

CHANGE THE GAME RESEARCH

Change in Action



MLSE
FOUNDATION



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

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LET'S GO

Initially intended to center youth voices in the development of youth sport programming, policy, and investment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Change the Game research project engaged more than 25,000 Ontario youth from 2021-2023 in a series of three annual surveys and reports, becoming the largest youth sport research project in Canada to date. In 2023, informed by the relevance of youth-informed insights to system-wide conversations on redefining safe sport and reimagining positive sport cultures, the project grew in scope with support from Canada's **Abuse-Free Sport Research** grant program to engage partners across different types and levels of youth sport and physical activity provision to create evidence-based, practical pilot interventions in response to the survey findings. 15 collaborative change partners have been engaged to date, with more planned for the year ahead. Supported by an advisory team of sport industry, research, and community-based experts, a fourth provincial youth survey was administered in Ontario in the fall of 2025.

WHAT'S NEW?

In total, 12,098 youth aged 6-29 participated in the 2025 survey. The sample was robust and diverse in gender, age, (dis)ability status, geography, race, religious affiliation, household income, whether youth are Indigenous to or a settler in Canada, and whether youth participate in a sport or not. The survey included consistent themes from prior years, some new to this survey, and some adapted from standardized population surveys such as the **Canadian Community Health Survey**. Consistent items for comparison with earlier Change the Game data include sport participation and frequency, experiences of racism and discrimination, quality of sport culture, and impact of play on youth mental health and sense of belonging.

New this year are explorations of youth perspectives on sport fandom, bullying and hazing, religion, body image, and the relationship between sport and the communities Ontario youth are growing up in. These new focal areas build on critical conversations driven by external research, policy and advocacy efforts, such as through the 2025-2035 Canadian Sport Policy and Future of Sport in Canada Commission, the Canadian Foundation for Race Relations, the Coaches Association of Ontario Coaching Report, the reSport Project, Anti-Racism in Sport in Canada campaign, and the Canadian Tire Jumpstart State of Youth Sport in Canada initiative.

2026 REPORT AND DATA DASHBOARD

This report includes key insights across the four thematic areas of Interest, Engagement, Quality and Culture, and Impact and Wellbeing, alongside promising practices and calls to action. Insights and recommendations emerging from this research are being shared broadly across the sport and Sport For Development sectors, including with providers, coaches, funders, policymakers, youth, parents/guardians, and researchers. To access the data directly and learn more about how youth overall or from different regions, sports, or identities responded, please visit www.mlsefoundation.org/how-we-give/research to access an interactive data dashboard.

MLSE Foundation challenges sport policymakers, providers, funders, and participants pursuing change to consider three vital questions: What next? What's getting in the way? And how can we help?

The data is in your hands. **Let's Go.**



CHANGE THE GAME



CHANGE IN YOUTH SPORT ENGAGEMENT

Who is in the game and moving, and what is fuelling their participation?

In Ontario, youth sport participation is shaped by how interest, fandom, and opportunity intersect with place, cost, and identity. Sports with visible role models and flexible entry points convert fandom into participation most effectively, while youth facing layered barriers — particularly low-income girls, gender-diverse youth, and youth in underserved regions — often express strong interest but lack the access to support it. Offerings and partnerships tailored to regional realities and youth interests can unlock substantial untapped participation.

Where youth live, for example, doesn't just affect whether youth play sport — it affects which sports feel possible, and whether interest turns into participation. In large urban regions (GTA, Ottawa, Hamilton–Niagara, Waterloo region), youth tend to have high interest in sport and fandom, but more uneven participation. Youth are more likely to want to try sports than to already be participating. Barriers cluster around cost, transportation, waitlists, and access to facilities and equipment. In mid-size and smaller urban regions (London area, Windsor–Sarnia, Kingston–Pembroke), we see strong alignment between interest, fandom, and participation. Youth who are fans are more likely to be active. Fewer competing programs and slightly lower costs may help convert interest into action. In northern and rural regions (Northeast, Northwest, Muskoka–Kawarthas), participation rates are often moderate, but the variety of sports to try is lower, so interest concentrates on a smaller set of sports. Transportation, weather, and facility access are the dominant constraints.

WHICH YOUTH ARE PARTICIPATING (AND HOW?)

BUILD BRIDGES FOR CASUAL ATHLETES ALREADY IN THE GAME.

