











CHANGETHE GAME RESEARCH A study focused on youth sport access, engagement, and equity factors in the wake of the pandemic.

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KEY INSIGHTS

& FINDINGS



ABOUT THIS REPORT

COVID-19 and the public health restrictions introduced as a result of the pandemic have had a stoppage effect on the organized sport sector. This includes league and competitive offerings, Sport For Development* programs, and youth sport opportunities in community, recreation, and public settings.

Recent global events have further heightened attention on societal inequities related to the status of women and girls and both Black and Indigenous communities.

Considered as a whole, the pandemic and other current events have both exacerbated and raised awareness of pre-existing disparities across race, gender, ability, income level, and geographies regarding opportunity and capacity to engage in sport.

In response, sport programming organizations, policy-makers, and funders are planning for a restart to the youth sport economy and are advocating to rebuild the sector despite many experiencing a severely depleted resource base.



Sport For Development

is a specific methodology that suggests the intentional use of sport and physical activity can build healthy communities and help people reach their full potential.

Equity research in the Canadian sport context to date has frequently emphasized age and gender distinctions, but the availability of sufficient data to support meaningful insights related to race, geography, household income, and other intersecting aspects of marginalization have been limited.



In response, MLSE Foundation launched the Change the Game Research Project, the largest study of its kind in Canada.

The study examined the impact of COVID-19 on youth sport, the demographics of access and engagement, barriers to participation and ideas for building a better sport system for Ontario's diverse youth.

Study Findings

In collaboration with Dr. Simon Darnell of the University of Toronto, an online survey of youth (aged 6-29) and their parents/guardians was conducted to better understand the current state of sport and Sport For Development offerings in Ontario in the wake of the pandemic. The study sheds light on who has been able to return to play, where, and in which contexts quality sport activities have been able – or unable – to resume.





SURVEY RESPONSE

In total, more than 6800 individual youth and parents from across Ontario participated in this research by sharing direct input related to their experiences with sport access, engagement, and equity factors in the wake of the pandemic.

The sample was robust and representationally diverse in terms of gender, age, geography, race, income, and disability status, and included youth who have collectively participated in more than 100 different sports as well as those who are not engaged in sport.

The survey questions were aligned with MLSE Foundation's overall Change the Game Campaign* and population surveys such as the Canadian Community Health Survey. Data collected included both qualitative and quantitative inputs.





The Change the Game Campaign

is dedicated to raising funds and awareness to address systemic barriers preventing youth from reaching their potential. Told through the lens of real kids MLSE Foundation works with, it shows us what's possible when you level the playing field. Our hope is that if we all play a role in changing the game, then every kid will have a fair chance to write their own story.

Learn more at mlsefoundation.org

All key insights and recommendations emerging from this research will be shared broadly across the sport and Sport For Development sectors including sport organizations, funders, policymakers, and researchers.

To access the data directly and learn more about how youth overall, from different regions, or from specific demographic groups responded, please visit mlsefoundation.org/how-we-give/research to access an interactive online dashboard of results and an anonymized open data set which can be downloaded for additional analysis.



EXPAND ACCESS TO FREE, LOW COST OR SUBSIDIZED YOUTH SPORT AND SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

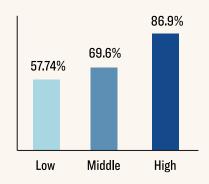
Youth across all income brackets cite affordability as the top priority for building sport back better. Where sport participation has been allowed throughout the pandemic outside of lockdown periods, these opportunities have been disproportionately accessed across income levels, with more than 1 in 3 youth from lower-income households reporting no sport participation since the start of the pandemic.

Crucially, the need to reduce the financial burden of sport participation, access, and equipment was identified as the top barrier to address across all demographic groups. This is true among youth from households earning more than \$90K per year, as well for youth from middle and lower-income households, and from youth with and without disabilities. Further, youth and parents from Northern Ontario and other regions of the province identified the challenges of accessing appropriate transportation and facilities – both in terms of cost and available regional infrastructure – as key barriers to being able to access sport opportunities.

