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Out-of-school youth sport in the United States is bigger, more varied, and more impactful than ever before. In dialogue with existing scholarship, this paper uses multisite, collaborative fieldwork to identify core elements of program variation and develop a composite typology of this organizational field. The typology is based on a distinction between “sport-focused” programs and programs oriented toward nonsport social and developmental goals. Our primary insight is that programs within these domains exhibit two different organizational logics, one hierarchical, the other categorical. We also argue that variabilities of funding, social context, and reliance on public facilities are additional factors that impact the operation and effectiveness of these program types including their ability to address the racialized challenges of access, equity, and inclusion. Theorizing these differential configurations and their underlying characteristics can help parents, policymakers, practitioners (including coaches), and sports researchers engage youth sports more effectively under increasingly competitive neoliberal conditions.

The United States is a sport-obsessed nation that has long boasted one of the highest youth participation rates in the world (Stempel, 2020). However, research on American youth sports remains surprisingly limited and narrowly focused (Messner & Musto, 2014, 2016). For example, even though the size, scale, and scope of interscholastic athletics are a distinctive feature of American sport (Hartmann & August, 2019), existing research on school-based athletics focuses mostly on elite-level competition and training (Hextrum, 2021; Tompsett & Knoester, 2021); nonsport outcomes such as educational attainment and development (cf. Anderson-Butcher, 2019; Bruner et al., 2021); and disparities in access, opportunity, and participation (Hartmann & Manning, 2016; Meier et al., 2018; Snellman et al., 2015; Zarett et al., 2020)—not youth sport itself. A particularly neglected and increasingly consequential aspect of youth sport in America is the programming provided by out-of-school organizations and programs (Doherty et al., 2014). This paper focuses on this latter set of private and civic sector athletic organizations, leagues, tournaments, and other activities—that is, organized youth sports not based in schools.

Out-of-school, competitive youth athletics have a long history in the United States (Smith & Gould, 2019; Wiggins, 2013). Nevertheless, in the early 21st century, the range of options for youth sport and other related forms of physical activity is greater and more varied than ever. In addition to the traditional seasonal sports organized by parents or community volunteers and sponsored by civic organizations, public playgrounds, or community parks, this now includes travel teams and private athletic clubs; year-round competition, specialized training centers and academies; new leagues, tournaments, and levels of competition at local, regional, and national levels; entirely new sports; and the “sportification” of all physical pursuits and recreational activities. And this is not even to mention the vast array of after-school, weekend, and summer programs—religious, recreational, educational, and otherwise—that include physical and competitive activities as a regular programming element.

The existence of this large and largely de-centralized collection of organizations, activities, and programs raises vital questions about the origins and appropriate goals of youth sport, its efficacy in implementation, and the actual impacts of participation. The aforementioned problems of access, equity, and inclusion, and the role of these activities in perpetuating economic, racial, and gender inequalities are also directly implicated. However, our primary goal in this study is not to address such issues directly. Instead, we step back and generate a more basic sociological framework from which to approach them. Extending from previous work (Dorsch et al., 2022; Sabo & Veliz, 2008) and guided by organizational field theory, we identify the various social and programmatic factors that distinguish American out-of-school youth athletic programs from...
each other and then develop a typology by which to understand this organizational landscape taken as a whole. We do this through a series of linked ethnographic studies in a large midwestern city synthesized in dialogue with each other and existing research on youth sport and development. This exercise yields a multidimensional mapping of the American youth sport field with implications ranging from parental choice and program design to funding, resource allocation, and assessment.

This paper synthesizes what we learned about youth sports through this empirically driven, theory-building exercise. It is organized in three sections. After a review of the literature and methods, we first catalog the basic dimensions of variation among youth sports programs. We then offer an inventory of the interactions of these factors and develop an idealized typology of youth sports organizations and the different institutional configurations within which they operate. Here, we draw upon recent sport theorizing to argue that there is a crucial distinction between athletic programming focused primarily on sport and programs that purport to do more-than-sport, what is commonly called “sport-for-development (SFD).” Our primary insight and finding are that these two institutional domains are organized according to very different structuring logics—and that these logics and associated underlying factors have myriad implications for analyzing both the operation and impacts of youth sport participation. The third section provides a discussion of the practical and scholarly uses of this typology and sketches how these various types connect with funding patterns, social context, and reliance upon public facilities. The implications for access, equity, and diversity in a market-driven, neoliberal context are emphasized.

Theory, Literature, Data, and Methods

This project is motivated by the belief that youth sport in the United States is underresearched (see Messner & Musto, 2014) and, moreover, that there is an urgent need for a basic, baseline understanding of the primary characteristics and organizational forms that structure and define it. This impulse refers to McCormack and Chalip’s generative (1988) critique of sport socialization scholarship for relying upon an overly simplistic, one-dimensional conception of sport and its potential social impacts. Three main bodies of scholarship provide the foundation for this study: organizational field theory, existing sociological research on youth sport, and recent developments in collaborative and institutional ethnography.

We begin by theorizing out-of-school youth sport in the United States as an organizational “field”—not an “industry,” “institution,” “organization,” or a “system.” Following sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1985), we understand a field as a social space comprised of many different actors with various motivations and interests, all engaged in similar activities, organizations, and shared cultural understandings. Essentially, a field is a social setting in which various individual and organizational actors interact and “compete” according to commonly held rules, norms, resource allocations, and understandings particular to that specific setting or space (see also Martin, 2003). Bourdieu (1988) himself alluded to the logic of field as a comprehensive or “totalizing” space in laying out first principles for a proper sociology of sport:

In order to be able to constitute a sociology of sport, one must first realize that a particular sport cannot be analyzed independently of the totality of sporting practices; one must conceptualize the space of sporting practices as a system within which each element receives its distinctive value. In other words, to understand a sport, whatever it may be, one must locate [the] position of [any given sport] in the space of [all other] sports.

