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National Youth Sport Participation Trends Report

2015

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Introduction

Sport touches many aspects of Canadians' lives—their health and well-being, their social networks, their sense of social connectedness. Organized sport can help children grow, giving them a sense of achievement while building teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, decision-making, and communications skills. Sport also enables children to channel their energy, competitiveness and aggression in socially beneficial ways. Improving health through sport and other forms of physical activity may reduce future health-care costs and build lasting habits of physical fitness while combating the growing problem of childhood obesity.

Most children are first introduced to sports through the family, which has an important influence on children as they develop their identity and build self-esteem. Many studies have identified the influence that parents have on their children's sports involvement by investing time, emotional support and financial resources.

This article will examine trends in regular organized sports participation of children aged 5 to 14, using data from the General Social Surveys (GSS) of 1992 and 2005. It will also look at the factors that influence children's participation in sports including parental involvement in sports, socio-demographic characteristics of the family, and geography. Other physical activities (such as walking, jogging, dancing) may also contribute to the health and well-being of children, but these remain beyond the scope this article. Only those activities that are considered organized sports are discussed here (see "What you should know about this study" for a definition of the sports included in this article).



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Sports participation is declining

In 2005, 51% of children aged 5 to 14 (2.0 million children regularly took part in sports during the previous 12 months. About 51% of these active children participated in more than one sport and were involved in sports activities on average about 2.6 times per week per sport during their sport's season.

Whereas boys' participation in organized sports has declined in all age groups, girls' participation trends depend on their age (Chart 1). In 2005, 5- to 10-year-old girls played organized sports at about the same rate as in 1992. In 2005, older girls aged 11 to 14 were less likely to play sports than they did in 1992, but the decline was less sharp than for boys the same age.

According to the 2005 GSS, boys aged 5 to 14 are still more likely to participate in sports than girls the same age, but the gap is narrowing. Sports participation of boys has declined from 66% in 1992 to 56% in 2005. Over the same time period, sports participation of girls has changed little from 49% to 45%.

Not only are boys now less likely to regularly participate in sports than they were back in 1992, those who do compete are involved in fewer sports—an average of 1.8 sports versus 1.9. In contrast, girls who participate played the same average number of sports in 2005 as they did in 1992, at 1.7. However, the frequency of sports participation is similar for boys and girls, at 2.5 times per week for boys compared with 2.7 times per week for girls.



Chart 1
Kids' sports participation has declined in recent years

Household income and education of parents influence sports participation

In 2005, 51% of two-parent households with children spent money on sports and athletic equipment. Those who made such expenditures spent an average of \$579 during the year. In addition to these equipment expenses, families may also spend money on facility rentals, transportation to sports events, club memberships and competition entry fees in order to support their children's participation in sports.

In light of such costs, it is not surprising that sports participation **is most prevalent among children from high-income households** (highest adjusted income quintile) at 68%, and lowest among children from lower income households (lowest quintile), at 44% (Chart 2).⁹ (See "What you should know about this study" for an explanation of adjusted household income quintiles). Interestingly, the participation gap between boys and girls narrows as household income rises, suggesting that **girls from lower income families are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to involvement in sports.**



Parental education levels are closely linked to household income. Children who have a parent with a graduate or first professional university degree were more likely to play sports (60%) than children whose parents have a high school diploma (42%). Children of parents who have not graduated from high school are even less likely to be sports participants (22%). **The relationship between parental level of education and sports participation of their children is linked to household income, as the children of university-educated parents are more likely to be in high-income households.**



Chart 2

Sports participation is highest for children in high income families

Sporty parents have sporty kids

Parents are often involved in their children's sports, whether it is on the sidelines shouting encouragement or being more formally involved as a coach, referee, organizer or fundraiser for a team, league or sports club. They also financially support their children's sports activities.

On an average day, about 7% of parents of 5 to 14-year-olds are involved in some form of sports activity with their children, whether it be participating in sports, coaching or attending a professional or amateur sporting event as a spectator. They spent an average of 2.5 hours doing these sports-related activities with their children.

