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**Four Hypotheses about the Public Policy  
Significance of Youth Recreation:  
Lessons from a Literature Review and a Data  
Analysis on “Learning through Recreation”**

Joint Summary Report of a *Data Analysis: Learning through Recreation* prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) and a *Literature Review on Learning through Recreation* prepared by the Family Network of Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) for the Laidlaw Foundation, June 2001.

## The Genesis of this Research

In December 2000, the Laidlaw Foundation commissioned the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) and the Family Network of Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) to conduct a joint research project on recreation for young people. The research produced two detailed reports on different aspects of the subject:

- *A Data Analysis: Learning through Recreation* was prepared by Andrew Jackson, Paul Roberts and Shelley Harman of the Canadian Council on Social Development, and
- *A Literature Review on Learning through Recreation* was prepared by Caroline Beauvais of the Family Network of Canadian Policy Research Networks.

Based on these two reports, CCSD and CPRN prepared this Joint Summary Report of the findings.

## Four Hypotheses about the Public Policy Significance of Youth Recreation:

### Lessons from a Literature Review and a Data Analysis on “Learning Through Recreation”

In December 2000, the Laidlaw Foundation commissioned the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) and the Family Network of Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) to complete two studies about “Learning Through Recreation” that, together, could be used to inform the Foundation’s future work in the area of youth recreation. CCSD produced a *Data Analysis: Learning Through Recreation*, while CPRN conducted a *Literature Review on Learning through Recreation*. This summary report combines the key findings of these two studies as they relate to four hypotheses about the public policy significance of youth recreation advanced by the Laidlaw Foundation. The data analysis and literature review are available as separate background documents that support and expand upon this summary report.

In 1999, the Laidlaw Foundation originally developed four major hypotheses concerning the policy significance of youth recreation:

1. ***The Human Development Hypothesis:*** The absence of structured recreation for youth negatively affects the long run socio-emotional human development of youth as adults.
2. ***The Civic Competence Hypothesis:*** The absence of involvement by youth in interpersonal recreation activities affects an individual’s future civic competence and also affects the quality of democracy.
3. ***The Insufficiency Hypothesis:*** Significant numbers of youth are not participating in recreation activities at levels sufficient to support their human development and future civic competence.
4. ***The Inadequacy Hypothesis:*** Non-participation by youth in recreation and arts activities can be related to the inadequacy of existing public systems dealing with the provision of youth recreation.

Fitness Canada defines *recreation* as comprising all socially acceptable activities in which a person may choose to take part that will make his or her leisure time more interesting, more enjoyable, and personally satisfying (McKay, *et al.*, 1996: 284). There are many forms of recreation – reading, playing sports, engaging in artistic pursuits, hanging out, camping, making music in a group, surfing the Web, and so on. We view *structured recreation* as a significantly smaller subset of recreation, which consists of recreational activities involving elements of instruction, choice and skill development.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is the definition found in the Laidlaw Foundation document entitled *Learning Through Recreation* (2000).

The nature and results of a Canadian literature review on youth recreation and an analysis of available data on the subject are summarized below. This is followed by an assessment of how these findings and empirical observations relate to the four hypotheses presented above, with respect to: (1) access to structured recreation; (2) impacts of recreation; and (3) research and policy implications.

## **The Nature and Overall Results of the Literature Review**

The literature review summarizes what we know about the access of young people between 10 and 15 years of age to structured recreational activities, and the effects of these activities. We primarily examined the scientific literature, that is, the literature originating within research institutes or universities. Some reports published by governments or by private or public organizations were also taken into account when they were scientific in character or when, as a result of their impact on new programs or new orientations, they had left their imprint on the field. We also gave priority to recent studies (from 1990 on), while noting older works that are still considered important. We have also given priority to Canadian literature, but introduced foreign studies wherever it appeared that they would contribute to a particular topic, or wherever relevant Canadian literature was sparse or even silent on a topic. Thus, the foreign literature sheds light on the gaps in the Canadian literature, and suggests new avenues to be explored within the framework of future research in Canada.

To complete the literature review, we used several sources to find the documents that could be of some relevance. First, we identified literature reviews and any reference documents that already exist on the subject of recreation, leisure or physical activity.<sup>2</sup> Interviews were also conducted with two experts in the field: Robin Wright, Assistant Professor at The School of Social Work, McGill University; and Jean Harvey, Professor, School of Human Kinetics at Ottawa University. These experts directed us to more detailed research findings. We also used databanks such as *Sport Discuss* and others in the social sciences to find relevant articles and scientific reviews.

The goal was a synthetic literature review of published academic studies of youth and structured recreation that would help the Laidlaw Foundation identify research gaps and research needs for the future in Canada. Therefore, we have put the emphasis on documents and articles that reflect the current field of knowledge in Canada, without claiming this is an exhaustive review of the subject.

