

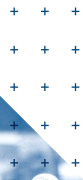


# STATE OF PLAY

## Central Ohio



ANALYSIS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS





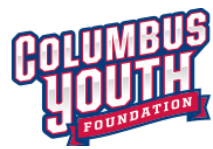
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Chris and Lori Holtmann Fund  
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*The Aspen Institute thanks our partners for their support of this report.*

# WELCOME

As rabid as Central Ohio is about the traditions around Saturday college football, the region embraces other sports as well. Columbus has major professional hockey and soccer franchises, plus minor league baseball. The city has hosted a range of diverse sporting events, including the NCAA women's basketball Final Four, USA Olympic and amateur sporting events, and the Gay Softball World Series. These events can inspire youth to play sports. But unfortunately, too many Central Ohio youth lack quality access to some of the diverse sports offerings that the community showcases at professional, amateur and college levels.

There's room for improving the quality and quantity of diverse athletic experiences for all children, regardless of race, gender, income or ability, which in turn can produce healthier communities. Franklin County, home to the city of Columbus, ranks 48th out of 88 Ohio counties for overall health outcomes, according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Nationwide Children's Hospital reported that 31% of Franklin County youth are overweight or obese, on par with rates that are also too high for Ohio (33%) and the U.S. (31%). In Central Ohio, there is a divide based upon race and income in youth sport experiences.

The Aspen Institute's Project Play initiative aims to support Central Ohio in identifying opportunities to build healthier kids and communities through sports. This report offers an assessment of the state of play for youth sports, physical activity and outdoor recreation in Central Ohio, which was defined as Franklin County and the general Columbus area. The report was made in partnership with The Columbus Foundation, Lindy Infante Foundation, Columbus Recreation and Parks Department, Columbus Youth Foundation, Nationwide Children's Hospital and the Chris and Lori Holtmann Fund.

The work of Project Play is anchored in the body of research that has emerged over the past decade establishing the many benefits of physical activity. It's associated with greater cognitive function, positive mental health, better educational outcomes, and lower health care costs in adulthood. A virtuous cycle gets unleashed, especially if children can be engaged in regular sport and physical activity before age 12.

Project Play produced this *State of Play Central Ohio* report by analyzing sport programs, facilities and experiences of young people in this region through the eight strategies ("plays") highlighted in our seminal 2015 report, *Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game*. Guiding our findings is the State of Play Central Ohio Advisory Group consisting of local leaders across several key sectors.

The report is intended to inform community strategies and help organizations develop new partnerships and programs, which will especially be needed during the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. We applaud the desire of Central Ohio to improve the lives of youth through all sports, not only football. We encourage the community to become a national model by taking collective, sustained action guided by these findings.

Sincerely,



**Tom Farrey**  
Executive Director  
Aspen Institute  
Sports & Society Program



**Dan Sharpe**  
Vice President  
The Columbus Foundation



**Stephanie Infante**  
President  
Lindy Infante Foundation

## THE VISION

A Central Ohio  
in which every  
child has the  
opportunity to  
be active through  
sports, play  
and outdoor  
recreation.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program analyzed the landscape of youth sports in the Central Ohio region from November 2019 to December 2020. *State of Play Central Ohio* offers a snapshot of how well adults are serving youth through sports, physical activity and outdoor recreation, regardless of race, gender, income or ability.

Findings for this report were guided by an advisory group of local leaders and obtained through multiple methods: individual interviews with a broad collection of stakeholders and community members; focus-group discussions with youth, coaches, and parents and caregivers; surveys conducted of youth; media accounts; and existing reports, policy analyses and publicly available data collected by the Aspen Institute and Columbus resident Michael Quesnell, the report's principal investigator.



## Some key findings in the report:

- **Relationships with peers are a key motivator for sports participation.** In our youth survey, the No. 1 reason kids said they play sports is to be with friends. Although many Central Ohio youth are competitive, winning ranked ninth.
- **Financial barriers block sports participation for many.** Twenty percent of surveyed Central Ohio youth said that the costs of sports prevent them from playing more often. This affects Black youth (28%) more than White youth (18%), and elementary school students (29%) more than those in middle school (19%) and high school (14%).
- **Safe access to open play areas is uneven across the region.** In our youth survey, White youth (86%) reported feeling safer than Black youth (71%). The effects of COVID-19 further limited access to play spaces.
- **E-sports are popular for some youth.** Almost three out of 10 Central Ohio youth said they “sometimes” or “often” participate in competitive video gaming with others or in a league.
- **Boys (34%) were more likely to play e-sports than girls (17%), and Black youth (45%) were far more likely to participate than White youth (18%).**
- **Standardized coach training is inconsistent.** Expectations exist for high school coaches to be trained in areas such as CPR, first aid, concussion protocols and sexual abuse protection. But this attention is not universal for club and recreational sports. Mental health is recognized by coaches as essential in working with young people, but this typically happens informally with very little official training.
- **Boys reported they most frequently play basketball, and girls listed soccer.** More than half of the surveyed youth said they have tried basketball (58%) and soccer (54%), well ahead of the next-closest activities: swimming and biking (36%). Girls told us the sports they most want to try are volleyball and basketball. Boys said they are most interested in basketball and tackle football.



- Tackle football’s decline continues despite adjusted training techniques.** Football participation has dropped 27% across the state of Ohio, the steepest decline in the U.S. In Central Ohio, far fewer boys reported having ever played tackle football (36%) than basketball (71%) and soccer (60%). Black youth were twice as likely to have played football and three times as likely to want to try football than White youth. Flag football is a viable alternative for safety concerns, with 16% of all youth having tried flag versus 21% having played tackle.

Our recommendations — located in the Game Changer section starting on page 31 — offer ideas based on the unique characteristics of Central Ohio and the feedback of the community advisory group. The main recommendation is to direct Central Ohio’s collaborative power into a coalition focused on health and inclusion through youth sports.

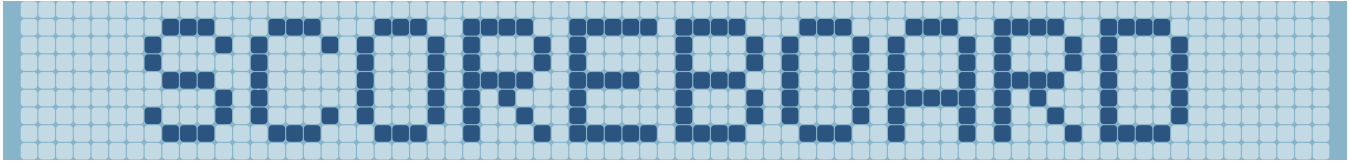
The coalition could inspire systems-level interventions, beginning with these five areas of focus and activations:

- Knowledge sharing and communications:** Increase information and access to underutilized sports facilities.
- Family empowerment:** Implement a sports-nonprofit training, transparency and inclusion index that is publicly available.
- Coach development pipeline:** Emphasize existing and new coach training that prioritizes social and emotional skill development, particularly as kids return to play during and after the pandemic.
- Equity and inclusion:** Foster a viable and sustainable pathway for participation that’s reflective of systemic disparities across race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, ability and income.
- Quality assurance among funders:** Coordinate investments to create an equitable and sustainable network for youth sports.

With a passionate sports culture and a spirit of collaboration, Central Ohio has the opportunity to take action and provide more equitable access to and higher quality of sport, physical activity and recreation opportunities for all children. This can be accomplished through a joint commitment — by schools, local government agencies, nonprofits and the business community — to the health and well-being of our next generation.

**State of Play Central Ohio is the Aspen Institute’s 10th overall community report. The Aspen Institute has produced county reports on Seattle/King County, Washington and Mobile County, Alabama; a state report on Hawai’i; regional reports on Southeast Michigan, Western New York, Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes, and Central Ohio; and local reports on Harlem, Baltimore and Camden, New Jersey. Stakeholders in those communities have taken actions based on the recommendations and are seeing results.**

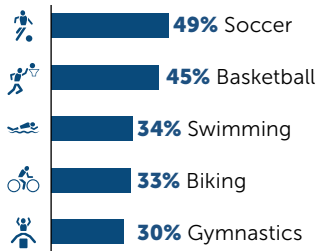
# THE STATE OF PLAY IN CENTRAL OHIO



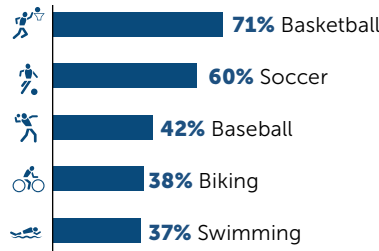
## TOP 5 SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES YOUTH HAVE TRIED

Results from Aspen Institute's survey of 594 youth. Multiple answers were allowed.

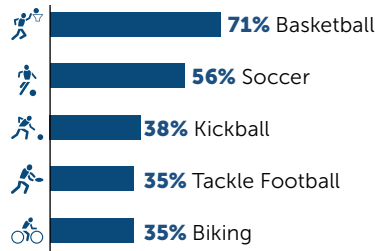
### GIRLS



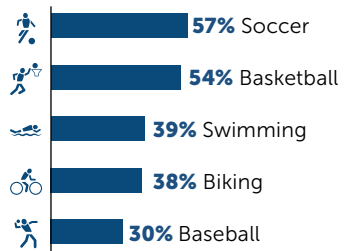
### BOYS



### BLACK

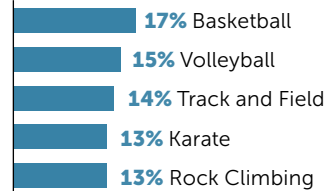


### WHITE

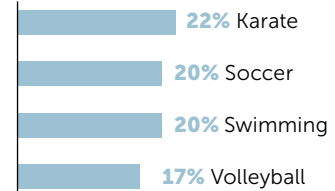


## TOP SPORTS YOUTH WANT TO TRY

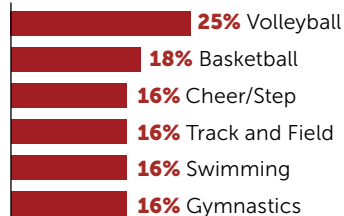
### OVERALL



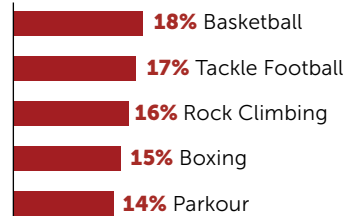
### ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



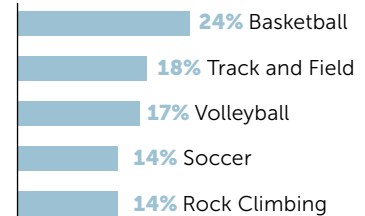
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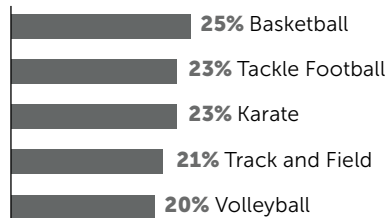
### BOYS



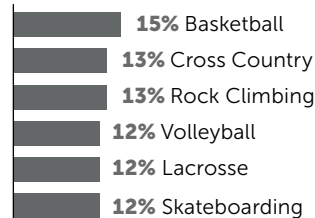
### MIDDLE SCHOOL



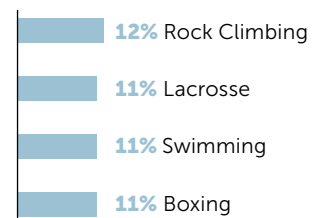
### BLACK



### WHITE



### HIGH SCHOOL



## WHY SOME YOUTH DON'T PLAY SPORTS OFTEN

| Girls                                  |     |
|--|-----|
| No time due to schoolwork              | 32% |
| Sports are too expensive               | 17% |
| No time due to family responsibilities | 16% |
| I'm not good enough to play            | 14% |
| I don't want to get hurt               | 14% |

| Boys                                  |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| Sports are too expensive              | 23% |
| No time due to schoolwork             | 17% |
| I don't want to get hurt              | 11% |
| Not enough information about programs | 11% |
| My friends don't play sports          | 10% |

| White                        |     |
|------------------------------|-----|
| No time due to schoolwork    | 20% |
| Sports are too expensive     | 18% |
| I'm not good enough to play  | 12% |
| My friends don't play sports | 11% |
| I don't want to get hurt     | 11% |

| Black                                  |     |
|--|-----|
| No time due to schoolwork              | 32% |
| Sports are too expensive               | 28% |
| No time due to family responsibilities | 17% |
| I don't want to get hurt               | 16% |
| Not enough information about programs  | 11% |

| Why Coaches Think Youth Don't Play* |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| They're not interested in sports    | 45% |
| Their friends don't play            | 44% |
| Sports are too expensive            | 44% |
| They don't have a way to get there  | 30% |
| They're not good enough to play     | 29% |

\* Results on the Coach Perception of Youth chart came from a coach survey conducted by LiFEsports at Ohio State University.





# THE 8 PLAYS

+ +

The Aspen Institute's seminal 2015 report, *Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game*, identifies eight strategies ("plays") that can get and keep all kids active through sports – regardless of race, gender, income or ability. On the pages that follow are five findings from Central Ohio related to each "play."

