



# Enhancing Youth Sport Participation in the EU: Rates, Motivations, Barriers and Ways Forward

Intellectual Output 1 of Erasmus+ Project: ICOACHKIDS+

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# Executive Summary

Children's physical activity levels and competence have dropped steadily and globally over the last two decades. This decrease has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Action is needed.

ICOACHKIDS+ is an Erasmus+ Sport co-funded project part of the overall activities of the ICOACHKIDS Global Movement. It aims to enhance sport participation and maximise sport's health enhancing properties for children aged 13-18.

This report presents the findings of a unique series of two multi-country and multi-sport studies investigating the participation rates of children and young people in organised youth sport and the reasons why they stop taking part. Recommendations for all stakeholders follow.

## Study 1 – Participation Trends in Organised Sport Across the EU

We collected 3 years' worth of participation data for 5.5 million children across 27 countries and 18 sports.

### Key Findings:

- Youth male sport participation rates are four times higher than females.
- This trend, however, has a distinct sport-specific flavour with sports like football being played predominantly by boys (92%) and others like volleyball (73%) and dance sports (85%) being typically played by girls



27 Countries



Participation Data 2017-2020



5.5 million children



18 sports

Overall participation peaks for both boys and girls between 12 and 14 years of age after which there is a marked drop off. This trend is also sport and gender specific.

### Male

Cycling 92% dropout (from U14 to U18) Swimming/Diving 75% dropout (from U8 to U18)  
Martial Arts 67% dropout (from U8 to U18)

### Female

Swimming/Diving 71% dropout (from U8 to U18) Dance Sports 57% dropout (from U8-U16)  
Martial Arts 55% dropout (from U8 to U16)

Interestingly, female participation in sports like skiing (55%) and boxing (86%) grows in the late teens.

The study also highlighted shortcomings in the way participation data collection is conducted by national sporting agencies and federations. This limits our capacity to fully understand young people's journeys in organised sport. Creating standardised participant registration systems across multiple sports would facilitate real participation tracking and provide vital information.

These findings confirm that youth sport participation is a complex phenomenon with gender, age, and sport specific patterns that require further investigation. Our second study investigated the different factors that influence participation and attrition patterns.

## Study 2 – Why do young people drop out of organised sport?

We developed a novel Youth Sport Dropout Questionnaire (YSDQ; Lara-Bercial et al., in preparation) containing 49 dropout reasons and gave it to 450 students in the UK.

### General Trends



52% of young people drop out between 14–18 years of age



39% took part for more than 5 years before dropping out



70% saw themselves as sporty, yet still dropped out

- 1 Found other things to do
- 2 Performance related stress
- 3 Prioritised studies
- 4 Didn't think I was good enough
- 5 No one helped me stay
- 6 Not as good as my friends
- 7 Stopped enjoying it
- 8 Not enough playing time
- 9 Didn't like how I looked
- 10 Not worth the effort

### Top 10 Reasons for Dropout

### Individual Differences

Crucially, there were differences in the most important reasons for dropout based on specific sociodemographic factors and age at dropout.

#### Single Parent Family



Couldn't afford it

#### Low Income Family

#### High Income Family



Performance related stress

#### Gender



Didn't think I was good enough

#### Disability



No one helped me stay

#### Migratory Background

#### Dropout age

6–8 years



Didn't think I was good enough

9–11 years



Stopped enjoying it

12–18 years



Found other things to do

19–21 years



Performance related stress

Very Sporty



Performance related stress

Elite Standard

Not at all Sporty



Didn't like how I looked

## Conclusions

The findings demonstrate how dropout is a time-bound, context-based, multi-factorial and highly individualised phenomenon.

Different young people drop out for different reasons at different stages, and this is influenced by key sociodemographic characteristics

There is not a “one size fits” all solution to the youth sport dropout problem

Different stakeholders will play different roles at different times and to counter different factors

Reducing dropout will take a collective effort and, at times, a “one child at a time” attitude

## Recommendations

Considering the findings from the two studies, we offer some general recommendations.

### Federations

Conduct research to understand why young people play your sport and why they stop.

Explore new formats and rules to make your sport fit the needs of the young people.

Consider new ways of grouping children so they can all thrive

Develop initiatives to improve your sport’s diversity and inclusion power.

