

Equity and Health in Youth Sports

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***Original Research Papers** are papers that report on original empirical research with a focus on teaching and learning. Papers may be qualitative or quantitative and include an Abstract, Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion, and Reference section, as well as any tables and/or figures.

Abstract

This study explores the significance of youth sports and highlights its multifaceted importance for today's children as well as the next generations. This report will start by examining the economic shifts for families across southern Ontario who want to be able to provide their children with the opportunity to play sports. The rising cost associated with youth sports poses challenges for families, from expensive equipment to travel expenses to coaching fees and the financial burden it has on many families who want to provide their children with the opportunity to play sports. Addressing the economic barriers in youth sports will ensure that all children in Ontario will have equitable access to the benefits that organized sports offer. Following this section, we continue to examine the importance of both physical and mental health among children and the challenges children face. Regular participation in sports enhances cardiovascular health, builds muscular strength, and improves overall physical health. Through many studies provided below, we will also highlight the importance of youth mental and physical health. Lastly, this report will highlight the next steps and recommendations regarding the current subsidy programs that are offered throughout some municipalities. We will compare the current programs they offer families and suggest changes to the current plan. In conclusion, youth sports are crucial for the holistic development of children. Therefore, communities, policymakers, educators and government officials must prioritize and support youth programs to ensure the well-being and future success of youth. In examining the rising affordability and accessibility challenges of sports in Ontario, this report explores how it's now viewed as a luxury rather than a necessity despite its critical role in promoting physical and mental well-being. Recognizing the pivotal role of sports as determinants of health, this report will underscore the essential linkage between youth sports, children's health, and overall prosperity.

Introduction Project Scope

The purpose of this project is to inspire positive change in the communities that we are focusing on in Southern Ontario. The regions we are targeting are

Peel, York, Toronto, and Simcoe; the five sports we are aiming at are soccer, basketball, learn-to-skate/hockey, aquatics, and accessible sports. As a group, we want to create a meaningful impact for our representatives of each municipality to help work towards solutions in the community, with adjustments to policies, budgets, and funding. Our objectives are simple: we have set out to break the norm and create change to allow more youth the opportunity to play community-level sports and identify what areas need more support and change. The two questions we are asking everyone are, **Is Youth Sports a Necessity or a Luxury?** and **Why is Youth Sports important?**

Methodology

Through our utilization of specific methods and gathering both qualitative and quantitative data, we analyzed and interpreted our findings/results, which aided us in making concrete conclusions based on our hypothesis. Within our research of qualitative data, we conducted a literature review and analyzed many articles and studies pertaining to our topic to see if there is a correlation between youth sports. To gather our quantitative data, we conducted interviews with city officials and community centre members within our targeted regions/municipalities with specific questions pertaining to the necessity of youth sports that will establish conclusive evidence, either supporting or rejecting our hypothesis. Our sample size includes individuals aged 4 to 18 from the four regions in the designated sports we discuss in this report. From this analysis, we had a better understanding of the overall information on youth sports.

Economic shifts in youth sports

Youth sports participation is a pressing issue, with many children lacking access and funds to join programs, rendering them unable to benefit from municipal recreational services. In today's economy, essential goods take precedence over recreational activities, excluding youth from sports opportunities. Our research in Toronto, York, and Peel highlights why youth sports are viewed as a luxury rather than a necessity.

We first investigated inflation rates in Canada, analyzing the Consumer Price Index (CPI) to understand the rising costs of essential goods and services. In 2023, the CPI saw a 3.9% annual increase, surpassing the 6.8% peak in 2022. Factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, housing market inflation, and geopolitical instability contributed to this rise, impacting

consumer behaviour and creating economic challenges (Government of Canada, "The Daily — Consumer Price Index: Annual Review, 2023").

Additionally, we explored the growing provincial and federal net debt, which nearly doubled from \$1.18 trillion in 2007/08 to a projected \$2.18 trillion in 2023/24 (Fraser Institute, 2024). Provincially, Ontario's residences are second to Newfoundland & Labrador in having the highest combined debt per person with approximately \$61,000 (Fraser Institute, 2024). This amount of debt, coupled with financial anxiety among Canadians, especially lower-income individuals, exacerbates the challenge of affording youth sports.

Our research revealed that average and median household salaries in Ontario (See [Figure 1](#)) fall short of covering average annual expenditures, estimated at \$97,000 (See [Figure 2](#)). When factoring in additional costs for recreation services and equipment, households face a deficit of \$2,000 to \$18,600, making it difficult to enroll children in sports programs (See [Figure 3](#)). Moreover, housing market prices and rental rates within the GTA present significant barriers for families. Sales prices for houses and condos range from \$726,000 to \$1,400,000 (See [Figure 4](#)), while rent rates stand at \$2,755 to \$3,329 (See [Figure 5](#)).

