriers of entry into sports.

Kansas City can do the same. Locally, cataloging efforts are being made by the Kansas City Physical Activity Ecosystem Mapping Project, which is funded by Children’s Mercy Kansas City through the Kansas City Physical Activity Plan. The University of Missouri-Kansas City’s Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership is creating a regional map to understand the system of programs and organizations associated with encouraging and enabling youth physical activity in the region. This includes tracking direct service providers of sports programs with hopes to create a searchable database that the public can use.

No matter the direction Kansas City takes, the larger point is this: Funders need to develop more relationships with Black and Latino/a communities that generate more efficient investment into their neighborhoods for sports and play.

“There’s a definite haves vs. have-nots in Kansas City in which kids have resources based on where they live,” said Bill Brandmeyer, founder of the ShareWaves Foundation, which distributes micro-grants to help lower-income kids access sports. “It’s systemic, it’s a problem and it’s divided us. But it also could be fixed if we have the right group of people in a room.”



Two Models in Other U.S. Cities

Oakland, California

Positive Coaching Alliance's Sports Equity Coalition aims to build community ownership of strategies in Oakland to remedy the negative impact systemic racism has had on the youth sports space. Members include education leaders, youth sports professionals, government leaders, community stakeholders, minority business leaders and professional athletes.

The coalition created the Oakland **Sports Equity Agenda**, which outlines goals and strategies to increase youth sports participation rates in low-income neighborhoods (especially for BIPOC girls), identify more BIPOC coaches and improve the quality of coach education to create better experiences for children.

Through monthly coalition meetings, the Oakland Unified School District and fellow coalition partners created a district-led sports league in district elementary schools. Coalition members provided the programming and received funding to do so. This effort created 4,000 new sports opportunities for low-income youth across the city in sports and activities including baseball, golf, hip-hop dance, skateboarding, soccer and softball. The programming increased sports participation rates in BIPOC neighborhoods and brought in more coaches of color.

Washington D.C.

The **Fight for Children Youth Development Institute** serves as a collaborative network of regional nonprofits focused on improving the lives of young people through sports. The effort focuses on providing customized resources and services to nonprofit partners that address their fundraising, impact measurement, board and programming needs. There are 34 nonprofit partners representing 35 sports within Fight for Children's network.

The spirit of the model is that it's an a la carte menu of options to help nonprofits build out infrastructure. Organizations can find what's most relevant and meaningful to them at a given time, recognizing that they don't have the capacity to participate in everything that's offered.



Schools

Create adaptive sports leagues with disabled and non-disabled athletes.

Children with disabilities often face more barriers to access sports. These challenges exist due to lack of awareness from those without disabilities to include them, lack of opportunities for training and competition, lack of accessible facilities, limited resources and perceptions about the interests and abilities of youth with disabilities to play sports.

Greater promotion in schools of integrated sports — meaning pairing children with and without physical or intellectual disabilities on the same team — can help increase access to sports for children with disabilities. Nationally, Special Olympics offers children with and without intellectual disabilities to play on the same team through Unified Sports, often in schools. Kansas reported in 2022-23 having 35 schools with Unified bowling teams — the only Unified school sport in the state, and Missouri had no Unified school teams, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.

While more Unified opportunities are needed in schools, the situation is even more challenging to access adaptive sports in schools. Only six states (not including Kansas or Missouri) have schools with adaptive basketball programs, whether integrated or not. Kansas City-area schools could create a local adaptive sports league in partnership with adaptive sports providers, such as Midwest Adaptive Sports and its Kansas City Kings wheelchair basketball team, YMCA Challenger, American Association of Adaptive Sports Programs and Move United.

Local school districts could start by piloting integrated wheelchair basketball leagues, meaning children with and without disabilities play on the same team.

Schools have often overlooked the requirement to provide sports for students with physical disabilities. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) of the U.S. Department of Education has urged schools to create interscholastic programs for students with disabilities due to schools' responsibilities under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Given basketball's popularity — it's the world's most popular Paralympic sport — wheelchair basketball in middle and high school settings could be organized as the pilot sport. Move United offers [guidelines for wheelchair basketball](#) and advises that schools follow standardized rules so teams can compete state-wide.

