

# STATE OF PLAY

Camden

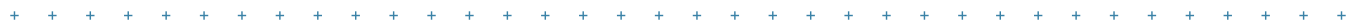
ANALYSIS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program analyzed the landscape of youth sports in the city of Camden from November 2019 to October 2020. *State of Play Camden* offers a snapshot of how well adults are serving youth through sports, recreation and other physical activities.

Findings for this report were developed through multiple methods: input from project advisory group members; individual interviews with a broad collection of stakeholders and community members; focus-group discussions with youth; surveys conducted of youth; media accounts; and existing reports, policy analyses and publicly available data collected by the Aspen Institute with support from Ellen Staurowsky, former Drexel University sport management professor.



## Some key findings in the report:

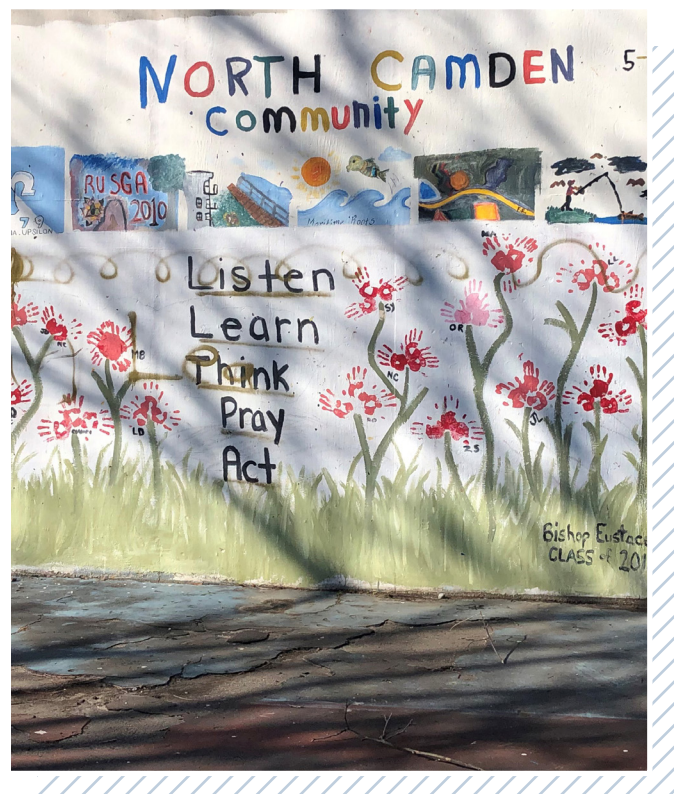
- **Local programs are challenged by a lack of resources, collaboration, and now, the pandemic.** Camden is not among the more than 10,000 cities around the country with a municipal recreation department that provides organized youth sports. For those programs, the city is more dependent than most on community organizations, which often work in their own silos and are totally dependent on one or two people coordinating events and raising money. Further, as with elsewhere in the country, some nonprofits may struggle to survive due to lost program revenues and the recent disruption in activity. Our youth survey showed that while most respondents (53%) indicated they would either be similarly or more active in sports after the pandemic, there was also a high rate of uncertainty (32%).
- **Middle school sports often leave Camden youth unprepared for high school sports.** Many middle schools lack fields, coordinated centralized schedules and proper skill development by coaches, so children’s experiences vary widely. These factors, along with schoolwork and family responsibilities at home, contribute to some youth quitting sports during their middle school years. Participation in team sports, in both organized and casual form, declines from 71% in elementary-school-age years to 65% in middle school to 59% in high school.
- **Girls in Camden have fewer opportunities to play sports than boys.** Our youth survey found that 59% of girls said they regularly play sports, compared to 72% of boys. Boys are three-and-a-half times more likely to play on a travel



team and twice as likely to play on a rec center team than girls. At Woodrow Wilson High School, females comprised 42% of the student body in 2017-18 but only 23% of the athletic participants. Camden High School showed a gap of 47% female students but 21% female athletes. One challenge in closing that gap is overcoming the perception among some that sports aren't for girls.

- **Basketball is the most played sport among youth, by far.** Our student survey found this is the case with boys, girls and Black and Latino/Latina youth. More than six out of 10 youth said they have played basketball, including 38% who play regularly. Soccer is also popular, as is, with Black males, tackle football. Baseball and softball have proven to draw participants through the North Camden Little League. But our survey also revealed strong interest in trying activities that sit outside the mainstream and are less often made available, including boxing, volleyball, karate, swimming, cheerleading/dance and fencing. Some community members told us sports providers should be mindful of kids having different sports interests when designing budgets and programs.
- **Camden has relatively few parks and recreation spaces.** Only 8% of city land is used for that purpose, barely half the national average of 15%, according to the Trust for Public Land. It's 13% in Philadelphia and 21% in New York City. In our youth survey, only 13% indicated that they go to parks more than once a week, and 24% said they do not visit parks at all. They said they wish parks were cleaner and had better equipment. Public and private investments have been made to renovate some parks and prevent vandalism.

- **Lack of transportation options is a major barrier that limits access to local programs.** Some parents said they don't register their children for sports programs since they know they don't have the ability to drive their child to games and practices, either due to work hours or not owning a vehicle. According to our youth survey, Latino/Latina youth are less likely to be transported to sports by a non-family member than Black youth; they also are less likely to walk or take the subway or school bus.
- **Building trust within the community for sustainable solutions is essential.** For example, many people in the Camden community perceive that the privately run Kroc Center, which has state-of-the-art pools, an indoor gym and a fitness center, is not available to them due to costs, behavioral rules and geography. New leadership at the Kroc Center is interested in finding ways to hold more youth sports programming.



Our recommendations for improving the local state of play — located in the Game Changer and Call for Leadership sections, starting on page 34 — are based on the unique characteristics of Camden and informed by feedback from the project’s community advisory group. They include:

- Create community partnerships to make the Kroc Center more accessible to city youth.
- Start a citywide middle school sports league.
- Use the power of the permit — the recognized authority of government agencies to manage public property — to promote coaching standards and equitable facility use.
- Recruit college students to become youth coaches.
- Annually track female sports participation and interests.
- Create and market online resources to promote access to sports facilities.

With a passionate sports culture and collective action, Camden can provide more equitable access to and higher quality of sport, physical activity and recreation opportunities for 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 Camden 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 and Baltimore. Stakeholders in those communities have taken actions based on the recommendations and are seeing results.*



