



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



## Eradicating the pay-to-play system in American youth soccer: Economic, social, and athletic implications for grassroots development

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** The pay-to-play paradigm in American youth soccer imposes considerable financial constraints on families, frequently reaching from hundreds to thousands of dollars annually for expenses such as travel, membership fees, and equipment. This system disproportionately affects outstanding athletes from lower-income households, limiting their access to elite training and tournaments and resulting in a less varied talent pool. Unlike many European and South American countries, where professional teams support young academies and provide free training to selected prospects, the U.S. relies primarily on this fee-based structure, creating systemic barriers for players from less affluent households. Critics claim that this method not only restricts access for impoverished youngsters but also inhibits the general development of soccer in the country by reducing the pipeline of prospective talent. Efforts to solve these difficulties have begun to develop, such as major spending in youth programmes targeted at lowering financial impediments and encouraging diversity.

**Materials and Methods:** to analyse the pay-to-play paradigm in American youth football, this study carried out a systematic review in accordance with PRISMA standards. A thorough search of various databases, including Google Scholar, IEEE Xplore, Web of Science, Scopus, and the ACM Digital Library, returned 2,084 publications. After deleting duplicates and implementing the inclusion criteria, which were peer-reviewed English-language studies on youth football development published between 2012 and 2024, 144 sources were chosen. Data extraction captured the goals, methodology, participant information, conclusions, and repercussions of the study. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist were utilised for quality assessment. Screenings were carried out by two independent reviewers to reduce bias, establishing a consensus through discussion or, if appropriate, third-party consultation.

**Results:** the pay-to-play paradigm in American youth soccer imposes considerable financial obligations on families, with average annual costs of \$883 per child, including expenses such as travel, membership fees, and equipment. These growing expenditures, including a 19% rise in travel charges compared to pre-pandemic levels, disproportionately affect brilliant players from lower-income and minority backgrounds, limiting their access to elite training and contests. Critics claim that this method narrows the talent pool and affects the overall competitiveness of U.S. soccer.

**Discussion:** Many organisations rely on player fees to pay for things like coaching, facilities, equipment, and travel, which limits access for lower-income and minority players and decreases the potential pool. As a result, shifting away from the pay-to-play paradigm in American youth soccer faces substantial financial, cultural, and logistical hurdles. Professional clubs could, however, set up fully funded academies based on the successful systems in Spain and the Netherlands; federal, state, and local government subsidies could lessen the need for participant fees; corporate sponsorships and public-private partnerships could secure more funding; and FIFA-mandated training compensation and solidarity payment schemes could provide financial support for youth clubs. Furthermore, reorganising leagues and

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competitions to cut travel expenses and encouraging volunteers can further lower operational costs, finally producing a more sustainable, equitable, and inclusive environment for the development of young football players.

**Conclusion:** The pay-to-play method in American youth soccer generates major financial obstacles that limit access and disqualify talented players from less affluent households, eventually limiting diversity, inclusion, and the general competitiveness of the sport. In contrast, more open institutions abroad create bigger talent pools and more international success. Drawing on Social Capital Theory—which emphasizes the importance of community networks in creating equitable opportunities—and the Theory of Planned Behaviour—which explains how financial constraints influence parental decisions about participation—it is clear that transitioning to more inclusive funding models is crucial for the sustainable development of U.S. soccer.

**Keywords:** Pay-To-Play System; American Youth Soccer; Social Capital Theory; Theory of Planned Behaviour

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## 1. Introduction

American youth soccer's pay-to-play system forces families to pay significant expenses for their children's involvement in clubs, competitions, and coaching. These costs—which cover travel, membership fees, and equipment—can run from hundreds to thousands of dollars yearly (Duru, 2021). Many times, excluding gifted athletes from lower-income backgrounds, this financial system limits access to elite training and competition. As many outstanding athletes are unable to finance participation in elite programmes, the talent pool thus gets less varied (Golini, 2022).

Traditionally, young football in the United States has been run under private clubs running a fee-based business (Madsen, & Farrell, 2021). Unlike many European and South American nations, where professional teams subsidise young academies and offer free instruction to chosen prospects, the U.S. mostly depends on this pay-to-play system (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). This approach developed when private businesses set clubs needing participant financial contributions to support running expenses as football became more and more popular in the United States (Duru, 2021). This strategy became the standard throughout time, therefore building systematic obstacles for players from low incomes (The Guardian, 2024).

The restrictions of the pay-to-play system have come under more examination recently. Critics believe that it not only restricts access for impoverished youngsters but also inhibits the general growth of soccer in the country by reducing the pipeline of potential (Koller, 2024). The U.S. Men's National Team's inability to qualify for the 2018 World Cup exacerbated arguments regarding the need for a more inclusive and merit-based development structure (Cowell, 2021). Comparisons with overseas models have emphasised the usefulness of funded academies in cultivating diverse talent pools, leading calls for reform in the U.S.

Efforts to overcome these difficulties have begun to appear. For instance, in 2024, philanthropist and Washington Spirit owner Michele Kang announced an unprecedented \$30 million contribution in U.S. Soccer's women's and girls' programmes (Anzidei, 2024). This financing intends to increase young national team camps, boost scouting networks, and promote the development of female coaches and referees, therefore decreasing financial obstacles and fostering diversity (Guest, 2021). Such measures constitute important advances in dismantling the pay-to-play system and fostering a more egalitarian environment for soccer growth in the United States.

The purpose of this research is to critically explore the economic, social, and athletic ramifications of the pay-to-play system in American youth soccer. By studying how this paradigm influences access to the sport, skill development, and general diversity within youth soccer, the study tries to discover the structural hurdles it produces. Furthermore, the research will investigate alternative solutions and reforms to erase these barriers, with the objective of establishing a more inclusive and fairer workplace that promotes talent across all socioeconomic backgrounds.

### 1.1. Research Questions

American young soccer's pay-to-play system has long been a topic of discussion as many families see financial constraints restricting access to the game to be created by it. This strategy sometimes entails significant financial commitments from participants, therefore eliminating gifted players from under-represented areas and influencing the general diversity and inclusion in young football initiatives. Furthermore, financial limitations might impede talent discovery and growth, therefore affecting the competitive scene of young football in the United States. Developing practical solutions meant to support a fairer and more inclusive environment for all aspiring football players depends on an awareness of the structural issues sustaining these economic and social inequalities.