Across all racial/ethnic groups, most youth participate in sport *at least sometimes*. The key differences lie in how often and how, not whether, youth participate. Mixed Race (56%), Middle Eastern (54%), East Asian (48%), and South Asian (43%) youth report relatively high rates of participating more than once per week. White youth participate most often, with 64% participating more than once a week, and report the lowest rate of infrequent participation (less than once a week; 8%). Participation in sport less than once a week is most prevalent among Latinx youth (21%), followed closely by Indigenous youth (19%). Black (54%) and Southeast Asian (58%) youth are most likely to participate about once per week, rather than more frequently. Racialized youth active in sport are also more likely to be participating in a casual sport than an organized sport environment, with Indigenous respondents reporting the highest casual participation rates at 61%, followed by Middle Eastern youth (52%), Black youth (49%) and Southeast Asian youth (48%).

CONTINUE INVESTING TO CLOSE THE GENDER GAP

Gender remains among the clearest structural divides in sport participation. The gaps are robust, and gender-based inequities in sport access and retention remain a central issue. Boys/young men show the highest participation rates, with 89% engaged in organized (59%) or casual (31%) sport, while only 11% were not engaged in any sport or physical activity. Girls/young women are significantly less likely to participate: 76% engage in casual (39%) or organized (36%) sport, and 24% do not participate in any kind of sport or physical

activity. Further, 61% of boys/young men are participating more than once per week, compared to 46% of girls/young women. Gender-diverse youth (non-binary, Two-Spirit, self-described) show participation and frequency rates equal to or lower than girls/young women, though estimates are less precise.

DEVELOP PATHWAYS AND ADAPTATIONS FOR DISABILITIES YOU CANNOT SEE

While having a disability is associated with lower participation overall, participation trends vary according to the type of disability and available support. Youth with identified mental health disabilities, for example, reported the highest rates of non-participation, with half (50%) of youth with a mental health disability reporting not participating in sport at all. With regard to sport type, 49% of youth reporting no disability participate mostly in organized sport. This drops to 30% among youth with visible disabilities, 26% among youth with invisible disabilities, and 19% among youth with mental health disabilities.

CONSIDER THE \$80k THRESHOLD

Household income is a key determinant of youth participation in sport and physical activity, with participation becoming more structured as income increases, whether in organized or casual settings. Youth from households earning above \$80K are 17% more likely to participate in both casual and organized sport and/or physical activity, but 28% more likely to participate in organized sport than casual, compared to youth from families earning less than \$80K. Youth from households earning below \$80,000 are 16% more likely to participate in casual vs. organized sport, suggesting a preference for or reliance on less structured sport.

For example, youth from families with a household income of \$20K or less were more likely to participate in pickup or drop-in opportunities, informally with friends or family, or alone, or in programs at community and recreation centers. Highest-income households show the strongest engagement in organized sport, with over half of respondents from households earning \$125K+ report participating primarily in organized sports, while non-participation is rare. Regarding frequency of participation, 43% of youth from households earning below \$80K participate in sport more than once a week, and 43% participate about once a week. In contrast, 59% of youth from households earning above \$80K participate more than once a week, while 35% participate about once a week. While 15% of youth from households earning below \$80K participate less than once a week, this number drops significantly to only 6% for youth from households earning above \$80K.

Whereas affordability, having friends to play with, access to appropriate spaces adaptable for all abilities, and a variety of sport and play offerings all feature heavily among the most frequently cited barriers to play, barriers themselves are most frequently expressed and experienced in the context of participation, not only before entry. This is especially true for youth trying to stay engaged in spite of them, where reducing barriers improves the quality, sustainability, and equity of participation, not just initial access. When examining individual barriers (e.g., cost, transportation, access to facilities, coaching, weather), youth who report more barriers are often more likely, not less likely, to already be participating in sport.

Change in Action

Philpott Community Tennis Foundation wanted to find ways to improve their unique leadership program that welcomes young people from the community to earn their official tennis coaching certifications and gain jobs working as coaches for the Philpott children's programs.

Learn more about how they are changing the game [HERE](#).



“Cost is always one of the first things I weigh, because even if I really enjoy the activity, it has to be financially manageable. I also pay attention to the schedule, since I don’t want to commit to something that will constantly clash with classes, work, or other priorities. The location matters too, because if it’s too far or inconvenient to get to, I know I won’t stay consistent. Beyond the logistics, I ask myself if it’s something I would genuinely look forward to doing rather than forcing myself through. I like the idea of activities that not only improve my fitness and health but also give me energy or reduce stress. Finally, I think about the social side—whether I’d meet new people, feel motivated by a group, or even just enjoy being part of a community—because that can make a huge difference in keeping me committed.”