In sport studies, the notion of “field” has generally been used to test Bourdieu’s explanation of the relationships among sports participation, culture, and social class as well as of various associated social outcomes and inequalities (Bourdieu, 1978, 2013). Examples include how various cultural and economic factors influence participation in various sports (Wilson, 2002) or how athletic participation impacts educational attainment (White & McTeer, 1990). Stempel’s (2002) use of the U.S. National Health Interview Survey helped demonstrate how dominant upper-class communities use strenuous aerobic sports, moderate weight training, and competitive sports to draw boundaries between themselves and the middle and lower classes—findings “congruent with” both Lareau’s (2011) description of concerted cultivation, Manning’s (2019) race-centered critique of intensive parenting culture under neoliberalism, and Lamont’s (1992) analysis of upper- and middle-class boundary-making (Lamont & Lareau, 1988).1

In this study, we use the notion of “field” to capture the collection of various distinctive and uniquely positioned activities, organizations, and programs that define, support, and constitute out-of-school youth sport as it is structured and experienced in the United States today. (For a related, albeit more general treatment of out-of-school activity field, see: Malone & Donahue, 2018.) We believe field theory is particularly suited for this exercise because of the multifaceted, decentralized, and increasingly competitive, market-driven nature of organized, out-of-school American youth sport.2 The decentralized, privatized structure of the American field stands in stark contrast to the top-down, rationalized, and hierarchical system of youth sport in, for example, the European context (Sennett et al., 2022) or Canada. Dyck’s (2012) ethnographic depiction of the “systematizing of [youth] sport in Canada” is illustrative. Some of the features that Dyck calls attention to are recognizable to the U.S. readers (fees and other cash costs, e.g., or the reliance on volunteers), but the formal, systematic ways in which these are organized and justified by larger governing bodies (p. 32–38) are not. In other countries, formal athletic organizations govern all sports, and agencies with formal responsibilities exist at all levels (municipal, provincial, and federal) with established funding structures and clearly delineated ideological guidelines/goals. This is not the situation for the U.S. youth sports, especially those that operate outside of schools and interscholastic sports organizations and leagues. The American youth sport field is an inchoate landscape of extracurricular options, lacking central authority and unified goals, varying tremendously by activity, highly dependent on market forces and private funding, and yet relying hugely on public facilities.

At the program level, we draw from Klinenberg’s notion of “social infrastructure” (2018) to examine the often behind-the-scenes aspects that differentiate various organizations, programs, and approaches within youth sport. Previous ethnographic studies of specific sports or youth sports communities provide inspiration and context here: basketball and the Amateur Athletic Union scene (Brooks, 2009; May, 2008); little league baseball (Fine, 1987; Grasmuck, 2005); field hockey, figure skating, ice hockey, and ultimate frisbee (Eckstein, 2017); dance, soccer, and chess (Friedman, 2013); soccer (Andrews & Silk, 2012); and alternative or emerging sports (Rinehart, 2000; Wheaton, 2004). Research and theory on athletic organizations (Bohnert et al., 2010; Doherty et al., 2014; Perkins & Noam, 2007; Rail, 1988; Warner et al., 2012) as well as research on adolescent extracurricular activities more generally (cf. Eccles, 2005; Mahoney

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also help guide the identification of program-level differences. These include levels of participation, staffing, non-sport mission and goals, and broader, more social (or sociological) factors such as institutional infrastructure, facilities, equipment, funding, social context, and target population. Finally, the “SFD” literature provides an essential touchstone and fundamental distinction between sport-focused programs and those that use sport for other social and developmental purposes (Darnell, 2012; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Levermore & Beacom, 2009). This distinction will be developed in some detail below.

Data and Methods

To apprehend the field of out-of-school American youth sport, we conducted collaborative ethnographic fieldwork involving 12 researchers (two faculty members, eight graduate students, and two advanced undergraduates), each investigating youth sport sites with which they had particular interest, experience, or expertise. There was some overlap in sports under examination, and several team members collaborated on multiple sites. This team-based, multisite approach drew upon recent ethnographic efforts to study larger systems, globally or organizationally, by employing multiple researchers in various locations within the larger organization or field (Auyero & Swiston, 2009; Burawoy et al., 1991; Jarzabkowski et al., 2015; for sport studies’ examples, see: MacAlloon, 1999, 2013). Such a collaborative, team-based approach not only generates a large amount of information on a given organization or setting, but it helps coordinate both observations and analyses as well as avoid some of the idiosyncrasies and biases that can sometimes appear in fieldwork.

Our team-based approach also bridged institutional and organizational forms of ethnography. Like institutional ethnographies often associated with feminist approaches (DeVault, 2006; Smith, 2006), we shared sensibilities about diversity, equity, and the primacy of varied experiences (although the analyses presented here are not explicitly feminist nor focused only on gender). Similar to organizational ethnographies (e.g., Eberle & Maeder, 2021), we attended to the institutional setting and program properties shaping the experiences of individuals in specific, formal organizations such as workplaces or schools. By comparing the broader social forces and cultural dynamics across organizations, our team could grasp the nature of program design and qualities of any given site as well as their fit into and what they revealed about the field as a whole.

As part of this multisite, collaborative approach, each researcher on our team used their background in youth activities and sociological inquiry to produce detailed ethnographic descriptions of 14 different sites and their institutional contexts. Several researchers worked at multiple sites and/or collaborated across sites. We conducted informed, reflexive discussions of our decisions in studying activities regularly. Through these exchanges, we frequently examined our observations and styles of inquiry (Belgrave & Smith, 1995), which often redirected our collective attention to previously unnoticed processes occurring at the sites. Differences across sites often redirected researchers’ foci to their sites, helping us to gain a deeper understanding of the field at multiple levels in different contexts.

Field Sites

The programs and activities incorporated into this analysis are all based in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, a metropolitan region long noted for its investments in youth development, its vibrant civic culture, and its strong public infrastructure; the area is also becoming home to diverse communities of immigrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities. This project is part of a larger research initiative housed in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota called the Kids Involvement and Diversity Study. The Kids Involvement and Diversity Study project is a multimethod, collaborative attempt to better understand the structure and consequence of the new field of adult-supervised extracurricular youth activities. It includes intensive interviewing with a large and diverse sample of parents and children, mapping of activity sites and the demographics of participation, and archival work on the historical origins and evolution of youth programs and infrastructure across the country.