*1.1.1. Extensive on these factors, this study aims to answer the following research questions:*

- How does the pay-to-play model impact young soccer's financial accessibility for families from all socioeconomic levels?
- Especially with regard to under-represented groups, in what ways does the pay-to-play system affect diversity and inclusiveness among young football programmes?
- What influence do financial obstacles have on talent discovery, development, and the overall competitive environment of youth soccer in the United States?
- Which structural issues inside the present young football system support social and economic inequalities?
- What practical solutions may be created and suggested to eradicate the pay-to-play paradigm, therefore fostering a fairer and more inclusive atmosphere for every aspirational football player?

By investigating these questions, the research intends to give a thorough knowledge of the various implications of the pay-to-play system and to offer practical solutions for increasing diversity and fairness in American youth soccer. This comprises identifying the economic hurdles that limit participation among lower-income families, assessing how these financial restraints affect the diversity and inclusion of youth soccer programmes, and examining the impact on talent discovery and development. Additionally, the study will identify structural issues within the present framework that perpetuate discrepancies and provide concrete solutions to eradicate these obstacles, ultimately encouraging a more equitable environment for all aspiring soccer players.

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## **2. Research Objectives**

The pay-to-play model in American youth soccer has been a subject of intense controversy owing to its major economic, social, and athletic ramifications, particularly addressing grassroots development. This study intends to examine solutions for removing this model to build a more inclusive and fairer environment. The overall purpose is to study ways for removing the pay-to-play system in American youth soccer, focusing on its economic, social, and athletic consequences for grassroots growth. The precise aims are:

To study the impact of the pay-to-play model on financial accessibility in youth soccer, analysing how it impacts families across varied socioeconomic backgrounds and influences their capacity to participate. This entails assessing the direct and indirect costs involved with participation, such as club fees, travel expenditures, and equipment prices, and how these financial demands may dissuade or exclude families with low financial means. Understanding these financial constraints is vital for designing solutions to make youth soccer more accessible to all.

To explore the implications of the pay-to-play system on diversity and inclusion within youth soccer programmes, with a special focus on its effect on marginalised populations and their participation rates. This aim attempts to explore how financial constraints contribute to the underrepresentation of specific demographic groups in youth soccer, potentially resulting to a lack of cultural and socioeconomic diversity within the sport. By highlighting these gaps, the study hopes to emphasise the need for more inclusive behaviours and policies.

To assess how financial hurdles inherent in the pay-to-play model impact talent discovery and development, and how these barriers shape the competitive environment of youth soccer in the United States. This involves studying how the exclusion of talented players from lower-income households effects the overall quality and competitiveness of young soccer, as well as the long-term ramifications for the development of top soccer talent in the country.

To study the structural problems within the present youth soccer framework that perpetuate economic and social gaps, identifying significant drivers that sustain these discrepancies. This requires assessing organisational policies, financial systems, and cultural practices within youth soccer that contribute to the survival of the pay-to-play paradigm and the related inequities. Understanding these systemic concerns is vital for informing comprehensive reform attempts.

To create and offer practical solutions targeted at removing the pay-to-play paradigm, proposing measures to build a more egalitarian and inclusive environment for all aspiring soccer players, regardless of their socioeconomic situation. This aim focuses on devising practical initiatives, such as alternative financing methods, regulatory changes, and community-based programmes, to remove financial obstacles and guarantee that all young athletes have the chance to participate and succeed in youth soccer.

By addressing these aims, the research intends to give a thorough knowledge of the various implications of the pay-to-play system and to offer practical solutions for increasing diversity and fairness in American youth soccer

### 3. Review of The Literature Sources

#### 3.1. Understanding the Concept of the Pay-To-Play System

In American youth football, the term "pay-to-play system" implies an arrangement in which families must finance the expense of their kids' football programme participation. Club subscriptions, coaching fees, uniforms, and travel costs are all included in this model, and they may amount thousands of dollars a year (Van Kerckhoven, 2023). Many families, especially those from weaker socioeconomic origins, may find competitive football prohibitive owing to these financial commitments.

In the past, local clubs and leagues have structured youth football in the US, usually with the support of participation fees. The United States largely rely on private funding for youth sports, in contrast to many other nations where government or community groups support sports. Due to this reliance, the pay-to-play model—in which the participants' families share the financial burden—has grown increasingly popular (Bucy, 2013).

Tiered degrees of engagement are a prevalent characteristic of pay-to-play systems, with higher tiers giving greater exposure and more complex coaching (Liu et al., 2024). However, the additional expenditures connected with these highest tiers put skilled players at a disadvantage. Because only those who can afford to pay may play at the top levels, this structure may restrict the pool of talent and reduce diversity in the sport (The Guardian, 2024).

The pay-to-play strategy is accused for promoting social and economic inequalities in addition to limiting access. Many prospective players from under-represented groups are excluded by the system as football is largely a sport for the rich. Calls for greater financing and support for youth soccer programmes, especially in impoverished regions, are part of efforts to solve the difficulties with the pay-to-play system. This exclusion can have long-term implications on the growth of the sport in the United States since it affects the diversity and breadth of talent entering the pipeline (Freeman et al., 2022). Some think that the prevailing budgetary restrictions may be alleviated by applying models from other nations where junior sports are more extensively funded. In order to develop a more inclusive and equal system, there is also a movement for professional football organisations to become more involved in the design and financing of young programmes (Birtchnell et al., 2020).



<https://demontattler.com/12771/sports/pay-to-play-the-high-stakes-of-youth-travel-sports/>

**Figure 1** Image Representing Ideal of Pay-to-Play System

The graphic illustrates the pay-to-play paradigm in American youth soccer, where financial constraints dictate access to the sport. The soccer ball, representing the game, is surrounded by floating dollar notes, suggesting how money is a necessity for participation. This method contrasts with many other nations where young soccer is widely accessible and merit-based. In the pay-to-play arrangement, children must pay exorbitant fees for club memberships, coaching, and travel expenditures, restricting options for bright but disadvantaged athletes. This economic barrier diminishes diversity, lowers the skill pool, and ultimately inhibits the long-term growth of U.S. soccer on a competitive level.

