



## Regular Article

## Youth sport during the COVID-19 pandemic: The influence of race and affluence on parents' perspectives of youth participation

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## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 restrictions led to a nearly 50% decline in youth sport participation across the United States (Dorsch et al., 2021). Today, communities and sport organizations have resumed sport. However, research has yet to fully elucidate how COVID-19 restrictions impacted youth participation across different sociodemographic groups during the pandemic. The present study explored the association between race and affluence and their relationship with parents' attitudes toward children's youth sport participation before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Online questionnaires were completed by a nationally representative sample of 3706 parents ( $M_{age} = 39.57 \pm 9.03$  years) who had a child regularly participating in youth sport before COVID-19. Multivariate Analyses of Variance using Tukey post-hoc tests were conducted to examine the main effect differences by race and affluence and the interactive effects of race and affluence. Results suggest that race and affluence – independently and in combination – were salient categorical variables of children's weekly hours of sport participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings highlight that White<sup>a</sup>high affluent groups had the highest rates of sport participation during the COVID-19 pandemic and that these families desire to invest more time and money at greater rates upon returning. Theoretically, designed intersectionality research is recommended to explore further effects of race and affluence in youth sport.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted society, including youth sport in the United States. Youth sport, an organized extra-curricular activity, is a prominent developmental context for children and their families (Howie et al., 2020; Knight et al., 2017). The extra-curricular activity draws approximately 40–45 million participants annually (Foss et al., 2014; Merkel, 2013). During the onset of the pandemic, federal political and public health leaders implemented measures to slow the spread of the disease, including stay-at-home orders (Bourassa, 2021). Eventually, states were given the authority to implement their strategies to ensure the safety of their citizens – such as physical distancing, mask-wearing, and vaccinations – and were allowed to determine when they would reopen (Bourassa, 2021). These

safeguards ultimately resulted in the cancellation of sport seasons and led organizations to adjust operations and, in some cases, shut down permanently (Sanderson & Brown, 2020). The impact of these decisions was felt in terms of youth's physical, social, and emotional well-being factors typically associated with participation in a positive and well-organized youth sport program (Anderson-Butcher, 2019).

In an era where the pay-for-play model increases costs associated with youth sport participation (see Bucy, 2013), parents play a crucial role as the gatekeepers of their children's opportunities and experiences (Dorsch et al., 2016; Knight et al., 2022). In some cases, this can place a significant financial burden on many families (Dunn et al., 2016; Fleming et al., 2023; Hyman, 2012). Contrary to most Westernized sports culture, "sport-for-all" (Hartmann-Tews, 2006) is not a cornerstone in the United States. In practice, this means that federal, state, and

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local policies are less likely to support extra-curricular activities via taxpayer funding, especially when economic hardship occurs, like the COVID-19 pandemic (Powers et al., 2019, 2020). Instead, families are left to decide how to afford the rising cost of youth sport.

The last time the youth sport sector was affected by an economic downfall comparable to that of COVID-19 was the 2008 recession. Consequently, youth sport participation dropped from 45% in 2008 to 38% in 2014 (Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 2016). Many youth sport leagues sponsored by governments and municipalities lost significant budgetary support and never recovered (Gould, 2019) – further decreasing affordable community-based programming (Powers et al., 2020). A more affordable option for sports parents is interscholastic (school-based) sports. Local school districts primarily fund interscholastic sports (Malina, 2010). Previous studies have noted that parents spend an average of \$200 (USD) per year on interscholastic sports compared to \$1500 on club sport (Post et al., 2018). However, interscholastic sports are highly competitive, decreasing opportunities for athletes to participate. As such, club sports, which are year-round and operate via myriad for-and non-profit organizations (Krohus et al., 2017), provide more, albeit *more expensive*, opportunities for children to participate.

While there is variability in how much sport parents spend annually, recent research asserts parents spend, on average, \$883 annually per child (Aspen Institute, 2022). Whether intended or not, the commercialization of club sports decreases access to the youth who could benefit from sport the most (Gould, 2019). For sure, parent income is a significant factor in youth sport participation. Parents are willing to invest time and financial resources to support their children's participation in youth sports (Côté, 1999; Green & Chalip, 1997; Kirk et al., 1997). Many parents report feeling the need to give their children a competitive edge in their sport trajectories (Dorsch et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand parents' perceptions and behaviors as families have re-engaged the sports landscape post-pandemic. As the world – and youth sport – continue to adapt to our new “normal,” key stakeholders (e.g., politicians, community leaders, researchers, and practitioners) can help reimagine the design and delivery of youth sport in the United States. Furthermore, understanding parents' perceptions of the cost associated with youth sport can help increase advocacy for affordable sport programming.

Past research has explored how levels of affluence shape parents' perspectives and decisions regarding youth sport participation. Affluence is defined as the position that individuals or families hold contingent upon their personal or household income distribution (Medeiros, 2006). A recent study by Krohus and colleagues (2021) sampled 1025 sports parents and found that less affluent families were more likely to perceive the financial burden of, and time commitment to, youth sport as significant barriers compared to higher affluent families. Still, the lower affluent group saw sport participation as a protective factor against crime and a potential pathway for their children's college aspirations. Meanwhile, the more affluent families in the sample focused more on the tangible benefits of sport participation, such as physical health and social development. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new financial challenges for many families.