Parents themselves are involved in many sports-related activities. In total, 57% of parents are involved in some way with sports as participants, spectators, coaches, referees, sports administrators, organizers or members of sports organizations. The remaining 43% are not involved in sports in any way.

According to the 2005 GSS, nearly half of parents (46%) watch amateur sporting events. They are often spectators of their own children's games. In this role, they are taking the time to encourage and be involved with their child's sports, even if it is just watching from the sidelines and driving them to and from the event.

About one-quarter (26%) of parents regularly played sports themselves. Organized sports participation declines quickly after adults reach their early 20s (Chart 3); in fact, in 2005, 34% of fathers and 20% of mothers played sports. Some parents were involved as coaches (8%), referees (2%) or sports administrators (11%), but fathers were twice as likely as mothers to be in these roles, at 20% versus 11%.

The level of parental involvement in sports has an impact on children's sports participation. In 2005, 24% of children participated in sports if their parents were not involved in sports in any way. It makes a big difference if parents are involved, even just as spectators of amateur sports: children's participation rates more than doubled (62%). This finding shows that parents can support their children's sports activity simply by watching and encouraging them.



Of those parents who play sports themselves, about half also watch amateur sports. Over two-thirds of children (69%) of these parents also play sports. Sports participation is highest among children whose parents are involved in refereeing, coaching or in sports administration (82%).



Chart 3

Children and adolescents are most likely to participate in organized sports

Family structure can affect participation

Family structure can also influence the sports participation of children, especially if there are two parents who can share the responsibility of facilitating their children's sports participation. The highest children's sport participation rates (53%) occur in intact families where both birth parents are present.

However, children are more likely now than in the past to experience living in a lone-parent, step or blended family. A key finding of the GSS results is that boys' sports participation was almost the same for all family types (ranging from 54% to 58%).

In contrast, girls in lone-parent families (39%) are less likely to be sports participants than girls from intact families (48%). Lone-parent families, especially those headed by women, are more likely to experience financial difficulties. Under the strain of financial problems, lone parents may sacrifice the sports participation of their daughters, reasoning that sports have traditionally not been as important to young girls' identities as they are to young boys'.¹²

In two-parent families, children's sports participation is highest (75%) if both parents are involved in sports as sport participants themselves, as coaches, referees, sports administrators, as amateur sport spectators or as members of sports clubs or organizations. When only one of the parents is involved in sports, children's sports participation is lower (49%). Although fathers have traditionally been more likely to be involved in sports than mothers, children's participation tends to be about the same whether the father or mother is involved (50% if only the father, 48% if only the mother). If neither parent is involved, only 22% of children take part in sports.

In lone-parent families, parents are less likely to be involved in sports than parents in two-parent families, at 50% versus 59% respectively. If the lone parent is involved in sports, 69% of their children participate in sports compared with 27% if the lone parent is not involved in sports. These results reinforces research that shows the importance of the family in introducing children to sports early in life.¹³

Children whose mothers are under age 30 are also less likely to participate in sports than children with mothers in their 40s. This likely reflects lower levels of educational attainment and lower household incomes among younger mothers—two factors associated with the sports participation of children.

Parental attitudes to sport



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No time for sports

Although money and access to sports facilities are positive factors associated with sports participation, parental apathy may be the biggest stumbling block. Parents who did not play sports themselves were asked about their reasons for not participating. Half said they have no time for sports, and one-quarter said that they have no interest in sports. Few cited a lack of sports facilities or money. We might expect that those who had no money to play sports themselves would also be limited in the way they could financially support their children's sports. Unfortunately, the small number of parents who reported this reason did not allow us to determine the impact of this upon their children's sports participation due to a small sample size. Not surprisingly, the children of parents with no interest in sports had lower rates of sports participation than those whose parents cited other reasons for not participating.