### **3.2. Understanding Youth Soccer Development**

Youth soccer development is a thorough process that focuses on growing young athletes' technical talents, tactical knowledge, physical ability, and psychological maturation to prepare them for higher levels of competition (Kelly & Williams, 2020). This growth is often based around age-appropriate training approaches that correlate with the players' cognitive and physical maturation phases. The major purpose is to establish a supportive atmosphere where players may steadily increase their talents while cultivating a lifetime enthusiasm for the sport (Abarghoueinejad et al., 2021)

A well-established paradigm in young soccer development is the Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) model (McBurnie et al., 2022). This strategy stresses a methodical approach, leading players through numerous stages that correlate to their growth milestones (Fardilha, 2021). The LTPD framework argues for personalised training programmes that focus on skill acquisition throughout important times of a child's growth, ensuring that coaching techniques and objectives are appropriate for each age group (Bean et al., 2021).

Technical abilities such as dribbling, passing, and receiving are key components of early soccer schooling. Mastery of these skills provides the basis upon which more advanced tactical ideas are constructed. As players age, the focus changes towards learning game strategy, spatial awareness, and decision-making processes, enabling them to employ their technical talents successfully within the framework of a match (Abarghoueinejad et al., 2021).

Physical development is also a vital part of young soccer training. Age-appropriate conditioning regimens are meant to develop players' strength, endurance, agility, and flexibility, all of which are required for maximum performance (Kelly & Williams, 2020). These programmes are carefully planned to fit with the physical capabilities and limits of different age groups, fostering athletic development while limiting the risk of injury (Towlson et al., 2020).

Equally crucial is the psychological and social development of young athletes (Tadesse et al., 2020). Creating a pleasant and encouraging environment helps foster confidence, resilience, and collaborative abilities (Camiré et al., 2020). Coaches play a vital role in this aspect by building a culture that values effort, learning, and personal growth over victory (Cassidy et al., 2023). This method not only contributes to the overall development of the athlete but also instills vital life skills that extend beyond the soccer field.

In essence, good young soccer development demands a balanced concentration on technical, tactical, physical, and psychological factors. By employing age-appropriate training approaches within a supportive atmosphere, young players may acquire the full skill set essential for success in soccer and beyond

### **3.3. Merits of Youth Soccer Development**

Youth soccer offers a plethora of benefits that help considerably to the physical, mental, and social development of children and adolescents. Engaging in regular soccer exercises promotes cardiovascular health, agility, coordination, and general physical fitness. Studies have shown that teenage soccer players displayed considerably greater physical fitness levels compared to their untrained counterparts, demonstrating the sport's usefulness in increasing health-related physical fitness (Hammami et al., 2018).

Beyond physical advantages, engagement in childhood soccer improves mental well-being. The sport needs participants to acquire strategic thinking, focus, and decision-making abilities throughout fast-paced games. These cognitive challenges can boost problem-solving ability and mental resilience. Moreover, the collaborative aspect of soccer develops collaboration and communication, which are vital life skills that transcend beyond the playing field (Gledhill et al., 2018).

Socially, young soccer provides as a platform for forming meaningful relationships and strengthening social skills. Players learn to work cooperatively towards common goals, negotiate group dynamics, and create a sense of kinship with colleagues. This social connection may increase self-esteem and create a sense of belonging, which is particularly advantageous during the early years of youth development (Gledhill et al., 2018).

Furthermore, engagement in childhood soccer has been related with excellent academic performance. Research reveals that student-athletes frequently achieve greater academic achievement, including higher grade point averages and test scores, compared to non-athletes. The discipline and time management skills developed via frequent sports engagement may contribute to these academic gains (University of San Diego, n.d.).

Ultimately, youth soccer is a useful sport that fosters the overall development of young humans. By encouraging physical health, mental acuity, social skills, and academic performance, soccer provides a holistic foundation for growing well-rounded and resilient adolescents.

### **3.4. Emerging Issues in Pay-to-play in American Youth Soccer**

The pay-to-play model in American youth soccer has far been a matter of contention, with recent advancements bringing new difficulties and discussions to the forefront (Hjalmarsson, 2023). One key rising concern is the increased financial stress on families (Abke, 2018). According to the Aspen Institute's State of Play 2022 study, the typical family spends around \$883 year on one child's major sport, a statistic that has witnessed swings due to different variables, including the COVID-19 epidemic (Aspen Institute, 2022). Notably, travel expenses have grown by 19% compared to pre-pandemic levels, further intensifying the financial burden on families (Aspen Institute, 2022).

This financial barrier has led to worries about diminishing diversity within the sport. High participation expenses might remove bright players from lower-income and minority backgrounds, reducing the talent pool and hurting the overall competitiveness of U.S. soccer (Hjalmarsson, 2023). A 2024 story in *The Guardian* emphasised that excessive costs for young soccer restrict promising players from lower-income families, particularly harming minority communities. Critics contend that this strategy restricts access, underlining the need for more inclusive, community-funded systems as seen in other nations like Brazil and Germany (*The Guardian*, 2024).

The concentration on short-term earnings by some clubs has also been noted as a worry (Cimpeanu & Lalova, 2024). Djibril Doumbia, a goalie for San Diego State University's men's soccer team, stated that the U.S. system typically focuses on quick financial advantages through participation fees, which can lead to burnout among young players who cannot withstand the financial expectations. This strategy contrasts with international approaches that favour long-term player development above immediate financial gains (*The Daily Aztec*, 2024).

In response to these issues, several programmes have evolved to promote inclusion and give opportunity for marginalised groups. For instance, actress Judy Reyes and filmmaker George Valencia have invested in Watford Women to address the dearth of Latina representation in soccer. Their *Sound of Gol* charity wants to develop possibilities for impoverished Latina players from the U.S., where youth soccer's pay-to-play market limits access for many (Reuters, 2024).

These rising challenges underline the need for structural improvements in American youth soccer. Addressing financial obstacles, increasing diversity, and changing attention from short-term revenues to long-term player development are essential steps toward developing a more equal and successful system. By learning from other models and supporting programmes that create inclusion, U.S. soccer can strive toward a more accessible and prosperous future.

