

Original Research

Higher Levels of Income and Education are Associated with More Specialized Sport Participation Behaviors: Results from a Representative Sample of Youth Sport Parents from the United States

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Keywords: youth sport, parent, socioeconomic status

<https://doi.org/10.26603/001c.86127>

International Journal of Sports Physical Therapy

Vol. 18, Issue 5, 2023

Background

While previous studies have examined the impact of family socioeconomic characteristics on a child's sport specialization behaviors, this research has been limited to affluent communities with limited sociodemographic diversity.

Hypothesis/Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine associations of parent income and education with child sport specialization behaviors among a nationally representative sample of youth sport parents in the United States.

Study Design

Cross-sectional.

Methods

Parents of youth athletes in the United States (n=236, age: 39.2±8.1 years, 57.2% female) were recruited to complete an online questionnaire by Qualtrics Online Samples (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) using a combination of actively managed, double-opt-in market research panels. The questionnaire used for this study consisted of: 1) parent demographics (including parent age, race/ethnicity, biological sex, gender identity, household income, and educational status), and 2) child sport participation characteristics and sport specialization behaviors.

Results

Parents who reported an annual household income of \$75,001 or more were more likely than parents making less than \$75,000 to report that their child participated on an organized club team (OR [95%CI]: 1.94 [1.15-3.27]), participated on multiple organized teams at the same time (OR [95%CI]: 1.85 [1.10-3.11]), or specialized in a single sport (OR [95%CI]: 2.45 [1.45-4.14]). Parents who reported receiving a Bachelor's degree or higher were more likely than parents who did not to report that their child participated on an organized club team (OR [95%CI]: 3.04 [1.78-5.18]), participated on multiple organized teams at the same time (OR [95%CI]: 2.42 [1.43-4.10]), or specialized in a single sport (OR [95%CI]: 1.94 [1.15-3.26]).

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Conclusions

These results suggest that in the modern youth sport culture, family resources may serve as a major determining factor in the type of experiences available for a youth athlete.

Level of Evidence

III

INTRODUCTION

Participation in youth sports has a wide range of benefits for a child, including increased physical activity, the development of motor and social skills, and most importantly, having fun and making friends.¹ Increasingly, youth sports are also viewed as an avenue for obtaining a college scholarship, which has led to the increasing professionalization of youth sports and the push towards increasingly specialized youth sport behaviors.¹⁻⁴ For example, a recent survey found that approximately one-in-three Little League baseball players between the ages of 7 and 12 have received private coaching in the previous year in an effort to improve their skills.⁴ Another survey found that over half of youth basketball athletes had traveled overnight at least once a month in the past year for basketball competitions or showcases.² As a result of this shift towards highly professionalized youth sports, the ability of a child to participate is increasingly not only a matter of a child's interests, but also the ability of the child's family to access these environments.

Several previous studies have examined the impact of family socioeconomic characteristics on a child's sport specialization behaviors. One survey of parents of club athletes in Wisconsin found that as the income category of a household increased, their children were more likely to specialize in a single sport or played a sport year-round.⁵ A similar study of high school baseball parents in southern California reported that children from high-income families were more likely to participate on a club team, specialize in baseball, and play baseball year-round.³ However, these previous studies were limited due to the non-representativeness of their study populations, with the majority of participants in each study consisting of white, highly-educated, and affluent individuals.^{3,5} To the authors' knowledge, only one study to date has examined the impact of family socioeconomic characteristics on sport specialization behaviors in a sample of parents that was nationally-representative with regard to parent race/ethnicity.² This study found that the children of high-income parents were more likely to participate in a variety of highly specialized behaviors.² However, this study only surveyed parents of youth basketball athletes, limiting the ability to draw more general conclusions about youth sport parents in the United States.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to examine associations of parent income and education with child sport specialization behaviors among a nationally representative sample of youth sport parents. It was hypothesized that parents with higher household incomes or levels of educational attainment would be more likely to report that their children participated in a variety of specialized sport behaviors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

This cross-sectional study was declared exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Indiana State University. A national sample of youth sport parents from across the United States completed an online questionnaire administered via Qualtrics Online Samples (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). Qualtrics Online Samples recruited participants for this study using a combination of actively managed, double-opt-in market research panels. The "opt-in for market research" process requires respondents to submit an initial registration form requesting to participate in market research studies. These respondents are used by Qualtrics for corporate and academic research only. Potential respondents build their profile from a standardized list of questions. The panels then use the profiles to randomly select respondents for surveys where the respondents are likely to qualify. Potential respondents were sent an e-mail invitation from Qualtrics Online Samples informing them that the survey was for academic research purposes only and how long the survey was expected to take. To avoid self-selection bias, the e-mail invitation did not include specific details about the contents of the survey. Within the e-mail invitation was a link to the questionnaire, which was completed through Qualtrics (Qualtrics). Participants first completed screening questions that determined whether they qualified for the study.

