



NATIONAL RECREATION
AND PARK ASSOCIATION



YOUTH SPORTS in Parks and Recreation

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Teammates pose after a basketball game in Henderson, Nevada.
Photo courtesy of City of Henderson (Nevada) Parks and Recreation Department



Introduction



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

At NRPA, we believe all children — no matter their race, ethnicity, gender identity, ability, age, household income or interests — deserve equitable access to high-quality youth sports opportunities. Parks and recreation is critical to advancing this vision. As one of the largest providers of youth sports in the nation, reaching more than 40 million youth annually, park and recreation professionals are catalysts for advancing equity in youth sports in communities nationwide, offering affordable, fun, inclusive and multisport options that level the playing field and promote positive youth development. Young people who participate in youth sports reap a number of immediate and long-term benefits, from enhanced mental and physical health to improved academic performance and career success. These benefits can also improve communities through [reduced healthcare costs and a stronger long-term labor market](#). However, not all children [participate in youth sports](#) at equal measure; disparities continue for Black children, children from low-income families and especially for girls. Factors that contribute to disparities can

Youth participate in a yoga class in a park.

include lack of access to facilities and leagues, cultural norms and attitudes, lack of representation in coaching and leadership positions, cost, and an absence of available programming options, according to [Project Play](#).

To better understand the gaps in and opportunities for advancing youth sports equity through parks and recreation, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) partnered with Nike to launch the Youth Sports in Parks and Recreation Survey in October 2024. Overall, 393 park and recreation agencies nationwide contributed data to the survey. This report includes findings from the survey, along with insights into the current state of youth sports delivery through parks and recreation, and reflections on the potential for advancing strategies that level the playing field and promote positive youth development.

Youth Sports in Parks and Recreation



Team sports leagues are the most frequently cited youth sports activity offered by park and recreation agencies.

Most agencies (**91%**) partner with other organizations to deliver youth sports offerings.



The greatest challenges in youth sports delivery are volunteer coach gaps (**82%**) and lack of facilities (**67%**).



Overall, **35%** of participants in agencies' youth sports programs are girls and **25%** of coaches are women.



The top barrier for youth sports participation for girls is a lack of women coaches.

Almost three in five agencies (**59%**) lack specific training for coaching girls in sports.



Park and recreation professionals believe that providing coach training (**86%**), financial resources (**85%**) and sports equipment (**75%**) are the top ways agencies can ensure fair and just access to youth sports.



Key Findings

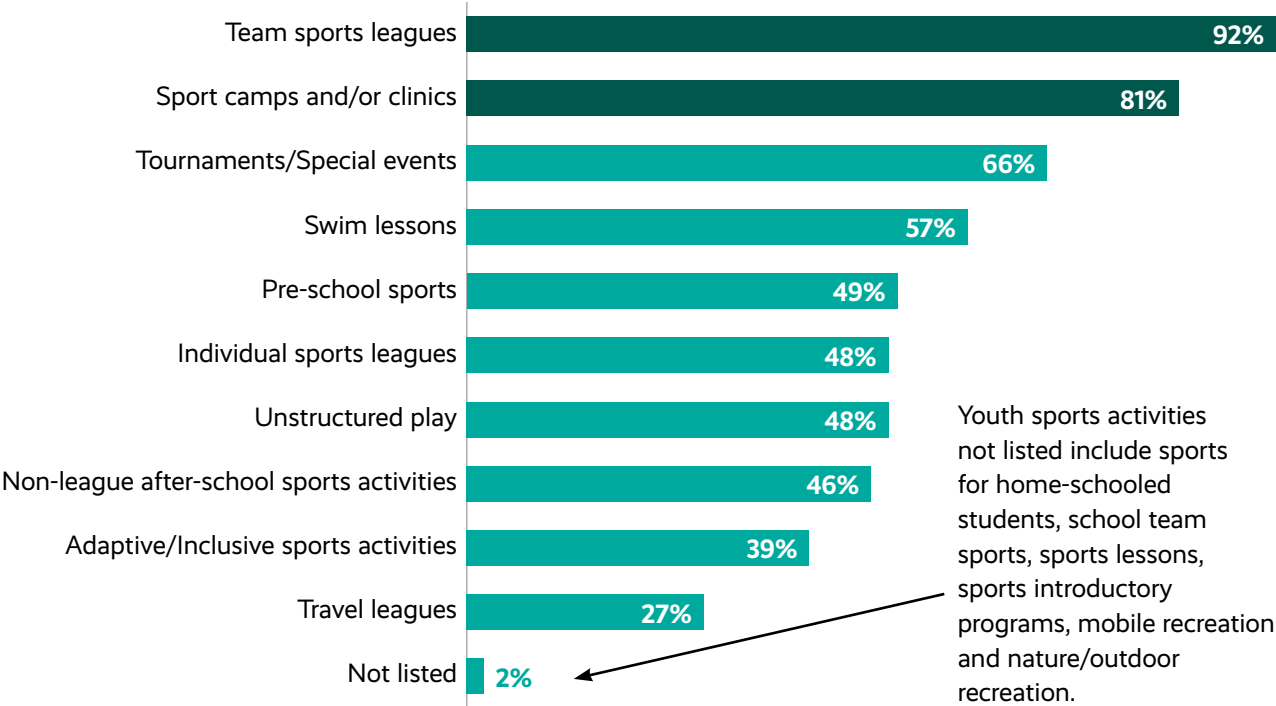
Youth Sports Offerings

Park and recreation agencies offer a variety of youth sports activities, either directly or in partnership with other organizations. These activities include structured team and

individual youth sports activities, as well as unstructured independent play opportunities at park and recreation facilities.

Team sports leagues and sports camps/clinics are the top youth sports activities offered by park and recreation agencies.

% of agencies offering youth sports



Results from a September 2024 poll of 1,000 U.S. parents or guardians, showed that half (50%) of the youths from households with children under 18 had participated in youth sports activities at their local park and recreation facilities in the previous 12 months. Of those 1,000 households polled, 32 percent of children had participated in organized youth sports programs while 19 percent of children had participated in drop-in opportunities. Boys were more likely to participate in both organized and drop-in youth sports compared to girls (41% vs. 24% for organized sports; 28% vs. 11% for drop-in sports).

