



THE PERILS OF POVERTY:

The Health Crisis
Facing our
Low-Income
Girls... And the
Power of Sports
to Help





Introduction

The health of California's girls – and particularly those living in low-income communities and communities of color - is in a state of crisis. The socio-economic conditions of their neighborhoods make them especially vulnerable to falling prey to a host of poor health outcomes including obesity, low-academic achievement, depression, substance abuse, violence, incarceration and pregnancy.

More than any other subgroup in our society, these young women may have no other choice but to spend their after-school hours hanging out in front of the corner store or sitting in front of a television screen eating unhealthy snacks. Indeed, the data tell a story that is upsetting to contemplate but too urgent to ignore. We must do something about this crisis because the costs in the loss of human potential and the impact on our health care, educational and other social institutions is staggering. These costs will only continue to rise unless we act now. Providing high-quality organized sports programs to girls living in poverty offers one relatively low cost remedy with proven results.

Participation by girls in these programs can increase a girl's chances of growing up to be a successful, healthy adult, reduce her likelihood of obesity and depression, and decrease her chances of illegal drug use or unprotected sex. Yet girls in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color have the fewest opportunities to access and benefit from the life-changing power of sports.

Sobering Statistics

- ▶ Between 2001-2008, obesity rates for African-American and Native-American girls increased to 22% and 23% respectively.
- ▶ African-American girls have alarmingly high rates of inactivity. Nearly 44% of Black females reported they did not participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity on any given day.
- ▶ The United States has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrialized world. Three in ten girls become pregnant as a teen and one in four teen girls have contracted an STD. Poor and low-income teens – who make up approximately 40% of the adolescent population in California – account for 83% of teens who give birth.
- ▶ Two of every three babies born to teens in California are born to Latinas.
- ▶ Girls and women are being incarcerated at alarming rates. Between 1995 and 2004, the total number of female State and Federal prison inmates grew 5% a year, compared to 3.3% average growth for male prisoners.
- ▶ The costs grow as the girls grow. In California, although women have much lower incarceration rates than men, African-American women have a much higher incarceration rate than other women and are four times more likely to be imprisoned than their white counterparts.

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- ▶ Adolescent girls are at particular risk for low self-esteem. During adolescence, girls' self-esteem drops about twice as much as boys.

For many low-income girls, sports can offer a path around and through the many perils they face in their teenage years. But in order for that to happen; affordable, accessible, quality girls' sports programs are needed. Team-Up for Youth is committed to helping build those programs for the girls who need them most.

Why Girls' Sports?

Sports have the power to change a girl's life.

- ▶ A girl who plays sports has higher self-confidence, feels greater ownership of her body, and is more likely to make healthy decisions about drugs, alcohol, and sex.
- ▶ The more physically active girls are, the greater their self-esteem and the more satisfied they are with their weight, regardless of how much they weigh. Yet 40% of girls ages 11-17 say they do not play sports because they do not feel skilled or competent.
- ▶ High school girls who participate in sports wait longer before having sex for the first time than their peers who don't participate in sports.
- ▶ Female high school athletes are less than half as likely to get pregnant as female non-athletes.
- ▶ Female sports participants are less likely than female non-participants to report cigarette smoking, using marijuana or cocaine and contemplating or attempting suicide.
- ▶ Sports participation is associated with less risk for body dissatisfaction and disordered eating among adolescent girls.
- ▶ Women who participated in team sports in their youth are more likely to be physically active, and as a result to have decreased risk factors for heart disease, including healthier weight and Body Mass Index.
- ▶ Despite all of the evidence for the positive impact of sports on girls' lives, girls participate in sports and physical activity at much lower rates than boys. A recent report by The National Federation of State High School Associations reported that in the 2009-2010 school year, 4.45 million boys participated in sports nationwide vs. 3.17 million girls. And this is particularly true for girls living in low-income communities or communities of color. These girls have the least access to sports opportunities and are far less likely to participate in any kind of organized athletics.



A Young Woman's Story: Meet Zulma

Zulma Muñoz is a third year student at University of California, Berkeley.

"Soccer and my coach," she claims, "saved my life."

Growing up in East Oakland, my mother wanted me to participate in positive activities that kept me safe during the after-school hours.

I loved soccer and with the support of my mother, I joined a league – along with many of my friends. But when we all got to middle school – a lot of my friends dropped out of soccer and I was left with a very difficult decision. Would I choose my future or would I choose my friends? It was hard not to succumb to peer pressure but I chose my future.

A lot of my friends took a different journey that caused them to drop out of school or end up as young mothers. But I remained focused on school and soccer. Part of what helped me to do this was my soccer coach. She literally changed my life.

She pushed me to my limits, believed in me and helped me believe in myself. She helped me with my college application process. She helped transform me from the scared, timid girl I was into a confident and persistent young woman. My friends didn't have a coach like I did in their lives. I know it's because of soccer and my coach that I got into UC Berkeley and am pursuing a bright and successful future."