Model for Integrated Adaptive Sports in Schools

The [Georgia High School Association](#) (GHSA) found a cost-effective and OCR-compliant model, allowing for an appropriate number of students to field teams. GHSA offers integrated wheelchair sports for basketball, handball and football. Since 2001, GHSA has recognized the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP) as the governing and sanctioning body for interscholastic adapted athletics, serving Georgia students with physical disabilities and qualifying health and sensory requirements.

School districts located in more rural areas may form regional teams by collaborating with another school district or community partner, such as a local YMCA and/or parks and recreation department. The AAASP membership fee in Georgia is \$3,100 per sport season for up to four teams fielded by a school district. The fees include [various services](#) provided by AAASP.

Able-bodied involvement educates those without disabilities on a different perspective of sports and valuable social interactions with peers. It also helps sustain the growth of wheelchair basketball to have enough members for teams. Wheelchair basketball uses a classification system, based on the extent to which an impairment impacts performance, to ensure the sport is inclusive and fair while determining positions and roles on the court. Players are assigned a classification from 1.0 to 4.5 points based on their functional ability. Non-disabled players and players who do not have an eligible impairment are assigned the highest value of 5.0 points.

[Research in Britain](#) shows health and social benefits are the main reasons players with and without disabilities say they play the sport together. Players like the social aspect of wheelchair basketball with its mixed ability, mixed gender and mixed ages. The research found that able-bodied participants were not aware they could play wheelchair basketball until they were introduced to it by friends.

Matt Bollig, founder of the Kansas City Kings wheelchair basketball team, has seen the benefits firsthand. The Kings run integrated camps, allowing siblings and friends of children with disabilities to play as well.

“

It makes children feel less scared to play by including someone they know in the experience.”

“It makes children feel less scared to play by including someone they know in the experience,” Bollig said. “Integrated basketball in schools could definitely be done here.”

Cities and Counties

Establish local athletic councils to coordinate how sports are offered.

Youth sports in America are largely delivered by community-based organizations that train and compete mostly at publicly owned recreational spaces.

States and the federal government set broad agendas through governance and other policies, but city and county governments can shape access to programs in communities and the quality of a child's experience.

Across the country, some cities and counties have begun to pay closer attention to how sports in their area are organized and made available to youth. Some local governments are working to coordinate and rationalize the way sports are offered to children. Some provide funds to neighborhood youth sports groups.

Governance styles vary. Some governments have formal meetings to discuss and take action on items related to youth sports, and some offer more informal settings. For instance, Baltimore's mayor recently announced he is creating the Charm City Sports Cabinet to bring partners and the city government together to collectively promote play. Young people will be included on the cabinet, so their voices are central to the effort.



Key mechanisms that athletic councils can employ include:

- **Collaboration with schools and sports providers:** These efforts can involve sharing resources, coordinating schedules and promoting collaboration among stakeholders.
- **Permitting and regulation:** Local governments can include requirements for safety measures, insurance coverage and adherence to zoning ordinances when establishing permitting processes and regulations for sports events on public property.
- **Funding and grants:** Government funding can be used for equipment purchases, facility rentals, coach training and program development. Governments can also offer discounts to programs that serve vulnerable populations.
- **Facilities management:** Local governments often own and operate parks, community centers and athletic fields. They can allocate resources to maintain and improve these facilities, making them accessible for youth sports programs and activities.
- **Community outreach and engagement:** Governments can engage with residents through community events, workshops and outreach efforts to promote the benefits of sports participation. They can also work to address barriers to participation, such as transportation issues or lack of awareness about programs.

In Virginia, the Fairfax County Athletic Council serves in an advisory capacity to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, the school district board and county agencies on matters relating to sports in the most populous jurisdiction in the Washington, D.C., area.

