

Strategies to Enhance Accessible Participation Opportunities in Youth Basketball



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief overviews the increased popularity of basketball in the Canadian youth sports landscape – and underscores the challenges of accessibility within the sport. Municipal- and policy-level strategies are summarized – each aimed at fostering inclusive participation opportunities in basketball for all youth – and can support youth sector stakeholders in advocating for change.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Accessibility: Different definitions of accessibility exist. For the purposes of this Evidence Brief, accessibility refers to *the quality or characteristics of something that make it possible to approach, enter, or use.*¹

House League: Neighbourhood or community-based recreational sports program, primarily for children or adolescents, where teams are made up of players residing in the same area/community. Basketball house leagues are open to young people from all skill levels; players work with coaches, participate in regular practices, and compete against other house league teams. These programs are typically less competitive and fast-paced, as compared to **rep basketball**, which is played at a higher skill level, with teams competing in ranked divisions.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

01. The Importance of Sports Participation for Youth

Sports participation offers youth various short- and long-term benefits. Significant physical health benefits are associated with young people's routine engagement and participation in sports, which can reduce stress,² improve cardiovascular health,³ and enhance overall physical wellbeing.⁴ Summaries of research evidence continuously highlight the numerous health advantages associated with youth sport participation, further emphasizing the importance of physical activity and sports in promoting the healthy development of youth.⁵

Sports participation also plays an important role in the psychological, social, and emotional growth of youth, who can develop valuable life skills, such as teamwork, resilience, communication, and leadership.⁶ These skills not only benefit youth in their current sports activities but can be transferred to other areas of life, including educational and employment settings.⁷ Furthermore, youth sports programs promote positive youth development,⁸ a strengths-based approach that views youth as

having resources to be developed rather than as problems to be ‘fixed’.⁹ Sports reinforce positive youth development by cultivating a sense of belonging within a community, providing youth with a supportive environment to build quality relationships with others and to thrive.¹⁰ Basketball has one of the highest rates of youth sport participation and is well suited to offer youth opportunities to acquire these short- and long-term benefits.¹¹

02. The Current Landscape of Basketball in Canada

a) Popularity Among Youth

Basketball has grown significantly in popularity among Canadian youth, making it one of the country’s most played sports. Over four million Canadian youth participate in organized sports – a participation rate of 67% among the total population of 6.1 million youth (ages 3 to 17).¹² Basketball is listed as *the fourth most popular sport for Canadian youth and one of the top three sports with the highest increase in participation post-pandemic (16%)*.¹²

This increase may be attributable to the media’s increased focus on basketball, such as greater coverage of NBA games and more airtime to women’s basketball stars like Caitlyn Clark. Prominent Canadian NBA players, such as Steve Nash and, more recently, RJ Barrett and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, and the previous successes of the Toronto Raptors (Canada’s only NBA team), are inspiring a new generation of players to take up the sport. There is also the “the culture of basketball, which connects the sport to music, fashion, art, design, film, and tech, [and] offers many in-roads to a deeper relationship with the game.”¹³

Basketball’s popularity among Canadian youth might also be explained by the sport’s strong presence in school athletics. Basketball is one of the top sports in high school athletics, with thousands of students participating annually in interscholastic competitions. Due to the sport’s rise in popularity and its influx of high-level talent, Canadian high schools have begun to partner with organizations, such as the [Ontario Scholastic Basketball Association](#), to implement preparatory schools that provide elite-level training, competition, education, and exposure to premier high school basketball student-athletes. These schools offer high school-aged youth the opportunity to receive their high school diploma while participating in a basketball-focused daily training environment.

As youth transition into adolescence, school-based sports participation can offset the costs needed for participation in fee-based out-of-school programs.¹⁴ However, secondary school sports are highly competitive and only offer participation opportunities to those with the highest skill level.

b) Accessibility of Youth Programs

While basketball is becoming more popular within Canada, there are growing concerns over its accessibility. For instance, financial and economic worries are the top concerns reported by parents in the Canadian Youth Sports Report survey.¹² Parents/caregivers spend an average of \$1,002 annually per child on youth basketball;¹⁵ this cost grew from pre- to post-pandemic, with parents indicating that inflation is the leading cause for the increase in participation costs.

In Canada alone, basketball has the highest registration costs of all sports, at an average of \$730.¹⁶ These costs are in addition to other rising costs that families face outside of sport (e.g., housing, food affordability). As a result, “[t]he benefits associated with sport and physical activity participation for children and youth will not be equally distributed in societies when the ability to pay influences access to programs.”¹⁴

The limited availability of programming spaces also affects accessibility. Outdoor courts may be more readily available, but these spaces are unreliable¹³ – due to weather, “the impact of concrete on the body”,¹³ and, in some instances, municipal policies.¹⁷ Not all indoor courts are accessible to community programs, and even the community use of indoor courts at public schools may be constrained or inconsistent.