Nearly 40% of families with children aged six or younger reported that their families experienced unemployment or loss of income during the first six months of the pandemic (Waxman et al., 2020). Consequently, many families adjusted their budgets and cut household spending, tapped into emergency or retirement savings, or took on additional personal debt. COVID-19 undoubtedly exacerbated the existing barriers related to access and outcome realization in youth sport for specific populations (Whitley et al., 2021). As Iceland (2019) asserts, “[u]nderstanding patterns of affluence is all the more important given the growth of income inequality in the United States” (p. 2). Often, there are hidden nuances associated with inequalities (see Azzarito, 2016). Therefore, examining how multiple factors, such as affluence and race, are intimately related in the United States warrants investigation

(Powell, 2007).

Indeed, the intersections of multiple sociodemographic characteristics likely shape parents' perceptions and behaviors in sport. Therefore, it is beneficial for sport researchers to investigate the social contexts and constructs that affect parents' perceptions of youth sport. Doing so will build a more nuanced understanding of how personal characteristics such as race and affluence independently and together shape parents' perceptions and behaviors. In terms of the sport environment, very few studies have examined the relationship between race and affluence simultaneously.

Research has shown that race stratification intertwines with affluence (see Williams et al., 2010). It is well documented that minoritized groups (i.e., African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinx individuals) are more likely to face heightened financial challenges, live in structurally vulnerable neighborhoods – and, in the case of COVID-19, be at a higher risk of catching the contagious disease (Berkowitz et al., 2020; McLaughlin & Stokes, 2002). It is plausible that the wealth disparities in the United States are associated with these outcomes. For instance, studies have shown that White families have four times as much wealth as Black families and three times as much as Latinx families and can afford (more) quality healthcare (Yearby et al., 2022; refer also to Kochhar and Cilluffo, 2017; Tai et al., 2020). With this in mind, White families are less likely to be essential workers who may expose themselves and their relatives to COVID-19 (Alcendor, 2020).

Race and affluence relate to youth sport because the cost, access, and exposure can significantly affect less affluent families and minoritized communities (Kamphuis et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2021). Therefore, examining how the COVID-19 pandemic affected families at the intersection of race and affluence is essential. Comprehending these social contexts will offer youth sport researchers and practitioners a better picture of *who* is most affected by COVID-19 and *how*. This approach will enable them to implement targeted measures and prioritize resources for those most in need. Moreover, it will be vital to consider how the country might reimagine the design and delivery of youth sport moving forward to ensure every child has the opportunity to engage sport in meaningful ways.

The present study explored the association between race and affluence and their relationship with parents' attitudes toward children's youth sport participation before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It was hypothesized that parents' sociodemographics, specifically affluence and race, would significantly differ when examining their attitudes about sport participation related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The present research addresses a theoretical call made by Dorsch et al. (2022) to explore how societal resources (e.g., relative affluence versus non-affluence) are related to organizational opportunities for and demands on athletes and parents within the youth sport system. It also addresses Meier and colleagues' (2018) call to investigate further youth sport participation patterns across the domains of race and class, as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, this study aligns with Whitley and colleagues' (2021) call to deepen understanding of youth sports participation disparities. Addressing these calls has the potential to move the needle toward a youth sport system that is more inclusive.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Study participants ( $N = 3706$ ) were a statistically representative subset of youth sport parents in the United States. Recruitment quotas were established based on demographic data published by the United States Census Bureau (2020) and past research conducted by industry leaders (Aspen Institute, 2019; Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 2020; Wintergreen Research, 2019). Participants were recruited proportionally from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. California was the most represented state in the sample ( $n = 321$ ), and Vermont

and Wyoming were the least represented states ( $n = 4$  each). Across the country, participants self-identified as residing in urban (40.8%), suburban (42.2%), and rural (17.0%) communities.

Parents were 1631 males and 2068 females (seven parents identified as non-binary) and ranged in age from 19 to 89 years ( $M = 39.57$ ,  $SD = 9.03$ ). Participants' ages were normally distributed, with 46.1% of the study sample falling between 35 and 45 years old. In alignment with national distributions (see [United States Census Bureau, 2020](#)), 2165 parents (58.4%) identified as White, 669 (18.1%) as Latinx, 506 (13.7%) as Black or African-American, 208 (5.6%) as Asian, 90 (2.4%) as multiracial, 40 (1.1%) as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and nine (0.2%) as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Thirteen participants preferred not to disclose their race, and six selected "Other."

Roughly three-quarters of the sample (77.2%) reported living in a two-parent household (either married or cohabitating), and seven in ten (70.2%) reported being employed full-time or part-time in a wage-earning job. In line with national unemployment statistics provided by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), 8.0% of the sample reported being out of work at the time of survey completion, with 81.3% attributing their unemployment to COVID-19-related layoffs. Further, in line with publicly available data from the [United States Census Bureau \(2020\)](#), the median household income of the study sample was \$67,000 (range = \$0-\$7,500,000). A generally even proportion of participants reported annual household earnings of less than \$50,000 ( $n = 1296$ ; 35.0%), between \$50,000 and \$99,999 ( $n = 1255$ ; 33.8%), and \$100,000 or more ( $n = 1155$ ; 31.2%).