The council, comprised of 23 voting members, meets monthly, advises on policy and establishes priorities for making sports programs accessible. Representatives come from the following:

- 9 from each of the county’s magisterial districts (civil divisions)
- 3 from towns not included in the magisterial districts
- 8 from sport-specific councils (baseball, soccer, basketball, slow-pitch softball, fast-pitch softball, football, volleyball, lacrosse), who are selected by their own sport council
- 3 at-large representatives, to speak up for women, diversity concerns and general issues
- 3 members from county government: directors of Fairfax County Neighborhood and Community Services and the parks authority, and a Fairfax County School Board member (all non-voting)

The strength of Fairfax’s council is that it forces all members to see beyond the narrow interest of the group that it represents. The council’s historical knowledge of the county’s residents, programs, facilities and systems provides legitimacy. Its manageable size provides flexibility to act. The appointed representatives are respected among their constituents. And the council connects representatives who are close to the ground with those who are from essential governing bodies (park authority, school district, county government).

Cities and counties in the Kansas City area could establish local councils that make sense for their specific community to grow sports access for more children, especially underserved populations. There’s not one correct way to operate a local sports council. Just connecting like-minded organizations together will create opportunities for government to assist.



States

Pass state laws requiring coach training and conduct policies in youth sports.

A child's experience in sports is often only as good as the coach. And too few coaches are trained in key areas. For instance, less than 60% of surveyed coaches have ever taken trainings in trauma-informed practices, performance anxiety, emotional regulation and how to work with parents, [according to the National Coach Survey](#) as administered by the Aspen Institute, Ohio State, Nike and partners in 2022.

Almost all coaches said they feel strongly about their ability to coach X's and O's, foster a positive environment and promote good sportsmanship. Only 18% reported feeling highly confident in their ability to link athletes to mental health resources and refer athletes to support. Also, coaches were rarely positive in their perspectives of parent behaviors in sports settings. For instance, two-thirds of coaches reported that parents sometimes, often or always criticize the performance of their own child and/or the performance of game officials. Recreational coaches reported more positive parent behaviors than club and school coaches.

Kansas and Missouri could take a page from Colorado by creating state laws — and enforcement mechanisms — that attempt to reduce abusive behavior in youth sports. [A new Colorado law](#) that passed in 2024 establishes requirements for nonprofit and for-profit youth sports organizations that operate outside of schools.

Until Colorado's new law, very few states set expectations for youth sports outside of schools. It's a largely unregulated landscape that often operates without specific standards and minimum expectations to create a safe environment for children in sports. Starting in July 2025, youth sports organizations in Colorado must:

- **Require coaches to complete abuse-prevention training.** The training must include prohibited conduct by coaches, appropriate one-on-one interactions between players and coaches, mandatory reporting requirements, how to recognize and appropriately respond to behaviors that violate the conduct policy, and how to respond to disclosures of sexual abuse, child abuse or reports of other behaviors. The sports organization must maintain records of completed trainings.
- **Require background checks for those working in the organization.** The background check should disclose, at a minimum, sexual offenses and felony convictions. The law allows youth sports organizations to rely on criminal background checks when making employment decisions and to be immune from civil liability unless the organization knows the information is false.
- **Develop a prohibited conduct policy for coaches, parents, spectators and athletes.** This includes a process for investigations, due-process requirements, and sanctions for violations of the policy. Organizations must post the policy on their website or, if they have no website, provide the notice directly to parents.
- **Create an online portal for conduct-policy violations by coaches.** Upon learning of a potential violation, the organization must investigate and, if a violation is found to have occurred, ban the coach and report it to the state attorney general. The attorney general must review the handling of the violation and, if it is determined that the coach received due process, post the violation online in a searchable list. The law specifies that youth sports organizations that fail to comply engage in an unfair trade practice.

Until the law is implemented, it remains to be seen how effective it will be. There could be enforcement challenges. But at the very least, having specific standards for how a state believes children should be treated in sports is impactful and can be a model for Kansas and Missouri.

Region

Create a recognition program informed by the Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports.

Every child has the right to play sports and, when in the care of adults, the human rights they are born with need to be respected. This simple idea informs the [Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports](#), a resource designed to create a shared cultural understanding that all youth should have the opportunity to develop as people through sports.