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

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*For more on the framework of each play, see the Project Play report at*

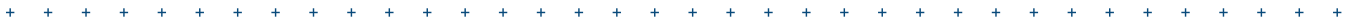
YOUTHREPORT.PROJECTPLAY.US



# 1

Challenge: Youth sport is organized by adults

## The Play: Ask Kids What They Want



### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*To get and keep kids involved in sports, build the voice of children into the design of activities.*

### FIVE FINDINGS IN CENTRAL OHIO

#### Relationships with peers are a key motivator for sports participation.

In our youth survey, the No. 1 reason kids said they play sports is to be with friends. Winning ranked ninth. One high school athlete said the best part of sports is “being able to be with people who like something that you like and be able to do it with them.” These relationships can act as a buffer against self-doubt, offering encouragement at critical times. “If you’re going against the other team and you miss the ball, your team around you is cheering you on to go back and make sure you’re not bringing yourself down,” a middle school athlete said. Friendships are associated with greater physical competence, self-worth, success perceptions and lower sport stress.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, the isolation caused by COVID-19 has impacted motivation to play. A middle school girls soccer player said her club coach has sent videos during the pandemic to work on skills and she tries to exercise, “but sometimes I just am too tired to do that.”

#### Strain from organized sports can thwart interest in participation.

In our survey, girls (32%) were more likely than boys (17%) to say they don’t play sports more often because of lack of time due to schoolwork. Rhiannon, a Grandview Heights seventh grader, swims on middle school and club teams 13 hours over six days a week for eight months.

“It’s hard, because as a teenager I really want to have free time,” she said. Andreas James, sports director for a prominent Central Ohio AAU basketball program, said the fun and love of the game is being ignored. Nationally, the typical child sticks with a sport less than three years and quits by age 11, usually because the sport stopped being fun.<sup>2</sup> Factors that can contribute to a lower level of enjoyment are starting organizational sports at a younger age, more time in practice and training versus free play, and lack of quality coaching.<sup>3</sup>

### WHAT YOUTH LIKE MOST ABOUT PLAYING SPORTS

|                            |     |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Playing with friends       | 75% |
| Having fun                 | 62% |
| Competing                  | 50% |
| Exercising to stay healthy | 49% |
| Getting better at sports   | 46% |
| Challenging myself         | 42% |
| Making new friends         | 41% |
| Learning new skills        | 41% |
| Winning                    | 33% |

\* Multiple answers allowed

Source: Aspen Institute Youth Survey

## **Personal growth is a priority for athletes, who also desire to grow as people.**

“People don’t enjoy (sports) as much as they should because coaches care too much about winning and not helping kids themselves,” said one high school athlete. Adding to this is the desire to contribute to the team’s success in concrete ways. Researchers speak to the need for athlete autonomy and empowerment to avoid exhaustion.<sup>4,5</sup> For some, empowerment means being heard by coaches. Mackenzie, an athlete from Dublin Coffman High School, said coaches listen to her opinions and “that makes them better coaches by listening to me and not just telling me what to do.” These opportunities for personal growth through sport have been significantly challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The #Iwanttoplay social media campaign, initiated in July 2020 by Ohio Lt. Gov. Jon Husted, acknowledges the challenges ahead while reminding people that sports are “where we learn teamwork, grit and how to compete.”<sup>6</sup> Coaches in a survey by LiFEsports at Ohio State University said they want to be role models (96%), but spend little time talking to parents and caregivers (which coaches ranked 13th out of 14 weekly duties).

## **Achieving success in sports is considered valuable.**

Competing was the No. 3 answer Central Ohio youth gave us for what they like about playing sports — a higher ranking than in most other communities studied by the Aspen Institute. “My favorite part about school sports is the fact that when we win, we can be proud of who we’re winning it for because we have the school name on our uniforms,” said a Central Ohio high school athlete. Striving to reach achievement milestones is very much a part of a young person’s sense of independence. Constraining that can result in burnout.<sup>7</sup> Local competitors think that peers sometimes drop out of sports when they do not think they can, or want to, keep pace with others on the team.

Girls were more likely than boys to tell us that they’re not good enough to play sports. As a further indicator of how important competitive sports are, the Ohio High School Athletic Association has largely continued playing sports during the pandemic, even as cases and hospitalizations surged. Fifty-six percent of high school administrators in the state supported winter sports starting on time.<sup>8</sup>

## **Kids say they want less pressure from parents when playing sports.**

In our youth survey, 7% of respondents said they don’t play sports often because they’re too serious. White youth were eight times more likely than Black youth to say this. A pay-for-play program director lamented that many moms and dads yell at first graders during his training sessions. “If this is what’s happening to 5-, 6-, 7-, 8-year-olds, how are they going to be at 19, 20 and 21?” Parent sideline behavior is a significant form of communication largely aligned with task goals for their children and social ambitions, and it’s linked to the parents’ own ego.<sup>9</sup> “Before I get on the field, I make sure I tell my mom not to scream because sometimes that just makes it worse,” said a middle school female athlete. A soccer player from Dublin Coffman High School said because she doesn’t feel pressure from her parents, she isn’t stressed to make them happy. “I just play to my best ability and have fun,” she said.





### **Ejheni Mdivanian, 11**

Growing up in Grandview Heights, Ejheni was introduced to sports at a young age. She would tag along with her mom, Becky, who coaches middle school soccer for Grandview Heights City Schools, and watch Los Angeles Dodgers games on TV with her father, Tigran. Those early experiences gave Ejheni a love of sports that she now fully embraces as a multisport athlete in soccer, softball and gymnastics.

Playing different sports teaches her different skills and life lessons, such as perseverance. She is a competitive gymnast, spending four hours a day over three days a week at Universal Gymnasts, Inc. in Hilliard. To get through tough training days, Ejheni says she focuses on the thrill of upcoming competition. "Getting a new skill in gymnastics, you can't do it, you can't do it, you can't do it, and then finally, once you get it, it's really nice," she says.

Teamwork is an important life skill she has learned from playing team sports — defense and midfield for the Worthington United Soccer Club and second base, shortstop and outfield for the Lewis Center Sharks softball team. "For softball, sometimes you need to get yourself out so your team can score a run, and it's like, 'Oh, I don't want to get out, but I want my team to win,'" she says.

While a competitive person by nature, Ejheni says she appreciates that her softball team focuses first on improving themselves.



**We don't care about winning or losing as much as getting better. I like that there's not a lot of pressure.**

**EJHENI MDIVANIAN**

Outside of school, sports, and wrangling her two younger brothers, Ejheni likes playing outside with friends and reading science fiction. She's currently working her way through *The Lord of the Rings* series and then watching the corresponding movies with her father. Although she enjoys these other pastimes, Ejheni says a life without sports would be very boring.

"I don't do any school clubs or anything because I usually have a sport going on," she says. "It would be so much free time and I wouldn't know what to do with myself."



# 2

## Challenge: Overstructured sports experiences

# The Play: Reintroduce Free Play



### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Make sure there's room not just for organized play but experiences that children can own.*

## FIVE FINDINGS IN CENTRAL OHIO

### Community centers' role in providing free play is evolving.

Communities such as Whitehall, Westerville and Columbus, with a newly built community center in the Linden neighborhood, are investing heavily in their parks and recreation facilities. Many municipalities now see their facilities as full-service sites addressing everything from jobs, family services, health, and, in the case of Westerville, dedicated e-sports space. About six in 10 youth told us they have played on a rec center team — the most common place where they access sports. Only about two in 10 youth said they have played sports informally at a rec center. Organized sports that are frequently outsourced to nonprofits (except for communities within Columbus) can cut into free play space as they compete for field and gym time. Darren Hurley, who directs the Worthington Parks and Recreation Department, said that pressure exists between what a local parks board may want in terms of free-play space versus sports boosters' expectations. Worthington and other suburban communities such as Grandview Heights, Upper Arlington and Westerville have created nature-themed playgrounds that are popular with families.<sup>10</sup>

The Columbus and Franklin County Metro Park system offers eight natural play areas designed to connect kids to nature through exploration.

### Where parks exist, they can be hard to reach.

More than half of Central Ohio youth (59%) said they have played sports at a playground or park. In the Trust for Public Land's 2020 index, Columbus ranked 49th out of the 100 largest cities in the country for how well it's meeting the need for parks, scoring 49.8 out of a possible 100 points. Only 8% of the city's area is dedicated to parks, close to half of the national average (15%). On the other hand, 68% of the population can get to a park within a 10-minute walk, better than the national average of 55%. Columbus parks rank low in some per-capita amenities categories, such as having dog parks, playgrounds, restrooms and splash pads for residents. The city spends \$94 per person on its parks, while Cincinnati, number five in the rankings, spends \$189 per person.<sup>11</sup> Access to the vast, seven-county Metro Parks system in Central Ohio can be hard for people without much money. "If you are a person with no transportation, and maybe a slight interest in the great outdoors, how do you get to Battelle Darby?" said Columbus and Franklin County Metro Parks Executive Director Tim Moloney. "It might as well be on the moon." Still, the Metro Parks system — 19 parks and 230 miles of trails — saw "an uptick in weekday attendance" in March 2020 during the pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

## For some youth, skateboarding offers a contemporary, inclusive version of free play.

Skateboarding cracked the top 10 in our youth survey for activities that Central Ohio boys have participated in and as a sport that all youth want to try. Franklin County has seven outdoor skateparks – two of which are in Columbus – and an eighth park is being built in Columbus. Some are easily accessible via bus line or bike trail. In the Trust for Public Land’s 2019 Index, Columbus ranked 89th out of 94 cities across the country in number of skateparks, with one per nearly 900,000 residents. However, as a local skateboarder noted, “There’s not one hub in central Columbus that everybody can go to.” Skateparks are seen as places for people of different races to interact with each other.<sup>13</sup> In our survey, 7% of Central Ohio girls said they have tried skateboarding – a higher rate than sports like lacrosse, figure skating, wrestling, rowing and field hockey, and the same rate as golf.

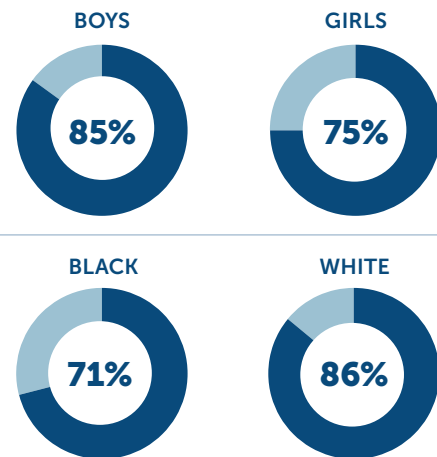
## E-sports are popular for some youth.

Almost three out of 10 Central Ohio youth said they “sometimes” or “often” participate in competitive video gaming with others or in a league. Boys (34%) were more likely to play e-sports than girls (17%), and Black youth (45%) were far more likely to participate than White youth (18%). Although e-sports is a growing phenomenon, it offers none of the health advantages that physical exercise provides. There are ways to use technology to get kids outside and moving. After the mobile application Pokémon Go was launched in 2016, it became a smash hit among millennials, with 43% of users being female.<sup>14, 15</sup> Kim Conrad, Grove City parks and recreation director, said many more people in recent years have used Pokémon Go in parks.

## Safe access to open play areas is uneven across the region.

In our youth survey, White youth (86%) reported feeling safer than Black youth (71%). Columbus has launched a strategy for neighborhood safety that pools resources in opportunity neighborhoods, such as the One Linden plan.<sup>16</sup> In other communities like Whitehall, Parks and Recreation Director Shannon Sorrell said police have actively worked to improve safety, yet it has been many years since a basketball court has been built due to gang violence. Parents in focus groups from South Columbus and West Columbus are aware of their neighborhood challenges. One mother said she would never allow her 15-year-old child to walk to the store, due to visible prostitution and drug activity. A grandmother from another neighborhood noted that she lived near a park referred to as the “glass park,” because youth would frequently vandalize it. The effects of COVID-19 further limited access to safe play spaces, with the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department, as directed by the state, closing high-use areas like playgrounds and outdoor recreational equipment during the height of the pandemic.

### YOUTH WHO FEEL SAFE PLAYING IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD



Source: Aspen Institute Youth Survey

# 3

## Challenge: Sameness and specialization

# The Play: Encourage Sport Sampling

**From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:**

*Resist early sport specialization that limits overall development. Grow the menu of sport options, create better connections to vulnerable populations, and more athletes-for-life will emerge.*

## FIVE FINDINGS IN CENTRAL OHIO

### Being a multisport athlete resonates with local sport leaders.

Across the region, prominent leaders such as Ohio State Athletic Director Gene Smith have vocally endorsed the goal of multisport athletes to reduce the risk of overuse injuries and burnout. Ohio State coaches often look to recruit athletes who have played several sports. Smith said the athletic department often has to inspire single-sport athletes to stay motivated in college athletics due to burnout. Jay Sharett, the head football coach at perennial champion Pickerington High School North, noted that 60% of his players are at least two-sport athletes.

Resolute Lacrosse, which provides individualized training for its sport, reduces nonseasonal programming to encourage multisport participation. Sports specialization happens for a variety of reasons. For some parents, peers can weigh heavily on their decision to have their child specialize. “The whole sports-specialization movement really originated from more parents looking left and right at what the other kids on the block were doing and believing they have to keep up,” said Dr. Chris Stankovich, a national sports performance expert and local parent.