"Cost and transportation are the main barriers for me before and during COVID."

Age 20, Indigenous, Female

Youth
Participation
in Sports
Over the
Last Two Years



Income Level

The intersections of geography and race on sport affordability factors show up in other parts of the province as well. Black youth from the GTA were almost 40% more likely to identify affordable sport opportunities as a key aspect of building back better relative to Black youth from outside of the GTA.



of youth indicated that free or affordable equipment was also an important way to make sport opportunities more accessible



of youth across income levels identified "making sport opportunities more **affordable**" as the top priority for the returning sport sector



of Black youth in the GTA identified affordability as a top priority to support their participation, compared to **47**% of Black youth from outside of the GTA



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Even if COVID ends and it is safe to play and organize, it is extremely hard for families and northern schools and clubs to plan and compete at the same level as those elsewhere. Can we extend subsidies or transportation infrastructure in other places?

— (Parent) Age 9, Indigenous, Female, Northeastern Ontario



(There is little) access to high level sports and general access to fields and gyms. Little to no basketball courts other than high school gyms (which are difficult to book) or safe grass fields for soccer and other sports. Thunder Bay's facilities are so far behind that many players leave the city for other very expensive opportunities.

- Age 16, White, Male, Northwestern Ontario

Building back better means that when sports come back that more people should have the chance to play sports, even if they can't afford them. My parents can afford to pay for me, but I know lots of kids who don't play sports because the costs are more than the parents can afford.





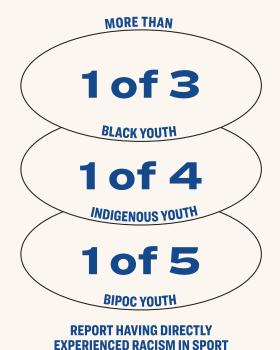


DEVELOP A CULTURE OF REPRESENTATION AND INCLUSION THAT IS SUPPORTED BY POLICIES AND PROCESSES

More than 1 out of every 3 Black youth, 1 of 4 Indigenous youth, and 1 of 5 BIPOC youth report having directly experienced **racism** in sport. When asked about discrimination rather than racism specifically, those numbers rise. Further, less than 1 out of every 3 Black or Indigenous

youth report having someone they can talk to if they experience racism or discrimination in a sport environment. When reimaging a way forward, the below areas received broad support for rebuilding a sport system that is more welcoming, inclusive, and culturally relevant for youth.

Creating an inclusive sport environment where the individual identities of teammates are welcomed by their fellow players and participants, and where individual cultures are acknowledged and respected at an organizational level, is important. Across all identified racialized groups "organizations that respect my culture" was identified as a necessary perquisite in building sport back better.





BIPOC youth were 237% more likely to identify "organizations that respect my culture" as a key aspect of building back better than youth overall. At least 20% of Indigenous youth, Black youth, Middle Eastern youth, Latinx youth, Asian youth and Bi-Racial youth identified this as important.

For each of the eight different BIPOC categories, at least 1 out of every 5 youth indicated this was important, with this being especially important for groups such as Black, Middle Eastern, and South Asian youth. Recognizing that BIPOC is an acronym which does not represent a homogenous community, to properly respect, acknowledge and create a welcoming environment for different cultural identities, it is important that organizations and policy makers do not treat BIPOC youth in a one-size-fitsall way, and instead tailor their approaches to the needs of the communities they serve.

"Teammates accepting who I am" was iden-

tified as an important aspect of building back better by more than 40% of Black youth, South

Asian youth, Southeast Asian youth, youth with dis-

abilities, lower-income youth, and girls.

For hiring practices and workforce development, groups such as Black and South Asian youth and girls, for example, were more likely to list "coaches that look like me" as an important way to improve

sport. Black youth specifically were **370%** more likely to prioritize this factor compared to white youth. Where **1 in 8** youth overall identified this as an important factor for a better sport system, its relative importance is heightened for specific populations as 1 out of every 3 Black youth and 1 in 5 South Asian youth identify it as important to them.



