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The Cost of AAU Youth Sports: Is Playing Sports Out of Reach?

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Abstract: Close to 60 million United States (U.S.) school-aged children and seventy-five percent of American families participate in organized sports annually. American families spend around $40 billion per year on youth sports, and it is estimated that this amount will exceed $75 billion by 2026. This expenditure represents more than 7% of their total household spending. The average family spends between $700 and $1,000 per month on children's sports, with spending increasing by more than 50% during the past decade. This study examines the amount of money that the typical American family spends on youth sports and where they spend it. It also examines whether income, race, gender, and geographical location impact spending and the hours kids participate in youth sports. Using a survey questionnaire to gather data, we estimate a two-stage least squares model that examines the time and money families spend on youth sports and the demographic factors that impact whether a child participates and how many hours they play sports.

Keywords: youth sports, household spending, family income, socioeconomic disparities

Introduction

U.S. families spend around $40 billion annually on youth sports. According to the Aspen Institute *State of Play Survey* (2025), Americans spend more on youth sports than the annual revenues of the NFL, NBA, or NHL. Spending on youth sports has increased by more than 55% since 2010. Today, 60 million kids participate in youth sports yearly, and seventy-five percent of families with school-aged kids participate in organized sports.

According to the Aspen Institute (2025), the average U.S. sports family spent $1,016 on their child's primary sport in 2024, representing a 46% increase since 2019. This spending includes club fees, private lessons, equipment, camps, school sports fees, travel, and other related costs. Among the four major sports, parents spend more money on soccer ($1,188 average cost) and basketball ($1,002), followed by baseball ($714) and tackle football ($581). Many people are unaware of the dramatic changes that have occurred in youth sports since the 1990s. Officially, club sports began when the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) was established in 1888. However, during the 1970s, the AAU, or club sports in general, modified their vision to include all participants, regardless of ability, at a younger age. In 1996, Walt Disney World built the first sports complex to host youth national tournaments. Since Disney owned ESPN and had airtime to fill, they started to air the facilities' youth tournaments, which caused an explosion in AAU or club sports participation.

By 2015, more than 40% of U.S. kids played an organized sport year-round (NPR, 2015) with the most common AAU sports for kids being Basketball (36.8%), Soccer (26.5%), and Tackle Football (15.7%). Today, AAU has nearly 700,000 members and 150,000 volunteers across 41 sports programs and 55 U.S. districts (Ho et al., 2024). Private sport clubs have grown into a $15 billion industry, with 63% of parents paying $1,200 to $6,000 annually for their kids to participate in sports. The economic impact of amateur and youth sports tourism is staggering. According to the Sports Events and Tourism Association, $39.7 billion was spent directly on youth sports in 2021, generating a total economic impact (direct and indirect) of $91.8 billion, creating 635,000 jobs, and a total tax revenue of $12.9 billion.

Much of this spending is on travel. In 2019, 179 million people traveled to out-of-town events for youth sports. As a result, U.S. families spent money on hotels, restaurants, shopping at regional retailers, and visiting local attractions. By 2021, sports-related travel accounted for 66.5 million nights families spent in hotels. Travel is essential because hotel tax revenue finances many sporting venues. Since 2005, the annual growth rate of amateur and youth sports tourism has been 5.9%. These statistics point to accelerated growth within the industry. On average, across all sports, parents spent more annually on travel ($260 per sport, per child) than on equipment ($154), private lessons ($183), registration fees ($168), or camps ($111).

