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Declining Participation in Youth Sports and Its Contributing Factors

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, ST. PAUL

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

COLLEGE OF KINESIOLOGY

**Declining Participation in Youth Sports
and Its Contributing Factors**

A GRADUATE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MS Coaching & Athletic Administration

by

Aaron Roy Shackle

St. Paul, Minnesota

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Dedications

“Just play, have fun, enjoy the game” (Nadeau, 2014, para. 1). This quote perfectly summarizes what youth sports are all about. This research paper is dedicated to Minneapolis Public Schools and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. Your dedication to our youth is commendable, and without the opportunities you provide, our children may never participate in the wonderful experiences of sports.

Abstract

This study was designed to research the declining participation numbers of youths, ages 5 to 18, in organized sports in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Specifically, this study would look into reasons as to why youth sport participation numbers are on the decline. While the total number of youth athletes are difficult to ascertain, it is known that from 2008 to 2019 the total number of athletes participating in youth sports have been in decline for both male and female athletes (“From 2008”, 2021) Participants will take home a survey that they can complete on their own or with a parent or guardian and return it to their school. Eight schools in Minneapolis were chosen to participate in this study: four elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools. These schools were chosen from all areas of Minneapolis to reflect the different diverse demographics of Minneapolis. It will be important to have schools that have various student ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and neighborhoods. This study is theoretical in nature and has not been completed. The results will not be known due to this fact.

Keywords: Youth sports, participation, Park & Recreation

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Introduction

Introduction to the Youth Sports

Proverbs 16:27 states “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” This Biblical verse is commonly quoted and has been used countless times in a variety of settings. While it has many different uses it can be used to describe how participation in youth sports is a valuable tool in keeping children active, healthy, and busy. Youth sports are accessible for many people in the United States where children and adolescents can participate in sports from baseball to volleyball to lacrosse. There are a multitude of sports available to play, but this was not always the case. It is easy to think that sports have been around forever, but in fact, “In 1903, New York established the Public Schools Athletic League, pitting schools against each other for championships and bringing more competition to youth sports” (Baker, 2020, p. 3). This is one of the first known organized youth sports leagues in the United States and was a catalyst for the boom of youth sports. By 1910, 17 other cities had formed similar organizations (Baker, 2020).

As the number of sports organizations grew, so did participation among young men, providing them with the opportunity to play organized sports with their peers. From the beginning of these leagues through 1972, youth sports were dominated by young males. It was not until Title IX passed in 1972 which stated, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, para. 2). Title IX provides female athletes equal opportunity to play organized sports like their male counterparts. It can be debated whether Title IX has been followed as it was originally designed to do by providing equal opportunities for male and female athletes, but the results speak for themselves; “Before Title IX, one in every 27

girls played sports. By 2016, it was two in every five, according to the Women's Sports Foundation, and the number of girls playing high school sports was up 990%" (Baker, 2021, p. 6).

Significance of the Study/Rationale

While the total number of youth sport participants in the U.S. is under debate, it has been shown that the number of participants has been trending down (Youth Sports Facts, 2021). In the most recent data by Aspen Project Play, researchers found that from 2008 to 2019 the number of youth ages 6-12 dropped from 16.5% to 14.4%, and those playing basketball dropped from 16.6% to 14.0%. The number of males who participate in a regular sport dropped from 2012-2019 from 49.1% to 39.1%, while females dropped from 33.5% to 31.7%. Any data that could be skewed by Covid-19 was left out, as the years 2020-2022 were exceedingly difficult for youth sports participation due to the deadly virus and the world shutting down (Baker, 2022).

Research Question

Excluding the factors brought on by Covid-19, there have been a variety of reasons postulated as to why participation in youth sports has been decreasing. Factors such as sports specialization, overall cost, burnout, bad or ill-equipped coaches, and organizations closing are contributing reasons to why youth sports participation numbers are decreasing (Bogage, 2021). This particular study is interested to see if there are other factors that may be attributed to this trend and what can youth sport professionals do to help increase the overall participation in youth sports. Specifically, the purpose of this study will be to investigate why participation in youth sports within municipal recreation programs is on the decline, what were some of its contributing factors, to offer suggestions on what can be done, and boost the overall number of children involved in youth sports.

Biases and Assumptions

As with any research project, there are biases and assumptions. It was not the intention of this study to provide a list of sports for the families to choose from. Instead, the definition of sport will be left vague as to not alienate those who participate in nontraditional sports. Because this study will not specifically define what constitutes a sport, each family completing the survey will have to define what sport means to them personally. It may hold a bias that for what some may consider a sport is not necessarily what another would.

Limitations

As with any research project, this study will have limitations. With the use of a survey sent home to individual students and their families there is little control over who will return or honestly complete the survey. It is hoped to get honest feedback from those participating. It will be difficult to have the survey translated into all the languages that the students and their families speak at home so it is possible that some who receive the survey will get one that they are unable to read. While sending out this survey to the entire district would be ideal to get a more accurate assessment of who is participating in youth sports and who has stopped, money and time are contributing factors as to why specific schools are being chosen. While these schools help to get a general idea of who has stopped participating in youth sports in Minneapolis as they are specifically chosen due to their geographic location and varying demographics it may not necessarily lead to a specific rationale as to why these youth are choosing to stop participating in sports.