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## **4. Theoretical Framework**

The study is grounded on two theories; the social capital theory and the theory of planned behaviour.

### **4.1. The Social Capital Theory**

Social capital theory explores the value generated from social networks and interactions, highlighting how these connections allow collaboration and mutual benefit within civilisations (Zugravu-Soilita et al., 2021). It asserted that social networks act as a sort of capital, analogous to physical or human capital, that people and groups may use to accomplish social and economic goals (Lulewicz, 2019). Robert D. Putnam, a prominent political scientist, classifies social capital into two main types: bonding social capital, which refers to the value allocated to social networks between homogeneous groups of people, and bridging social capital, which refers to the value assigned to social networks between socially heterogeneous groups (Gradinaru, 2021). The idea underlines that the form and quality of social connections may generate good results of social interactions, benefiting individuals, social groups, and society as a whole (Fontes, 2022). In essence, social capital theory underlines the role of social relationships and trust in creating societal cohesiveness and facilitating collective action.

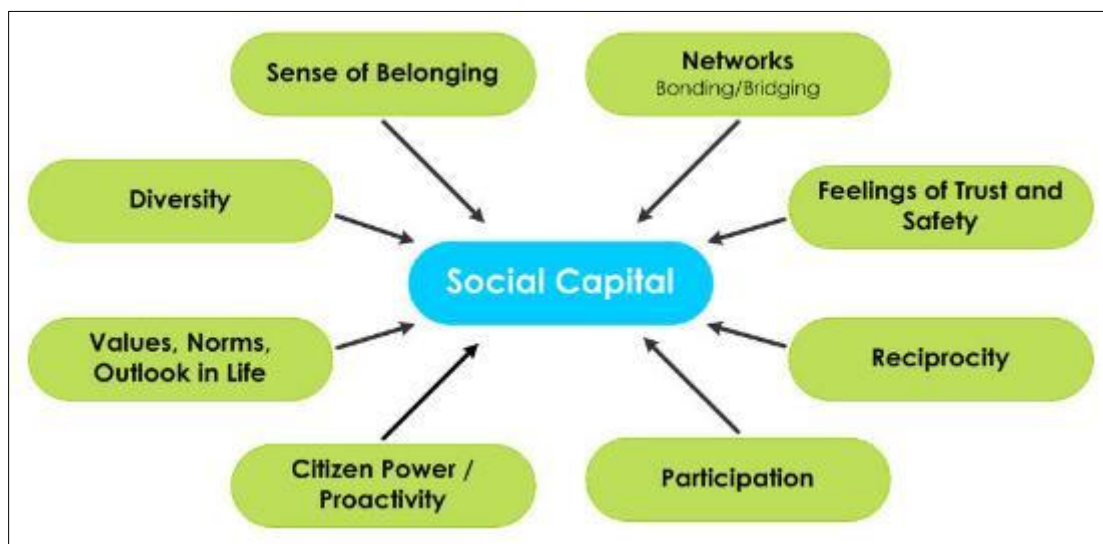


The Social Capital Theory provides a good perspective for studying the pay-to-play system in American youth soccer, particularly addressing its economic, social, and athletic ramifications for grassroots growth. Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and trust that promote coordination and collaboration within a society (Putnam, 2015). In the context of youth soccer, social capital may appear through community participation, parental involvement, and the accessibility of soccer programmes to various demographics.

The pay-to-play approach, which compels families to pay for their children's involvement in competitive soccer, can undermine social capital by imposing economic hurdles that limit access for lower-income families. This exclusion not only decreases the diversity of participants but also diminishes the opportunity for creating broad-based community networks that are crucial for the holistic development of young athletes. Research reveals that high participation prices in youth soccer limit access for many youngsters whose families cannot afford to pay, hence decreasing the sport's reach and the related societal benefits (Golini, 2022).

Moreover, the reduction of informal, community-based soccer activities, such as pick-up games, due to the over-structuring of youth sports, has been related to a drop in social capital. These informal games have historically played a key role in establishing social relationships, community cohesiveness, and the spontaneous development of soccer abilities among youngsters. The change towards formal, pay-to-play frameworks can thereby erode these community advantages (Brown, 2016).

Applying Social Capital Theory to this situation shows that lowering financial obstacles and fostering inclusive, community-oriented soccer activities can build social capital. By making soccer more accessible, communities may promote different social networks, stimulate increased parental and community participation, and assist the growth of young players from various socioeconomic backgrounds. This strategy corresponds with the wider objective of establishing a more fair and socially cohesive environment in American youth soccer.



Accessed from [https://career.iresearchnet.com/career-development/social-capital/#google\\_vignette](https://career.iresearchnet.com/career-development/social-capital/#google_vignette)

**Figure 2** Depiction of Social Capital Theory.

Key components of social capital—as the graphic shows—are networks, trust, reciprocity, involvement, and a feeling of belonging, all of which help to create a harmonic and encouraging society in figure 2. By building strong networks through clubs, academies, and local leagues, social capital is rather important in football in promoting inclusion, teamwork, and skill development. While participation increases involvement and love for the activity, high degrees of trust and reciprocity inside teams improve teamwork. But by eliminating gifted players from lower-income families, the pay-to-play model in U.S. youth football limits diversity and access, therefore restricting social capital. Different financing sources and community-based projects have to be used to maximise social capital in football so that more people may participate and inclusiveness is guaranteed.

#### 4.2. The Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), founded by Icek Ajzen in 1985, is a psychological framework that aims to anticipate and understand human behaviour (Manstead & Parker, 1995). According to this theory, three main factors

influence a person's intention to engage in a particular behaviour: attitude towards the behaviour (the extent to which a person views the behaviour favourably or unfavourably), subjective norms (the perceived social pressure to engage in the behaviour or refrain from engaging in it), and perceived behavioural control (the perceived ease or difficulty of engaging in the behaviour) (Ajzen, 2011). These elements jointly shape an individual's behavioural intentions, which are regarded the most direct drivers of actual conduct (Ojeleye et al., 2023). TPB has been widely used across numerous areas, including health-related behaviours, environmental acts, and voting patterns, indicating its effectiveness in explaining and predicting a range of human activities.