### Variety in sport options is anchored in geography and socioeconomic factors.

Suburban communities in the region offer a variety of sports opportunities through a wide network of organizations. Opportunities are less prevalent in Columbus City Schools. To be a multisport athlete, at least two factors must be present: The sport has to be made available and the resources to play must be on hand. The effect of parental income is an important factor in raising multisport children.<sup>17</sup> This includes access to sports that require natural resources like bodies of water, such as the popular Hoover Reservoir in Westerville. Parents from neighborhoods in the city, however, tell us a different story. One mother reported that kids “don’t have the exposure to different sports, especially if the only access to sports you have is our rec centers.” As a single mom, she drives her children to places where opportunities exist.

"I'm a.k.a. 'Uber' because I drive everywhere," she said. Yet, the ability and time to drive is itself a luxury for many families who might like to expose their children to sports.

### **School-based sport opportunities vary widely by location, further diminishing the likelihood of multisport play.**

Access to multisport opportunities faced by individual families is mirrored regionally at the interscholastic level. The Ohio Capital Conference, which is home to 32 suburban high schools across five counties, offers 24 multilevel varsity sports. Schools offer between 18 and 28 sports. Columbus City Schools, with limited middle school and no freshman sports, provides even fewer options for interested students. Some sports, such as lacrosse, thrive in the suburbs but are hard to find in the city. At Whetstone High School, which recently started a girls lacrosse program, Athletic Director Randy King said the sport is "still struggling to find a home here. The girls are learning a new activity for the first time. We haven't had a lot of success on the field, but the kids have seemed to really enjoy it." A program that has been able to transcend this sport inequity is the Special Olympics, where many athletes, regardless of their school district, can participate year round in a variety of sports. Ohio State University researcher Leeann Lower-Hoppe found that "for some athletes, particularly those in low socio-economic home life, Special Olympics is their primary outlet, so I think that also motivated year-round participation."

### **Exposure to new sports is expanding, especially among underserved stakeholders.**

Central Ohio elementary school students told us they most want to try karate. For high school students, it's rock climbing. In the Franklinton neighborhood, Dan Moehrman directs a popular youth sports program through the Gladden Community House that offers floor hockey and "extreme sports" such as snowboarding and canoeing. The Columbus Blue Jackets introduce urban youth to the game of hockey.

Only 4% of Central Ohio youth said they have tried ice hockey. Blue Jackets Senior Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer Kathryn Dobbs said they contact thousands of local youth annually in underserved communities with a focus on "getting kids active, healthy, and getting sticks in hands to make sure that every kid has access and opportunity." Ohio State University's LiFEsports program gives low-income youth in its camps and community programs exposure to nine sports. One focus group grandmother praised the program because not only did it teach her grandson different sports, "it gave him a purpose." During the COVID-19 pandemic, LiFEsports partnered with the Lindy Infante Foundation for "Sports in a Bag" to distribute sports equipment and play curriculum to underserved youth.

### **Pickleball is gaining in popularity across the region.**

What was started in 1965 by three dads to help their bored kids find something to do over the summer has now been coined as "the fastest-growing sport you've never heard of," growing by 650% over the last six years.<sup>18</sup> Worthington Parks and Recreation initially just taped off some boundaries to see if anyone would play. Having outgrown that space quickly, it now has dedicated pickleball courts where people wait to play.<sup>19</sup> With 16.7% of the 3.3 million players nationally being in the 6- to 17-year-old age group,<sup>20</sup> many young people are learning the game from their parents or even grandparents.<sup>21</sup> A key reason pickleball is gaining popularity among youth is that it's more fun than tennis, and youth do not spend as much time chasing the ball, said middle school physical education teacher Jesse Gates.<sup>22</sup>



Worthington Parks and Recreation Director Darren Hurley said interest in pickleball is growing because it's being played now in secondary schools. Grove City Parks and Recreation also reported seeing growing interest in pickleball.



### **Lorenzo Styles Jr., 18**

You've probably heard of Lorenzo, a star football player at Pickerington High School Central and one of the nation's top recruits who signed to play at Notre Dame. What you may not know is his journey — the fun with friends in travel sports, the skills he developed as a multisport athlete, and the pressure he feels to perform.

"When I was younger, I really wasn't too competitive," Lorenzo says. "I just liked playing the game. It wasn't like until I was 10 or 11 when I really started taking it more seriously. My parents wanted me to play a bunch of different sports. College coaches like you to play more than one. I feel like basketball and track helped with my football agility."

Lorenzo's best childhood memories are from hanging out in hotels with friends on travel sports trips for football and basketball. "I definitely wouldn't do it differently," he says. "I still have friendships with (those) guys and we talk about those memories."

Lorenzo says his father, who played football at Ohio State and in six NFL seasons, never pushed him to play sports.

But Lorenzo was aware of the money spent on him. Around age 13, Lorenzo says his parents informed him that if he wasn't fully committed to sports, he should let them know so they wouldn't waste money.

"I feel like that's why I have to perform even more, because I know how much money was put into the sport," he says. "We spent a lot of money in sports — not just (on) me, also my little brother and older sister. Both my parents couldn't even come to games. My grandparents even helped do this, and I felt I had to be good or I'm wasting their money."

In eighth grade, Lorenzo played for an inner-city football team and saw sports in a new light. He had teammates who struggled emotionally at home, needed rides to practices, and couldn't afford equipment. "It was so different than the suburbs," Lorenzo says. "With inner-city kids, I wish they had more sports to create their value."

Lorenzo regrets not playing lacrosse after hearing from friends who loved it. He says Black youth need more exposure to lacrosse, baseball and soccer, but he's not sure how because they naturally gravitate to football and basketball since those are the sports where they see successful Black athletes.

Lorenzo graduated from high school in December 2020 so he could enroll early for college football. He plans to major in finance and wants to work with stocks and real estate after a potential NFL career.



**I think people overlook how much sports means to people. I think it shaped me to who I am today. Without sports, to be honest, I don't know where I would be. I put so much investment into it.**

**LORENZO STYLES JR.**



# 4

## Challenge: Rising costs and commitment

# The Play: Revitalize In-Town Leagues

**From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:**

*Provide community-based, low-cost leagues and programs that are accessible to all kids – not just youth with the resources and ambition to participate on travel teams.*

## FIVE FINDINGS IN CENTRAL OHIO

### Financial barriers block sports participation for many.

Twenty percent of surveyed Central Ohio youth said that the costs of sports prevent them from playing more often. This affects Black youth (28%) more than White youth (18%), and elementary school students (29%) more than those in middle school (19%) and high school (14%). Coaches surveyed also considered costs to be a top barrier to participation. Kim Emch, who runs the faith-based nonprofit Serving Our Neighbors Ministries in Hilliard, said a low-income mom was brought to tears because she constantly had to tell her son he couldn't play sports at school due to the costs. "The child quickly learns, they don't want their mom to cry," Emch said. "And they certainly don't want to be the cause of her tears, so they stop asking." Many kids in immigrant families from Africa or other parts of the world lack access to sports due to costs, said George Kissi, a local entrepreneur from Ghana. Josué Vicente, leader of the Ohio Hispanic Coalition, said that sports activities in the region have barely changed how they operate over the past 30 years. COVID-19 has not helped. The City of Columbus's general fund was reduced by \$41.5 million in 2020, though Columbus Recreation and Parks officials stressed that they will not reduce programming or raise prices in the future.

### A revitalized Columbus Recreation and Parks sports system holds promise, while the suburbs continue outsourcing most sports to nonprofits.

Two years ago, the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department rolled out a revised youth sports office in direct response to resident needs. Instead of having 27 recreation centers each organizing their own games, clinics, camps, registrations and volunteer recruitment, the department created a one-stop-shop through a web portal. "I can tell the difference in our (participation) numbers and our style of communication with the public," said Char Barnes, sports office manager. During the pandemic, Columbus Recreation and Parks is trying to reach as many kids as possible while following public health guidelines, building loyalty along the way with a focus on improved quality and opportunity for all ages to play sports. The department pivoted to a lot of free programming and retooled soccer leagues into clinics while providing a ball for every child. In addition, they plan to introduce lacrosse as a rec center team sport in spring 2021. In the suburbs, sports programs are largely outsourced to local nonprofits, allowing recreation centers to focus on programming, fitness, preschool and other activities, said Darren Hurley, Worthington Parks and Recreation director. These loosely monitored partnerships with nonprofits can be troubling since few have formal inclusion policies or financial transparency.

“Our process is to be fair and equitable,” former Hilliard Recreation and Parks Director James Gant said. “Right now, that’s not the case. (The nonprofits) believe it’s their park, even though it’s the city’s park. It’s meant for the city as a whole.”

### **Within the traditional pay-to-play sports landscape, some parents want to see more localized opportunities.**

The drive to shape future stars is alive and well in Central Ohio for those who can afford it. Some organizations have been impacted by COVID-19 while others haven’t skipped a beat. Nova Village Basketball, which has sent 55 players to the NCAA Division I level, decreased from 33 expected local and travel teams to six due to health restrictions. Aaron Conrad, head of operations with the Bo Jackson Elite Sports facility, said it has 30,000 kids in the facility’s database and 500 kids on travel teams, which typically cost at least \$2,500 before any private lessons or other enhancements. Conrad said the facility has largely been “business as usual” during COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, travel sports organizers said their teams often must go on the road because the best teams want to play in the elite tournaments near East Coast schools or other major tournament hubs such as Atlanta, Kansas City, and Milwaukee. Some parents say they travel because they can afford to provide their child with that opportunity. One mom questioned why her daughter’s gymnastics club needed to go to North Carolina for competition. “There’s no good gymnasts between Ohio and North Carolina we couldn’t have played? I don’t need to drive that far.”

### **Community organizations are working to fill the opportunity gap, but information-sharing challenges persist.**

In some areas of Columbus, small leagues provide underserved youth access to soccer — the No. 2 sport that Central Ohio youth told us they have tried, behind basketball. The Kids Innerscity Developmental Soccer League was born because “there was zero soccer” in the community, according to Dan



Moehrman, the league coordinator. On the East Side, Liga Latinos Unidos runs year-round soccer for youth and adults. The Columbus Indoor Soccer Cup “has become a symbol of unity and achievement for the Somali community in Central Ohio,” according to its website. In Westerville, the Vineyard Community Center offers a basketball program for 300 kids, at half the cost of the YMCA. But some parents interviewed in focus groups for this report said they have tried unsuccessfully to find activities in the city, suggesting that gaps, at least in terms of information, continue to exist.

### **Local leagues fill the sports opportunity gaps when schools cannot.**

Schools continue to provide consistent access to sports for many youth. More than half of surveyed Central Ohio youth told us they have played on a school team, with girls more likely to have played school sports than boys. Even with wide variations in school-based, pay-to-play costs, school sports are still considered, by some, to offer the best overall value because they occur within the educational context. Due to COVID-19, some Ohio school districts are planning to greatly scale back purchases while trying to find new revenue streams, like online subscriptions to watch games.<sup>23</sup> Columbus Recreation and Parks plans to continue running its basketball program up to age 18 and other sports up to age 14, with hopes of expanding to provide more opportunities with health restrictions in place.

Dublin Youth Athletics has sports programs that run parallel to the high school season, through grade 12. Some suburban sports organizations are working to do the same. Many kids stop being active when they reach high school and don't make a team, a gap that could be filled by more community programming for older youth, said Dr. Thomas Pommering, director of sports medicine at Nationwide Children's Hospital.



**Nehemiah Clayton, 17**

Nehemiah, a senior at Cristo Rey High School, knows the value of recreation centers. As a child, he played sports constantly at the Far East Community Center in Columbus, sometimes playing all day from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Coaches there supported him athletically and academically, and he later became a mentor for kids, too.



**Keep funding recreation centers. Not a lot of kids wait until middle school to grow the love of sports. The love has to be built in younger at these recreation centers.**

**NEHEMIAH CLAYTON**

Nehemiah attributes his current high school soccer and AAU basketball experiences as valuable tools in his personal growth.

Nehemiah likes developing leadership skills through sports settings. He hopes to attend Loyola University Chicago next fall and double-major in criminology and political science, with a goal to become a criminal immigration lawyer.

Nehemiah considers himself a community activist, having attended some protests and signing petitions related to Black Lives Matter and gun violence. "I very much embrace those hard dialogues," he says.

Nehemiah says the distribution of wealth by race is evident within youth sports in Central Ohio. His private school, which has 86% students of color (well above the state average of 19%), doesn't have a home gym or field, so that's 15 minutes of lost practice time traveling to another facility. "Think about the color of those going to suburban versus public schools and the differences in resources, with three or four gyms and a full weight room in the suburbs," he says.

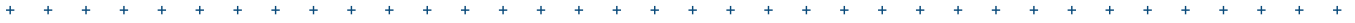
Because so many Columbus rec centers shut down for play during the COVID-19 pandemic, "that's impacted the mental and physical health of a lot of kids," Nehemiah says. "Not a lot of kids just want to go run for no reason. If you put a ball in front of them, they'll be more interested to stay in shape. Sports have a huge coping mechanism for youth, whether they realize it or not."

Nehemiah realizes he won't be a college athlete. That's OK. He wants to use sports to stay in shape and make connections for what's next in life — he wants to be a lawyer.