WHY DEVELOP A CULTURE OF REPRESENTATION AND INCLUSION THAT IS SUPPORTED BY POLICIES AND PROCESSES?

"Racist, sexist and homophobic language seems to be common in all dressing rooms."

Age 17, Mixed Race, Male, Toronto Region

"It is time for youth sport to have a good look at systemic sexism and racism. Look at the makeup of the youth teams, most do not represent the local community even when cost is removed from equation."

> Age 17, East Asian, Female, Toronto Region

"In a high-level team you have to keep quiet or you could risk losing your spot."

Age 29, White, Male, Toronto Region

"Building back better means giving attention to all age and skill groups. Playing for an under-22 competitive female hockey team it was clearer than ever during the pandemic that certain age groups and higher skill level teams, were given more attention and opportunities and especially boys teams over girls."

Age 20, Female, Hamilton-Niagara "It is hard to call out racism when it happens, (I'm) afraid it will prevent him from getting ice time. This needs to stop... skills (are) not what gets you on a team, it is who you know and who can offer sponsorship for things on the team."

(Parent) Age 16, Black, Male

1 out of 5



South Asian Youth

1 out of 3



Black Youth

Identify "coaches that look like me" as an important way to build back better compared to 1 out of every 8 youth overall.

Black youth were 370% more likely to cite this as important than white youth.



DESIGN POST-PANDEMIC PLANS AROUND WHY YOUTH PLAY

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Look, I just want to play hockey. It will be my last year before I go to university. My association cannot promise that I will be on a team next year because they don't know what kind of numbers they have. I won't get to play with my friends possibly. We've lost so much hockey already and it makes me really sad and anxious.

I would like the associations to look at their numbers and reach out with better communication to their loyal members to get their girls back on the ice. I'm a Pakistani girl playing hockey. There are not a lot of girls from my culture on the ice and I need to continue to represent! Some ice is better than no ice.

Age 16, South Asian, Female, Toronto Region



What were the most popular reasons for participation among youth who had access to sport during the pandemic?

For a majority, the strongest overall motivators driving participation were the availability of a sport they liked, the ability to participate with friends or teammates who welcomed them, and sound health and safety protocols

In other words: Is it fun, is it social, and is it safe?

Youth from low-income households were more likely to list a combination or all these factors. Adaptive sport offerings were cited both by youth with a disability and by more than 1 out of every 4 youth overall.

Youth and parents from higherincome households were more likely to cite performance-related motivators such as appropriate level of competition, or access to quality coaches to support growth in sport skills.



"Building back better requires equity in facility time for girls (womens) and boys (mens) ... in my organization, girls pay more for less, for poorer quality facilities, at worse times."

Age 13, Indigenous, Female, Kingston-Pembroke

Sound health and safety protocols were especially important to youth from low-income households as well as youth from across all BIPOC categories. Altogether, from elite to recreational sport, from Sport For Development to learn-to-play, school sports, social leagues and everything in between – there are a variety of motivations, considerations, and accessibility needs across the entirety of the sport spectrum.

Regardless of environment, however, the context of COVID-19 has **fuelled demand** for a system that provides a variety of options for sport and for programs which are accessible, fun, social and safe.





"(Building back better) means making sure all sports are important. We have a community centre with three arenas in it and a pool and a gym.

They are letting swimmers go and hockey players but they aren't letting basketball players book the gym. I think that is discrimination."

Age 11, Mixed Race, Female, Kitchener-Waterloo



65.5% cited sports they like being available as key for their participation



65.4%

identified the opportunity to play with friends as key for their participation



53.4%

reported feeling welcomed as part of the team as key for their participation



52.1%

called for sound health and safety regulations as key for their participation



26.5%

listed access to adaptive sport offerings as key for their participation





INVEST IN SPORT TO BUILD COMMUNITY BELONGING

Investing in sport infrastructure and access to opportunities at a community level is a vehicle for improving youth sense of belonging in that community.