CHANGE IN YOUTH SPORT INTEREST

If youth are putting up their hand to say they want to try a new sport, what is fuelling that interest, and what can be done to meet the moment?

Across Ontario, youth sport participation remains the norm rather than the exception, with roughly two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents reporting that they participate in sport in some form (organized or casual). However, sport participation and interest are unevenly distributed across demographic groups, mental health status, and sport fandom.

LEVERAGE FANDOM AS AN UNDERUSED PATHWAY INTO PARTICIPATION

Having an interest in professional sport is one of the strongest predictors of sport participation. Youth who have a favourite professional sport are dramatically more likely to participate in sport than those who do not. This pattern is consistent across gender, mental health levels, and regions of Ontario. Pro sport fandom appears to function as a gateway or reinforcing mechanism for participation. This has important implications for partnerships with professional teams and leagues, role-model visibility, and the use of fandom as a bridge into participation - particularly for underrepresented groups.

However, not all fandom is equal in terms of relationship to participation. Young fans of professional soccer, football, basketball, tennis, volleyball, cricket, and similar sports show especially high participation rates. Youth who have no favourite professional sport are participating at the lowest rates by a large margin. Being a fan of different sports appears to create distinct participation trends: those who follow sports with lower equipment barriers, more casual and community-based opportunities, and strong cultural visibility tend to show tighter alignment with participation. In other words, sports where fandom is likely to lead to participation are those that are easy to try informally (parks, school yards, community programs), require minimal specialized equipment, and have high media visibility (major leagues, highlights, social media, role models), such as basketball and soccer. Youth who are fans of these sports are 1.8-1.9x more likely to participate in sports compared to youth who don't follow sports as fans.

FAVOURITE PRO SPORT (AS FAN)	SPORT PARTICIPATION RATE	LIFT VS. NON-SPORTS FAN
TENNIS	89%	+43
BASEBALL	89%	+43
BASKETBALL	87%	+40
FOOTBALL	83%	+37
SOCCER	83%	+37

The same fandom can produce very different participation outcomes depending on regional infrastructure density and travel burden. The relationship between fandom and participation is strongest in regions where sports can be played informally (parks, school gyms, community centres) and entry does not require long travel or specialized infrastructure. For example, soccer, basketball, and volleyball show strong fandom/participation alignment in the GTA, Waterloo–Barrie, London, and Ottawa. These sports benefit from school-based play, community leagues, and informal “pickup” culture.

Among non professional sport fans, interest extends to movement-based, accessible, and non-traditional sport activities like swimming and dance, representing a high-potential subset for growth in participation if programming meets them where they are – possibly outside of mainstream sport facilities, in schools, parks, and social or ‘third’ spaces.

SPORTS ONTARIO YOUTH WANT TO TRY

SPORT	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER OF ONTARIO YOUTH
TENNIS	17 %	813,400
VOLLEYBALL	13 %	617,400
FLAG FOOTBALL	12 %	597,000
SWIMMING	11 %	553,700
SKI/SNOWBOARD	11%	539,000
CYCLING	10%	470,400
BASEBALL	9%	421,400
DANCE	9%	421,400
GOLF	8%	377,300
RUNNING	8%	367,500

NEW INTERESTS FORM WHEN YOUTH ARE ALREADY PLAYING

Interest in trying certain sports is strongly skewed to youth who are already active in sport. Other 'Expansion sports' of interest to current participants are skiing/snowboarding, cycling, flag football and baseball. In contrast, youth who are not currently active in sport are more likely to be interested in dance and swimming compared to youth who are already active. These 'first entry-point' sports may offer lower pressure, more welcoming on-ramps for youth currently sidelined. Girls and young women were more likely than boys and young men to be interested in trying dance, tennis, and volleyball, whereas interest in trying baseball was strongest among boys and young men, and interest in flag football and volleyball was strong among non-binary and gender-diverse youth.

DEVELOP COMMUNITY-BASED AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

In urban regions, especially the GTA and Ottawa, youth are more likely to want to try tennis, volleyball, dance, swimming, and flag football. These regions show high curiosity but lower participation rates in cost- or facility-intensive sports (tennis courts, swim time, coaching). In northern and rural regions, youth are more likely to want to try cycling, running, skiing/snowboarding, and canoeing/kayaking - sports that rely more on the natural environment, require less formal programming, and are less dependent on league structures. Youth interests adapt to what feels realistic in their region. When infrastructure is scarce, interest clusters around sports that can be self-organized.

