



A Series on Mental Health's Connection to Other Social Issues



A Primer on Sports and Mental Health

Sports and recreation have long been a prominent component of youth and community development, attracting significant financial investment. This includes foundations that support youth and community recreation, corporations sponsoring local sports teams of all levels, and individuals giving back to their school sports. Yet, the connection between sports and mental health has only recently garnered greater appreciation. Sports leagues have provided resources for clubs, schools, and coaches to support athlete mental health, and professional athletes have started to talk about—and even step away from—competition due to mental health challenges.

Mental health must be a more intentional focus of sports and recreation funding at all ages in order to maximize athletic achievement and the positive impact those activities can have on lifelong mental health.

Introduction

Research shows sports are associated with numerous positive mental health benefits throughout life—from decreasing severity of symptoms, to reducing cravings associated with alcoholism, and lowering individual mental healthcare costs.¹ The inherent demands of athletic training can foster adaptability and emotional regulation skills that significantly improve mental health. Athletes at all levels also develop lifelong skills, social connections, and feelings of community created on teams, resulting in greater self-worth and confidence, increased acceptance by peers, and improved social support.² Those who participate in sports also show less fatalistic attitudes, negative self-talk, and loneliness, especially among girls.³

However, sports can also present athletes with unique stressors, marked by exceedingly high expectations and a demand for peak performance. Recently, we have also seen a hyper-professionalization of sports, pushing athletes to intense levels of competition at increasingly younger ages. Not only does this add stress to those athletes, it also prohibits youth from benefiting from the positive aspects of sports. In this primer, we examine the complex interplay between sports and mental health and highlight opportunities for philanthropy to support the mental well-being of athletes through the creation of community, structure and skills building, support systems, and equitable access.

Positive Youth Development

Sports promote physical health while simultaneously providing essential protective factors, particularly for youth, that contribute to overall well-being. Teams can create safe and supportive environments where young people and their families build a sense of connection and belonging, which is associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety.⁴ Sports participation is also related to lower levels of depression among LGBTQ+ youth.⁵ Participation in team sports not only fosters the development of interpersonal skills, but also enables youth to respond to challenges and build necessary life skills, such as time management.⁶ In addition, sports offer significant physical benefits that contribute to positive mental health outcomes, including lower cortisol levels, better sleep, and healthy weight management.⁷

Yet, as sports become more expensive and intensive, fewer children are able to reap these benefits. By collaborating with existing programs dedicated to serving young people, philanthropy can intervene by creating more inclusive opportunities for youth to engage in sports at all levels of competition and ability from an early age. For those funders already committed to these programs, additional support can more intentionally advance positive youth development and well-being, for example, by supporting programs that emphasize positive coaching approaches.

1 Mahindru, A., Patil, P., & Agrawal, V. (2023). Role of Physical Activity on Mental Health and Well-Being: A Review. *Cureus*, 15(1), e33475. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.33475>

2 PCSFN Science Board. (2020). Benefits of Youth Sports. https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2020-09/YSS_Report_OnePager_2020-08-31_web.pdf.

3 Women's Sports Organization. (2023). The Healing Power of Sport. <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-Healing-Power-of-Sport-FINAL.pdf>

4 Hoffmann, M. D., Barnes, J. D., Tremblay, M. S., & Guerrero, M. D. (2022). Associations between organized sport participation and mental health difficulties: Data from over 11,000 US children and adolescents. *PLoS ONE*, 17(6), e0268583.