When controlling for demographics and the ability to access opportunities, **participation in sport** had a significant impact on a youth's likelihood to report sense of belonging to their local community as strong or very strong.

Race, disability status, and geography also impacted sense of belonging, and youth who have participated in sports in the last two years were much more likely to have a higher sense of belonging to their local community than youth who have not accessed sport opportunities.

Youth who had participated in sports within the past two years were 91% more likely to list a very strong sense of belonging to their community.

In the Toronto region, for example, this is higher than the average as reported in the Toronto Foundation's 2019/2020 Vital Signs Report, and especially so for youth. Importantly, sense of community belonging and connection among youth active in sport pre COVID-19 remained high, despite lower rates of sport accessibility and participation rates overall throughout the pandemic

These findings were strongest among newcomer youth, and youth from the GTA, Northern Ontario and Southwestern regions of Ontario.

26%

of youth who have been able to access sport opportunities had a very strong sense of community belonging, compared to

5%

of youth who have not accessed a sport opportunity within the past two years

74.5%

of youth who participated in sports in the last two years had a very strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging to their community





REIMAGINE YOUTH SPORT BEYOND COVID-19

THE CHALLENGE

The impact of COVID-19 on sport access and engagement is drastic.

Declines in the frequency of sport participation overall have been steep alongside changes to both how and where youth have been able to access opportunities. Whereas youth have reported a slight uptick in their engagement of individual sport and physical activities such as running, strength training, or conditioning, the growth is marginal relative to much larger declines in team and facility-based sports such as soccer, basketball, hockey, swimming, and baseball.

Although different virtual initiatives have been introduced across the sector, the increase in virtual engagement has been modest relative to the larger proportions of youth who previously enrolled in sport or recreation offerings in-person and who are no longer able to participate.

Compounding these declines, several youth who have relied on Ontario's school system for accessible opportunities and competition have now experienced two consecutive years of disruption from contract disputes in the education system pre-pandemic to COVID-19 restrictions during the pandemic.

THE OPPORTUNITY

The extent to which organized sport has effectively been shut down in Ontario presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity: to experience what life is like without sport, to evaluate and reflect on what is important, and to reimagine a better way for youth to develop through sport.

When Ontario's youth were invited to share open-ended feedback about their experiences, barriers to participation, and what the idea of "building back better" means to them, the responses were extensive and passionate. Sentiments expressed by youth across all demographics and regions of the province were overwhelmingly of frustration and sadness about the loss of sport and the desire for a future sport system that considers both the game and crucially, what it represents in their lives beyond the game: a sense of purpose and connection, a place to inspire goals and make friends, an opportunity to learn about other people and places, and an environment where they can belong.

Ontario's youth have told us what they want.

Let's rebuild it better.

Let's change the game.

REIMAGINE YOUTH SPORT BEYOND COVID-19

(CONT.)

Less than half of youth who played a team sport pre-pandemic are engaged in their sport now.

When controlling for other demographic factors, girls and young women as well as South Asian and Southeast Asian youth are less likely to be participating relative to youth overall.



"Sports should always be competitive, and that environment is so great, but we need to look at why so many people drop sports in the latter years of high school (especially girls). Coaching and these environments are pushing people away. We need to find a balance between competitive and fun."

Age 20, Female, Ottawa Region



"School sports need to come back strong. It is the one place in real life where almost every kid is."

Age 17, White, Male, Toronto Region



"We cannot settle for the same level of normal that we had before. Thousands of youth are not able to access sport because of cost. Sport and recreation are vital to mental health and if we improve access to sport and recreation, we improve mental health."

Age 23, Female, Windsor-Sarnia

Less than **25%** of youth are participating in a sport activity more than once per week, compared to more than 70% pre-pandemic

More than **30%** of girls and young women report being less interested in playing sports now compared to pre-pandemic



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPORT AND RECREATION PROVIDERS

01

Design sport and program plans around the primary reasons for why youth play. Regardless of the type of sport organization, prioritize engagement outcomes and values which reinforce experiences that are safe, social, accessible, and fun.