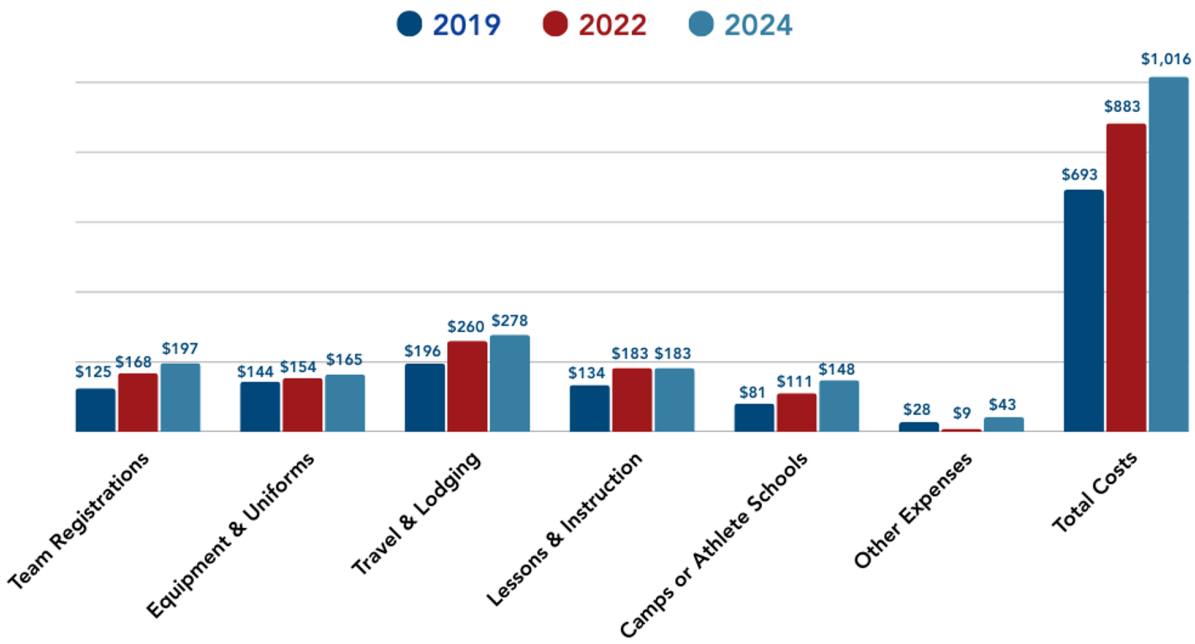


Figure 1. Average annual family spending on a child's primary sport (2019, 2022, 2024)

Source: 2025 Youth Sports Parent Survey, Aspen Institute Project Play initiative, Utah State University Families in Sport Lab, Louisiana Tech University Minds in Motion Lab. 2022 and 2019 figures are from previous Aspen Institute parent surveys with Utah State and Louisiana Tech.

Not only are American families spending money on club sports, but they also spend more time. Many children play club sports 3-5 days a week, 12 hours a week, 12 months a year. This time commitment to club sports has encouraged kids to specialize in playing one sport. As more kids play year-round club sports, it has generated a dramatic drop in the number of kids playing multiple sports. As a result of more athletes specializing in and playing club sports year-round, neighborhood Little League, town, and church programs have diminished. Fading is the era of sandlot or pickup ball. This decline in local youth sports was exacerbated by reductions in local and state funding for parks and facilities and growing limitations on physical education at high schools.

As youth sports are no longer low-cost or free, the expense of club sports potentially pushes out many lower-income families from playing any sport. While ninety percent of American youth participate in some form of organized sport, the number falls significantly as children age. In the past decade, overall youth sport participation fell by over 8%, with COVID-19 causing participation rates to fall even more. Today, 70% of all kids stop playing any sport by age 13, and 80% stop playing by age 15.

One reason for the drop in sports participation is the high cost of club sports. 59% of families experience financial strain from their children's sports. While 48% of families with

kids participating in sports say they will find a way to make it work, 11% plan to take on debt. As sports have become privatized into AAU teams, they may become out of reach for lower-income families. Today, children across the U.S. have different sports experiences based on income, race, and gender. Participation in sports among families earning less than $75,000 has dropped significantly since 2011, while children from better-off families are participating in ever greater numbers. About 7 of 10 children from families earning more than $100,000 play sports, compared with 3 in 10 from families earning less than $25,000.

Wealthier households spend four times more on their child's sport than the lowest-income families, according to the *State of Play Report* (2025). Some families spend as much as $35,000 annually. Families making $150,000 or more spent 83% more on travel for their child's experience than families earning under $50,000, and 65% more than households making between $50,000 and $149,999. Wealthier families are almost twice as likely to report they spent a little or substantially more on sports during the past year than the lowest-income households.

The annual survey by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA, 2021) found that 24% of kids ages 6 to 12 from homes with $25,000 or less played sports regularly, compared to 40% of kids from $100,000+ homes. Of the 25 million children below the poverty line in the US, only 22% play any sport. However, parents from lower-income households are nearly twice as likely to say they hope their child will become a professional athlete as those from higher-income homes (39% vs. 20%), according to the NPR survey (2015). The biggest predictor of a kid's participation in sports is the parents' income. U.S. children who come from household incomes greater than $100,000 participate in sports at almost twice the rate as those from households with incomes less than $25,000 (42.7% vs 21.6%) (Kuhn et al., 2021). Only 27.5 percent of kids from homes with incomes below $25,000 play sports, compared to 45.5 percent of kids from homes with incomes greater than $100,000. Families earning less than $50,000 or less cite costs as the top reason their kids don't play organized sports.