Overall, most agencies that offer youth sports (99%) provide mixed-gender sports options, while 67 percent offer

girls-only sports and 57 percent offer boys-only opportunities. Additionally, 33 percent of agencies offer adaptive sports.

Grouping the availability of sports by binary gender categories shows that agencies most frequently offer boys-only choices for baseball (46%), lacrosse (42%) and basketball (38%). Agencies most often offer girls-only options for softball (65%), cheerleading (46%), lacrosse (38%) and basketball (37%). For adaptive sports, basketball (21%), swimming/diving (17%), hockey (16%), and track and field (16%) are the most frequent offerings.

Most park and recreation agencies offer mixed-gender options for youth sports. Adaptive sports are less frequently offered, overall.

% of agencies offering specific youth sports by gender and for youth with disabilities

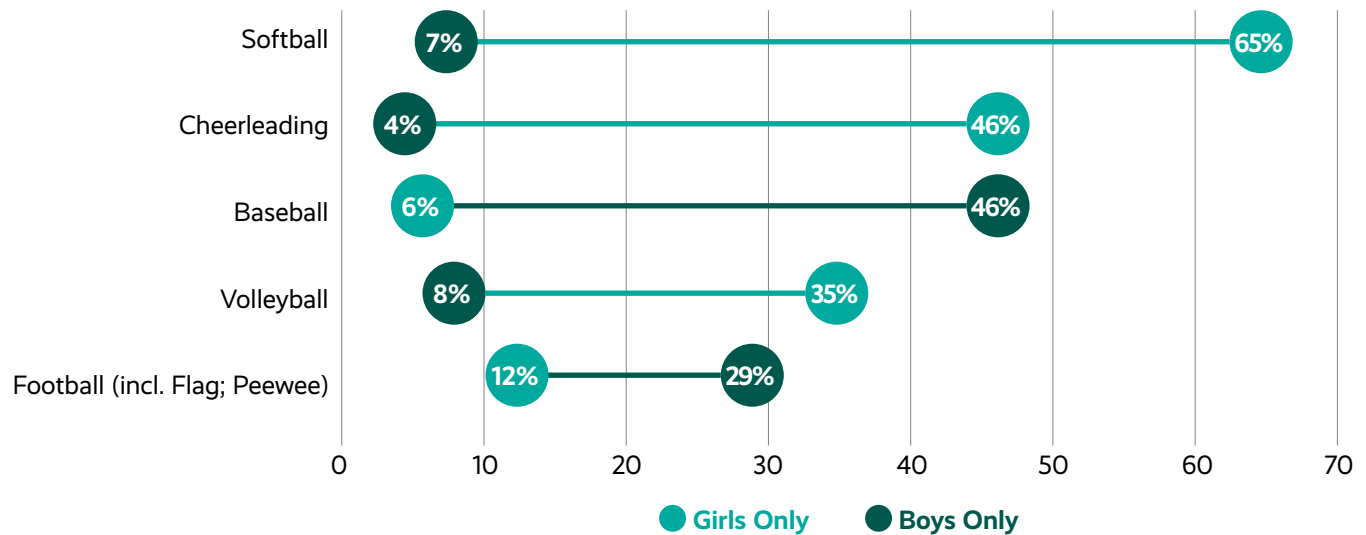
Youth Sports	Mixed Gender	Boys Only	Girls Only	Adaptive
Baseball	68%	46%	6%	12%
Basketball	87%	38%	37%	21%
Bicycling	100%	6%	6%	6%
Boxing	69%	28%	25%	6%
Cheerleading	57%	4%	46%	4%
Dance/Step	89%	5%	16%	7%
Disc golf	99%	3%	3%	3%
Football (incl. flag; peewee)	84%	29%	12%	6%
Golf	92%	9%	7%	14%
Gymnastics	94%	9%	16%	7%
Hockey (incl. inline)	94%	18%	18%	16%
Kayaking	97%	8%	8%	14%
Lacrosse	71%	42%	38%	9%
Martial arts (e.g., karate)	98%	4%	3%	6%
Pickleball	99%	8%	8%	7%
Running/Cross country	97%	13%	15%	11%
Skiing	91%	0%	0%	9%
Soccer	91%	27%	27%	14%
Softball	37%	7%	65%	10%
Swimming and diving	96%	7%	7%	17%
Tennis	98%	9%	9%	10%
Track and field	93%	10%	11%	16%
Volleyball	73%	8%	35%	7%
Wrestling	79%	28%	23%	2%

The largest differences between girls-only and boys-only sports offerings are for softball (58% difference), cheerlead-

ing (42% difference), baseball (40% difference), volleyball (27% difference) and football (17% difference).

Differences between youth sports for girls and boys vary.

% of agencies offering specific youth sports by gender



Running Youth Sports Programming

Program Design

Delivery of park and recreation youth sports programs varies across agencies. [Previous research](#) from leaders in the field recommends strategies to increase access and engagement, such as designing programming based on age and developmental needs, providing local opportunities close to home (non-travel opportunities), encouraging sport sampling, and centering youth and community voice in program design. Survey respondents rated their level of agreement