I'm keen about sports

Parents who regularly participate in sports were asked how strongly they felt about five different reasons for their own participation. They were most likely to view their own participation in sports as "very important" for recreation and relaxation (71%), as a way of maintaining physical health and fitness (67%), and as a family activity (60%). They were less likely to rate achievement and skill development (41%) and developing new friendships (27%) as very important reasons.

The attitudes of fathers play a key role in the likelihood that their children play sports. Fathers who cited at least four out of the five reasons as "very important" exhibited a very positive attitude towards sports participation. This outlook is associated with significantly higher sports participation for their children (77%) compared with children whose fathers reported zero or one reason as very important for their own sports participation (54%).

In contrast with fathers' attitudes, the level of importance mothers placed on their own sports participation made little difference to that of their children. Still, there is a significant difference when mothers participated in sports in any way: their children's participation rate was much higher (71%) than that of children whose mothers did not (29%).

Parents' workforce status affects children's participation

Among two-parent families, children's sports participation is highest where the mother works part-time and the father works full-time (66%); it is slightly lower when both parents work full-time (58%), and lowest when the mother is not working (38%).

This finding reinforces the argument that children's sports participation entails the use of many family resources, including both money and time. Families where both parents are working full-time are more likely to be in the top household adjusted income quintile, but they may have less time to support their children's sports participation. In fact, in families where both parents work full-time, 58% of mothers and 61% of fathers are involved in sports in some way compared with 61% of mothers and 76% of fathers in families where the mother works part-time (Chart 4).



In families where the mother is not employed and the father works full-time, income may become a limiting factor in children's sports participation as families are more likely to be in the lowest income quintiles. In these families, 44% of mothers are involved in sports in some way as are 59% of fathers.



Chart 4

Parents are most likely to be involved in sports if the father is employed full-time and the mother is employed part-time

Children of recent immigrants are less likely to participate

Data from the 2006 Census show that the percentage of Canada's population that is foreign-born has reached its highest level in 75 years (20%). In 2006, as it was in 2001, nearly 6 in 10 recent immigrants were born in Asia (including the Middle East). One of the problems that recent immigrants face is achieving economic stability in their new country. **As participation in sports often requires economic resources, children of recent immigrants may face financial barriers to sports participation.**

According to the 2005 GSS, children of recent immigrants (immigrants who had been in Canada for less than 10 years) are less likely to participate in sports (32%) than children of Canadian-born parents (55%). **While internationally popular sports such as soccer may provide the children of recent immigrants with a familiar place to integrate into Canadian society, even in soccer, participation is lower (10%) than among those whose parents are Canadian-born (23%).**

Place of residence influences sports participation

In 2005, the sports participation of children aged 5 to 14 was highest in Atlantic Canada and lowest in British Columbia and Quebec. It was also low (47%) in Canada's three largest cities (Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver) and highest in smaller cities and towns with a population between 10,000 and 50,000 (58%).

Rural Canada had lower levels of sports participation (49%), similar to that of mid-sized census metropolitan areas (51%). This result may be because sports activity in rural settings often involves longer distances, which may limit the opportunities to participate for rural children.

The physical environment can promote sports participation by providing clean and safe places for people to practice and compete. Studies have shown that children are likely to participate in sports if they live in neighbourhoods that are considered safe for outside play. Neighbourhood disorder is more likely to occur in places that have higher levels of low income, thereby limiting sports participation among children.



The 2005 GSS supports those earlier studies and shows **that sports participation is lowest among children in high-density areas (42%) where low-income families are more likely to be found,18 and highest in low-density suburban areas (52%) of large and mid-sized metropolitan areas.**

Soccer is Number One with kids

Look at the popularity of the FIFA Under-20 World Cup, a premier world event for soccer held in Canada during the summer of 2007! It's another sign that soccer has become the most common sport for both boys and girls. Once seen as a European or South American sport, soccer has caught on among Canadian youth, with nearly 20% of young people playing the game. In contrast, other sports have seen declining child participation, particularly baseball, swimming, downhill skiing, volleyball, gymnastics and figure skating (Table 1).