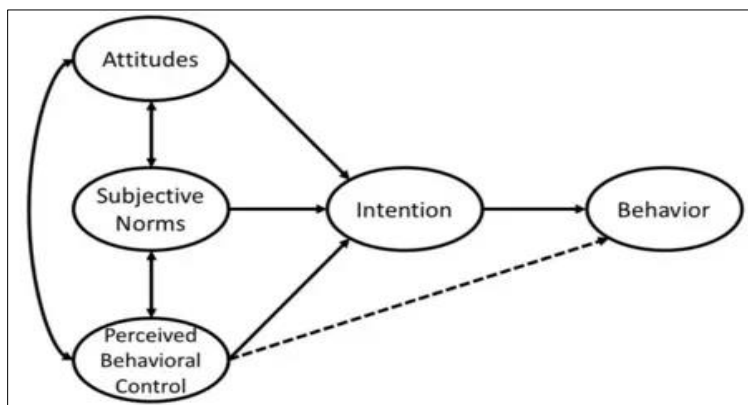
The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) offers a beneficial framework for analysing the variables influencing parents' decisions regarding their children's involvement in youth soccer under the pay-to-play system. TPB proposes that an individual's behaviour is driven by their intention to execute the activity, which is impacted by three components: attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 2011).

In the case of young soccer, parents' attitudes may be impacted by their perceptions about the benefits of involvement, such as physical health, social development, and prospective future prospects. However, the financial obligations of the pay-to-play model can lead to poor reviews, especially among families with little financial means. A study examining the effects of pay-to-play systems on youth soccer diversity found that high participation fees significantly impact the racial and socioeconomic diversity of players, suggesting that financial barriers may lead to unfavorable attitudes toward participation among less affluent families (Thibaut et al., 2020).

Subjective norms comprise the perceived societal constraints to do or not execute the activity. Parents may feel obligated to include their children in pay-to-play soccer programmes if they consider that significant individuals (e.g., family members, friends, or community members) appreciate such participation. Conversely, if their social group does not favour organised sports or is critical of the related expenditures, parents may be less willing to enroll their children. Research revealed that socioeconomic position effects parents' perceptions of the costs and advantages of youth sports involvement, impacting their motivation to participate their children in such activities (Holt et al., 2011).

Perceived behavioural control related to the perceived ease or difficulty of doing the activity, determined by prior experiences and predicted barriers. In the pay-to-play scenario, perceived behavioural control is substantially altered by financial considerations. Families with higher incomes may feel more capable of handling the expenditures connected with young soccer, while those with lower incomes may regard these financial hurdles as insurmountable, leading to decreasing participation rates. The Aspen Institute's State of Play 2022 study emphasises that the typical family pays \$883 yearly for a child's major sport, with travel expenses increasing by 19% compared to pre-pandemic levels, emphasising the financial constraints encountered by many families (Aspen Institute, 2022).

By utilising the TPB paradigm, stakeholders may better understand the psychological and social elements that impact parental decisions in the context of the pay-to-play system. This insight can influence the creation of interventions targeted at changing attitudes, shifting subjective norms, and strengthening perceived behavioural control to encourage more equal entry to youth soccer programmes.



[https://ascnhighered.org/ASCN/change\\_theories/collection/planned\\_behavior.html](https://ascnhighered.org/ASCN/change_theories/collection/planned_behavior.html)

**Figure 3** Diagrammatical Representation of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Accessed from



The Theory of Planned Behaviour figure 3 shows how attitudes, subjective standards, and perceived behavioural control affect human behaviours. While subjective standards comprise social pressure from peers, family, or society to engage in a behaviour, attitudes represent an individual's favourable or negative opinion of a behaviour. Perceived behavioral control relates to the perceived ease or difficulty of doing the activity, considering external restrictions. These three aspects shape intention, which directly determines behaviour however perceived behavioral control can potentially effect behavior independently. In young soccer, a player's decision to participate is impacted by their pleasure of the sport (attitude), support from coaches and family (subjective norms), and availability to financial and logistical resources (perceived behavioral control). The pay-to-play approach restricts access by diminishing perceived behavioral control for lower-income families, restricting participation despite high attitudes and social support.

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## 5. Materials and Methods

The study adopted a systematic review strategy conforming to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) standards to provide a structured and precise examination, allowing the identification of pertinent data. The selected studies underwent a detailed selection procedure, encompassing steps of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. An initial literature search was undertaken across numerous electronic databases, such as Web of Science, Scopus, IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, and Google Scholar. To extend the field of prospective publications, the search method included subject-specific phrases paired with Boolean operators. The principal terms utilised in the search were "American youth soccer," "pay-to-play system," "grassroots soccer development," and "soccer development."

The inclusion criteria for this review encompassed: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters; (2) publications in English; and (3) research published between 2012 and 2024 to ensure the incorporation of recent material pertinent to contemporary advancements in soccer development. Exclusion criteria consisted of: (1) opinion-based articles or research papers; and (2) studies focusing on football without clear emphasis on grassroots development. The bibliographic database search initially generated 2,084 potentially relevant publications. After deleting duplicates, 1,625 records remained for screening. Two independent reviewers reviewed the titles and abstracts, removing 689 publications that did not match the inclusion criteria owing to irrelevance. A second examination found an additional 792 papers that either lacked alignment with the study's purpose or did not provide sufficient quality data. Ultimately, 144 sources were included in the final systematic review.

Methodologically, data extraction was accomplished using a standardized pro forma, which recorded critical information from each study, including research objectives, methodological approaches, participant details, key findings, and implications for young soccer development. The retrieved data were evaluated applying both narrative synthesis and thematic synthesis methodologies. This integrated methodology allows for the discovery of repeating themes, developing trends, and noteworthy patterns across the literature, including data from both qualitative and quantitative investigations.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the included research, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was employed for empirical studies, while the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist was utilized for systematic reviews. These techniques permitted the removal of low-quality studies, hence boosting the credibility and robustness of the final analysis. Several measures were implemented to minimize bias and improve the validity of the review process, including conducting searches across multiple databases to reduce publication bias, involving two independent reviewers in the screening and eligibility assessment, and calculating inter-rater agreement using Cohen's  $\kappa$  coefficient. In cases of dispute, conversations were held until a consensus was formed, and if required, a third reviewer was consulted to resolve conflicts.