Intersectional identity factors work together to influence observable patterns in sport interest. For example, girls living in lower-income households in the GTA experience layered barriers relating to gender (girls are already less likely to participate), income (cost sensitivity), and regionality (competition for space, travel times). Girls in this subgroup have high interest in sports like dance, swimming, volleyball and tennis, with lower actual participation due to cost and transportation barriers, waitlists, and lack of available programs - structural friction prevents sustained participation. Another example is non-binary and gender-diverse youth in mid-size cities or rural regions. Gender, regional, and social inclusion concerns layer to create a pattern of low participation despite high interest in sports such as volleyball, flag football, and cycling. The barrier is not cost alone, but program design and social climate, amplified by having fewer local sport options. Finally, youth from northern Ontario living in lower-income households are impacted by their income level, geography, and scarcity of infrastructure. Interest clusters around cycling, running, and outdoor sports, with limited progression due to low participation in organized sport. Barriers include lack of access to transportation, coaching, and facilities.

Change in Action

Adrienne Clarkson Public School and Ophea collaborated to reimagine recess time when Junior Jams was created, emphasizing low-organization games that prioritize a low skill gap that appeals to youth who wouldn't typically identify as athletes or sporty. Running once a week on Fridays, the program saw strong attendance from girls and those who wouldn't typically join organized sports teams.

Learn more about how they are changing the game [HERE](#).



CHANGE IN YOUTH WELLBEING

Do improvements in sport access and quality improve youth mental health and belonging?

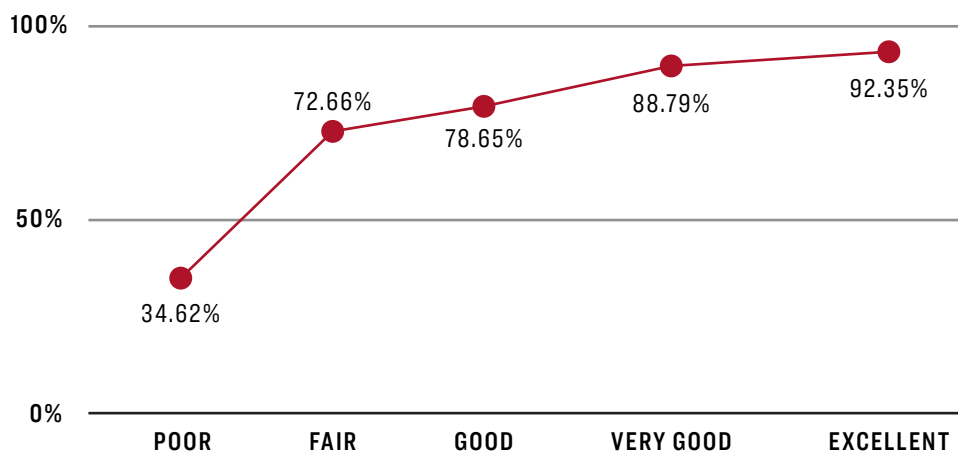
Or do programs and activities which center their focus and KPIs around mental health and belonging improve sport participation?

Yes.

How youth perceive themselves – body and mind – impacts how they navigate the world around them, and the activities, groups or teams they decide to try - or not.

In 2025, a majority of youth (51%) who participated in at least one sport in the past year described their mental health status as either very good or excellent compared to 24% of youth not active in sport, indicating a beneficial relationship between sport participation and a healthy mind. Interestingly, each incremental step up the mental health self-rating scale (Poor > Fair > Good > Very good > Excellent) is also associated with a meaningful increase in sport participation.

PARTICIPATION RATES BY MENTAL HEALTH STATUS



Although this trendline was comparably observed among both organized and casual sport participants overall, 26% of boys/young men playing organized sport, for example, had *excellent* mental health ratings compared to boys/young men in casual sport settings (18%). Further, in organized sport, boys/young men were more likely (26%) to rate their mental health as excellent than were girls/young women (14%).

YOUTHS' SELF-PERCEPTION MATTERS

Year over year, there is a 3% decrease overall from 2023 to 2025 for those describing their mental health status as very good or excellent. There is also a notable change along gendered lines when comparing data from 2023 to 2025. Women and girls report an 8% decrease in excellent mental health status, while non-binary respondents show an 11% decrease, and boys' excellent status remained consistent. Differences such as these within intersections of gender show that the sport and mental health relationship is fluid and responsive to changes in experience and conditions.

