

Study: For first time in 30 years, high school sports participation is down

For the first time in 30 years, participation in high school sports declined, [according to a study](#) by the National Federation of State High School Associations.

In the 2018-19 school year, there was a decline of 43,395 from the year prior, according to the NFHS's annual High School Athletics Participation Survey.

The last time the report found a decline was in 1988-89.

The sports with the largest declines were two of the most popular ones: 11-player football and basketball.

Boys 11-player football touched its lowest mark since the 1999-2000 school year. The study found that 1,006,013 boys participated in it, which was almost 31,000 fewer than 2017-18.

The study found participation in boys 11-player football dropped in 44 of the 51 states counted, which includes the District of Columbia.

However, boys six-, eight- and nine-player football teams expanded. There were 156 more schools that offered these forms of the sport, and about 1,600 more participants overall.

Additionally, girls 11-player football has doubled over the past 10 years.

“The survey certainly confirms that schools are not dropping the sport of football, which is great news,” NFHS executive director Karissa Niehoff said in a statement.

“Certainly, we are concerned about the reduction in the number of boys involved in the 11-player game but are thrilled that states are finding other options by starting 6-player or 8-player football in situations where the numbers have declined.”

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Basketball had the second-largest decline. Almost 24,000 fewer students participated in the sport, and the girls total of about 399,000 is the lowest since the 1992-93 school year.

The study notes, however, that the majority of the girls drop-off came from Texas. There has been a decrease of 25,000 girls basketball players over the past two years; excluding that state, the number held steady.

The report isn't a doomsday prediction regarding high school sports involvement.

Though participation dropped, the 2018-19 season still had the third-highest number of athletes the study has ever recorded.

Since 2012, boys and girls lacrosse has increased 19%, and boys soccer is up 9%. Volleyball has seen growth for both genders, rising 26% for boys and 8% for girls in that time span. Competitive spirit has increased 38%, and girls wrestling has grown 27%, up to 21,735 participants.

CALIFORNIA: [High school football participation drops for fourth straight year](#)

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There are now 70 different sports offered including bowling, weightlifting and archery, and 14 are specifically tailored for students with disabilities.

“A decline in the number of public school students has been predicted for a number of years, so we knew our ‘streak’ might end someday,” Niehoff said. “The data from this year’s survey serves as a reminder that we have to work even harder in the coming years to involve more students in these vital programs — not only athletics but performing arts programs as well.”

Niehoff added the NHFS is “thrilled” to see more sports emerging.

“Our ultimate goal is to involve as many students as possible in high school sports and other activity programs,” she said.

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Meritocracy Is Killing High-School Sports

Athletics are supposed to be great equalizers in American life. But they're being hijacked by the wealthy.

[Derek Thompson](#) Aug 30, 2019



Staff writer at The Atlantic



If you want to understand how income inequality and opportunity-hoarding by the rich can combine in toxic ways to hurt the less fortunate, you could look in all the usual places—elite colleges, housing policy, internships.

Or you could look at high-school sports.

In the 2018–19 school year, the number of kids participating in high-school sports declined for the first time in three decades. At least, that was [the headline](#); the reality was even worse. Thirty years ago, the high-school population itself was shrinking, due to a short-term falloff in births after the Baby Boom. This past school year is the only period on record when high-school sports participation declined even as school attendance increased.

“It doesn’t surprise me, but it definitely concerns me,” Tom Farrey, the executive director of the Aspen Institute’s Sports and Society Program, told me. “Evidence on the benefits of youth sports has grown by leaps and bounds over the past decade. Kids who are physically active are one-tenth as likely to be obese, less likely to have chronic disease, and more likely to stay in school.”

The most obvious reason for the decline of high-school sports is that football, the Friday-night-lit mainstay of the high-school experience, is withering on the vine, likely due to fears about injuries and head trauma. The number of high-school boys playing the sport fell [for the fifth straight year](#) in 2018–19, and fewer male high schoolers now play football than at any other time this century. Many schools cannot field a full team and have resorted to a six-on-six version, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS). America’s most popular sport on television could be close to a full-blown crisis.