# 5

Challenge: Not enough spaces to play

## The Play: Think Small



### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Large sport centers are great — but people living within a mile of a park are four times more likely to use it than those who live farther away. Be creative in the use and development of play spaces and how kids can be transported there.*

## FIVE FINDINGS IN CENTRAL OHIO

### Transportation creates challenges to access athletic resources.

According to walkscore.com, out of a total of 100 points, Columbus' walk score is 40, transit score is 33, and bike score is 50. The average walk score for 10 suburbs is 46, ranging from a low of 17 in Dublin to a high of 72 in Grandview Heights. Transportation is a constant challenge for more kids to access programming because "we have yet to really figure out where the real opportunity is," said Nick Jones, manager of Nationwide Children's Hospital's Healthy Neighborhoods Healthy Families initiative. There have been efforts such as free bus passes, vouchers for ride-share services, and the ride service SHARE. But challenges continue. One mother remarked, "I have plenty of income and live in a great neighborhood (but) I can't get my kids (anywhere) without another mom helping me." In Hilliard, a local youth sports leader said transportation is the "biggest issue in suburban poverty." In West Columbus, a single parent said her kids don't play much because she doesn't own a car and struggles financially. The mom walked 1.5 miles each way for her daughter to participate in Girls on the Run programming at school. COVID-19 further complicated public transportation with Columbus'

transit system slashing services and capping the number of riders in spring 2020. (See Appendix C for map of transportation challenges.)

### Vacant lots present untapped potential to create hyperlocal play spaces.

Between 2012 and 2016, the City of Columbus Land Bank demolished more than 1,000 properties but only sold 4% of those as single-family homes, leaving behind a lot of empty space and devalued properties.<sup>24</sup> Currently, around 40% of vacant residential lots listed on the Land Bank Center website<sup>25</sup> are concentrated in two low-income neighborhoods, Central Hilltop and South Linden. The Trust for Public Land uses GIS mapping to identify park gaps in urban communities to reimagine these spaces.<sup>26</sup> Once identified, organizers and key community partners can begin creating pocket parks, or small outdoor spaces where a few people can gather to relax, play or have small events.<sup>27</sup> In some communities, investors like Under Armour and ESPN's RePlay program work with local organizations and residents to revitalize vacant lots into sports and play areas.<sup>28</sup> Amy Gingrich, executive director of Cultivate CDC, a community development corporation impacting the Milo-Grogan community, said similar play areas could be built in Columbus to address tension that often builds when investors target low-income neighborhoods for revitalization efforts.

### Using space creatively has led hockey to adapt.

Street Jackets, led by the local NHL Blue Jackets, provide community centers with the resources to launch youth street hockey programming. The effort reaches 1,000 new youth annually, adding centers across the region. In Westerville, a fall league was established following a one-day clinic for 500 kids and a six-week skills training for 150 youth.<sup>29</sup> In our survey, more Central Ohio youth said they have tried street hockey (5%) than ice hockey (4%). White youth were twice as likely to have reported playing hockey on the streets of Central Ohio than on ice. The Blue Jackets also support physical-education teachers through their Power Play Challenge program, a hockey-themed wellness curriculum, with the goal of reaching 154 schools and 46,200 students by the end of 2020. When the email went out inviting Columbus PE teachers to participate, "I couldn't say yes quickly enough," said Patricia Hamilton, a teacher for Innis and Parkmoor elementary schools.<sup>30</sup>

### Local leaders in a few communities are forging important partnerships to offset facility inequities.

The Worthington Youth Boosters has contracts with the public schools and parks and recreation department to use their facilities for year-round sports. Canal Winchester, a city of 8,500 residents that spans two counties and three townships, created the Central Ohio Joint Recreation District agreement to address unreasonable distances between facilities, as well as disparities in recreation funding. Canal Winchester Director of Public Service Matthew Peoples said the agreement has helped his district find grassland and open spaces closer to the schools to use as soccer fields. Access to school buildings for recreation during non-school hours is also a feature of this agreement, with members and coaches having keys to the buildings for gym use. Historically, the district was created to provide funding for recreation programs through tax levies.

Other communities, like Whitehall<sup>31</sup> and Grove City,<sup>32</sup> have partnerships with the YMCA to extend the reach of facilities. (See Appendices A and B for facility distribution by age and race)

### Play Streets creates pop-up play spaces in neighborhoods often excluded from access.

In 2019, the Healthy Neighborhoods Healthy Families (HNHF) initiative at Nationwide Children's Hospital launched Play Streets to get kids outside to play and increase social cohesion in the community. In other communities, Play Streets has increased the amount of open space between 47% to 100%, outdoor play from two to three days, and physical activity (as measured by pedometers) from 28% to 53%, while decreasing screen time by 62% when time is spent at the event.<sup>33</sup> The inaugural HNHF Play Streets program was provided to community members along Whittier Avenue, one of the busiest streets in South Columbus. Around 350 children engage in activities such as dance classes, basketball and various arts themes. Plans to expand the initiative to other sites are aligned with the mayor's overall revitalization strategy while adding pedometers to measure physical activity. In response to COVID-19, HNHF has adapted by providing Play Streets in a Box, which provides a free box of toys, games and other activities to keep families active.

## TRANSPORTATION YOUTH USUALLY USE TO PLAY SPORTS

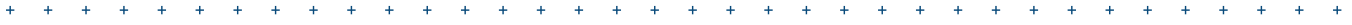
|                           | All | Girls | Boys |
|---------------------------|-----|-------|------|
| Driven by a family member | 88% | 88%   | 89%  |
| Driven by someone else    | 21% | 24%   | 17%  |
| School bus                | 20% | 24%   | 18%  |
| Walk                      | 11% | 7%    | 14%  |
| Bike                      | 10% | 7%    | 13%  |

Source: Aspen Institute Youth Survey \* Multiple answers allowed

# 6

Challenge: Too much, too soon

## The Play: Design for Development



**From the Sport for All, Play for Life report:**

*Age 6 is not 16. Offer programming that is age and developmentally appropriate, while tailored to the population served and needs of the individual child.*

### FIVE FINDINGS IN CENTRAL OHIO

**Sport participation for the large foreign-born population has many barriers.**

Without immigrant arrivals, population growth in the Columbus area would have slowed 25% in the last decade.<sup>34</sup> Franklin County leads all Ohio counties with a total immigrant population of 135,600, more than a quarter of the state’s 521,000 total.<sup>35</sup> Many new Americans “don’t want to feel like their child is being forced to assimilate to a certain way of thinking,” said local Girls on the Run Executive Director Jessica Sparks. “They want to still be able to preserve their own cultural beliefs, faith, and values.” As immigrants seek to integrate, their priorities are developing reliable incomes and getting strong educations. They often don’t want activities that distract from those goals. Burmese pastor Thang Pau said he discourages youth from playing sports because they miss church services, community service and homework. “My parents struggled with the (sports) schedule,” said Yohana Hagos, originally from Eritrea. “I had to be there after school and they didn’t understand why I was coming home late, even though they knew I was playing sports, and then the dress code was very inappropriate for them.”

**Positive youth development through sport can be found.**

Some organizations are exemplars in this area. Examples include Girls on the Run, Ohio State’s LiFEsports and Gladden Community House. These programs share a commitment to develop a comprehensive framework that supports what youth need to be successful by using sports as the means toward that end. “I don’t think we’re selling sports as the answer for these kids,” said Becky Wade-Mdivanian, LiFEsports director of operations. “We’re using sport as the hook.” Many youth-serving organizations also have sports as a subset of their broader programming, such as Boys and Girls Clubs and After-School All-Stars. Some pay-to-play organizations try to adopt a type of values-based approach as well. In interscholastic sports, the attention to youth development varies, with some coaches focused mostly on Xs and Os. Dr. Chris Stankovich, a local sports expert, said devoting field time to life skills development would “upset” many pay-to-play parents.

**Youth sports philanthropy is limited, with sports enterprise nonexistent.**

A Guidestar search of Central Ohio youth sports organizations returns 91 results. That might seem like a lot, but only two of the listed organizations that report revenue invest in youth sports. The rest are donation-seeking nonprofits, often funded by the parents who enroll their children to play.

Of the grant-giving entities, the largest is the Lindy Infante Foundation, which focuses on equitable access to youth sports. According to its website, the foundation gave about \$525,000 to 17 local youth organizations in 2019, with roughly 43% going to the Boys & Girls Club. The second-largest grant-giving organization is the Columbus Youth Foundation, a supporting foundation of The Columbus Foundation.<sup>36</sup> With a focus on supporting sport and recreational activities for youth, the foundation said it awarded \$160,000 in 2019 to 18 organizations, out of 40 applications. Two for-profit organizations that invest specifically in youth sports and fitness initiatives are the NHL's Columbus Blue Jackets and Cardinal Health. The Columbus Crew Foundation has made investments to expand access to soccer. To date, minimal investment capital has fostered innovations aimed at health and inclusion through sports.

### **Youth with disabilities have a committed network of athletic support.**

Of the more than 1.2 million Franklin County residents, 4.6% of minors have a physical or intellectual disability (ID).<sup>37</sup> Across the region, they have a variety of sports access points, which is important because, as Ohio State University researcher Dr. Leeann Lower-Hoppe noted, "Athletes want to be perceived as athletes. They want to be treated as person first, not disability first." However, nearly two-thirds of coaches surveyed were not confident in their ability to adapt their coaching to specific player disabilities. Yet 83% of coaches said there needs to be more sports opportunities for children with disabilities. The Ohio State School for the Blind (OSSB) is a public K-12 facility that offers students six different sports in an athletic association of 12 schools for the blind, plus local and regional events for younger athletes. Special Olympics provides programming and focuses on Unified Sports, which blends athletes with and without intellectual disabilities on a single team. Central Ohio has better access to sports than other regions of the state, with 10% to



15% of its programming Unified, said John Wysocki, former COO of Special Olympics Ohio. He noted that inner-city schools are the most inclusive and suburban schools are more segregated.

### **The LGBTQ youth community faces significant challenges to sport participation.**

Columbus is home to a large, vibrant LGBTQ community that drives connectedness<sup>38</sup> and scores 100% on the Human Rights Municipal Equity Index.<sup>39</sup> However, there are barriers to inclusion in sports for LGBTQ youth, particularly for transgender youth. At the interscholastic level, the Ohio High School Athletic Association policy is that transgender females can participate on boys teams at any time, but to play on girls teams, they must have gone through a minimum of one year of hormone treatment plus offer physical evidence that they do not possess any advantages over genetic female peers. Transgender males have similar, though less rigorous, stipulations.<sup>40</sup> In Ohio legislation to outright ban transgender females from high school sports, dubbed the Save Women's Sports Act, was introduced in 2020.<sup>41</sup> According to the Human Rights Campaign's Play to Win: Improving the Lives of LGBTQ Youth in Sports, nearly nine in 10 LGBTQ youth nationally never feel safe in the locker room, and, lacking a sense of support, LGBTQ youth drop out of sports at almost two times the rate of non-LGBTQ peers.

When LGBTQ youth do play a sport, they feel less depressed, less worthless, and safer versus those who never played or used to play.<sup>42</sup> Central Ohio teens struggling with gender identity are not getting what they need from sports, said Ashton Colby, a former high school field hockey player and a transgender male who teaches yoga classes for LGBTQ teens.



**Arriana York, 13**

Arriana has been deaf since birth, so communication can be a challenge when she is at home in Darke County with her family, since they do not sign.

"I have to read lips," Arriana says through an interpreter. "I have to write things down on paper and show them, and then they respond on the paper and I have to read that and figure out what that means."

When at school, however, Arriana has complete communication access. She has been attending Ohio School for the Deaf (OSD), a residential education institution in Columbus for deaf and hard of hearing students, for nearly eight years. She likes being around other students and staff who she can communicate with — and playing sports.

It was at OSD that Arriana first became involved with Girls on the Run, a national nonprofit aimed at helping girls get physical exercise and simultaneously grow their self-worth. Arriana first joined the group in third grade. By fifth grade, she had become a junior coach.

One of her biggest challenges has been turning the English used in Girls on the Run material into American Sign Language. Arriana likes getting out and participating in games and activities that keep her heart rate up.

"I have a lot of energy to do that physical stuff and so sometimes I get worn out after doing it," she says. "Sometimes after doing it, I want to just get back and do it all over again!"

Girls on the Run emphasizes exercise with outdoor games such as freeze tag, which helps prepare girls for a 5K at the season's end. But it also teaches them about character and belief in themselves.

“

**I learned about expressing your feelings, staying positive, learning how to stand up to bullies, and other things that are really important for life.**

**ARRIANA YORK**

In her free time, she enjoys painting, making bracelets and learning about other cultures and their sign languages. She says the values that Girls on the Run has instilled help in other parts of her life, such as school. "If something negative comes up," she says, "I try to remember what I learned from Girls on the Run to stay positive."