Our economic analysis underscores the widening gap between household finances and the cost of living, making youth sports unattainable for many families. An "Economic Budget" was created to explain the current financial crisis that households are currently facing (See [Table 1](#)). This shifting economic landscape necessitates a re-evaluation of funding allocations and program structures to ensure equitable access and sustainable participation opportunities for youth sports.

To address these challenges, we examined pricing structures, availability, and accessibility of five targeted sports across Toronto, York, and Peel. Through continuous evaluation and adaptation, we aim to balance affordability and inclusivity in youth sports programs, ensuring all children have access to recreational opportunities.

Engaging children in sports from a young age is a fantastic way to promote physical activity, teamwork, and discipline. Various sports cater to different interests and skill levels,

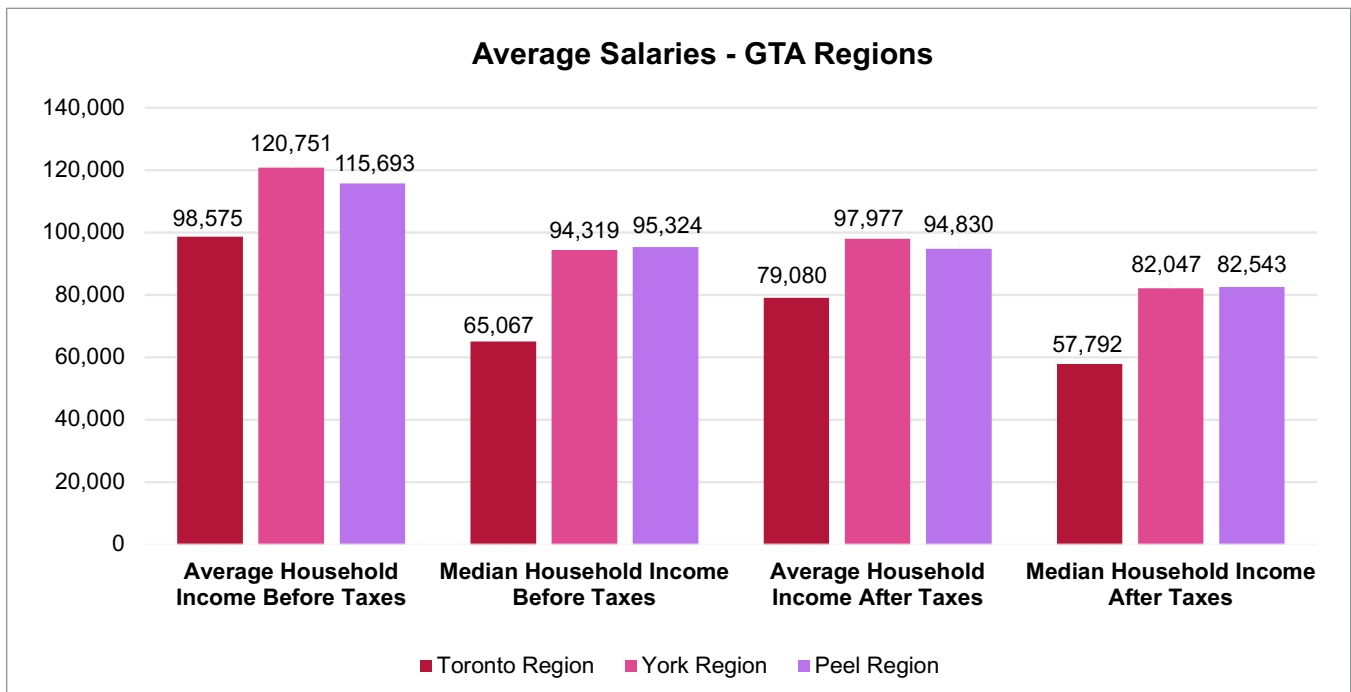


Figure 1. Average and median household salaries in Ontario

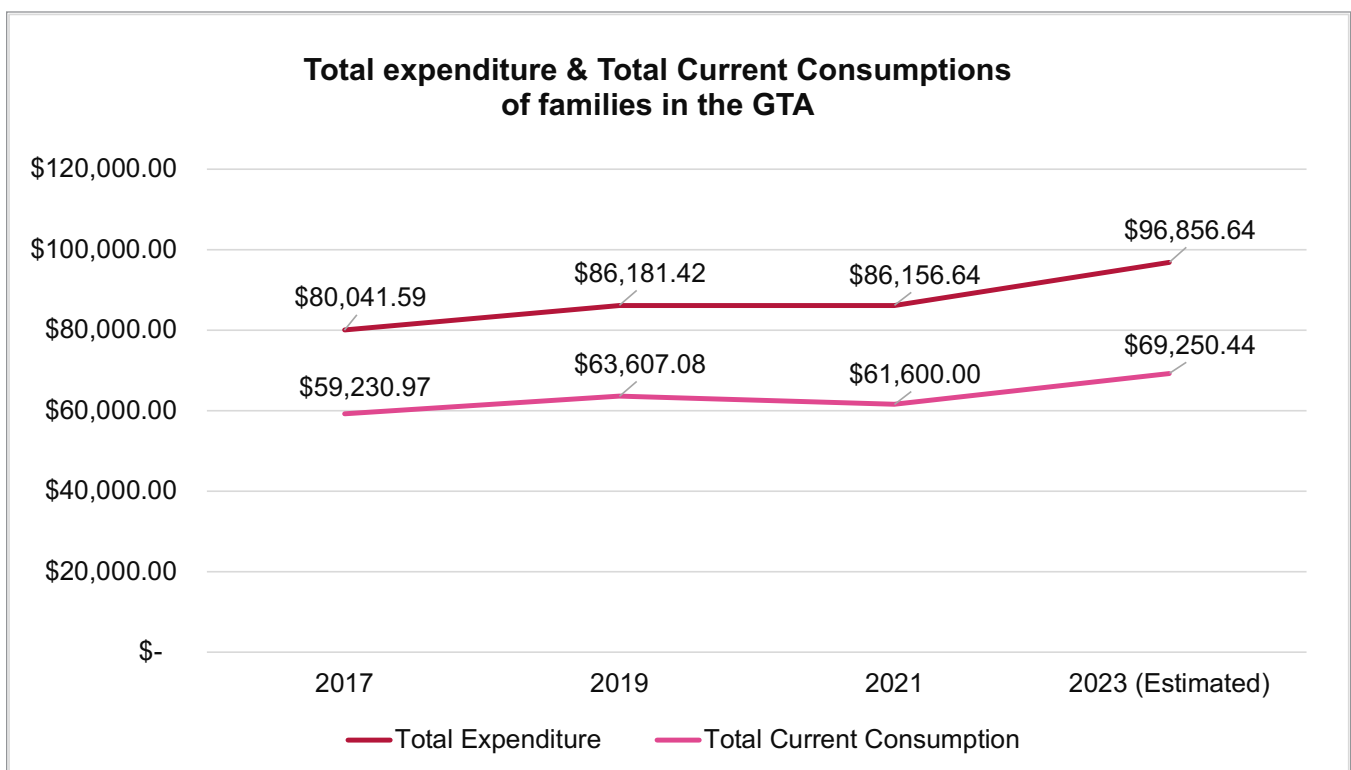


Figure 2. Total expenditure & Total Current Consumptions of families in the GTA. Created by the author, data pulled from Statistics Canada

