



YOUTH SPORTS

at Park and
Recreation
Agencies

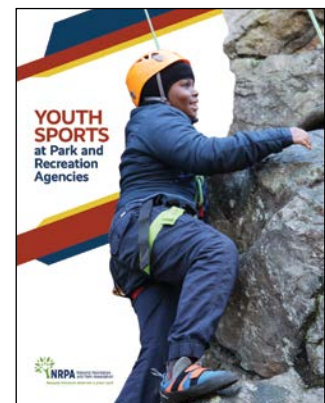


NRPA National Recreation
and Park Association

Because everyone deserves a great park

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Youth Sports at Parks and Recreation: Key Statistics.....	5
Key Findings.....	6
Youth Sports Offerings and Partnerships for Delivery.....	6
Delivery of Youth Sports.....	10
Centering sports around youth needs.....	10
Providing opportunities close to home.....	11
Laying the foundation for an active future.....	12
Fees and Registration.....	14
Equitable Access to Youth Sports.....	17
Challenges in Youth Sports Administration.....	18
Conclusion.....	20
Acknowledgements.....	20



A participant of Outdoor Adventure Club goes climbing at Hanging Rock in Roanoke, Virginia. Photo courtesy of Susan Herndon-Powell

Introduction



PHOTO COURTESY OF TRISH COBB

Organized and unorganized sports are critical starting points in a young person's lifelong journey toward an active and healthy lifestyle. Youth who engage with sports not only are more physically active and confident, but also gain long-term benefits — including better health outcomes, greater educational attainment and success at work — that follow them throughout their lives.

However, in recent years, there has been a sharp decline in the number of children playing team sports. Data from the [Sports & Fitness Industry Association \(SFIA\)](#) find that the percentage of children ages six to 12 participating in sports declined from 72.9 percent in 2012 to 71.8 percent in 2019.

Equity is at the heart of access to youth sports. Studies demonstrate that gender, household formation and income correlate with the likelihood (and level) of children's engagement with organized sports, what sports they may play and how long they engage in those activities.

Youth take part in an annual end-of-year lacrosse tournament in Columbia, Maryland.

Unfortunately, there are significant disparities in who has access to youth sports opportunities, both in terms of proximity to sports fields and courts and the ability to afford registration fees.

Park and recreation professionals and their agencies are major providers of both organized and unorganized sports program facilities across the nation. They offer safe spaces where kids can play together, build new relationships and learn about teamwork. They also serve all community members, including youth from under-resourced neighborhoods and/or households that cannot afford participation on other sports teams, including travel-team sports. By identifying and addressing inequities in youth sports opportunities in their communities, park and recreation professionals are in a unique position to promote increased access to sports through their agency and with their partners.

At the same time, agencies must compete with and frequently manage space for competitive travel sports leagues and other providers that charge higher fees, and often they must do so with limited funding support. The coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and resulting recession have greatly exacerbated these funding challenges and put extra pressure on the ability of park and recreation agencies to offer or partner with others to provide low-cost youth sports programs to everyone.

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) teamed up with the Aspen Institute to explore how park and recreation leaders can address gaps in the provision of youth sports opportunities. This work builds on the Aspen Institute's *The 8 Plays*, as well as the resources and ideas developed through

[Project Play 2019](#) and [Project Play 2020](#) that have brought together a cross-sector group to develop shared goals and to mutually reinforce actions to make sports accessible to all children.

To better understand the current state of youth sports programming at park and recreation agencies, in July 2020, the NRPA Research team conducted a survey of park and recreation leaders. The 22-question survey asked about youth sports programs, focusing on agency partners, fee structures and activities that park and recreation agencies use to promote greater access. The survey also asked park and recreation leaders about the impact COVID-19 has had on their agencies' organized sports offerings in 2020. The survey's 254 responses are the basis of this report.

Three youth participate in the Spring Coach Pitch Baseball League, hosted by Franklin County (Virginia) Parks and Recreation.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FRANKLIN COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION

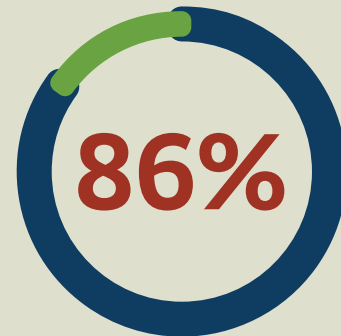
Youth Sports at Park and Recreation Agencies: KEY STATISTICS

5 in 6 park and recreation agencies work with partners to deliver youth sports activities

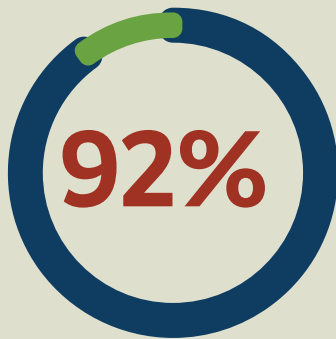


Park and recreation professionals agree that their agency:

- **Emphasizes positive communication**, teamwork, respect and leadership in youth sports activities
- **Encourages youth** to sample different sports and other forms of physical activity
- **Tailors its youth sports programming** to different age groups



of park and recreation professionals agree that they and their peers can contribute to a **fair and just future** for youth sports by identifying inequities in access to organized sports offerings



of park and recreation agencies charge registration fees for all of their youth sports offerings

- 2 in 3 agencies offer reduced or discounted fees for lower income residents

Insufficient resources and uneven competition hamper parks and recreation in delivering youth sports activities to a community, including:

- Difficulty in recruiting enough volunteer coaches
- Competition with travel sports leagues
- Insufficient sports fields and courts



Key Findings

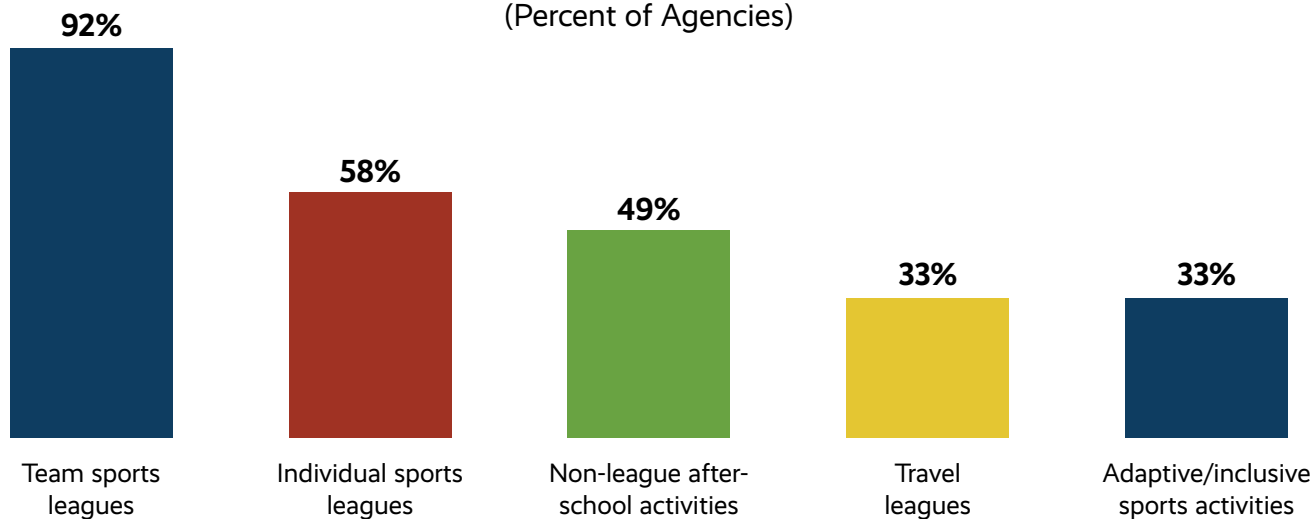
Youth Sports Offerings and Partnerships for Delivery