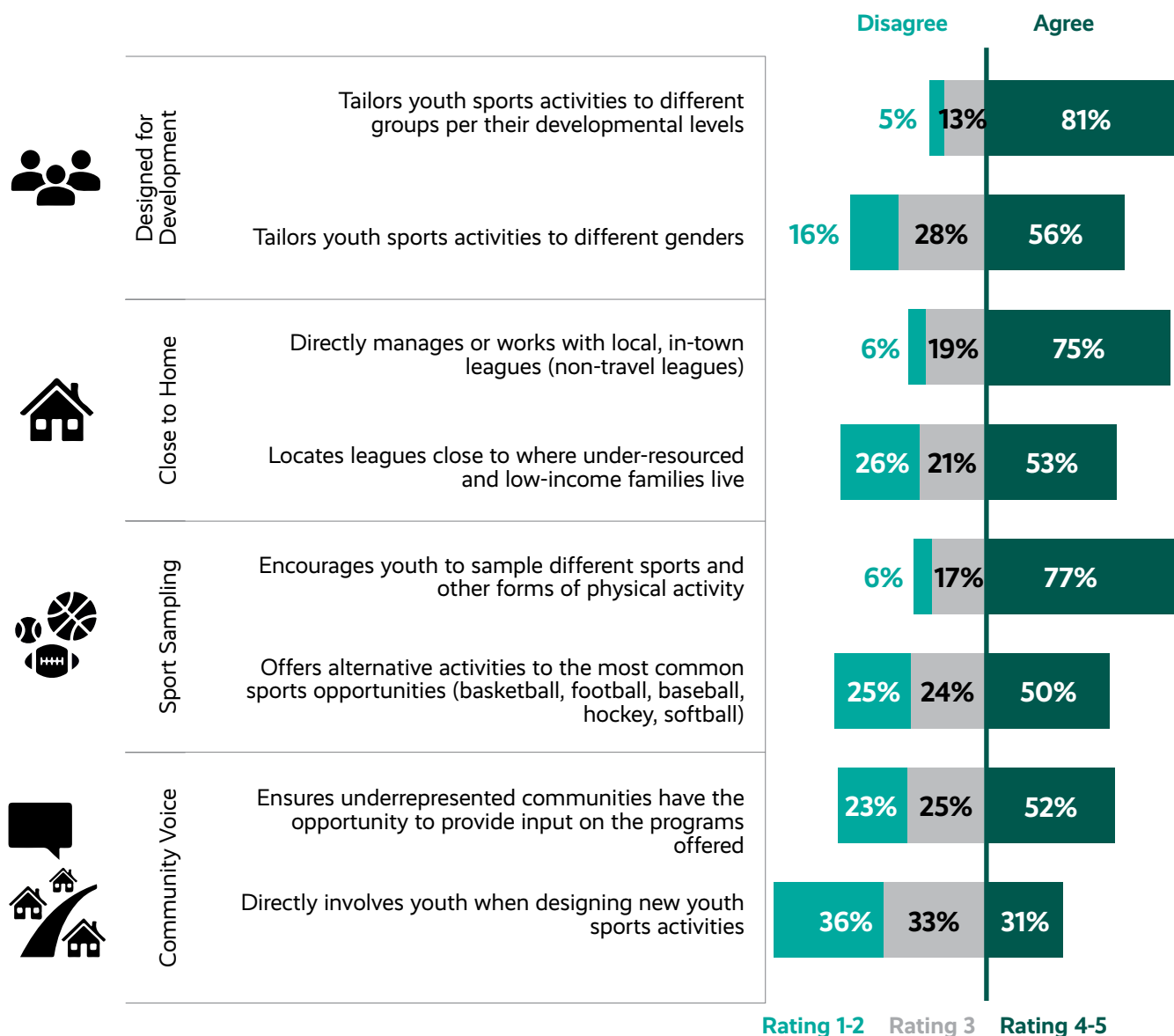
with statements related to these program design strategies at their agencies. At least half of agencies were implementing most of these strategies, with 81 percent tailoring sports activities to different age groups based on their developmental levels. Agencies were least likely to involve youth in program design (32%), suggesting a strategy that agencies may want to incorporate to bolster interest in youth sports offerings.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

At least half of agencies incorporate program design strategies that support access and engagement for youth sports.

% distribution of agencies using program design strategies



Coach Development

Coaches are an essential component of [youth sports programming](#) because they directly influence youth experiences. Coaches help young people build key skills, such as teamwork, compassion and responsibility. To best equip and retain coaches to serve all youth in their communities and promote positive youth development, leaders in the field recognize that [training on relevant topics is critical](#). Survey respondents rated their agreement with statements related

to coach training and support at their agencies. The highest percentage of agencies (68%) provides coach training on injury/concussion prevention. Interestingly, agencies were much less likely to offer specific training for coaching girls (11%). In fact, 59 percent of agencies seemed to lack specific girls sports coaching training altogether. These findings support a need for more coach training that focuses on the unique needs of girl athletes.

At least half of agencies provide coach training related to injury prevention and safety, communication, and conflict resolution.

