



Volume 15
Issue 3
May 14, 2012

Report Highlights

Over 60% of children who play school sports had an athletic pay-to-play fee; only 6% received waivers for the fee.

Only one-third of lower-income parents report their child participates in school sports, while more than half of higher-income parents have a teen playing school sports.

In lower-income households, nearly 1 in 5 parents report a decrease in their child's school sports participation due to cost.

Contact us

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics and Communicable Diseases, and the University of Michigan Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Unit.

Pay-to-Play Sports Keeping Lower-Income Kids Out of the Game

School budget challenges have resulted in deep funding cuts for middle and high school sports. In response, many school districts now charge fees for athletic participation. These "pay-to-play" fees are a flat charge per year or per number of sports; parents often pay additional team fees, as well as other costs such as equipment and transportation. There is little information about how increasing the cost of school sports for families may affect participation.

In January 2012, the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children in middle or high school (age 12-17 years) about participation in and costs of school sports.

Costs of School Sports

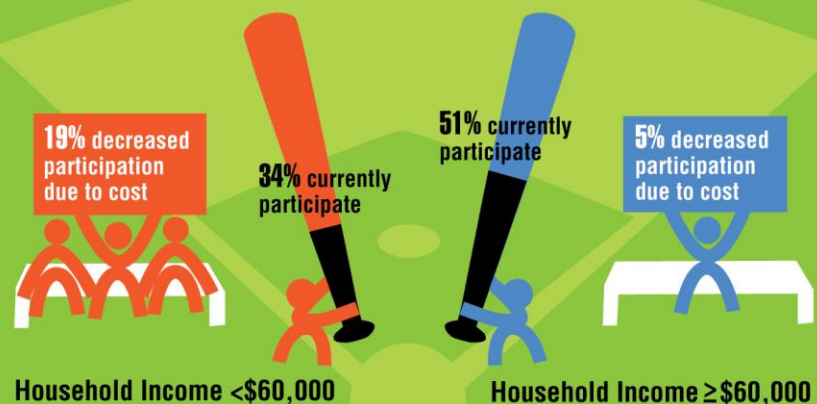
Overall, 43% of parents report that their child participates in school sports. A school pay-to-play fee was charged for 61% of sports participants. The average fee was \$93, but 21% of children faced a pay-to-play fee of \$150 or more. Six percent of children who play school sports received waivers for the pay-to-play fees. Importantly, pay-to-play fees are only one component of the school sports costs reported by parents. Including additional team fees and other costs, the average cost for sports participation was \$381.

Participation in School Sports by Family Income

Substantial differences in school sports participation are seen based on household income. Among lower-income families, only one-third have a teen playing school sports; in comparison, among families earning \geq \$60,000 per year, more than half have a teen playing school sports (Figure 1).

Overall, 12% of parents report that the cost of school sports has caused a decrease in participation for at least one of their children. However, nearly 1 in 5 parents in lower-income households report a decrease in their child's sports participation—a much bigger decrease than their higher-income peers (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Participation in School Sports for Kids 12-17 Years, by Household Income



Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2012.

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Knowledge Networks, Inc. (KN), for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital via a method used in many published studies. The survey was administered in January 2012 to a randomly selected, stratified group of parents of children age 12-17 (n=814) from the KN standing panel that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 60% among panel members contacted to participate. The margin of error is ± 3 to 7 percentage points.

Implications

Each year, millions of US teens play competitive sports through their middle and high schools. Results from this National Poll on Children's Health indicate that during the 2011-12 school year, nearly two-thirds of students playing school sports had a pay-to-play fee requirement, with an average pay-to-play fee of over \$90. Moreover, pay-to-play fees comprise just a portion of the overall costs of school sports.

The impact of the cost to families of school sports is demonstrated in another key finding from this National Poll on Children's Health: teens from lower-income families participate in school sports at substantially lower rates than their higher-income peers. Moreover, 1 in 5 parents in households earning <\$60,000/year indicate that at least one of their children has decreased participation in school sports due to cost—far more commonly than teens in higher-income families.

In this Poll, only 6% of school sports participants received a waiver of the pay-to-play fees. Waiver policies vary widely. In some districts, students who qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program are automatically given waivers for pay-to-play fees. However, such policies would miss working families who earn too much for free/reduced lunch, but not enough to afford additional fees for sports.

School sports offer many benefits: higher school achievement, lower dropout rates, improved health, and the development of teamwork, problem-solving skills, and enhanced self-confidence. Findings from this Poll are a cautionary tale for those who administer middle and high school sports programs. Pay-to-play programs should be implemented carefully, to ensure that all teens have an equitable chance to benefit from participating in school sports.

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