Invest in the education of all stakeholders.

### Clubs and Schools

Develop policies and practices to ensure a safe physical and psychological climate.

Create a developmentally appropriate training environment (age, stage, psychosocial).

Consider all types of reasons why young people do sport and cater for them.

Explore adding new, less traditional activities to your PE curriculum.

### Coaches

Encourage and listen to the voice of the young people.

Make FUN a goal for all your sessions.

Prioritise relationships and developing a sense of belonging and togetherness.

Give everyone a chance to learn, improve and experience success curriculum

### Parents

Provide unconditional love regardless of competence, performance or result.

Bring positive energy to training and competitions. Work with coaches not against.

Get involved in the club as a volunteer.

Foster independence.

## Where to next?

If you wish to know more about how to minimise youth sport dropout, we would love you to complete our brand new FREE e-learning course “Minimising Youth Sport Dropout”. Click [HERE](#) to access our e-learning platform.



ICOACHKIDS+ is led by the International Council for Coaching Excellence and Leeds Beckett University with another seven partners including: Hungarian Coaching Association, Sport Ireland Coaching, the Netherlands Olympic Committee and Sport Confederation (NOC\*NSF), the European University of Madrid (Spain), the Royal Belgian Football Association, the German Youth Sport Council (DSJ), and FIBA Europe.

## INTRODUCTION

Children's physical activity levels and competence have dropped steadily and globally over the last two decades. This decrease has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of this decline in young people's physical and mental wellbeing, now and in the future, has been demonstrated in multiple studies.

### **ACTION IS NEEDED**

ICOACHKIDS+<sup>1</sup> (ICK+) is an Erasmus+ Sport co-funded project part of the overall activities of the ICOACHKIDS Global Movement. It aims to enhance sport participation and maximise sport's health enhancing properties for children aged 13-18. This report presents the findings of a unique series of multi-country and multi-sport studies investigating the participation rates of children and young people in organised youth sport and the reasons why they stop taking part. Based on these findings, a set of recommendations to enhance young people's participation in sport are proposed.

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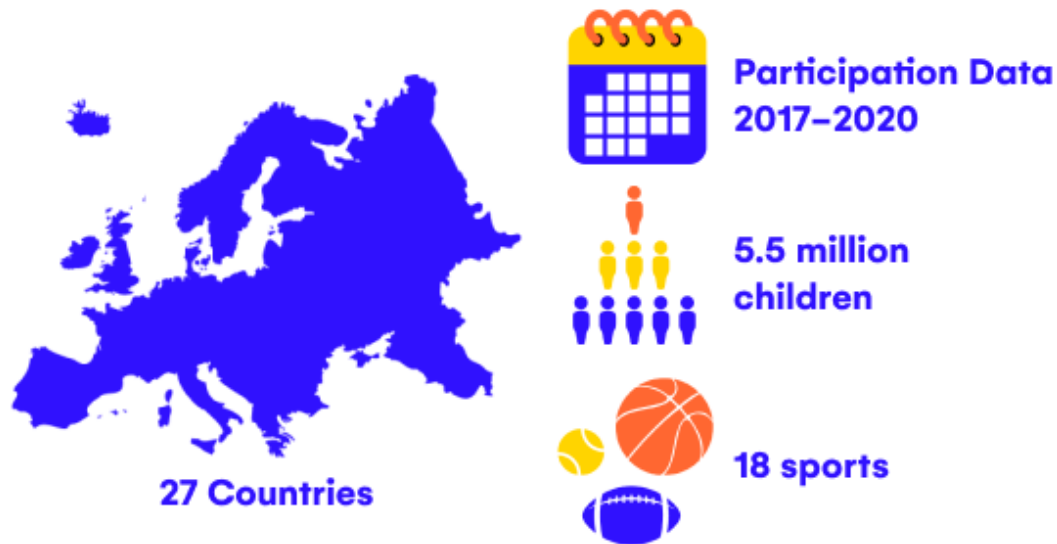
<sup>1</sup> ICOACHKIDS+ is led by the International Council for Coaching Excellence and Leeds Beckett University with another seven partners including: Hungarian Coaching Association, Sport Ireland Coaching, the Netherlands Olympic Committee and Sport Confederation (NOC\*NSF), the European University of Madrid (Spain), the Royal Belgian Football Association, the German Youth Sport Council (DSJ), and FIBA Europe.