# 7

Challenge: Well-meaning but untrained volunteers

## The Play: Train All Coaches

**From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:**

*Coaches can create athletes for life — or wreck their enthusiasm for sport altogether. Get them trained in key competencies, including safety, sport skills and general coaching philosophy.*

### FIVE FINDINGS IN CENTRAL OHIO

#### **Standardized coach training is inconsistent.**

The Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) has a strong network through which it can disseminate information and training, such as in response to COVID-19. Even prior to the pandemic, the Ohio Department of Education required that coaching or pupil activity permits for paid and volunteer adults be acquired at the interscholastic level. This includes training in the fundamentals of coaching, CPR, first aid, and treating concussions.<sup>43</sup> Local nonprofits like Dublin Youth Athletics and Worthington Youth Boosters also require coaches to complete training in Lindsay's Law (CPR), concussion protocols, and SafeSport (sexual abuse protection), plus have a background check. These expectations, however, are not universal. Some municipalities continue to propose ordinances that require coaches or volunteers to meet simple safety standards, though even at a cost as low as \$35, community leaders resist.<sup>44</sup> Legal precedent has been set that exposes sports organizations to negligence, and therefore significant damages, when they do not offer this minimal protection.<sup>45</sup> At Resolute Lacrosse, one of Ohio's premier pay-for-play lacrosse programs, co-owner Anthony Kelly said his organization does not require the type of training or background checks found in high schools. He wants to change that.



#### **Supporting athletes' mental health is done informally among coaches and official training is uncommon.**

In a focus group with coaches for this report, participants universally recognized mental health as essential in working with young people, though training is not common. "I don't think we're trained a lot on it as much as we are (about) a blow to a knee or a tweaked ankle or concussions," said Kellina Snyder, Canal Winchester High School volleyball coach. Some coaches said the lack of training in mental health is partly because many coaches are also teachers, so it's assumed they've already been trained.

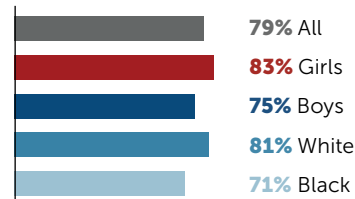
Yet from the college to youth level, sports leaders speak to the necessity of listening skills, knowing how to focus on the individual, and connecting with kids at the human level. Local athletes said that at the beginning of COVID-19, their coaches were often checking in with training resources and, when possible, on personal matters and even group texts about favorite movies. “You have to have that rapport,” Hamilton Township High School volleyball coach Carole Morbitzer said. “You have to have those relationships.” Coaches in our survey expressed interest in receiving training in skills and tactics, but they were less interested in training around emotional intelligence and mental health.

**Organizations work to identify and retain coaches who are passionate about kids.**

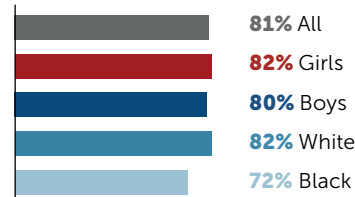
Almost eight in 10 surveyed Central Ohio youth said their coach “frequently” or “almost always” makes them feel good when they improve a skill, with higher rates from White youth (81%) than Black youth (71%). Jessica Sparks from Girls on the Run said her organization develops coaches not by assuming a common starting place, but rather training coaches to recognize each individual’s beginning point. Local sports leaders involved with youth of all ages describe people they seek to coach as having “passion,” “being dependable,” and “loving kids.” Dante Washington, a former pro soccer player and current Columbus Crew executive, said he doesn’t remember the specific skills his coaches taught him, “but I sure as heck remember how they made me feel, and who they made me become.” In a LiFEsports coaches survey, 75% of coaches said they have coached more than one sport in their career. This speaks to the importance of training coaches on youth development, communication and leadership, all of which are transferable across sports. Programs might do well to partner with each other to provide training for efficiency of time and funding.

**YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF COACHES**

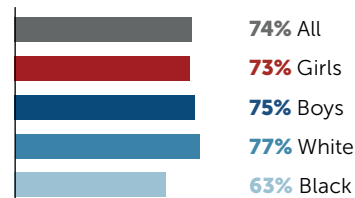
**COACH MADE ME FEEL GOOD WHEN I IMPROVED A SKILL**



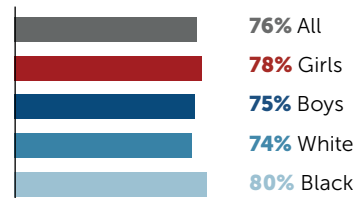
**COACH ENCOURAGED ME TO LEARN NEW SKILLS**



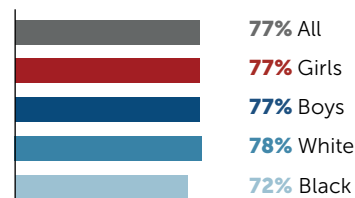
**COACH TOLD US TO HELP EACH OTHER TO GET BETTER**



**COACH TOLD US TRYING OUR BEST WAS MOST IMPORTANT**



**COACH TOLD US WE ALL WERE IMPORTANT TO TEAM SUCCESS**



Source: Aspen Institute Youth Survey

## **Developing a reliable coach pipeline is demanding.**

Finding and keeping good coaches is a challenge. In Whitehall, it is a struggle because the people who run the sports leagues are grandparents or great-grandparents without kids as participants, said Shannon Sorrell, director of parks and recreation. For programming for Columbus city youth, volunteers willing to consistently show up and deal with behavioral problems are often accepted because of the shortage of options, said Becky Wade-Mdivanian from LiFEsports. Worthington Christian High School Athletic Director Kevin Weakley said the coaches he hires rarely last beyond three years. Char Barnes from Columbus Recreation and Parks noted that the department has some success developing coaches by helping college athletes transition from their competitive mindset to celebrating the progress kids can make. For some families, a younger coach makes sports more fun, but others said younger coaches are too emotional. In those cases, the organization must be prepared to provide greater oversight. Many area programs are forced to adopt the approach described by a Grandview Heights sports leader: "If you can pass a background check and you're breathing, you're in."

## **The coaching culture can impede recruiting and retaining female coaches.**

Coaches need to feel supported and have the resources to succeed. Juggling coaching and family duties can be challenging for female coaches, said Hamilton Township High School volleyball and softball coach Carole Morbitzer. "There was a week when I didn't see my children awake for three days in a row," she said. Worthington Christian High School Athletic Director Kevin Weakley said he has lost several really talented young volleyball coaches once they started a family. Brad Burchfield, athletic director and football coach at Bishop Hartley High School, said in some situations the demonstrative nature of male coaches can "intimidate" female coaches.

"It is different sets of rules for female coaches and male coaches," Burchfield said. Canal Winchester High School volleyball coach Kellina Snyder said some young female coaches leave programs because of a highly authoritarian male athletic director. Nationally, women make up only 27% of youth coaches; this figure decreases with boys sports and as children age.<sup>46</sup>



# Youth Sport Coaches in Central Ohio:

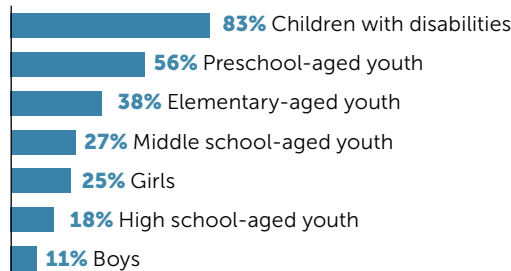
## Current Trends, Behaviors and Needs



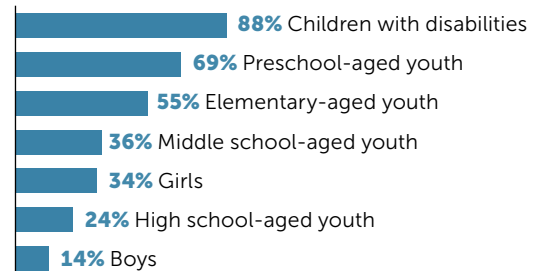
The Aspen Institute partnered with LiFEsports at Ohio State University to help explore the quality and quantity of youth sports in the region. Here are some results from the 461 surveyed coaches (the majority of which coach at schools).

### POPULATIONS IDENTIFIED IN NEED OF MORE SPORTS OPPORTUNITIES

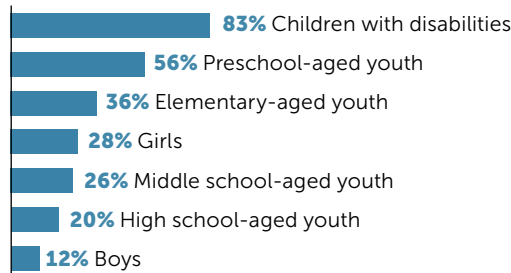
#### ALL COACHES



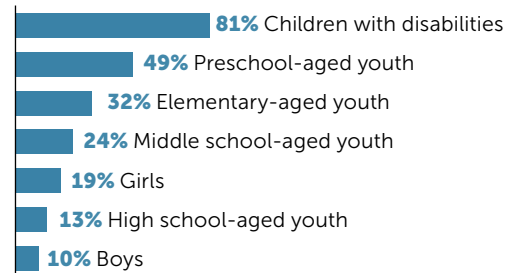
#### URBAN COACHES



#### SUBURBAN COACHES



#### RURAL COACHES



## VALUES BY COACH GENDER

### Male Coaches

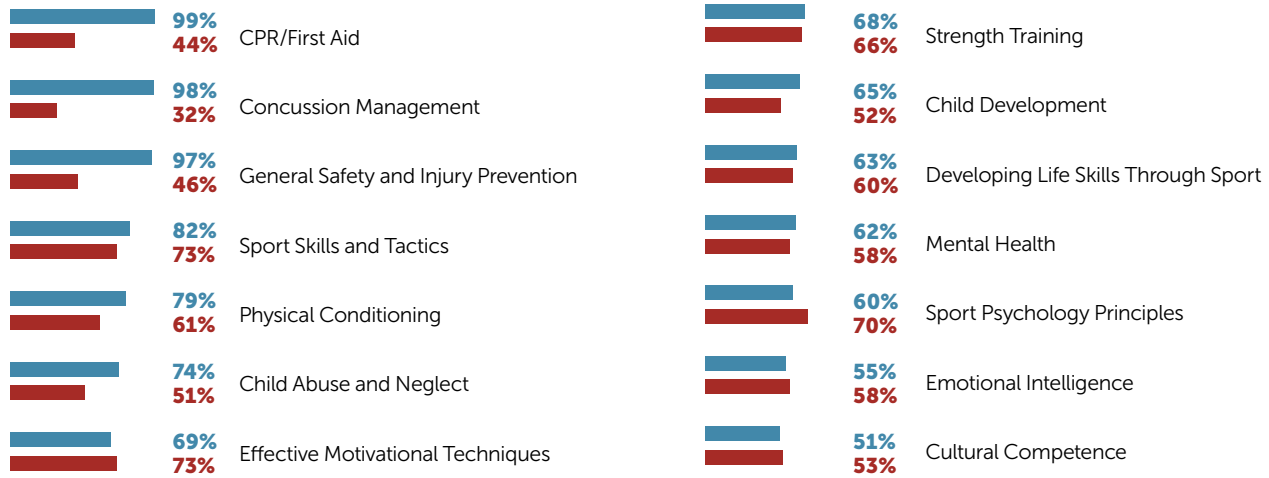


### Female Coaches

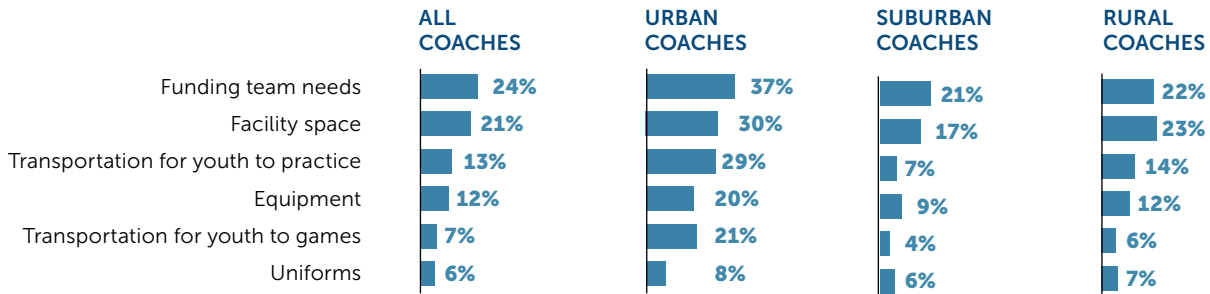


## COACH TRAINING EXPERIENCE AND INTEREST

■ Previously Attended ■ Interested in Future Training



## COACH-IDENTIFIED NEEDS FOR YOUTH SPORT TEAMS



## PRIORITIES BY LEVEL OF COMPETITIVENESS OF THE SPORT

### School/Club Coaches



### Recreational Coaches



# 8

Challenge: Safety concerns among kids, parents

## The Play: Emphasize Prevention

**From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:**

*Children deserve environments that limit injuries and offer protections against emotional, physical and other forms of abuse. And today, many parents demand as much.*

### FIVE FINDINGS IN CENTRAL OHIO

**Despite lots of information on injury prevention, adoption is a challenge.**

In our Central Ohio youth survey, the third most common reason kids said they don't play sports more often was fear of injury. Education on athletics and injury prevention for youth are important in avoiding some lifelong health problems.<sup>47</sup> But local sports medicine experts continue to see challenges. "We are not doing a great job of getting into the communities and implementing prevention programs," said Dr. Christy Zwolski from the Ohio State Sports Medicine Research Institute. "Our coaches are not educated on prevention techniques and methods. Parents don't place a high value on it until their kid is injured."