We organized the literature review around two aspects of the relationship between young people (aged 10 to 15 years) and structured recreation. The first consisted of identifying the effects of recreation on the physical and psychosocial development of youth, and the second involved identifying factors affecting youth participation in structured recreation.

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<sup>2</sup> Books such the *Conclusions of The 1992 International Consensus Symposium on Physical Activity, Fitness, and Health* (Bouchard, Shepard and Stephens, 1994), *Sport in Society* (Coakley, 2001), *Benefits of Leisure* (Driver, Brown and Peterson, 1991), *Benefits and Impact of Physical Activity for Ontario* (Craig, Russell and Cameron, 1995), and *Overcoming Systemic Barriers to Access in Active Living* (Donnelly and Harvey, 1996) were useful for assessing the existing state of knowledge.

The link between the two was as follows: *If participating in structured recreation has a beneficial effect on the physical and psychosocial development of youth, then access to participation should be extended to all children.* In this regard, David Offord, Ellen Lipman and Eric Duku state, “The first issue that must be addressed in the policy domain is whether or not participation in sports, arts and community programs is beneficial for children. If it is not, then the issue of unequal participation rates in different subgroups of children should not be of concern” (1998: 24).

With respect to identifying the effects of recreation on the physical and psychosocial development of youth, we have observed a significant difference between the conclusions of the scientific literature and widespread notions about recreation as a factor in development. While the evidence relating to physical and biological outcomes is scientifically grounded, the evidence relating to psychosocial outcomes is much less so. We therefore obtain mixed results.

Due to the methodological weaknesses of available studies, many influential authors are reluctant to say that recreation produces positive (or negative) effects on personality development, moral development or social values. In part, of course, the deficiencies in the research stem from the nature of psychosocial development itself. It is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by many factors. Therefore, recreation is likely to have an essentially *indirect* impact on it.

It is apparent, however, that there are positive physical, psychological and social benefits to be derived from *structured recreation*. Authors in the field share a general assessment of the positive effects of structured recreation on youth development. Overall, the observation is that the relationship between youth recreation and benefits is more complex than we might expect, and researchers stress the need for additional research that will yield more conclusive results.

Indeed, if we agree that structured recreation can generate *positive* outcomes, we are much less confident about the conditions that will engender such benefits. Structured recreation does not necessarily lead automatically to positive outcomes, and the acquisition of benefits depends largely on participation in appropriate programs, and on the social environment in which the activity takes place. As Wankel and Berger (1991) remind us, it is futile to wonder whether sport is good or bad. Like many things, sport is neither good nor bad in itself but can produce positive and negative effects. Thus, the following questions must be asked. What are the conditions that will generate positive outcomes? What conditions should be avoided in order to minimize negative effects?

With regard to identifying factors affecting youth participation in structured recreation, it is important to recall that there are many overlaps in the literature that deals with barriers to participation. It seems that both *socioeconomic status* and *gender* are key determining factors for youth participation but others are also important, such as the organizational structure of recreational services and the influence of peers and parents. Yet authors have some difficulty weighting and categorizing these factors. For example, the variable of gender can confound our measures of the influence of peers or parents. Also, some constraints may be more important for some social categories of young people, and less so for others.

Again, the methodological deficiencies of the studies arise largely because of the difficulty of analyzing, not to mention isolating, some variables. The socioeconomic status variable, for example, is easier to observe than the diffuse, less tangible effects associated with gender.

There is a serious lack of research on the effects of publicly provided services on youth participation in structured recreational activities. Very few studies in Canada examine either if access to publicly supported recreation services affects participation in structured recreation in adolescence or if there are differences in participation according to socioeconomic status. However, recommendations for giving a greater number of young people access to recreation often originate in the study of constraints and barriers to youth participation. In general, authors call for greater flexibility in administering and developing recreational programs; enhanced accessibility to programs in terms of costs, transportation and availability; and, above all, greater awareness of the needs and desires of the principal stakeholders – youth.

## **The Nature and Overall Results of the Data Analysis**

### **I. Access and Level of Activity**

How children spend their recreational time is influenced by the access they have to particular recreational activities. Children have more control over choosing which unstructured activities they participate in, and greater access to unstructured recreational activities. Access to and participation in structured recreation, however, is constrained: coached and supervised activities require qualified adult supervision, instruction usually takes place at a particular locale requiring transportation and often involves a cost to participate. These are only some of the barriers to participation in recreation. Which children access structured recreation and how often they participate is related to a number of factors including income, gender, city size, and family structure. The National Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) developed in 1994 by Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada, was used to examine the relationship between these factors and participation in structured recreation.

The 1996 cycle of the NLSCY included a questionnaire to be completed by children between the ages of 10 and 13. Included were a number of questions about participation in: organized team sports with a coach; dance and gymnastics classes; music and art lessons; clubs and community groups, such as cubs and brownies; and participation in overnight and day camps. The NLSCY also provides data on income, gender, family type and urban area size. Data from the National Population Health Survey (NPHS) and General Social Survey (GSS) were also used.