# Study 1: Participation Trends in Organised Sport Across the EU



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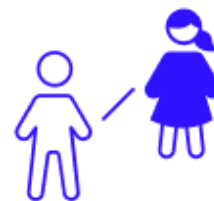
The first ICK+ study focused on understanding the participation trends in organised sport across the EU. Over 5.5 million children and young people from 18 sports across 27 countries were sampled.



Key findings included:

- Youth male sport participation rates are four times higher than females.
- This trend, however, has a distinct sport-specific flavour.

Overall, youth male sport participation rates (80%) are significantly higher than females (20%). This trend has a distinct sport specific flavour.



Low female participation sports include: soccer (8%), wrestling (18%), table tennis (24%) and boxing (26%).



Moderate female participation sports include: basketball (34%) and cycling (35%).





**Equal / near equal female participation sports include: water sports (39%), martial arts (40%), triathlon (44%), handball (48%), badminton (49%), tennis (49%), athletics (49%), swimming/diving (53%) and skiing (51%).**



**High female participation sports include: volleyball (73%) and dance sports (85%).**



## RECOMMENDATION TO NATIONAL SPORT ORGANISATIONS

To create a standardised participant registration systems, including individual identifier numbers for each participant. This would facilitate tracking real participation across sports and overtime in order to gain a more accurate picture.

Overall, Study 1 confirmed that these findings confirm that **youth sport participation is a complex phenomenon with gender, age, and sport specific patterns** that require further investigation. Specifically, dropout and re-engagement appear to be highly personal and context-specific events. **More needs to be known about the different factors that influence participation and attrition patterns.** This was the purpose of our second study.

## **Study 2: Why do young people drop out of organised sport?**



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Understanding the reasons why young people stop taking part in organised sport is vital. Only then can we develop strategies to support continued participation or to facilitate transitions to other forms of physical activity that may suit them better as they get older. For this second study, we developed the Youth Sport Dropout Questionnaire (YSDQ; Lara-Bercial et al., in preparation). The YSDQ contains 49 dropout factors grouped into 13 dimensions (see Technical Report 2 for the full questionnaire). This study is currently being replicated across 5 other European countries to establish similarities and differences between different contexts.

We piloted the YSDQ with a sample of over 400 university students in the UK4. The study also considered key sociodemographic factors to build a picture of which reasons were more important for different young people to discontinue their participation.

## DIMENSIONS OF DROPOUT

The 13 dimensions of dropout as mentioned above are as follows:



## GENERAL TRENDS

The study identified some notable general trends:



**52% of young people drop out between 14-18 years of age.**












**39% took part for more than 5 years before dropping out.**





**70% saw themselves as sporty, yet still dropped out.**





The main reasons for dropout were:

- #1**  Found other things to do
- #2**  Performance related stress
- #3**  Prioritised studies
- #4**  Didn't think I was good enough
- #5**  No one helped me stay
- #6**  Not as good as my friends
- #7**  Stopped enjoying it
- #8**  Not enough playing time
- #9**  Didn't like how I looked
- #10**  Not worth the effort



## INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Crucially, there were differences in the most important reasons for dropout **based on specific sociodemographic factors and age at dropout**. Below we highlight some of them:

Income		
Single Parent Family	Low Income Family	High Income Family
		
Couldn't afford it		Performance related stress

Dropout Age			
6-8 years	9-11 years	12-18 years	19-21 years
			
Didn't think I was good enough	Stopped enjoying it	Found other things to do	Performance related stress

