



Executive Summary

The National Youth Sports Strategy



Defining the Challenge

The benefits for youth who engage in regular physical activity are clear: they have improved bone health, weight status, cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness, cardiometabolic health, and cognitive function and a reduced risk of depression.¹ Playing sports can provide additional benefits, including developing competence, confidence, and self-esteem; reducing risk of suicide and suicidal thoughts and tendencies; and improving life skills, such as goal setting, time management, and work ethic.²⁻⁷ Sports participation also provides youth with the opportunity to develop social and interpersonal skills, such as teamwork, leadership, and relationship building, and enables youth to benefit from the communal aspect of team sports.^{3,4}

Sports can facilitate the development of physical literacy, which is the ability to move with competence and confidence in a variety of physical activities in multiple environments that benefit the healthy development of the whole person.^{8,9} Sports encompass many of the basic movement skills that contribute to physical literacy, including running, balancing, hopping, skipping, jumping, dodging, gliding, falling, lifting, swimming, kicking, throwing, and catching. Additionally, sport sampling, or trying out a variety of different sports and physical activities rather than focusing exclusively on one sport, can help develop physical literacy.



With all of these benefits, it is striking that only 20 percent of adolescents meet the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* (getting at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity each day).¹⁰ Only 54 percent of youth participated in a sports team in 2017,¹¹ so there is a clear opportunity to support youth getting more physical activity through sports. Additionally, there are disparities in participation: girls, racial and ethnic minorities, youth from households of low socioeconomic status, youth living in rural areas, and youth with disabilities are less likely to be physically active and play sports.^{2,10,12} And they are disproportionately affected by barriers to youth sports, including cost, access, and time, among others. Therefore, the *National Youth Sports Strategy* (NYSS), developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), emphasizes underserved populations and highlights strategies that can facilitate participation despite these barriers. The NYSS is an important first step to reorient U.S. youth sports culture around a shared vision: that one day all youth will have the opportunity, motivation, and access to play sports, regardless of their race, ethnicity, sex, ability, or ZIP code.

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Developing a Strategy

Presidential Executive Order 13824 tasked the HHS Secretary with developing a youth sports strategy. The executive order outlined four key pillars that form the foundation and focus areas of the NYSS:

1. Increase awareness of the benefits of participation in sports and regular physical activity, as well as the importance of good nutrition.
2. Promote private- and public-sector strategies to increase participation in sports, encourage regular physical activity, and improve nutrition.
3. Develop metrics that gauge youth sports participation and physical activity to inform efforts that will improve participation in sports and regular physical activity among young Americans.
4. Establish a national and local strategy to recruit volunteers who will encourage and support youth participation in sports and regular physical activity, through coaching, mentoring, teaching, or administering athletic and nutritional programs.

Youth sports is measured in a variety of ways. No single system, Federal or non-Federal, measures all aspects of sports participation, including who is participating (e.g., sex, race, ethnicity, age); frequency of participation; number of sports teams; time spent playing sports; type(s) of sports; and location of participation (e.g., school, recreational facility). The NYSS describes several steps to better align data collection and dissemination to understand participation in and access to youth sports. Additionally, there is no standard definition of sports used in national surveys. Therefore, the NYSS defines sports as

a form of physical activity that, through recreational or competitive participation, aims to develop or maintain skills, fitness, mental well-being, and social-emotional health. While sports can be played by individuals of nearly all ages, the NYSS focuses on children and adolescents, ages 6 to 17.

The target audience for the NYSS is policymakers and key decision makers in youth sports. However, the themes and strategies are more far-reaching. Many Americans have engaged with youth sports in some capacity: by playing as a child, parenting a young athlete, coaching a team, or watching a sporting event. Therefore, we all have the opportunity and responsibility to make youth sports a positive experience. This includes positive sideline behavior and role modeling, supporting and respecting coaches and sporting officials,

celebrating effort over achievement, and keeping the emphasis on fun and enjoyment. Organizations and communities can embrace a sports-for-all mentality and offer programs that are safe, fun, inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and accessible to all youth. They can also support coaches by providing training and consider partnerships to share resources and funding. Policies can be enacted to help ensure the safety of youth and to increase access, such as by authorizing background checks or by supporting shared use agreements.