The Canadian Council on Social Development's report *Access to Recreation Programs in Canada* examines children's access to recreation programs across Canada. Information about barriers to participation was taken from this report and is attached to the *Data Analysis and Review: Learning Through Recreation* report.

## II. Impacts of Structured Recreation

Participation in structured recreation has been shown to have an impact on child development in a number of ways. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) 1994 and 1996, the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP), the General Social Survey 1998 (GSS), and the National Population Health Survey (NPHS) 1996 and 1998, we were able to establish some links between recreation and physical development, psychosocial development and behaviour, civic behaviour and present and future civic competence.

Data on recreation and physical development and psychosocial behaviour were taken from the NLSCY, which sampled children between the ages of 10 and 13. The General Social Survey 1998 (GSS 1998), sampled Canadians 15 years of age and older on their time use, including how much time they spent participating in recreational activities and how much time they spent volunteering and participating in their community. To examine recreation, volunteering and community participation (civic competence in the present) of youth, we restricted the sample to youth ages 15 to 17.

Information about civic competence was derived from the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP), conducted by Statistics Canada in 1997. The NSGVP sampled respondents 15 years of age and older and asked them retrospective questions about their participation in recreational activities as children, and their current level of civic participation and involvement in their community. The NSGVP also questioned adults about their participation in team sports and youth groups.

## III. Overall Conclusions of the Data Analysis

We found significant income barriers to equal participation in coached sports, and evidence of infrastructure barriers. We find evidence consistent with the argument that involvement in structured recreation promotes higher levels of social involvement and future civic competence.

### Access to Structured Recreation – Correlates and Patterns

We can draw certain conclusions about *access* to structured recreation by age, gender, income, and a range of other factors, and according to barriers that prevent participation. The literature and quantitative data allows an analysis of three correlates of access.

**Age:** From the literature, we observe that children are more likely than adolescents to take part in and appreciate organized activities. As young people grow older, they are inclined to abandon organized activities in favor of informal activities. While it is true that participation in organized activities dramatically decreases with age for both genders, girls begin to withdraw from organized sport even earlier than boys do.

**Gender:** Compared to boys, girls seem less drawn to team sports and competition, and are more likely to participate in cultural and interpersonal activities. Girls cite substantially the same reasons as boys for engaging in physical activity, including personal enjoyment and companionship. Most authors ascribe differences in participation between boys and girls to deeper cultural factors associated with the production and reproduction of gender roles in recreational activities. Certain cultural norms seem to be internalized by girls in early childhood, discouraging them from developing their physical skills. Later on, as adults, these norms prevent them from enjoying physical activities that demand a higher level of physical skills. Although most authors concede that much progress has been made and that girls now have more opportunities to participate, disparities in participation rates and recreation choices persist. Girls are breaking into many sports once considered male bastions. However, boys are much more reluctant to engage in “typically feminine” activities.

The quantitative data analysis (NLSCY) also shows that gender influences the types of activities that children favour and in which they participate. Girls between the ages of 10 and 13 were slightly less likely to participate in sports with a coach; 22.7 per cent “never” participate compared to 18.9 per cent of boys. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to participate in coached sports on a more frequent basis (at least once a week). However, girls were much more likely to participate in dance or gymnastics and also more likely to participate in art, drama or music. Boys were also less likely to participate in scouts than girls in guides. Girls were slightly more likely to participate in overnight camp and both genders were equally likely to participate in day camp.

**Income:** The review of the literature found that young people identify lack of money and difficulty in accessing activities as major barriers to their participation. Researchers similarly identify economic inequalities as one of the major factors shaping patterns of youth participation. The number of barriers to recreational activities mentioned by young people decrease as family income rises. There are significant differences in levels of participation between youth from low-income families and those from middle- and high-income families. Participation in physical and artistic activities is particularly low and irregular for children from low-income families. The differences are greater for structured recreation and for recreation that requires elements of instruction or expensive equipment. Municipal recreation user fees discourage participation by youth from low-income families since costs are a more acute problem for them.

The data analysis shows the following. Participation in some recreational activities increased with income level while income had little or no impact on participation in other activities. Children from high income families and those living above the Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO) were much more likely to participate frequently in organized sports (i.e., sports with a coach) than children from lower income quintile families and those living below the LICO. Nearly three-quarters of children from the highest income quintile played sports with a coach one or more times per week compared to just over half (56.6 per cent) of children in the bottom quintile. Income had little or no impact on participation rates in dance or gymnastics. Sixty-two per cent of children living in households in the lowest income quintile had never participated in dance/gymnastics, compared to sixty-one percent of children from highest income quintile families.

Children from middle income families were slightly more likely to participate in art, drama or music and in guides or scouts, but there was little difference in participation rates between children living in households above and below the LICO.