More by Derek Thompson



But it's not just football. Basketball, baseball, golf, and lacrosse are all losing players too. The number of girls playing high-school basketball has fallen to its lowest level since the early 1990s. Head injuries can't explain all that.

Neither can school funding or the number of high-school teams, which are steady, according to the NFHS. Something else is going on.

Daniel Markovits: How life became an endless, terrible competition

So is it screens?

Smartphones conveniently take the blame for just about every other societal ill, from rising anxiety to declining sex. But Farrey assured me that screen culture is not the culprit here. What's telling, he said, is that the children of high-income parents are playing as much as ever. Kids from homes earning more than \$100,000 are now twice as likely to play a team sport at least once a day as kids from families earning less than \$25,000.

The deeper story is that the weed of American-style meritocracy is strangling the roots of youth sports. As parents have recognized that athletic success can burnish college applications, sports have come to resemble just another pre-professional program, with rising costs, hyper-specialization, and massive opportunity-hoarding among the privileged.

Before kids enter high school, they tend to participate in youth sports leagues, which have become one big pay-to-play machine. It's now common for high-income parents to pull their kids out of the local soccer or baseball leagues and write thousand-dollar checks to join super-teams that travel to play similar kids several counties away. [As I wrote last year](#), it's not a crime for parents to spend money on their children. But as travel teams hoard talented (and, typically, high-income) kids, they leave behind desiccated local leagues with fewer resources and fewer players. As a result, many low-income children lose the sports habit (or never gain it to begin with), and simply stop playing altogether by the time they get to high school.

Another crucial factor is the rise in sports specialization. Once again, it might seem harmless that ambitious parents and coaches want talented kids to pick a sport and focus on it. But the frenzy around early specialization might be

misplaced. [A 2015 paper from Harvard](#) concluded that specialization—defined as at least one year of intensive training in a single sport that requires quitting other activities—increased risks of “injury and burnout.” In July, ESPN [published](#) a two-part story on specialization in basketball and its correlation with injuries and emotional exhaustion. One coach likened the overwork of young athletes to “an epidemic.”

What’s more, it’s simple math that specialization means fewer kids per high-school sports team. A teenager who plays three sports counts as three distinct participants in the NFHS data. So the decline in participants partly reflects the fact that students who, 20 years ago, played football in the fall, basketball in the winter, and baseball in the spring are now just focusing entirely on, say, basketball.

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Obsessive competition in high-school athletics is inseparable from the gargantuan role that sports plays in college admissions.

“Athletic recruiting is the biggest form of affirmative action in American higher education,” says Philip Smith, a former dean of admissions at Williams College, [has said](#). (About 30 percent of Williams students are recruited athletes.) In the 1990s, Division I and Division II colleges annually distributed less than \$300 million in student-athlete scholarships. Today [that figure is](#) more than \$3 billion.

You might think most of that scholarship money is going to help kids from poor families who couldn’t otherwise afford college. That’s not the case. In 2010, just 28 percent of Division I basketball players were first-generation college students, meaning they likely came from low-income families. Five years later, that figure has fallen by nine percentage points. Today, [fewer than one in seven students](#) receiving athletic scholarships across all Division I sports come from families in which neither parent went to college. Farrey calls this the slow-motion “gentrification” of college sports.

This process starts in youth and high-school sports. Both historically served as a pipeline to flagship universities for low-income kids. But when they're shut out from pricey travel leagues and the expensive coaching that early specialists receive, lower-income kids are denied not only the physical benefits of playing sports, but also the jackpot that is college recruitment and Division I and II scholarships.

Institutions that were meant to be opportunity-equalizers for the rich, poor, and everybody in between—community youth sports leagues, public high schools, the American college system—are being stealthily hijacked to serve the primary goal of so many high-income parents, which is to replicate their advantages in their children's generation.

We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.



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