Coaches themselves, according to our survey, chose avoiding injury as the least important value driving their philosophy. Thomas Pommering, director of sports medicine at Nationwide Children's Hospital, notices how the pay-to-play culture can shape conversations. Often the first question parents will ask him as their kid is limping down the hall is about playing again in a matter of days.

**Athletic training resources are not equitable across the region.**

Columbus ranks 54th nationally for athletic trainers based on salary potential, location affordability, and athletic trainer concentration.<sup>48</sup> Some of the well-funded programs have an abundance of training staff. For instance, Pickerington High School Central has two trainers, one lead trainer, and a doctor at all football games. An athletic trainer is even available at the local junior high. Others are less fortunate. Hospitals intensely compete to sign up schools for trainer services in a type of athletic arms race that could help them land future patients. These services can cost school districts anywhere from \$0 to \$50,000 a year depending on the provider and number of trainers. Larger schools get this coverage, "but there's still tons of schools that don't have any athletic training coverage, and certainly no (athletic trainer) position," sports medicine physician and parent Dr. Thomas Pommering said. According to a benchmark study on athletic training services, Ohio respondents reported that 71% of practices are covered by an athletic trainer every day.<sup>49</sup>

## Tackle football’s decline continues despite adjusted training techniques.

In both Hillard and Canal Winchester, the parks and recreation directors see interest in the sport waning. Two years ago, Whetstone High School, on the city’s north side, almost didn’t field a team until coaches and parents worked to increase the participation numbers. Ohio ranks fourth in the country in producing NFL players. However, participation in the sport has dropped 27% across the state, the steepest decline in the U.S.<sup>50</sup> Central Ohio coaches said public conversations around concussions and brain injuries have motivated them to redesign their instruction around avoiding high-impact hits and how to tackle properly. “Mom is saying, ‘Hey, we’ve got a lot of other options here besides you going to play football,’” former Ohio Capital Conference Commissioner Dave Cecutti said. “Football’s still a violent sport.” In our youth survey, far fewer boys reported having ever played tackle football (36%) than basketball (71%) and soccer (60%). Still, tackle football was the No. 2 sport that boys said they most want to try, slightly behind basketball. Black youth were twice as likely to have played football and three times as likely to want to try football than White youth. Flag football is a viable alternative for safety concerns, with 16% of all youth having tried flag versus 21% who played tackle.

### YOUTH WHO HAVE PLAYED TACKLE AND/OR FLAG FOOTBALL

|                   | Tackle | Flag |
|-------------------|--------|------|
| Male              | 36%    | 26%  |
| Female            | 5%     | 5%   |
| White             | 17%    | 14%  |
| Black             | 35%    | 23%  |
| Elementary School | 19%    | 16%  |
| Middle School     | 23%    | 7%   |
| High School       | 21%    | 5%   |

Source: Aspen Institute Youth Survey

## ACL injuries persist, impacting younger athletes.

Ohio State’s Wexner Medical Center began a study of patients ages 7 to 14 with anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries because more youth are requiring surgery than in the past. Other research shows that although boys ages 5-12 have more total ACL injuries than girls, that changes for girls over the course of puberty to age 17.<sup>51</sup> ACL injuries among younger athletes are especially troubling, as those pediatric patients who returned to the same preinjury level of competition after surgery sustained a second ACL injury 32% of the time.<sup>52</sup> Many athletes who undergo revision ACL reconstruction to treat a second ACL injury will suffer a third injury. Common factors contributing to ACL injuries include muscle fatigue, participating in sports that require twists and sudden changes in direction, and simply not effectively warming up and cooling down during sport participation.

## The psychological side of injury recovery is a clear and present issue.

In one of our focus groups, Central Ohio middle school athletes spoke about feeling “judged” and “just really low” because they did not think they were ever going to recover from their injury. Rhiannon, a middle school athlete, said youth are harmed mentally by feeling pressure from teammates and within themselves while recovering from a physical injury.

“I should be doing it,” she said in reference to playing sports with her teammates, “and if I don’t do it, I feel like I’m missing out or I feel like I’m not going to be as strong and I’m not going to be as good, even though I should rehab and I should be sitting out.” This can be especially true with injuries that are not as visible, like concussions. Often in the rehab setting, the focus is on physical competence while mental health outcomes are “very strongly underemphasized,” said Dr. Christy Zwolski of Ohio State.

In a sign of changing perspectives, Bo Jackson Elite Sports embeds onsite physical trainers from Ohio State to address the whole athlete. Nationwide Children's Hospital Sports Medicine has tried actively to recruit a sports psychologist to work with patients.



### **Nyemah Green, 18**

Nyemah had a whole plan for how to get recruited to play college softball. She would play her junior year at Columbus Africentric Early College, the public high school she attends, and try travel softball for the first time in summer 2020. Then COVID-19 hit. The high school season was canceled, and she didn't know that travel softball was still happening during the pandemic.

Nyemah hasn't played a game in more than a year. She has visited the batting cage only three times with her dad.

"It made me a little upset because I didn't want to lose everything I worked for all those years," she says. "I tried to continue watching college softball games on TV just to keep my skills up. I hope when we get back I'm not as rusty as I think I'm going to be."

The pandemic has been "pretty hard," says Nyemah, who lives on the south side of Columbus and has had a couple friends test positive for COVID-19.



**Some athletes, including me, usually take all of our emotions out on sports and games. But throughout the pandemic, you can't really go anywhere or practice because you don't have equipment or don't have space. It really takes a toll on you because you want to let those emotions out but don't know how.**

**NYEMAH GREEN**

What are those emotions? "It's fear, a little anger. You try to find ways to cope with it and move on and hope things will go back to the way they were."

Nyemah was first introduced to softball, basketball and bowling at a Boys and Girls Club. She started there at age 5 and didn't stop attending until she was 17. "It's very cheap and it was helpful on my family because all they had to do was drop me off and go do what they needed and come pick me up," she says.

There is hope for her softball career. She plans to play in 2021-22 at Akron University. Nyemah says Akron offered her \$18,000 in athletic aid over four years. Akron has never seen her play in person, mainly learning of her through a camp she attended at Otterbein University and videos.

Nyemah is applying for other scholarships at Akron with hopes of leaving college debt free so she can focus on becoming a firefighter. "I like the family aspect, saving lives every single day on the clock," she says.



# Game Changer and Call for Leadership

Direct Central Ohio’s collaborative power into a coalition focused on health and inclusion through youth sports

Central Ohio is home to a precious resource, rare for metropolitan communities anywhere in America, which has been the source of a Harvard case study that describes a place leaders consider as “far from typical in the manner that citizens worked together.”<sup>53</sup> That resource is the Columbus Partnership, a nonprofit member organization of leading CEOs whose vision is for Columbus to be the most prosperous and equitable region in the U.S. by following the Columbus Way, a practice of collaboration, cooperation and civic engagement. Many significant landmarks along the way have in turn fostered a unique collaborative ecosystem. The network effect of this ecosystem is demonstrated in the success other organizations — like The Columbus Foundation and Greater Columbus Sports Commission — have had in improving the economic, cultural and social vitality of Central Ohio.

A vivid example of how to align resources and capacity with The Columbus Way is CelebrateOne’s effort to cut the racial health disparity gap by focusing on reducing infant mortality. This effort exemplifies Central Ohio’s ability to effect change and acts as a template for the lasting legacy of the *State of Play Central Ohio* report.

To build on the collaborative ecosystem that already exists, we recommend creating a coalition across Central Ohio dedicated to increasing equitable access to quality sports, physical activity and outdoor recreation for all children, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, income or ability. The coalition would focus on collective priorities in the local youth sport landscape identified through this report, taking into account racial and economic inequalities.





In our survey, 28% of Black youth said the costs of sports prevent them from playing more often, compared to 18% of White youth. Safe access to open play areas is also uneven across the region: 71% of Black youth said they have a safe place to play in their neighborhood, compared to 86% of White youth. And Black youth were almost twice as likely as White youth to cite family responsibilities, which are often due to the household's economic situation, as a reason they don't play sports more frequently.

The creation of a Central Ohio coalition could create a permanent, trusted entity that helps tackle challenges related to youth sports with the mission of closing access gaps based upon race and income. Previous State of Play reports in some other communities have done just that. Project Play Western New York, Project Play Southeast Michigan, and the King County (Seattle, Washington) Play Equity Coalition are central hubs with key stakeholders collectively addressing issues like access, funding and inclusion in the youth sports environment.

Here are five areas of focus that this coalition could address to inspire systems-level interventions that would benefit all children. Within each focus area are recommendations that working group members of the State of Play Central Ohio Advisory Group and other key stakeholders could immediately act on to address identified inequities in access to sport.

## Knowledge Sharing and Communications

The Columbus region is home to one of the largest concentrations of colleges and universities in the country.<sup>54</sup> Coupled with this are nearly 300 elementary, middle and high schools in Franklin County, most of which have fields and gyms in neighborhoods of all types. This results in a spectacular amount of facility space that often goes underutilized for both free play and more organized athletic activity. (See Appendix A for a map of Franklin County facilities.)

Currently, no central entity exists to act as a clearinghouse for available facilities and programming. For instance, Ohio State University takes calls from local organizations that are interested in using a field or gym for their sports events and occasionally provides access. But to manage large-scale community outreach, opening its campus would be costly due to additional staffing and maintenance, Athletic Director Gene Smith said. That leaves community members on their own to contact each individual university, college or public school when looking for facility space for athletic activities. On the flip side, many of these facilities could benefit from partnerships with high-quality sports providers.

### Starting point

#### Increase information and access to underutilized sports facilities.

There is potential to improve the divide between institutions' athletic resources and community access by creating an entity that aggregates all of the facilities across the Columbus area. An easily accessible, equitable, coordinated approach could be a solution to what Smith sees as "a lot of space that's not optimized." Leveraging the knowledge and talent of existing entities across Columbus will be essential to improving access to sports for many underserved pockets of youth across the region.

A regional hackathon, bringing tech programmers and community leaders together to build an online inventory and scheduling platform, could be an opportunity to determine the best method for sharing this information. This would build on Columbus' growing social enterprise industry. The Greater Columbus Sports Commission, which is already "dedicated to hosting a great sporting environment in Columbus," knows the ins and outs of the available facilities in the region. The tech know-how of Smart Columbus and Can't Stop Columbus will also be essential.

In addition, this platform could act as a connecting point between suburban and urban space, provide open-access information for everyone between the city and county parks, and support safety regulations, which have proven especially important during COVID-19. Over time, this platform could also include information about sport programming providers, so that underutilized facilities could find resources to build their capacity to diversify their offerings.

## Family Empowerment

When parents and caregivers enroll their children in a sports program, the vast majority believe that the experience is good for their social development.<sup>55</sup> No one is in a better position nor has more invested in the health and well-being outcomes of youth than their caregivers. Thus, parents and caregivers should be empowered with information to make decisions on what programs are best for their children.



## Starting point

### Implement a sports-nonprofit training, transparency and inclusion index.

Aside from interscholastic sports, there is no oversight on training or criminal background checks for coaches, nonprofit finances, and formal inclusion policies for youth sports in Ohio. Thus, caregivers are left to their own devices in determining the trustworthiness of organizations, because no system-wide protections for young athletes exist to hold nonprofit organizations accountable. This puts an undue burden on caregivers, leaving them and their children unnecessarily vulnerable.

Adding to the technical platform for facilities sharing, the Central Ohio youth sports coalition could expand its capabilities to include a rubric and index that documents the training, financial transparency, background check, and inclusion policy compliance of every youth sports organization that operates within the community.



A Central Ohio public index that clearly depicts where each provider is with its training, transparency and inclusion would be a first step in holding youth sports organizations accountable. Creating this index would set Central Ohio apart as a leader in youth sports safety and inclusion and could be a valuable tool adopted by others in addressing program quality across the state.

As the index is coming together, the coalition could make available a parent and caregiver sports development toolkit that can be used in ordinary conversations for parents to understand the quality of youth sports programming. Sports organizations, along with schools and community organizations, could act as distribution partners of the toolkit. Project Play can offer support as a starting point with its Parent Checklists, Healthy Sport Index and other parent resources.

## Coach Development Pipeline

Youth in the region say that coaches should understand both the sport itself and the kids who want to play it. Coaches and sports administrators told us that the coaching pipeline can be very limited and recruiting and retaining female coaches can be difficult. Within this context, there are opportunities for recruitment and training, both for coaches and officials. Central Ohio is not immune to the national trend of fewer people starting and staying in officiating. Some organizations, like Columbus Recreation and Parks, have recognized the potential that local university students and recent college graduates present to shore up their coaching and officiating ranks for youth teams. This has the potential to offer a pool of young candidates whose viability could be further developed through targeted recruitment and training. For instance, the Grandview Heights Baseball and Softball Association hires those who have graduated out of its league to work as umpires and concession staff.

In order to be effective, all coach-recruitment strategies need to be linked to a strategy for training, not just in the specifics of the sport, but also the fundamentals of coaching young people that are both developmentally appropriate and attentive to their social, emotional and mental health needs.