Day camp and overnight camps are often relatively expensive structured recreational activities for children. As such, it is not surprising that children from higher income households and children living above the LICO were more likely to have attended overnight camp than were children from lower income households or those below the LICO. Participation in overnight camp increased with income quintile, with the largest proportion of children by far attending overnight camp being from the highest income quintile. Attendance in day camp also rose consistently with income quintile. Nearly half of the highest income quintile children had attended day camp the previous summer compared to just one-fifth of the lowest income quintile children. NPHS data also show large income impacts on participation in sports.

The Family Expenditure Survey (FAMEX), conducted by Statistics Canada in 1992, and the Survey of Household Spending (SHS) conducted in 1998, found that of all families with children, those with the lowest household incomes spent a higher proportion of their income on recreation. The lowest income households spent on average 7.5 per cent of their household income on recreation, while middle income earners spent 6.3 per cent of their income on recreation and the highest income earners spent only 5.8 per cent of their income on recreation. However, when percentage of household income is translated into a dollar value (per year), the lowest income group spent an average of \$1,895 on recreation, the middle income group spent \$3,413 and the highest income group spent \$5,982. Participation in recreation for lower income families is at a greater expense than for higher income families, 7.5 per cent versus 5.8 per cent of their annual incomes, yet despite the greater proportion spent on recreation by lower income families the actual dollar value of their contribution is only a third of what is spent by high income families. This data suggests that lower income families recognize value in recreation and are willing to spend a significant portion of their income on recreation.

***Other Factors:*** A number of other factors can also influence youth participation in structured recreation. These include urban/rural living, minority youth, time constraints, parental influence, family type, peer influence, and changing lifestyles. Each factor is discussed below.

- **Urban/Rural Living:** More often than not, inactive children and adolescents live in communities with fewer than 1,000 residents. Some research findings suggest that small municipalities are less successful than larger municipalities in meeting young people's needs for physical activities. The data show the following. Participation in structured recreation is highly dependent on availability and proximity to activities. Consequently, the size of the urban area in which children live can enhance or limit their opportunities to participate in structured recreation. Children living in urban areas were more likely to participate and to participate more frequently, in a greater number of activities than children living in rural areas. Moreover, as the size of the urban area increases, so does the likelihood of participation in coached sports, dance or gymnastics and in art, drama, or music lessons.

Urban area size had less of an impact on participation rates in guides/scouts; participation was only very slightly higher in large cities (26.4 per cent) than in smaller cities (26.1 per cent) or rural areas (24.8 per cent). Children from larger cities were just slightly more likely to participate in overnight camp, followed by children living in rural areas, children from smaller cities were the least likely to participate in overnight camp. However, children from rural areas were much less likely to attend day camp than children from larger urban areas. (NLSCY).

- **Minority Youth:** Young immigrants, Aboriginal youth, and youth with disabilities face particular and additional barriers to participation in structured recreation.
- **Time Constraints:** Many youth identify lack of time and competitive time demands as barriers to their participation.
- **Parental Influence:** Active youth are more likely than inactive youth to have parents who participate in sport. Parental influence varies according to the type of recreation. Parents have more influence over the organized recreational activities of their children than over their non-organized recreational activities.
- **Family Type:** Family type seems to affect children's participation in structured recreation. Children from two-parent families were somewhat more likely to participate in coached sports and to attend day camp than children from single parent families. This is likely attributable in significant part to income differences. Children from two-parent families were also slightly more likely to have participated in art/drama/music and to have attended overnight camp than children from single parent families. However, there was little difference in participation in guides/scouts and dance/gymnastics between children from single parent or two-parent families. (NLSCY)

The NPHS found that youth from higher income households (greater than \$60,000 per year) were much more likely to participate in group sports than youth from the low-income households (less than \$10,000 per year). More than three-quarters (75.5 per cent) of youth from the higher income households participated in grouped sports, compared to less than half (46.1 per cent) of youth from low income households. There is a strong relationship between family type and household income. Two-parent households are much more likely to have higher household incomes than one-parent families, which in turn impacts the participation levels of children from two-parent and one-parent families.

- **Peer Influence:** Peers could represent barriers as well as motivators to youth participation in structured recreation.
- **Changing Lifestyles:** Many young people are now replacing structured or organized sports with alternative, non-structured, participant-controlled recreation. This new trend appears to go beyond physical activities, as demonstrated by the popularity of the Internet and video.

***Infrastructural Barriers:*** In a Canadian study, the presence of good parks, playgrounds, and play spaces in the neighbourhood was strongly associated with increased rates of participation in supervised sports and, a lesser extent, in unsupervised sports and the arts. Forms of service delivery can affect youth participation in structured recreation. Organizational constraints often involve a failure to attend to the needs and wants of youth with regard to recreational matters, program rigidity, lack of coordination among the agencies responsible for providing youth recreational services, and a general lack of regard for young people's needs and wants. The lack of precision concerning the division of responsibilities of the various levels of government seems to worsen the situation.