Regardless of whether they participated in sport or not, 49% of boys, 58% of girls, and 87% of non-binary youth endorsed wishing their bodies looked different; compared to an overall average of 55% of all youth. Further, 53% of youth either strongly agree or somewhat agree that how they feel about their body impacts their interest in playing sport.

The good news? When youth can play the impact can be far reaching, as evidenced by the 83% of youth who strongly or somewhat agree that sport has a positive impact on their mental health. Further, 77% of sport participants rated their sense of belonging to their local community as very strong or somewhat strong, compared to 46% of youth not active in sport. These insights are consistent with prior years, and challenge practitioners and policymakers to consider what outcomes are possible when investing in quality sport is conceptualized as a means toward a larger health, mental health and community end. **Let's go.**



Change in Action

Jr. HoopQueens, like many sport organizations, relies on volunteer coaches to run their programs, and the Toronto-based basketball organization was interested in learning about how they could improve their coach retention.

Learn more about how they are changing the game [HERE](#).

“The presence of sport and sporting events has a noticeable impact on my community because it creates a sense of connection and pride that brings people together. Local games and events often serve as social gatherings where families, friends, and neighbours interact, which helps strengthen relationships beyond just the activity itself. On a cultural level, sporting events often become part of the community’s identity, giving people a common topic of conversation and something to celebrate together. Overall, they add energy, unity, and opportunities for both personal growth and collective enjoyment”



CHANGE IN YOUTH SPORT CULTURE

Investing in efforts to address financial, travel, accessibility, and climate-related barriers is essential for increasing the opportunities youth have to play. The role of culture and the quality of the experience youth “feel” when they are in a play space or environment, however, is key to how long they stay. Youth continue to signal that an intentional focus on quality in sport programs, and social connection in play environments, are vital steps for realizing the 2025-2035 Canadian Sport Policy pillar of mass participation. When sport is at its best, the experience is social, safe, and fun, and youth feel comfortable, accepted and like they belong. In 2025, more youth were in fact experiencing this, despite improvements not being equitably experienced for all.

Change in Action

Toronto Playground Baseball Association set out to gain an understanding of the experiences of their house league players and the parents of those players in order to improve their overall club culture, particularly for under-represented populations such as girls and racialized communities.

Learn more about how they are changing the game [HERE](#).

ENDURING CHALLENGES

Only 10% of respondents participating in sport in the past year report their sport environment(s) as welcoming of queer, trans and non-binary youth.

Whereas 26% of all youth have either directly experienced bullying or hazing practices themselves, or have witnessed incidents to which they were not the target, only 10% feel like they have someone to talk to about it. Black youth and youth with a disability are 2x more likely, and Indigenous youth 3x more likely, to have directly experienced bullying or unsafe hazing practices, compared to youth overall. Further, the 2025 Ontario Coaching Report indicates that young athletes in school sport are 3x more likely to experience an extreme hazing incident compared to youth in grassroots or competitive sport.

Experiences with racism and discrimination persist at all levels of sport, with a consistently large majority (87%) of youth not having someone

Change in Action

From research, education and producing *Sidelined: The Colour of the Game* documentary, **Anti-Racism in Sport** is raising awareness and promoting dialogue and disruption of racism at all levels of sport.

Learn more about how they are changing the game [HERE](#).

they trust to talk to about it. Girls/young women, for example, report being 2x more likely to have experienced discrimination based on who they are, compared to boys/young men. Whereas 19% of youth overall have experienced racism in a sports environment, these experiences are disproportionately felt among South Asian youth (28%), Indigenous youth (42%) and Black youth (55%). Related, Black and Indigenous youth each report a decline in access to play spaces they consider to be safe, with 69% of Black youth (84% in 2023), and 66% of Indigenous youth having access to safe places to play (81% in 2023).

Most concerning are the experiences and trends reported by Black youth, for whom the proportion who have experienced racism in sport have increased in each of the four time points the Change the Game survey has been administered - more than doubling since 2021. Whether this trajectory is being fuelled by new incidents, improved awareness and reporting, or other factors such as increased normalization of hate and polarization in society, the underlying reasons warrant further study and concerted action.

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

Despite the challenges of today, the arc of history is long and changemaking efforts are widespread. Positive progress and momentum is being felt across sport and play environments in schools, community clubs and nature-based settings, even as much of the sport system awaits the final report and safer sport recommendations of the Future of Sport in Canada Commission in 2026.