Participants were recruited via Qualtrics Online Samples due to the improved ability to recruit racial and ethnic minorities compared to traditional survey recruitment methods that typically results in largely White/Caucasian samples.⁶ The sample recruited was nationally-representative with regards to race/ethnicity in the United States⁷ (White/Caucasian 66.1%; African American/Black 12.3%; Hispanic/Latino of any race 11.0%; Asian 5.5%; 2+ races 2.5%; Native American/Alaskan Native 1.7%, Other 0.9%).

To qualify for this study, participants had to be a parent of a child between 7 and 17 years old and the child had to have participated on an organized youth sports team in the previous year. If participants qualified, they were presented with an information page describing the study, and then proceeded to the rest of the questionnaire. Data collection took place over a one-week period in May 2021.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire for this study was developed by a panel of content-area experts as part of a more extensive mixed-methods study focusing on youth sport participation behaviors during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ The specific sections of the questionnaire used for this study

consisted of: 1) parent demographics (including parent age, race/ethnicity, biological sex, gender identity, household income, and educational status), and 2) child sport participation characteristics and sport specialization behaviors. The parent education categories consisted of: Less than High School, High School diploma or GED, Some college, Associate or two-year college degree, Bachelor or 4-year college degree, Professional degree, and Doctorate degree. The parent household income categories were measured in United States dollars (USD) and consisted of: Less than \$35,000, \$35,001 to \$50,000, \$50,001 to \$75,000, \$75,001 to \$100,000, \$100,001 to \$150,000, and more than \$150,000. These categories were dichotomized as described in the statistical analysis section for final analysis.

In section two of the questionnaire, parents were asked how many months in the previous year their child participated in organized sports, how much money they had spent on their children's sport participation in the previous year, and whether their children participated on school, recreational, or club teams in the previous year. For sport specialization behaviors, parents were asked whether their child participated on multiple different sports teams at the same time, received private coaching outside of their organized teams, or traveled overnight at least once per month for sport competitions during the past year. Parents were asked whether their child met the definition of a specialized athlete ("participation in a single sport for more than 8 months of the year and at the exclusion of playing other sports"). Finally, parents were asked whether their child had suffered an injury in the previous 12 months while playing sports that required them to seek medical care.

Prior to collecting data, the questionnaire was pilot tested in a sample of eleven youth sport parents who met the study inclusion criteria to establish face and construct validity and internal consistency. An acceptable level of internal consistency was found, with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.805 (minimum alpha level of 0.80 needed).

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Data were summarized using means and standard deviations (SD), medians and interquartile ranges [IQR], and frequencies and proportions (%). Continuous variables were assessed for normality using the visual inspection of histograms and skewness/kurtosis values. Normally distributed variables were presented as means (SD), and non-normal variables were presented as medians [IQR]. Chi-square tests were used to examine associations between parent education/income and child sport specialization behaviors. Due to insufficient cell counts during the Chi-square analysis, both the parent education and parent household income variables were dichotomized (education: Less than bachelor's degree and bachelor's degree or above, income: less than \$75,000 and \$75,001 or more). The determinations for these cutoffs were selected so that approximately 50% of participants would be in each group (Less than bachelor's degree: 48.3%, bachelor's degree or above: 51.7%; Less than \$75,000: 50.4%, \$75,001 or more: 49.6%). An alpha level of 0.05 was set a-priori to determine statistical significance for all Chi-square tests. For each Chi-

square test, odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals (OR [95%CI]) were also calculated. All analyses were performed using R statistical software (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria).

