Sports and Recreation Access in Hartford

2026 Community Findings & Recommendations

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Hartford Sports & Recreation

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Background & Research Questions

Over the last 20 years, youth and families in Hartford have experienced a disinvestment in local amenities such as fewer recreation centers, shorter pool hours, and fewer affordable program options despite the clear need for physical and social development. This decline impacts youth physical and mental health. In Connecticut, about 4 in 5 youth ages 6–17 do not meet the CDC's recommendation of 60 minutes of[1] physical activity a day . This share is likely even higher in Hartford, as children in lower-income urban communities face greater barriers to being active. Our project was to learn more about the issues related to access to sports and recreation programs in Hartford through focus groups with youth and adults, a parent/guardian survey, and GIS mapping of amenities in Hartford.

Our Research Questions

- What sports and recreation facilities and programs are currently available in Hartford and where are they located?
- Do Hartford's existing sports and recreational program offerings and facilities meet the needs of Hartford children and youth? What types of programs are families looking for?
- What barriers limit children and youth's participation in Hartford's sports and recreation activities? (e.g., cost, lack of resources, location, time)
- What capital improvements should the City of Hartford prioritize to increase access to sports and recreation for children and youth?

1. America's Health Rankings analysis of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, National Survey of Children's Health, United Health Foundation, AmericasHealthRankings.org.

Focus Group Findings

Who participated

We held focus groups in October and November 2025 at Hartford Public Library branches and online by Zoom. We had two youth focus groups and two parent focus groups, with 32 total participants. Each participant received a gift card for participating.

Themes

The focus groups yielded themes of access and opportunity, benefits, communications, the types of sports and recreation available and what residents wished were available, and limitations and barriers to participation in activities.



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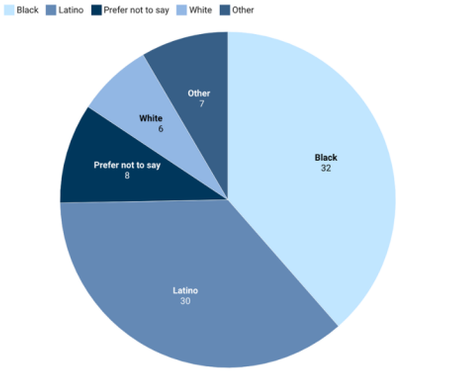
Survey Results

Race/Ethnicity of Survey Respondents



To compare to the general population, Hartford's population was roughly 34% Black, 45% Hispanic, 16% White in the 2023 American Community Survey.

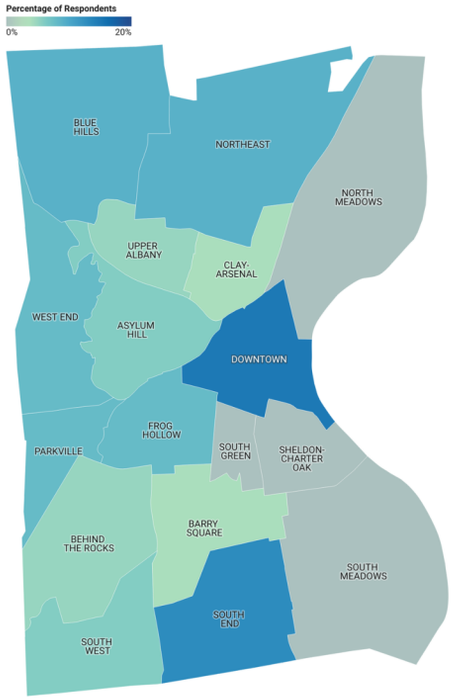
Chart: Geethika Fernando & Kate Eikel CTData • Source: CTData • Created with Datawrapper

Participants

126 Hartford parents or guardians completed the survey. 85% completed the survey in English and 15% in Spanish. A majority of respondents were women (76%) and 22% were men. 36% Black, 34% Latino, 16% Asian, 7% White, 8% Multiracial or other.

Survey respondents live in 14 of Hartford's 17 neighborhoods. The neighborhoods with the greatest number of respondents were Downtown (15%) and the South End (13%) neighborhood. Other neighborhoods with higher representation were Northeast (9%), Blue Hills (9%), the West End (8%), Frog Hollow (8%), and Parkville (8%) neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Diversity of Survey Respondents



(n=126)This chart illustrates where survey respondents live across different neighborhoods in Hartford.