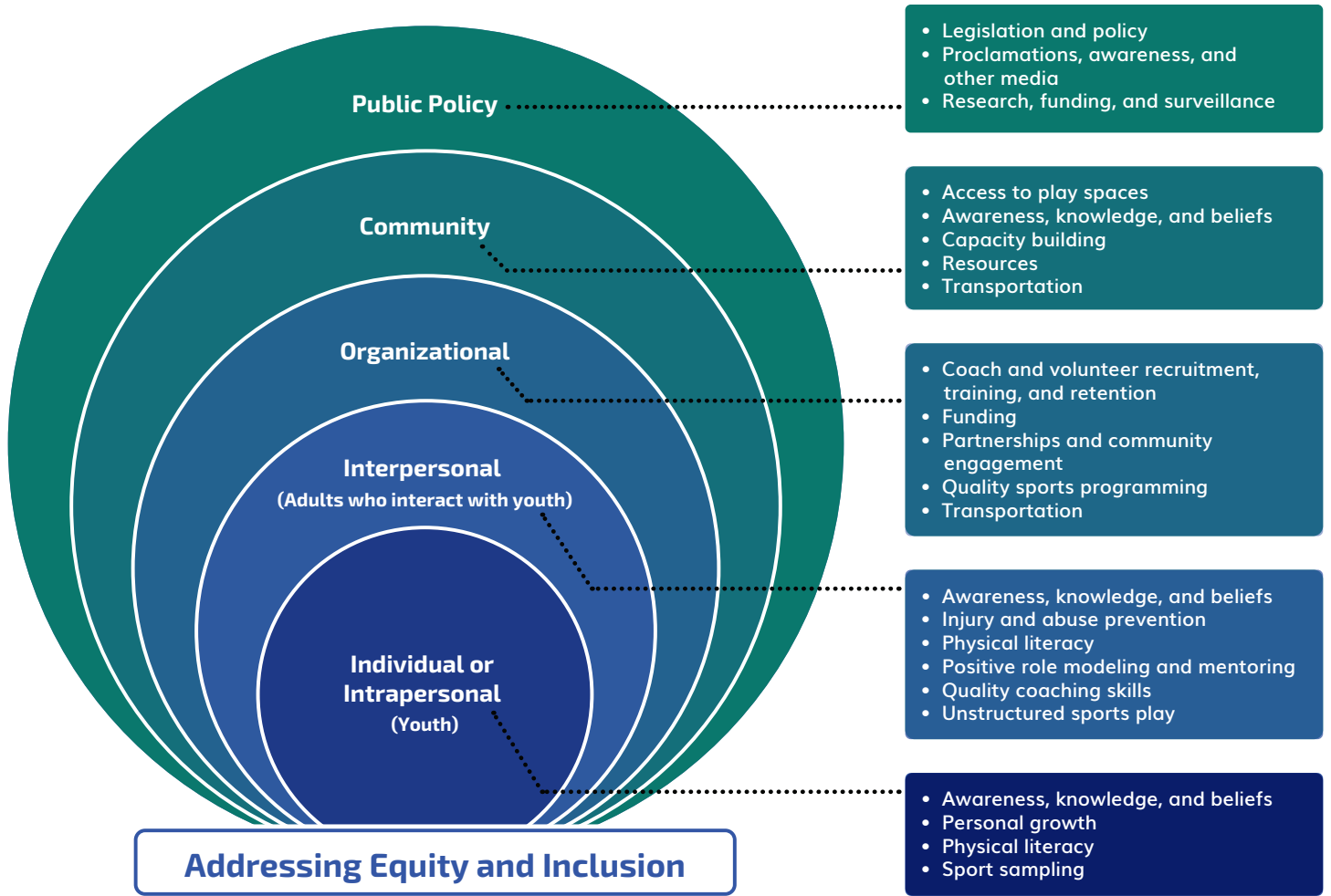
The focus of the NYSS is on youth sports in the United States, but much can be learned from other countries that emphasize maximizing youth participation and teaching life skills through sports, rather than driving youth toward elite competition.

Organizing the Plan of Action

The NYSS operationalizes a framework based on the social-ecological model, which summarizes key factors that influence youth sports participation at multiple levels (Figure A). Best practices were gathered through a public listening session, public comments, a literature review, and an environmental scan. The strategies were then organized into opportunities and action items for each level of the framework, providing steps for youth, adults, organizations, communities, and local, state, tribal, and Federal governments to improve the youth sports landscape in the United States.



Figure A. Framework for Understanding Youth Sports Participation



Taking Action: How We All Can Change the Youth Sports Landscape

Governmental and nongovernmental organizations at the national, regional, and local levels have many opportunities to take action to shift the culture of youth sports and to embrace and acknowledge that all American youth should have the opportunity to play sports. At HHS, our goal is to get as many youth as possible moving and meeting the Physical Activity Guidelines and to ensure that 100 percent of American youth have the opportunity to experience the benefits of playing sports. We are taking the first step by developing the NYSS, and we encourage others to take action as well. Together, we can create a culture in which sports are safe, fun, inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and accessible for all American youth.

Opportunities and Action Items for the Individual or Intrapersonal Level

Youth can:

Learn about the benefits of playing sports, as well as opportunities to play.

Ask parents or caregivers to sign them up for sports teams or activities.

