

# New study results show a major drop in sports participation among American youth.

[Sports Business Daily reports](#), according to a study done by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, that amid concerns of an overemphasis on sport specialization, more kids than ever are not playing sports at all. Inactivity among children approached 20% in 2014, continuing a six-year upward trend. In the same age bracket, the average number of team sports played per participant has fallen 5.9% over the last five years and now sits at 2.01, per the SFIA.

The only major team sport with an upward participation trend since 2009 is ice hockey. According to the report, USA Hockey, after an internal study revealed 43% of children quit the sport by age 9, made major changes by reducing its emphasis on travel and changing rules to facilitate safety, contributing to a reversal in the sport's decline and a 44% increase in participation. The U.S. Olympic Committee adopted USA Hockey's list of broader recommendations to increase accessibility—including encouraging its athletes to play other sports—and recommended the rest of its national governing bodies follow suit.

“What we're finding in our sport, because we're preaching this, is that a lot of parents are going, ‘Whew. Thank you. I knew this wasn't right,’ Ken Martel, technical director of USA Hockey's American Development Model program, [told Sports Business Daily](#) in reference to the travel and business operations that often go hand in hand with competitive youth play. “It's nice to have someone who is actually saying so.”

The pressure on parents to place their kids on competitive teams with expert coaching and skill development, as well as the desire from serious programs to compete against one another, has made youth sports a lucrative industry, particularly for tournament organizers. Costs for travel, practice time and other needs often increase the financial contributions needed from players' families.

That culture lends itself to an emphasis on specializing and picking one sport early. Following hockey's lead, governing bodies are attempting to effect a shift.

"We're starting to come together around this, and that's a step in the right direction," [said](#) Jim Tooley, CEO and executive director of USA Basketball. "It's hard to legislate an unlegislatable space. It's really free rein out there. What we're trying to do is educate people — coaches and parents and everyone involved — to get kids going in the right direction at a younger age. Until you can solve greed, it's a tough problem to put to bed. But getting the right information out there is the start."

- *Jeremy Woo*