Parents reported an average of 2.03 ( $SD = 1.08$ ) children living in the household, with 1.60 ( $SD = 0.98$ ) of those children having participated regularly in organized youth sport before the COVID-19 pandemic (78.8%). The children participants reported were 2148 males and 1555 females (three parents identified their children as non-binary) and ranged in age from 6 to 18 years ( $M = 12.29$ ,  $SD = 3.16$ ). A roughly even proportion of children were between 6 and 10 years old ( $n = 1160$ ; 31.3%), 11 and 13 years old ( $n = 1129$ ; 30.5%), and 14 and 19 years old ( $n = 1417$ ; 38.2%). Before COVID-19-related restrictions, 30.1% of children participated in their primary sport one or two days per week, 62.9% participated three to five days per week, and just 7.0% participated six or seven days per week. In their primary sports, children participated most in intramural sports at school (29.0%), free play (27.7%), travel/elite or club league sports (18.9%), community-based sport (15.1%), and interscholastic school sports (9.3%).

## 2.2. Procedure

Procedures were approved by an institutional review board for the protection of human subjects. Following this approval, parents were recruited via a paid Qualtrics panel or youth sport industry partner listserves. Participants were screened, and quotas were achieved based on sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., race, income, state, number of children) to arrive at a relatively representative sample of American youth sport parents. After receiving an email outlining the study's aims, participants provided informed consent online and answered 13 demographic questions about themselves, their oldest sport-participating child, and their family. Parents subsequently responded to two study-designed items assessing their children's weekly hours of sport participation before and during COVID-19-related restrictions as well as a single study-designed item assessing parents' perceptions of their children's likeliness to return to sport once restrictions were lifted, parents' willingness to spend money and time on sport in the future, and their fear of child illness as a barrier to sport. Data were collected between June 1st and September 24th, 2020, at the height of the moratorium on youth sport in the United States.

## 2.3. Measures

**Parent Age.** Parents were asked, "What is your age?" Response

options ranging from 18 to 99 years old were included on a drop-down list.

**Parent Race.** Parents were asked, "What is your race?" Response options included (a) White, (b) Latinx, (c) Black or African-American, (d) Asian or multiracial, (f) American Indian or Alaskan Native, (g) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, (h) I prefer not to disclose my child's race, and (i) "other."

**Parent Sex.** Parents were asked, "What is your sex?" Response options included (a) male, (b) female, and (c) non-binary.

**Annual Household Income.** Parents were asked, "What is your annual pre-tax household income (across all earners)?" Open-ended responses were rounded to the nearest dollar. Subsequently, participants were grouped into families who made between \$0 and \$49,999, \$50,000 and \$99,999, and \$100,000 or more annually ([Aspen Institute, 2019](#); [United States Census Bureau, 2020](#)).

**Children's weekly hours of sport participation.** Children's weekly hours of sport participation were measured using two parallel items. First, parents were asked, "How many hours a week did your child engage in the following before COVID-19 restrictions?" Parents responded to their children's weekly hours of participation (on a continuous scale, representing weekly hours of participation) in four settings (*pickup/free play, virtual training, focused practice or drills, games, or competition*). These totals were summed to calculate children's total weekly hours of sport participation prior to COVID-19-related restrictions. Parents were subsequently asked to report their children's weekly hours of sport participation (across the same four categories) during COVID-19-related restrictions.

**Willingness to spend money on sport in the future.** One study-designed measure assessed parents' willingness to spend money on sport in the future: "After youth sports resume, our family will likely spend \_\_\_ money than we used to on this child's youth sports participation." Participants were asked to respond on a scale from 1 (*substantially less*) to 5 (*substantially more*).

**Willingness to spend time on sport in the future.** One study-designed measure assessed parents' willingness to spend money on sport in the future: "After youth sports resume, our family will likely spend \_\_\_ time than we used to on this child's youth sport participation." Participants were asked to respond on a scale from 1 (*substantially less*) to 5 (*substantially more*).

**Fear of child illness as a barrier to sport.** One study-designed measure assessed parents' fear of their child getting sick when restrictions on youth sport were lifted: "I am afraid of my child getting sick if he/she starts playing sports again." Participants were asked to respond on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

## 2.4. Data analysis

MANOVAs and Tukey post-hoc tests were utilized to examine the independent effects of race and affluence. First, differences between whites and non-whites (White and Non-White) and income groups (\$0-\$49,999, \$50,000-99,999, \$100,000 +) were examined concerning children's weekly hours of sport participation, parents' willingness to spend money and time on sport in the future, and their fear of child illness as a barrier to sport.