Avenues to increase youth sports participation in inclusive and equitable ways are therefore viewed as an important priority.¹⁸ House league programs are often positioned as an equitable solution due to their lower registration costs, shorter seasons, fewer games and/or practices, and little to no travel required. Yet access to house league basketball in Canada is sporadic, with programs not readily available in many neighbourhoods,¹³ likely due to the reliance on operating in publicly-shared spaces (e.g., schools and community centres), access to which varies based on permit availability and proper scheduling.¹³ Strategies must be explored to address accessibility concerns (e.g., costs, facilities) and reduce barriers to youth’s participation in basketball.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE ACCESSIBLE PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES IN YOUTH BASKETBALL

Part A: Municipal-Level Strategies

Municipal-level strategies for increasing accessible participation opportunities for youth basketball involve actions that can be implemented in local community contexts.

01. Invest in the development and maintenance of basketball courts in public parks and recreation centres.

Municipalities can ensure that courts are well-maintained, safe, and available to the public **at no cost**. Additionally, municipalities can **retrofit existing outdoor spaces** with basketball hoops and ensure that indoor facilities are available for **year-round play**. Ontario’s Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund is an opportunity for municipalities, Indigenous communities, and non-profit organizations to apply for funding to repair and upgrade existing sport and recreation facilities and to build new and transformative facilities to meet the needs of communities.¹⁹

02. Support the creation of more community-based basketball programs, especially in advocating for increased community use of public school gymnasiums.

Municipalities can collaborate with local schools, community centres, and sports organizations to offer **affordable** or **free** basketball leagues, drop-in clinics, after-school initiatives, and summer camps. These programs can be tailored to different age groups and skill levels, providing both recreational play and competitive-developmental opportunities in accessible formats. Advocating for increased **community use of public school gymnasiums is critical** to ensuring diverse programming that can be accessible to more young people; school boards must acknowledge the important role they play in facilitating increased participation opportunities for youth basketball.

03. Ensure that programs target youth experiencing intersecting barriers to participation.

In addition to providing free or low-cost opportunities, municipalities should consider the intersectionality of youth (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status) to prioritize inclusive programming targeting underserved youth populations. While evidence supports the development of universal programs targeting access and availability, targeted interventions that consider the combined effects of gender, age, and income are necessary to address participation disparities for youth.¹⁴

04. Foster partnerships with local businesses, non-profits, funders, and professional sports teams.

Municipalities can work with these partners to secure funding, sponsorships, and resources for basketball programs and facilities. Collaborations with professional teams can bring additional visibility and enthusiasm to municipal basketball initiatives. For instance, leveraging the popularity of the Toronto Raptors and their players can help to promote local programs and encourage youth participation. Celebrating Canada's rich basketball history can also foster enthusiasm for the sport.

Additionally, municipalities should highlight organizations within their respective communities that offer reduced or barrier-free opportunities for participation to increase awareness and engagement. For example: **Lay-Up Basketball**, a Toronto-based organization committed to improving youth's access to basketball in Canada,¹³ and the **"Pete" Petersen Basketball League**, located in Kingston, which offers free programming for youth in the city's underserved areas and prioritizes fun and belonging in the sport.

By combining public and private efforts, municipalities can create a robust support system that enhances the accessibility and appeal of basketball for youth.

Part B: Policy-Level Strategies

Policy-level strategies for increasing accessibility to youth basketball focus on funding and initiatives to promote broader interest in sports and physical activity.

01. Direct federal funding to support sports infrastructure and community-based programs.

Through initiatives such as the [Canada Community-Building Fund](#), the federal government provides municipalities with financial resources to develop and maintain essential infrastructure, including sport and recreation centres. Part of this funding could be allotted to building more publicly owned and operated basketball-only facilities to meet future needs for affordability and accessibility.¹³

In addition, federal grants and contributions programs, such as the [Community Sport for All Initiative](#) and [Innovation Initiative](#), offer targeted funding to promote accessible and innovative avenues to increase sporting opportunities for youth across the country. Basketball organizations can actively apply to these funding streams to help offset costs associated with programming and to help lower financial barriers for their youth participants and their families.

02. Develop and advance initiatives that promote sports participation more broadly.

The federal government's [Canadian Sport Policy](#), which aims to enhance opportunities for all Canadians to participate in sport, supports the development of inclusive and accessible sports environments. Policies that prioritize physical education in schools and encourage after-school sports programs contribute to making basketball more accessible.

Public health campaigns and initiatives emphasizing the importance of physical activity for overall wellbeing can also increase youth's interest and participation in basketball. By integrating basketball into broader physical activity and health promotion strategies, federal policies can create a supportive environment encouraging youth participation in basketball.

Increasing youth participation in popular sports like basketball can be especially impactful for youth facing barriers.²⁰ Recognizing the benefits of **sport for development** – the intentional use of sport to build healthy communities and support people, especially youth, to reach their potential²¹ – can unite government departments and ministries with mandates to safeguard and promote youth wellbeing.

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "youth sports participation", "accessibility AND basketball", "participation AND basketball AND Canada", and "positive youth development AND sports".

ENDNOTES

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