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The benefits of sports participation are clear. The costs of not participating are startling. Getting low-income and girls of color involved in sports and physical activity is no longer simply about providing access to an extra-curricular activity. It is about saving lives and building futures.

Coaching Matters

Providing girls with access to sports programs is just the beginning. Great coaches have the power to change lives. They not only develop a girl's athletic skills, but also teach perseverance, selflessness, loyalty, cooperation, and tolerance. A challenging yet supportive coach helps girls take risks, develop self-confidence, teaches them to speak up and stand up for themselves, and supports them through the rocky road of adolescence. These qualities foster success well beyond the playing field – but also in school, work and family life.

And it's not just any coach. Girls do better when they relate to the coach that is mentoring them. In 2009, Team-Up for Youth formed a Youth Advisory Committee made up of young girls who had been impacted by the power of sports. These girls were quick to point out that having a female coach made all the difference in the world. They felt more connection to them on the field and were more comfortable talking to them about the experiences they were having off of the field. This exponentially enhanced the positivity of the experience for the girls and kept them engaged in the game for longer periods of time.

The Truth about Title IX

Lost in the praise surrounding the 35th anniversary of Title IX – the federal legislation that created an explosion in the number of women and girls participating in interscholastic sports – is the fact that while it did indeed impact girls, those girls were mostly from white, middle-class and affluent communities. Title IX has done very little to increase participation rates of the girls most often left out of the game.

In fact, Team-Up for Youth did a little digging in our own back yard and learned that at Piedmont High School, just on the outskirts of Oakland, 67% of the girls were involved in sports. But just a few miles down the road at Oakland High School, a mere 11% of the girls were involved in sports.

What is the difference between these two schools? Demographics and Economics. At Oakland High, 72% of students qualified for free or reduced priced meals while at Piedmont High, only 1% did. Additionally, 69% of students at Piedmont High were white while a mere 1.4% at Oakland High were. These data illuminate the grave disparity in access and opportunity for far too many of our girls.



A Coaches Testimony: Meet Kristin

Kristin is a VISTA Volunteer with Team-Up for Youth's Coaches for a Healthy California program. She works with low-income girls at the Boys and Girls Club of the Peninsula.



"One of the issues we identified right away was the lack of involvement of girls in the sports program. Culture, a lack in self-confidence and peer pressure are just a few among the many limiting factors in participation.

A major obstacle was there wasn't a woman in the athletic department. It was difficult for the athletic director to engage girls and entice them to join the Team-Up for Girls league.

Over several weeks, my VISTA partner Whitney and I spent countless recesses at the local elementary schools playing with girls. We believed that "if we play it, they will come." And they did. One afternoon in December, we took a basketball to a local elementary school and shot it around for about 20 minutes – with no sign of interest. But, just as we were giving up – a group of girls approached and asked to join us. We are now in the middle of January and we have 35 girls signed up at to play in the Team-Up for Girls Soccer League.

For many girls, seeing other young women play was enough to engage them, while others literally needed their hands held as we ran around together kicking soccer balls. Each girl is different; some need the one on one attention and repetitive confirmation that they too can play while others just need the ball kicked in their direction."



Girls in the Game: Getting Girls in Motion

Girls in the Game is a leading girls' health and fitness organization in Chicago. Every year, Girls in the Game empowers more than 2,500 girls – many of them from low-income communities and communities of color – to make healthier choices and develop the confidence and leadership skills they need to succeed on and off the field. Girls in the Game exposes girls to a wide mix of sports and fitness activities along with workshops on nutrition, health and leadership.

One of the keys to the success of this after-school program is its in-depth coach training, which is built on a detailed and well-researched written curriculum. The curriculum is aligned to the state standards in Physical Education, Health and Social Emotional Learning. After an initial orientation, coaches receive training before each three-week program module on both the curriculum and a specific professional development topic. Coaches are trained to be comfortable with each sport as well as in important skills like behavior management, engaging parents, and connecting with schools. Coaches, girls and supervisors complete evaluations after each module. They are observed while coaching by their supervisors and receive an annual written review.

Girls in the Game's focus on supporting girls and coach training is clearly working. Researchers from Loyola University found that after one year in Girls in the Game's 30-week after-school program, girls eat healthier, exercise more, have a healthier body image, and have better social skills than their peers.

Where We Go From Here: Recommendations for Moving Forward

It is well documented through research that sports have a powerful impact on the quality of young girls' lives. But research is not enough. Today, only two out of every five girls play high school sports – and the vast majority of those girls come from middle-class and affluent communities where access and opportunity abound. Stakeholders that include schools, community based organizations, teachers and parents must renew and increase their commitment to getting girls in the game and putting into practice what we know works best for some of our most vulnerable kids. If we do not address this issue now, we are sure to pay the price in health, educational and other social disparities later.