Table 1 lists the field sites and activities, identified by pseudonyms, on which this paper is based along with their respective type of organization and programming level(s). It includes 14 different organizations, encompassing seven different sports and two with multisport offerings. Three organizations were oriented or directed primarily to elite sports, four to recreational programming,
and four operated at the club level; three offered multiple participation levels. Regarding organizational types, we had three for-profit operations, seven nonprofits, and three government or public entities; one sport (the E-gaming community) operated without a formal organizing structure. Individual working papers on these research sites are archived and accessible at the project website: https://cla.umn.edu/sociology/research-collaboration/collaboration-opportunities/kids-involvement-and-diversity-study-0.

**Basic Dimensions of Variation**

We begin by identifying the dimensions of variation that we found to distinguish youth sports activities and programs from each other (see Table 2). Informed by previous research on American youth sport discussed above, we highlight both program-level differences—including levels and intensity of participation and non-sport mission and goals—and broader, more social (or sociological) factors such as institutional infrastructure, social context, and target population.

Many such projects would start from and emphasize “type of sport” as an important factor. Sports, after all, can be individual or team-focused, and they vary in the balance they demand between cooperation and competition. Having a wide range of athletic options is also one of the prominent features of the youth sports field in the contemporary United States. However, type of sport was not a point of emphasis for us. Early comparisons across field sites suggested that information about whether a child was playing soccer or tennis was less varied and significant than attending to how much they were training, who was coaching them, and their programs’ specific design and goals. Youth themselves said little about specific sports but had a lot to say about more general or generalizable phenomena like the quality of coaching, training, and facilities; the level of competition; and the broader benefits they believed to be associated with these athletic endeavors. We became convinced that what matters for kids’ experiences (and ultimate outcomes) is not any specific sporting practice but other factors, forces, and dimensions of variation.

**Levels of Participation**

One of the first and most obvious ways we observed that programs varied was in level of competition and intensity of involvement. Activity options span the range from emphasizing athletes considered the most eligible for the prizes highly valued within the fields of their sport (the U.S. National team memberships, college scholarships, and opportunities to play professionally) to those who were just learning the sport, or only participating casually or recreationally.

Our research on soccer, tennis, and gymnastics illustrated these differences. Our team investigated a large number of soccer sites around the Twin Cities and found an incredible array of competitive and not-so-competitive options made available by a range of different organizations. In tennis, we studied two different programs—a multisite, community-based program we called NETS, and upper-level specialty program we called ACES academy—and observed the very different levels of investment either required. Similarly, fieldwork at a large, multifaceted gymnastics club we called “Nordic” revealed how variations of level and intensity could exist within the same athletic club in providing options for families interested in different levels of commitment and competition from basic exercise and skills’ development all the way to Olympic-level training and meets.

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**Table 2 Dimensions of Variation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of sport</th>
<th>Athletic orientation</th>
<th>Level of competitiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participatory (developmental or recreational)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Elite</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Mission and goals     | Sport-focused                  | Elite athletic development and performance                                              |
|                       |                               | Competitive                                                                               |
|                       |                               | Participatory (developmental and recreational)                                         |
|                       |                               | Sport-for-development/“more-than-sport”                                                   |
|                       | Access/opportunity             |                                                                                         |
|                       | Recruitment, program enrichment|                                                                                         |
|                       | Education, youth development   |                                                                                         |
|                       | Intervention/risk prevention   |                                                                                         |
|                       | Community-building and social change |                                                                                     |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional infrastructure</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Facilities</th>
<th>Staffing</th>
<th>Social context and targeted programming</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender: boys, girls, and coed</th>
<th>Socioeconomic status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Across our sites, some programs and participants strove for elite-level performance and accomplishment, while others focused on local and regional competitiveness. Still, other programs and activities emphasize training and athletic skills building with others, mostly conceiving athletic activity as a means of physical fitness, recreation, or leisure. Even programs that used sport mainly to achieve other social and developmental goals exhibited substantial variation in the levels and intensity of participation. For example, the girls involved in Karen (a Southeast Asian refugee community in the Twin Cities) ethnic soccer participate in community-wide games throughout most of the year, but the regularity and intensity of their play changed during high school soccer season. For the youth who participate in lacrosse, the frequency of play and the athletic rigor depend on the organization and resources providing instruction. Youth in the “Squared Circle” boxing club trained up to 5 hr per week, where intense and rigorous conditioning was the norm. In contrast, the Somali Summer outreach program used activities like volleyball, dodgeball, or competitive tag as part of their regular daily camp for the primarily Muslim children who attended, but these activities were not that different from having lunch or heeding the daily call to prayer. We also noted the extreme intensity and temporal devotion with which young E-sport players approach their activity, while the various Robotics teams we observed from across the state varied markedly in commitment from program to program.
Mission and Functions

If programs in our study varied in the extent to which they embraced and enacted competitive physical activity, they also differed dramatically in their motivations and goals for athletic participation. One of the most fundamental distinctions we identified here—informed by the “SFD” literature—was between those programs that focused primarily on sport (“sport-focused,” in our terms) and those that emphasized doing “more-than-sport”—that is, using sport participation to achieve other nonsport purposes and developmental goals. We discuss this distinction in some detail in the following sections. For the moment, it is important to note that a wide range of nonsport social benefits were claimed by almost all of the programs we studied—character building and life skills development, risk prevention, community-building, exposure to diversity, and racial socialization, to name a few—but some programs were more self-conscious about these claims and systematic in operationalizing them than others. What defined programs one way or the other for us was that they had actual program elements that implemented nonsport objectives in practice.

Social Context and Community Targeting

Guided by the sociological literature, we attended to the demographic composition and social context that impact athletic experiences and the outcomes they provide the youth who participate. Core social characteristics include class, gender, and race/ethnicity. Different cultural traits and social circumstances dictate that children and adolescents from different backgrounds and stages in life require different types of engagement, resources, assistance, guidance, and coaching—especially if program leaders try to achieve nonsport goals outside of, or in addition to, the development of physical and athletic competencies. This includes issues of access and opportunity, differential treatment, adjusting to cultural differences and styles, and a match between program leadership and familiarity with the target population. All of this has significant implications for who is allowed and most able to participate, the nature of the experience itself, and its larger benefits or drawbacks to participation; this speaks to the realities of uneven access, differential treatment, and unequal outcome benefits.