In the 2024 survey, parents estimated their sports costs ranged from nothing to almost $25,000. The wealthiest families ($100,000 or more household income) spent $1,471 more annually on their child's primary sport than the lowest-income parents (under $50,000 income). Middle-class households were closer in spending to the lowest-income families than the wealthiest. Results also show that when parents whose child plays sports were asked about problems that make it difficult for their child to continue participating, about one in three parents (32%) who are less well-off (household incomes less than $50,000/year) say that sports cost too much, while just one in six parents (16%) who are more well-off (household incomes $50,000/year or more) say that sports cost too much.

Participation rates for kids from families earning more than $100,000 are double those of kids from families earning $25,000 or less (Shell, 2017). Participation rates are rising among wealthier kids with 70% of those from households making $100,000 participating in sport. However, 33% of kids from families earning less than $25,000 are physically inactive, a percentage that is steadily increasing. On the other hand, only 10% of kids from families earning over $100,000 are physically inactive, with this percentage steadily declining since 2012.

Sports participation rates for White children exceed those of Black and Hispanic kids. In 2021, 38% of White children ages 6-12 played sports regularly, compared to Hispanic (32%) and Black (31%) children, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA, 2021). White children are three times more likely than Latino kids and two times more likely than Black and Asian kids to play sports on a recreation center team, according to the *State of Play Report* (2025). Access to quality parks is part of the reason. Neighborhoods predominantly of color have 66% less park space than predominantly White neighborhoods.

White parents also spent almost twice the amount on their child's primary sport than Black parents. Parents who identified as Hispanic or Latino reported spending nearly the same amount ($1,068) as White parents ($1,124) on their child's primary sport. In Harlem, where 47% of the youth are below the federal poverty level, play space is one of the largest barriers for local leagues, as many fields are occupied by programs that do not serve local residents. There are also transportation barriers that limit who can reach sports complexes. Research shows a similar trend for Latinos and Native American communities.

Despite major gains in girls' sports due to Title IX, in 2012, participation rates for girls remained 2-5% lower than for boys. Overall, 30% of girls ages 6-12 participate regularly in sports compared with 40% for boys (Wilson, 2022). As adults, the gender gap is more pronounced: 35% of men say they play sports, while only 16% of women say they play sports. There is only a small gender gap in current sports participation between boys and girls (76% and 70%). However, this gap widens with age. Men are more than twice as likely as women (35% vs. 16%) to say they have played sports in the past year. Among younger adults aged 18-29, 48% of men and 23% of women currently play sports.4 This gender gap persists with age: among older adults aged 65+, men are more than three times as likely as women to say they currently play sports (32% vs. 9%).

Methodology

In this study, parents completed an anonymous and non-validated questionnaire. A total of 72 questionnaires were completed on-site or through email. The questionnaire asked parents to provide (1) demographic information about themselves and their children; (2) information regarding their child's sport participation, including how many years, months, and hours they play, and whether they play other sports; (3) any sports-related injuries the player has had; (4) socioeconomic information regarding parents income; (5) the player's race and gender identity; and (6) spending on sports by category including travel, club fees, equipment, tournament fees, training, coaches, and camps. The survey can be found at https://wpunj.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3gBH2bhdm8l3KOW.

In general, the survey questions were:

1) What is the athlete's primary sport?
2) How many years has the athlete played AAU?
3) How many months a year does the athlete play?
4) How many hours per week do they play?
5) Does the athlete play other organized sports?
6) Is the athlete Male, Female, or Non-Binary, prefer not to say or other?
7) Is the athlete White, African American, Latino, Asian, Mixed race, or Other?
8) Please indicate the family income per year: 0–$50,000, $50,001–$75,000, $75,000-$100,000, $100,001–$150,000, $150,000-$200,000, or >$200,000.
9) What is your yearly spending on each of the following:
   A. Club Fees
   B. Tournament fees
   C. Equipment and Uniforms
   D. Travel (hotel, airfare, fuel, etc.)
   E. Lessons or Private Coaching
   F. Camps or Athletic Schools
   G. High School Sports
10) Please list any sports-related injuries the athlete has experienced: ankle, knee, leg, hip, back, hand/wrist, neck, or head. If none, list none.
11) What is the athlete's zip code?