### Starting point

**Emphasize coach and official recruitment and training that prioritizes social and emotional skill development, particularly as kids return to play during and after the pandemic.**

Central Ohio coaches are highly visible people, whether at the grassroots or highly competitive levels, and offer tremendous potential value to the development of kids. Having enough coaches is important, but the quality of coaches beyond being able to teach sports fundamentals has been frequently mentioned throughout this research. Quality coaching attends to technical instruction while developing personal growth in players.<sup>56</sup> As documented in the report, there is growing evidence that mental health pressures on young athletes in Central Ohio are a persistent factor in their sport experience.

Research also shows that for girls, having a female coach can enhance their confidence, sense of belonging and self-efficacy, but since only a quarter of youth coaches nationally are women, these personal growth opportunities are being undermined.<sup>57</sup> Attending to the social and emotional health of all young athletes is all the more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic. Raising awareness of the immediate need for additional coaches and officials and sending a call to action are significant opportunities to improve the sustaining value of youth sports in the region.

While numerous partners across Central Ohio are training coaches, there is an opportunity to better share ideas and resources and, when needed, develop missing content in existing coach-training programs.



Initially, the focus can be on compiling existing resources, trainings and tools for coaches across the region, particularly as coaches aim to safely return to play. Leveraging existing resources for this period of rebuilding, Project Play can support it by offering free and open-sourced tools for coaches to emphasize social and emotional well-being with their youth, such as the resources available through our Calls for Coaches initiative.

Other national partners and initiatives can also be utilized to create and expand needed training. Over time, opportunities will unfold to build a comprehensive coach-development pipeline inclusive of recruitment, training and retention strategies.

## Equity and Inclusion

Inequities in youth sport access and participation in the Central Ohio region are reflective of systemic disparities across race, ethnicity, gender, geography, sexual identity, ability and income. There is a need to evaluate the intersection of these disparities to create a truly inclusive youth sport ecosystem. Beyond representation, building capacity to create environments that support all youth will be crucial. Nationally, parents of youth athletes reported that Black children spent more time playing sports (12.3 hours per week) than White youth (11.6 hours) prior to the pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, that has flipped, with White youth (7.9 hours) playing sports more than Black children (6.7 hours). White youth have spent 46% more time playing games than Latino/Latina youth during the pandemic and 39% more time than Black youth.<sup>58</sup>

Only 38% of LGBTQ youth participated in high school sports in the last year compared to 58% of straight youth, with transgender and nonbinary youth (TGNB) half as likely to participate as their LGBTQ peers.<sup>59</sup> In Central Ohio, leaders describe nearly insurmountable obstacles and gaps that keep these youth from sports participation. This finding is set within a local community that's home to a large, vibrant LGBTQ population that has hosted the North American Gay Amateur Athletic Alliance Gay Softball World Series three times. In 2019, Columbus also hosted the International Gay Rugby North American Championship East.

According to The Trevor Project's mental health survey, "Sport participation has been linked to higher self-esteem, better grades and lower depressive symptoms among LGBTQ youth."<sup>60</sup> Researchers from The Trevor Project said its data and other research suggest a need to transform sports environments into LGBTQ-affirming spaces so that no youth has to choose between being "out" and being an athlete.<sup>61</sup> Characteristics of LGBTQ-affirming spaces focus on creating a physical space where LGBTQ youth feel safe, as well as a climate and culture grounded in respect from coaches, players and other participants.

## Starting point

### Foster a viable and sustainable pathway for LGBTQ youth to participate in sports.

The Central Ohio coalition would work to create ways to intentionally grow access to sports for underserved populations, whether due to race/ethnicity, income, gender, sexuality or ability. Attentive to the intersectional nature of identity, the



initial focus could be on LGBTQ youth, who face significant challenges to sport participation.

Building on the recommendation above, training and education will be important tools in creating a viable and sustainable pathway for LGBTQ youth sports participation and can be linked with a focus on social and emotional skill development. One organization that focuses on programming, policy and public awareness is SportSafe and its LGBTQ SportSafe Inclusion Program. Developed by a gay Nebraska football player in 2016, this initiative is an education-focused deep dive for coaches, administrators and staff so that they "have the necessary tools and resources to show up for the student-athlete and their identities."<sup>62</sup> AthleteAlly is another organization that focuses on ending sport homophobia and transphobia while activating the athletic community toward LGBTQ equality. One of its signature initiatives is an online training course for coaches and athletic leaders called Champions of Inclusion.

Over the long term, the Columbus area offers a sporting context on which to build engagement with LGBTQ youth around the value of sports participation. The Greater Columbus Sports Commission has already modeled a successful way to launch a wide-ranging grassroots initiative tied to a major sporting event when it hosted the NCAA women's basketball Final Four in 2018. Connecting future LGBTQ sporting events to the community at large could act as a catalyst to raising awareness around the value of sports for LGBTQ youth and families in the community.

Looking beyond this immediate opportunity with LGBTQ youth, the coalition should also consider helping other groups that have more limited access to sports, including youth with disabilities.

## Quality Assurance Among Funders

Central Ohio is a giving community, as evident by The Columbus Foundation's record-breaking Big Give 2020 giving day event, which collected more than \$32 million for 1,100 local nonprofits. A few big brand organizations like the Ohio State University Foundation and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Ohio raised more than \$1 million each in donations alone.<sup>63</sup> Within any investment ecosystem, some organizations fare better than others due to several factors, such as market fit, financial tracking, marketing and competition. They all contribute to long-term viability. Nonprofits are no less immune to these dynamics. However, a survival-of-the-fittest approach to solving hyperlocal, deeply entrenched inequity around health and inclusion through sports ultimately undermines the whole system of care.

### Starting point for funders

#### Coordinate investments to create an equitable and sustainable network for youth sports.

Based on the existing giving environment, an opportunity exists to define and make publicly available to all stakeholders a set of giving guidelines aligned with the *State of Play Central Ohio 8 Plays* and future philanthropic investment. These guidelines can address necessary and interrelated opportunities. The first is direct investment in community-based organizations that are currently building capacity to deliver on the strategies outlined in this report, as well as emphasizing the populations of youth who have more limited access to sport. Within the Central Ohio region, several nonprofit organizations, big and small, focus on sports delivery.

Some, such as Grove City Kids Association and Worthington Youth Boosters, operate successfully with gross receipts of more than \$1.5 million as simple sports-delivery mechanisms. Others, like Girls on the Run, LiFEsports and the Gladden Community House, exist predominantly to improve youth development through sports. Investors who want to direct capital to opportunities that address health and inclusion through sports do not currently have a reliable ecosystem map to use. Such a map can help align their decisions with a rubric for evaluating if they effectively achieve shared goals for youth sports in the region.

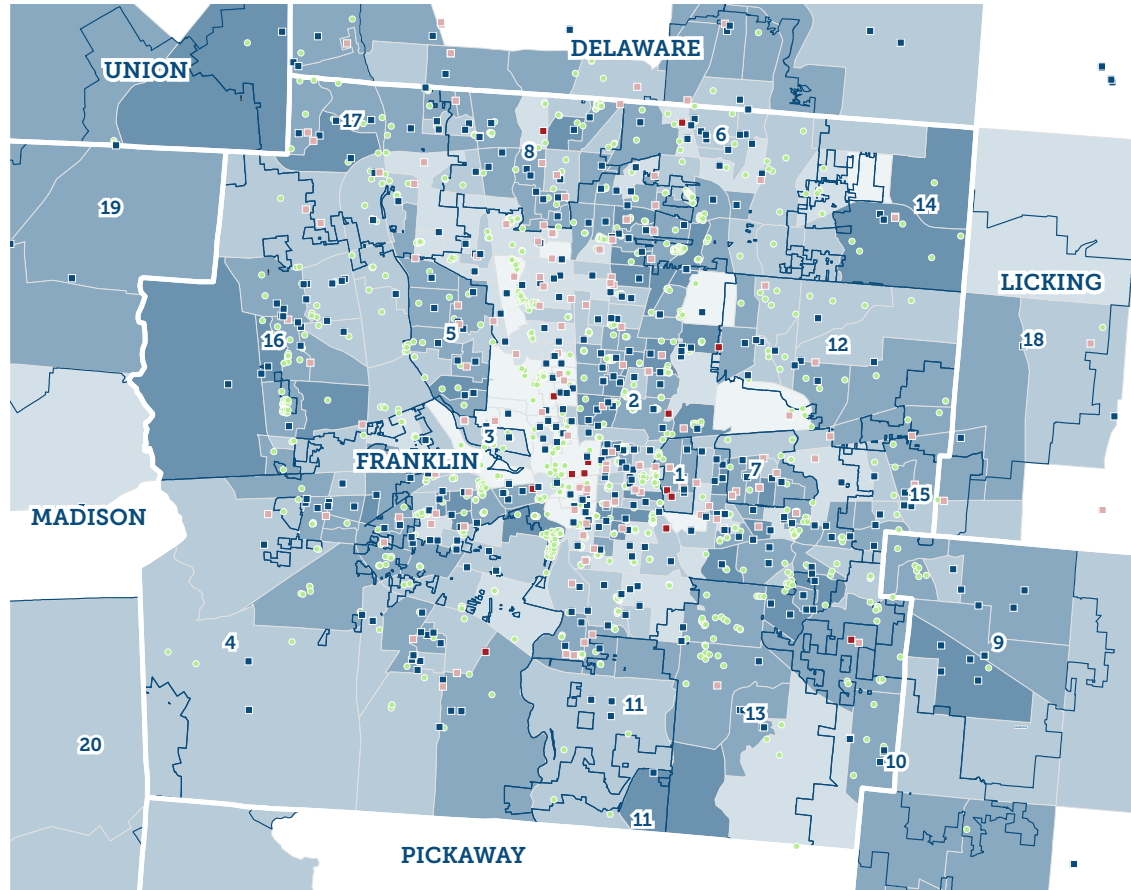
Since *State of Play Central Ohio* was supported by a diverse group of funders, they could work with others to provide direct support to execute the strategies outlined in this report. Investment in a more formal coalition could take many forms, including direct investment with partners to lead on specific initiatives or continued investment to build a local backbone organization. Expertise in coalition-building will be essential to success, as will clear articulation of how to measure success.

Not every community is capable of creating a coalition. Columbus' history suggests that it's possible in Central Ohio. Working together can provide a healthier and more prosperous sports future for all youth.



## APPENDIX A |

### FRANKLIN COUNTY FACILITIES BY POPULATION DENSITY UNDER AGE 18



- 1 Bexley City School District
- 2 Columbus City Schools
- 3 Grandview Heights City School District
- 4 South-Western City School District
- 5 Upper Arlington City School District
- 6 Westerville City School District
- 7 Whitehall City School District
- 8 Worthington City School District
- 9 Pickerington Local School District
- 10 Canal Winchester Local School District
- 11 Hamilton Local School District
- 12 Gahanna-Jefferson City School District
- 13 Groveport Madison Local School District
- 14 Plain Local School District
- 15 Reynoldsburg City School District
- 16 Hilliard City School District
- 17 Dublin City School District
- 18 Licking Heights Local School District
- 19 Jonathan Alder Local School District
- 20 Madison-Plains Local School District

#### % Population under 18

- 0%-10%
- 11%-19%
- 20%-25%
- 26%-31%
- 32%-48%

#### K-12 Schools

- Public Schools
- Nonpublic Schools
- Higher Ed. Institutions
- School Districts
- Rec. Facilities and Parks

| County    | % Pop. Under 18 |
|-----------|-----------------|
| Delaware  | 27%             |
| Fairfield | 24%             |
| Franklin  | 23%             |
| Licking   | 23%             |
| Madison   | 21%             |
| Pickaway  | 22%             |
| Union     | 25%             |