RESULTS

Participant demographic data is presented in [Table 1](#). A total of 236 youth sport parents (mean age: 39.2±8.1 years old, 57.2% female) fully completed the questionnaire and were included in the analysis. Just over half (N=122, 51.7%) of participants reported a bachelor's degree or higher level of educational attainment, while just under half (N=117, 49.6%) of participants reported an annual household income of \$75,001 or more. The sport participation characteristics of participants' children over the previous 12 months is presented in [Table 2](#). Parents reported spending a median of \$1,548 [IQR: \$574-\$3,754] on their children's sport participation in the previous 12 months. Just under half (N=111, 47.0%) of all participants reported that their child specialized in a single sport, with a similar proportion of parents (N=107, 45.3%) reporting that their child participated on multiple organized teams at the same time. Slightly fewer parents (N=100, 42.4%) reported that their child received private coaching for their sport outside of their organized team or traveled overnight for their sport at least once in the previous year (N=86, 36.4%). Approximately one-fourth of participants (N=62, 26.3%) reported that their child suffered an injury while playing sports in the previous 12 months that required them to seek medical care.

Differences in child sport participation based on parent income are provided in [Table 3](#). Parents who reported an annual household income of \$75,001 or more were more likely than parents making less than \$75,000 to report that their child participated on an organized club team (OR [95%CI]: 1.94 [1.15-3.27]), participated on multiple different organized sports teams at the same time (OR [95%CI]: 1.85 [1.10-3.11]), or specialized in a single sport (OR [95%CI]: 2.45 [1.45-4.14]). There were no significant differences based on parent income category in the likelihood of a child receiving private coaching (p=0.07), traveling overnight for their sport at least once (p=0.44), or sustaining an injury that required medical care (p=0.05). Parents with a household income of \$75,001 or more reported spending more money on their child's sport in the previous year compared to parents making less than \$75,000 (median [IQR]: \$2,113 [\$984-\$5,008] vs. \$1,050 [\$407-\$2,640], p<0.001) ([Figure 1](#)).

Differences in child sport participation based on parent education category are provided in [Table 4](#). Similar to the findings for parent income, parents who reported receiving a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely than parents who did not to report that their child participated on an organized club team (OR [95%CI]: 3.04 [1.78-5.18]), participated on multiple organized teams at the same time (OR [95%CI]: 2.42 [1.43-4.10]), or specialized in a single sport (OR [95%CI]: 1.94 [1.15-3.26]). Additionally, parents who reported receiving a bachelor's degree or higher were

Table 1. Parent Demographics (N=236)

Variable	N (%), Mean (SD), or Median [IQR]
Parent Age	39.2 (8.1)
Parent Gender	
Male	101 (42.8%)
Female	134 (56.8%)
Gender non-conforming	1 (0.4%)
Parent Sex	
Male	101 (42.8%)
Female	135 (57.2%)
Parent Race/Ethnicity	
Asian	13 (5.5%)
African American/Black	29 (12.3%)
Native American/Alaskan Native	4 (1.7%)
Hispanic/Latino of any race	26 (11.0%)
Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander	0 (0.0%)
White/Caucasian	156 (66.1%)
Two or more races	6 (2.5%)
Other	2 (0.9%)
Parent Education	
Less than High School	3 (1.3%)
High school diploma or GED	36 (15.3%)
Some college	45 (19.1%)
Associate or 2-year college degree	30 (12.7%)
Bachelor or 4-year college degree	67 (28.4%)
Professional degree	50 (21.2%)
Doctorate degree	5 (2.1%)
Parent Household Income Category (USD)	
Less than \$35,000	33 (14.0%)
\$35,001 to \$50,000	45 (19.1%)
\$50,001 to \$75,000	41 (17.4%)
\$75,001 to \$100,000	42 (17.8%)
\$100,001 to \$150,000	43 (18.2%)
More than \$150,000	32 (13.6%)

also more likely to report that their child received private coaching outside of their organized team (OR [95%CI]: 1.92 [1.14-3.25]) or suffered a sports injury that required them to seek medical care (OR [95%CI]: 2.04 [1.12-3.71]). There were no significant differences based on parent education category in the likelihood of a child traveling overnight for their sport at least once in the previous 12 months ($p=0.17$). Parents with a reported education level of a bachelor's degree or above reported spending more money on their child's sport in the previous year compared to parents with less than a bachelor's degree (median [IQR]: \$2,108 [\$984-\$5,256] vs. \$1,070 [\$389-\$2,545], $p<0.001$) (Figure 2).