Map: John D'Souza, CTData • Source: CTData • Created with Datawrapper

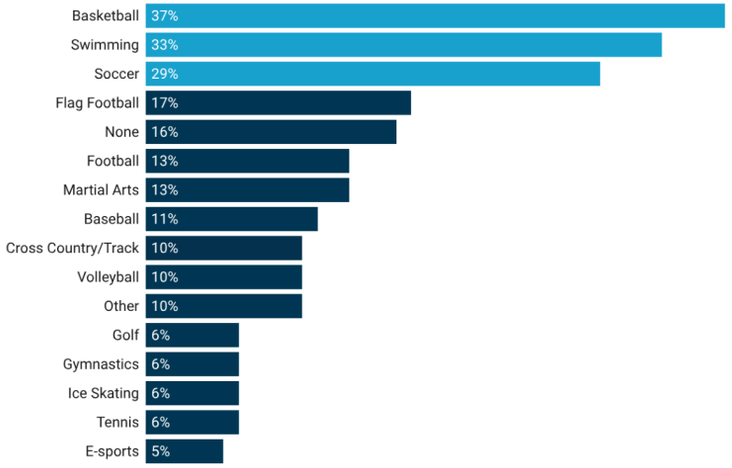
Popular Sports & Recreation Activities

In Hartford, access to sports and recreation is mostly concentrated in a few core, likely publicly supported programs like basketball (37%), swimming (33%) and soccer (29%). Recreational non-competitive swimming (81%) also stands out as a major shared recreation activity. However, respondents indicated they travel outside Hartford to find more sports. Nearly 1 in 5 of respondents say Hartford doesn't offer the sports they want, pointing to clear gaps and unmet demand in city's planning.

For recreation activities, community swimming (81%) was the most popular choice, followed by summer camps (27%), art (22%) and music (21%)

Basketball, Swimming, Soccer Top Sports for Children within Hartford

Responses to sports activities children participate in Hartford



Number of Respondents, (n) =126. Respondents could select multiple options; totals may exceed 100%. Other choices included cheerleading, squash, hockey, lacrosse, and pickleball which were selected by 13% of survey respondents

Chart: Jahlani Ustanny • Source: CTData • Created with Datawrapper

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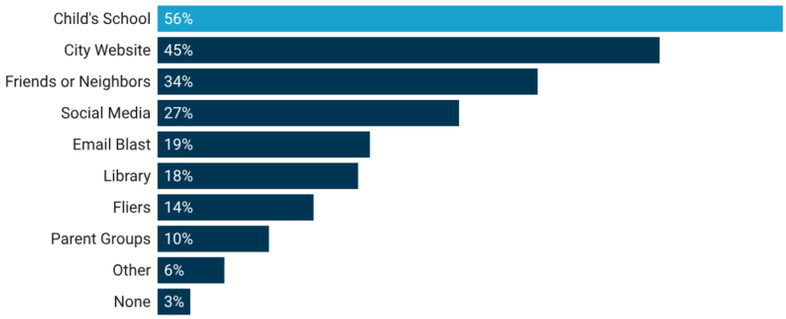
Majority of Respondents in Hartford Learn About Sports & Recreation Activities Through Child's School



Number of Respondents (n) =126. Respondents could select multiple options; totals may exceed 100%.

Chart: Jahlani Ustanny, CTData • Source: CTData • Created with Datawrapper

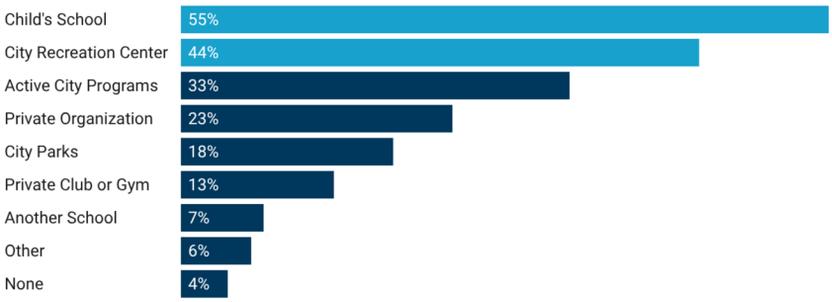
Communications

Most families hear about youth sports mainly through schools (56%), followed by the city website (45%) and word of mouth (34%), showing that schools and community networks are the strongest communication channels. Social media, email, and libraries play smaller but still useful roles in spreading information. However, nearly 1 in 3 respondents said they are not aware of available programs, suggesting a significant information gap.