Conclusion

With the effort it took to develop and cultivate youth sports organizations across the country, it is important to have a large population that uses them to enjoy the benefits of sport

and competition. However, the research shared above noted that there has been a decline in youth sports participation across the country (Youth Sports Facts, 2021). Therefore, this project proposes a study to look into why there is a decline in youth sport participation with the intent to address if there is something sport professionals can do to help stop this trend.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

The benefits of sports and exercise are well documented. Youth who participate in sports have stronger muscles and bones. It also helps keep their weight under control, which is important considering the childhood obesity problems (Meisterjahn & Dieffenbach, n.d.). The purpose of this study is to determine if there is a specific reaction or rationale as to why children are opting to not participate in youth sports. Sports are an important part of life for many children and adolescents for reasons ranging from something to do, to it being their passion, or a place to feel safe and welcome. These are important reasons for someone to participate in youth sports. While there are many reasons as to why someone may participate in sports the benefits are undeniable: The same Minneapolis students who make shots on basketball courts and score touchdowns under Friday night lights are graduating at higher rates than the district as a whole (Minneapolis Schools Report Higher Grad, n.d.). Knowing the importance of sports for children, it is imperative to understand how we can overcome these issues that are preventing children from participating. This study will use a survey to determine who is currently playing youth sports and who has recently stopped playing. The survey asked participants to choose their school, their age, if they have ever played organized sports, are currently playing, and if they have stopped playing in the past 36 months. There is also a section that asks for specific reasons as to why the athlete may have stopped playing, if applicable.

Participants

Students participating in the survey will be enrolled in the Minneapolis school district and be between the ages of 5 and 18 years old. Minneapolis Public Schools is the second largest school district in the state of Minnesota and has a diverse population. “Minneapolis Public

School District contains 96 schools and 34,612 students; The district's minority enrollment is 70%. Also 37.5% of students are economically disadvantaged" (Minneapolis Schools Report Higher Grad, n.d., para 1). The participants will be chosen from various locations around Minneapolis ensuring students from diverse neighborhoods, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses will be represented. There was a total of eight schools participating in this study. Four elementary schools; Armatage Elementary School, Waite Park Elementary School, City View Elementary School, and Hiawatha Elementary School; two middle schools, Olson Middle School, and Northeast Middle School and two high schools; Patrick Henry High School and South High School for a total participant count of 5,412 students. The geographic locations of these schools were a determining factor in the selection as they are from North, Northeast, South and Southwest Minneapolis.

Instruments

This study will use a survey (see Appendix A) that will be sent home asking specific questions about student participation in organized athletics ranging from recreation (rec) leagues to high school sports leagues. The first three questions of the survey will focus on demographics, gathering information on the school the students attend, their ages, and their gender.

The remaining seven questions of the survey will focus on whether these students have played an organized sport within the past 36 months, if they stopped, and reason for stopping. These seven questions will be yes/no (close-ended) with the option to add more details at three points as needed.

Procedures

The survey will be sent home by teachers in eight Minneapolis schools with a total of 5,412 students or parents assisting them being asked to participate. The survey will be done at home with the parent or guardian present to help assist those who cannot complete the survey on their own. The survey should take no longer than fifteen minutes and will be translated into a variety of languages to accommodate for students and parents who may not speak English, be fluent in English, or have English as a first language at home.

Once completed, students will be asked to return the survey to the school where it will be housed in the administrative office until it can be collected by the lead researcher. The survey will have a cutoff date of May 23, 2023, and will have two reminder emails sent home to parents on April 25, 2023 and May 14, 2023. Any surveys received after May 23, 2023, will not be counted and their data will not be entered in the results.

Design & Statistical Analysis

The data collected will be analyzed against recent data of youth participation in sports across the country where it will be looked at as a whole to see if there has been an overall trend down in participation numbers. The study will take the total number of athletes who have stopped participating in youth sports and create a percentage by taking the number who have stopped playing and dividing it by the number of participants overall. It will then take that number and compare it to the overall number of participants to see if there has been a decline. Once that data has been created it will look at the reasons or rationale as to why youth are quitting sports. It will look to see if there is an overall trend or reason why these athletes are stopping.

The demographic information questions will be used to sort data by their location, age group, and/or gender. The final seven questions are primary yes/no. The data from these will be analyzed using quantitative methods to find totals, averages/means, and to identify numerical trends. The three places in the survey that allow participants to add comments as they wish will provide qualitative data. The information collected from each of these open-ended questions will be sorted into categories and grouped by themes. Again, this information will help add insight into the trends of youth sport participation within youth sport programs. The dependent variable of this study will focus on the reasons the students stopped playing organized sports and the dependent variable in the study will be the reasons why students are stopping playing sports.