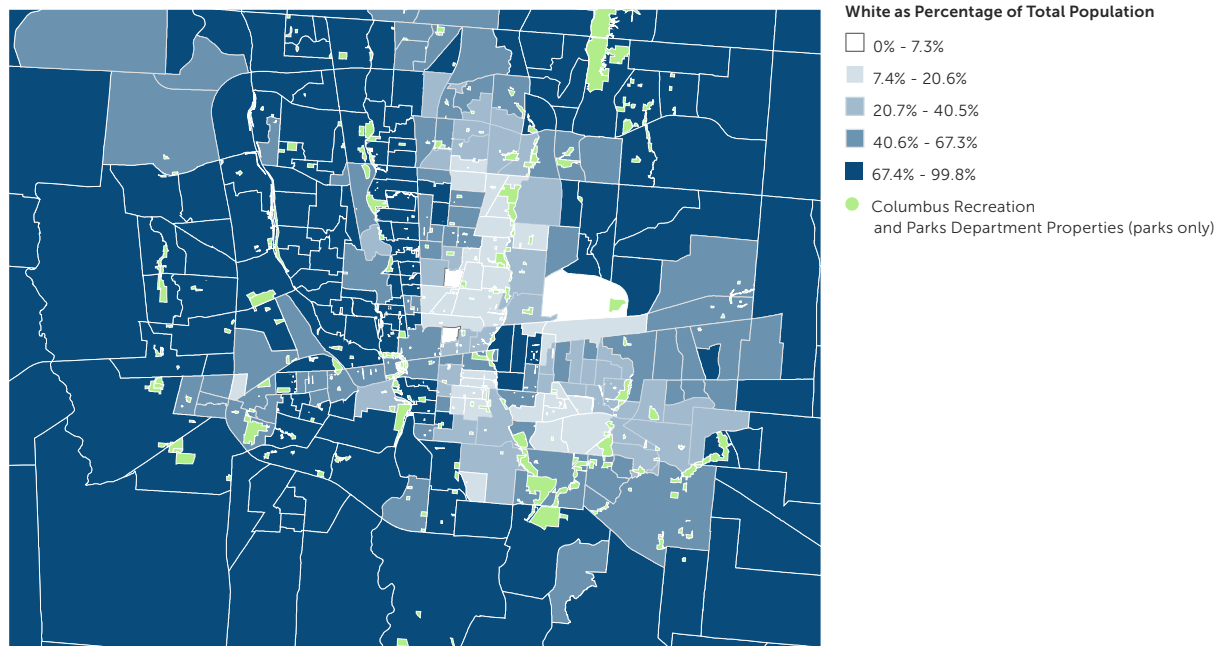
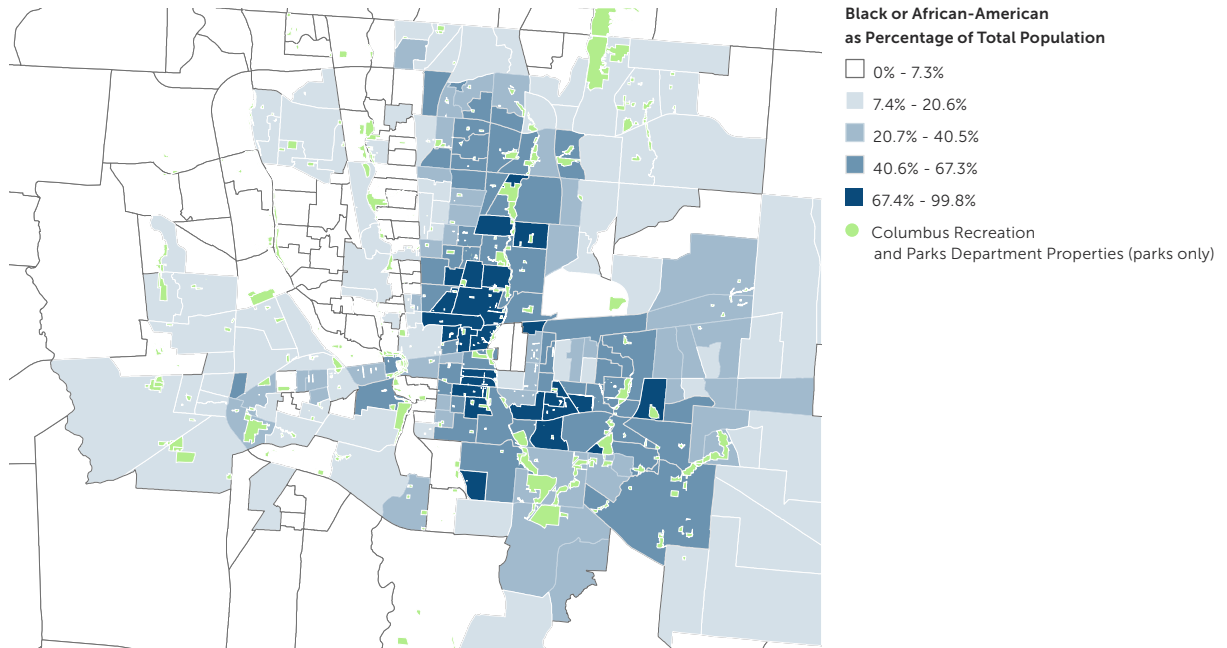
Demographic Data: U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2019

Geographic Data: GEOHIO Spatial Data Discovery Portal, ESRI, U.S. Census Bureau



## APPENDIX B |

### FRANKLIN COUNTY RACE DEMOGRAPHICS WITH COLUMBUS RECREATION AND PARKS DEPARTMENT PARKS

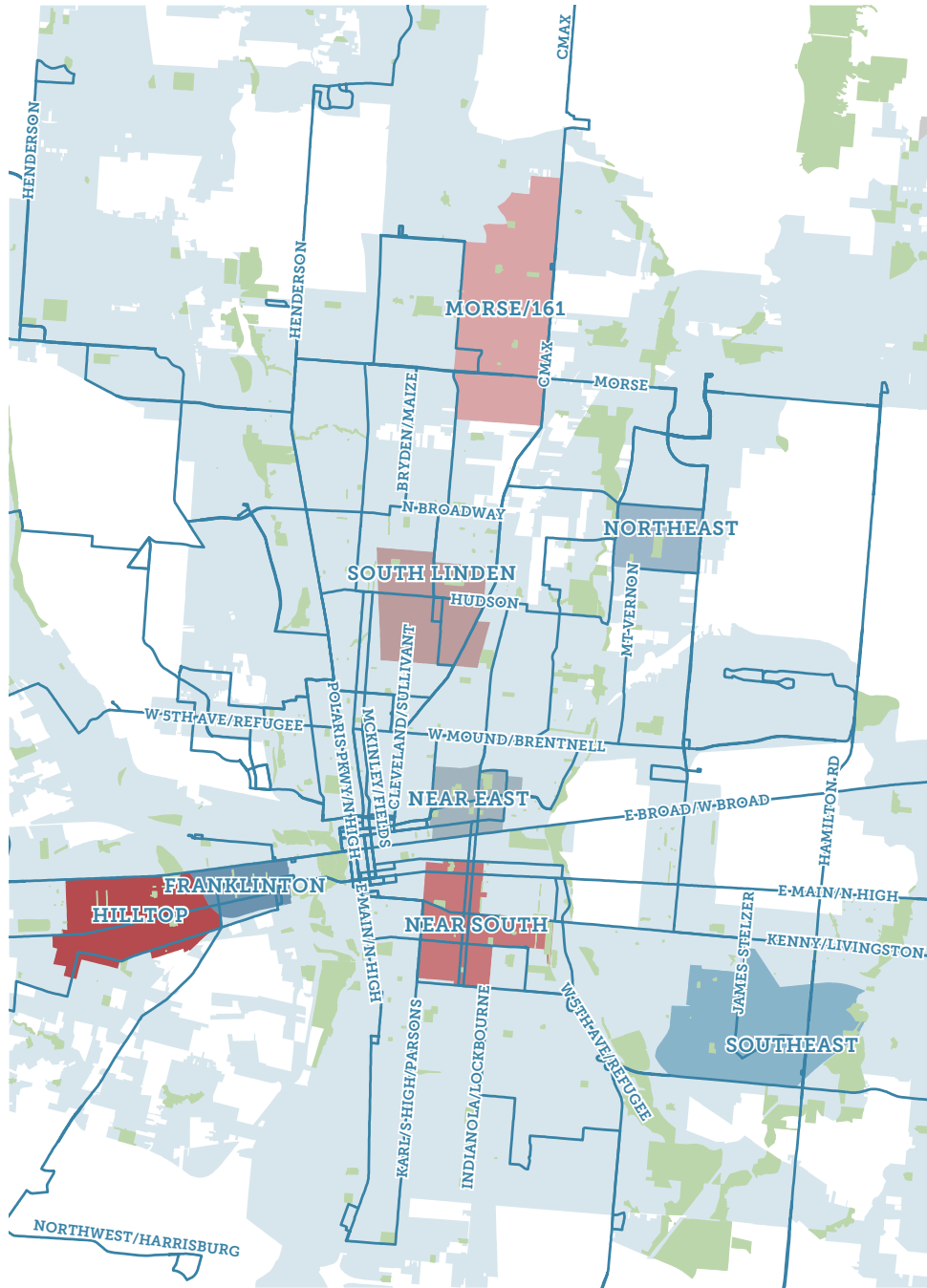


Demographic Data: U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2019

Geographic Data: GEOOhio Spatial Data Discovery Portal, ESRI, U.S. Census Bureau

APPENDIX C |

**CELEBRATEONE NEIGHBORHOODS WITH LIMITED ACCESS TO PUBLIC TRANSPORT AND PARKS**



— COTA Bus Lines  
 ■ Columbus Rec. Dept. Properties

CelebrateOne was created to carry out the Greater Columbus Infant Mortality Task Force's recommendations and has identified these as high-priority neighborhoods.

Data: U.S. Census Bureau, COTA, City of Columbus, ESRI

## APPENDIX D | WHERE YOUTH PLAY SPORTS

| Location             | Girls | Boys | White | Black |
|----------------------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| PE class             | 61%   | 67%  | 67%   | 59%   |
| School team          | 57%   | 48%  | 58%   | 44%   |
| Playground or park   | 54%   | 64%  | 60%   | 59%   |
| Rec center team      | 54%   | 68%  | 69%   | 59%   |
| Recess at school     | 51%   | 63%  | 63%   | 50%   |
| Travel team          | 36%   | 31%  | 39%   | 25%   |
| After-school program | 29%   | 21%  | 23%   | 31%   |

\* Multiple answers allowed

Source: Aspen Institute Youth Survey

## APPENDIX E | TIME SPENT ON SCREENS

Hours per day youth spend daily on phone, tablet, TV, video games, computer, etc. for fun outside of school

| Time          | All Kids | Black | White | Elementary School | Middle School | High School |
|---------------|----------|-------|-------|-------------------|---------------|-------------|
| 0 to 2 hours  | 25%      | 19%   | 27%   | 51%               | 20%           | 9%          |
| 2 to 5 hours  | 46%      | 41%   | 49%   | 34%               | 52%           | 47%         |
| 5 to 10 hours | 23%      | 28%   | 20%   | 10%               | 22%           | 33%         |
| 10+ hours     | 7%       | 12%   | 4%    | 4%                | 6%            | 11%         |

Source: Aspen Institute Youth Survey

## APPENDIX F | HOW OFTEN YOUTH PLAY E-SPORTS VS. PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

|   | All Kids | Girls | Boys | Black | White | Elementary School | Middle School | High School |
|---|----------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Play e-sports sometimes or often            | 27%      | 19%   | 34%  | 45%   | 18%   | 22%               | 31%           | 26%         |
| Play a sport or are physically active daily | 35%      | 34%   | 37%  | 30%   | 38%   | 32%               | 35%           | 37%         |

\* Note: The youth survey defined e-sports as competitive video gaming with others or in a league.

\* Note: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends youth should be physically active at least 60 minutes a day.

Source: Aspen Institute Youth Survey

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## PHOTOS

Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Ohio, Girls on the Run, Ohio High School Athletic Association, Greater Columbus Sports Commission, and Columbus Recreation and Parks Department

## CREDITS

The principal investigator was Columbus resident Michael Quesnell, who wrote the report as a consultant of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program. The report was edited by the Aspen Institute's Jon Solomon and the project was managed by Ranya Bautista and Jennifer Brown Lerner. The report was designed by The Hatcher Group and proofread by Catherine Lutz. The coach survey was produced by Dawn Anderson-Butcher, Rebecca Wade-Mdivanian, Obi Atkinson, Travis R. Sheadler and Jerome Davis of LiFEsports at Ohio State University. Maps were created by Conor Stinson and Lee Perlow of Perlow Mapping. Youth profiles were written by Jon Solomon and Ohio State student Darby Clark, with support from Ohio State Sports & Society Initiative co-director Nicole Kraft.

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An initiative of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, Project Play develops, shares and applies knowledge that helps build healthy communities through sports.

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Fifty-eight percent of all community-based sports fees are rising and 24% of high schools in the United States no longer offer sports. The rising costs of participation have closed the doors to youth sports for many children and teens in need. The playing field has been tilted in favor of wealthier families. The Lindy Infante Foundation is committed to leveling that playing field and ensuring that no young person misses out. We work to bring out the greatness in every child with a chance to play, grow and excel through sports.

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### REPORT METHODOLOGY

Throughout the report, “sports” refers to all forms of health-enhancing physical activity which, through organized or casual play, aims 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.

The youth survey data reported in the scoreboard section and throughout the report comes from youth in grades 3-12. From September to December 2020, 594 youth from schools in Canal Winchester and Westerville and youth residents of the City of Columbus through community-based organizations completed an online survey about their experiences and perceptions of sports, physical activity and outdoor recreation. The survey was conducted on an online platform and results were

analyzed by Resonant Education. Due to challenges related to the coronavirus pandemic, the survey is not a statistically representative sample of Central Ohio youth. The survey did not produce a large enough sample size to appropriately evaluate Latino/Latina youth responses. Perspectives from different races and ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographic areas of the region were included in this report through interviews and focus groups.

The coach survey data in the report came from “Youth Sport Coaches in Central Ohio: Current Trends, Behaviors and Needs,” produced by LiFEsports at Ohio State University. A total of 461 coaches completed the online survey. In relation to gender, 71.3% were male and 28.4% were female. Most of the participants were White (86.9%), with 7.2% Black, 1.7% Hispanic/Latino(a), 0.9% Asian, and 3.3% Other. In relation to geographical region, 17.2% of the participants coached in the Columbus City Schools area, 44.7% in Franklin County, and 38.1% outside of Franklin County. Coaches were classified into urban, suburban and rural regions. Findings from this study should be interpreted with caution, especially given the sample characteristics. The cross-sectional study only included a small sample of coaches in Central Ohio. The study authors were Dawn Anderson-Butcher, Rebecca Wade-Mdivanian, Obi Atkinson, Travis R. Scheadler, and Jerome Davis. To read the full study, visit the [Project Play website](#).