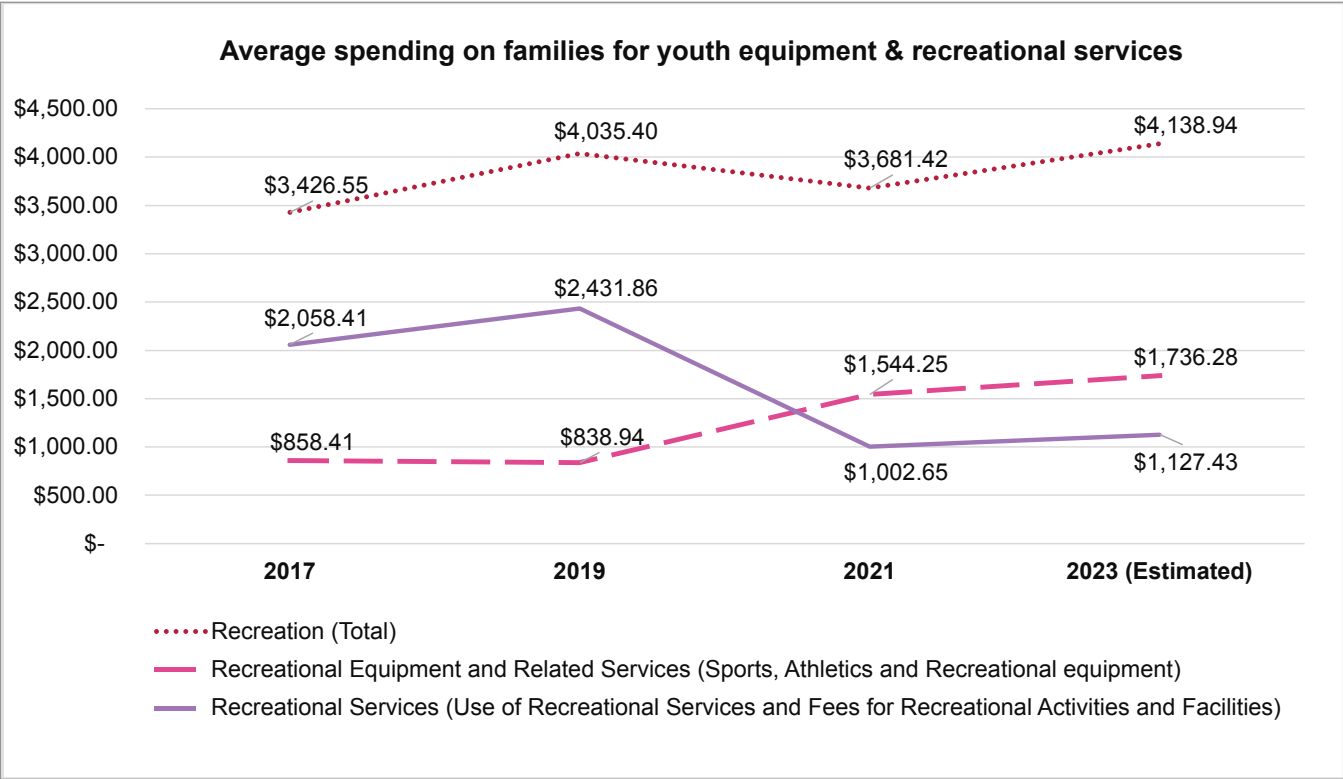


Figure 3: Average spending on families for youth equipment & recreational services. Created by the author, data pulled from Statistics Canada
 Specifically recreation section

