**Youth sport during the COVID-19 pandemic: The influence of race and affluence on parents’ perspectives of youth participation**

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**ABSTRACT:**

COVID-19 restrictions led to a nearly 50% decline in youth sport participation across the United States (Dorsch et al., 2021). Today, communities and sport organizations have resumed sport. However, research has yet to fully elucidate how COVID-19 restrictions impacted youth participation across different sociodemographic groups during the pandemic. The present study explored the association between race and affluence and their relationship with parents’ attitudes toward children’s youth sport participation before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Online questionnaires were completed by a nationally representative sample of 3706 parents (Mage = 39.57 ± 9.03 years) who had a child regularly participating in youth sport before COVID-19. Multivariate Analyses of Variance using Tukey post-hoc tests were conducted to examine the main effect differences by race and affluence and the interactive effects of race and affluence. Results suggest that race and affluence – independently and in combination – were salient categorical variables of children’s weekly hours of sport participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings highlight that White\*high affluent groups had the highest rates of sport participation during the COVID-19 pandemic and that these families desire to invest more time and money at greater rates upon returning. Theoretically, designed intersectionality research is recommended to explore further effects of race and affluence in youth sport. (Less than 300 words)

**KEYWORDS:** Youth sport; COVID-19; Race; Affluence; Intersectionality; (Times New Roman 9) (3 – 10 keywords)

# 1. INTRODUCTION (Times New Roman 10 Bold)

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted society, including youth sport in the United States. Youth sport, an organized extra-curricular activity, is a prominent developmental context for children and their families (Howie et al., 2020; Knight et al., 2017). The extra-curricular activity draws approximately 40–45 million participants annually (Foss et al., 2014; Merkel, 2013). During the onset of the pandemic, federal political and public health leaders implemented measures to slow the spread of the disease, including stay-at-home orders (Bourassa, 2021). Eventually, states were given the authority to implement their strategies to ensure the safety of their citizens – such as physical distancing, mask-wearing, and vaccinations – and were allowed to determine when they would reopen (Bourassa, 2021). These safeguards ultimately resulted in the cancellation of sport seasons and led organizations to adjust operations and, in some cases, shut down permanently (Sanderson & Brown, 2020). The impact of these decisions was felt in terms of youth’s physical, social, and emotional well-being factors typically associated with participation in a positive and well-organized youth sport program (Anderson-Butcher, 2019). (Times New Roman 10)

# 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Participants

Study participants (N = 3706) were a statistically representative subset of youth sport parents in the United States. Recruitment quotas were established based on demographic data published by the United States Census Bureau (2020) and past research conducted by industry leaders (Aspen Institute, 2019; Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 2020; Wintergreen Research, 2019). Participants were recruited proportionally from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. California was the most represented state in the sample (n = 321), and Vermontand Wyoming were the least represented states (n = 4 each). Across the country, participants self-identified as residing in urban (40.8%), suburban (42.2%), and rural (17.0%) communities. Parents were 1631 males and 2068 females (seven parents identified as non-binary) and ranged in age from 19 to 89 years (M = 39.57, SD = 9.03). Participants’ ages were normally distributed, with 46.1% of the study sample falling between 35 and 45 years old. In alignment with national distributions (see United States Census Bureau, 2020), 2165 parents (58.4%) identified as White, 669 (18.1%) as Latinx, 506 (13.7%) as Black or African-American, 208 (5.6%) as Asian, 90 (2.4%) as multiracial, 40 (1.1%) as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and nine (0.2%) as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Thirteen participants preferred not to disclose their race, and six selected “Other.”

2.2. Procedure

Procedures were approved by an institutional review board for the protection of human subjects. Following this approval, parents were recruited via a paid Qualtrics panel or youth sport industry partner listservs. Participants were screened, and quotas were achieved based on sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., race, income, state, number of children) to arrive at a relatively representative sample of American youth sport parents. After receiving an email outlining the study’s aims, participants provided informed consent online and answered 13 demographic questions about themselves, their oldest sport-participating child, and their family. Parents subsequently responded to two study designed items assessing their children’s weekly hours of sport participation before and during COVID-19-related restrictions as well a single study-designed item assessing parents’ perceptions of their children’s likeliness to return to sport once restrictions were lifted, parents’ willingness to spend money and time on sport in the future, and their fear of child illness as a barrier to sport. Data were collected between June 1st and September 24th, 2020, at the height of the moratorium on youth sport in the United States.

**3. RESULTS**

3.1. Descriptive statistics and frequencies of key variables

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the four outcome variables, and frequencies were calculated for the predictor variables of race (White vs. non-White) and affluence (low, medium, high). These data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and frequencies of key study variables.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | M | SD or Proportion | Min | Max |
| Change in weekly hours of participation | − 1.71 | 5.07 | − 30 | 36 |
| Willingness to spend money on sports | 2.85 | 1.08 | 1 | 5 |
| Willingness to spend time on sports | 2.86 | 1.12 | 1 | 5 |
| Fear of child getting sick upon return | 3.56 | 1.34 | 1 | 5 |

3.2. Group differences by race, affluence, and Race\*Affluence

MANOVA results show a statistically significant difference in attitudes towards COVID-19 and sport participation based on the athlete’s parents being White or non-White, F (5, 2568) = 13.59, p < 0.001; Wilks’ λ = 0.974. Results also show a statistically significant difference in these outcomes across family affluence, F (10, 5134), p < 0.001; Wilks’ λ = 0.944. Furthermore, a significant interaction effect was found when combining race\*affluence, F (25, 9526), p < 0.001; Wilks’ λ = 0.905. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Tests of between subject effects.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Affluence (low, medium, high) | DF | F | P |
| Change in hours of participation | 2 | 12.50 | 0.00 |
| Willingness to spend money on sports | 2 | 44.75 | 0.00 |
| Willingness to spend time on sports | 2 | 25.68 | 0.00 |
| Fear of child getting sick upon return | 2 | 4.11 | 0.02 |

# 4. DISCUSSION

# Using data from a nationally representative sample of youth sport parents in the United States, this study explored the association between race and affluence and their relationship with parents’ attitudes toward their children’s youth sport participation before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings indicate significant differences across race (White and non-White) and affluence (low, medium, and high). Importantly, results indicate a significant combined effect of race and affluence on parents’ attitudes toward youth sport participation. This suggests that the intersections of race and affluence are associated with parents’ perceptions of their children’s involvement in youth sport. Our data further support the argument that sociodemographic factors can and should be examined independently and in combination

# 5. CONCLUSION

# Youth sport is a relatively ubiquitous extra-curricular activity among children in the United States, and the positive outcomes associated with a well-designed and -delivered sport environment entice tens of millions of families to participate annually. However, COVID-19 led to the abrupt cancellation of most formal sport training and competitions in March 2020. Well before COVID-19, it was understood that youth sport had an accessibility issue (Whitley et al., 2021). Even so, multiple studies provide solid recommendations for addressing this issue (see Coakley, 2015; Gould, 2019; Whitley, 2021). Additionally, scholar-practitioners are actively working to promote equitable community youth sport programming and opportunities (e.g., Anderson-Butcher et al., 2022). While organizations such as the Aspen Institute work to disrupt the youth sport inertia, researchers can help by moving beyond vague language such as “disadvantaged youth” or “underserved youth” without providing further context on the who. Who constitutes underserved or underprivileged? Who in the United States is facing barriers to youth sport? Who in youth sport needs access to make youth sport a more inclusive environment? In the present study, we attempted to address some gaps in knowledge and action.

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