Participation rates of boys and girls have somewhat different trends in individual sports. Girls are diversifying their participation into sports once thought of as boys' sports, such as hockey and soccer; at the same time, their involvement has declined in traditional girls' sports such as swimming and figure-skating. Soccer is the only sport where boys' participation has increased significantly, while hockey – formerly the number one organized sport for boys – has seen a dip in participation, especially among boys from households in the lowest adjusted income quintile.



Table 1
Top 10 organized sports of 5- to14-year-olds in 2005



Summary

Children's participation in sport is influenced by gender, age, household income, parental education, parental involvement in sports activities, geographic location and immigrant status of parents.

Boys are more likely than girls to be sports participants, but this gender gap is narrowing. Those in their early teens are more likely to be in sports than younger children. Children from households with high incomes and those with highly-educated parents are much more likely to be sports participants than those from low-income families or those whose parents have a high school diploma or less.

Parents who are involved in sports activities themselves boost the sports participation rates of their children, even if they are only spectators of amateur sport. In two-parents families, children's sports participation rates are highest if both parents are involved in sports activities.

Children living in smaller towns and cities (population of 10,000 to 49,999) are the most likely to be sports participants, while those living in Canada's three largest cities are least likely. Children of recent immigrants are the least likely to be sports participants.

Other factors such as the quality of school sports programs and facilities, the safety of neighbourhoods, and the influence of peers may also influence children's sports participation, but these factors were not examined in the 2005 General Social Survey.

What you should know about this study

Data for this article is taken from the 1992 and 2005 General Social Survey (GSS) which asked respondents aged 15 and over living in the ten provinces to identify their own organized sports activities as well as those of other household members. In the 2005 survey, 2,021 respondents identified 3,112 children aged 5 to 14 living in the same household. For most children, the respondent was a parent (88%), a sibling (9%) or a grandparent (2%). Another 1% had other relationships with the child (e.g., aunt/uncle, cousin, nephew/niece or roommate).

Sport is defined as mainly team or organized activity such as hockey, baseball, basketball, golf, competitive swimming and soccer. A number of recreational physical activities were not defined as sports and are excluded: non-competitive aerobics, aqua fit, bicycling for recreation/transportation only, body building/body sculpting, car racing, dancing, fishing, fitness classes, hiking, jogging, lifting weights (non-competitive), motorcycling, snowmobiling, and non-competitive walking. Although dance can be an intense and highly competitive physical activity and is most popular among girls, it was not identified as a sport by the 2005 GSS.

In the 1992 GSS, cheerleading and skateboarding were also excluded from the definition of sport, but were included in sports in 2005. The inclusion of cheerleading and skateboarding in 2005 increased the overall sports participation rate for children aged 5 to 14 by less than one percentage point (rising to 49.8% versus 49.1% with the two sports excluded).



Sports participation refers to sports that one regularly participated in (at least once a week) during the previous 12 months. Children's sports participation is identified by the respondent, who was asked to report on the sports activities of no more than four other household members. This limitation may result in the underestimation of sports participation of children in large families; in 2005, however, only 0.3% children aged 5 to 14 may have been affected.

Adjusted household income quintiles

The composition and size of a household can affect its financial well-being. To compensate for these factors, household income is adjusted as follows: the oldest person in the household receives a factor of 1.0; the second oldest person in the household receives a factor of 0.4; all other household members aged 16 and over each receive a factor of 0.4; and all other household members under age 16 receive a factor of 0.3.

Quintiles are a convenient way of categorizing income from lowest income to highest income in order to draw conclusions about the sports participation of children from the bottom, top or middle part of the household income distribution. Adjusted household incomes of respondents are ranked from lowest to highest and then are traditionally divided into five groups of equal numbers of units, called quintiles. However, because the General Social Survey classifies household income into income ranges, it is only possible to divide the groups into approximately equal sizes, for those reporting household income.

