

Play Across Boston: Summary Report

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Prepared by¹

**Angie Cradock, Alison El Ayadi, Steven Gortmaker,
Cynthia Hannon, Arthur Sobol and Jean Wiecha
Harvard School of Public Health**

With¹

**Dan Finkelstein, Kevin Fitzgerald, Alfreda Harris, and Linda Keefe
Northeastern University Center for the Study of Sport in Society**

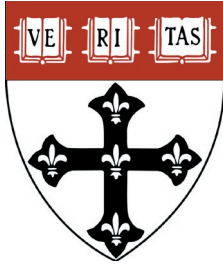
For additional information regarding this report and the Play Across Boston project, please contact:

Harvard Prevention Research Center
Harvard School of Public Health
677 Huntington Avenue 7th Floor
Boston, MA 02115
617.432.3840
www.hsph.harvard.edu/prc

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¹ Team authors are listed alphabetically within institutions.





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Project Teams

Harvard Prevention Research Center, Harvard School of Public Health

Steven Gortmaker, Principal Investigator
Jean Wiecha, Co-Principal Investigator
Cynthia Hannon, Project Manager
Angie Cradock, Research Associate
Alison El Ayadi, Research Assistant
Arthur Sobol, Statistical Programmer

Northeastern University Center for the Study of Sport in Society

Urban Youth Sports

Alfreda Harris, NU Project Director
Linda Keefe, Community Liaison
Dan Finkelstein, Research Assistant
Kevin Fitzgerald, Director, Urban Youth Sports

Play Across Boston Community Advisory Board

◆ **Matt Balls** ◆ **Steve Burke**, Center for the Study of Sport in Society ◆ **David Burnes** Boston Center for Youth & Families ◆ **Dean Conway**, Massachusetts Association of Youth Soccer ◆ **Daniel Correia**, Boston Center for Youth & Families ◆ **Rocky DiLorenzo**, Boston Public Schools Athletic Department ◆ **Mark Fahey** ◆ **Daria Fanelli**, Boston Center for Youth & Families ◆ **Yvonne Lam**, Boston Chinatown Community Center ◆ **Zack Lehman**, MetroLacrosse ◆ **Jamiese Martin**, Franklin Field/Franklin Hill/Dorchester –Healthy Connection ◆ **Patty McMahon** Mayor’s Youth Council ◆ **Jerry Mogul**, Boston Center for Youth & Families ◆ **Ellen Payzant**, Active Girls Initiative ◆ **Shawn Polk**, University of Massachusetts- Boston ◆ **Khita Pottinger**, Boston Center for Youth & Families, 2:00-to-6:00 After-School Initiative ◆ **Bill Raynor**, Boston Center for Youth & Families ◆ **Janice Roache**, Metropolitan District Commission ◆ **Steve Spinetto**, Boston Commission for Persons with Disabilities ◆ **Anne Strong**, CityKicks ◆ **Nicole Trudeau**, Special Olympics

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recognition of the benefits of youth physical activity, schools, community-based organizations, and municipal agencies in Boston have been working to improve opportunities for participation in after-school and summer sports and physical activity programs. However, there have been limited data for these groups to use in evaluating citywide resources and services and to understand and document the needs of the youth they seek to serve. *Play Across Boston* was created to address this missing link.

Play Across Boston is a project of the Harvard Prevention Research Center at the Harvard School of Public Health undertaken in collaboration with Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society and a broad-based Community Advisory Board. The project has worked since 1999 to describe youth sports and physical activity resources in Boston. Because of limited documentation of the local challenges to physical activity and sport promotion, *Play Across Boston* integrated a comprehensive community-based assessment of physical activity resources for Boston youth along with baseline data concerning the presence and condition of publicly accessible parks, facilities and playgrounds. Instruments were developed and data collected for baseline censuses of programs (n=235) and recreational complexes (n=230).

Key findings:

- Boston girls participate in sports and physical activity programs at about half the rate of boys.
- The highest participation levels for girls were in basketball, swimming, tennis, soccer and dance.
- Boys top sports choices were baseball/t-ball, basketball, soccer, swimming and football.
- White youth occupy 32% of the participation opportunities in Boston but only represent 27% of the overall population. Black youth account for 37% of the Boston youth population, yet only occupy 30% of the participation opportunities. Hispanic youth make up 23% of the city's youth population, but only occupy 19% of opportunities.
- Playground quality varies across the city's neighborhoods.

- While Boston has a substantial sports and recreation infrastructure, there are disparities in the number of facilities among the city's neighborhoods. Roxbury and Combined Central Area, encompassing Beacon Hill/Back Bay, Central, Kenmore/Fenway and South End, have the highest numbers of facilities, while Roslindale and North Dorchester have the least. South Boston and Charlestown have the greatest number of facilities relative to their population of youth, while Roslindale and North Dorchester have the fewest facilities relative to their youth population.
- Parts of Boston are as well served with facilities/programs as middle and upper income suburbs.

Implications

The contribution of physical activity to public health has been well documented. Research has shown that improving physical activity levels reduces morbidity and mortality from chronic diseases and improves overall quality of life for all ages. Integrating physical activity into daily life is therefore crucial for all ages, and especially important for youth as evidence suggests that active children are likely to become active adults. Unfortunately, available data and recent policy changes paint a discouraging view of youth physical activity in Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In 1996, state lawmakers terminated a requirement for minimum annual hours of physical education (PE) in schools. Prior to this, 80% of Massachusetts and 70% of Boston public high school students attended PE class once or more per week. By 1999, these rates had dropped to 53% and 54% respectively. A report from Sport in Society in 1997 indicated that youth residing in Boston had only one-third the opportunities for after-school physical activities offered in suburban communities. Nationally, youth in the United States are experiencing an epidemic of childhood overweight, and these trends are apparent in Boston youth as well. One recent study found that 20.4% of 4th grade students measured were overweight and an additional 23.6% were at risk for becoming overweight in Boston parochial schools. High school data obtained from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) via self-report indicate that in 1999 and 2001, 11.1% and 12.4% of youth were overweight, while an additional 16.5% and 17.0% were at risk for becoming overweight.

This report demonstrates a clear need for collective action to increase and sustain participation in youth sports and physical activities in Boston. *Play Across Boston* is collaborating with Boston's strong network of community, academic and municipal partners to ensure that interventions addressing these critical public health concerns remain central. *Play Across Boston* data provide a solid base upon which to build action plans for the future, with the goals of improving community health and reducing observed disparities in access and participation.