Accessing Programs

Within Hartford, respodents reported that their children mainly participate in sports and recreational activities through familiar and accessible locations such as schools (55%), recreational centers (44%), and other programs (33%). Fewer respondents also checked places such as city parks (18%) and private clubs/gyms (13%).

Schools and Recreation Centers Are the Most Popular Responses for Sports & Recreational Activities for Children in Hartford

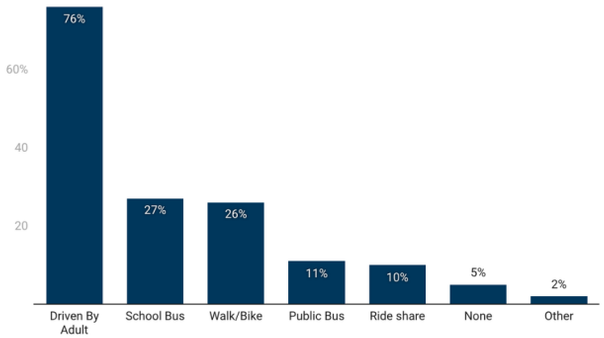


Number of Respondents (n) =126. Respondents could select multiple options, so totals exceed 100%.

Chart: Alex Robert, CTData • Source: CTData • Created with Datawrapper

Children and Youth Rely On Adults to Travel to Activities in Hartford

Responses to how children access sports and recreation activities ni Hartford



Number of Respondents (n) = 126. Respondents could select multiple options; totals may exceed 100%

Chart: John D'Souza, CTData • Source: CT Data • Created with Datawrapper

76% of respondents said their children primarily rely on transportation from an adult or guardian in order to get to their desired programming. Far fewer cited other avenues of travel, such as school buses (27%), public transit (11%), micromobility (scooters and bikes), walkability, and rideshare services (10%). Flexibility and affordability could improve participation and access to sports and recreational activities in Hartford.

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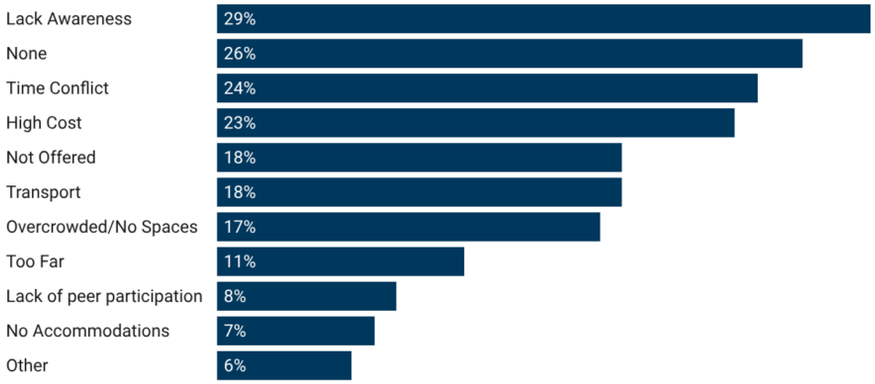
Barriers to Access

Nearly 1 in 3 respondents (29%) indicated they lack awareness about available programs for their children. Time conflicts were one of the most significant barriers to participation, cited by 24% of respondents. A majority of families prefer programs scheduled on weekend afternoons and evenings (60%), weekday after-school hours (56%), and weekend mornings (54%). High cost (23%), non-availability (18%) and transportation (18%) are other significant barriers.

Barriers to Children's Participation in Sports and Recreation Programs in Hartford



Number of Respondents (n) =126. Respondents could select multiple options ; totals may exceed 100%. This chart highlights the factors that limit children's participation in sports and recreational activities in Hartford, based on survey responses.