Survey results were compiled into an Excel spreadsheet with descriptive statistics determining the mean and standard deviations of all the variables. To examine how different demographic factors impact youth spending and hourly participation, we employed a two-stage least squares estimation technique to control for endogeneity and possible correlation between the error terms. To empirically examine the impacts of income, race, gender, and geographical location on total spending and participation hours, we use a simultaneous two-stage least squares regression to regress spending on participation, controlling for demographic factors. Specifically, we estimated:

1) $Spending = \alpha + \beta_1(Hours) + \beta_2(race) + \beta_3(gender) + \beta_4(Income) + \varepsilon_i$
2) $Hours = \alpha + \beta_1(spending) + \beta_2(race) + \beta_3(gender) + \beta_4(injury) + \beta_5(Income) + \varepsilon_i$

where *Spending* is measured as total spending and *Hours* is measured as total hours per week, $x_{k,i}$ is a vector of control variables, α and β's are parameters to be estimated and ε_i is an error term. This approach is a system estimation technique, where the endogenous regressors on the right-hand side of each equation are instrumented with the regressors *X* from all other equations. First, we regress *Y−i* on *X* and obtain the predicted values, then we estimate *γi*, *βi* by using an Ordinary Least Squares regression of *yi* on and *Xi*.

Results

The results are presented in the charts and tables below. Findings indicate that, on average, children participate in AAU sports for 5.11 years, with a 1.25 standard deviation. During the season, they play at least 9 hours per week, while in the off-season, they average 5 hours per week, and play their main sport year-round. Results also show that the average family spends over $2,000 annually on AAU or club fees, over $2,000 per year in travel, and an additional $500 or more annually on school or local fees and admission/visitor fees. As expected, travel and club fees represent the largest expenses for parents. Over 75% of participants were white and had a family income over $150,000 per year.

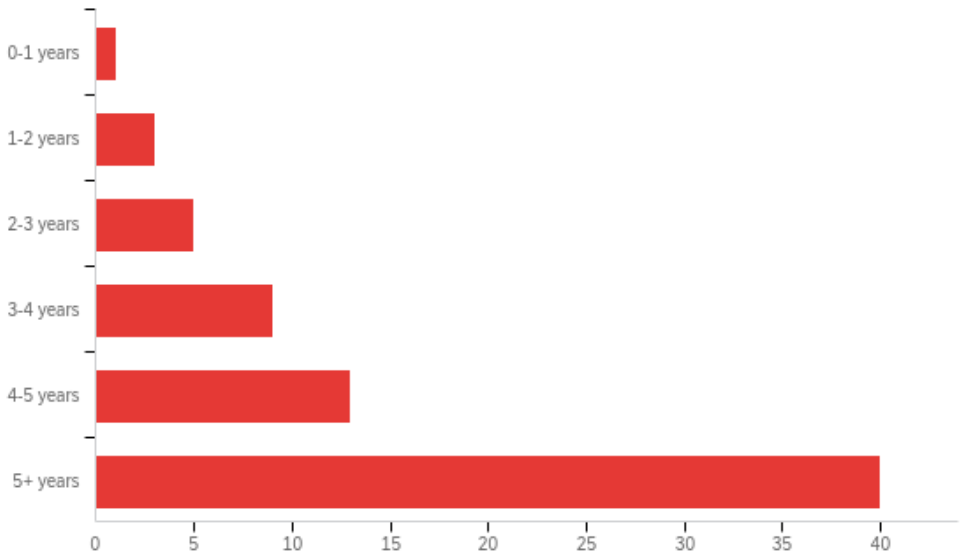


Figure 2. How many years has your athlete played AAU/Club competition?
(Average = 5.11, Standard Deviation = 1.25)