Programs based in distinct community settings (Doherty & Rich, 2015), or which were designed to serve specific groups of participants or provide opportunities for youth who might otherwise be left out of or marginalized from traditional athletic involvement are obvious examples of this. And we had several such field sites that targeted racial or ethnic groups—Karen soccer, for example, or the “Rooted” lacrosse program, or the Somali Summer outreach program. But we would also note that even programs that did not necessarily identify a specific target population also exhibited distinctive racial, economic, or gendered characteristics—say, a soccer program that serves primarily affluent, White suburban kids—just because its locale exhibits a distinctive demographic and community context. These characteristics play an important role in shaping the nature of the program and experiences offered.

Institutional Infrastructure

A final dimension of variation we foregrounded was “institutional infrastructure,” which refers to the organization, administration, and implementation of the sporting activity. This includes program funding, the facilities, and equipment a program utilizes, where these resources come from, who serves as coaches and support staff for various programming and activities (paid, professional staff vs. reliance on volunteers), and the processes by which programs and policies are developed and employed.

The range of organization of athletic experiences was, again, illustrated vividly in the case studies of traditional sports on soccer, tennis, and gymnastics: Each of these sports had radically different modes of institutional organization. Our soccer sites showed a broad range of programs and organizations with wide variations in access and cost, coaching, instruction, and facilities and equipment quality. In contrast, the gymnastics club we called “Nordic” revealed how a single, private club housed a range of program offerings that essentially ranged from entry-level skills development to Olympic-level training and competition, with varying time commitments. The two tennis programs we observed exhibited contrasting institutional infrastructures that were both somewhere in between in terms of the different ways in which they were funded (a combination of pay-to-play, subsidized programming, and outright scholarships), centralized programming across a range of sites, allocated staffing, and distributed program resources to different sites or levels of tennis activity.

Most of the programs and organizations had variations that were less pronounced than these; however, such stark contrasts provide a comparative context that highlights the different program structures and organizational characteristics that compose the activities and programs profiled. For instance, our boxing club presented a small, nonprofit organization that survived on public grants and private fundraising. The emerging new “sport” of robotics demonstrated how organizers and funders are borrowing both culturally and organizationally from athletics—more precisely, from interscholastic sport—both for innovative funding models (corporate sponsorships, specifically) and the organized, competitive structure of interscholastic high school sports leagues in Minnesota. In contrast, studying the E-gaming fighting community showed how somewhat culturally marginalized activities of competitive gaming are developing primarily on an essentially privatized, market-driven organizational model.

Funding sources and facilities supported these efforts. Public entities like parks and recreation associations and community education programs provided municipal-, county-, and state-level funds to operate some out-of-school programs. Private, for-profit businesses organize other sports clubs, leagues, and tournaments. Still, others are organized and sponsored by nonprofits like the YMCA and YWCA, the Amateur Athletic Union, the American Youth Soccer Organization, and several smaller local organizations, including a number of those described in this paper (e.g., the Kick It soccer organization, the ACES tennis club, both Rooted and Metro Native Lacrosse, and the Squared Circle Direction boxing gym). Finally, many activities involve partnerships among organizations: think privately owned travel teams with nonprofit booster clubs or parks and recreation leagues that host teams whose competitions are organized by nonprofit governing bodies.

Institutional infrastructure may be the most missed or misunderstood aspect of youth sports programs and activities we highlight in this study. Many coaches pay little to no attention to it, and most parents and participants are unaware of it. Like so much of what sociology studies, institutional infrastructure is backstage, contextual, and taken-for-granted. Yet, institutional infrastructure and organizational context impact everything from how an activity is experienced by participants to who it is accessible for to the benefits that result from participation.
Interactions and Organizational Configurations: Toward an Institutional Typology

Identifying the key dimensions of variation was just the first step toward better theorizing the field of out-of-school youth sports. The next step was to determine how these dimensions combine or tend to be configured. The various organizational types within the youth sport field began to emerge in these interactions and configurations. To envision existing organizational types and discern these larger institutional patterns, our research team conducted an inventory of all the combinations represented in our various field sites. Our initial reflections on the data and cases are compiled in Table 3, which itemizes characteristics that define each of the programs, organizations, and activities our team studied.

Initial Inventory

Several basic observations emerge from this inventory of cases and sites. First, as shown in Table 3, no single program or activity had the same combination as any other. This was surprising to us. Given the number of cases, we had figured that some of the programs—at least, for example, the sport-focused operations—would be the same or at least quite close. However, while there are similarities, each has a distinctive matrix of qualities and characteristics. This observation both underscores and amplifies one big, basic point about the youth sport field in the United States: It is not only large, but it is also composed of an incredibly diverse range of organizational types, activities, and assemblages.

Despite this top-level variation and complexity, closer attention suggests several emergent patterns. The most obvious of these involves the distinction between programs focused only or primarily on sports activities (“sport-focused”) and those working toward other nonsport missions, goals, or functions—what is, again, often called “SFD” in the literature. The lines between these can be blurry since programs can fulfill multiple and overlapping goals, and most programs in our study, like most across the country, justified and promoted themselves by claiming that program participation is associated with some nonsport developmental and social benefits. The key distinction for us, as noted above, is not whether such benefits were claimed but rather that concrete, nonsport program elements designed to implement and address these goals are offered. Working from this, our inventory of distinguishing characteristics and our on-the-ground fieldwork confirmed what the extant literature has suggested: that programs focused on sport only and look very different from those with dedicated programming oriented toward nonsport objectives and goals.

Programs that foreground athletic pursuits tend to offer more focused, less multifaceted programming and be less attentive to surrounding social factors like youth backgrounds or community characteristics. Youth skill level and competitiveness, usually at age-level, are the primary organizers. In general, sport-focused programs also appear to offer higher levels of athletic involvement and competition and are more likely to be privately funded. In contrast, organizations that operationalized nonsport program elements exhibit a broader range of programming (if only because they did not just do sport), and more diversity or range of youth served in any given activity. They often seemed to be targeted to particular social groups or communities, and there was also a lot more variation between them in how or to what extent they engaged sport.