To examine the combined effects (i.e., statistical interaction) of race and affluence, we created a variable named 'intersection' by calculating the factor of both scores. This yielded six groups: (1) White\*Low Affluence, (2) White\*Medium Affluence, (3) White\*High Affluence, (4) Non-White\*Low Affluence, (5) Non-White\*Medium Affluence, (6) Non-White\*High Affluence. Another MANOVA was conducted to assess whether significant differences existed across the six groups on the dependent variables of interest. This was followed again by Tukey's post-hoc analyses to identify where significant differences existed.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Descriptive statistics and frequencies of key variables

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the four outcome variables, and frequencies were calculated for the predictor variables of race (White vs. non-White) and affluence (low, medium, high). These data are presented in [Table 1](#).

#### 3.2. Group differences by race, affluence, and Race\*Affluence

MANOVA results show a statistically significant difference in attitudes towards COVID-19 and sport participation based on the athlete's parents being White or non-White,  $F(5, 2568) = 13.59, p < 0.001$ ; Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.974$ . Results also show a statistically significant difference in these outcomes across family affluence,  $F(10, 5134), p < 0.001$ ; Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.944$ . Furthermore, a significant interaction effect was found when combining race\*affluence,  $F(25, 9526), p < 0.001$ ; Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.905$ . Results are presented in [Table 2](#).

#### 3.3. Tukey's post-hoc tests for affluence

[Table 3](#) illustrates mean score differences among all three affluence groups. Differences in the change in hours of participation between the high and low ( $p < 0.001$ ) and high and medium ( $p < 0.001$ ) groups were found, but not for the medium and low comparison ( $p = 0.59$ ). Concerning the willingness to spend money on sports in the future, mean differences were found between the low and medium group ( $p < 0.05$ ), low and high groups ( $p < 0.001$ ), and the medium and high groups ( $p < 0.001$ ). Results show several significant differences in the willingness to spend time on sport in the future. Specifically, the high group ( $p < 0.001$ ) significantly differed from the medium and low groups. A significant difference was found for fear of the child getting sick once returning to sport between the medium and high affluence groups ( $p < 0.05$ ), but not between the low and medium affluence ( $p = 0.43$ ) or low and high affluence groups ( $p = 0.21$ ).

#### 3.4. Tukey's post-hoc tests for Race\*Affluence

Findings show that the White\*high affluence group differed significantly in a change in hours of participation from all other groups except the Non-White\*high affluence ( $p = 0.38$ ). Similar findings were observed for willingness to spend money on sport in the future, where the White\*high affluence group differed from all other groups ( $p < 0.001$  in all cases). However, the White\*medium affluence group also differed from the other groups ( $p < 0.01$  in all cases) except the Non-White\*high affluence group ( $p = 0.46$ ). When exploring the willingness to spend time on sports in the future, the White\*high affluence group differed from all other groups ( $p < 0.001$  in all cases). Meanwhile, the White\*medium affluence group differed only from the White\*low

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and frequencies of key study variables.

	M	SD or Proportion	Min	Max
Change in weekly hours of participation	-1.71	5.07	-30	36
Willingness to spend money on sports	2.85	1.08	1	5
Willingness to spend time on sports	2.86	1.12	1	5
Fear of child getting sick upon return	3.56	1.34	1	5
Income				
Low Affluence		35.0		
Medium Affluence		33.9		
High Affluence		31.2		
Race				
White		58.4		
Non-White		41.6		

**Table 2**  
Tests of between subject effects.

Affluence (low, medium, high)	DF	F	p
Change in hours of participation	2	12.50	0.00
Willingness to spend money on sports	2	44.75	0.00
Willingness to spend time on sports	2	25.68	0.00
Fear of child getting sick upon return	2	4.11	0.02
Race (White, Non-White)			
Change in hours of participation	1	2.41	0.12
Willingness to spend money on sports	1	44.55	0.00
Willingness to spend time on sports	1	23.90	0.00
Fear of child getting sick upon return	1	21.78	0.00
Association (Race x Affluence)			
Change in hours of participation	5	5.81	0.00
Willingness to spend money on sports	5	31.90	0.00
Willingness to spend time on sports	5	20.02	0.00
Fear of child getting sick upon return	5	8.00	0.00

affluence group ( $p < 0.01$ ). White\*low affluence differed significantly from Non-White\*low and high affluence in the fear of their child getting sick once returning to sport ( $p < 0.05$ ), whereas White\*medium affluence differed significantly from all groups except White\*low affluence ( $p < 0.001$  in all cases). See [Table 4](#) for the complete results of post-hoc examinations of the race\*affluence interaction.

### 4. Discussion

Using data from a nationally representative sample of youth sport parents in the United States, this study explored the association between race and affluence and their relationship with parents' attitudes toward their children's youth sport participation before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings indicate significant differences across race (White and non-White) and affluence (low, medium, and high). Importantly, results indicate a significant *combined* effect of race and affluence on parents' attitudes toward youth sport participation. This suggests that the intersections of race and affluence are associated with parents' perceptions of their children's involvement in youth sport. Our data further support the argument that sociodemographic factors can and should be examined independently *and* in combination ([Fleming et al., 2023](#); [Meier et al., 2018](#)).