Ethical Considerations

To address any potential ethical considerations, this study will begin with approval from the Concordia University IRB Board. Then, an informed consent statement will be placed before the survey (see Appendix A). Parents and children will review this together prior to taking the survey, and only upon agreeing, will they participate. This survey will not discriminate based on gender, race, or religion. It will ask for the participants' gender only to potentially use the data in a later study on gender and youth sports participation. No names will be attached to any of the surveys completed. By choosing to complete and return the survey you are opting to be part of the survey and its results. There is no compensation for time or answers. This survey will be anonymous and there will be no personal or identifying information attached to it so there will be no potential risk to participants. All data will be kept in a secure location where it will be stored for 24 months (2 years) for review by an independent review board if necessary.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study will be to investigate a link between those who are stopping playing organized youth sports and the potential reason(s) behind it. The goal is to be able to create an environment that allows these students to continue participating and flourish in their chosen activity. This study will allow the investigators to examine a variety of students from diverse backgrounds and geographic areas to see if there is a common theme to the lower participation levels. With 5,412 students participating in this study, the researcher will have the sample size necessary to create valid data and findings.

Chapter 3: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

Current trends showed a decline in youth sports participation for ages 5 to 18 (Youth Sports Facts, 2021). The purpose of this study will be to investigate the youth sport participation in Minneapolis, Minnesota. A survey was designed and will be sent out to eight Minneapolis Public Schools with a total of 5,412 students asked to participate. The survey (Appendix A) asks questions to see if these students have played organized sports over the past 36 months and if they currently play organized sports.

Practical Applications

The practical application of findings from this study can be used to determine if there is a common reason or theme that young athletes are quitting sports. If a common theme can be determined, it may be possible to work toward creating a solution for that problem. If it is possible to combat the issues these athletes are facing, hopefully someone can get ahead of them quitting and provide them with the necessary tools for success in the sport(s). Keeping the children engaged will provide them with healthy outlets for their energy, provide an opportunity for them to meet their peers and hopefully make friends, and help them deal with the trials that come along with life. Facing adversity early on in life and learning to deal with winning and losing is an important skill that youth need to learn at an early age.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are that the survey cannot control the number of participants involved in the study, and language barriers. There will be 5,412 surveys sent out across the city of Minneapolis and a desired response rate of 65%, which would be 3,518 surveys. While the idea is to have the survey translated to all languages spoken at home, it cannot be guaranteed that

this will be the case. It will also be basing the results off participant responses, which requires the participants or their parents to be honest in their answers. Having the questions open-ended could potentially pose an issue of generalizations and misinterpretations of the participants' answers.

This study will be a starting point for a larger study that can be brought to other cities both large and small. It could examine if this is an urban issue, rural issue, or both and are there similar reasons as to why our children are not participating in youth sports as much as they have in the past. Starting off in another large city with similar demographics would be the next logical step with this survey. Possibly looking at choosing schools in St. Paul, Minnesota which is a neighboring city of comparable size and demographics to see if the responses and answers are similar to what is found in Minneapolis.

Recommendations for Further Research

While the information gathered from this study would be a good starting point it is recommended that this study be conducted in other urban areas of similar demographics. St. Paul, Minnesota would be a good environment for replicating the study as the demographics are similar to Minneapolis. It is also recommended that this study be conducted in rural areas as well to see if there is a decline in participation there, and if so, are there contributing factors. Being able to validate the results could potentially help to develop a functioning hypothesis as to why numbers are trending down in youth sports participation and potentially help lead to creating answers on how to increase youth participation in sports.

Conclusion to Project

This study was designed to determine if there is an overall decline in youth participation in organized sports and if so, is there a specific reason as to why. Given the information available

it is safe to conclude that there has been a downward trend in youth participation in sports. This study will be used in Minneapolis, Minnesota where it will examine eight schools across the city that vary in demographics and socioeconomic status. It also looks to develop a hypothesis on why trends in youth sports participation are down and what the rationale behind it may be. The study will set a starting hypothesis and can be used as a jumping off point to help create a solution and help counteract the decrease in youth participation.

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Appendix A
Youth Sports Participation Survey

Aaron Shackle, a graduate student at Concordia University in St. Paul, is conducting research on youth sport participation. This survey is meant for your child to complete or for you to complete with your child about their experiences with organized sports. No names will be collected for this survey. The purpose of this survey is to help confirm or refute if there is a decline in youth participation in organized sports, and if so, is there a specific reason(s). By choosing to complete and return the survey you are consenting to be an anonymous participant. You will not be compensated for your time or answers.

School: **Check Your School**

- Armatage
- Waite Park
- City View
- Hiawatha
- Olson Middle
- Northeast Middle
- Patrick Henry
- Southwest

Age: **Check Your Age**

- 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12,
 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

Gender (check one): Male

Female

Other _____

- 1. Have you participated in an organized sport(s) program within the past 36 months?
Yes No

If yes, what sport(s) did you play?

- 2. Have you played in an organized sport(s) program ever? Yes No

- 3. Are you currently playing any organized sport(s)?

Yes No

- 4. Are you planning to play any organized sports in the next 36 months?
Yes No

- 5. Have you stopped playing for an organized sports team in the past 36 months?

Yes No

- 6. If so, was there a specific reason you stopped playing organized sports?
Yes No

- 7. If yes, why did you stop playing organized sports?

- 8. Is there any other information you would like us to know about your experience with youth sports?