Here are Team-Up for Youth's recommendations for moving forward.

Level the Playing Field:

- ▶ One way we can immediately begin to level the playing field in California is to prepare for the full implementation of California Assembly Bill 2404. This bill enforces Title IX by allowing state facilities providing sports programming to youth to be sued if they do not provide equitable allocations of resources and programming by 2015. Parks and Recreation Departments across California can – and should – prepare for this now by creating partnerships with schools and community-based organizations to begin to design curriculum, create leagues and upgrade facilities that will allow girls to equitably participate in sports.
- ▶ Title IX did much to increase access and opportunity for girls in sports on high school and college campuses but disparities still abound. Stakeholders must reignite the power of Title IX by paying special attention to low-income girls and girls of color and ensuring these young women have access to the life-changing benefits of sports. We must address the disparity in girls and sports by expanding the lens through which we look at girls' sports participation. Traditionally, funding, programming and public attention is focused on suburban sports programs and elite athletes. We need to re-think this paradigm and send resources to where they are needed most – low-income communities and communities of color – and the community based organizations or after-school sports programs that serve them.

Know Your Girls:

- ▶ It isn't enough to create a girls' soccer league and say it is for girls. Girls have gender-specific needs if they are going to be kept engaged in the game. These programs must be designed with girls in mind, from the coach to the curriculum and from the facilities to the support services.
- ▶ Girls living in low-income communities or communities of color may also have cultural barriers to their participation in sports. Program providers, teachers and coaches must be aware and sensitive to these dynamics and design outreach tactics, practice protocols and curriculum to address these issues so that these girls can get on the field.
- ▶ Female coaches matter. Girls respond best to role models they can relate to. Promote the inclusion of females in leadership positions at all levels of organizational structure, thus sending the message that women are leaders too. The power of role modeling for girls can help a girl dream big.
- ▶ More research is needed so that program providers, teachers and schools can better address the needs of girls and sports. Specifically, there is currently not enough research in the field on how the disparity in access and opportunity to play sports impacts girls living in low-income communities and communities of color. More needs to be done to monitor the effects of sports on those girls most often left on the sidelines.

Champion Girls Sports:

- ▶ Times are hard and resources are scarce. As a result, more and more funding is being cut from extra-curricular activities, including sports. When allotting resources to sports programs or when writing requests for sports funding – a special focus on creating quality programming for girls should be considered. Increasing opportunities for girls to be active and part of a team contributes to the health of girls and the health of California.
- ▶ Quality sports programming can have an incredible impact on girls' development, but it takes a true champion at an organization to make girls' sports a priority. Creating and sustaining community sports programs for girls takes time and hard work. We need champions who are committed for the long haul.
- ▶ Service is the backbone of this nation. As resources dwindle, we need more people to volunteer, especially women, and make the best use out of volunteer programs like AmeriCorps and Team-Up for Youth's Coaching Corps.
- ▶ Parent support is a crucial ingredient to a girls' sports participation and they are some of the best champions children have. It is critical to engage them often and early so they can truly support the efforts and successes of their daughters. Educate parents on the benefits of sports for their girls. When done right, parents are some of our most important, vocal and strong advocates.

Addressing the Whole Girl:

- ▶ Relationships between sports programming providers and organizations that work on issues such as pregnancy prevention, gang intervention and educational achievement are critical to ensuring that girls are maximizing the benefits from their participation in sports.
- ▶ Youth sports can be a powerful vehicle for promoting healthy physical and social development. But leadership, persistence and sportsmanship don't happen just because a girl joins a team. To help coaches maximize what their players get out of sports, coaches should implement a youth development model such as Team-Up for Youth's Building Blocks for Quality Youth Sports. These five principles – safety, positive relationships, youth participation, skill building and physical activity – help craft both the experience and the outcomes high-quality sports programs should provide for participating youth.

Conclusion: The Need is Great and the Time is Now

Over the last 30 years, research has shown and practice has proven that sports can play an important role in creating strong and confident young women capable of forging successful and bright futures. But far too many young girls of color – and those living in poor communities – are denied the opportunity to ever participate in high-quality sports programs or to receive

the life-changing benefits they provide. This disparity is compounded by other obstacles that exist in their communities such as schools with few resources, lack of safe places to play, inability to access fresh and healthy foods and community-based organizations that just don't have the dollars to do more. But rather than deter us, these obstacles must propel us into action.

Together, program providers, schools, community based organizations, parents and the girls themselves can commit through word and deed to getting our most vulnerable girls off of the sidelines and onto the field. We can shift where our existing resources go, make better use of volunteers and partner with other organizations and groups to pool resources and share successful strategies.

**The need
is great.**

**The time
is now.**

**Our girls
are waiting.**

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Team-Up for Youth works to eliminate disparities in access to high-quality after-school sports programs for young people living in poverty and communities of color to increase and improve their physical, emotional and social health.

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