

Scaling Youth Soccer Development: Strategic Insights into Texas Youth Soccer Markets

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Abstract: The U.S. youth sports economy is estimated at \$40 billion in annual family spending (Drape & Belson, 2025). Based on U.S. Census population estimates, Texas accounts for approximately 9% of that spending, equal to roughly \$3.7 billion share of the youth sports market (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Within this market, youth soccer in Texas is rapidly growing, evidenced by the MLS NEXT program's footprint with nine homegrown clubs across the state, the Dallas Cup's \$40 million annual economic impact, and recent facility investments and partnerships such as Garland's \$70 million soccer complex (MLS NEXT, Dallas Cup, 2025, City News, 2025). U.S. soccer families can expect to spend anywhere from \$1,000 to \$10,000 per child annually, making youth soccer a marker of cultural capital among middle and upper middle-class households (Solomon, 2025; Kooistra & Kooistra, 2018). This case study compares the soccer ecosystems of Austin, Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio, mapping regionally distinct and adaptive development models.

Keywords: Youth Sports Economy, Soccer Development, Texas Sport Industry, Texas Economic Impact

Introduction

Youth soccer is one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. sports economy, which accounts for over \$40 billion in annual spending, with Texas capturing \$3.7 billion shares (Drape & Belson, 2025; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Families invest \$1,000 to \$10,000 annually in soccer participation through club fees, travel and training, signaling cultural willingness to spend on athletic development (Solomon, 2025; Kooistra & Kooistra, 2018). With three Major League Soccer (MLS) professional teams, nine MLS NEXT academies, strong collegiate pipelines, and international events, the state of Texas has positioned itself as a youth soccer cultural institution and economic catalyst. This case study maps actors, institutions and economics across Austin, Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio to identify how demographic, economic, and technological conditions shape participation and opportunity.

Approach

This descriptive case study uses data from public sources including the U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), league websites (MLS NEXT, USL League Two, ECNL), city press releases, and peer-reviewed sources examining club and player trends. This analysis provides a comparative snapshot, focusing on market trends, clubs and pathways, facilities and events, coaching wages, and key takeaways.

Texas Metro Comparative

Austin

The Austin market (961,855 residents) is one of Texas's youngest and fastest growing areas, with rapid suburban expansion and average annual family income levels at \$90,430 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Austin FC (MLS NEXT), Capital City SC (MLS NEXT), and Lonestar SC (USL2) offer players pathways from grassroots to professional levels. These clubs emphasize technical proficiency, psychological readiness, and coachability, aligning with national recruiting criteria (Andrew et al., 2025). Austin-based startup Trace AI provides player analytics for youth clubs, enhancing player evaluation and performance feedback. The Q2 Stadium, home to MLS

professional team Austin FC and host to the 2025 MLS All-Star game, highlights Austin's event capacity. There are approximately 1,780 coaches and scouts employed in the region, earning a mean wage of \$57,670 (BLS, 2024). Key takeaway for the Austin soccer community is the tech-driven ecosystem through AI integration, which positions itself as an innovative soccer hub, focused on data enhanced player development.

Dallas-Fort Worth

The Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex leads Texas with an estimated population of 4,724,179 (Dallas County and Tarrant County) and average annual household income of \$82,064 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). A dense club ecosystem is anchored by FC Dallas (MLS NEXT), Dallas Texans SC (ECNL) Dallas Hornets (MLS NEXT) and Solar SC (ECNL). These academies have a strong link to integrating themselves with collegiate and professional teams. The area is home to some of the largest soccer events to include the annual Dallas Cup tournament, which has an annual impact of \$40 million, as well as being a 2026 FIFA World Cup host city, adding an estimated \$3.5 billion in economic impact (Dallas Cup, 2025; Lozano, 2025). There are approximately 4,900 coaches and scouts that earn a mean annual income of \$52,600 (BLS, 2024). The Dallas-Fort Worth area serves as a benchmark for elite infrastructure and global exposure, with strong talent export into collegiate and professional leagues.

Houston

With an estimated population of 2,304,508, Houston has a diverse populace and average household income of \$64,361 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Houston Dynamo FC Academy (MLS NEXT), Houston Rangers (MLS NEXT), Global Football Innovation (GFI) Academy (MLS NEXT, USL2), and Houston FC (USL2) offer a variety of pathways towards vertical integration into Houston Dynamo's MLS professional ranks. The Shell Energy Stadium is home to the Houston Dynamos, and the city is set to host games for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, attracting further investment in soccer infrastructure. There are approximately 3,740 coaches and scouts, with a mean annual income of \$45,320 (BLS, 2024). Key takeaway in the Houston area is the ability to leverage a diverse market into an inclusive environment for soccer growth. However, there is a disparity in soccer facility access across different communities, that rely on public parks.

San Antonio

San Antonio is a growing grassroots soccer community with an estimated population of 1,434,625, and average annual household income of \$66,176 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Notable clubs in the area include AC River (MLS NEXT), SAFC Pro Academy (USL2), SA City SC (ECNL) and Lonestar SC (ECNL). Of the major Texas cities listed, San Antonio has no professional MLS team to provide homegrown pathways to top U.S. competition. The infrastructure is also limited in comparison to the other Texas cities, with Toyota Field and the South Texas Area Regional (STAR) Soccer Complex being the most desirable facilities in the region. Coaches can expect to earn a median annual income of \$49,540 with approximately 1,240 coaches and scouts employed (BLS, 2024). The takeaway from San Antonio is the focus on grassroots offers a sustainable community-level club soccer ecosystem without the MLS professional infrastructure.

Discussion

Dallas-Fort Worth dominates the youth soccer ecosystem in the state of Texas, driven by elite soccer academies, infrastructure scale, professional alignment, and event hosting. Austin's integration of technology and analytics demonstrates the desire to accelerate youth soccer development through innovation. Houston has professional opportunities but faces economic

disparities to replicate the AI-driven training in Austin and event accessibility of Dallas-Fort Worth. San Antonio lags in facility density and MLS support.

Through public and private partnerships, facility disparities can be addressed. Austin's innovative approach to player development can be expanded to the other Texas metros. San Antonio's grassroots community needs a structured talent identification to compete with the other Texas Metro's. Finally, as Mannix et al. (2024) research discusses, there is a significant national gap with psychological support as players transition from academy to the professional landscape. Texas metros can benefit from incorporating scalable psychological preparation into the training curriculum, providing them with a competitive advantage against other clubs nationally.

Conclusion

Through technology and community engagement, Texas has postured itself with a sustainable sports economy. Dallas-Fort Worth sets the benchmark with elite infrastructure, while Austin applies innovation and data driven development. Houston must bridge the gap between infrastructure and equity, while San Antonio highlights grassroots inclusion but lacks a clear professional pathway. Together, these markets present a roadmap for scalable, balanced youth soccer development across the United States.

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