Review recruitment and hiring practices for coaches, staff, and volunteers to increase representation among leaders and in positions visible to youth.

06

Maintain sound health and safety protocols as society and the sport economy reopens. There is a strong demand among youth and parents for returning to play and sport inperson despite the pandemic. Health and safety will remain top of mind for youth, even as sport reopens.

04

Create a welcoming environment and embed culturally relevant approaches into operations, programming, and team-building activities.

08

Conduct needs assessments to optimize the allocation of facility spaces, considering an intersectional lens including sport type, gender equity, competition level and community access.

Understand access, equity and engagement issues to youth sport within your own membership and community. Review and discuss these findings for internal relevancy and consider collecting racial and other demographic data on an ongoing basis to set targets and track progress, as well as to better understand who you serve and how associated barriers and engagement needs evolve over time.

07

Be a good neighbour and engage with key stakeholders, organizations and businesses in the community that you operate and serve. Sport infrastructure and spaces can lead to a ripple effect for youth to belong and be part of the fabric of a community.

02

Review and reflect on the recommendations of the <u>Truth and Reconciliation Commission</u> of Canada with a special focus on the calls to action #87-91 related to sport and reconciliation.

09

Offer inclusive and adapted opportunities within your sport. Calls for increased adapted sport opportunities were important for athletes identifying as having a physical disability, athletes identifying as having an indivisible or mental health disability, as well as 1 out of every 4 youth overall.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS AND POLICYMAKERS

01

Expand investment by supporting additional free, low cost or subsidized sport opportunities for youth.

Recognizing the financial barriers identified by youth and parents, integrate a holistic and inclusive approach to expanding participation that considers equipment, transportation and other ancillary costs and that would enable youth to access available opportunities.

02

Rethink the funding formula for youth sport to reduce the reliance on and need for high participation fees while considering the precarious financial position that many sport programming organizations are in due to the pandemic. This is supported by multiple sources from the past year including both by MLSE Foundation's Change the Game research on the affordability of youth sport, and findings of the Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities, Jumpstart State of Sport Report (March 2021) on the financial and organizational capacity impacts of COVID-19 on sport and recreation providers.

03

Apply an intersectional or equity lens with the goals of creating a workforce development strategy that considers all facets of Ontario's youth sport economy. This should include staff and volunteer positions and recruitment across sport, Sport For Development, administration, and major events as well as mentorship and career development pathways, and strive to elevate opportunities for youth participating in sport to learn from a workforce that is as visibly diverse as the community around them.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS AND POLICYMAKERS

(CONT.)

04

Prioritize access and engagement outcomes in postpandemic strategies and investments which ensure grassroots sport opportunities are widely accessible, inclusive and fun. Recognizing that the debate regarding the appropriate long-term balance of resources allocated to performance versus play will likely continue, in the interim this research supports investment in youth sport which addresses the key participation factors identified by Ontario's children and youth: Expanding opportunities for youth to resume play and competition in environments which are fun, safe, and accessible.

Engage in active and ongoing needs assessment and asset mapping related to organizational capacity to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion priorities. Create and invest in coordinated strategies and approaches toward developing collective EDI capacity and competence across the youth sport system including policies, best practices, shared data collection methodologies, and training resources. Focus on organizations that have a high interest in improving their EDI practices but that may currently have a limited capacity to implement such strategies or may not know where to begin.

Invest in community youth sport initiatives in contexts where belonging, community connectedness, and social capital are issues. Recognize sport infrastructure and sport opportunities for youth to access said infrastructure as a means toward achieving their outcomes.





RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

01

Recognizing that this research was conducted with COVID-19 gathering restrictions of varying degrees in place in different parts of Ontario, a 2.0 or follow-up study should be conducted after the youth sport economy has fully reopened. This research should chart progress, examine whether key findings were acutely driven by the context of COVID-19, and establish a post-pandemic baseline or "new normal" for the demographics of youth sport participation in Ontario.