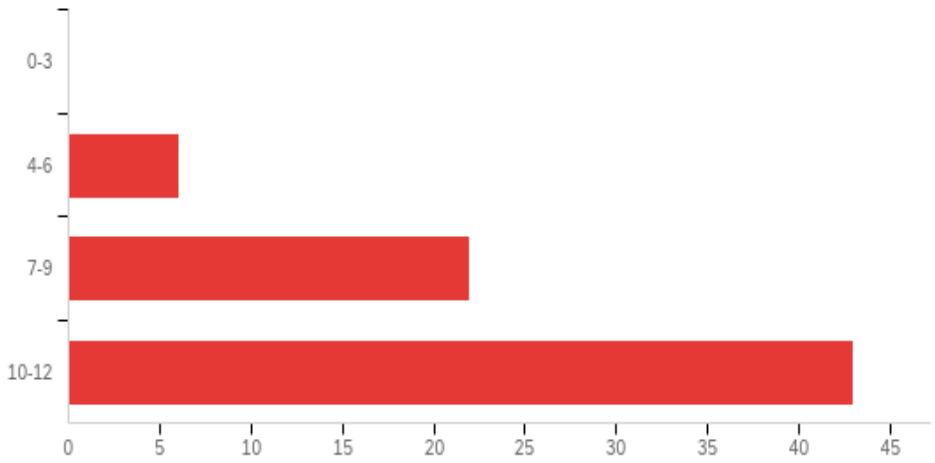


Figure 3. How Many Months a Year do you play?

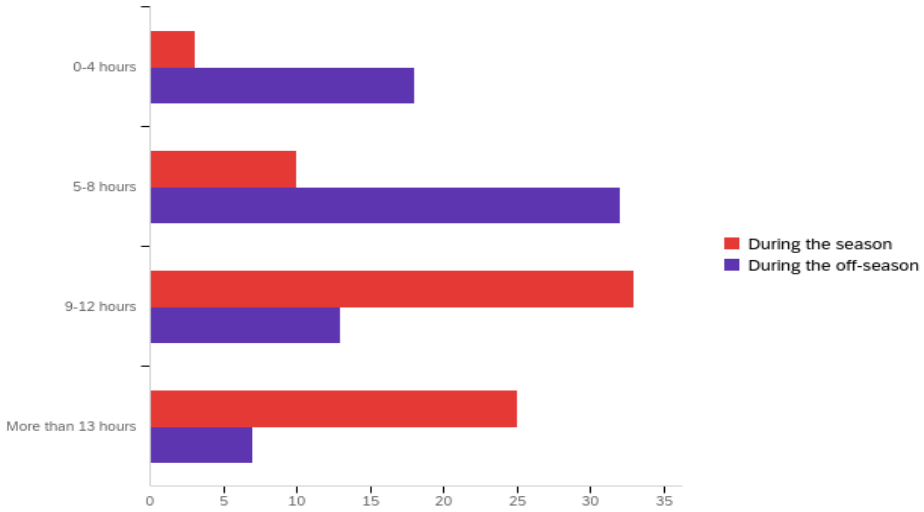


Figure 4. How Many Hours per Week do you Play?