Park and recreation agencies provide youth sports offerings through a wide variety of leagues and activities. Nine out of 10 agencies (92 percent) include team sports leagues as a part of their youth sports offerings. Fifty-eight percent of agencies have individual leagues for youth to engage in such sports as tennis,

track and field, and wrestling, while half of all agencies provides non-league sports opportunities as part of their after-school activities. A third of park and recreation agencies offers adaptive/inclusive sports activities; the same share of agencies has travel leagues as part of their youth sports portfolios.

Park and Recreation Agencies Offer a Wide Variety of Youth Sports Opportunities

(Percent of Agencies)

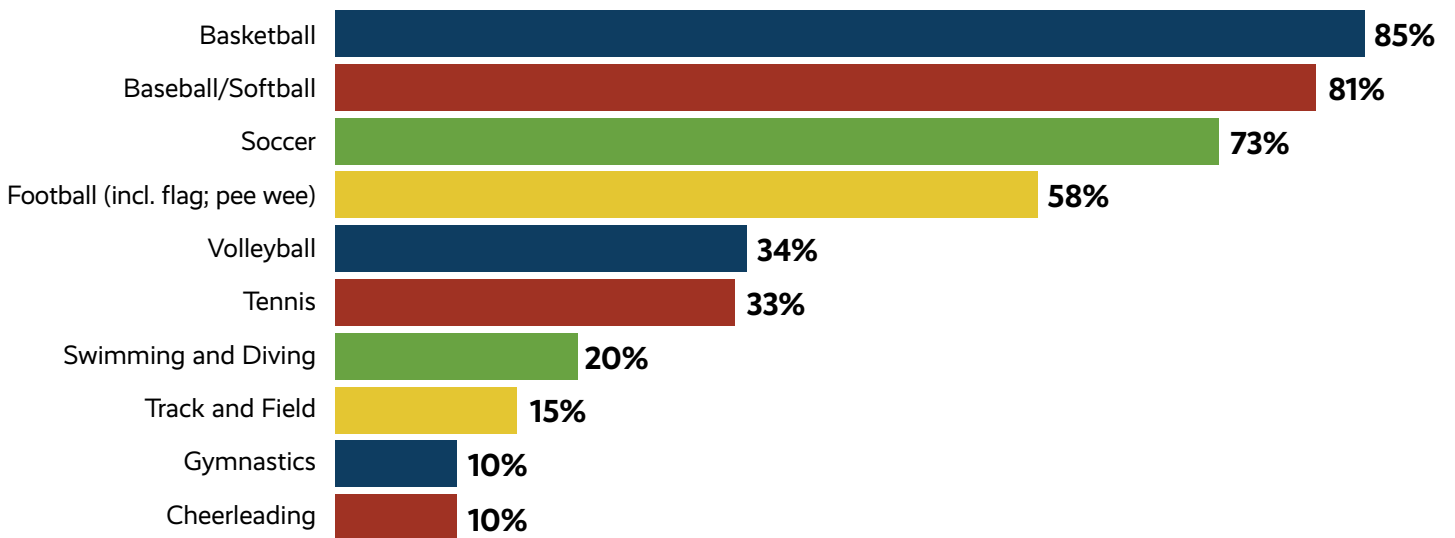


Tennis players pose for a picture at Kids' Night at Cooper Tennis Complex with the Springfield Lasers World TeamTennis Team in Springfield, Missouri.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KARA REMINGTON

Park and Recreation Agencies Offer a Diverse Set of Youth Sports Options

(Percent of Agencies Indicating Sport Is Among Their Top Five Most Popular Among Youth)



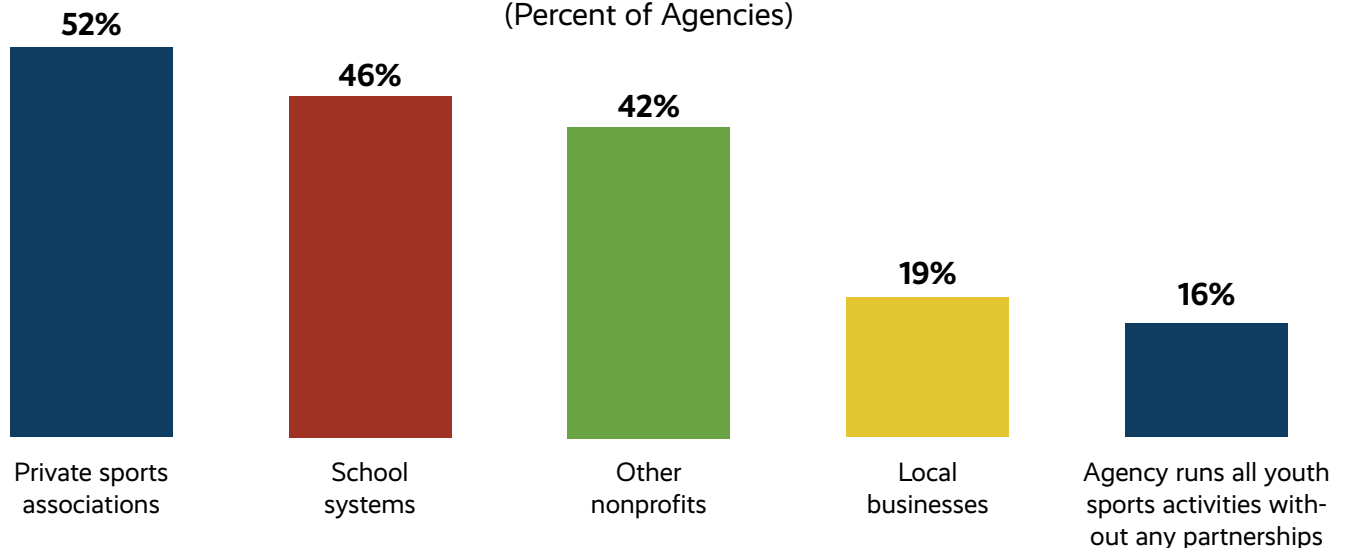
Park and recreation agencies offer a wide variety of youth sports options, including a mix of team and individual sport activities. The five most popular sports offered in terms of participation are all team sports. They include basketball (85 percent of survey respondents indicate that basketball is among the five most popular sports offered), baseball/softball (81 percent), soccer (73 percent), football — including flag and pee wee (58 percent) — and volleyball (34 percent). Other sports that at least 10 percent of survey respondents indicate are among their most popular sports include:

- Tennis (33 percent)
- Swimming and Diving (20 percent)
- Track and Field (15 percent)
- Gymnastics (10 percent)
- Cheerleading (10 percent)

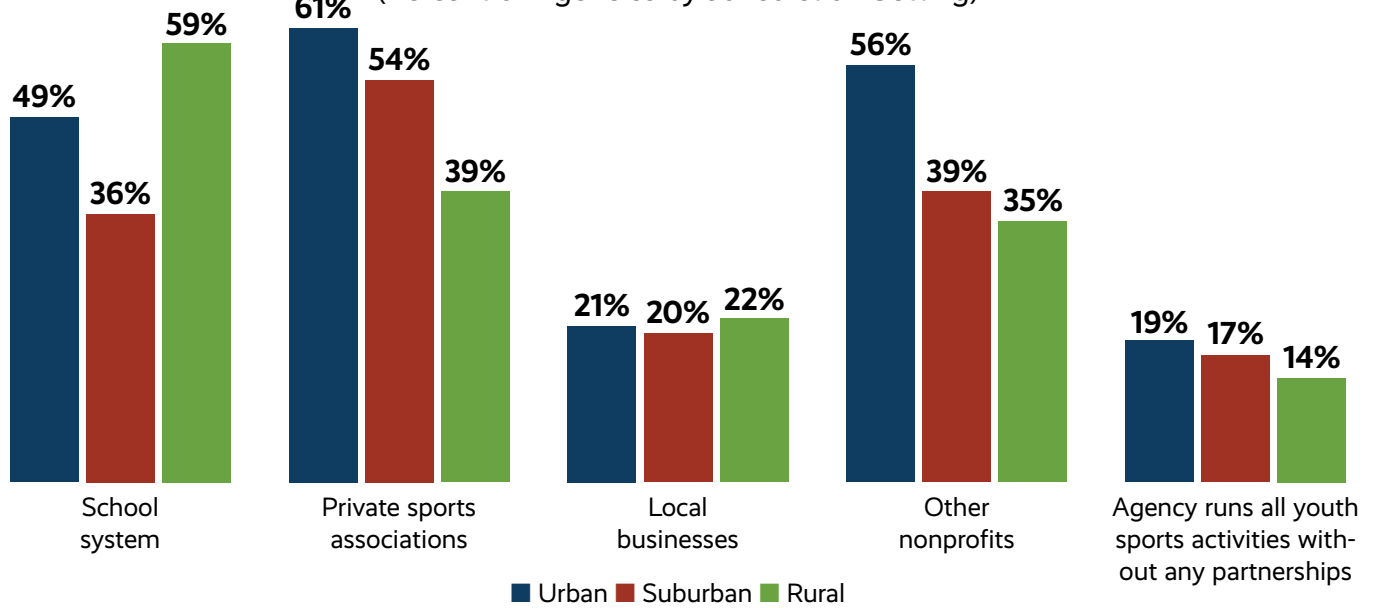
Relatively few park and recreation agencies “go it alone” when delivering sports opportunities for their communities’ youth. Instead, they develop and nurture partnerships with third parties; such partnerships are critical to an agency’s ability to offer a robust set of sports opportunities.

Five in Six Park and Recreation Agencies Work with Partners to Deliver Youth Sports Activities

(Percent of Agencies)



Park and Recreation Partners Providing Youth Sports Vary by Agency Locale (Percent of Agencies by Jurisdiction Setting)



Five in six park and recreation agencies work with partners to deliver youth sports activities. The most common third parties with which parks and recreation collaborate in the delivery of youth sports are private sports associations (cited by 52 percent of respondents), school systems (46 percent) and nonprofit organizations (42 percent). Rural

agencies are most likely to partner with schools (59 percent), while suburban park and recreation agencies are far less likely to do so (36 percent). Conversely, urban park and recreation agencies have developed partnerships most frequently with private sports associations (61 percent) and nonprofits (56 percent).

Kids play broom ball at Lowell Park in Waukesha, Wisconsin.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM KLROVSKY

The structure of park and recreation youth sports partnerships can vary significantly. Nearly three in five agencies host their partners' youth sports activities at their facilities, while 54 percent of agencies partner with other organizations for activities taking place at their facilities. Just over a third of agencies manage activities that take place at their partners' facilities.

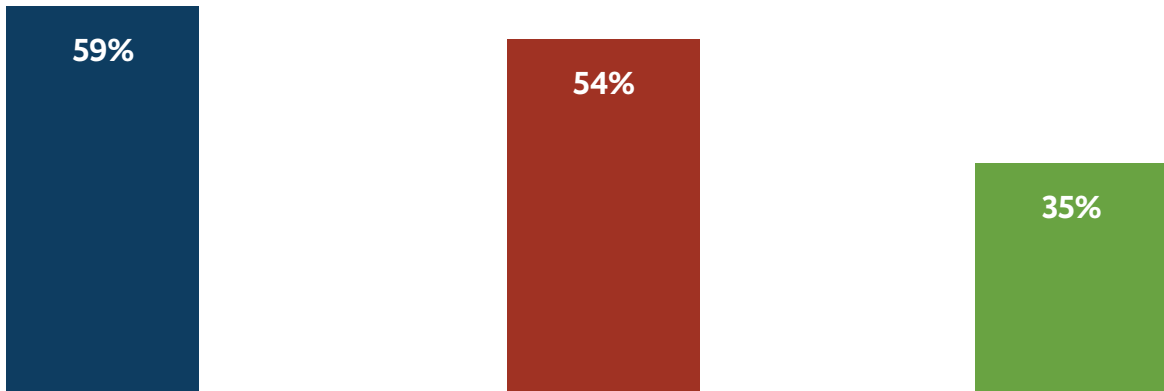
While urban park and recreation agencies most often host activities at their own facilities, 71 percent co-manage these offerings with another organization.

While urban park and recreation agencies most often host activities at their own facilities, 71 percent co-manage these offerings with another organization. In comparison, suburban agencies most often host activities at their own park and recreation facilities, but those offerings are delivered solely by another organization (73 percent). Many rural agencies must depend on a network of collaborators to deliver youth sports opportunities and, in particular, may lack access to quality park facilities for youth sports programming. Subsequently, rural agencies frequently find themselves managing youth sports offerings that are hosted at another organization's facility.

Youth soccer players run through a post-game parent tunnel at Lovejoy Soccer Complex in Clayton County, Georgia.



Parks and Recreation Cultivates Partnerships to Provide Youth Sports Activities
(Percent of Agencies)



Activities take place at the agency's facilities, but another organization solely manages the program

Activities take place at the agency's facilities, but the agency partners with another organization

The agency manages the program, but the activities take place at another organization's facilities

Delivery of Youth Sports

Park and recreation professionals and their agencies deliver sports options focused on youth, provide opportunities that are close to home, and emphasize the long-term development of children into healthy and active adults.