The range of programming goals and associated activities offered by “more-than-sport” programs that purported “to use” sports and all manner of competitive physical activities “for” other, nonsport purposes was surprisingly large and varied. Some wanted to bring otherwise difficult-to-reach youth into their purview or ensure that participants would remain engaged in and committed to the program once they had come in the door. We think about this as “recruitment and retention,” which we saw in the Somali Summer youth outreach program. Other programs used sports for nonsport purposes that were more ambitious and directive than this. One variation was to use sport as a means for educational enrichment or social development and life skills training (or both) similar to historical organizations such as the YMCA, YWCA, or Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs. Such an orientation was perhaps best represented in our study by the Robotics league and the NETS tennis summer reading program. Our fieldwork revealed other additional or alternative goals and orientations as well. Ethnic solidarity and community-building, again, was the focus for Karen ethnic soccer as well as for the Native-targeted “Roots” boxing program. The community-based “Squared Circle” boxing program focused on social intervention and risk prevention illustrates yet another distinct dimension for a population considered uniquely challenging or “at-risk” (Giulianotti et al., 2019; Hartmann, 2015; Kelly, 2013, 2011; Nichols, 2004). What is key here is not just the range of nonsport objectives these youth athletic programs worked toward, it is that they tried to achieve the goals even as they offered athletic experiences across different levels of competition and intensity at the same time.

We must be careful about drawing overly general conclusions from the patterns suggested via this inventory of cases since our study is not a systematic or formally representative sample of programs, organizations, and activities in the field. To wit: the fact that about half of the programs in our study offer sport-oriented programming exclusively, while the other half do some variation of sport for nonsport goals (or some mix thereof) is a product of the choices we made in selecting field sites (as well as constructing this table itself) and not necessarily representative of the field as a whole. Similarly, it is not the case that youth sports programs that perform nonsport functions are the only programs that targeted (or target) communities of color or kids with fewer resources. Nevertheless, the patterns and relationships suggested by organizing our case studies in this fashion can be helpful guides in theorizing, surveying, and analyzing the American out-of-school youth sport field. More than this, combining these findings and observations with what has been previously documented in the research literature provides the foundation for a more general, idealized typology of the entire organized, out-of-school youth athletics field in the United States. It is that theory-building exercise to which we now turn.

Organizational Typology

Table 4 presents an idealized conceptual grid of the various types of out-of-school youth sports activities and organizations that constitute the American youth athletic field. It is derived from the key features and configurations identified in our team’s field studies in concert with existing research and theory on youth sports. To illustrate each type, we have listed programs and sites from our study and added (in brackets) some examples of other familiar programs, organizations, and activities.

The typology begins with, and is based upon, the aforementioned “sport-focused” versus the “SFD” or “more-than-sport” distinction. And what this organizational chart helps make clear is not just that these two domains are different but how they are
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of participation</th>
<th>Sport only</th>
<th>Plus-sport/sport-for-development</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intensive</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasonally competitive</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Sport-focused</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite performance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic skill-building</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Health and fitness</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonsport goals</td>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enrichment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>X</td>
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different—namely, that these two institutional domains are organized by two very different organizational logics. In terms of the “sport-focused” category, it is most useful to organize or “group” activities, programming, and organizations in an essentially hierarchical fashion—basically, according to their orientation to increasing levels of competition and intensity of involvement. On the “sport for” or “more-than-sport” side, a more categorical scheme—whereby programming is organized by the different types of social goals and functions it is intended to serve—is more helpful and appropriate.

We posit three main varieties or “ideal types” of sport-focused programs and organizations, organized hierarchically in terms of levels of intensity and competition. The first encompasses elite, competitive programs and academies oriented toward athletic excellence or high-performance sport. This category is represented in our study by Fusion soccer or the ACES tennis academy. Second are more “mid-level” programs and programs which aspire to being competitive at state and regional levels but not quite with the same level of intensity and focus. Examples in our study include Lyons Football Club soccer or Metro lacrosse, or more traditionally Amateur Athletic Union basketball, travel-league summer softball, or Junior Olympics volleyball. Programs oriented toward sport for pure recreational purposes or focused on basic skills training, physical fitness, or active leisure round out this domain. In our study, this would include the NETS tennis program, the Somali Summer program, or Asian American after-school initiative; park and recreation opportunities of all sorts would fit here.

There can be overlap between these types—elite–competitive programs such as the Nordic gymnastics center, for example, might offer some basic skills training or more introductory-oriented programming; participation-oriented programs can provide training and skill development that feed participants into more club-type programs. And in actual practice, it may be that these variations exist on a continuum rather than as distinct type. But the key point is that for sport-focused programs, level and intensity of athletic programming, training, and competition are the drivers of the domain as a whole, and what distinguishes one program or type from the other.

Our fieldwork alerted us to two additional types of sport-focused programs. One is what we call “access- and opportunity”-oriented programs. These are athletically focused programs distinguished not by the level of competition but rather by their outreach to new or underserved populations or communities. The Future Leaders Karen soccer program is an example in our fieldwork, along with several of the training sites of the NETS summer tennis program; Major League Baseball’s Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities would be another, perhaps more familiar, example. The other category we observed is “new” or “alternative” sport. This category captures programs such as Kick It soccer, robotics, or E-gaming, attempting to cultivate new or innovative competitive–athletic pursuits for young people, or trying to challenge or change how traditional youth athletic training and competition are pursued.

