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Fewer Children Play Team Sports

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By RYAN WALLERSON

Updated Jan. 31, 2014 12:44 a.m. ET



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Participation in high-school football fell 2.3% in the 2012-13 season from 2008-09. *Washington Post/Getty Images*

If there's an unofficial national day for America's sports passion, it is Super Bowl Sunday, and one of the largest U.S. television audiences of 2014 is expected to watch the Seattle Seahawks face the Denver Broncos.

But ahead of this weekend's spectacle in New Jersey, there is some sobering news about the country's most-popular team sports: Fewer children are playing them.

Combined participation in the four most-popular U.S. team sports—basketball, soccer, baseball and football—fell among boys and girls aged 6 through 17 by roughly 4% from 2008 to 2012, according to an examination of data from youth leagues, school-sports groups and industry associations.

During those five years, the population of 6-to-17-year-olds in the U.S. fell 0.6%, according to the U.S. Census.

Organized sports have long been regarded as a valuable defense against increasing rates of disease-inducing inactivity among America's youth.



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Lacrosse participation was up 158% in 2012 from 2008. *Washington Post/Getty Images*

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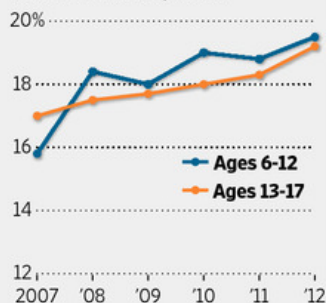
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40% of Americans say they would encourage their children to play a different sport than football due to concerns about concussions, according to a new Wall Street Journal/NBC poll. Photo: Getty

the period.

Slowing Down

Percentage of U.S. youths involved in no physical activity over a 12-month period.



Source: SFIA/Physical Activity Council survey of nearly 70,000 households and individuals

The Wall Street Journal

Declines in youth sports participation could bear long-lasting consequences, says William W. Dexter, a Maine physician who is president of the American College of Sports Medicine. "It is much more likely," he says, "that someone who is active in their childhood is going to remain active into their adulthood."

The trend has business implications, too. U.S. baseball-bat sales in 2012 fell 18% from 2008 sales in dollar terms, while football sales dropped about 5% and team-uniform sales for basketball and soccer were flat, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, a trade group.

From 2011 to 2012, total sporting-goods dollar sales rose 2.1%, half the projected increase, the SFIA says. While the association doesn't poll members about the reasons for the soft sales, "there is certainly the potential for those declines to be connected" with decreases the SFIA has noted in youth-sport participation, says VJ Mayor, the association's research director.

In recent decades, while some outdoor play—climbing trees, jumping rope, playing tag—faded as a childhood pastime, organized sports remained relatively strong. But that bright spot is dimming.

While football still draws crowds to the TV set, participation in the sport in U.S. high schools was down 2.3% in the 2012-13 season from the 2008-09 season, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations. High-school basketball participation fell 1.8% in

While high-school baseball participation rose 0.3% in the period, some data on the next generation of players presage a decline: Little League baseball—the biggest children's baseball league—reports that U.S. participation in its baseball and softball leagues in 2012 was 6.8% below that in 2008.

Signs of that dwindling participation among younger players show up in other popular sports, too. A new survey by the SFIA and the Physical Activity Council, a nonprofit research agency funded by seven trade groups, found that participation by players aged 6 through 14 in organized football in 2012 was 4.9% below that in 2008.

Basketball participation fell 6.3% in the 6-to-14 group during that period, according to the survey of nearly 70,000 households and individuals.

Even soccer, which has seen strong gains in recent decades, shows signs its numbers are stagnating. The high-school federation

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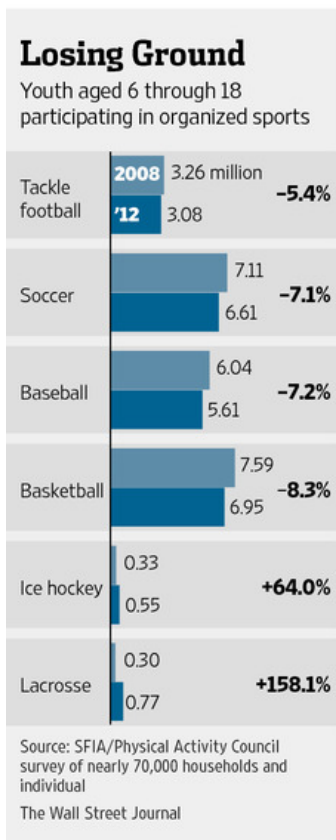


reports that soccer participation was up 7.4% in the 2012-13 season from 2008-09. But the United States Soccer Federation, which governs U.S. youth soccer leagues other than school-based leagues, says its youth soccer participation was flat between 2008 and 2012.

The causes of declines in youth sports aren't clear. Experts cite everything from increasing costs to excessive pressure on kids in youth sports to cuts in school physical-education programs.

