

UNITED STATES

Capital: **Washington, D.C.** | Population: **330 million**

Lead body for sport development:

U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee



Government Support D

Elite Sport Rank 1

Elite Sport Rank Per Capita 40

Youth Sport Participation Grade C

The United States is the largest sports market in the world, home of many of the most valuable professional franchises and the only nation with colleges providing major sports entertainment. The chase for financial and other rewards that flow to elite athletes and the programs that serve them increasingly shape the sport ecosystem down to the entry level, both creating and denying sustained participation opportunities for youth. Government supports largely through legislation that provides infrastructure funding and encourages equitable access by gender.

As with most countries the Aspen Institute studied, the bedrock of the United States sport system is community programs and clubs, locally organized and often run by volunteers or paid staff. Unlike in most countries, schools also offer a menu of sport teams, mostly for students who are teenagers. But beyond state high school athletics federations that oversee interscholastic competition, there isn't much governance of youth sports.

Most state boards of education take a hands-off approach to school sports. No state government has the equivalent of Department of Sports and Recreation, unlike Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory that has [used its sports agency](#) to register youth-serving organizations, conduct background checks, and support communities with facilities grants. Rare are local government bodies like the Fairfax County (Virginia) Athletic Council, an advisory board with sport, city, school, and parks and rec representatives that sorts through field use policies and other thorny issues. It's a chaotic, if dynamic, environment that often leaves providers frustrated, and parents with little assurance of program quality.

The federal government's first attempt at sport governance was in 1978, with the [Amateur Sports Act](#). Rather than create an agency or quasi-government body dedicated to mass sport participation like other countries have, Congress outsourced the job to the U.S. Olympic Committee (now the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee) which was tasked with establishing national goals for amateur sport activities and overseeing the now 50-plus National Governing Bodies charged with coordinating amateur sport activities down the youth level.

But it was an unfunded mandate, and starting in the 1990s the USOPC began telling Congress it couldn't get

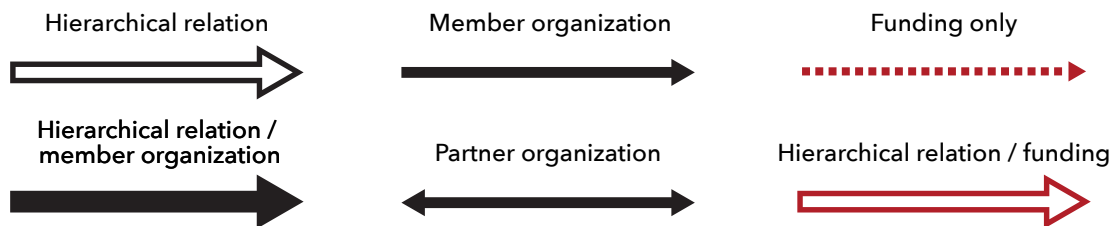
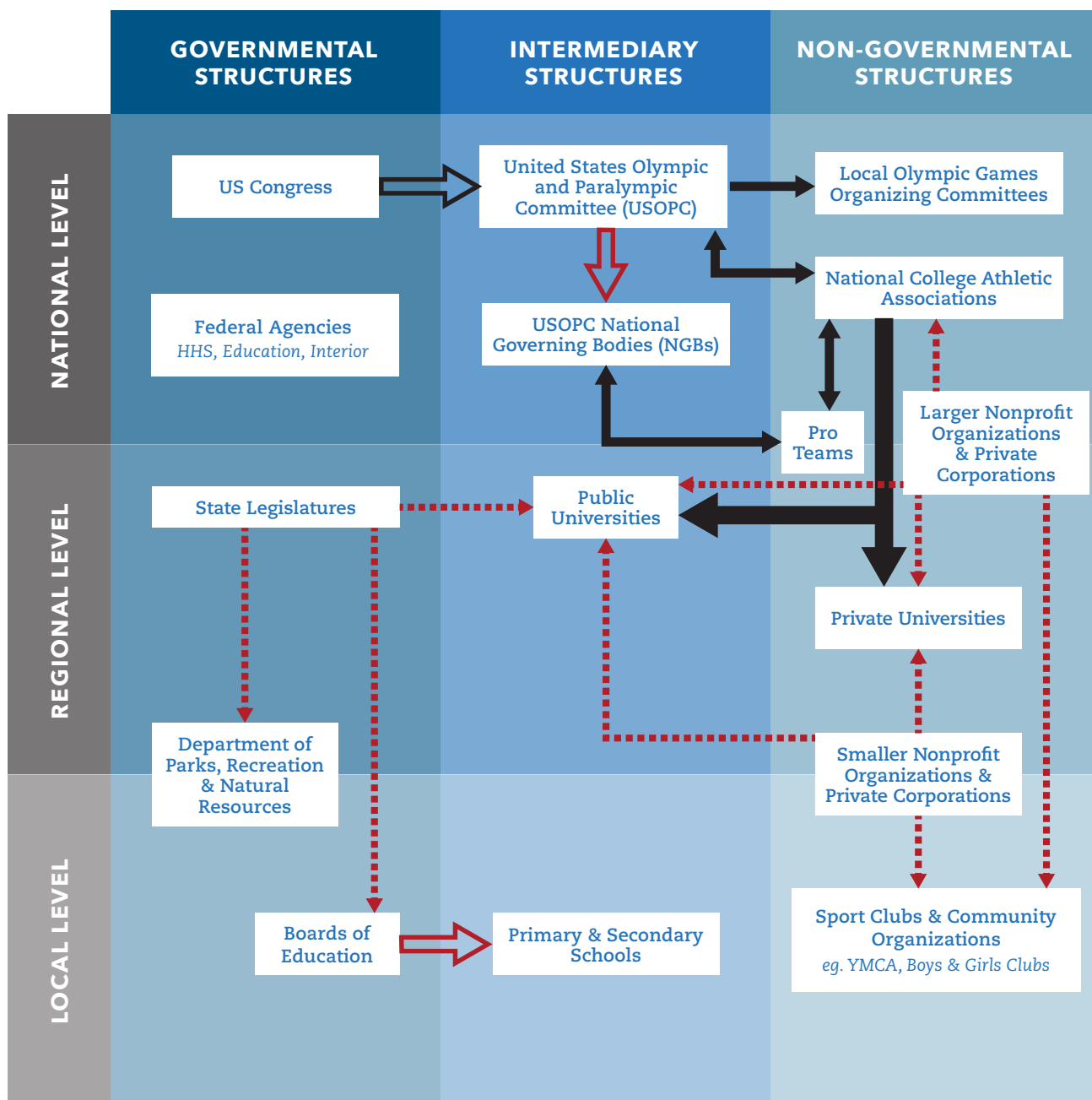
Americans off the couch while also getting American athletes onto the Olympic podium. That's still the case today. The USOPC distributes more than \$100 million a year to NGBs, the vast majority for the training of high-performance athletes. Congressional oversight has been inconsistent at best, confined to occasional hearings flowing from various scandals.