% distribution of agencies offering coach training/support

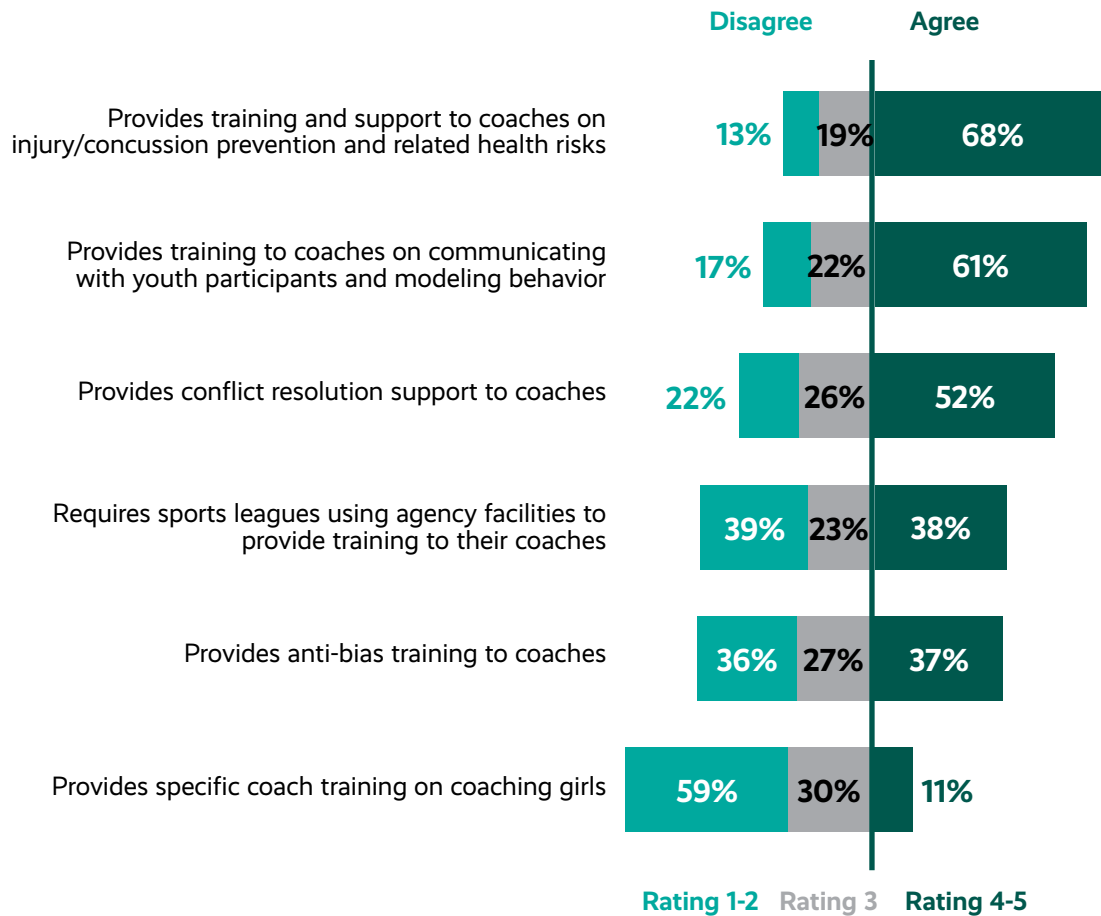


PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

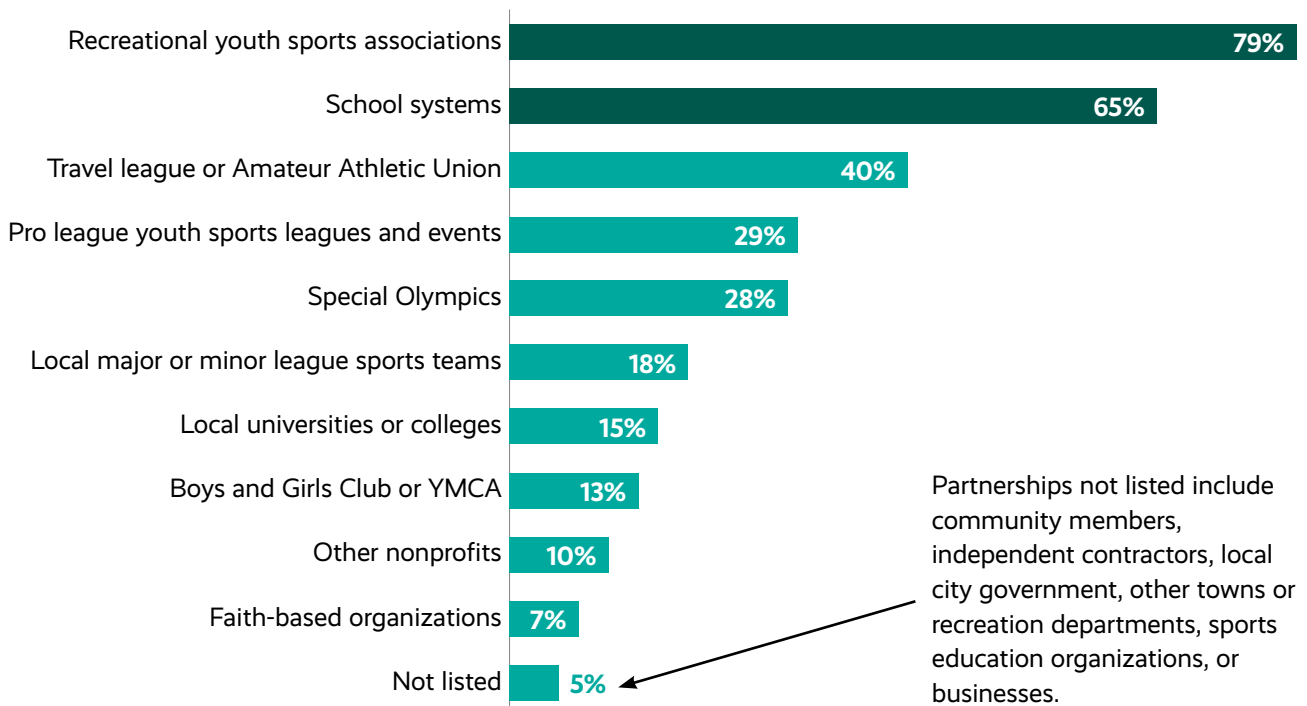
Partnerships

Partnerships between park and recreation agencies and other community organizations can help boost youth sports resources and programming, close access barriers and increase engagement in myriad ways. Most agencies (91%) employ some nature of partnerships to deliver youth sports offerings. Among the various types of potential partners, agencies

team up most frequently with recreational youth sports associations (79%) and school systems (64%). On average, agencies indicate that 62 percent of their youth sports activities are run by themselves exclusively, 37 percent are run by partner organizations exclusively, and 19 percent are run jointly by the agencies and partners.¹

Park and recreation agencies most often partner with recreational youth sports associations and school systems to deliver youth sports.

% of agencies employing partnership type



Participation Fees for Youth Sports

The ways in which park and recreation agencies determine registration fees for participation in youth sports programs vary. Almost all agencies (98%) charge fees for youth sports offerings, with most (57%) setting fees according to their expenditures.