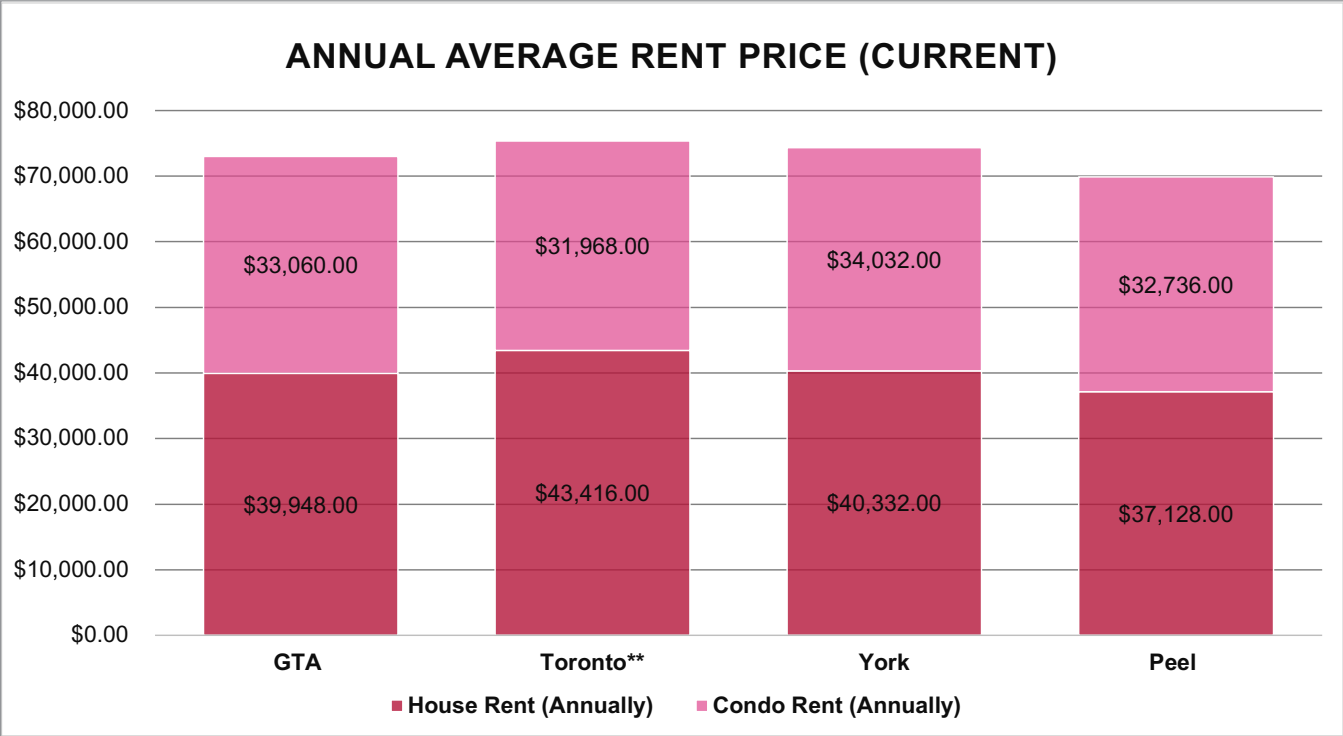


Figure 4: Created by the author, data pulled from Realosophy

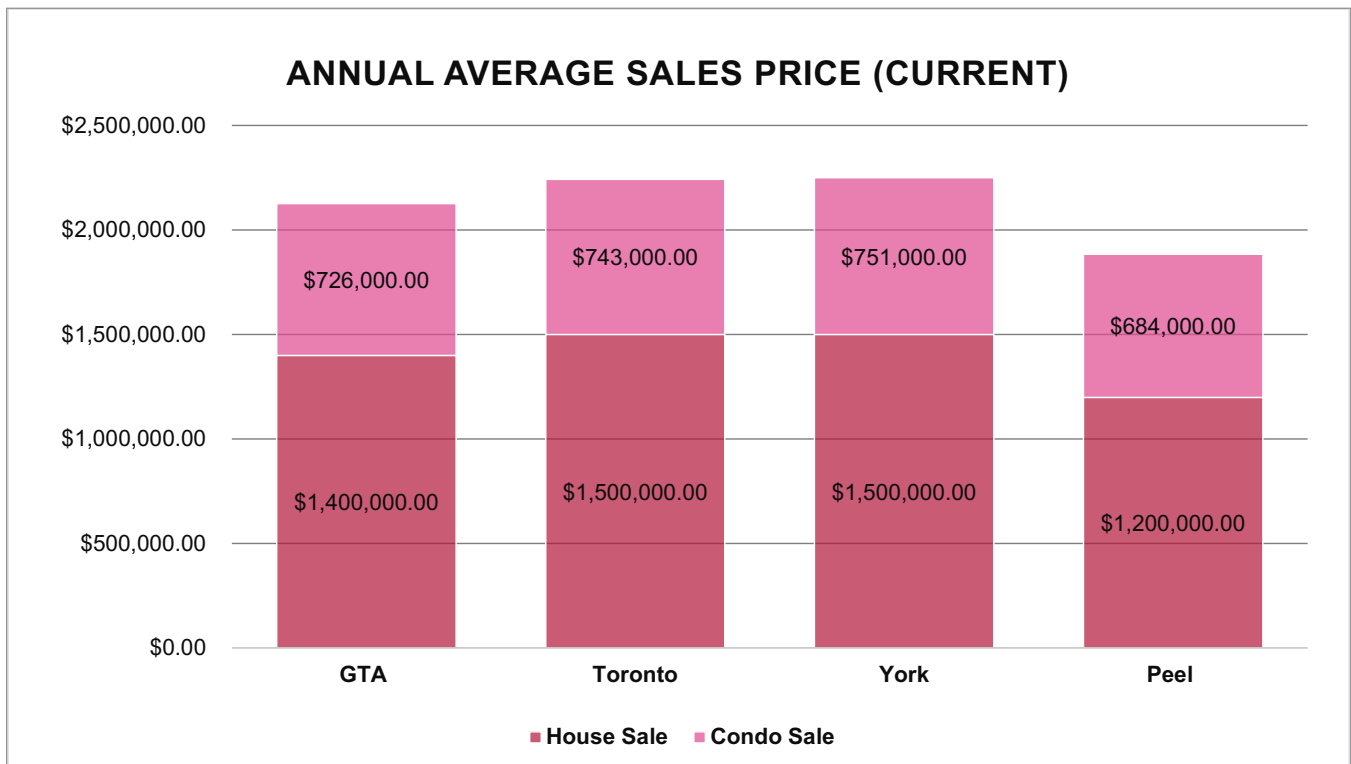


Figure 5: Created by the author, data pulled from Realosophy

each with unique equipment requirements and age-appropriate entry points.

Soccer: Soccer requires minimal equipment, making it accessible for many. Essential items include a soccer ball, cleats, shin guards, and appropriate athletic clothing. Youth as young as 4 or 5 years old can start playing soccer in introductory programs, focusing on basic skills and fun.

Hockey: Hockey demands more specialized gear, including skates, a stick, a helmet with a face cage, gloves, shoulder pads, elbow pads, shin guards, and a mouthguard. Children typically begin playing hockey around 4 to 5 years old in learn-to-skate programs before advancing to more competitive play.

Swimming: Swimming requires a swimsuit, goggles, and a swim cap. Access to a swimming pool is necessary, whether it's for lessons, practice, or competition. Youth can start swimming lessons as early as infancy for basic water safety and gradually move into more structured swim teams or competitive swimming by age 5 or 6.