Federal agencies make contributions. The U.S. Census Bureau collects data on sport participation, and an inter-agency group set a goal of [63% sport participation](#) by the year 2030. In 2019 the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services created a [National Youth Sports Strategy](#). The President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition promotes physical fitness. All lack the authority or budget to shift behavior in the sport ecosystem, relying mostly on opportunities like [supportive White House policy](#).

WHAT WE LIKE

The 1978 Amateur Sports Act, the nation's first attempt at sport governance, is increasingly and widely recognized as flawed legislation. But six years earlier, lawmakers got policy right in a big way with [Title IX](#), a statement of non-discrimination that vastly expanded sport opportunities for females in schools and ultimately reshaped the entire sport ecosystem, at home and around the world. Most U.S. Olympic medals are now won by women, and teams that other countries send to events like the Olympics and soccer World Cup are often populated with athletes trained on U.S. college campuses. Another federal law, the [Land and Water Conservation Act of 1964](#), allocated funds from Gulf of Mexico oil leases that has helped states, counties and cities build more than [45,000 sports and recreational spaces](#).

Sport Governance in the United States



Most grades in Youth Sport Participation and Government Support categories are drawn from a 2022 report prepared by the [Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance](#), a not-for-profit comprised of researchers, health professionals and stakeholders who work together to advance physical activity in children and adolescents around the world. Report cards for the 57 countries evaluated are based on a harmonized framework and standardized grading rubric, as reflected in the [Global Matrix 4.0](#). A grade of C, for instance, means a country is "succeeding with about half (47-53%) of children." The Government Support grade is given by experts in that country based on "evidence of leadership and commitment" by government "in providing physical activity opportunities or participation of children and adolescents through policy, legislation or regulation." No grades were offered in the Global Matrix report for Government Support for Norway, Germany, the United Kingdom and the U.S., so the Aspen Institute consulted experts in each of those country to offer one, using the same criteria. In the U.S., the "D" grade was the weighted grade offered by 90 experts engaged with Project Play, including youth sport industry leaders at the NextUp Conference hosted by LeagueApps.

The Elite Sport Rank and Elite Sport Rank Per Capita categories are drawn from [Greatest Sporting Nation](#), a website that analyzes elite international competition results in Olympic and other sports, not including those that involve animals or cars. The first category is a measure of the total number of athletes and teams in 2022 who performed well in competition, while the latter calculates results relative to a nation's total population.