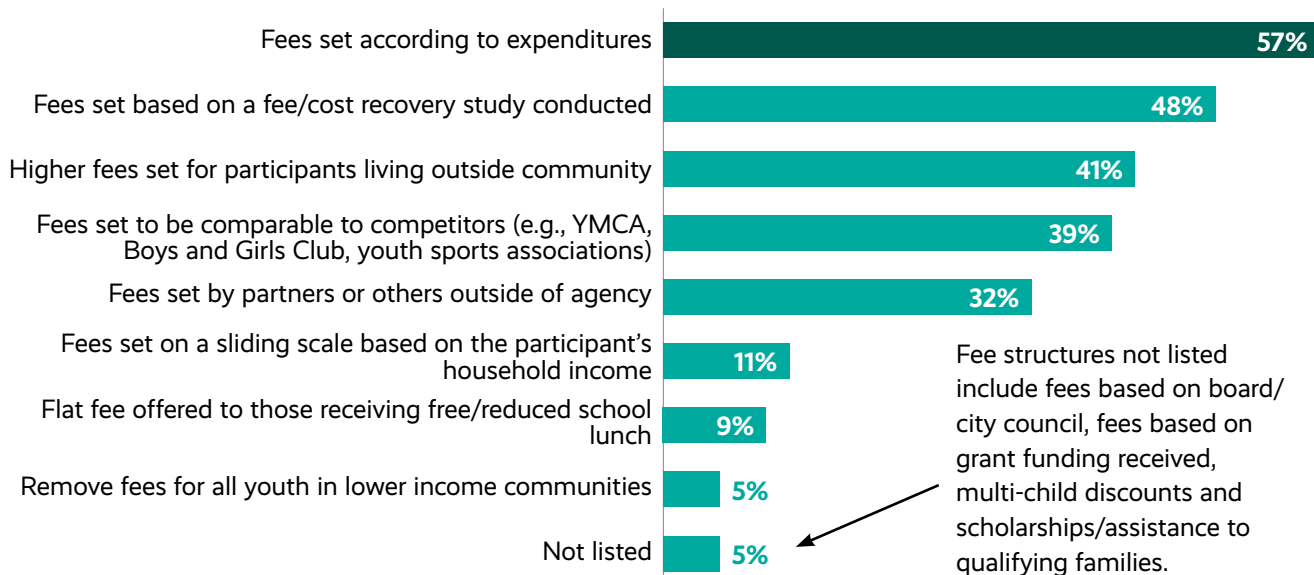
Cost can be a barrier to youth sports participation. In 2023, a [report](#) by the Sports Fitness Industry Association found that youth sports participation for families with household incomes less than \$25,000 was less in comparison to families

with a household income of \$100,000 or more. Similarly, a recent NRPA poll of 1,000 U.S. parents shows trends that children of households with incomes of \$100,000 or more participated more frequently in youth sports than do those from households earning less than \$35,000. One method agencies use to increase access for lower-income families is to reduce fees or offer discounts. Approximately nine percent of agencies provide these types of benefits, while five percent remove fees completely for lower-income youth in their communities.

¹ For simplicity, these numbers represent the average of estimated percentages provided by agencies for each category and do not reflect the overall size or composition of said programs. The median percentages provided for each category are: run by agencies (70%), run exclusively by partners (25%) and operated jointly (10%). These numbers together will not sum to 100% because each category is the percentage of rates provided by agencies.

At least half of agencies set fees based on expenditures.

% of agencies with fee structure



Of the agencies that allow third-party leagues to use their facilities, more than half (64%) charge the same rate to all third-party leagues, 20 percent charge different rates

based on population served, and less than 10 percent charge rates based on league budgets or alignment with agency values.

A teenager plays basketball.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

Challenges in Youth Sports Administration

Not surprisingly, given the many youth sports offerings provided by park and recreation agencies and their partners, almost all agencies (99%) experience challenges in some

form. Agencies most frequently note challenges in the lack of volunteer coaches (82%), shortages in the number of facilities or facility space (67%), and hardship in recruiting officials.

Most agencies face challenges with not having enough volunteer coaches/officials and lack of facilities for youth sports programming.

% of agencies reporting challenges



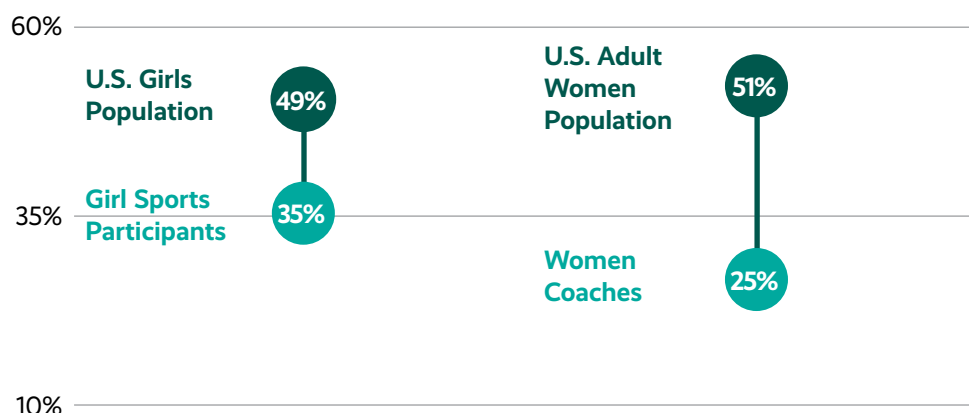
Participation in Youth Sports for Women and Girls

The typical youth sports program offered by park and recreation agencies uses 125 coaches to serve 2,000 youths annually. Overall, 35 percent of participants in agencies' youth sports programs are girls (range: 5-70%) and 25 percent of coaches are women (range: 0-80%). In the United States, women comprise 51 percent of the adult population and girls comprise 49 percent of the youth population. When compared to the current U.S. population, these results highlight the underrepresentation of women and girls in youth sports.

In line with national trends, 45% of agencies report a gender gap in the number of girls versus boys participating in their youth sports programs.

Women coaches and girls are underrepresented in youth sports programming in parks and recreation as compared to the U.S. population.