### 5.1. Social and Economic Impact of the Pay-to-Play System

The pay-to-play model in American youth soccer imposes considerable financial constraints on participating families, encompassing charges such as registration fees, travel costs, and training expenditures. On average, families spend around \$883 yearly on their child's primary sport, with travel expenses having grown by 19% compared to pre-pandemic levels (Aspen Institute, 2022). In elite leagues like the Elite Clubs National League (ECNL), annual costs can vary from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per player, covering club subscriptions, coaching fees, uniforms, and travel (Garcia, 2024).

These large fees create socioeconomic hurdles that disproportionately exclude lower-income families from participation. The financial demands of the pay-to-play system often limit access to youth soccer for children from less socioeconomic households, many of whom are minorities (Golini, 2022). This exclusion not only inhibits chances for physical activity and social development but also reinforces economic and racial imbalances within the sport.

The financial hurdles inherent in the pay-to-play business contribute to discrepancies in access to elite training and scouting opportunities. Players from wealthier families can afford higher-level coaching and exposure to scouts, while gifted players from lower-income homes may lack these opportunities due to cost constraints (Blake, 2024). This disparity inhibits the identification and development of skilled players across varied socioeconomic backgrounds.

Consequently, the pay-to-play system significantly affects talent identification and the diversity of national teams. By limiting participation primarily to those who can afford the associated costs, the system narrows the talent pool, potentially overlooking gifted players from underprivileged communities. This lack of inclusivity can result in national teams that do not fully represent the country's diverse population, ultimately impacting the performance and cultural richness of the sport at the highest levels (Cunningham, 2019).

## **5.2. Alternative Funding Models from International Soccer**

In contrast to the pay-to-play model common in American youth soccer, many overseas funding models offer alternate ways that promote equality and skill development. For instance, in nations like France and Germany, government-subsidized models provide major public financing for young soccer programmes, ensuring access for players regardless of socioeconomic level. Additionally, club-based development methods in places such as Spain and the Netherlands involve professional teams establishing academies that offer free or low-cost participation, with income from player transfers reinvested into young development. Furthermore, corporate sponsorships and public-private partnerships, epitomised by Japan's J.League model, reduce financial pressures on families and foster community engagement in youth soccer activities. These international examples illustrate that alternate finance arrangements can effectively support the development of young soccer talent while fostering inclusion.

## **5.3. Government-Subsidized Models (e.g., France, Germany)**

In countries like France and Germany, youth soccer development benefits from extensive government backing. In France, the centralized and state-oriented ecology of sport comprises collaboration across numerous bodies, including universities, national sport federations, and schools (Schut & Collinet 2016). The top governing body of sport in France is the Ministry of Sports, which controls the different regional levels of government responsible for sport as well as the French National and Olympic Sports Committee (CNOSF). The Ministry of Sport is responsible for national sport policy, including the 2006 Code du Sport, a comprehensive statute governing the interactions of all key sports actors within the centralized and state-oriented ecosystem of sport (Scelles, 2017). All costs included, the annual funding for sport amounts to approximately €40 billion, supported by public funding, an increasing percentage of private spending, and specific funding for big sporting events.

This extensive support framework guarantees that young athletes have access to quality training and facilities without large financial obligations on their families. The CNOSF is responsible for selecting and leading the French delegation at the Olympic Games and other contests governed by the IOC (Verheyden, 2010). The CNOSF is made of 106 Affiliated Federations and Associate Members, comprising the 36 National Olympic Sport Federations, 39 National Sport Federations, 14 Multisport Federations, 5 School and University Federations, and 12 Associate Members. The core of high-performance sport in France is the National Institute of Sport, Expertise, and Performance, a top Olympic and Paralympic training institution under the Ministry of Sports that provides health care, training, nutrition, research, and educational possibilities for athletes. In 2019, the National Agency of Sport (NAS) was formed to work with the National Sport Federations and athletes to improve the country's place in the Olympic medal table. NAS will receive €284 million, with some of that (€90 million) going to high-performance but the lion's share going to sport-for-all and grassroots programmes (€194 million) and sport infrastructure (€129 million).

## **5.4. Club-Based Development Models (e.g., Spain, Netherlands, South America)**

In nations such as Spain, the Netherlands, and numerous South American countries, professional soccer teams play a crucial role in young development (Fay, 2022; Platvoet, 2023). These teams generally operate academies that provide free or low-cost participation to talented young players. For instance, clubs like Ajax in the Netherlands are renowned for their youth academies, which focus on cultivating potential from a young age (Fay, 2022). The financial model of these clubs involves revenue-sharing mechanisms, where money from player transfers and other income streams are returned into youth development programmes, assuring the viability and accessibility of their academies (Platvoet, 2023).

This method not only supports the development of local talent but also develops a self-sustaining system that benefits both the clubs and the players. By investing in young athletes, smaller teams can nurture competent players who may potentially be transferred to larger clubs for substantial amounts (Platvoet, 2023). A percentage of these revenues is

then returned into the young academies, enabling for continued upgrading of facilities, coaching, and scouting programmes. This cycle ensures that financial constraints do not hinder the growth of promising athletes, fostering inclusivity and diversity within the sport.

### **5.5. Corporate and Sponsorship Models**

In Japan, the J.League model shows how corporate sponsorships and public-private partnerships may effectively promote grassroots soccer (Gutierrez, 2019). From its founding, the J.League aspired to build community-based teams, breaking away from the typical corporate-centric model prevalent in Japanese professional sports (Bandyopadhyay, 2024). This technique produced strong local support and encouraged corporate companies to invest in youth development programmes.

Corporate sponsors play a vital role in funding many categories of Japan's national teams, including young levels. For example, companies like Kirin Brewery Company, Limited, and Kirin Beverage Company, Limited, have been official partners, sponsoring all categories of Japan National Teams, such as "SAMURAI BLUE" (Men's National Team), "NADESHIKO Japan" (Women's National Team), and all "Under" Japanese National Teams (Japan Football Association, 2015).

These collaborations not only ease the financial burden on families but also create community engagement and support for youth soccer projects. By merging corporate resources with local soccer programmes, the J.League model ensures that young athletes have access to quality training and facilities, promoting the development of soccer talent across Japan.