On the “sport for” side of the ledger, we identified five unique types, each distinguished by their broader programming and/or nonsport social functions. These include programs which:

- use athletics as a mode of recruitment or program enrichment for other nonsport goals, such as the Somali Summer program;
- employ athletic involvement as part of a larger, more specific program of education and/or child development—the NETS tennis outreach reading program, for example, or the kinds of programs often offered by youth organizations such as the YMCA/YWCA, Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs, or Scouting organizations;
- deploy sport for purposes of social intervention (Kelly, 2013; Nichols, 2004) or risk prevention such as the Squared Circle boxing gym or perhaps more prominently, midnight basketball (Hartmann, 2016);
- are oriented toward specific community-building ideals like the Rooted lacrosse program or Karen Future Leaders soccer (Doherty & Rich, 2015) and serve as a particular racialized space of social interaction for youth (Manning, 2019);
- aiming toward some broader social change or transformation. We did not have such a program in our fieldwork, but one such program in the Twin Cities would be an all-girls running club that encouraged running not for competitive purposes but to challenge dominant gender norms and stereotypes.

This list obviously contains a large number of types, and we struggled to come up with a way to organize them logically or set them in relation to one another. Unfortunately, the conventional “SFD” literature, with its emphasis on non-U.S. programming and on development either with respect to adolescent education and growth
or broad economic, social justice, or even “peace”-related goals, provided little guidance or assistance. This set contains program types with programming and goals simply not captured by standard developmental frames, and we did not have any of the more progressive, interventionist types that some SFD scholars have called for (Darnell, 2012; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Hartmann & Kwaku, 2011). For these reasons, we see the category as broader than development alone, and thus labeled and organized it categorically according to the nonsport goals toward which sport can be directed.

Discussion: Implications and Extensions

This basic typology is a heuristic organizing frame and somewhat incomplete. For one thing, it does not incorporate some of the top-level dimensions of variation within the field that motivated this study: institutional infrastructure, funding, social context, and the demographics of participants. (More on those shortly.) There are also organizations and programming that do not fit neatly into our categories. For example, some of the organizations we studied operated across different levels of athletic involvement (Nordic gymnastics, e.g., Metro lacrosse or robotics), and there were several multisport operations (park and recreation centers or the Somali Summer program). Also, some organizations offered multifaceted agendas and programming that did not fit neatly into our binary, sport-focused/more-than-sport scheme. The alternative “Kick It” soccer club comes immediately to mind: It is an explicit attempt to blend recreation and fitness with more elite-level training and performance and to transform sport along the way in terms of access and providing a fun-filled recreational environment. Similarly, ethnicity-based organizations like Karen soccer or “Rooted” native lacrosse tried to offer higher level athletic involvement even as they emphasized community-building.

Rather than forcing such outlier cases into our primary, twofold typology, in fact, we ultimately embraced the complexities they revealed and delineated a third set of youth sporting organizations and programs: namely, “multifunction hybrids” that offer some combination or balance of athletic programming and nonathletic elements. Moving forward, we would not be surprised to learn of organizations that use youth sport for nonsport purposes that did not appear in our fieldwork and would thus add dimensions to our typology.

These complexities and cautions acknowledged, we nevertheless believe the program characteristics and types we have identified can help sport stakeholders—from researchers and administrators to coaches, parents, and participants—move beyond simplistic, one-dimensional understandings of sport participation, the range of offerings available, and the benefits (or drawbacks) that can be expected.

At a program level, for example, such distinctions provide clarity and direction for administrators and funders in designing programs to meet their varied goals, as well as for coaches and volunteers in implementing them. They can help parents (and kids) choose programs and navigate the youth activity landscape as well as better understand their experiences and assess whether their goals are being met (Dorsch et al., 2017). Here, it seems safe to say that the youth sports programs that work best—which is to say, that operate the most smoothly and are most satisfying to all those involved—are those in which the different elements and expectations of participants and organizers are all aligned, that is, when the program’s larger mission and goals match the hopes and expectations of its various participants.

For sport researchers, these variables and types provide a framework for data collection, measurement, and evaluation on many key questions about youth sport participation. Do programs focused on elite, intensive involvement actually produce the best, most highly skilled young athletes, or might we do better to look to intermediate-level participation or multilevel organizations? How might this vary by sport, or do we need to get outside of the box of sport specialization altogether? The program factors and types help us answer these questions as well as better understand why some kids thrive while others get frustrated and drop out in different contexts (Aspen Institute, 2019). Outcome assessment for the range of “sport for” programs we have identified would also apply: How structured and deliberate do nonsport program elements need to be? Does this vary by objectives and goals? Can multiple functions be accomplished at once? How or to what extent can nonsport goals be accomplished in the context of sport-focused programs? Suffice to say, this typology itemizes the variables that need to be operationalized and data that need to be collected to answer such questions (and refine SFD theories appropriately).

This typology can also help policymakers and researchers determine where youth sport offerings in any locale or for any given group are diverse and robust, and what limitations or structural gaps might exist. As such, this community- or system-level orientation also reminds us that resources are finite—which is to say, that there may not be sufficient resources to offer all types of programming to everyone in any given place—and that this framework is only just a start to theorizing the youth sport field as a whole.

From Organizational Type to Field as a Whole

So far, we have discussed the variations and distinguishing program types in a somewhat dispassionate way as if they are all relatively equal and a matter of the preferences and goals of various participants and stakeholders. However, a key feature of social field theory is attention to resources, hierarchies, and inequalities—that is, how different activities, organizations, programs, and types are differentially supported and thus unequally positioned relative to each other. Such inequities can result from differential economic, social, and symbolic capital in an organization as well as from external and highly stratified forces and community characteristics in and across the field.

Generating a conceptual map of the youth sport field along these additional dimensions with ethnographic methods is challenging no matter how collaborative. We were not able to collect systematic data about funding at all the sites, and our ethnographic, site-based fieldwork did not provide us with a large enough sample to feel comfortable generalizing about how factors such as economic resources, community context, and program populations map onto the primary organizational types. However, our fieldwork and organizational typology combined with existing critical research do put us in a position to begin theorizing in this fashion. And this is where the shift toward more market-driven, privatized youth sport of the past several decades becomes crucial.

Neoliberal policies have transformed the landscape of organized, out-of-school youth sport over the past half century. We observe their effects in reorientations in public park and recreation programming (Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003; Crompton & McGregor, 1994); the increasing costs of youth sport (Gregory, 2017; Hyman, 2012) and shifts in school sports toward pay-to-play models (Zdroik & Veliz, 2016); the bifurcation of funding for richer suburban communities (Hextum, 2021) and urban...
populations only for risk prevention (Pitter & Andrews, 1997; see also: Hartmann, 2016, pp. 21–33, 45–50); the privatization of all manner of education, extracurricular activities, and child-rearing (Adler & Adler, 1994; Snellman et al., 2015); and the rise of more intensive, competitive youth activities (Friedman, 2013).