Sportiness		
Very Sporty	Elite Standard	Not at all Sporty
		
	Performance related stress	Didn't like how I looked

Other		
Gender	Disability	Migratory Background
		
Didn't think I was good enough		No one helped me stay

## ANALYSIS BY DIMENSION

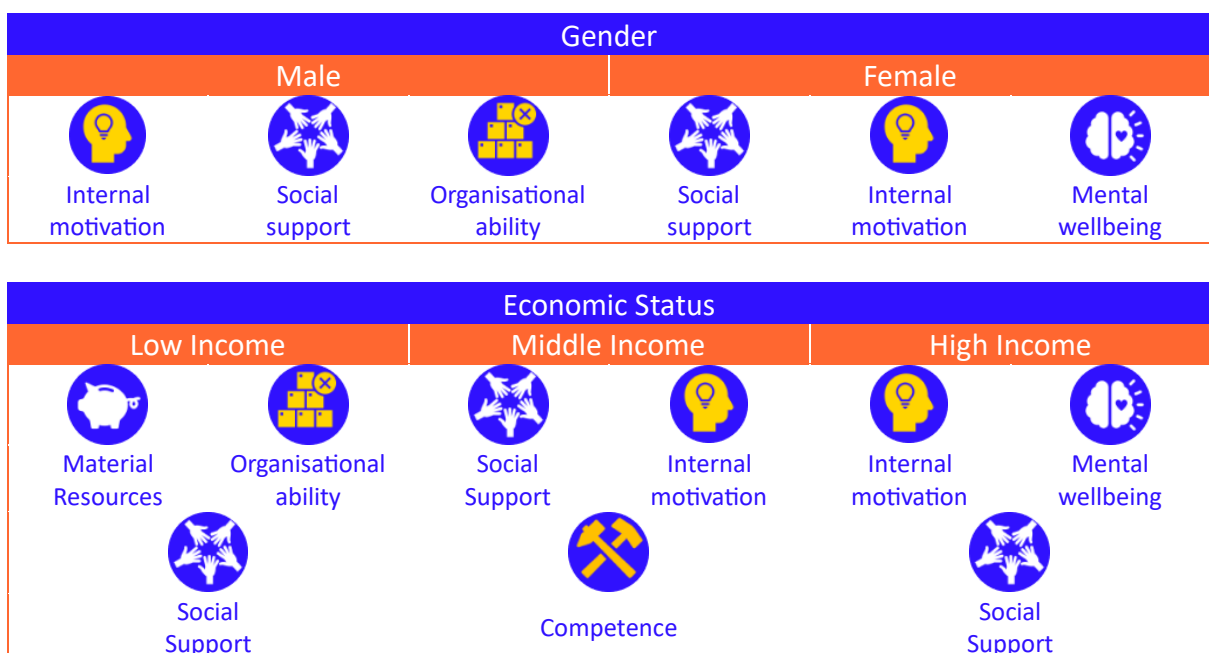
Of course, young people do not typically drop out of sport for a single reason. It is thus important to understand which dimensions of dropout, or groups of reasons, are most important. Across the whole sample, young people rated **SOCIAL SUPPORT and INTERNAL MOTIVATION** as the most important dimensions of dropout.