The first quintile (lowest) represents the households with approximately the lowest 20% of reported adjusted household income. The "2nd", "3rd–middle" and "4th" quintiles represent progressively higher levels of adjusted household income; the 5th or highest quintile represents those households from about the top 20% of adjusted household income. The GSS also has a substantial number of respondents who did not report their household income; these are shown as a separate group.



Appendix Table A1 **Sports participation of children aged 5 to 14 by socio-demographic characteristics, 2005**



Notes

Bloom, M., Grant, M., & Watt, D. (2005). Strengthening Canada – The social-economic benefits of sport participation in Canada. The Conference Board of Canada, August 2005. (p. iii). Retrieved September 13, 2007, from http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/sc/pubs/socio-eco/sports_participation_e.pdf

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Tremblay, M. S., & Willms, J. D. (2000). Secular trends in the body mass index of Canadian children. Canadian Medical Association Journal, 163(11), 1429-1433. Also, Erratum published in 2001, 164(7), 970.

Tremblay, M. S., & Willms, J. D. (2003). Is the Canadian childhood obesity epidemic related to physical activity. International Journal of Obesity, 27, 1100-1105.

Côté, J. & Hay, J. (2002). Family influences on youth sport performance and participation. In Silva, J. & Stevens, D. (Eds.). Psychological foundations of sports (pp. 503-519). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

The 2005 General Social Survey asked respondents to identify other household members who regularly participate in organized sports. Some of these household members were children aged 5 to 14, the group of interest in this article. The GSS samples Canadians aged 15 and over living in the 10 provinces and therefore does not directly count the number of children. The 2.0 million count of 5- to 14-year-olds who regularly participated in organized sports is obtained by applying the sports participation rate of 5- to 14-year-olds from the GSS sample to the population estimate of 5- to 14-year-olds in the 10 provinces published by Demography Division, Statistics Canada.

Five- to ten-year-old boys' sports participation rate dropped from 60% in 1992 to 52% in 2005, whereas girls of the same age remained relatively stable (at 45% in 1992 and 43% in 2005—a difference that is not statistically significant). Among 11- to 14-year-olds, boys' participation dropped from 74% to 62% while girls' dropped from 54% to 48%.

Statistics Canada. (2006). Detailed average household expenditure by household type, Canada, 2005. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 62F0034XDB. Ottawa: Minister of Industry.

Only 39% of children in households not reporting their household income were sports participants.

Parents who play organized sports and watch amateur sports.

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Turcotte, M. (2008). Life in metropolitan areas–The city/suburb contrast: How can we measure it? *Canadian Social Trends*, 85, 2-19. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 11-008-XIE. Retrieved February 27, 2008, from [/pub/11-008-x/2008001/article/10459-eng.pdf](http://pub/11-008-x/2008001/article/10459-eng.pdf)

Large and mid-sized CMAs include those with a population of over 250,000 in 2001 which are: Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver, Ottawa-Gatineau, Calgary, Edmonton, Quebec City, Winnipeg, Hamilton, Windsor, London, St. Catharines, Victoria, Oshawa and Kitchener.

The drop in participation in downhill skiing may be partially related to the availability of snow during the winter. During January-March 2005 and December 2005, the prime skiing season for many Canadians, there was less snow than during winters in the 1990s.



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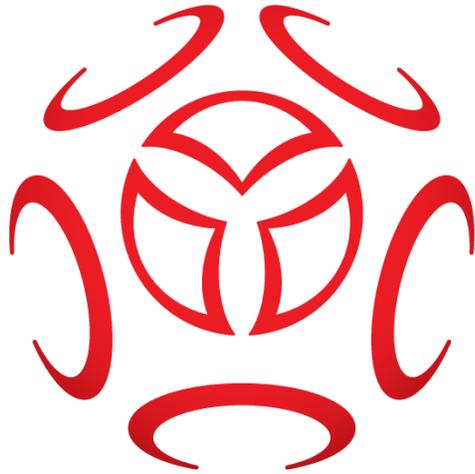


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