DISCUSSION

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to examine associations of parent income and education with child sport specialization behaviors among a sample of various youth sport parents that is nationally-representative with regard to race/ethnicity. Parents in the higher income and education categories were more likely to report that their child specialized in a single sport, participated on a club team, or participated on multiple different sports teams at the same time. Additionally, parents in the higher educational attainment category were more likely to report a child receiving private coaching for their sport or suffering an injury in sport that required them to seek medical care.

These findings are in general agreement with several previous studies of youth sport parents. Surveys of parents

Table 2. Sport Participation Characteristics of Participants' Children in Previous 12 Months.

Variable	N (%), Mean (SD), or Median [IQR]
Months of Organized Sport Participation	3 [1-6]
Money Spent on Children's Sports in Past 12 Months (USD)	1,548 [578-3,754]
Any children participate on organized school team?	
Yes	180 (76.3%)
No	56 (23.7%)
Any children participate on community recreational team?	
Yes	148 (62.7%)
No	88 (37.3%)
Any children participate on organized club team?	
Yes	132 (55.9%)
No	104 (44.1%)
Any children participate on multiple organized teams at same time?	
Yes	107 (45.3%)
No	129 (54.7%)
Any children receive private coaching outside of organized teams?	
Yes	100 (42.4%)
No	136 (57.6%)
Any children travel overnight for sport at least once?	
Yes	86 (36.4%)
No	150 (63.6%)
Any children participate in single sport for more than 8 months at the exclusion of other sports?	
Yes	111 (47.0%)
No	125 (53.0%)
Any children suffer an injury while playing sports that required them to seek medical care?	
Yes	62 (26.3%)
No	174 (73.7%)

of club sport athletes, Little League and high school baseball athletes, and youth basketball athletes have all reported that parents who report higher family incomes or greater educational attainment are more likely to have a child who specializes in a single sport or participates in a wide variety of sport specialization behaviors, such as participation on a club team or receiving instruction from a private coach.²⁻⁵ Unsurprisingly, several of these studies also reported that parents in the higher-income categories also reported spending significantly more money on their child's sport participation compared to parents in the lower-income categories.^{2,3,5} Similarly, we found that parents in the higher income or education categories spent approximately twice as much money on their children's sport activities compared to parents in the lower-income or education categories.

The current findings, and the results of the previous studies cited above, are part of a larger trend towards disparities in access and resources among modern families. For example, Doepke et al. reported that in 1970, there were no differences in the amount of time parents spent with their child based on parent education, but by 2012 parents with higher levels of education reported spending three

more hours with their children per day compared to parents with less educational attainment.⁹ Additionally, the amount of time that high-education parents spend assisting with their child's schoolwork has increased over this time period from three hours per week to eight hours per week.⁹ The authors theorize that these differences are not truly due to a lack of educational attainment among these parents, but likely result from a lack of financial resources and time due to the need to be working beyond full-time or working multiple jobs with variable schedules compared to parents with higher levels of education.⁹ Similarly, Ramey et al. reported that from 1995 to 2008, parents with higher education have re-allocated over nine hours per week from independent child leisure-time towards direct childcare, compared to a re-allocation of four hours per week among parents with lower educational attainment.¹⁰ The authors report that this shift has occurred alongside an environment of increasingly competitive college admissions, which the authors describe as the "rug-rat race".¹⁰ In an environment of increasing economic uncertainty and with increasing material returns to college education, Wilkinson and Pickett suggest that parents with sufficient resources may respond to the anxieties caused by this environment by be-

Table 3. Differences in child sport participation based on parent income category.

Variable	Less than \$75,000 N (%)	\$75,001 or more N (%)	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Any children participate on organized club team?			5.6	0.02
Yes	57 (47.9%)	75 (64.1%)		
No	62 (52.1%)	42 (35.9%)		
Any children participate on multiple organized teams at same time?			4.9	0.03
Yes	45 (37.8%)	62 (53.0%)		
No	74 (62.2%)	55 (47.0%)		
Any children receive private coaching outside of organized teams?			3.3	0.07
Yes	43 (36.1%)	57 (48.7%)		
No	76 (63.9%)	60 (51.3%)		
Any children travel overnight for sport at least once?			0.6	0.44
Yes	40 (33.6%)	46 (39.3%)		
No	79 (66.4%)	71 (60.7%)		
Any children specialized in single sport?			10.6	0.001
Yes	43 (36.1%)	68 (58.1%)		
No	76 (63.9%)	49 (41.9%)		
Any children suffer an injury while playing sports that required them to seek medical care?			4.0	0.05
Yes	24 (20.2%)	38 (32.5%)		
No	95 (79.8%)	79 (67.5%)		

coming increasingly involved and invested in their child's success.¹¹ In fact, a recent meta-analysis reported that parent expectations of their children have increased over the past 30 years, and these changes in parent expectations are larger in countries with greater income inequality.¹²