The CCSD, in collaboration with the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association conducted a survey of municipal recreation providers in 2000, to examine children's access to recreation. Included were questions about user fees and how they affect participation. The most cited barrier to participation was transportation. Children unable to access transportation to and from recreational facilities could not participate in the programs. Lack of bus service or inadequate bus service can affect children living in urban and rural areas.

Most municipal recreation programs for children in Canada charge user fees with over 90 per cent of aquatic programs for children and over 75 per cent of children's athletic programs charging users. After school programs and drop in programs for youth are the programs least likely to charge user fees. User fees for most aquatic and athletic programs have risen over the last five years and in some cases were implemented for the first time within the last five years. More than half of the respondents said they felt that user fees were a moderate barrier to participation, while between 13 and 20 per cent felt that user fees were a significant barrier.

Social and cultural barriers are thought to be significant as children from different ethnic groups may not be familiar with some of the activities being offered and may not feel comfortable in participating. Finally, the *Access to Recreation Programs in Canada* report also found that limited facilities, high equipment costs, and lack of volunteers were significant barriers to participation.

## **Impacts of Recreation – Positive and Negative**

### **Present Impacts**

***Immediate Physical Outcomes:*** The immediate impacts of recreational activity on youth physical and biological development are numerous. However, the literature in the health sciences, which is the primary source of information on youth physical and biological development, does not differentiate between structured and non-structured activities, so we cannot distinguish between the physical outcomes related to structured and non-structured recreation within the literature review.

Physical activity has an important impact on the growth and maturation of youth. It has been found that physical activity generates greater skeletal mineralization, greater bone density and increased bone mass and flexibility. Physical activity is an important factor in the regulation of body mass. There is also a positive correlation between physical activity, increased muscle strength, motor fitness and aerobic capacity. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of coronary disease for at-risk youth. But health problems such as unintentional injuries can arise during sporting activities. Delays in maturation and menstrual dysfunction can also be produced by physical activity practices that are too intense.

The data analysis showed the following. Parents of children who participated in organized sports rated their children's health as slightly better than parents of children who did not participate in organized sports. Sixty-three per cent of children who participated in organized sports were reported to be in excellent health by their parents, compared to 57.9 per cent of non-participants. Participation in other forms of recreation did not appear to be related to health status. Children who participated in any of the sampled forms of recreation (coached sports, dance/gymnastics, art/drama/music, guides/scouts, day camp or overnight camp) were somewhat less likely than non-participants in these activities to have ever tried smoking, which can be considered an indicator of high risk behaviour.

***Immediate Psychosocial Outcomes:*** For the psychosocial impact of *structured recreation*, the literature reports a positive correlation between physical activity, structured outdoor programs and extra-curricular activities, which increased self-esteem, self-concept, acceptance among peers, and self-empowerment. Physical activity can also have an impact on the development of cognitive functions. It has been found that participation in structured recreation is less likely than non-participation to be associated with deviant behaviour, and a negative relationship was demonstrated between participation in extra-curricular activities and dropping out school. We have also seen that structured recreation decreases boredom, a factor linked to the development of deviant and unhealthy behaviour. This is perhaps an explanation for the link between participation in recreation and lower rates of delinquency. But highly competitive sports activities or vigorous training programs can also produce negative psychosocial effects such as burnout and high stress levels. In some cases, physical activity may be associated with a distorted body image and an unrealistic desire to lose weight.

For *non-structured recreation* and its impact on psychosocial development, the literature reports a positive correlation between physical activity and increased self-esteem, self-concept, acceptance among peers, and self-empowerment. A positive correlation was also found between participation in unsupervised sports and in artistic activities and a reduced rate of psychosocial problems among children and youth. But, as with structured recreation, physical activity may be associated with a distorted body image and an unrealistic desire to lose weight among young girls.

An analysis of the quantitative data showed the following. The vast majority of all children report being happy with their lives. However, the proportion reporting so was slightly higher for children who participated in organized sports. Children who participated in guides/scouts were more likely to be doing well or very well overall, compared to children who did not participate in guides/scouts.

Youth participation in organized sports is also linked to higher levels of self-esteem. Youth who participated in organized sports were somewhat more likely to report being very satisfied with their level of self-esteem (46.5 per cent) compared to 37.0 per cent of non-participating youth.

Children who participated in organized sports and children who did not participate were equally likely to report that they engaged in bullying. However, slightly higher proportions of children who did not participate in organized sports or in art/drama/music reported being victims of bullying behaviour. Children who never participated in guides or scouts and children who never attended camp were slightly more likely to engage in bullying behaviour, and children who attended guides or scouts were slightly more likely to be the victims of bullying behaviour.