It almost goes without saying that these neoliberal transformations have also led to greater inequalities in terms of youth access and opportunities in sports participation. On the one hand, families and kids with more resources and/or who live in wealthier communities are better positioned to secure access to sports programming and facilities. Indeed, in an era of increasing class inequality, Robert Putnam’s (2015) argument about extracurricular activities as a means by which middle- and upper-class parents secure and reproduce privilege applies.

Racial discrimination, White privilege, and patterns of racial segregation often overlap with class and thus contribute to uneven access and unequal programming as well. Indeed, it is no accident that the sports participation levels among youth of color generally tend to rise and even equalize around ages 12–14 years (Hartmann & Manning, 2016). Even as some youth drop out of privatized, out-of-school sport, the presence of more affordable and available scholastic and interscholastic sport opportunities opens doors for higher levels of access and participation for kids of color.

One big, still-to-be-answered question is whether and how these structural forces and the social inequalities associated with them map onto the organizational types we delineated in our typology. Previous research suggests that certain permutations of these characteristics tend to pattern together and that these structures can impact access and potential developmental outcomes. Intensive, elite-level sports, for example, tend to be dominated by expensive, privately owned clubs, teams, and coaches and serve primarily children from well-to-do families who can afford the costs of training, travel, and competition (Hextrum, 2021). On the other hand, as Pitter and Andrews pointed out (1997), sport programs in urban areas targeted at children from underprivileged backgrounds are often deeply racialized and forced to seek funding from other sources and this typically requires a deficit/risk reduction model (rather than more educational or enrichment orientations) instead of a sport-focused rationale. It is thus tempting to see direct connection between social privilege and high-level athletic involvement and, conversely, between SFD programming and disadvantaged or marginalized communities.

We would resist simple one-to-one correspondences of this sort for several reasons. One is because some pay-to-play models in privately owned sports clubs are funded as much (or more) by mass participation as by elite-level competition. The Nordic Gymnastics Club we studied would be a prime example: It offers a large, accessible recreational program that generates the revenues necessary to fund a small, elite team.

Nordic is a complicated arrangement, to be sure. A large, less-experienced group of coaches staff the recreational program, whereas a handful of more experienced “career” coaches staff the highly competitive travel team. As new coaches gain experience, they can gradually work with more skilled athletes. Athletes gain seniority within the club and acquire the privilege of training with more experienced coaches. Although superficially fair, this system benefits children whose families can enroll them in more than one lesson at a time or at least keep them enrolled in one class continually, who have consistent transportation to practice, or who are willing to allow their children to try out for the competitive team. In private clubs like Nordic, all training takes place within the same facility. This means that all participants, instructors, and administrators recognize the two programs’ disparities in space and equipment. This recognition allows the team’s privileged use of space and equipment to acquire a symbolic significance, reinforcing a hierarchy among programs. In this system, some children can use more and better equipment, but their privilege is rationalized as their due, owing to their work to achieve a higher performance level.

Another reason we are cautious about drawing direct connections between different levels and types of youth sport programming with various communities and social contexts is that several of the programs that use sport to work for various broad, nonsport ends in our study—contrary to prevailing social problems logic and stereotyping—are oriented neither toward youth development nor toward problem prevention. The Rooted lacrosse site and Karen soccer have clear cultural and ethnic foci, and these foci are not only about broader social agendas but also about sport provision for targeted communities. This is a key finding of our study, in fact. Not all racially targeted programs offer nonsport elements; moreover, some of these programs are really and only about sports—and creating access and opportunity for sport to communities who might otherwise be excluded or engage sport in ways that do not fit the standard, White middle-class model.

Again, we need to be careful not to overgeneralize here. We do not know precisely how many racially targeted programs in any community there may be, nor what different organizational forms and program goals they may assume. However, it appears clear to us that we need to be very aware of this approach and distinction, and NOT overgeneralize about the extent to which all racially targeted programs are about intervention, risk prevention, and social problems.

There is at least one overarching, general point we do want to highlight. It relates to funding, organizational status, and reliance on public facilities. What is important about how the types of youth sport programming we have identified are situated in the context of neoliberalism and its associated social dynamics and inequalities is not so much whether they are sport-focused or driven by other nonsport goals, but rather the extent to which programs are publicly supported (and run) or privately financed and administrated. And if we had to speculate here, it would be to suggest that elite athletic activities tend to be staffed and funded through more privatized, market-driven mechanisms. On the other hand, programs that emphasize access or nonsport missions and functions—especially those not just about individual development and enrichment—tend to be supported more by nonprofit organizations or public resources. This should be expected given the realities of elite, pay-to-play sports organizations, and the market in general. Sport programs require resources, and no program can do everything. It makes sense to narrow and focus, and that those with the ability to pay can secure that focus.

In the not-for-profit context, in contrast, many additional factors must come into play. Athletic activity may be just part of the organizational agenda. Various physical locations make play accessible to families in different communities. Because coaches and athletes from different communities are rarely or never in contact with one another, there is great variation in implementing the organization’s philosophy. Some children receive high-level coaching and use high-quality equipment and courts, while others are denied these opportunities because of where they live. Coaches are chosen from the communities they serve and their experience and training reflect inequalities in the communities they serve. Coaches in affluent communities often benefit from the expensive training their families can afford. All of this impacts the design and quality of any youth sports program.
One final point about organizational infrastructure and support in a neoliberal context: in spite of the general public/nonprofit–private/for-profit dynamics we have just suggested, the fact remains that almost all youth sports programs, activities, and initiatives are supported by some complicated, hybrid combination of for-profit/ nonprofit and public funding, facilities, and staffing. It is widely known that most public programs these days regularly require some level of payment to play. But what is less widely appreciated and probably more important and impactful is that even the most privatized, pay-to-play programs often rely on public facilities for training, competitions, and tournaments—that is, parks and recreation centers, school gymnasias, and community fields and facilities often built in the middle part of the 20th century—for the vast majority of their programming. Even private, for-profit youth sport, in other words, is often subsidized by public resources.