5 The Trevor Project. (2021, September 15). LGBTQ Youth Sports Participation. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/lgbtq-youth-sports-participation-2/>

6 Norris, G., & Norris, H. (2021). Building Resilience Through Sport in Young People With Adverse Childhood Experiences. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 3, 663587. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2021.663587>

7 Mahindru, A., Patil, P., & Agrawal, V. (2023). Role of Physical Activity on Mental Health and Well-Being: A Review. *Cureus*, 15(1), e33475. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.33475>



Support Systems

Despite the expansive benefits of sports, athletes experience higher levels of pressure that can negatively impact mental health. These only intensify as youth progress into higher levels of competition. Athletes are also at higher risk of sports injuries, which can compound existing or emerging mental health challenges given how grounded their identity may be in their sport. This can result in burnout and mental exhaustion, as well as higher rates of depression and anxiety.⁸ Athletes may also be less likely to seek help compared to their non-athlete peers, especially in academic institutions.⁹

Funders can mitigate such risks associated with sports, especially at high levels of competition, by reinforcing support systems available to athletes. For example, philanthropy can implement and scale programs that equip parents and coaches with skills and resources to identify, support, and respond to the mental health needs of their athletes. For funders backing school-based sports, consider equipping athletic departments to better support student-athlete mental health, such as by educating coaching staff and athletes on mental health literacy in a similar way they might for nutrition or safety. Funders can also prompt athletic departments to provide additional resources in the way of counselors and connections to care when mental health issues arise.

Championing Sports Equity

Sports programs are often characterized as “pay to play,” requiring parents and families to cover participation costs.¹⁰ This is prominent in school sports programs, as schools struggle to fully fund coaching, facilities, gear, and travel costs. As a result, lower income families find it challenging to afford the average \$833 per child per sport.^{11,12} This financial disparity causes youth from low-income households to quit sports at a rate six times higher than their peers from high-income households.¹³ This not only impedes the positive development associated with sports participation, but also limits access to the associated mental health benefits. Therefore, any support for sports and mental health must consider the accessibility gap across different groups, including race, ethnicity, zip code, socio-economic status, and gender.

Philanthropy can support community-based programs that offer free or low-cost sport activities, while providing scholarships, equipment, or transportation to eliminate economic barriers that hinder participation. Additionally, philanthropy can invest in infrastructure development, creating facilities in low-resource settings. Philanthropy can also establish collaborations between local organizations, sports clubs, and schools to democratize access to all sports, with specific attention to the needs and experiences of individual communities.

8 Wolanin, A., Gross, M., & Hong, E. (2015, January). Depression in Athletes: Prevalence and Risk Factors. *Current Sports Medicine Reports*, 14(1), 56-60. <https://doi.org/10.1249/JSR.0000000000000123>

9 Davoren, A. K., & Hwang, S. (2014). Mind, Body and Sport: Depression and anxiety prevalence in student-athletes. <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2014/10/8/mind-body-and-sport-depression-and-anxiety-prevalence-in-student-athletes.aspx>

10 Whitaker, A. A., Baker, G., Matthews, L. J., McCombs, J. S., & Barrett, M. (2019). Who Plays, Who Pays? Funding for and Access to Youth Sports. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2581.html

11 U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. (2019). National Youth Sports Strategy. https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-10/National_Youth_Sports_Strategy.pdf

12 Aspen Institute. (2023). TeamSnap Project Play REPORT v2. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/TeamSnap-Project-Play-REPORT-v2.pdf>

13 Solomon, J. (2020, January). Survey: Low-income kids are 6 times more likely to quit sports due to costs. Project Play. <https://projectplay.org/news/low-income-kids-are-6-times-more-likely-to-quit-sports-due-to-costs>



Key Considerations for Funding Sports and Mental Health

Sports have a profound impact on mental health for people of all ages. Therefore, funders already supporting youth, community recreation, or sports must consider how to reinforce the positive mental health benefits of sports throughout the lifespan, while also strengthening support systems that respond to any negative effects. The following questions are intended to be self-reflective to help you achieve greater impact across your portfolio by integrating support for mental health within current efforts related to improving outcomes in other issue areas.

What sports programs do you support that could benefit from greater attention to addressing intersections with mental health needs? Are there opportunities for collaboration, either within or outside your portfolio, to enhance their impact?

Does your philanthropic approach lend itself to expanding opportunities for youth to (1) reap the mental health benefits associated with sports, (2) strengthen mental health support systems within sports settings, or both?

How can you ensure greater equity in youth benefiting from sports, and the associated mental health gains, across your current or future portfolio?

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