#### 4.1. Sport participation patterns: An examination of parental race and affluence as sociodemographic factors

As hypothesized, MANOVA results indicated differences in parents' attitudes toward youth sport participation during the COVID-19 pandemic as a function of their race. Indeed, race was a significant predictor of all outcome variables except for parents' fear of a child getting sick upon return to play. Results indicate a significant difference between White and non-White parents in athletes' change in hours of participation through the pandemic. This suggests that race may be associated with parents' attitudes toward their children's weekly hours of sport participation. Similar findings were found in Fleming and colleagues' (2023) study, which found White parents reported higher hours of sport participation compared to Asian and Latinx parents. This aligns with previous literature that found non-White youth report lower amounts of sport participation compared to their White counterparts ([Johnston et al., 2007](#)). These findings can be interpreted as minoritized youth who were less physically active before COVID-19 than their White peers may have remained less physically active during COVID-19 (see [Basch, 2011](#)). Thus, we may see a continual decrease in these groups' participation rates post-pandemic. Researchers and practitioners should consider investigating further how race influences behaviors, attitudes, and experiences in youth sport. Doing so will provide assistance in providing recommendations to engage minoritized groups' physical activity better.

Results also indicated that affluence is related to parents' attitudes



**Table 3**  
Tukey’s post-hoc tests for affluence.

Variable	Reference Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	SE	P	95% CI	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Change in hours of participation	\$0-\$49,999	\$50,000-\$99,999	-0.45	0.46	0.587	-1.52	0.62
		\$100,000 +	-2.22	0.47	0.001	-3.31	-1.13
		\$50,000-\$99,999	0.45	0.46	0.587	-0.62	1.52
		\$100,000 +	-1.77	0.47	0.001	-2.87	-0.67
		\$0-\$49,999	2.22	0.47	0.001	1.13	3.31
Willingness to spend money on sports in the future	\$0-\$49,999	\$50,000-\$99,999	1.77	0.47	0.001	0.67	2.87
		\$100,000 +	-0.14	0.05	0.018	-0.25	-0.02
		\$100,000 +	-0.47	0.05	0.001	-0.59	-0.35
		\$50,000-\$99,999	0.14	0.05	0.018	0.02	0.25
		\$100,000 +	-0.34	0.05	0.001	-0.46	-0.22
Willingness to spend time on sports in the future	\$0-\$49,999	\$50,000-\$99,999	0.34	0.05	0.001	0.22	0.46
		\$100,000 +	-0.10	0.05	0.170	-0.22	0.03
		\$100,000 +	-0.37	0.05	0.001	-0.5	-0.25
		\$50,000-\$99,999	0.10	0.05	0.170	-0.03	0.22
		\$100,000 +	-0.28	0.05	0.001	-0.41	-0.15
Fear of child getting sick once restrictions have been removed and returning to sport	\$0-\$49,999	\$50,000-\$99,999	0.37	0.05	0.001	0.25	0.50
		\$100,000 +	0.28	0.05	0.001	0.15	0.41
		\$50,000-\$99,999	0.08	0.06	0.432	-0.07	0.23
		\$100,000 +	-0.11	0.06	0.213	-0.26	0.04
		\$50,000-\$99,999	-0.08	0.06	0.432	-0.23	0.07
	\$100,000 +	\$100,000 +	-0.19	0.07	0.012	-0.34	-0.03
		\$0-\$49,999	0.11	0.06	0.213	-0.04	0.26
		\$50,000-\$99,999	0.19	0.07	0.012	0.03	0.34
		\$50,000-\$99,999	0.19	0.07	0.012	0.03	0.34

Notes: Group Membership: \$0 - \$49,999 n = 906, \$50,000 - \$99,999 n = 865, \$100,000+ n = 803.

toward their children’s sport participation and how they expect to invest time and resources in youth sport in the future. Specifically, compared to low to medium-affluent families, high affluent families reported more hours of continued sport participation throughout the pandemic. These findings align with previous literature suggesting that families from higher affluent backgrounds were likelier to engage in sport and leisure activities during the pandemic (Post et al., 2022). This is also consistent with literature suggesting that youth from wealthier families are given more financial support for their sport endeavors (Dunn et al., 2016; Frasier-Thomas & Cotè, 2006; Friedman, 2013; Walker et al., 2021). Despite COVID-19 being a significant disruptor in all families’ lives, highly affluent families were more likely to withstand the financial constraints (Kroshus et al., 2017), unlike medium to low-affluent families that potentially faced more financial hardships during the pandemic (Chen et al., 2022). A plausible interpretation could be that medium-to-low-affluent families may have cut youth sport from their budgets during the pandemic. This aligns with previous research that notes less affluent families struggled to afford the cost of team expenses, travel to facilities, and tournament fees (Hernandez et al., 2023).

Regarding willingness to spend time on youth sport in the future, our results indicate that the high affluent parents significantly differed from medium and low affluent parents. This may relate to the inequities in work flexibility (see Kantamneni, 2020) that allowed highly affluent parents to accommodate remote work during the pandemic. This presumes that more affluent parents had the means and flexibility to remain engaged with their children’s sport participation. As it relates to parents’ fear of their children getting sick, results highlight significant differences among our high, medium, and low affluent groups but not between the medium and low groups. This suggests that medium- and low-affluent parents may have similar perceptions about their children falling ill compared to the highly affluent group. One plausible explanation could be that parents are concerned about the potential for sick children to necessitate missed work, the use of medical leave (if available), or the financial burden of hospital visits (Hall et al., 2022).