Developed by the Aspen Institute through its Project Play initiative and a working group of human rights and sports policy experts, the Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports identifies eight rights of children:

- 1. To play sports.** Organizations should make every effort to accommodate children’s interests to participate, and to help them play with peers from diverse backgrounds.
- 2. To safe and healthy environments.** Children have the right to play in settings free from all forms of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), hazing, violence and neglect.
- 3. To qualified program leaders.** Children have the right to play under the care of coaches and other adults who pass background checks and are trained in key competencies.
- 4. To developmentally appropriate play.** Children have a right to play at a level commensurate with their athletic ability. They should be treated as young people first, athletes second.
- 5. To share in the planning and delivery of their activities.** Children have the right to share their viewpoints with coaches and for their insights to be incorporated into activities.
- 6. To an equal opportunity for personal growth.** Programs should invest equally in all child athletes, free of discrimination based on any personal or family characteristic.
- 7. To be treated with dignity.** Children have the right to participate in environments that promote the values of sportsmanship and of respect for opponents, officials and the game.
- 8. To enjoy themselves.** Children have the right to participate in activities that they consider fun and that foster the development of friendship and social bonds.

In 2024, Kansas City, Missouri, became one of the first cities to sign the Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports through an endorsement by Mayor Quinton Lucas.

Other endorsers include UNICEF USA, U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee, YMCA, National Recreation and Park Association, NBA, NWSL, Little League, USA Football, DICK's Sporting Goods, ESPN, National Council of Youth Sports and hundreds of other organizations and pro athletes.

"In two years, Kansas City will be one of the few U.S. cities hosting the world's largest sporting event, the 2026 FIFA World Cup," Lucas said. "Yet thousands of young people in our community lack access to sports and physical activities. Endorsing the Children's Bill of Rights in Sports is a first step for all of us — cities, organizations, youth sports teams and coaches — to aspire for a future where all children are able to access sports and play in safe and healthy environments."

Additional cities, pro sports teams and others in the Kansas City region could join Lucas to endorse these principles. The region could work collectively to start a recognition program honoring local sports providers who meet the Bill of Rights' mission and incentivize improvement for other organizations. Youth sports providers would apply for the free, voluntary recognition program, which would promote what quality sports experiences for children should look like in the Kansas City area.

Kansas City's pro sports teams — the NFL's Chiefs, MLB's Royals, NWSL's Current and MLS' Sporting Kansas City — could collaborate to help build the recognition program. Each organization already provides valuable support of youth sports. Examples of their work include the following:

- The Current partners with YMCA to offer youth soccer programs throughout the metro area, ranging from ages 3-5 on the basics and kindergarten through seventh grade as kids develop. The partnership includes

YMCA Challenger Soccer, which is open to athletes from ages 6 to over 30 with physical, developmental and intellectual disabilities.

- Sporting Kansas City owns and/or operates three facilities in the Kansas City area with 27 youth soccer fields: Compass Minerals Sporting Fields, Swope Soccer Village and Central Bank Sporting Complex. Sporting KC Youth Soccer runs leagues for youth and adults and holds free soccer clinics, coaching education opportunities and equipment drives. Sporting KC's foundation, The Victory Project, also provides financial assistance to play soccer and sponsors a Special Olympics Unified team for players with and without intellectual disabilities.
- The Chiefs' flag program has over 50 coed flag football leagues at every age and skill level, allowing children to wear official Chiefs gear. The Chiefs host NFL Flag tournaments at Arrowhead Stadium. They are aggressively piloting flag football for girls in high schools with hopes to sanction the sports in Missouri and Kansas.
- The Royals Amateur Development System (RADS) offers the Crown League, a partnership between the Royals and local baseball and softball leagues with tailored resources for coaches and players that fit their needs. This includes practice plans, coaching clinics and workshops, player development programs and player clinics.

The Royals, Chiefs, Current and Sporting Kansas City could collaborate to fund a recognition program of outstanding Kansas City-area providers from all sports who best put needs of children, as expressed in the rights, above all else.

One model to emulate is the [Tennessee Safe Stars youth sports ratings system](#), which recognizes leagues throughout Tennessee for providing the highest level of safety for youth.

Safe Stars consists of three levels — gold, silver and bronze — for programs that implement policies in areas such as concussion education, weather safety and injury prevention.

