



CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research
on Civic Learning & Engagement

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Youth Sports: A Boost for Democracy?

Young People Involved in Sports Vote, Volunteer and Engage More than Non-Athletes

Related New Report Reveals Gaps in Knowledge, Conflicting Findings

College Park, Md. – Young people who are involved in sports report higher levels of voting, volunteering and engagement in their community than those who do not participate, according to a new report released by The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland.

The report, *Participation in Sports and Civic Engagement* by Mark Hugo Lopez and Kimberlee Moore from CIRCLE, offers a detailed look at the role sports play in the civic development of 18-25 year olds. The data show that young people who participated in sports activities during their high school years were more likely than non-sports participants to have:

- **volunteered** (32 percent vs. 21 percent),
- **registered to vote** (58 percent vs. 40 percent),
- **voted** (44 percent vs. 33 percent in 2000), and
- **followed news closely** (41 percent vs. 26 percent).

“Although there are problems with big-time sports today, high school and college athletics still prepares young people for active and responsible citizenship,” said Hon. Tom McMillen, valedictorian of the University of Maryland class of 1974, Rhodes Scholar, NBA player, and former Member of Congress.

“We considered that people who choose to participate in sports may also tend to choose to participate in politics and civic affairs, and sports may not be the reason for their civic engagement,” said Mark Lopez, research director at CIRCLE and the study’s lead author. “However, the relationship between sports and civic engagement remains even when we statistically control for other factors like gender, race/ethnicity, income, other high school activities, region and educational attainment. That result suggests that sports have positive civic effects for many young people.”

While some of the relationship between sports participation and civic engagement is driven by other factors, young people who have participated in sports are indeed more engaged in some civic activities once these observable factors are controlled. For instance, even after controlling for these factors, the study finds:

- **Volunteering rates** remain higher for sports youth: 24 percent of participants volunteer versus 18 percent of non-participants.
- Young people involved in sports in high school were **more likely to be registered to vote and vote in the 2000 election** than non-sports youth: 60 percent vs. 44 percent were registered and 43 percent vs. 33 percent voted.
- Sports youth are more likely to say they **watch the news** than their non-sports counterparts: 41 percent vs. 27 percent.

According to the National Federation of State High School Associations, the number of students involved in high school sports has steadily increased over the past sixteen years. In the 2004-2005 school year, approximately 7 million high school students participated in athletic programs, up from 5.3 million in 1990. In 2002, about 42 percent of youth 18-25 had participated in organized sports during high school.

A related new study, *Sports, Youth and Character: A Critical Survey*, which looks at the effects of participation on youth from age 4 to 18, found conflicting analyses and a dearth of reliable, data-driven research on the role sports play in character development. For one thing, until the 1990s, researchers have lacked rich longitudinal, representative data sets to analyze for effects on youth development – healthy or unhealthy – of sports participation. The reports can be found at www.civicyouth.org.

“So many reports of young people and sports highlight the negative – pushy parents; steroid use, cheating and excessive aggressiveness to get ahead; and even high levels of suicide among youth athletes,” said Peter Levine, executive director of CIRCLE. “These two new studies suggest a more complicated and nuanced picture of the role sports play in the character and civic development of young Americans.”

The studies relying on richer data surveyed by *Sports, Youth, and Character* point to some links between sports and positive outcomes like higher levels of college attendance, girls’ increased interest and success in math and science, better school attendance, fewer drop-outs, more parental involvement and better grades. However, these outcomes are not direct measures of character, and questions still remain about the role that sports have in leading young people to play fair, persevere and show leadership skills, for example.

“That sports builds character is a widespread belief in our society,” said Robert K. Fullinwider, research scholar at the University of Maryland’s Institute for Philosophy & Public Policy, and the author of this review of sports research, “But the scholarly literature paints a mixed and incomplete picture. We need better-grounded research than we currently possess.”

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Since 2001, CIRCLE has conducted, collected, and funded research on the civic and political participation of young Americans. CIRCLE is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy and is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and Carnegie Corporation of New York.