The results of the current study also make sense within the lens of the so-called "rug-rat race" towards college admissions. Youth sport success is increasingly viewed as an avenue for college admissions or scholarships, and early sport specialization is widely believed among parents to increase the chances of their child improving at their sport and eventually receiving a college scholarship.²⁻⁴ However, the increasing time and financial resources needed to support a child's participation in the highly specialized modern youth sport culture serves as a significant barrier to many families. In series of qualitative interviews with parents from low socioeconomic status families, Hernandez et al. reported that parents overwhelmingly described wanting their children to participate in sport both due to the benefits for their child's health, but also because sport participation developed skills that aligned with their family's values, such as teamwork, discipline, hard work, and socialization.¹³ Several of these parents also expressed a belief in the ability of youth sports to help "break the socioeconomic cycle" for their families, by developing skills that may lead to future opportunities or help their children stay out of trouble.¹³ However, these parents also reported that the increasing cost and time burden of youth sports, as well as the current youth sport culture of specialization and partic-

ipation on selective club teams were significant barriers for their child's sport participation.¹³

A novel aspect of the current findings is the recruitment of a sample of youth sport parents that is nationally-representative with regard to the parent's race/ethnicity. While this study focused specifically on the associations of parent income or education with child sport participation and specialization behaviors, it is also important to further understand the influence of various cultural backgrounds on participation in the current youth sport culture. For example, in a qualitative investigation of Hispanic/Latinx parent-child dyads, the participants reported a variety of strategies unique to their cultural background that they used to navigate the youth sport environment.¹³ These included selecting organizations that aligned with their cultural values and relying on extended family members as resources for navigating youth sports.¹³ However, the participants also reported negative consequences due to the interaction of their cultural background and the youth sport environment, such as not feeling like they belong in certain settings or dropping out from sport participation altogether.¹³ Therefore, it is important to consider the multi-dimensional nature of socioeconomic status, as there are existing disparities in education and income based on race/ethnicity, which in turn contribute and intersect with the disparities in access to youth sports that have been demonstrated in this study and others.^{14,15}

This study has several important limitations to consider. First, the sample was limited to 236 parents, which resulted in small numbers of parents in certain race/ethnicity cate-