% of women's and girls' participation trends in youth sports

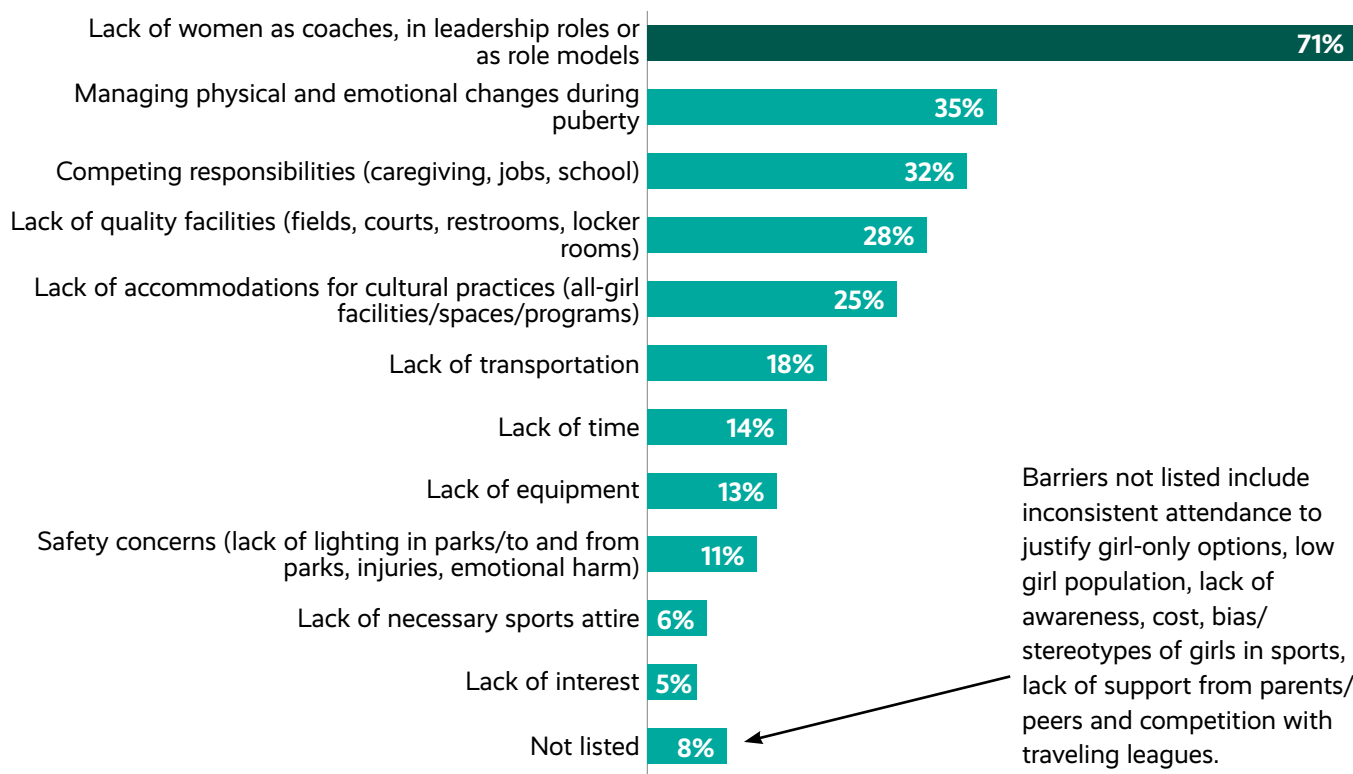


Most agencies (80%) indicated that girls face barriers to sports in their communities. The most frequently noted barrier faced by girls participating in youth sports is the lack of

women role models in leadership and coach positions (71%). More than a third (35%) noted navigating changes in adolescence as an obstacle facing girls.

Agencies most frequently noted the lack of women role models as a barrier to youth sports participation for girls.

% of agencies indicating barriers for girls' participation in youth sports



Nearly 40 percent of agencies are deliberately working to recruit female coaches.

Addressing Gender Gaps

Agencies that identified gender gaps in their youth sports programming are working toward addressing disparities by increasing opportunities and decreasing barriers for girls. Based on each community's condition, agencies are implementing strategies such as:

- Recruiting more female coaches.
- Identifying age-based approaches to prevent drop out of girls in sports during middle-school years.
- Discontinuing coed competitive leagues in favor of gender-specific leagues.
- Offering more convenient play times.
- Providing uniforms fit for girls.
- Lowering fees.
- Offering sports that girls want to play.

Some agencies mentioned partnering with schools to support these efforts, and one highlighted the importance of gathering feedback from community members for program improvement and continuous monitoring of participation trends.

One agency that implemented strategies to increase the number of women coaches and offer sports of interest to girls in the community said, *"While addressing this [gender] gap is an ongoing effort, early results show increased inter-*

"Over the last few years, we have been able to transition from historically co-ed leagues to girls only leagues...across [many of] our programs run in house. We have received positive feedback with the change as it has helped girls feel more comfortable trying a new sport or continuing participation."

—Youth Sports Survey Respondent

est and participation from girls in our programs. We remain committed to ensuring that all children, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to experience the benefits of youth sports."

A recent NRPA poll of 1,000 U.S. residents showed that the public supports efforts to support girls, with more than half (57%) stating that they believe it is highly important for girls to be encouraged to participate in sports as they enter middle school and high school.

Twenty-one percent of agencies are developing or have developed public awareness campaigns for engagement with girls and women coaches.

Sixty-eight percent of agencies are making a conscious effort to offer as many all-girl youth sports as all-boy youth sports.



A group of teens walk with their skateboards.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