#### 4.2. An examination of parental race and affluence as combined sociodemographic factors

The primary contribution of this research is its examination of how the combined influence of race and affluence shaped parents’ attitudes toward youth sport participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is understood that sport outcomes are complex and are influenced by the diverse characteristics of the parents and children (Dorsch et al., 2022; Powell, 2007). As hypothesized, our findings indicate that White\*high affluent families significantly differed from other groups on the variables of interest. For example, when coupled with affluence, race was significantly associated with parents’ perspectives regarding their children’s sport participation. Specifically, White\*high affluent families diverged significantly in the change in participation hours from all other groups except the non-White\*high affluence. This general trend aligns with Fleming et al. (2023), who asserted that those identifying as White with higher income levels were more likely to report more elevated amounts of sport participation compared to minoritized groups except Black families.

It is possible that affluence is related to the ways in which race becomes a more conditional predictor of sport participation rates. Future studies should investigate at what level of affluence race could become a more significant predictor of parents’ attitudes toward youth sport participation. This could provide valuable insights into the potential interplay among race, affluence, and parents’ attitudes toward youth sport participation. Understanding the experiences of minoritized youth not raised in structurally vulnerable communities may help further address determinants hindering sport engagement. Moving forward, researchers and practitioners can be well-positioned to advocate that local, state, and federal resources be directed toward families who would benefit the most (Gould, 2019).

Similar findings were discovered for parents’ willingness to spend money on sport in the future. White\*high affluent families differed from all other groups, while White\*medium affluent families differed from all other groups except non-White\*high affluent families. These results suggest that White\*high or White\*medium affluence may have been least affected financially during the pandemic. Intersectional scholars understand that race and affluence have an intimate relationship

**Table 4**  
Tukey’s post-hoc tests for combined effects.

Variable	Reference Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	SE	P	95% CI		
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Change in hours of participation	White + Low Affluence	White + High Affluence	-0.26	0.61	0.001	-4.32	-0.86	
		White + Medium Affluence	-2.37	0.61	0.002	-4.23	-0.62	
	White + High Affluence	White + Low Affluence	2.59	0.61	0.001	0.85	4.32	
		White + Medium Affluence	2.37	0.61	0.002	0.62	4.12	
		Non-White + Low Affluence	2.85	0.63	0.001	1.05	4.65	
		Non-White + Medium Affluence	2.13	0.64	0.011	0.31	3.96	
	Non-White + Low Affluence	White + High Affluence	-2.85	0.63	0.001	-4.65	-1.05	
		White + High Affluence	-2.13	0.64	0.011	-3.96	-0.31	
	Willingness to spend money on sports in the future	White + Low Affluence	White + Medium Affluence	-0.25	0.07	0.003	-0.44	-0.06
			White + High Affluence	-0.68	0.07	0.001	-0.87	-0.5
White + Medium Affluence		White + Low Affluence	0.25	0.07	0.003	0.06	0.44	
		White + High Affluence	-0.44	0.07	0.001	-0.63	-0.25	
		Non-White + Low Affluence	0.24	0.07	0.008	0.04	0.44	
White + High Affluence		Non-White + Medium Affluence	0.23	0.07	0.013	0.03	0.44	
		White + Low Affluence	0.68	0.07	0.001	0.50	0.87	
		White + Medium Affluence	0.44	0.07	0.001	0.25	0.63	
		Non-White + Low Affluence	0.68	0.07	0.001	0.48	0.87	
Non-White + Low Affluence		Non-White + Medium Affluence	0.67	0.07	0.001	0.47	0.87	
		Non-White + High-Affluence	0.58	0.08	0.001	0.36	0.8	
		White + Medium Affluence	-0.24	0.07	0.008	-0.44	-0.04	
		White + High Affluence	-0.68	0.07	0.001	-0.87	-0.48	
		White + Medium Affluence	-0.23	0.07	0.013	-0.44	-0.03	
		White + High Affluence	-0.67	0.07	0.001	-0.87	-0.47	
Non-White + High-Affluence		White + High Affluence	-0.58	0.08	0.001	-0.8	-0.36	
		White + Low Affluence	-0.23	0.07	0.014	-0.44	-0.03	
Willingness to spend time on sports in the future		White + Low Affluence	White + Medium Affluence	-0.23	0.07	0.014	-0.44	-0.03
	White + High Affluence		-0.60	0.07	0.001	-0.79	-0.40	
	White + Medium Affluence	White + Low Affluence	0.23	0.07	0.014	0.03	0.44	
		White + High Affluence	-0.36	0.07	0.001	-0.56	-0.16	
		White + Low Affluence	0.60	0.07	0.001	0.4	0.79	
	White + High Affluence	White + Medium Affluence	0.36	0.07	0.001	0.16	0.56	
		Non-White + Low Affluence	0.51	0.07	0.001	0.3	0.71	
		Non-White + Medium Affluence	0.57	0.07	0.001	0.36	0.78	
		Non-White + High-Affluence	0.50	0.08	0.001	0.27	0.73	
	Non-White + Low Affluence	White + High Affluence	-0.51	0.07	0.001	-0.71	-0.3	
		White + High Affluence	-0.57	0.07	0.001	-0.78	-0.36	
	Non-White + Medium Affluence	White + High Affluence	-0.57	0.07	0.001	-0.78	-0.36	
		White + High Affluence	-0.50	0.08	0.001	-0.73	-0.27	
	Non-White + High-Affluence	White + High Affluence	-0.50	0.08	0.001	-0.73	-0.27	
		White + Low Affluence	-0.29	0.09	0.038	-0.57	-0.01	
		White + Medium Affluence	White + High Affluence	-0.33	0.08	0.001	-0.58	-0.09
			Non-White + Low Affluence	-0.37	0.09	0.001	-0.62	-0.12
			Non-White + Medium Affluence	-0.46	0.09	0.001	-0.71	-0.2
Non-White + High-Affluence		-0.51	0.10	0.001	-0.79	-0.23		
White + High Affluence	White + Medium Affluence	0.33	0.09	0.001	0.09	0.58		