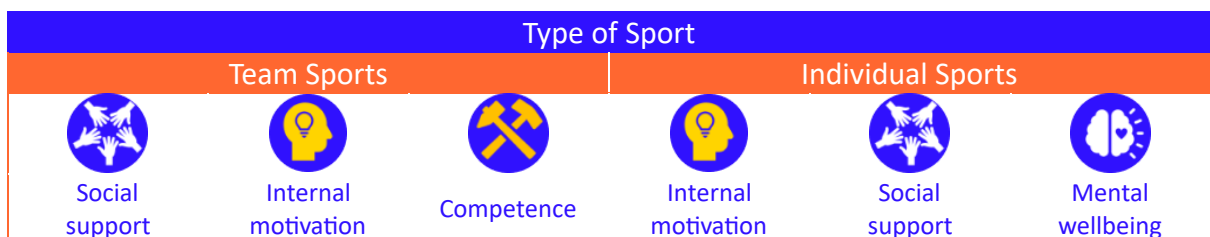
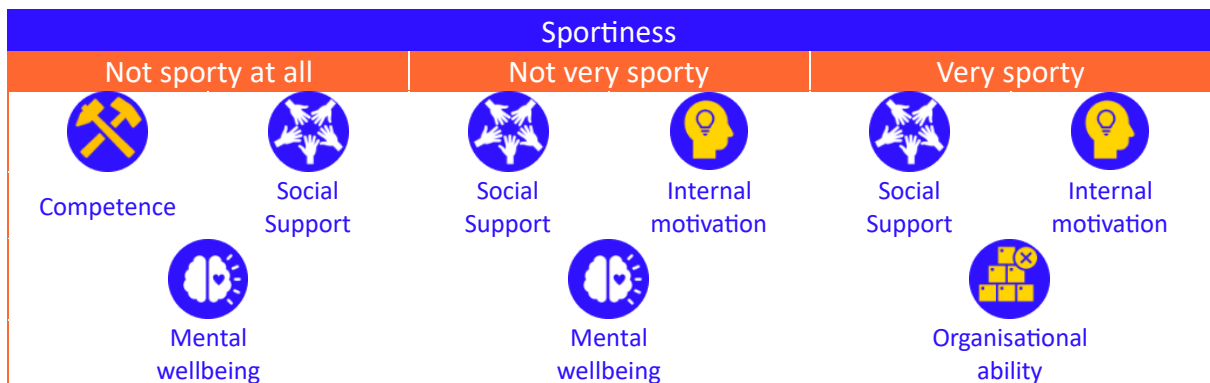
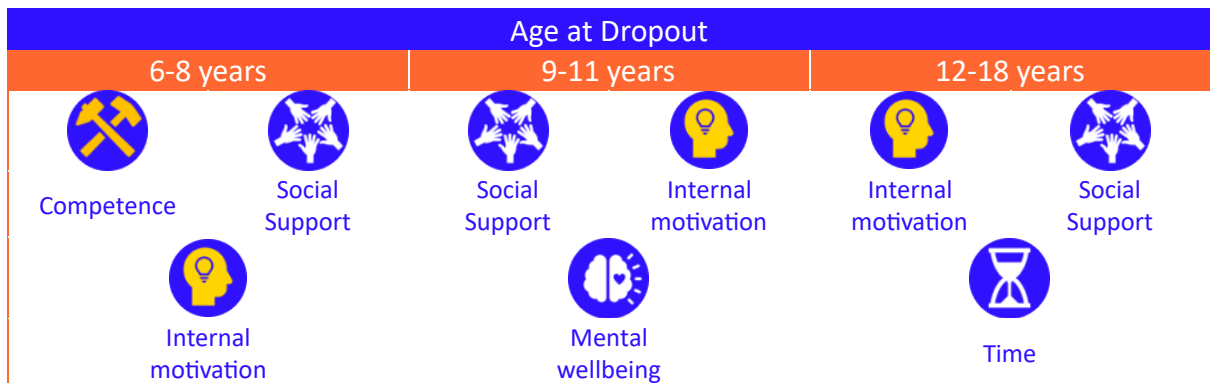
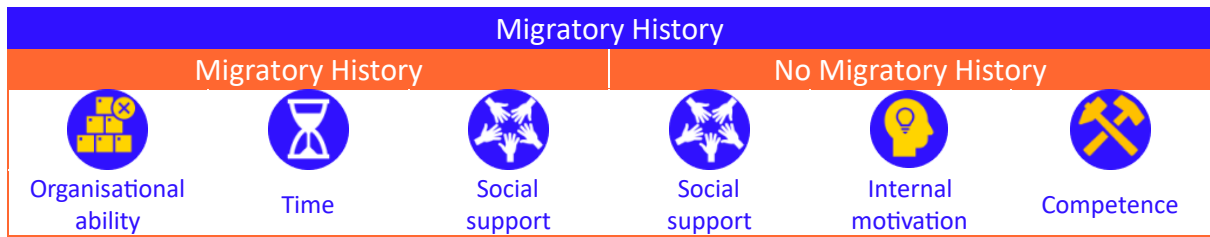
## TOP DIMENSIONS OF DROPOUT








## INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

The study, however, also showed that a plethora of **sociodemographic factors impact on the relative importance** of the main dimensions of dropout.





# Conclusions

-  The findings demonstrate how dropout is a time-bound, context-based, multifactorial and highly individualised phenomenon.
-  Different young people dropout for different reasons at different stages, and this is influenced by key sociodemographic characteristics.
-  There is not a “one-size-fits-all” solution to the youth sport dropout problem.
-  Different stakeholders will play different roles at different times, and to counter different factors.
-  Reducing dropout will take a collective effort and, at times, a “one child at a time” attitude.



# Recommendations

**Considering the findings from the two studies, we offer some general recommendations for different stakeholders.**

## Federations

Conduct research to understand why young people play your sport and why they stop.

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