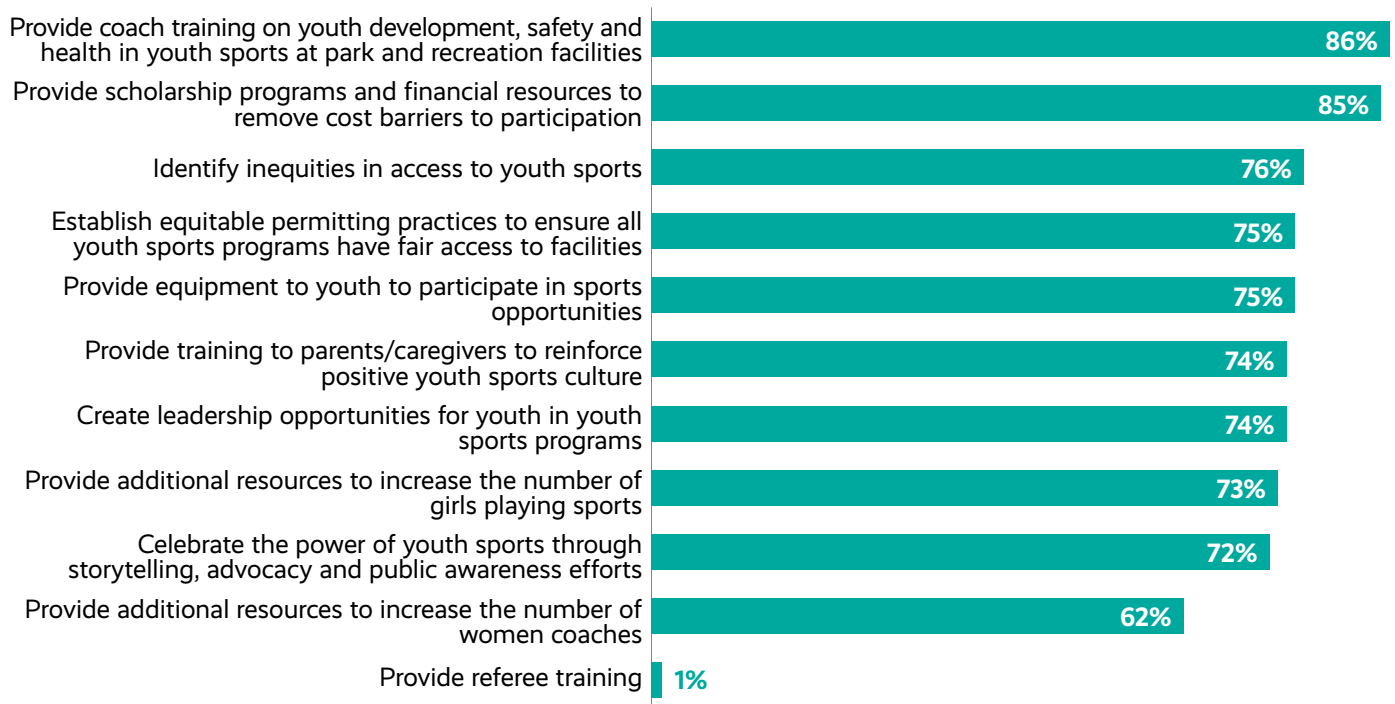
Advancing Youth Sports Equity Through Parks and Recreation

With the wide reach of youth sports programming provided by parks and recreation, agencies are uniquely positioned to implement strategies that advance equity and improve the quality of these programs. In fact, surveyed agencies generally agree that park and recreation professionals and their agencies play many roles to ensure fair and just access to youth sports so all kids can play. At least three in five

agencies (62% or more) believe park and recreation agencies should provide training, resources and equipment; assess current youth sports systems to identify inequities; and engage in advocacy to elevate the power of youth sports. Agencies indicated that providing coach training (86%) and financial assistance to participants (85%) are top priorities to ensure fair and just access to youth sports.

Respondents believe parks and recreation should play various roles to advance equitable youth sports.

% of agencies who believe parks and recreation should play each role



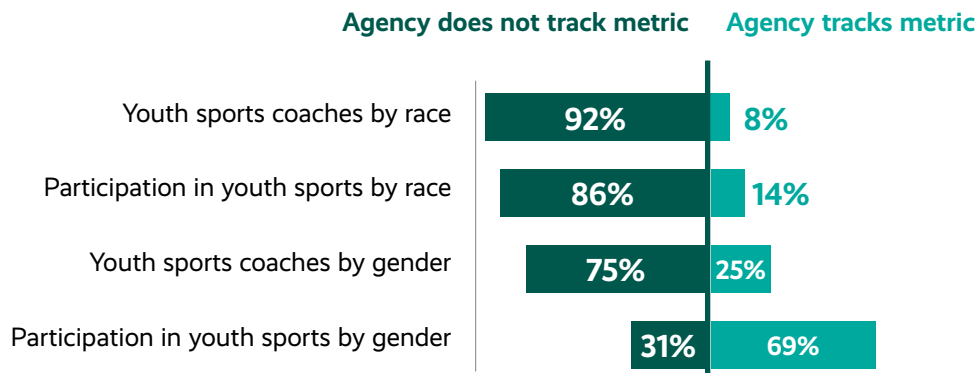
Tracking Demographic Metrics

Most survey respondents (76%) think that park and recreation agencies should play a role in identifying inequities in youth sports access. Collecting data about youth sports participants is a valuable first step in this effort because it provides insight on the composition of the community and

sheds light on whether all segments of communities are appropriately represented. Survey findings show that while many agencies (69%) track youth sports participation by gender, park and recreation agencies have an opportunity to improve the gathering of other demographic data.

Most agencies **do not track metrics** for race and gender of coaches or for race of youth participating in youth sports.