Centering sports around youth needs

Studies demonstrate that youth are more likely to remain engaged in sports activities if they have the option to participate in sports that interest them the most. In addition, they are most likely to get what they want from sports activities *when youth themselves play a role in the design of the activities.*

Similarly, youth engaged in unstructured play may develop skills that do not necessarily result from strictly organized sports. Having multiple choices allows children and teenagers to learn about new activities, increasing the likelihood of finding a sport that they enjoy. Connecting children and teen-

Three-quarters of park and recreation professionals agree that their agencies encourage youth to sample different sports and other forms of physical activity

agers to favorite sports activities promotes greater and more sustained physical activity and a lifelong love for participating in sports.

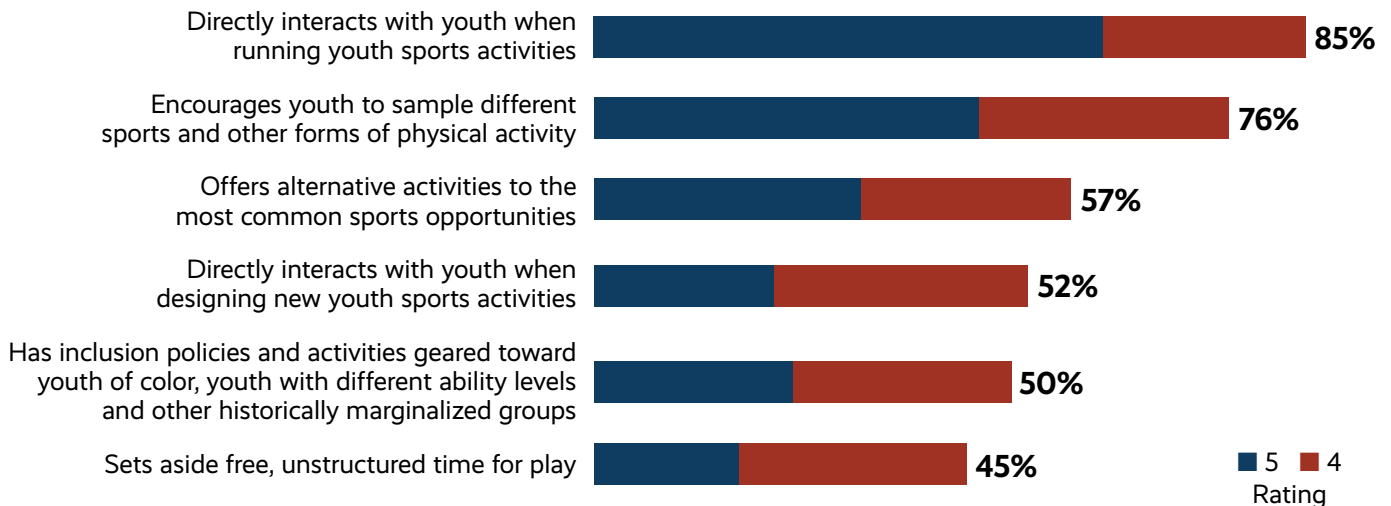
Many park and recreation professionals note that their agencies could make a greater effort to ensure their programming is responsive to the needs of youth. For example, while



Youth play baseball during sunset at Winfrey Point in Dallas, Texas.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN MINNA

Park and Recreation Agencies Center Sports Offerings Around Youth Needs (Percent of Respondents Rating a “4” or “5” on a Five-Point Scale for Their Level of Agreement with Statements on Their Agencies’ Youth Sports Offerings)





Campers dance, tumble and dress up at Princess Dance Camp, held each summer at Greenville (North Carolina) Recreation and Parks' Jaycee Park Center for Arts and Crafts.

Providing opportunities close to home

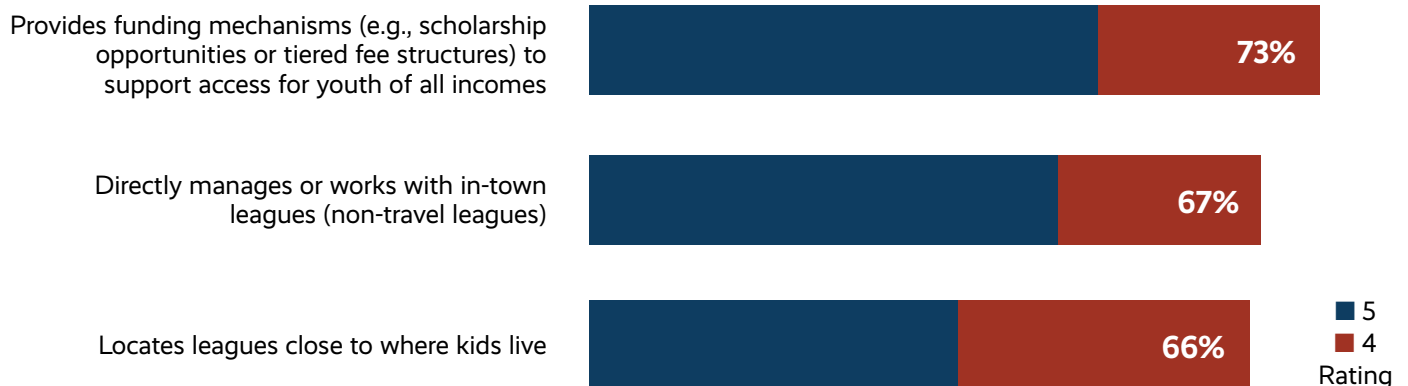
Park and recreation agencies provide essential services and facilities for people in all communities across the country, including fields, courts and other infrastructure for youth sports programming. Agencies often supplement their assets with those offered by schools and other municipal agencies; this expands their agencies' offerings and closes service gaps for those living in underserved areas.

However, not all agencies succeed at closing gaps in youth sports opportunities. For example, a third of park and recreation professionals indicates that their agencies are not always successful in locating leagues close to where kids live. This suggests that a significant number of youth who do not live in proximity to sports activities faces a persistent barrier in accessing such opportunities — a situation aggravated in areas with inadequate public transportation. The result is reduced participation rates in youth sports among children living in lower income households.

85 percent of survey respondents agree that their agencies interact directly with youth when running their youth sports activities, only half of respondents concur that their agencies do so *when designing new youth sports activities*. Similarly, while three-quarters of park and recreation professionals agree that their agencies encourage youth to sample different sports and other forms of physical activity, only 45 percent concur that their agencies set aside free, unstructured time in their programming for play. Finally, 57 percent of survey respondents agree that their agencies offer alternative activities to the most common sports — basketball, football, baseball/softball. A lack of diversity in youth sports offerings suggests opportunities exist to engage youth with different interests or abilities.

Ninety-four percent of park and recreation professionals agree that their agency tailors its youth sports programming to different age groups

Park and Recreation Agencies Provide Youth Sports Opportunities Close to Home (Percent of Respondents Rating a "4" or "5" on a Five-Point Scale for Their Level of Agreement with Statements on Their Agencies' Youth Sports Offerings)



Many park and recreation agencies directly manage or work with in-town, non-travel leagues that help reduce the costs associated with youth sports and promote participation among all youth. In-town leagues allow more kids to participate in sports while leaving room for other activities children may enjoy. Sixty-seven percent of survey respondents agree that their agencies are managing or working with in-town leagues.