Given that the sports world generally touts its history as defined by mass accessibility and participatory opportunity for poor kids and communities of color, it is essential to realize that such a narrative is intertwined with the reality that most organizations and programs rely on some sort of public support. Publicly funded infrastructure likely plays a decisive role in some sports, programs, and approaches being more amenable to diversity and inclusion than others. Here, it is also helpful to remember what the social historian George Lipsitz (2011, pp. 31–32) wrote about how, in the 1960s, the Federal Housing Administration promoted loans and developments for private recreation spaces over community recreation centers and public parklands. Such policies not only had the effect of subsidizing certain types of athletic activities over others but promoting racial inequalities—or more precisely White privilege—in the process.

Conclusions

This article grew out of the idea that out-of-school youth sports in the United States have grown and diversified dramatically in recent decades, and that these changes have significant consequences for how young people experience athletic participation and the benefits (or drawbacks) that can come with it. Our objective was not to document the size of the youth sport field, nor to assess its strengths and weaknesses. Our primary goal, rather, was to illustrate its complexity and generate an orienting sociological framework to better understand and analyze it and its impacts. More specifically, we wanted to identify the various social and programmatic factors that distinguish American out-of-school youth athletic programs from each other and then develop a typology by which to understand the field taken as a whole. And we developed this framework through a series of linked ethnographic studies synthesized in dialogue with existing research and theory.

This exercise has yielded a series of findings and insights. One is that the out-of-school American youth athletic field is composed of many different modes of participation with a myriad of goals, all of which are, in turn, supported by a range of organizational structures. Second, some of the most significant differences we identified are between those programs focusing primarily on sport compared with those oriented toward broader, nonsport, or “more-than-sport” missions, ambitions, and claims. And what differentiates “sport-focused” programming from “SFD” initiatives and organizations is that the former can be organized by levels of intensity or competition, while the latter is composed of a broad, diverse range of nonsport goals and ambitions (a range of functions that are even broader than are captured by prevailing notions of development in the literature).

The organizational typology presented here remains a work-in-progress. As discussed, a fuller, more critical Bourdieusian field mapping will require additional information about how the various organizational types that are identified tend to be related, empirically, to socioeconomic resources and inequalities as well as variable social–community contexts. Nevertheless, we believe the organizational typology we have presented is an important step in that direction. We also believe this framework can be immediately helpful for stakeholders across the youth sport field. We itemized some of these potential benefits and uses for coaches, program administrators and policymakers, and parents and kids above. Here, by way of conclusion, we offer three more general, overarching points.

One immediate implication is the need to develop a more multifaceted theory of the “SFD” sector—the range of programming that defines all organizations and programs that use sport for various nonsport purposes and goals as well as who these various initiatives serve. As documented in our fieldwork, the existing development label simply does not capture the full range and diversity of such programming. A more nuanced model would better capture the wide range of goals it encompasses. It could also help such initiatives identify diverse and underserved populations, and how they might be served without further marginalization or stigmatization. (For a very useful start, see Whitley et al., 2023.)

A second point has to do with how organized, out-of-school youth sport activities and programs relate to more traditional, school-based youth sport offerings. There is a great deal of work that can and should be done on this front. Our hope, in a nutshell, is that the broad, sociological typology initiated here can be the impetus for an even larger, more comprehensive mapping of the grand landscape of athletic participatory options and opportunities for kids in the United States that includes both school and out-of-school athletic programming and organizations.

A third and final point—or set of points—has to do with how this sociological framework can help both researchers and practitioners move beyond individual outcomes and program-level offerings toward a broader, more system-oriented way of thinking about and organizing (or at least coordinating) youth sport in the United States. The comprehensive, field-level orientation we have operationalized here reveals the organizational characteristics of the decentralized, competition-oriented logic that organizes and governs youth sport (and sport more generally) in the United States. Not only can it help us see the array of sports programming that is offered, it can help ascertain where certain forms of programming and goals may be missing or underdeveloped, as well as the challenges of access, inequality, and differential treatment many parents and kids, especially those in marginalized and disadvantaged communities, face.

Such perspectives are particularly invaluable in the face of the neoliberal, market-driven forces that have come to shape and define the out-of-school youth sport field in recent decades in the United States. Ensuring that the resources available are best matched to the program’s core goals and mission means program operators must think carefully about who their target audiences and goals are. Awareness of the characteristics that can make programs inaccessible or inhospitable to target groups, or the types of behaviors by coaches and activity leaders that alienate or can discriminate against some children, can help program directors and funders avoid mistakes and create opportunities to bring more and a wider range of kids into the youth sport arena—none of which is easy to address in essentially decentralized, market-driven, and privatized settings. The more we can promote a sociological way of thinking

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about the field of youth sport in the United States, the more effective, inclusive, and equitable it is likely to become.

Notes

1. Field theory has also been used to analyze the social patterns of sport spectatorship in Canada and the United States (see, e.g., White & Wilson, 1999). This application is essential in understanding the impact and appeal of mass spectacle sport in North America and all over the world, especially since this aspect of modern capitalist sport was given relatively limited attention from Bourdieu (see also MacAlloon, 1988).

2. The recent growth and diversification of organized, out-of-school youth sport are driven by social forces both inside and outside of sport, among them: retrenchments in public park and recreation programming (Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003; Crompton & McGregor, 1994); the increasing costs of youth sport (Gregory, 2017; Hyman, 2012) and shifts in school sports toward pay-to-play models (Zdroik & Veliz, 2016); the bifurcation of funding for richer suburban communities (Hextrum, 2021) and urban populations only for risk prevention (Pitter & Andrews, 1997; see also: Hartmann, 2016, pp. 21–33, 45–50; Title IX (Stauroswky et al., 2022), the privatization of all manner of education, extracurricular activities, and child-rearing (Adler & Adler, 1994; Snellman et al., 2015); and the rise of more intensive, competitive youth activities (Friedman, 2013).

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