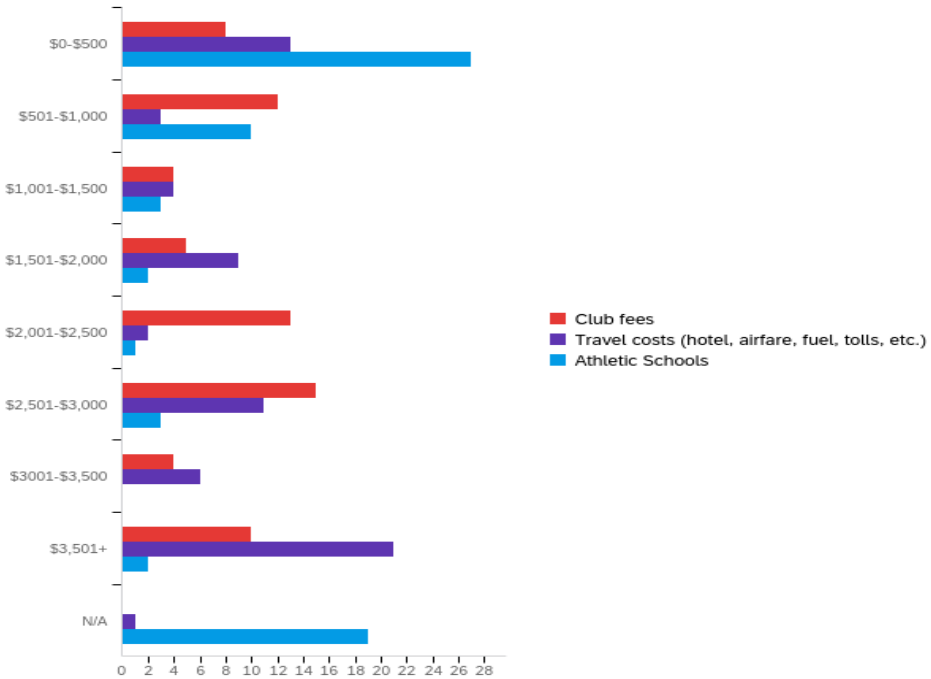
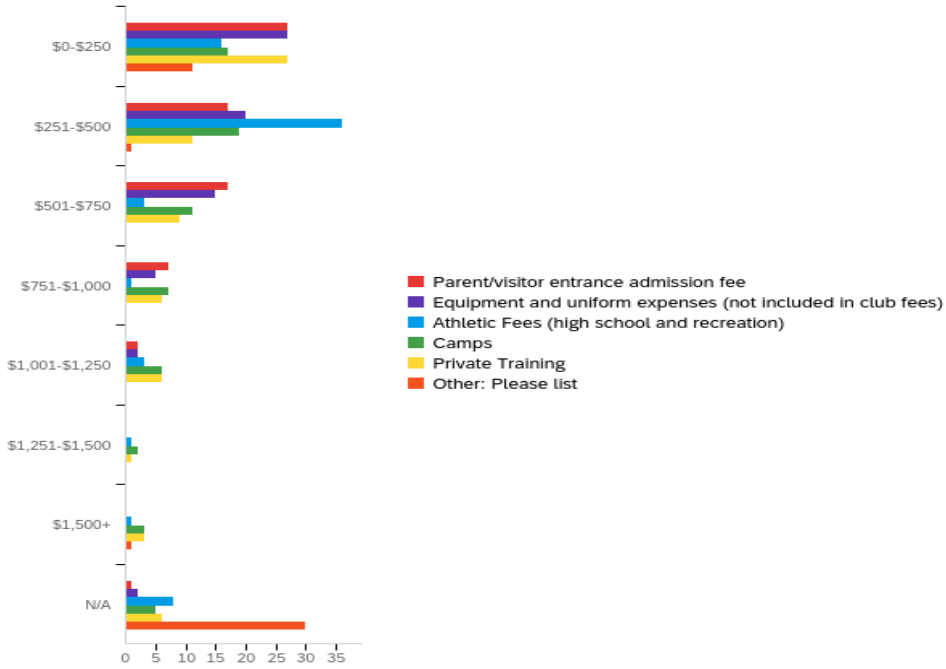


Figure 5. What is your Yearly Spending by Category?



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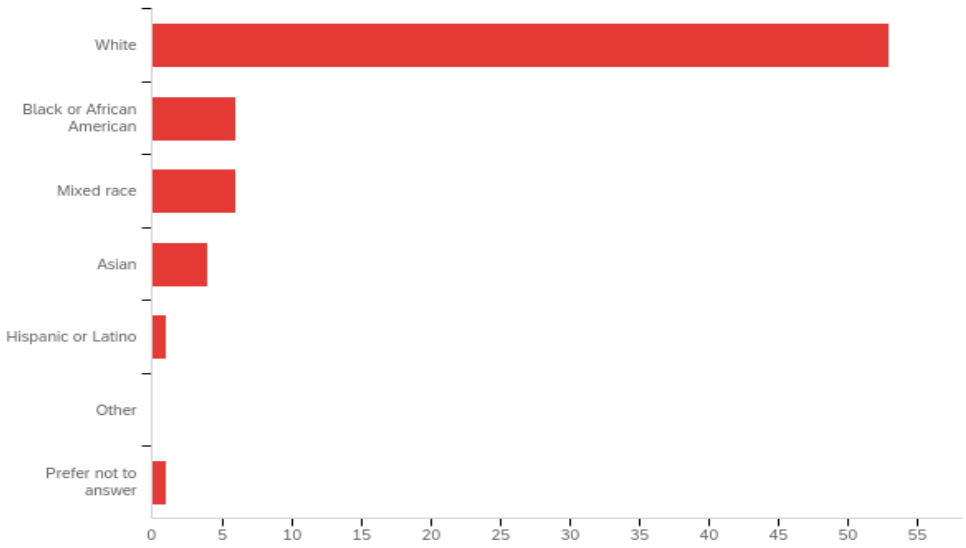