Laying the foundation for an active future

By participating in sports, children can gain a foundation for physical and mental well-being that endures into and throughout their adult years, with proven benefits in work-life, relationships and health. Ninety-four percent of park and recreation professionals agree that their agency tailors its youth sports programming to different age groups, emphasizing the importance of sports in supporting physical literacy and development. An example is sports opportunities for young children that focus on fine motor skills while developing sports-specific skills for these children as they become older.

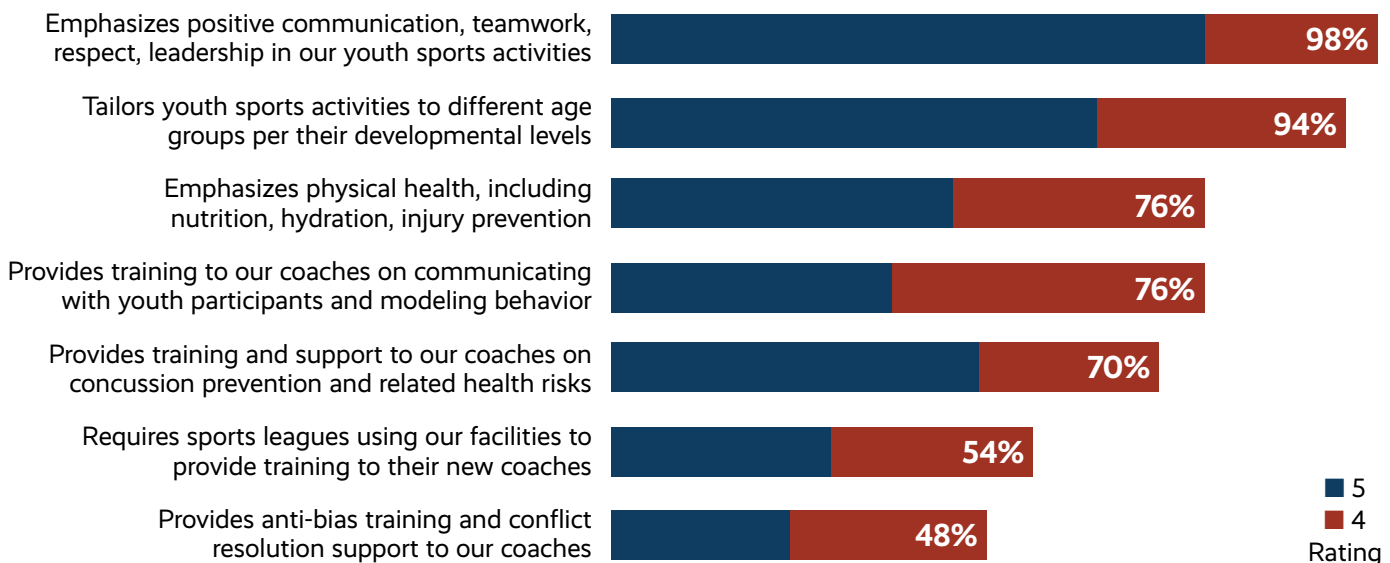
Youth sports also support socioemotional development. Sports provide youth with opportunities to create friendships, build social skills and learn how to negotiate. Each one of these skills benefits children and teenagers in everyday situations outside of sports. Virtually all survey respondents (98 percent) concur that their agencies' youth sports programming emphasizes positive communication, teamwork, respect and leadership.



A child swings a bat during T-ball at Veterans' Memorial Pratte Field in Boulder City, Nevada.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF BOULDER CITY

Park and Recreation Youth Sports Activities Are an Investment in the Future (Percent of Respondents Rating a "4" or "5" on a Five-Point Scale for Their Level of Agreement with Statements on Their Agencies' Youth Sports Offerings)



Park and recreation professionals design their agencies' youth sports programming to emphasize health and wellness. For example, three out of four park and recreation professionals agree that their agencies' youth sports programs emphasize physical health, including nutrition, hydration and injury prevention. The remaining share of respondents' views may sig-

nal an opportunity for more agencies to ensure that youth sports programming focuses on an individual's ability to have an active and healthy life beyond youth sports.

70 percent of survey respondents concur that their agencies provide training and support for coaches in the prevention of concussions and related health risks

While agencies tailor their youth sports activities to the developmental needs of children, the level of investment agencies make in training coaches is mixed. For instance, three out of four park and recreation professionals agree that their agencies provide training for coaches in communicating with youth participants and modeling positive behavior. Similarly, 70 percent of survey respondents concur that their agencies provide training and support for coaches in the prevention of concussions and related health risks. In contrast, less than half of survey respondents agree that their agencies provide anti-bias training and conflict resolution support for coaches, while slightly more than half concur that the sports leagues using park and recreation facilities provide sufficient training for their coaches.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLISON KOGER

All ages and abilities joined the U.S. Paralympians Josh Pauls and Steve Cash, as well as members of DASA Blues sled hockey team for a free sled hockey event at Brentwood Ice Rink in Brentwood, Missouri.

Fees and Registration

Registration fees are a major source of funding for park and recreation agency youth sports offerings. More than nine in 10 agencies rely on registration fees to fund their youth sports offerings. Tax support is also a critical funding source for youth sports offerings — 40 percent of park and recreation agencies use general fund tax support to finance their youth sports offerings while six percent of agencies have access to dedicated or special tax/levies to support these activities.

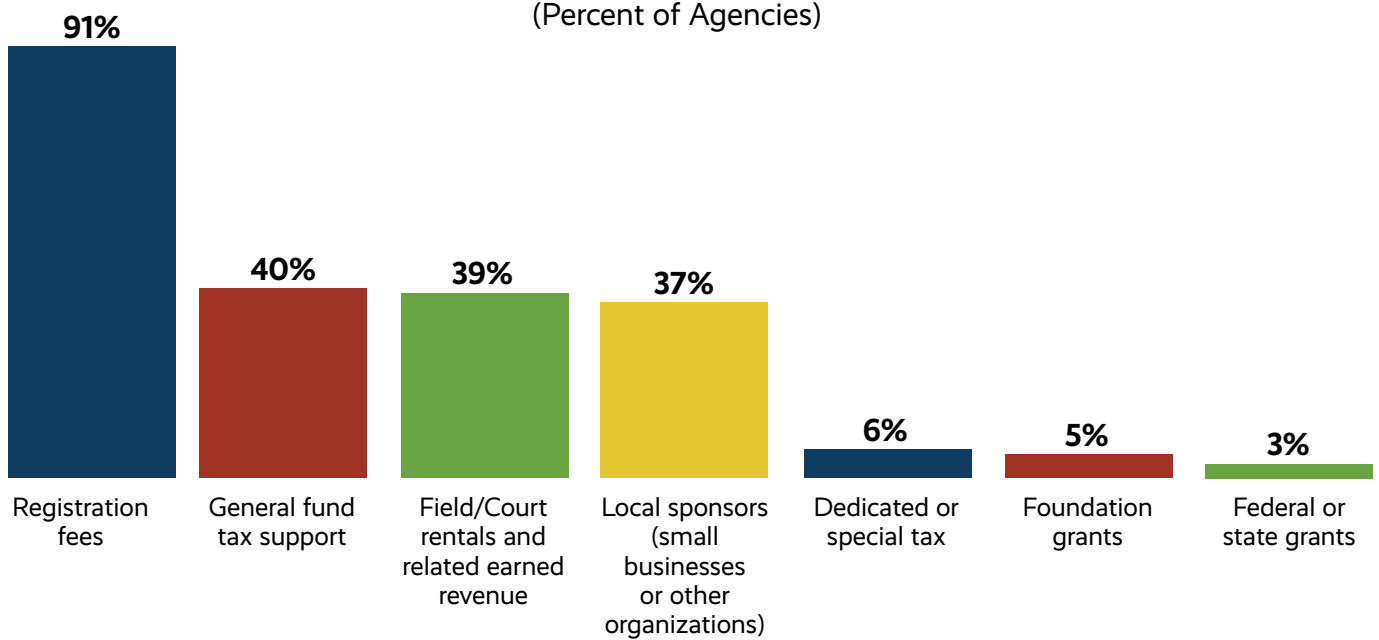
Some agencies also support their youth sports offerings by generating non-registration fee revenues. For example:

- Field/Court rentals (cited by 39 percent of respondents)
- Local sponsors (e.g., small business) (37 percent)

In addition, a relatively small percentage of park and recreation agencies support their youth sports activities from grants:

- Foundation grants (five percent)
- Federal or state grants (three percent)

Registration Fees and Tax-Support Provide the Main Revenue Sources for Youth Sports Activities (Percent of Agencies)



Durango (Colorado) Parks and Recreation hosts a youth soccer program at Smith Sports Complex



PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT BRADLEY

An overwhelming majority of park and recreation agencies charges registration fees for all of their youth sports offerings (92 percent). Fee requirements are nearly universal among agencies regardless of locale.

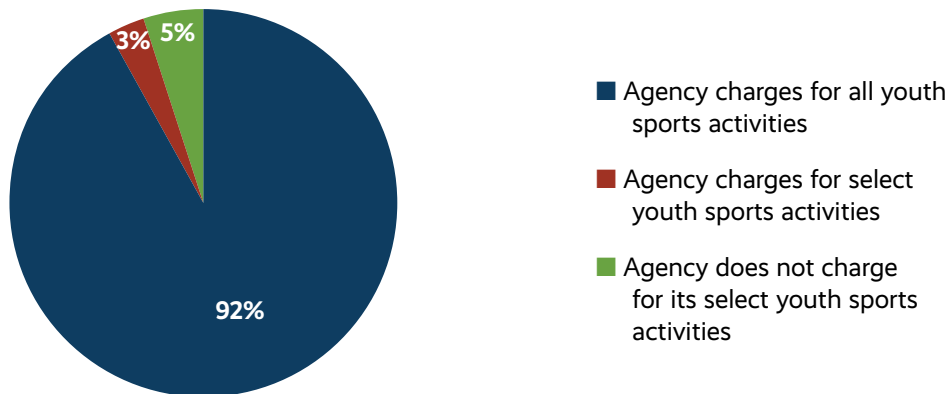
Fees are a critical part of a park and recreation agency's cost recovery and operating budget. At the same time, registration fees can be barriers that hamper access to youth sports for many lower income residents. One method that agencies use to expand access is offering reduced fees or discounts to lower income residents. Two in three agencies offer reduced or discounted fees for lower income residents. Reduced fees are most commonly offered by urban agencies (61 percent) and rural agencies (56 percent). In comparison, only 38 percent of suburban agencies offer reduced fees to lower income residents for their youth sports activities.



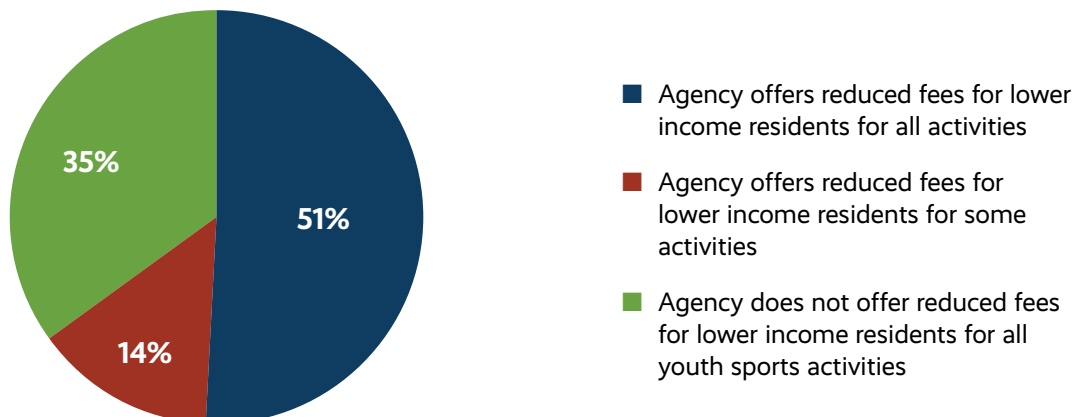
WinnebagoLand BMX at Sunnyview Expo Center was voted best track in Wisconsin five years in a row, which allowed it to host the state meet where riders of all ages compete.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KEVIN KEIMNITZ

Vast Majority of Park and Recreation Agencies Requires a Registration Fee to Participate in Youth Sports Activities (Percentage Distribution)



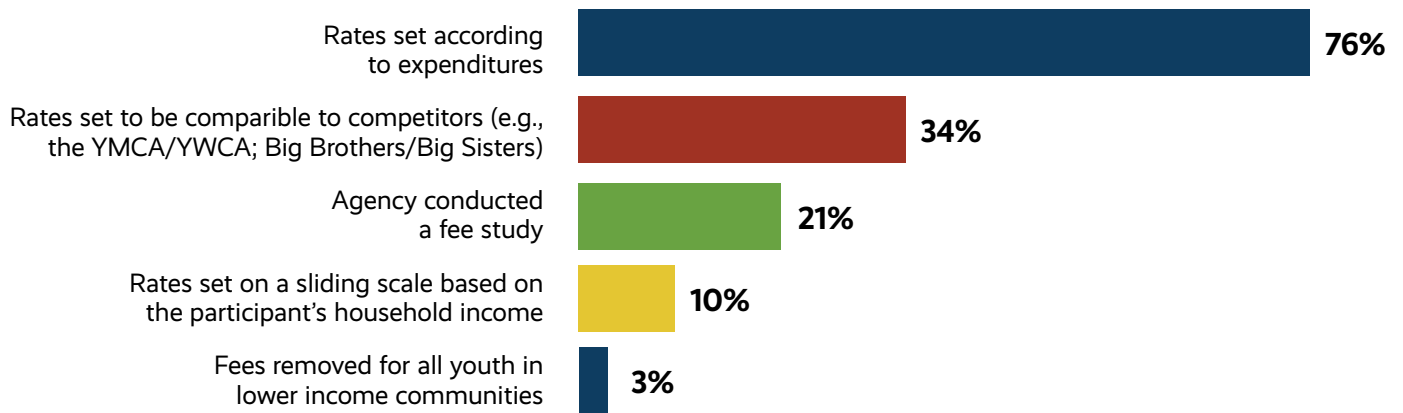
Nearly Two in Three Park and Recreation Agencies Offer Reduced Fees to Lower Income Residents (Percentage Distribution)



Park and recreation agencies set registration fees based on a mix of costs and the competitive market. Three-quarters of park and recreation agencies base their youth sports registration fees primarily on expenditures. One-third of agencies considers the rates charged by their competitors — including those of the YMCA/YWCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters and other private providers — when setting rates for their youth sports offerings. Twenty-one percent of survey respondents report their agencies conduct studies that scan the marketplace and consider their expenditures when setting their fee structure.