Basketball: Basketball equipment is relatively simple, including a basketball, proper athletic shoes, and

comfortable sports attire. Children can start playing basketball in introductory programs as young as 5 or 6 years old, focusing on fundamental skills and teamwork.

Children's health in relation to youth sports

Promoting children's health in youth sports is crucial for their overall well-being and development. Some of the highlights for promoting children's health are physical fitness, motor skills, social and emotional well-being, and mental health. To start off, physical fitness is important to children's overall health, focusing on maintaining a healthy weight, strengthening bones/ muscles, and reducing the risk of developing chronic diseases such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and health diseases later in life. In 2022, Stats Canada reported that 27.2% of children between the ages of 12-17 years old were overweight or obese and had an increase of 2.9% in 2023. Diabetes is currently increasing in children's health. In 2023, 76.5% of youth between the ages of 12-17 were not physically active, and 7,000 children have been diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Statistics from a StatsCan report released in 2019 highlight that diabetes affects approximately 0.19% of children ages 1-17, with girls being twice as likely to have it at 0.26% compared to boys at 0.11%. When a family has a child who suffers from

Table 1 Economic Budget

Table 1a. Average Household Salaries and Median Household Income (After Tax)

Average Household Salaries and Median Household Income (After Tax)	Average Salary	Median Salary
Toronto Region	\$79,080.00	\$57,792.00
York Region	\$97,977.00	\$82,047.00
Peel Region	\$94,830.00	\$82,543.00
Total Salary:	\$90,629.00	\$74,127.33

Table 1b. Expenditures Per Household (Estimated 2023 - After Tax)

Expenditures Per Household (Estimated 2023 - After Tax)	Average Salary	Median Salary
Total Expenditure (Not Including Recreation)	\$92,717.70	\$92,717.70
Recreation (Equipment and Services)	\$4,138.94	\$4,138.94

Table 1c. Total Expenditures

Total Expenditures	Average Salary	Median Salary
Average Household consists of 2-3 people	\$96,856.64	\$96,856.64

Table 1d. Net Result

NET RESULT	Average Salary	Median Salary
NET RESULT Including Recreation	\$(6,227.64)	\$(22,729.31)
NET RESULT Not Including Recreation	\$(2,088.70)	\$(18,590.37)

a health condition, it can become extremely costly for the family. Another health condition that children are facing today is asthma. Asthma poses a significant health concern among children aged 1 to 17, 7% of whom were affected by this respiratory condition, according to a 2019 report by StatsCan. Asthma's impact extends beyond its immediate symptoms, often leading to reduced quality of life, which is why early intervention is crucial in reducing symptoms in the long term.

When children are playing sports, their social and emotional well-being play a very important role. Regular exercise releases endorphins, which are mood lifters, helping to reduce stress and anxiety in children and promoting better sleep. According to the CSEP guidelines, children of ages 5-13 should be receiving 9 to 11 hours of uninterrupted

sleep per night and 8 to 10 hours of sleep for children aged 14-17, with consistent bed and wake-up times. While children are playing sports, they learn many different life lessons, but one of the important lessons is how to handle their emotions through the wins and losses of a game. During these times, children develop emotional resilience and learn to manage stress as well as disappointments.

When children participate in sports, they also develop social skills, giving them the chance to interact with other children, develop team skills, and learn other important skills such as communication, cooperation, and sportsmanship. In 2021, SickKids Hospital released an article highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted children's mental health. SickKids completed a study with over 3,700 participants ranging in age from 2 to 18 who live in Ontario to understand

the impact. Among 2,206 members (74%), the research showed a strong association between time spent online learning and depression and anxiety in school-age children aged 6-18. The results showed that the more time students were spending online learning, the more signs of depression and anxiety they experienced. During this time, children were also exposed to family troubles, such as job loss, income change, and food insecurity, which caused high emotional levels for both children and parents showing strong signs of mental health.

“Child and Youth Mental Health: Signs and Symptoms,” a study conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), highlighted that 70% of mental health challenges have their onset in children. About 1 in 5 children and youth in Ontario suffer from mental health. After researching the impact anxiety has on children, Stats Canada released an article in 2019 which showed that anxiety poses a significant concern for our youth, impacting 5% of kids ages 5-17. Academic pressures and societal expectations could be prominent factors in these heightening of stress levels. From the ages of 8-13, children start puberty, where self-esteem plays a factor, as well as finding where they belong in this world. Children will start to look for a sense of accomplishment and conference.