Play a variety of sports to build physical literacy (the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life) and find enjoyable activities.



Opportunities and Action Items for the Interpersonal Level

Adults can:

Make having fun a primary focus of sports activities.

Encourage sport sampling (playing more than one sport throughout the year).

Promote physical literacy (the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life) as a foundation for sports programs.

Model good sporting behavior by interacting with other parents or caregivers, coaches, officials, and volunteers in a positive manner.

Set a positive example by being physically active, participating in sports, or playing sports with youth.

Sign up as a coach, official, or volunteer in a local youth sports program.

Participate in training or certification programs to acquire, develop, and maintain skills for engaging with youth sports participants.

Emphasize skill development over competition and performance outcomes.

Engage youth in the decision-making process.

Adapt or modify sports activities and ensure access to equipment that meets the needs of youth of all abilities.

Structure practices and games to provide all participants with more time engaged in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity to meet the Physical Activity Guidelines.

Establish and enforce appropriate safety practices and protocols to reduce the risk of injury, and ensure that appropriate safety equipment is accessible and used correctly.

Create environments that support unstructured sports play.

Opportunities and Action Items for the Organizational Level

Organizations can:

Make having fun a primary focus of sports programs.

Embrace a sports-for-all mentality and offer programs that are safe, fun, inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and accessible to all youth.

Promote the benefits of and access to sports opportunities to youth and their families.

Recruit coaches who reflect the demographics of the community.

Facilitate and support individuals who wish to become a coach, official, or volunteer, such as by using an online platform to recruit, register, train, and schedule shifts as well as to provide incentives.

Require and provide background checks for coaches, officials, and volunteers.

Require and provide access to training or certification programs for coaches, officials, and volunteers.

Provide adequate equipment, training, and other necessary resources to adapt or modify sports activities to meet the needs of youth of all abilities.

Develop partnerships across a variety of sectors, including business, community recreation, education, faith-based, government, health care, media, public health, sports, and technology.

Partner with academic institutions or public health organizations to evaluate programs.

Include information about sports programs in hospital community needs assessments.

Implement the principles of the American Development Model within youth sports programs.

Incorporate elements of positive youth development in youth sports programs.

Promote physical literacy (the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life) as a foundation for sports programs.

Encourage sport sampling (playing more than one sport throughout the year).

Structure practices and games to provide all participants with more time engaged in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity to meet the Physical Activity Guidelines.

Establish and enforce appropriate safety practices and protocols to reduce the risk of injury, and ensure that appropriate safety equipment is accessible and used correctly.

Consider the location of sports programs and transportation options to ensure safe and inclusive access.

Opportunities and Action Items for the Community Level

Communities can:

Ensure that safe play spaces are easily accessible for all youth.

Promote the benefits of and access to sports opportunities to youth and their families.

Promote and encourage partnerships across a variety of sectors, including business, community recreation, education, faith-based, government, health care, media, public health, sports, and technology.

Collaborate with academic institutions or public health organizations to evaluate programs.

Partner with national or local volunteer organizations (such as the Corporation for National and Community Service) to recruit coaches, officials, and volunteers to support youth sports programs.

Develop shared use agreements to increase access to sports facilities at schools and within the community.

Locate sports facilities in areas that are safe and accessible via multiple transportation options, including walking, biking, and public transportation.

Opportunities and Action Items for the Public Policy Level

Public agencies can:

Support an entity with the responsibility to organize and coordinate efforts within and across sectors to foster and expand youth sports participation.

Support policies that facilitate access to youth sports and facilities (e.g., shared use agreements, Complete Streets, master development plans, Safe Routes to School).

Seek out and support public- and private-sector partnerships.

Promote collaboration across all levels, including neighborhoods, communities, tribal areas, cities, and states, to increase and expand youth sports participation.

Disseminate messaging, through a variety of platforms, about the benefits of youth sports and availability of opportunities to play sports.

Coordinate data collection by standardizing questions so that data can be compared across Federal, state, and/or local levels.

Identify and provide grants, funding opportunities, and other resources to support youth sports programs.



Opportunities and Action Items for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

HHS can:

Identify an existing Federal staff office — perhaps the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion and the President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition — to elevate youth sports.

Collaborate with agencies within HHS and with departments across the Federal Government.

Provide funding support to communities and organizations in the public and private sectors.

Partner with the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Collaborate and engage with the National Fitness Foundation.

Reinstate the Science Board of the President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition.

Develop partnerships with organizations to further enhance opportunities for youth sports participation.

Engage members of the President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition to disseminate and promote messages to support the NYSS.

Create new resources for the *Move Your Way* communications campaign to encourage youth sports participation.

Develop standardized surveillance questions to measure youth sports participation.

Track youth sports participation as a *Healthy People 2030* objective.

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