As necessary as they may be to cover costs, participation fees often present a formidable barrier that prevents lower income families from enjoying the benefits of youth sports. An inability to pay registration fees can have a lasting impact on youth. Ten percent of survey respondents indicate that their agencies' youth sports fees are on a sliding scale based on the participant's household income. Some agencies go a step further by removing all fees for lower income residents (three percent).

Agency Expenditures Typically Determine Youth Sports Activities Participant Fees (Percent of Agencies)



A Glenview (Illinois) youth basketball league participant drives for a layup.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRIS MIRANDA

Equitable Access to Youth Sports

Because their agencies serve large cities, small towns and communities of all sizes across the nation, park and recreation professionals are in a unique position to ensure fair and just access to youth sports. It is the mission of parks and recreation to advance the health of all members of a community. One way to do this is by ensuring youth sports opportunities are accessible to all.

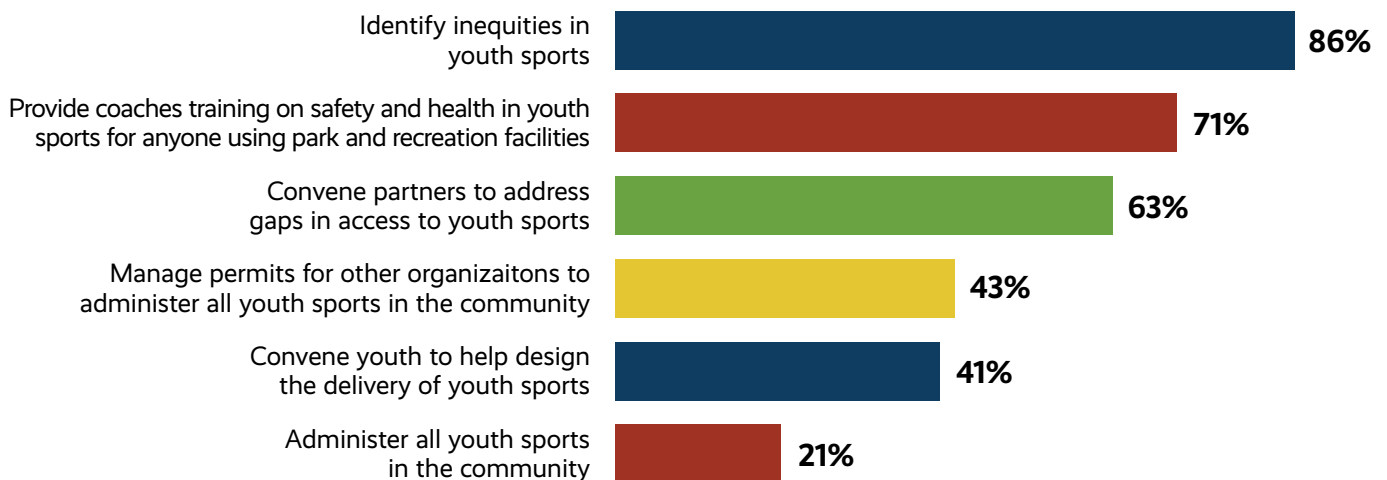
Eighty-six percent of park and recreation professionals agree that they and their peers can contribute to a fair and just future for youth sports by identifying inequities in access to these activities. Additional ways in which park and recreation professionals see part of their role to ensure equitable access to youth sports are:

- Providing coach training on safety and health for anyone using park and recreation facilities (cited by 71 percent of respondents)
- Convening partners to address access gaps in youth sports (63 percent)
- Managing permits for other organizations administering youth sports in the community (43 percent)
- Convening youth to help design the delivery of youth sports (41 percent)
- Administering all youth sports in the community (21 percent)

Some of these possible roles are within the reach of park and recreation professionals and their agencies, such as providing coaches training on both safety and health in youth sports. Others may be less feasible or require extensive partnerships, such as administering all youth sports in the community.



Park and Recreation Professionals Agree that They Play a Role in Ensuring Fair and Just Access to Youth Sports (Percent of Respondents)



Challenges in Youth Sports Administration

Nine in 10 park and recreation professionals report that their agencies face challenges that hamper their mission to deliver youth sports activities to all community members. A number of these challenges are in the form of insufficient resources. For example, 59 percent of survey respondents report difficulty in recruiting enough volunteer coaches. Forty-five percent of survey respondents indicate their agencies lack a sufficient number of sports fields and courts to meet the youth sports needs in their communities. Nineteen percent of survey respondents report that their agencies need more administrative staff or resources, while 14 percent of agencies do not have sufficient funding to ensure fair and just access to high-quality youth sports.