Children between the ages of 10 and 13 who participated in one or more of the specified recreational activities (coached sports, dance/gymnastics, art/drama/music, guides/scouts or day or overnight camp) were much more likely to report that they expected to complete university or college, in response to the question “How far do you expect to go in school?”. While 71.9 per cent of children who participated in coached sports one or more times per week expected to complete college/university, only 59.7 per cent of non-participants expected to do so. Seventy-one per cent of participants in dance/gymnastics, one or more times per week, expected to complete college or university, compared to 67 per cent of non-participants.

With the exception of camp participation, children who participated in structured recreational activities (coached sports, gymnastics/dance, art/drama/music, guides/scouts) were more likely to report getting along very well with their friends and having more close friends and spending more time with close friends. Ninety per cent of children involved in coached sports reported having lots of friends and 83.8 per cent reported getting along easily with others compared to 87.1 per cent of non-participants reporting they have many close friends and 79.9 per cent getting along easily with others. Participation in recreational activities does not appear to be related to how well children get along with their parents, although children who did not participate in recreational activities were slightly more likely to report having better relationships with their siblings.

***Immediate Civic Outcomes:*** The literature does identify some civic outcomes associated with *structured recreation*. High-risk youth can benefit from the positive effects derived from structured activities (such martial arts) if the activity includes a cognitive and social component. It has been found that participation in structured recreation has been seen as beneficial to moral development to the extent that behaviour, attitudes and decisions all draw attention to moral considerations. But some authors argue that *non-structured recreation* is more likely to give rise to moral behaviour, inasmuch as the child is directly involved in decision-making.

The analysis of the available data showed the following. Data from the NLSCY indicates a strong relationship between participation in organized recreational activities and propensity to participate in unpaid school activities, fund raising and community work. Forty-two percent of children who participated frequently in dance/gymnastics also helped with school activities, compared to 32.1 per cent of children who did not participate. Children who participated in art/drama/music were also more likely to help with fundraising (53.9 per cent) than children who did not participate (41.8 per cent).

Childhood participation in team sports and youth groups appears to have an impact on adult participation in the community and volunteering activity. The NSGVP found that adults who participated in organized sports and youth groups as children were much more likely to have also performed volunteer work and to have participated in student government as children than those that did not participate. Over 70 per cent of respondents who had belonged to a youth group as children had also performed volunteer work, compared to only 33.3 per cent of respondents who did not belong to a youth group. Sixty percent of respondents who had participated in organized sports had also done some volunteer work versus 33.1 per cent who did not participate in organized sports. Participation in a youth group had a greater impact on volunteering than did participation in team sports.

Youth patterns of participation in recreation and volunteer activities are somewhat different than that for younger children. The GSS 1998 found that youth aged 15 to 17 who participated in organized sports and youth who did not participate were equally likely to have spent time volunteering. However, the types of volunteering activities that organized sports participants and non-participants engage in differ slightly. Youth who did not participate in organized sports were slightly more likely to have volunteered through a group or organization and to have helped repair or build a facility for an organization. Youth who participated in organized sports were slightly more likely to have taught or coached as an unpaid volunteer, or to have collected, served or delivered food for an organization. Both groups were equally likely to have canvassed, campaigned, or fundraised as an unpaid volunteer; to have provided counseling as a volunteer through an organization; or to have helped to organize activities or events for an organization.

## **Future Impacts**

***Future Physical Outcomes:*** Again, the health sciences literature does not differentiate between structured and non-structured activities, so from the literature review we cannot distinguish between future physical outcomes related to structured and non-structured recreation. Nonetheless, participation in physical activity has been found to produce some future impacts on youth physical outcomes.

Physical activity among youth suffering from obesity can play an important role in lowering the risk of developing cardiovascular diseases during adulthood and limiting the risk of developing hypertension in the future. The impact of physical activity on the cardiovascular health of children considered to be at risk can be reversible, and the risk may not persist in the future unless the physical activity is curtailed in adulthood.

***Future Psychosocial Outcomes:*** Some authors speculate that psychosocial outcomes developed in younger children will persist over the life-course. However, we have not found any research that conclusively links recreational activity in youth – structured or non-structured – to future psychosocial outcomes.

***Future Civic Outcomes:*** Relating to future civic competencies, the literature reports a positive correlation between participation in extracurricular activities and political involvement in adulthood, and between involvement in youth and religious organizations and community involvement in adulthood.

The data analyzed showed the following. Compared to adults who did not participate in team sports or youth groups as children, adults who participated in team sports or youth groups as children were much more likely (as adults) to canvass, campaign, or fundraise as an unpaid volunteer; to be a member of a board or a committee; to teach or coach for an organization as an unpaid volunteer; and to have voted in the last federal election. For example, 13.2 per cent of respondents who had participated in a youth group as a child, were unpaid members of a board or committee as adults, compared to only 6.2 per cent of respondents who had not belonged to a youth group. There was little difference between childhood participation and non-participation in team sports and adult membership in a neighbourhood or community association or membership in a political party. However, adults who had participated in youth groups as children were slightly more likely to have membership in a neighbourhood or community association or membership in a political party.