% distribution of agencies that track metric



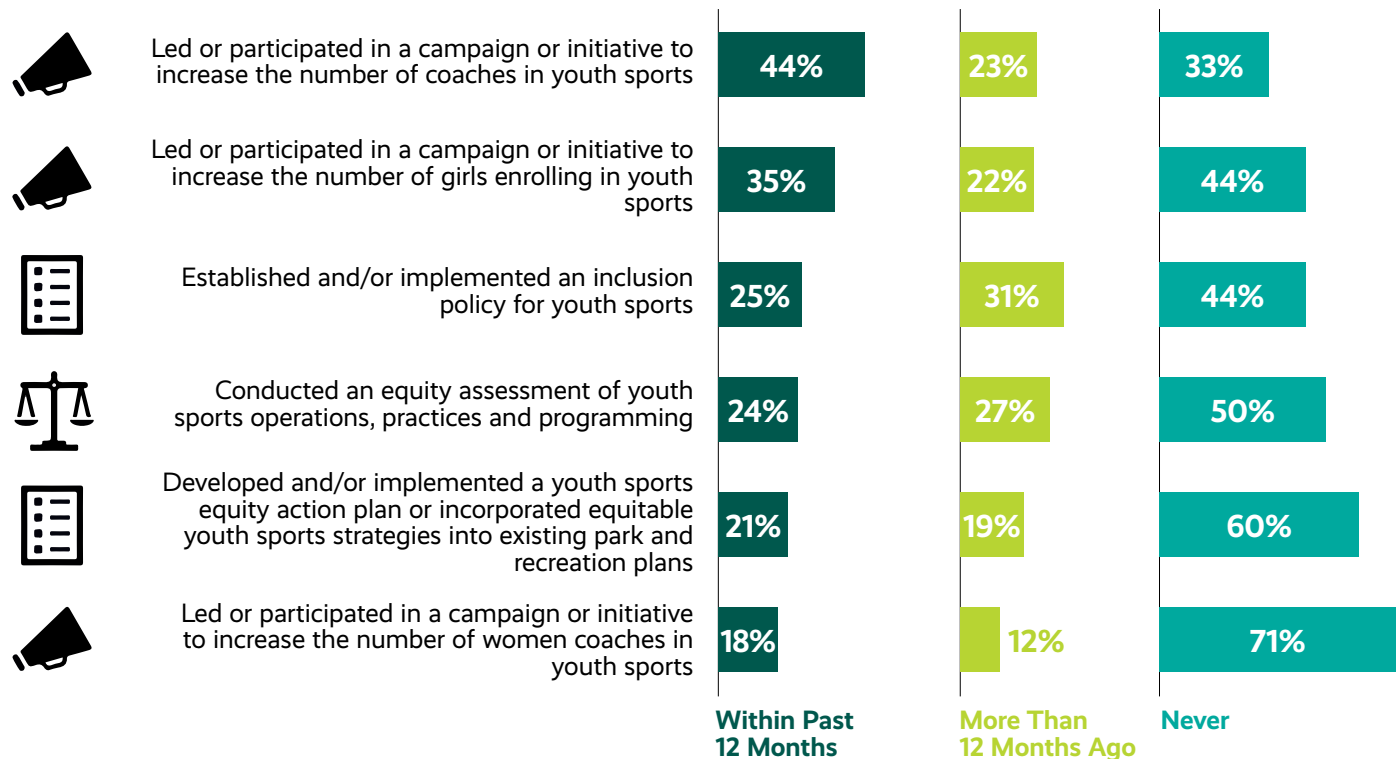
Systems-Level Actions Toward Equity

Actions at the park and recreation systems level — such as the creation of plans, policies and practices; installation of infrastructure; and engagement in advocacy — can shift the conditions that support inequity and drive changes that can achieve greater impact through youth sports. Agencies reported that the most common systems-level actions taken

within the past 12 months included advocacy campaigns to increase the number of coaches (44%) and girls (35%) in youth sports. Most had never been involved in initiatives to increase female coaches (71%) or youth sports equity action plans (60%).

While over 40% of agencies participated in advocacy campaigns to increase the number of coaches in youth sports, less than 20% had been involved in campaigns to increase the number of women coaches.

% of agencies taking action





Agencies that conducted an **equity assessment** identified **gaps in their youth sports programming** — such as transportation and financial obstacles, inequitable promotion, and unmet needs for girls and young children to participate. One agency reported their agency's equity assessment findings to public schools and sports providers, outlining the necessary resources to address needs. This communication effort resulted in a county-wide strategy to advance gender equity.

"We conducted an equity initiative that showed which parts of our town we were not serving adequately. Participation rose after we changed our marketing efforts and scholarships."

— Youth Sports Survey Respondent



Agencies that engaged in a **campaign or initiative** to increase the number of **girls in youth sports** also shared experiences of their efforts. These efforts included school mandates to promote girls sports, single- or multi-day events providing opportunities for girls to play sports through clinics and classes, and the use of social media and marketing to model the participation of women in sports.



Two youth face off at a hockey rink.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

"We implemented a National Girls and Women in Sports day event last year. It was a free event, and we hosted it at a facility...in an underserved community. We wanted it to be within walking distance if transportation was an issue."

We made it free to eliminate the socioeconomic barriers and we brought in mainly female coaches.... It was so successful. It's an annual event that we hope to grow and expand upon."

— Youth Sports Survey Respondent



Agencies that engaged in a **campaign or initiative** to increase the number of **women coaches** in youth sports reported using various strategies. These included the use of social media and marketing for recruitment, offering financial incentives, and providing training and mentorship to create "an empowering environment for female coaches in [the] sports community."

"Representation matters! Women running coed and girls' programs make such a difference for both our girls and boys. Girls need to see other women in spaces and have positive role models, while boys need to see and respect women in sports leadership roles to break societal cycles.... Although it seems small, our kids notice those who are in these positions and themselves in each of us, so I think representation is what makes us successful."

— Youth Sports Survey Respondent

Conclusion

A young child plays ping pong.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

This report describes the state of youth sports programming provided by parks and recreation. The findings show that park and recreation agencies have adopted proven design strategies for access, engagement and coach development, but face challenges in program delivery. Gender disparities persist for girl participants, with the lack of representation of women leaders and coaches as the top barrier. Results also show that specific training on coaching girls in sports is lacking.

In response to these challenges, park and recreation professionals recognize their role in addressing gaps and advancing equity so that all youth can experience the benefits of youth sports. Through systems-level and programmatic approaches, agencies are advancing this work and sharing their successes in increasing opportunities and decreasing barriers for girls in sports. Taken together, the information presented in this report provides baseline data and a tool for advocacy and program development of accessible youth sports programming for all.

Acknowledgements

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The research team would like to thank Nike for its generous support of this project.

About NRPA

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this vision by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, environmental resilience, and overall health and well-being.

NRPA brings strength to our message by partnering with like-minded organizations, including those in the federal government, nonprofits and commercial enterprises. Funded through dues, grants, registrations and charitable contributions, NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives for our members that ultimately enrich the communities they serve.

NRPA places immense importance on research and data to raise the status of parks and recreation and conducts research with two goals. First, NRPA creates and analyzes data to help park and recreation agencies make optimal decisions on operations, programming and spending. Second, NRPA develops data and insights that support park and recreation professionals making the case for greater and more stable funding to policymakers, key stakeholders, the media and the public. The NRPA Research team works closely with internal subject matter experts, respected industry consultants and the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at nrpa.org/Research.

About Nike

Nike is powering the future of youth sport — with the vision of an active, inclusive world that inspires all youth to play and achieve their greatest potential. Together with community organizations, athletes, experts and employees, Nike is changing the game to improve sport access and experience for everyone and is focused on providing quality coaching, engaging more girls in sport, and addressing societal barriers that keep too many youth on the sidelines. All youth need play for communities to thrive, and an active next generation means a better, more equitable future.

Learn more about [Nike's Social & Community Impact](#) work as part of its Purpose to move the world forward through the power of sport.



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