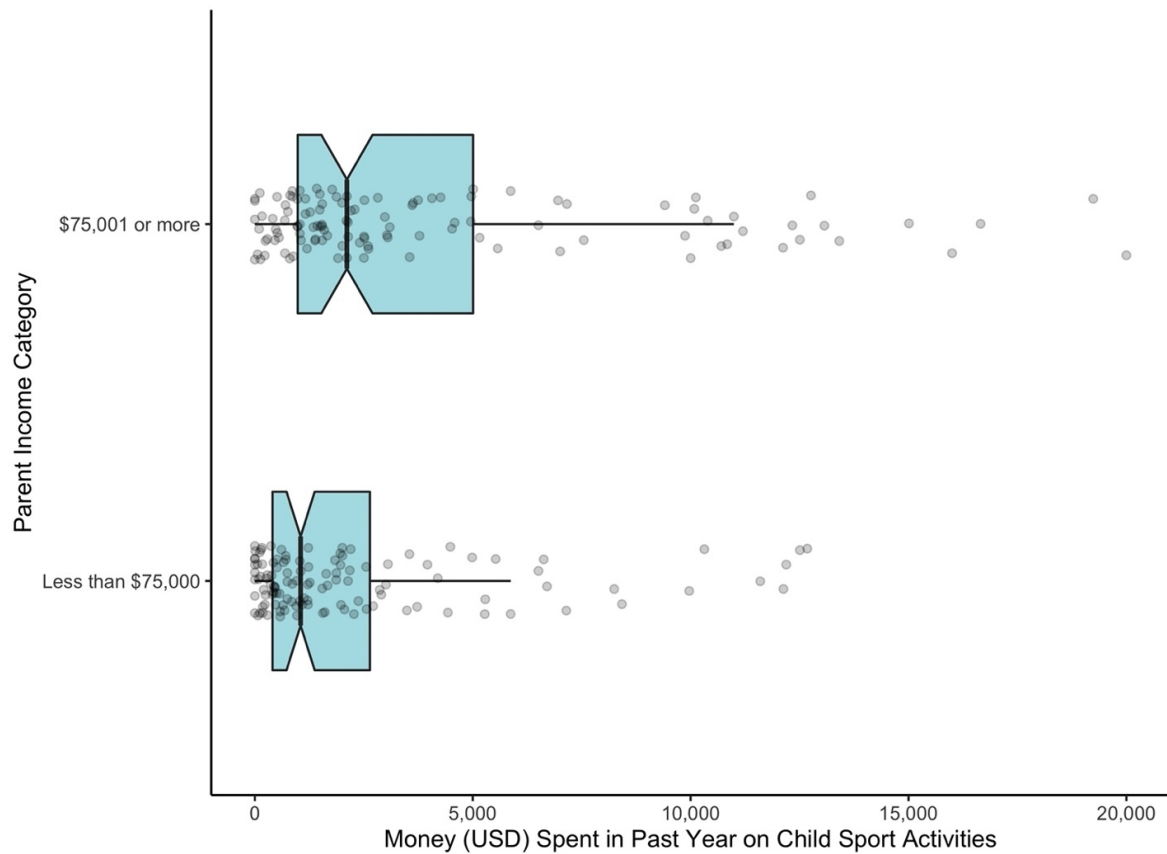


Figure 1. Comparison of money spent in past year on child’s sport activities between parent income categories.

Presented as a notched box plot, with box representing interquartile range (IQR), whiskers representing range of 1.5 times the IQR, line indicating median, notch displaying 95% confidence interval of the median, and individual data points for each parent.

gories, despite recruiting a sample that was proportionally representative regarding race/ethnicity. Second, because the authors chose to recruit the sample to be nationally-representative for race/ethnicity, our sample is not necessarily nationally-representative regarding parent education or income categories. This decision was made due to the limited research in samples of parents that are diverse regarding race/ethnicity, and the difficulty/cost required to recruit samples that are nationally representative across multiple demographic categories. However, as a result there were not sufficient counts within each income or education categories and dichotomized these variables instead to meet the assumptions for all our Chi-square analyses. Future research in this area should aim to recruit samples of participants that are nationally-representative not only in race/ethnicity, but also in household income and educational attainment, in order to perform more robust statistical analysis that is able to determine associations across more specific categories of income and education. Due to the potential overlap between education and income, future research should also attempt to isolate the potential effects of each of these variables. Finally, we chose to define specialization as a dichotomous (yes/no) variable using the most recent consensus definition of sport specialization,¹⁶ as opposed to using other measures that have been used in this area of the literature, such as the 3-point scale.¹⁷ As a result, it is difficult to make comparisons between the rel-

atively high prevalence of specialization (47%) observed in the current study with previous research. The on-going difficulties in scientific definitions of early sport specialization highlights the need for development of a valid and reliable measure of specialization in youth sports.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

In a nationally representative sample of youth sport parents, it was found that increased parent income and education were both associated with their children participating in a variety of specialized sport behaviors, such as specializing in a single sport or participating on multiple teams at the same time. These results suggest that in the modern youth sport culture, family resources may serve as a major determining factor in the type of experiences available for a youth athlete. As a result, many youth are currently excluded from participating in sports as a result of the modern year-round, specialized youth sport culture.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was funded by an internal grant from the University Research Committee at Indiana State University.

Table 4. Differences in child sport participation based on parent education category.