The good news? Change efforts are working, with 45% of youth reporting that the quality of the sport culture they have experienced has improved in the past year, compared to 9% for whom it has gotten worse. This trend is observable across almost all identities in the survey, with notable positive outliers including a majority of South Asian youth (56%), newcomers to Canada (60%), and Middle Eastern youth (66%) citing somewhat or strongly improved sport cultures in the past year. Respondents acknowledge the unique ability of sport to bring people together, facilitate human connections, and promote a sense of unity and community, and continued efforts to center belonging, social and cultural connection as core outcomes of sport provision and policymaking can continue to build momentum and realize tangible improvements.

Accordingly, the top 5 youth-identified ways to improve the quality of sport and play culture, are:

1. **Facilitate social environments where youth can make friends and form healthy relationships with peers and adults.**
2. **Provide welcoming sport spaces where youth feel comfortable as themselves.**
3. **Develop practices and activities to support the development of life skills.**
4. **Connect youth to wraparound supports such as culturally-centered activities, mental health services, and helpful supports through difficult times.**
5. **Ensure team climates are rooted in mutual respect, where peers and teammates accept “who I am”.**

Change in Action

MLSE Foundation invested \$1M over 4 years to **ENAGB Youth Agency**, to intentionally co-design a roadmap toward improving culturally relevant access to recreation and wellness supports for Indigenous youth across Ontario.

Learn more about how ENAGB engaged more than 400 Indigenous youth across Ontario, and their reflections on sport, recreation and wellness in their report [HERE](#).

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SO WHAT/WHAT NEXT?

The data is clear. Youth are asking for better, braver, more human sport. The opportunity now is to move faster than the barriers, design with intention, and turn momentum into real change.

The data is in your hands. **Let's Go.**

— 1. BUILD ON-RAMPS, NOT JUST PROGRAMS

Turn interest into action — everywhere, for everyone.

Youth are telling us they *want* to play — but the system is losing them between curiosity and commitment. Interest, fandom, and participation only align when sport is easy to try, flexible to access, and designed around real life, especially for girls, gender-diverse youth, low-income youth, and those in underserved regions.

CALL TO ACTION:

Stop designing sport for “full-season, full-commitment” participants only. Invest in low-barrier, drop-in, modular, and casual entry points — pop-up programs, school- and park-based play, short seasons, and try-it formats — that meet youth where they already are. Partner with pro teams, creators, and community leaders to turn fandom into first play moments, not just spectatorship!

If youth are raising their hand, don't make them jump through hoops. Open the door and let them play.

— 2. MAKE BELONGING THE KPI

If it doesn't feel safe, social, and affirming — it doesn't work.

Participation alone is not the win. Youth stay when sport feels welcoming, relational, and human. Right now, too many young people — especially Black, Indigenous, disabled, queer, trans, and gender-diverse youth — are still telling us sport environments are unsafe, isolating, or silent when harm happens. At the same time, youth are clear about what does improve quality and retention: friendships, respect, trusted adults, and spaces where they can be themselves.

CALL TO ACTION:

Shift accountability. Measure success by belonging, not just registration numbers. Fund and mandate training, staffing, and program design that center social connection, anti-racism, inclusion, and youth voice. Build clear, visible support systems so when harm happens, youth know exactly who has their back.

No more “character building” without care. Belonging is the baseline.

3. DESIGN FOR REAL LIFE — ESPECIALLY MENTAL HEALTH

Sport should give energy, not take it.

Youth are navigating declining mental health, body image pressure, school, work, caregiving, and financial stress — and they are explicit: they want sport that fits their lives, supports their wellbeing, and helps them feel connected, not overwhelmed. The strongest benefits show up when sport is flexible, affirming, and socially supportive — not rigid or high-pressure.

CALL TO ACTION:

Co-design the future of sport with youth. Rethink schedules, expectations, competition models, and coaching norms so sport supports mental health, not just performance. Embed wraparound supports, normalize rest and choice, and create multiple ways to belong — competitive, casual, creative, and community-based.

Sport should help young people breathe deeper, not burn out faster. Let's build it that way.



END NOTES

THIS DOCUMENT MAY BE REFERENCED AS:

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All key insights from this research will be shared broadly across the sport and Sport For Development sectors, including with sport organizations, funders, policymakers, and researchers. For anonymized data and to learn more about how youth overall or from different regions or demographic groups responded to the questions, please visit <https://www.mlsefoundation.org/how-we-give/research> to access an interactive online dashboard of results.

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