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Variable	Reference Group	Comparison Group	Mean Difference	SE	P	95% CI	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	Non-White + Low Affluence	White + Medium Affluence	0.37	0.09	0.001	0.12	0.62
	Non-White + Medium Affluence	White + Medium Affluence	0.46	0.09	0.001	0.20	0.71
	Non-White + High-Affluence	White + Low Affluence	0.29	0.10	0.038	0.01	0.57
		White + Medium Affluence	0.51	0.10	0.001	0.23	0.79

Notes: Only significant differences included  $p < 0.05$ . Group membership: White-Low Affluence  $n = 486$ , White-Medium Affluence  $n = 463$ , White-High Affluence  $n = 514$ , Non-White-Low Affluence  $n = 420$ , Non-White-Medium Affluence  $n = 402$ , Non-White-High Affluence  $n = 298$ .

(Williams et al., 2010), as White families have quadrupled and triple the wealth of Black and Latinx families, respectively (Kochhar and Cilluffo, 2017). Therefore, it is plausible that White\*medium income levels mirror non-White\*high income levels. This is a critical hypothesis to test, as scholars may be better able to advocate for equitable needs across various sociodemographic strata. Indeed, sport is not a zero-sum game, and sport leaders can help craft policies and budgets that buy all families, especially those most marginalized.

As predicted, in terms of families willing to spend time on sport in the future, the White\*high affluent group differed from all other groups. Meanwhile, White\*medium affluent families differed only from White\*low affluent groups. These results complement previous literature that suggests White\*high affluent families may have stronger attitudes about specializing in sport with the intent of obtaining intercollegiate scholarship opportunities (Post et al., 2021). Indeed, many parents believe that paying for club sports can offer more opportunities for youth athletes to specialize year-round, thus increasing their chances of earning a coveted athletic scholarship in college (Walker et al., 2021). Meanwhile, members of minoritized groups can hold similar attitudes towards youth sport as a pathway to college (Johnston et al., 2007) but are more likely to lack the necessary resources or access to participate in club sport programming. This was especially true during COVID-19, when most families had to make tough financial decisions and reduce the amount or quality of youth sport engagement (Hernandez et al., 2023).

It is also probable that White\*high affluent families in this sample were more likely to be comprised of a traditional two-parent household (Hearne et al., 2020). It is reasonable to assume that parents can engage in their children's sport endeavors together. On the contrary, minoritized groups in the United States are more likely to reside in non-traditional households. For example, nearly 67% of all households in the Black community are single-parent households (Kids, 2021). Consequently, single parents may face disparities in providing youth sport opportunities on one income and/or finding the time and energy to support their children's participation (Quarmby et al., 2011).

Findings in the present study shed light on the unique intersectional challenges faced by non-White\*high affluent families (see Abuelgasim et al., 2020). Studies indicate that certain minoritized groups met negative psychosocial experiences and outcomes during the pandemic. For example, individuals who identify as Asian were more likely to perceive and experience hate crimes, verbal abuse, or discrimination related to COVID-19 (Gover et al., 2020). Black/African American and Latinx families were more likely to experience a COVID-19-related sickness or possible death (Alcendor, 2020). These findings help explain the fact that White\*low affluent parents' fear of their child getting sick differed significantly from non-White\*low and non-White\*high affluent families. By understanding the association between race and affluence and its relationship with parents' attitudes, researchers can further catalyze retention efforts in youth sport by considering how families from diverse backgrounds uniquely interact with sport.

#### 4.3. Limitations and future directions

Despite the potential contributions made by this study, several limitations should be considered when interpreting its results. First, the sample for this study was drawn from a representative subset of parents in the United States. We acknowledge that parents whose children participate in youth sport might not align perfectly with the overall population and that our sampling protocol may have biased the experiences of engaged and available parents due to the self-report nature of the study. Likewise, the sample was cross-sectional, which limits our ability to make causal inferences about parents' experiences. Additionally, we recognize that attitudes and perceptions fluctuate, and in the case of COVID-19, parents who participated in this study may have changed their perspective over time. As a result, future scholars should consider ways to effectively design and execute longitudinal studies, as doing so would allow them to comprehend further the complex mechanisms that drive parent thoughts and behaviors in youth sport.