## **Research and Policy Implications Relating to the Four Hypothesis**

To recap, the four major hypotheses set out by the Laidlaw Foundation concerning the policy significance of youth recreation are the *Human Development Hypothesis*, the *Civic Competence Hypothesis*, the *Insufficiency Hypothesis*, and the *Inadequacy Hypothesis*.

It is almost impossible, due to the way the literature is structured, to directly address the hypotheses, which were framed by the Laidlaw Foundation in the negative, that is, in terms of the *absence* of participation in structured recreation. This is for two reasons. First, looking only at the absence of participation leaves too many unanswered questions about the effects of participation. Second, and more important, the literature quite exclusively analyses participation in the positive. Therefore, we do not know the impact of non-participation on human development – physical or psychosocial – except, in part, for biological development. Neither can we assess the effects of non-participation on the development of civic competencies.

Moreover, the hypotheses are framed in the long term, saying that non-participation affects *future* civic development or long-run socio-emotional human development. Because of the serious lack of longitudinal studies, we cannot draw evidence-based conclusions about the long-term effects of *participation* on youth socio-emotional or civic development. Nor do we know if constraints limiting youth participation have effects that persist throughout the life course. We can say even less about the long-term impacts of *non-participation* and can neither support nor refute the hypothesis that insufficient participation will ultimately affect the quality of democracy. Therefore, *further research on the collective and social consequences of youth participation in recreation could be a way to analyze patterns, so as to determine if access to recreation should be treated as a public good.*

Many of the deficiencies in the research stem from the nature of psychosocial development itself. It is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by many factors. Therefore, recreation is likely to have an essentially *indirect* impact on it. Except for physical and biological development, there are many *causal* variables but only positive and negative *correlations* between participation in some kinds of activities and youth development.

Also, the current literature does not provide us with information about the *level* of activity required to obtain positive outcomes for either human development or the development of civic competencies.

Relating to the ***Human Development Hypothesis***, adolescence constitutes a critical period in the development of identity formation and self-concept. However, there are very few studies that describe the way that recreation can influence this process. We have seen that structured recreation can foster positive lifestyle choices among youth and, in some cases, can help reduce delinquency and dropping out of school. Some researchers argue that it is less expensive to set up recreation programs than it is to pay the eventual social costs of not setting them up. Therefore, *future research needs to delve more deeply into the circumstances that influence the development of positive attitudes and identity formation among youth.*

Instead of looking for *moral development* through structured recreation, the literature told us that we should look at activities, circumstances and environments that *encourage* moral development. We should be able to say that certain activities such the scout and guide movements and structured outdoor programs are more likely to promote moral development or civic competencies, but this has not been a focus of Canadian researchers. Adult attitudes (i.e., coaches and parents) have also been found to play a significant role in the way that youth acquire moral skills through recreation. *The role of adults as well as types of activities fostering and encouraging moral development therefore need to be further explored.*

The importance of diversity in structured recreation for helping to develop different kinds of skills (social, emotional, civic or moral skills) has not been analyzed in the literature. Neither has the balance between the level of structured and unstructured recreation that is needed to obtain certain skills. In general, we can say that, in Canada, not much attention has been paid to recreation at all, despite the fact that it may turn out to be a critically important means of acquiring socio-emotional and civic skills. This absence of information does not permit us to draw any definitive conclusions about the ***Civic Competence Hypothesis***.

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Relating to the ***Insufficiency Hypothesis***, we have seen that significant number of youth face multiple barriers to participation, among them youth from poor economic backgrounds, young girls, and young people from minority groups. All the studies agree that the needs of youth living in poverty do not receive the same attention by public services as those of other young people, but few studies identify the specific recreational needs of young people from disadvantaged environments. Even fewer suggest how public services can help these youth without stigmatizing them.

Aware of the complexity and multidimensional nature of poverty, a range of authors maintain that holistic, integrated strategies are needed to produce greater participation by children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Municipal recreation user fees discourage participation by youth from low-income families and, in some provinces, user fees are widespread and, in certain cases, have increased. A re-examination of user fee policies and other cost factors could be part of the answer to equalizing access to structured recreation.

We have also seen that gender is still a major correlate of differences in participation in structured recreation. The persistence of sexual stereotypes should be taken into account when designing programs. If we see equal access to recreation as a social goal, the development of promotional strategies for recreational activities for youth from both sexes should be part of the political agenda.