In Ohio, where the high-school federation data show high-school participation in basketball fell 15% to about 39,400 during the five years ended last spring, the less-elite players are going missing, says Greg Nossaman, president of the Ohio High School Basketball Coaches Association. "The kid who practices hard and who takes pride in being part of the team but who gets only a few minutes in the game—that kid has too many other options," says Mr. Nossaman, head basketball coach at Olentangy Liberty High School in Powell, Ohio.

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Fifteen-year-old Jessica Cronin is the daughter of a former three-sport high-school athlete. But Jessica doesn't participate in high-school sports, choosing to spend her time outside of class volunteering in her community and going to her temple youth group each Wednesday. "I considered doing track, but it takes up so much time," said Ms. Cronin, a sophomore at Bethlehem Central High School in Delmar, N.Y.

Social networking, videogames and other technology may be drawing children away from sports. As many as 140 kids used to try out for 45 slots on the baseball team at Shawnee Mission North High School in Overland Park, Kan. Today, fewer than 45 kids try out, says George Sallas, the school's athletic director.

"Kids are more trained now to stay at home and play videogames," he says. "Sports don't intrigue them."

The main reason kids fall away from youth sports "is that the sport isn't fun to the child," says Michael Bergeron, Executive Director of the National Youth Sports Health & Safety Institute. "We have to be aware of single sport specialization, overuse, overworking kids searching for the elite athletes; all of these things are causing kids to leave youth sport and not

return."

Football faces another hurdle: growing concern that concussions and other contact injuries can cause lasting physical damage.

Several high-profile former players have said they wouldn't want their kids to play the game—a sentiment echoed by the nation's sports-fan-in-chief. "If I had a son," President Barack Obama told New Republic Magazine in one of multiple interviews he has given on the subject, "I'd have to think long and hard before I let him play football."

Some public-health officials believe the risks associated with playing football and other sports are overblown, especially compared with the risks of not playing anything at all. "In terms of overall health, I'm more concerned about an inactive child than a child suffering a head injury," says Cedric X. Bryant, Chief Science Officer for the American Council on Exercise.

Dr. Bryant says he worries that media attention on the safety risks of contact sports may be turning parents against not only football but also hockey, baseball and soccer.

The soccer-participation data may be the biggest surprise, because the sport has been one of the brightest spots in U.S. sports.

In the past quarter century, Americans have embraced the sport, giving rise to Major League Soccer and making heroes of U.S. women's Olympic teams. Among American youth, participation grew in leagues governed by the U.S. Soccer Federation to about four million in 2007 from about two million in 1990.

Then growth sputtered. From 2008, the annual number hovered around four million. In 2012, the last year for which the figures are available, the number of youth soccer players in the federation fell slightly below four million.

The SFIA/Physical Activity Council survey, which included youth league and school-based participation, found a steeper drop in the period, with soccer participation down 7.1% in the 6-to-18 age group.

"Booms like the one we experienced can't go on forever," says a soccer federation spokesman. "A ceiling or end to such rapid growth is to be expected. I see the fact that we've maintained this high point of participation among kids as more important than the fact that the rapid increase has reached its end."

The shift in youth participation worries youth-health officials who see organized sports as an antidote to growing problems like youth obesity. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has noted a sharp increase in youth obesity since the 1980s.

The percentage of inactive 6-to-12-year-olds—youths involved in no physical activities over a 12-month period—rose to near 20% in 2012 from 16% in 2007, according to the SFIA/Physical Activity Council survey. Inactive 13-to-17-year-olds rose to 19% from 17%.

Because organized sports provide supervision, coaching, structure, social interaction and team-building skills, many health experts believe they represent an ideal solution to youth inactivity. "Youth sports can become the choice solution to the public-health problem based around inactivity," says Dr. Bergeron of the sports-health institute.

Sporting-goods sellers are concerned as well. So far, new products and rising prices have helped sustain sporting-goods dollar sales, says a spokesman for the National Sporting Goods Association, which represents sporting-goods retailers and dealers. But, he says, "decreases in team sports participation are a significant concern in the long run for sporting goods retailers who sell team sports equipment."

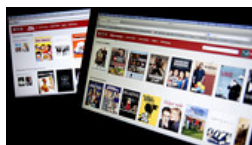
There are a few rising stars in youth sports. By one estimate, from the SFIA/Physical Activity Council survey, 770,000 youth participated in organized lacrosse in 2012, up 158% from its 2008 estimate. The sport uses many of the same skills as football, though with less contact, and may be gaining some participation from football's losses.

The survey showed ice-hockey participation growing 64% from 2008 through 2012 among the 6-to-18 age group. But that sport, too, is small: The council estimates that 549,000 youth played it in organized teams in 2012, compared with about seven million participants in basketball and 6.6 million in soccer.

—Sara Germano contributed to this article.

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