



STATE OF PLAY

Central Ohio



ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS



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.