Figure 6. Athlete by Race

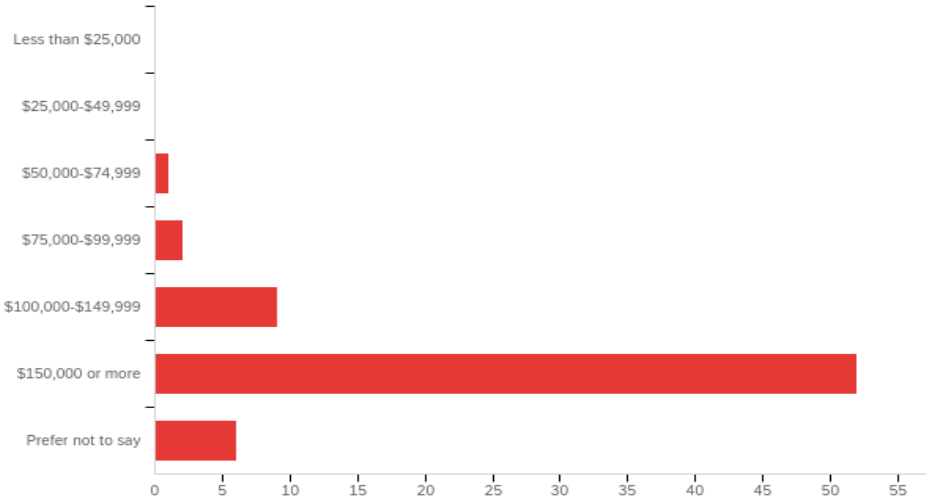

Figure 7. What is your yearly income?

Two-Stage Least Squares Results

Results in Tables 1 and 2 show that greater incomes spend more on kids' sports, however, the results are not statistically significant. Similarly, results also show that being a minority or a female reduces how much is spent on kids' sports, although it is also not statistically significant. As expected, the more hours kids play sports, the greater the spending. Results are statistically significant and show that kids who play more hours spend about $400 more a year.

Results for hours played are similar and show that higher parental incomes increase the number of hours kids play sports. While the impact is relatively small, it is statistically significant. Results continue to show that being a minority and a female reduces the hours played, but it is not statistically significant. This lack of significance may be due to the surveys being very homogeneous and having a small sample size.

Table 1. Results for spending

Sample: 71				
Variable	**Coefficient**	**Std. Error**	**t-Statistic**	**Prob.**
INCOME	0.022353	0.015660	1.427388	0.1581
RACE	-1186.026	1037.988	-1.142620	0.2573
GENDER	-21.65497	1024.876	-0.021129	0.9832
HOURS	399.7337	164.5437	2.429347	0.0178
R-squared	0.090028	Mean dependent var		6879.338
Adjusted R-squared	0.049283	S.D. dependent var		3625.163
S.E. of regression	3534.706	Akaike info criterion		19.23334
Sum squared resid	8.37E+08	Schwarz criterion		19.36081
Log likelihood	-678.7834	Hannan-Quinn criter		19.28403
Durbin-Watson stat	1.924348			

Table 2. Results for hours

Included observations: 71				
Variable	**Coefficient**	**Std. Error**	**t-Statistic**	**Prob.**
INCOME	0.000121	5.36E-05	2.262455	0.0269
RACE	-6.215062	7.173764	-0.866360	0.3893
GENDER	-1.800162	3.909248	-0.460488	0.6466
R-squared	.268376	Mean dependent var		11.40845
Adjusted R-squared	.335093	S.D. dependent var		2.369915
S.E. of regression	3.621470	Sum squared resid		891.8231
Durbin-Watson stat	1.729387	Second-Stage SSR		365.8194
J-statistic	4.528735	Instrument rank		4
Prob (J-statistic)	0.033330			

Conclusions

Many people are unaware of the dramatic change that has occurred in youth sports since the 1990s. AAU youth sports started exploding in the 1990s. Today, American families spend close to $40 billion a year on kids' sports. Youth sports is a bigger industry than any professional sports league. The average cost of AAU/Club spending is over $5,000 a year. Travel and Club Fees are the largest portion of this spending for U.S. families. Over 75% of our survey participants were white and had a family income over $150,000. This suggests that AAU/Club sports are very expensive and may be becoming out of reach for lower-income minority families. While two-stage least squares results show that white males with higher parental incomes spend more on sports, the results are not statistically significant. As expected, the greater the number of hours a kid plays, the greater the spending.

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