Another limitation to note was that our research was theoretical in its design. It does not fully explore the complex and intersecting factors that drive parents' perceptions and attitudes toward youth sport participation amidst a global pandemic. Scholars should consider implementing an intersectionality framework (see Crenshaw, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Hill-Collings, 2019 & Parker & Hefner, 2015). Although intersectionality research is becoming more popular in sport contexts (see Azzarito, 2016; Dagkas, 2016), little work has utilized such a theoretical lens to examine potential disparities across salient subgroups in youth sport. Intersectional scholars recognize that inequities such as affordability in youth sport are not the result of a single factor. Indeed, race, class, gender, age, ability, country, and participation level are all important factors in understanding an individual's experiences in youth sports. Each factor is worthy of study (Bowleg, 2012), and scholars should be encouraged to look at the intersection of two or more of them simultaneously as they strive to understand the differences in thoughts and behaviors of stakeholders from various backgrounds. We also urge scholars to pay particular attention to the multiple persons and contexts that comprise the youth sport system, investigating the interdependent nature of experiences and outcomes (Dorsch et al., 2022). Doing this work in such a way can inform policy, legislation, and sport governance, eventually attenuating the observable disparities within the youth sport system in the United States (Gould, 2019).

A final limitation of this study is the grouping "affluence" by household income bracket (\$0-\$49,999, \$50,000-\$99,999, \$100,000+). This limited our ability to engage in a granular assessment of the factors that define family affluence. Similarly, treating "race" as a binary characteristic (White versus non-White) limited our ability to assess specific races on parental outcomes of interest. These analytic decisions were made based on the desire to include all participants in the study while also maintaining sufficient power to conduct our analyses. However, we acknowledge that we lost the ability to tell a more complex story of multiple groups in the process. As Kuah and colleagues (2021) assert, "the aggregation of data... Masks critical within-group differences and disparities limiting the... abilities to target [our] resources

where most needed” (p. 1). Future scholars should consider more advanced methodological approaches that parse out minoritized groups as distinct individual variables rather than grouping them. This would provide more nuance and help researchers know where to allocate equitable resources and support as key stakeholders reimagine youth sport as more inclusive and equitable for all.

## 5. Conclusion

Youth sport is a relatively ubiquitous extra-curricular activity among children in the United States, and the positive outcomes associated with a well-designed and -delivered sport environment entice tens of millions of families to participate annually. However, COVID-19 led to the abrupt cancellation of most formal sport training and competitions in March 2020. Well before COVID-19, it was understood that youth sport had an accessibility issue (Whitley et al., 2021). Even so, multiple studies provide solid recommendations for addressing this issue (see Coakley, 2015; Gould, 2019; Whitley, 2021). Additionally, scholar-practitioners are actively working to promote equitable community youth sport programming and opportunities (e.g., Anderson-Butcher et al., 2022). While organizations such as the Aspen Institute work to disrupt the youth sport inertia, researchers can help by moving beyond vague language such as “disadvantaged youth” or “underserved youth” without providing further context on the *who*. Who constitutes underserved or underprivileged? Who in the United States is facing barriers to youth sport? Who in youth sport needs access to make youth sport a more inclusive environment? In the present study, we attempted to address some gaps in knowledge and action.

As families in the United States have re-engaged in youth sport in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the present study sheds light on the importance of how the pandemic affected youth sport families in various ways – encouraging researchers and practitioners to consider how the pandemic influenced a diverse range of sport families and how a more just and equitable youth sport system might be shaped moving forward. As such, one of the primary contributions of the present study lies in its ability to highlight the potential patterns of disparities that exist across diverse demographic groups in the current youth sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022; Meier et al., 2018; Whitley et al., 2021), as revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional discussion on who is affected by the rising cost of youth sport can be further explored by investigating sociodemographic factors like race and affluence. Therefore, scholars should be encouraged to intentionally approach their research to expand their knowledge portfolio and recommendations to all participants (Dorsch et al., 2023). Sport has been described as a microcosm of broader society (Coakley, 2015). Thus, the economic downfall from the 2008 recession saw local parks and recreational departments struggle to recover after significant budget cuts were made to youth sport programming (Gould, 2019). COVID-19 posed similar threats, decreasing the already depleted community programming for those most who likely need it. Thus, to disrupt the growing chasm between the “have’s” and “have nots,” assessing and understanding the role of sociodemographic characteristics such as race and affluence has the potential to help make “sport-for-all” a reality.

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## A.I. disclosure statement

While preparing this work, the authors used Grammarly A.I. assistance to check for grammatical errors and the manuscript’s readability. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the publication’s content.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Amand L. Hardiman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Daniel J.M. Fleming:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Travis E. Dorsch:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jordan A. Blazo:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Tom Farrey:** Data curation, Investigation, Project administration. **Jennifer Brown Lerner:** Project administration, Investigation, Data curation. **Jon Solomon:** Project administration, Investigation, Data curation.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests.

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