Safe Stars' goal is to provide resources and opportunities for every youth sports league to enhance their safety standards. A committee of health professionals dedicated to reducing youth sports injuries developed the criteria for achieving Safe Stars recognition. A collaboration between the Vanderbilt Youth Sports Health Center and the Tennessee Department of Health, Safe Stars was originally aimed at public schools statewide when it debuted in 2021. By 2023,

Safe Stars expanded to include private schools and community youth sports organizations participating on public property.

Criteria would be created to identify quality programs to recognize in Kansas City. Application questions could be centered around health and safety, centering the voices of young people, developmentally appropriate play, coach training and having fun. We know these are central pieces to keeping children engaged in sports. Let's honor those who are the best of the best and provide incentives for others to join them.

How the Children's Bill of Rights Can Be Used

Examples of how the principles appear in the work of the Royals Amateur Development System:

- **The right to play sports:** Partnerships with local leagues with a goal of increasing participation and retention rates.
- **The rights to safe and healthy environments and having qualified coaches:** Require all league coaches to receive background checks. Coach training is provided to help prevent emotional abuse and decrease physical injuries.
- **The right to developmentally appropriate play:** Provide a checklist of age-appropriate skills for coaches.
- **The right to share in the planning and delivery of activities:** Providing surveys is a starting point, along with encouraging leagues to have a player board. This is an area the Royals want to improve upon.
- **The right to equal opportunity for personal growth:** A variety of opportunities are provided free of charge to participants. Partner with leagues to sometimes help offset costs, which can decrease player fees.
- **The right to be treated with dignity:** The Shut Out the Stigma initiative related to parent pressure on kids, and parent, player, coaching and umpire training are areas of focus.
- **The right to enjoy themselves:** Fun is the main goal of everything they do, especially through free-play opportunities at all age levels. Practices often involve rolling out balls and equipment and letting the children play sandlot style. Kids pick the teams, make up the rules and just have fun.



APPENDIX

Kansas City Physical Activity Report Card

The KCPA Report Card, released in 2020, is based on the U.S. Report Card (a report by the Physical Activity Alliance on physical activity in American children and youth), and it measures the same nine indicators of physical activity on the same rating scale. The KCPA Report Card also measures the quality of the available data sources. Data was obtained from publicly available sources in 2019 and 2020. In addition, members of the KCPA Plan Core Work Group provided input on indicators and data-quality grades.

Read the Kansas City Physical Activity Report Card:

www.childrensmercy.org/contentassets/f4f2baa8ea8b45d0b1a5b469e7630cc7/kc-physical-activity-report-card.pdf

Source: Kansas City Physical Activity Plan

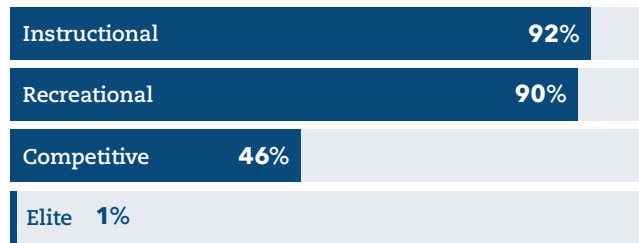
2020 KANSAS CITY REGIONAL REPORT CARD ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

INDICATOR	GRADE	DATA QUALITY GRADE
Overall Physical Activity	C-	A
Sedentary Behaviors	C	B
Active Transportation	F	C
Organized Sport Participation	B-	A
Active Play	INC	INC
Physical Fitness	INC	F
Family and Peers	INC	INC
School	INC	F
Community and Built Environment	C-	B

GREATER KANSAS CITY CHILDREN AND YOUTH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ECOSYSTEM

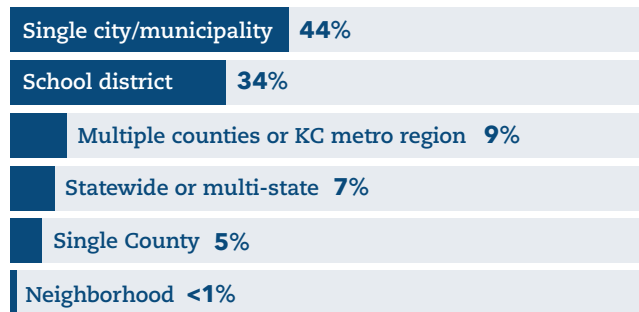
The University of Missouri-Kansas City is mapping the system of programs (and their organizations) that encourage physical activity in the six-county core of the Kansas City metro region. As of July 2024, 3,276 programs reported providing direct physical activity services to children and/or their families. The information shared here is self-reported from organizations and programs and is considered preliminary prior to the release of UMKC’s report.