### **5.6. Developmental Fees and Solidarity Payments**

FIFA has devised systems like as training compensation and the solidarity mechanism to compensate young clubs for their role in developing players (Helokumpu, 2020). Training compensation is payable when a player signs their first professional contract with a club different from the one(s) that contributed to their training, and for future moves until the end of the season of their 23rd birthday (Laskowski, 2019). The amount is computed based on the costs of training and educating young players, with the purpose of rewarding clubs that have invested in nurturing talent.

The solidarity mechanism applies when a professional player is transferred between clubs in separate nations before the expiration of their contract. In such circumstances, 5% of the transfer fee is withheld and allocated to all clubs that trained the player between the ages of 12 and 23, proportionally depending on the time of training at each club (Laskowski, 2019). This mechanism ensures that clubs involved in a player's early development receive financial recognition when the player travels worldwide.

To assist these payments, FIFA has developed a Clearing House, which centralizes and automates the delivery of training rewards. The Clearing House determines the sums due to training clubs based on the player's history and guarantees that payments are made efficiently and openly. This effort aims to protect the integrity of the transfer system and promote the financial viability of grassroots activities (Laskowski, 2019; De Weger, & De Weger, 2016).

These mechanisms provide financial assistance to grassroots programmes, boosting their sustainability and encouraging continuing investment in youth development. By rewarding clubs for their contributions to a player's early training, FIFA's system incentivizes the nurturing of young talent and helps maintain a robust pipeline of skillful players.

### **5.7. Potential Benefits of Eliminating Pay-to-Play in the U.S.**

Eliminating the pay-to-play approach in U.S. youth soccer might greatly boost accessibility, allowing children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to join (Kimbrough, 2024). Currently, hefty expenditures connected with club fees, travel, and equipment typically exclude lower-income families, limiting the talent pool. Removing these financial hurdles will enable a greater spectrum of young athletes to engage in the sport, creating inclusivity and equitable opportunity.

A more accessible approach will certainly lead to greater diversity in player backgrounds, enhancing the talent pool with various talents and perspectives. This inclusivity can boost the overall quality of play and promote diverse styles and techniques, benefiting the sport's development at all levels (Rausch, 2015). By accepting players from all groups, U.S. soccer can develop a more dynamic and competitive atmosphere.

In the long term, abolishing pay-to-play could boost the talent pipeline for Major League Soccer (MLS) and national teams. A more broad and extensive pool of young players increases the probability of recognising and fostering extraordinary talent. This approach corresponds with methods in nations where soccer is more accessible, leading to their worldwide success. By extending the search for talent, U.S. soccer can boost its competitive status globally.

Moreover, lowering financial barriers can enhance grassroots soccer culture and community engagement. When youth activities are open to everybody, communities may rally around local teams, creating pride and support. This communal involvement can lead to more volunteers, local sponsorships, and a bigger fan base for the sport. Building a healthy soccer culture at the grassroots level lays a solid basis for the sport's growth and appeal countrywide.

In short, migrating away from the pay-to-play model holds the potential to make U.S. youth soccer more accessible, diverse, and competitive, while also boosting community relationships and the sport's cultural presence.

### **5.8. Challenges of and Feasibility of Transitioning Away from Pay-to-Play Model**

Transitioning away from the pay-to-play model in U.S. youth soccer involves various issues that must be carefully explored. One key impediment is the financial structure of many young soccer organisations, which rely primarily on player fees to cover expenses such as coaching wages, facility rentals, equipment, and travel costs. Eliminating these fees will necessitate discovering alternative financing sources to maintain operations and ensuring the quality of training programmes. This could mean soliciting sponsorships, government funding, or community fundraising activities, each of which comes with its own set of hurdles and uncertainties (Simon, 2023).

Another difficulty is the profoundly embedded nature of the pay-to-play system inside American youth sports culture. Over time, this model has been the conventional method, and transitioning away from it will need a huge culture change among clubs, coaches, parents, and players. There may be resistance from stakeholders who are accustomed to the current system or who profit from it financially (Newham, 2022). Additionally, introducing a new paradigm would involve significant preparation and cooperation to ensure a smooth transition and to handle potential unforeseen consequences.

The feasibility of abolishing the pay-to-play model also depends on the availability of alternative funding and resources. In nations where youth soccer is more accessible, there is typically strong assistance from professional teams, government agencies, or community organisations. Replicating such support in the U.S. would entail forging solid alliances and generating sustainable funding sources (Simon, 2023). This could be particularly hard in locations with limited access to professional soccer infrastructure or where soccer is not the primary sport.

Moreover, there is a concern that eliminating player fees could lead to a decline in the perceived value of the programmes. Parents and athletes who engage financially in their participation may be more committed to the sport. Without this financial investment, there is a risk that commitment levels could decline, thereby hurting player development and the overall competitiveness of the programmes. Therefore, any move away from pay-to-play would need to incorporate efforts to sustain high levels of interest and commitment among participants.

In conclusion, while the goal of eliminating the pay-to-play model in U.S. youth soccer is praiseworthy for its potential to promote accessibility and inclusivity, completing this transformation involves overcoming difficult financial, cultural, and logistical challenges. Careful planning, stakeholder engagement, and the development of sustainable alternative finance methods are important to assure the feasibility and viability of such a big transformation in the youth soccer environment.

### **5.9. Practical Solutions to Eradicate the Pay-to-Play System**

Transitioning away from the pay-to-play model in U.S. youth soccer demands a diverse approach to maintain accessibility and inclusivity. One practical option is to establish club-funded academies that offer free or low-cost participation. Professional soccer clubs can invest in young development programmes, covering expenses such as coaching, facilities, and equipment. This concept has been successful in nations like Spain and the Netherlands, where teams like Ajax operate renowned academies focusing on cultivating talent from a young age. Implementing a similar model in the U.S. would entail teams allocating resources expressly for young development, either supported through revenue-sharing mechanisms or reinvestment of earnings from player moves.

Another method is expanding government financing for young soccer activities. In nations like France and Germany, substantial public money is dedicated to sports, ensuring that young athletes have access to quality training and facilities

without large financial constraints on their families. Advocating for similar government funding in the U.S. may comprise advocating for grants or subsidies dedicated to youth sports, so lowering the need on player fees.