As well, we have seen that the Canadian literature on public services analyzes *access* to services, but not the *supply* of recreational services as such. This undoubtedly explains why the negative assessment of public services focuses on lack of access, but only to existing supply. We found that the presence of good parks, playgrounds and play spaces in the neighbourhood was an important factor in rates of participation. We do not know, however, what impact access to publicly supported recreation services has on rates of participation in structured recreation, or on differential socioeconomic rates of participation. It is a prerequisite to knowing the implications of the *Inadequacy Hypothesis*, which attributes the non-participation of youth to the inadequacy of existing public systems in dealing with the provision of youth recreation. Therefore, *more research on recreational supply is required to have a better idea of the structured recreation that is available to youth.*

Limits emerging from the service delivery process challenge governmental practices in it. Organizational constraints seem numerous. There is not a clear mandate to promote equality of opportunity in recreation, and the lack of precision in the division of responsibilities of the various levels of governments makes the situation even worse.

Authors call for greater flexibility in administering and developing recreational programs; enhanced accessibility to programs in terms of costs, transportation and availability; and, above all, greater awareness of the needs and desires of youth. Also, changing lifestyles and the increased popularity of non-structured recreation raises questions about the ability of current recreational structures to meet youth's changing recreational needs, and about the impact of this new situation on young people's participation in structured recreation.

Overall, the findings of the literature review permit the following research gaps and recommendations to be identified:

- There is a lack of systematic research on the effects of *structured recreation* on children and adolescents. Most studies simply do not take the distinction between structured and unstructured recreation into account. This holds true especially for the health sciences literature.

**Recommendation:** Research comparing the potentially different effects of structured and unstructured recreation would help to fill this gap. Such distinctions are important because of competing hypotheses. A “social capital” hypothesis, for example, would make no distinction between structured and unstructured recreation, because in that literature it is the *interaction* that matters. Hypotheses about the effects of peers and interaction with adults, in contrast, would see the distinction between structured and unstructured recreation as relevant.

- Studies on physical activities and sports dominate the literature on youth and structured recreation. There are few Canadian studies of other kinds of structured recreation such as artistic endeavors, hobbies and clubs, or of movements such as Scouts, Guides, and Boys and Girls Clubs, although many of these activities specifically emphasize the development of social skills and civic competencies. While the lack of studies is proving to be less critical with respect to extracurricular and outdoor activities, it is very important in the case of artistic activities.

**Recommendation:** Research on non-sport recreation, and comparisons of sports with other forms of recreation would make a significant contribution to knowledge. Evidence-based information about the contributions of all kinds of recreation is important in these times of limited budgets. Such information is all key to thinking about the kinds of partnerships that could be forged with the voluntary sector in order to advance an agenda of inclusion and citizenship.

- There is a lack of longitudinal data on youth and structured recreation. We do not know the long-term effects of recreation on youth development, nor do we know if constraints limiting youth participation have effects that persist throughout life. Researchers agree that there is a general need for longitudinal studies on youth participation in structured recreation.

**Recommendation:** Research on the cross-time effects of recreation is key to understanding and making policy conclusions in this area. While it is true that longitudinal studies are expensive and require time, it is possible to collect more detailed information from adults about their recreational activities as young people in order to begin mapping this area. Such evidence is obviously important if civic competencies and social capital are to become the focus of attention.

- Studies of “youth and recreation” generally focus on individual outcomes and much less on the collective consequences of youth participation in recreation. Analysis of the economic costs of physical inactivity is almost the only exception. Focusing only on the individual outcomes of recreation gives rise to a knowledge gap in research on recreation as a public good, as a citizen right, and as a way to foster social cohesion and healthy democracy. Perceiving recreation as an essentially individual activity is undoubtedly one of the reasons that there are few studies on the supply of public recreational services as a factor influencing participation levels.

***Recommendation:*** It is important to re-conceptualize recreation as a collective good. This involves a certain amount of theoretical work, building on the very limited Canadian studies but the more prevalent European studies that analyze recreation in these ways. It also involves careful empirical work to bridge levels of analysis, from micro to macro. Successful work of this type would constitute a major contribution to recasting the public agenda around recreation.

### **Research Gaps and Recommendations from the Data Review**

Unfortunately, data from the child response questionnaire for the 1998 NLSCY were not available when we undertook this research. These data, which will soon be available, will cover children aged 13 to 15, making possible a more detailed analysis of how participation changes with increasing age. Further, the three cycles of NLSCY for children who are now (1998) 13 to 15 years of age will permit us to see continuing involvement in structured recreation over time is associated with stronger evidence of positive (or negative) outcomes than we could determine using only the cross-sectional data for 1996. Further analysis could be undertaken of the extent to which participation in one structured activity (e.g., sports) is associated with participation in others (e.g., dance/drama) and the extent to which involvement continues and deepens among participants.

New NSGVP survey data will be available in August 2001 permitting replication/confirmation of the findings reported here. The major data gap is on infrastructure cost barriers to participation. We have very little data on what share of youth recreation is provided by the private, not for profit and public sector, and cost and quality differences by type of provider. This gap may be remedied in part by attempts to further administrative data. (The federation of Canadian Municipalities is actively interested in this subject.) The CCSD is currently undertaking some key informant interviews with and for the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association relating to best practices in terms of reducing barriers to participation in recreation on the part of low-income children.