

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (OR-01)

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

"Benched: The Crisis in American Youth Sports and Its Cost to Our Future"

Tuesday, December 16, 2025 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses. I also look forward to this hearing today.

Whether it's tee-ball, track and field, baseball, lacrosse, soccer, football, swimming, hockey, figure skating, or anything I left out, we know that participating in sports has long-term benefits for young people, their families, and their communities. Studies show that participating in youth sports improves mental and physical health, lowers stress, heightens self-esteem, fosters social skills, improves academic outcomes, sparks collaboration, joy, and more. More than 60 million children participate in youth sports in the United States annually.

Sports have long been an avenue for all children to come together regardless of socioeconomic status, but the playing field is increasingly a pay-to-play industry, accessible only to the wealthy.

According to the Aspen Institute, which we will hear from today, the youth sports industry generates, as the Chairman said, more than \$40 billion in revenue every year — that's more than the revenue of the NFL. The New York Times reported that in 2024, the average family spent more than \$1,500 on their child's sports. As the cost of living continues to rise, working families must juggle skyrocketing health care costs, housing costs, groceries, and more. And on top of this, families are now facing exorbitant fees and costs associated with team registrations, travel, lodging, equipment, and apparel. This enormous financial barrier to entry can and does prohibit families from enrolling their child in these important activities.

Youth sports used to be local recreational activities, but in recent years, we've seen this cherished pastime be consumed by corporate interests that put profit over play. Increasingly, private equity firms are taking advantage of families by buying up and consolidating training programs and leagues and then setting sky-high prices. These private equity firms can drive up prices because they know that parents will sacrifice to give their children the best opportunities and a chance to succeed.

But the gap is widening. Fewer children have access to the benefits that come with participating in youth sports. We heard about that from the Chairman, and I know we'll hear about that from the witnesses. With youth sports it shouldn't matter where you grew up or how much money your family has— it matters how much you try and learn and what you can do on the field. But increasingly, that's not the case.

In many ways, the takeover of youth sports by private equity exemplifies problems we see throughout today's economy. Health care costs are already high – and climbing – in part because private equity firms are buying up hospitals, knowing that consumers don't have a choice in whether to receive necessary medical care. Private equity firms have swooped into child care and housing, often making everyday life more expensive without improving quality. After all, when you have a few entities that own and control everything in an industry, there is nothing stopping them from increasing prices and tacking on fees.

We all want to give students the best shot to succeed. For millions of families, this means access to high-quality extracurricular and community-based programs, like arts, music, dance, and, of course, sports. Unfortunately, the local organizations, school-based programs, and nonprofit organizations that once made up the youth sports scene have long been underfunded.

Many community-based sports programs never recovered from the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in lower-income communities. This chronic lack of local investment has given private equity firms and big corporations an opportunity to get in and hike prices.

Then, to make matters worse, the Trump Administration is making it more difficult for youth sports to remain accessible. The budget for Fiscal Year 2026 included nearly \$4 billion in cuts to national parks and recreation areas, and recent funding cuts and the termination of public education programs will further contribute to the lack of accessible sports programs for children. And, the Trump Administration has done nothing to reign in private equity, curb corporate greed, or protect consumers.

The majority of Americans live in a country where the economy doesn't work for them. And despite the President's claims, the American people know that the affordability crisis is no "hoax."

Youth sports are a small but critical part of this affordability crisis. All children, no matter their socioeconomic status, deserve to have every opportunity to pursue their dreams, nurture their talents, and create lifelong memories on the field, the court, or the rink. Although private or corporate funding may have a small role to play, it is not a substitute for sustainable local and federal investment. We must do our part to foster local investment, prevent monopolization, and promote access to sports for every child and every family, not just the wealthy and the well-connected.

Mr. Chairman, that being said, I will note that the title of this Committee hearing refers to the quote "crisis in American youth sports." As important as sports participation is for kids, there is a much more pressing crisis at hand that the majority needs to recognize. According to Education Week, there have been 17 K-12 school shootings in 2025. There have been more than 150 shootings in the past five years.

We know what happened over the weekend. This doesn't even include shootings at institutions of higher education – just this weekend, two students were killed and nine others injured at a mass shooting at Brown University, and the shooter is still at large. At least a couple of students at the university have previously survived a mass shooting at their high schools. And Sunday marked 13 years since the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre.

This subcommittee has held several hearings this year, but we have not had a single hearing related to gun violence. We have not marked up a single bill that will make students safer from gun violence. We can talk about the other issues as much as we want – reading, math, CTE, screentime, student privacy, sports. None of that matters if children are shot and killed.

I urge my colleagues in the majority to make it a priority in 2026 to address the real and ongoing crisis of gun violence in schools. This is not an issue we can afford to ignore. Kids are counting on you.

I do look forward to this hearing today, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.