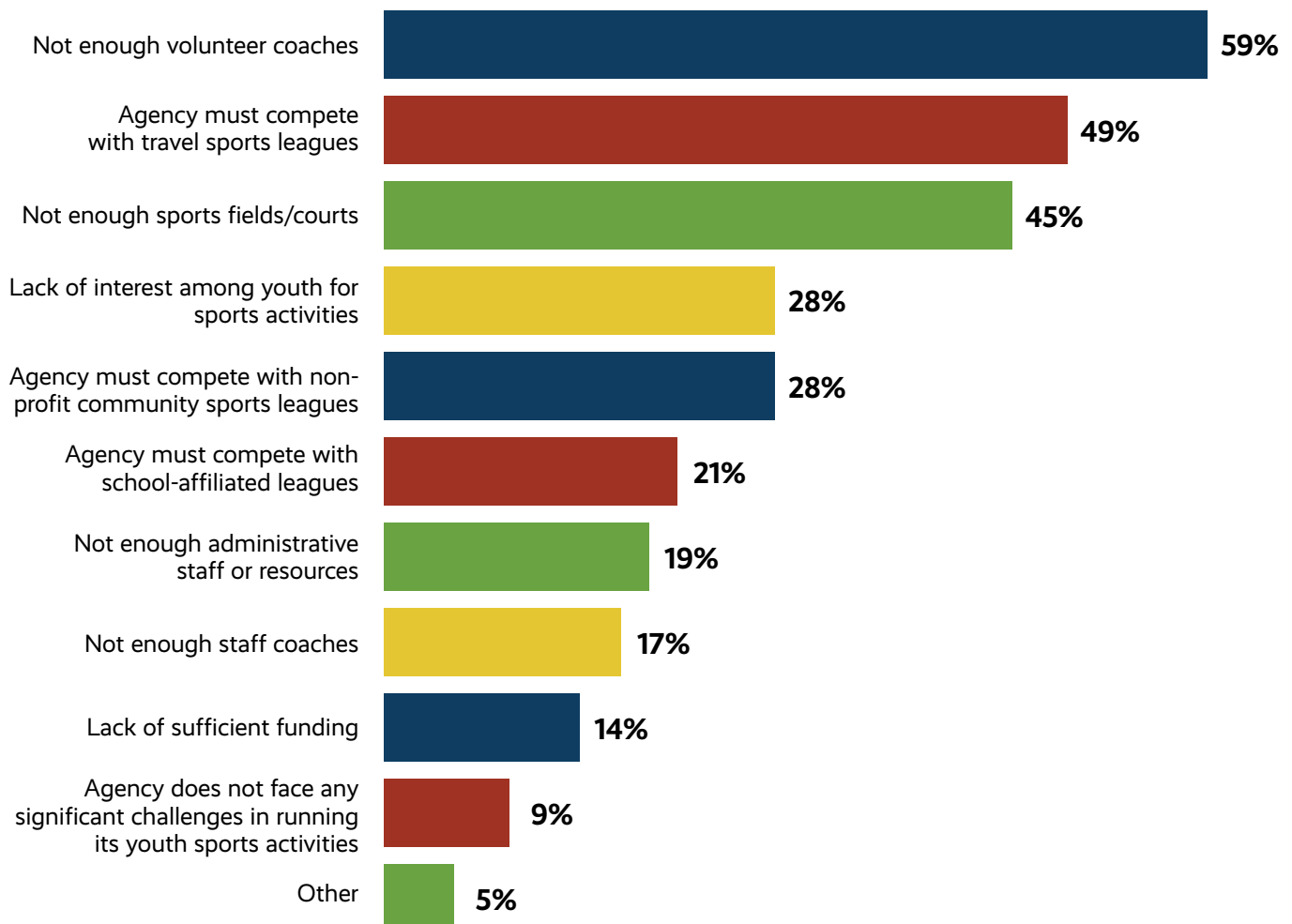
Competition is another challenge faced by many agencies. Park and recreation agencies aim to deliver services to all members of the community, regardless of ability or income. At the same time,

private-sector sports leagues have the option to target who to serve (e.g., by location and ability to pay registration fees). Many park and recreation agencies are unable to compete in such a marketplace and, as a result, are unable to generate sufficient revenues to deliver on their mission to serve all members of the community. Among the competitors park and recreation agencies face are:

- Private travel sports leagues (cited by 49 percent of respondents)
- Nonprofit community leagues (28 percent)
- School-affiliated leagues (21 percent)

Beyond resource constraints and competition, the other significant threat to youth sports is level of interest. Twenty-eight percent of park and recreation professionals report that a lack of interest among their communities' youth for sports activities is hampering their agencies' offerings.

Insufficient Funding and Uneven Competition Hamper Parks and Recreation in Delivering Youth Sports Activities to the Community (Percent of Agencies)



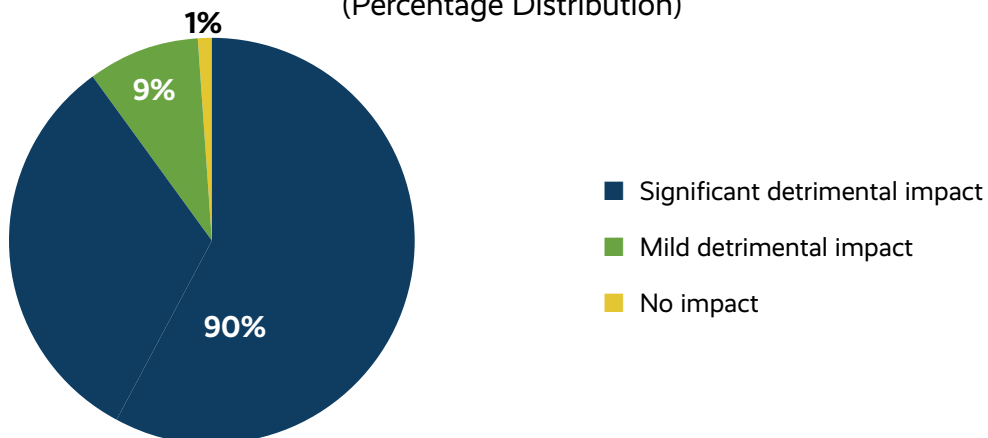


Children in summer camp at St. Andrews Recreation Center in Los Angeles, California, participate in a wheelchair tennis demonstration.

As it has with nearly every facet of life, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic downturn have weighed heavily on park and recreation agencies and, in particular, their youth sports activities. Ninety percent of park and recreation professionals report that the pandemic negatively impacted their agencies' youth sports programming during the sum-

mer and fall of 2020. Agencies have faced a wide spectrum of challenges resulting from the pandemic, including budget cuts; restrictions on when, where and how groups of people can congregate; and the need to train staff and volunteers on safe-distancing practices.

COVID-19 Has Detrimentally Impacted Youth Sports Programs at Nine in Ten Park and Recreation Agencies (Percentage Distribution)



Conclusion



PHOTO COURTESY OF HIALEAH PARKS AND RECREATION

Children ages 6 to 14 participate in the Turkey Trot Race, an annual race involving local schools and parks in Hialeah, Florida.

Park and recreation professionals and their agencies play a critical role in providing or facilitating youth sports opportunities across the country. Agencies support many popular team and individual sports activities, often working in conjunction with partners to meet the needs and interests of youth in their communities.

This report’s findings highlight the fact that park and recreation agencies not only are simply providing opportunities for sports, but also are contributing to the development of youth into healthy, active adults. By centering sports programming around youth’s needs and laying a foundation for long-term participation, park and recreation agencies are critical to sustained engagement in sports and the long-term health of our society.

Despite their key role in youth sports delivery, agencies face many challenges in delivering on this mission. Some of the hurdles in youth sports delivery result from resource capacity and budgetary constraints; others result from persistent barriers, such as participation fees that limit lower income families from being able to reap the benefits of youth sports.

The COVID-19 pandemic puts the immediate future of youth sports in a tenuous position, as physical distancing requirements, budget shortfalls and changing demand hamper the ability for park and recreation agencies to deliver these critical services. A mix of greater support — in the form of sustainable governmental tax support and the nurturing of partnerships — will ensure that every member of our communities gain the many benefits of youth sports.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Kevin Roth, Gina Mullins-Cohen, Vitisia Paynich, Roxanne Sutton, Melissa May, Lauren Redmore, Lindsay Hogeboom, Jennifer Fulcher-Nguyen, Rachel Banner, Allison Colman, Kevin Brady, Kim Mabon and Kate Anderson for making this report possible. Also, thank you to those who contributed the photos included throughout.



NRPA National Recreation
and Park Association

Because everyone deserves a great park

**22377 Belmont Ridge Road
Ashburn, VA 20148-4501**

800.626.NRPA (6772) | nrpa.org