

Opening Statement of Rep. Kevin Kiley (R-CA), Chairman
Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee
Benched: The Crisis in American Youth Sports and Its Cost to Our
Future
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(As prepared for delivery)

For generations, sports have served an important role in building the character of America's youth, keeping kids active, and teaching important lessons in perseverance, discipline, and teamwork.

Today, fewer kids are getting those foundational skills from youth sports. Seventy percent of children now quit organized sports by age 13. This decline will have a negative effect on children's long-term development and broader economic and societal consequences for the nation.

Part of the decline stems from the increased commercialization of youth sports. In 2024, the average U.S. sports family spent more than \$1,000 on its child's primary sport, a 46 percent increase since 2019. In total, the youth sports industry generates more than \$40 billion in annual revenue, but this revenue comes at a steep cost to families.

Parents are told that only year-round travel teams, private coaching, and early specialization will keep their child competitive—and maybe even earn them a scholarship. That false promise has created a spending surge that prices out the average family while pushing kids as young as eight

into high-cost, high-pressure programs that simply aren't necessary for long-term development. Private equity firms are now pouring billions into youth sports facilities, tournaments, and leagues, further fueling exorbitant spending.

As programs get more expensive, fewer kids have access to affordable opportunities in their own communities to learn important life skills and try new things. This leaves millions of kids losing the very benefits sports are supposed to deliver. Inactive youth feel negatively about themselves at nearly double the rate of youth who are active.

The broader consequences of declining participation are stark. Today, one in three youth ages 10 to 17 are overweight or obese. Medical expenses associated with obesity alone cost taxpayers \$173 billion a year, with lifetime costs for today's obese youth projected to exceed a trillion dollars.

Meanwhile, on average children spend nearly 8 hours a day on screens and for kids who do not participate in extracurricular activities it is roughly 2 additional hours every day. Excessive screen time is linked to obesity, depression, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem.

What we are witnessing is more than a drop in sports participation—it is the loss of one of the most effective tools we have to combat rising isolation and mental health challenges in our children. When children lose regular, in-person team activities, they lose daily opportunities to build confidence, belonging, and real-world social connection.

Here is the good news: We already have a national target to turn this around. The Healthy People 2030 goal, administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, calls for 63 percent youth sports participation by 2030. It's the first-ever national benchmark to promote physical activity and child development for America's youth. Achieving it would require about 3 million more kids to participate in sports and would result in \$80 billion in savings from reduced medical costs and

lost productivity, plus millions of additional quality years of life for America's youth.

That is why we are here today: to shine a national spotlight on youth sports, the critical role they play in America's future, and how increasing participation can save billions in health care costs and improve millions of lives.