Children who play sports have less of a chance of going through depression as sports help regulate moods. There have been many studies completed to show the positive relationship between physical activities and depression. CAMH completed a study in November 2023 to show how

sports participation has long been associated with positive physical health outcomes, especially among young people. The study focused on a subgroup of 4,975 kids between the ages of 9 and 10 and found strong correlations between playing team sports or non-contact sports with fewer behavioural and social issues. Additionally, every participant supplied saliva samples for genetic testing, which enabled researchers to determine each person’s susceptibility to certain mental diseases. Assessments for anxiety, attention span, and rule-breaking behaviours were conducted concurrently. Playing sports also encourages the release of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that is essential for mood control.

Subsidy Program

The revised rates listed in [Table 2](#) are based on how much Canadians spend on children yearly. According to StatsCan, it roughly costs parents with one child \$21,600 per year from the ages of 0 to 17. Furthermore, if a Canadian makes \$16.55 and works 7.5 hours a day, the final net pay after tax is roughly \$32,272.50 (net \$28,320.39). According to current subsidy rates, this level of income is not sufficient to raise a child in the current economic condition or even apply for programs in these regions.

The four main areas of focus regarding municipalities that are our focus of subsidies include Toronto, York Region, Mississauga, and Brampton. These regions represent a large portion of the diverse population across Ontario. In this section, we will be exploring the potential benefits of increasing the subsidy amount across these regions. The

Table 2. Subsidy rates based on how much Canadians spend on children yearly created by the City websites

Household	Toronto	York Region	Mississauga	Brampton	Caledon
2 people	\$ 34,254.00	\$ 43,000.00	\$ 29,632.00	\$30,788.00	Caledon has no subsidy program for patrons.
3 people	\$ 42,111.00	\$ 53,000.00	\$ 36,898.00	\$38,338.00	N/A
4 people	\$ 51,128.00	\$ 61,000.00	\$ 46,033.00	\$47,829.00	N/A
5 people	\$ 57,989.00	\$ 68,000.00	\$ 52,418.00	\$54,463.00	N/A
6 people	\$ 65,401.00	\$ 74,500.00	\$ 58,133.00	\$60,401.00	N/A
7 people	\$ 72,814.00	\$ 80,500.00	\$ 63,848.00	\$66,339.00	N/A

Source: Table 2 subsidy rates based on how much Canadians spend on children yearly created by the City websites

subsidy program is a crucial component for each of these regions as it can provide benefits to many low-income households; however, we believe that the current numbers are not sufficient for the inflation that has occurred over the past few years due to the growing demands of each respective population.

Our whole report reflects on the question of if sports are considered a necessity or a luxury. This demonstrates the importance of ensuring equitable access to sports opportunities for all residents, regardless of socio-economic class. For example, there are instances across Ontario where single parents raising one child making the official minimum of \$32,272.50 (52 weeks of working the minimum wage of \$16.55 having 37.5 hours a week) annually can't even qualify in Mississauga for the current maximum of \$29,632. This is taking away so many opportunities from young kids living in these households, including any chance of playing sports. The above-mentioned issues can then be tied into the whole health aspect of how it can negatively affect youth in terms of physical, mental, and emotional well-being. By increasing subsidies to meet these specific types of needs, regions can promote healthier and happier lifestyles while reducing the burden on healthcare systems and fostering a more resilient younger generation.

According to a new report from Stats Canada (See [Table 3](#)), families are 29% more likely to raise their kids until the age of 22 than 17, and this number is only on the rise (Crawford, 2023). Parents are spending more on food, shelter, clothing, and bare necessities, which are of the utmost importance.

However, after this, oftentimes, it does not leave much for sports, if any. Providing financial assistance to individuals and families by increasing subsidies can truly help address these needs for families who may be unable to access sports in their communities. Additionally, increasing subsidies demonstrates a commitment to investing in the well-being and prospects of Ontario's younger generation in this increasingly challenging world.

Recommendations and next steps
Economic shifts in youth sports

Due to economic hurdles, youth sports face significant challenges in gaining prominence on people's agendas, with inflation being the main cause of financial strain. As household incomes struggle to keep pace with rising costs, creating a favourable environment for youth sports becomes increasingly challenging. While addressing these economic struggles may seem daunting, efforts to mitigate inflation can alleviate financial burdens, freeing up resources for recreational activities. Implementing financial assistance programs and restructuring subsidies can provide support to families with limited resources, ensuring access to sports opportunities. Moreover, municipalities can adopt data-driven approaches to pricing strategies, benchmarking against comparable programs to ensure affordability for all. Collaborations with schools, non-profits, and businesses can further bolster support and funding for youth sports initiatives, enhancing accessibility and participation. There is a need for greater attention to para-sports for individuals with disabilities. While some progress has been made through inclusive modifications, dedicated programs within