02

The demographic nature of the survey, and the ways its questions were constructed, should be used for comparisons to other openly accessible data sets, such as those from Statistics Canada, neighbourhood asset maps made available through municipalities, or those focused on regional cost of living indicators and urban to rural analysis. NOTE: An anonymized version of the Change the Game data is available for download **HERE**, and interested researchers and data professionals from across the sector are encouraged to use it to advance further exploration, analysis, and discovery of important insights to guide youth sport forward.



03

Recognizing that population surveys are suited towards identifying population-level baselines, trends, and insights, targeted qualitative follow-up research should be conducted in order to develop a deeper understanding of how the themes of this research may be reflected at the level of a specific community.

04

Recognizing specific insights from this study regarding the intersection of sport and sense of community belonging, and the frustration, sadness and emotions resulting from the loss of sport, should be studied further as they relate to the state of youth sport and broader place-based investment planning. Additional research is also recommended that focuses on sport as a component of a sense of belonging for youth, compared to other factors. As well, examinations should be conducted into the role of sport in post-pandemic recovery and the mental health burden of young athletes - and youth overall - emerging from COVID-19 lockdown measures.



END NOTES

This report may be cited as: MLSE Foundation, Change the Game Research: A study focused on sport access, engagement, and equity factors in the wake of the pandemic, (July 2021).

All key insights from this research will be shared broadly across the sport and Sport For Development sectors including with sport organizations, funders, policymakers, and researchers.

The Change the Game research project was supported with funding from the MLSE Foundation and Mitacs Inc, with ethical oversight provided by the Canadian Community Research Ethics Office (CREO).

The following individuals and organizations are acknowledged and appreciated for their contributions in making the Change the Game research project possible.



To access the data directly and learn more about how youth overall or from different regions or demographic groups responded to the questions, please visit https://www.mlsefoundation.org/how-we-give/research to access an interactive online dashboard of results and an anonymized open data set which can be downloaded for additional use.

Change the Game Research Team

- Bryan Heal, Change the Game Project Lead
- Daniel Sailofsky, Mitacs Research Fellow
- Marika Warner, Director of Research & Evaluation, MLSE LaunchPad
- Simon Darnell, Academic Advisor & Associate Professor, Sport For Development and Peace, University of Toronto
- Jackie Robinson, Research & Evaluation Coordinator, MLSE LaunchPad

Change the Game Research Advisory

- Lisa McLaughlin, Director of Philanthropy & Operations, MLSE Foundation
- Quazance Boissoneau, Manager of Indigenous Education & Engagement, Humber College
- Richard Norman, Post-Doctoral Fellow, Ryerson University
- Farah Bastien, Director of Data Science & Engineering, MLSE
- Paul Holley, Research Director, Association of Canadian Studies
- Shannon Travers, Manager of Sport Development, MLSE
- Jason Vescovi, Research
 Associate, University of Toronto
- Sonya Silva, Manager of Engagement, MLSE LaunchPad

Change the Game Research Collaborative Partners

- University of Toronto
- Leger
- MLSE Digital Labs
- Young Canadian Roundtable on Health (YCRH)

Change the Game Outreach and Data Specialists

- Chantal Pac, Member Services, MLSE LaunchPad
- Olu Paynter, Youth Mentor, MLSE LaunchPad
- Geoff Voisin, Member Services, MLSE LaunchPad
- Vanessa Wallace, Youth Sport Coach, MLSE LaunchPad
- Quinton Lindsay, Youth Sport Coach, MLSE LaunchPad
- Farah Abdullah, Research
 Volunteer, MLSE LaunchPad/
 MLSE Foundation
- Curtis Lue, Research Volunteer, MLSE LaunchPad/MLSE Foundation
- William Reyes, Data Engineer, MLSE
- Nicole Ridout, Data Engineer, MLSE







LET'S CHANGE THE GAME.