DIRECT SERVICE PROGRAMS BY PROGRAM INTENSITY LEVEL

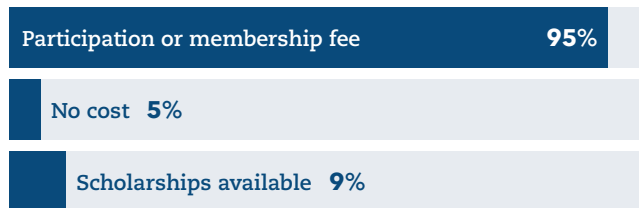


Note: UMKC defines the program intensity level by the following. Instructional = programs that provide instruction and training to help participants advance or further develop skills. Recreational = programs primarily for fun, not for the purpose of engaging in competition. Competitive = programs for experienced and skilled participants, usually on teams or clubs in highly competitive activity that’s often in organized tournaments and leagues. Elite = programs that enhance the abilities of highly-skilled, highly-experienced participants who seek to compete at the highest levels of their sport.

PROGRAM GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE



PROGRAM COST TO PARTICIPANTS



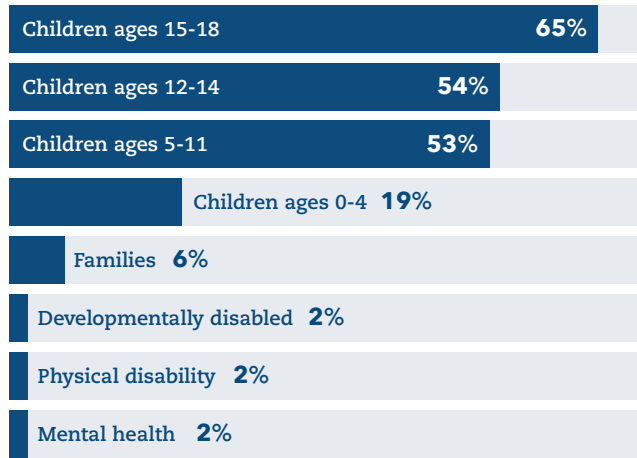
PROGRAM OFFERINGS BY SPORT

General physical activity (no single sport)	582
Soccer	290
Swimming	253
Dance	211
Basketball	187
Baseball	158
Volleyball	150
Gymnastics	148
Tennis	135
Golf	125
Tackle Football	117
Martial Arts	109
Wrestling	108
Track and Field	106
Cheerleading	103
Cross Country	101
Softball	88
Flag Football	51
Skating (Ice, Inline, Roller)	39
Yoga	37
Lacrosse	33
Bowling	33
Bicycling	18
Weightlifting	16
Ice Hockey	15
Pickleball	12
Rock Climbing	12
Diving	12

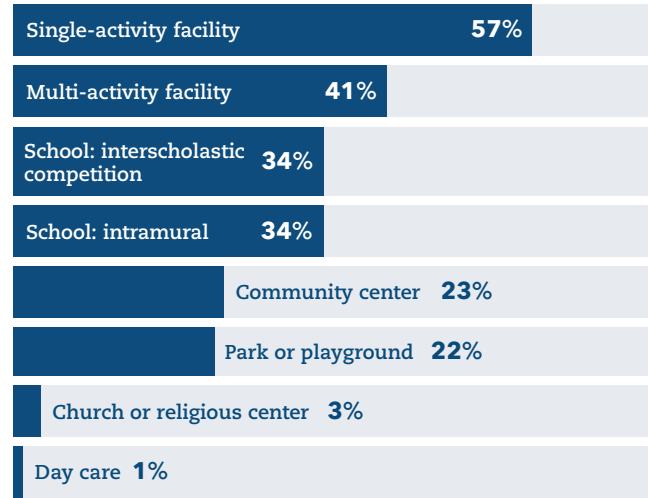
Note: Archery, disc golf, field hockey, kickball and skateboarding have fewer than 10 programs in the region.