Table 3. Subsidy rates based on how much Canadians spend on children yearly created by the City websites

Household	Toronto	York Region	Mississauga	Brampton	Caledon
2 people	\$ 49,114.00	\$ 46,852.00	\$ 45,947.00	\$46,897.00	\$46,852.00
3 people	\$ 70,114.00	\$ 68,452.00	\$ 67,547.00	\$68,497.00	\$68,452.00
4 people	\$ 92,314.00	\$ 90,052.00	\$ 89,147.00	\$90,097.00	\$90,052.00
5 people	\$ 113,914.00	\$ 111,652.00	\$ 110,747.00	\$111,697.00	\$111,562.00
6 people	\$ 135,514.00	\$ 133,252.00	\$ 132,347.00	\$133,297.00	\$133,252.00
7 people	\$ 157,114.00	\$ 154,852.00	\$ 153,947.00	\$154,897.00	\$154,852.00

Source: Table 3 revised subsidy rates based on how much Canadians spend on children yearly created by created by the authors

the public sector, supported by investments in infrastructure, transportation, and education, are essential for fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment for all participants.

Children's health in relation to youth sports

Everyone plays a vital role in advocating for children's participation in sports through various initiatives and policies. Firstly, launching public awareness campaigns can effectively highlight the benefits of sports for children. These campaigns, disseminated through diverse media channels, aim to educate parents, caregivers, educators, and children themselves about the significance of sports. Secondly, government collaboration with schools to integrate sports and physical education into the curriculum is crucial. By prioritizing sports from an early age, schools can foster a culture of physical activity and cultivate healthy habits in children for lifelong well-being. Lastly, ongoing government investment in research on the advantages of children engaging in sports and data collection on participation rates, demographics, and trends are essential. This data-driven approach informs policymaking and identifies areas requiring intervention to encourage sports participation among children. Through proactive measures to promote children's sports involvement, governments, parents, and educators contribute to building a healthier, more active, and inclusive society.

Subsidy program

After reviewing several factors that have affected sports over the years, it is safe to say that it is becoming increasingly harder for people to register and participate in sports, with cost being one of the primary issues. Subsidy programs are created to help aid individuals or families who are at or below the poverty level and give them some financial support to register for these sports programs. However, after doing some calculations, it has become abundantly clear that these subsidy programs do not properly represent the demographic of people who are struggling in society today as more people are heading towards poverty. These subsidy programs must be re-evaluated to increase the baseline incomes people need to show in their households to even apply for these programs. The cost of living has increased greatly, and Canadians, more than ever, are struggling financially and are having to, unfortunately, make important decisions about where to allocate money, with sports being

cut from their child's life to afford the bare necessities in life. The various regions highlighted throughout this report could use this report's example of the updated subsidy as a reference to potentially change and increase the amounts in each given region.

Limitation

Simcoe County

Throughout our research, we could not find any conclusive evidence regarding the Simcoe region and their recreational information. Despite our efforts over several weeks, there were few resources related to community sports participation levels. While Simcoe County has a fund for tourism, culture, and sport enhancement, only Barrie is openly engaged in recreational programs. Despite exhausting all of our efforts and reaching out to multiple Simcoe representatives, our team was unable to gather sufficient information for the Simcoe region. Moving forward, we will focus on analyzing youth sports programs in other regions to inform potential strategies for Simcoe County.

Time Constraints

A major limitation our project faced was the time frame in which it needed to be completed. Being that it was to be completed in 16 weeks, our group was tasked with conducting research in a short timeframe while meeting deadlines given by the professors of the class. Since the time frame was short, our group had to choose quicker methods, where needed, to produce both accurate and meaningful observations as well as research to further define the project scope.

Access to information

Certain information needed to further our scope was available in a timely manner, given the time frame of the research project. This included government websites as well as local sports clubs with information pertaining to the sports we highlighted in the report. As a result, our group had to pivot and find other useful resources within our scope.

Conclusion

Our project aimed to spark positive change in Southern Ontario communities regarding youth sports and recreation. We sought to determine if youth sports should be viewed as a necessity or a luxury, firmly advocating for their necessity. Our research delved into economic challenges facing families, emphasizing the vital role of youth sports in mental

and physical well-being. We propose reshaping subsidy programs to support broader access. Youth sports offer more than leisure; they foster holistic development, life skills, and community bonds. We urge stakeholders to recognize their significance and consider changes to Ontario's youth sports structure. Investing in youth sports means investing in community well-being and prosperity. We hope our report convinces stakeholders of youth sports' essential role in building healthier and happier communities.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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All authors are graduated students from Humber College with Bachelor of Commerce: Management Studies Degree. Humber College Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning

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