Source: CT Data • Created with Datawrapper

I work at a certain time. I get off at a certain time. Mother works. It's hard getting them from... getting from work, picking my kids up, getting them to the programs that they need to be.
-survey respondent

Inclusivity and Identity

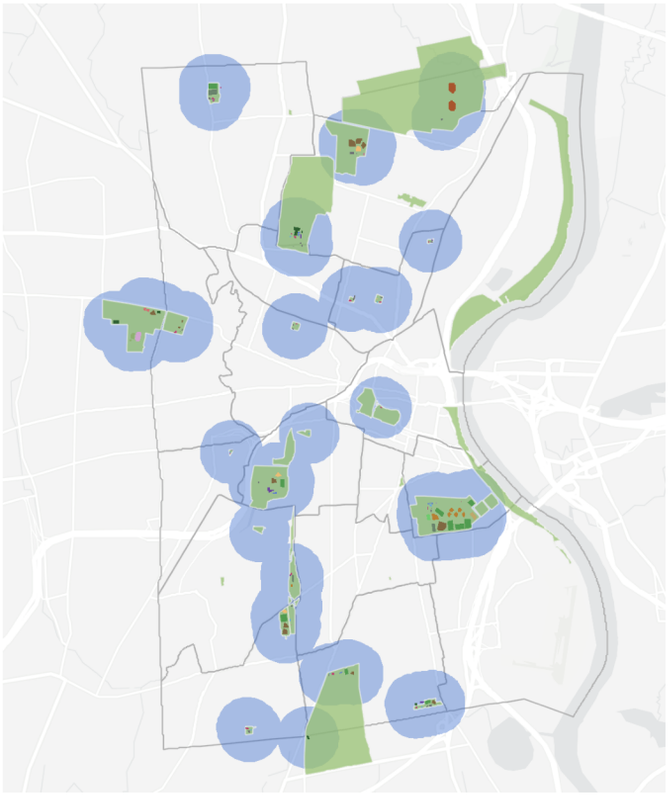
Hartford's youth sports programs are generally viewed very positively, particularly for being inclusive, supportive, and welcoming. 91% of respondents reported they enroll their children in programs they enjoy. Families point to supportive staff (45%) and a welcoming environment (45%) as key reasons for participation.

Most families in our survey believe the programs are inclusive across disability, gender, race, and language, with 95% reporting that children with disabilities are supported and 91% noting strong language inclusion for children who speak languages other than English.

Map of Facilities & Access

Main findings

- Most of Hartford has geographic access to parks. 58% of land within Hartford is within a quarter-mile of a park.
- Approximately 63% of Hartford children under the age of 18 live within walking distance to a park, though proximity is uneven at a neighborhood level.
- While parks are relatively well distributed, sports fields and structured recreation facilities are concentrated in a smaller number of large parks or in sections of large parks.



This map shows areas of Hartford in blue that are within a quarter mile of a sports facility.

Scan the QR Code to Access the StoryMap

www.ctdata.org/sports-and-rec-hartford-spatial

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Recommendations for Next Steps

- Expand program offerings in response to student interest, especially dance, indoor winter activities, and enrichment classes such as cooking, music, and art
- Continue to grow the amount of low-cost programs offered
- Invest in more pools, splash-pads, and multi-use facilities
- Schedule weekend afternoon and weekend evening programs
- Increase the amount of neighborhood and school-based programming
- Create more forms of communication such as email lists, a newsletter, and social media, and a centralized website as a source to find all Hartford programming
- Continue to create and promote welcoming environments

> Hope to see more programs that are cost effective at appropriate times in our neighborhoods that are close, safe convenient.
> -survey respondent

Contributors

This research was made possible through funding from the 2025 Local Data for Equitable Communities program supported by the Urban Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We also partnered with the City of Hartford, Department of Sports and Recreation and Active City throughout the project.

CTData was privileged to work with six alumni from our Hartford Youth Data Fellowship program: John D'Souza; Nashali Johnson; Samra Mujcinovic Alex Roberts; Jahlani Ustanny; and Tatiana Watson. They worked with CTData staff weekly from late August through May and received additional training in focus group facilitation, qualitative analysis, and survey development to lead this research.

For additional questions about this project, contact Kate Eikel (keikel@ctdata.org) and Geethika Fernando (gfernando@ctdata.org)