Variable	Less than Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree or above	χ^2	<i>p</i>
	N (%)	N (%)		
Any children participate on organized club team?			16.0	<0.001
Yes	48 (42.1%)	84 (68.9%)		
No	66 (57.9%)	38 (31.1%)		
Any children participate on multiple organized teams at same time?			10.2	0.001
Yes	39 (34.2%)	68 (55.7%)		
No	75 (65.8%)	54 (44.3%)		
Any children receive private coaching outside of organized teams?			5.4	0.02
Yes	39 (34.2%)	61 (50.0%)		
No	75 (65.8%)	61 (50.0%)		
Any children travel overnight for sport at least once?			1.9	0.17
Yes	36 (31.6%)	50 (41.0%)		
No	78 (68.4%)	72 (59.0%)		
Any children specialized in single sport?			5.7	0.02
Yes	44 (38.6%)	67 (54.9%)		
No	70 (61.4%)	55 (45.1%)		
Any children suffer an injury while playing sports that required them to seek medical care?			4.9	0.03
Yes	22 (19.3%)	40 (32.8%)		
No	92 (80.7%)	82 (67.2%)		

DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts or disclosures to report.

Submitted: January 12, 2023 CDT, Accepted: July 16, 2023 CDT

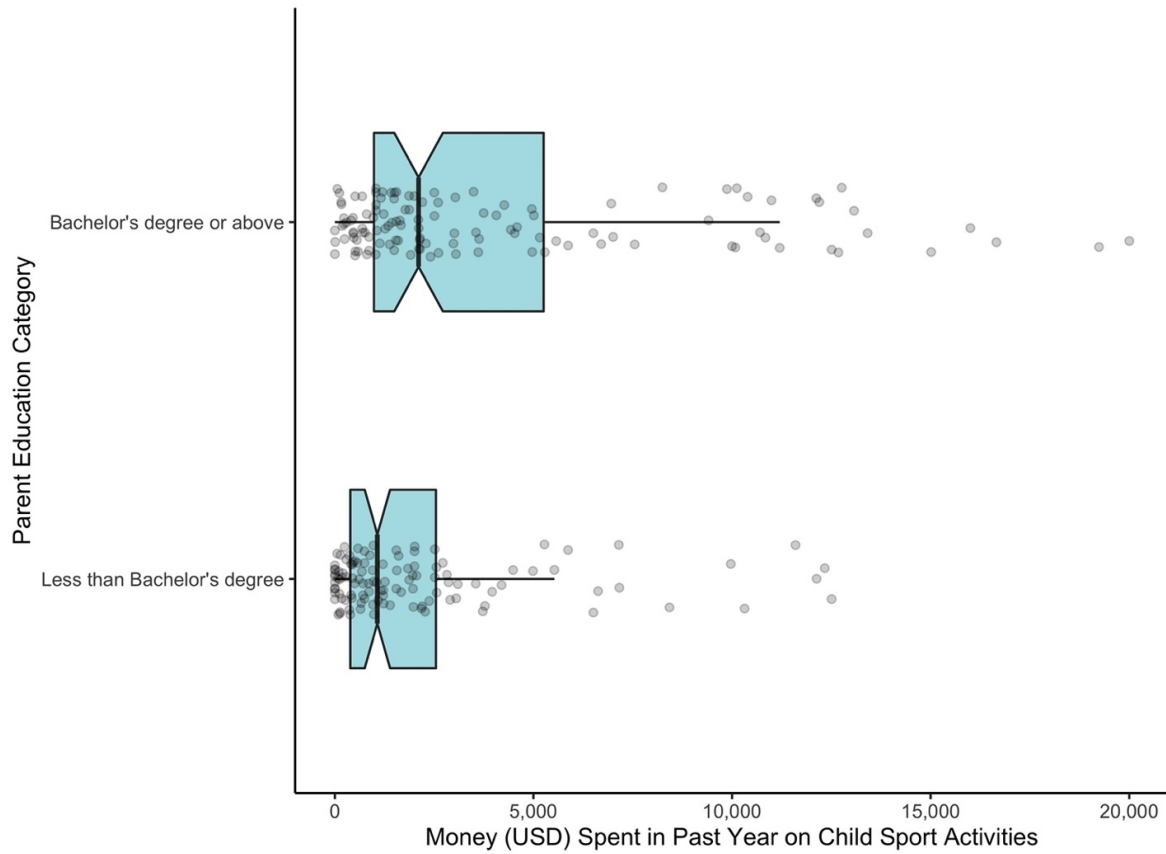


Figure 2. Comparison of money spent in past year on child’s basketball activities between parent education categories.

Presented as a notched box plot, with box representing interquartile range (IQR), whiskers representing range of 1.5 times the IQR, line indicating median, notch displaying 95% confidence interval of the median, and individual data points for each parent.



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