Barriers to recreation

Why children and youth do not participate in recreation
Recreation can help children in low-income families develop strong bodies and social skills. But children can’t always participate—and it’s not just because they’re short of money. Fifteen percent of boys and eleven percent of girls under 18 say they never have access to recreation and sports activities. Barriers to recreation can take many forms:

• Families may not have access to transportation or time to travel to recreation programs.
• Language, culture or feelings of isolation may inhibit their participation.
• Information about recreational opportunities may not reach them—they may not have Web access, and programs may not be advertised in communities where they live or in media that reach them.
• Their neighbourhoods may not have recreation facilities or even safe outdoor places to play.

Key barriers
Low-income families and their children face significant barriers to recreation. Many of the key barriers have existed for decades.

A 1994 Canadian study found that recreation services have a variety of systemic barriers:¹

• gender barriers—there is a bias in favour of boys, especially in sports
• cultural barriers—visible minorities feel uncomfortable and unwelcome
• socio-economic barriers—the cost of recreation is prohibitive
• organizational barriers—a lack of supportive policies, facilities and financial resources
• communications barriers—information about recreation resources and services doesn’t reach low-income families

Moving beyond blame
Nothing is clear-cut when it comes to understanding the diverse lives of low-income people, yet in mainstream culture the poor fall into two categories:

• Deserving—people like the disabled who are poor through no fault of their own
• Undeserving—people like single moms or people with addictions who did something “wrong” and who we blame for their poverty

These categories rob people of their dignity and deny factors such as domestic violence, cultural history and child abuse, which can contribute to poverty.

Moving from an attitude of blame to an attitude of acceptance is the first step toward inclusion.

— Coordinator, Sunshine Coast Everybody gets to play Pilot Project

¹ Impact and Benefits of Physical Activity and Recreation on Canadian Youth-at-Risk, joint initiative of the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association and the Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council, conducted by the University of New Brunswick, December 1994.
General barriers

Municipal recreation departments

Municipal recreation departments often:

- assist only those who ask for help—many families are too proud to ask
- ask families to prove that they need help—a humiliating experience
- do not work with other service providers that are trusted by low-income families
- respond to budget cuts by cutting subsidy programs or promotions that may increase demand
- lack creative ways to help families understand the value of recreation

Processes and structures

- Staff can be insensitive and unwelcoming.
- Youth are not involved in decision-making.
- Regulations are not tailored to youth (facilities may be closed in the evenings when youth often “hang out”).
- Sexual stereotyping and biases against gay, lesbian and transgendered youth may discourage participation.

Programming and infrastructure

- “Packaged” programs are not flexible enough to meet children's needs.
- Programs are not interesting to youth. They may not be tailored to different age groups (younger and older teens do not mix easily) or developed with girls and young women in mind.
- Programs are too structured (some youth prefer drop-in or loosely organized activities).
- Information about programs does not reach low-income families or youth.
- Children living in low-income families do not feel comfortable with wealthier kids.
- Playing fields and other recreation facilities are not available or are too far away.

Economics

- Program fees are too high.
- Equipment and clothing, especially for sports and physical activities, is too costly.
- Youth in low-income families may have to work to boost family income.

Transportation

- Low-income families may not own vehicles.
- Parents may not let children participate in activities that require transportation if they cannot share in driving or pay for gas.
- Bus systems are often inadequate and many low-income neighbourhoods do not have bus routes, or routes with appropriate schedules.
- Low-income families may not have money for bus transportation.

Social and physical skills

- Children living in low-income families have fewer opportunities to build the skills they need to participate.
- If they don’t participate when they’re children, youth may lack the social and team skills, and physical ability to participate at the same level as others.