Source: Greater Kansas City Children and Youth Physical Activity Ecosystem, University of Missouri-Kansas City

AGE AND SPECIAL POPULATION EMPHASES BY PROGRAMS



PROGRAM DELIVERY SETTING



Source: Greater Kansas City Children and Youth Physical Activity Ecosystem, University of Missouri-Kansas City

KANSAS CITY'S AMERICAN FITNESS INDEX 2024 RESULTS

Each year, the American College of Sports Medicine ranks America's largest 100 cities on a composite of health behaviors, health outcomes, community infrastructure and local policies that support a physically active lifestyle. Here's how Kansas City, Missouri, fared in the 2024 rankings.

	Kansas City	100-City Average
Overall score	36.5	50.8
Personal health rank	28.1	50.5
Bike score	35.0	52.3
Parks/10,000 residents	4.4	4.1
Walk score	35.3	47.9
Ball diamonds/10,000 residents	2.5	1.7
Basketball hoops/10,000 residents	2.5	3.6
Playgrounds/10,000 residents	2.5	2.5
Rec centers/20,000 residents	0.4	0.9
Pools/100,000 residents	1.7	2.3
Tennis courts/10,000 residents	1.8	1.8
Park expenditure per resident	\$130	\$129

Note: Higher numbers reflect better health results than lower numbers in the categories of "Overall score," "Personal health rank," "Bike score" and "Walk score."

Source: American Fitness Index

PHOTOS

Photos in this report were photographed or provided by Allison Shanahan, City of Bonner Springs, Girls on the Run Greater Kansas City, Guadalupe Centers, Johnson County Park and Recreation District, Jon Solomon, Kansas City (Kansas) Public Schools, Kansas City Royals, KC United!, Ryogoku Soccer Academy, ShareWaves Foundation, Sporting Kansas City, and University of Missouri-Kansas City.

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ABOUT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization whose purpose is to ignite human potential to build understanding and create new possibilities for a better world. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership and action to help solve society's greatest challenges.

www.AspenInstitute.org

ABOUT PROJECT PLAY

An initiative of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, Project Play develops insights, ideas and opportunities to help stakeholders build healthy communities through sports.

www.ProjectPlay.org

ABOUT CHILDREN'S MERCY KANSAS CITY

Children's Mercy is a leading independent children's health organization dedicated to holistic care, translational research, breakthrough innovation and educating the next generation of caregivers. The Kansas City Physical Activity Plan was coordinated in 2019 by the Kansas City Healthy Lifestyles Collaborative, a program of Children's Mercy Kansas City.

www.childrensmercy.org

REPORT METHODOLOGY

Throughout the report, "sports" refers to all forms of physical activity that, through organized or casual play, aim to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being. The term "youth" refers to 6- to 18-year-olds. The term "parent" is used to refer to the caregivers with whom youth reside. The term "coach" is used broadly to include those who instruct youth in both sports and other physical-activity programming.

Youth survey results identified in the report came from the Aspen Institute's State of Play Kansas City Youth Survey, administered online from September 2023 to January 2024 through the Resonant Education platform. Surveys were available in English and Spanish. The survey was completed by 4,186 youth in grades 3-12 who live in the Kansas City region. Surveys were distributed primarily through school districts and parks and recreation departments.

The demographics of survey respondents were:

Gender: 49% male, 45% female, 2% nonbinary

Race/ethnicity: 43% White, 16% Black, 9% Latino/a, 8% two or more races/ethnicities, 4% Asian, 2% American Indian or Native American

School grade: 61% 6th-8th grade, 34% 3rd-5th grade, 4% 9th-12th grade

Location: 35% Clay County, 18% Jackson County, 14% Johnson County, 3% Cass County, 3% Wyandotte County, 1% Platte County. In addition, 27% of respondents indicated they don't know the county in which they live.

Affluence: 14% low income, 39% medium income, 47% high income. Family affluence was assessed through proxy questions for family household income.