Societal attitudes

- Poverty can be ignored and well hidden within communities.
- “Consumerism” is a significant barrier. Parents may feel inadequate and avoid activities that require expensive uniforms or equipment.
- Blame and judgment are common public attitudes.
- Some people feel “If I have to pay so should they.”
Family perceptions, attitudes and knowledge

Families may:

- not understand the value of recreation, know how to access it, or feel welcome
- not be familiar with recreation settings
- have low self-esteem
- lack childcare and need older children to care for younger ones
- feel isolated and not wanted by the community
- fear being judged and stigmatized

Five ways recreation policies and practices create barriers

Many recreation policies and practices increase barriers for low-income families and children by:

1. Assuming that subsidies work
2. Requiring proof of poverty
3. Espousing community development, but operating from a direct delivery model
4. Failing to provide sufficient in-service training for frontline staff
5. Making cost recovery and revenue generation the priority

Barriers for cultural and visible minorities

Visible minorities and Aboriginal people are more likely to live in poverty than other Canadians. They also face additional barriers to accessing recreation.

- New immigrants may not know how Canadian recreation facilities work, or what goes on in recreation settings. They may feel intimidated and excluded as a result.
- Cultures view recreation in different ways and beliefs vary—some cultural beliefs prevent women from wearing bathing suits or swimming in public, but pools may not accommodate alternatives.
- Recreation facilities may not have staff trained to make people from all cultures feel welcome.
- Recreation departments may not have staff who speak languages other than English or French. They may not be able to translate information on programs, or develop materials in other languages.
- Recreation programs are rarely based on community needs assessments, and may be irrelevant to some of the cultures in a community.

Barriers in small, rural and remote communities

Children in small, rural and remote communities face more barriers to recreation than kids in cities.

- Recreation that’s not part of the school system can involve a lot of travel.
- Many communities have no public transportation.
- Youth who live on farms may have chores or have to care for younger children after school; it may be impossible to drive back to communities for recreation activities.
- Children may not be able to participate in programs not scheduled right after school.
- After-school programming in schools may be limited or dedicated mostly to sports.
- In small and rural communities, volunteers are spread thin. It’s harder to find support for programs aimed at children and youth living in low-income families.

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3 Based on information received from recreation practitioners and volunteers in Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and the Northwest Territories.
Barriers for girls and young women

Girls and young women are less active than boys. According to the “On the Move Handbook” published by the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity in 2000, 64% of girls between the ages of 12 and 19 are not active enough to meet international guidelines for optimal growth and development. Fifty-two percent of boys are similarly inactive.

Girls and young women face barriers to participation in sports and other physical activities, including:

- stereotypes about female participation
- choosing sedentary activities
- lack of female role models
- family responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings
- dislike of competitive programs
- limited choices and awareness of opportunities
- lack of basic skills in sport or team play
- safety concerns
- little family support
- cultural restrictions
- lack of money to pay fees or purchase equipment
- getting teased about inappropriate clothing, equipment or skills

Barriers for youth

Youth in focus groups have identified factors that reduce their interest, or prevent them from becoming involved in recreation services.

- lack of money for registration fees, equipment, appropriate clothing and travel expenses
- need to work—youth in low-income families may have part-time jobs to supplement family income
- lack of transportation options—public transportation can be inadequate and most youth do not have private transportation
- lack of information about programs and services—information is often in places where youth would not look or in language that does not speak to them
- program structure is often too rigid for youth—many youth prefer informal, unstructured programs or sport activities
- sport focus is not appealing to youth—they want to be involved in activities that they plan and have control over
- adult focus of many recreation services gives youth the impression that their needs are not important
- class and racial discrimination is a serious problem for Aboriginal youth and visible minorities—they do not feel comfortable or welcome in mainstream activities and facilities
- lack of family or parental support—youth who have little family support are less likely to participate and are more likely to pursue activities that put them at risk
- gender bias is prominent—many programs are considered “male only” and program leaders are often male; girls and young women may not feel that they belong
- abuse and harassment in recreation settings can stem from racism, sexism, ableism and homophobia—gay, lesbian, transgendered, bisexual or physically disabled youth often encounter harassment and abuse based on who they are

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4 Impact and Benefits of Physical Activity and Recreation on Canadian Youth-at-Risk, joint initiative of the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association and the Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council, conducted by the University of New Brunswick, December 1994.