Corporate sponsorships and public-private partnerships may offer feasible routes for funding. The J-League model in Japan illustrates how corporate sponsorships may effectively promote grassroots soccer. Corporations sponsor young teams and competitions, giving financial resources and infrastructure. These collaborations not only ease the financial burden on families but also create community engagement and support for youth soccer projects. Establishing ties with local businesses and larger enterprises can give crucial financing and resources, making soccer more accessible to a broader spectrum of participants.

Implementing developmental fees and solidarity payments, as mandated by FIFA, can further support young clubs financially. When a player is transferred between clubs, a part of the transfer fee is provided to the teams engaged in the player's development, often between the ages of 12 and 23. This method gives financial assistance to grassroots activities, boosting their sustainability and encouraging continuing investment in youth development. Adopting and enforcing such systems within the U.S. soccer framework can ensure that young clubs are compensated for their role in developing players who move to higher levels.

Additionally, revamping league and tournament formats might cut costs connected with travel and participation. Reevaluating the necessity of statewide leagues and lengthy travel can lead to more localized competitions, cutting expenses for families and groups. Increased volunteerism among groups can also assist cut operational costs. Encouraging parents and community people to volunteer their time and expertise helps offset expenses linked to coaching and administration, making programmes more affordable.

By applying these practical measures, the U.S. can move towards abolishing the pay-to-play paradigm, making youth soccer more accessible and inclusive for all aspiring players.

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## 6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The pay-to-play approach in American youth soccer creates considerable financial barriers, limiting access for many families and potentially removing talented players from less affluent households. This method contrasts with systems in countries where soccer is more accessible, contributing to bigger talent pools and better international success. Critics believe that the pay-to-play model hinders diversity and inclusivity, eventually harming the development and competitiveness of U.S. soccer at all levels. In the United States, youth soccer fees average \$1,188 per child yearly, making it expensive for many families. This financial burden sometimes limits participation to affluent households, diminishing diversity within the activity. Consequently, the talent pool is constricted, and the development of U.S. soccer is hindered. In comparison, countries with more accessible youth soccer programmes have bigger talent pools and achieve higher international success. Critics believed that the pay-to-play model hinders diversity and inclusivity, eventually harming the development and competitiveness of U.S. soccer at all levels.

### 6.1. Proposed Funding Strategies to Replace Pay-to-Play

Eradicating the pay-to-play model in American youth soccer needs the implementation of many key initiatives:

- **Club-Funded Academies:** Professional soccer teams should build and invest in youth academies that offer free or low-cost participation. This method parallels successful approaches in nations like Spain and the Netherlands, where teams such as Ajax have famous youth development programmes. These academies emphasise on cultivating potential from an early age, providing accessible avenues for players regardless of their financial situations. By investing in such academies, teams can foster a diversified talent pool and contribute to the general growth of soccer in the United States.
- **Government Subsidies:** Advocating for increased public financing at federal, state, and municipal levels is crucial to sustain youth soccer initiatives. Government subsidies can lessen dependency on participant fees, making soccer more accessible to youngsters from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Public investment in sports has been proved to increase physical health, social cohesion, and community participation. By contributing cash to youth soccer, governments may create inclusion and assist develop future talent for national teams.
- **Corporate Sponsorships and Public-Private Partnerships:** Fostering ties with corporations and community organisations can secure sponsorships and develop partnerships that give financial support and resources for youth soccer projects. Corporate sponsors might give funding for equipment, facilities, and travel fees, lessening

the financial load on families. Public-private collaborations can also lead to the development of community programmes that encourage participation and support grassroots soccer growth.

- **Training Compensation and Solidarity Payments:** Implementing FIFA-mandated procedures, like as training compensation and solidarity payments, can generate financial sources to support grassroots activities. When a player is transferred between clubs, a part of the transfer fee is provided to the teams engaged in the player's development, often between the ages of 12 and 23. This method compensates youth clubs for their role in training and developing players, supporting sustainability and encouraging continuing investment in youth development. By adopting these systems, U.S. soccer may assure that clubs contributing to player development are financially rewarded, thus motivating the cultivation of young potential.

By following these techniques, American youth soccer may progress towards a more inclusive and equitable model, reducing financial barriers and supporting the development of diverse talent across the nation.

## 6.2. Policy Recommendations for U.S. Soccer Federation, MLS, and Local Soccer Organisations

### 6.2.1. U.S. Soccer Federation:

To promote financial accessibility in youth soccer, the U.S. Soccer Federation (USSF) should examine the following recommendations:

- **Develop and Implement Policies Encouraging Financial Accessibility:** The USSF should adopt comprehensive policies aimed at decreasing economic obstacles to youth soccer participation. This includes supporting community-based programmes with reasonable registration costs, cooperating with local schools and non-profit groups to promote accessible playing opportunities, and pushing clubs to adopt sliding scale prices based on family income.
- **Allocate Resources to Subsidize Participation Expenses for Low-Income Families:** The USSF should allocate funding to assist low-income families with expenditures connected with young soccer, such as registration fees, equipment, and travel expenses. This might involve expanding current scholarship programmes, granting funds to local clubs explicitly allocated for financial help, and partnering with corporate sponsors to fund these projects.
- Establish and administer programmes for training compensation and solidarity payments to aid youth clubs: FIFA's training compensation and solidarity protocols, which give clubs financial incentives for developing players who sign professional contracts or are exchanged between teams, ought to be accepted and executed by the USSF. By giving clubs a return on their training investments, this model encourages investment in youth development and improves the sustainability of youth programmes.

### 6.2.2. Major League Soccer (MLS)

To better increase young development and inclusion in American soccer, Major League Soccer (MLS) should examine the following recommendations:

- **Mandate Fully Funded Academies with Free Participation:** MLS should force all member clubs to create fully funded academies that give free participation to selected players. This method has been taken by clubs such as Atlanta United FC, whose academy is free for all selected players and provides additional benefits like equipment and access to top-tier facilities. [cite]turn0search10 By eliminating financial obstacles, MLS can ensure that bright youngsters from all socioeconomic backgrounds have equal opportunities to develop their skills.
- **Establish Revenue-Sharing Structures to Fund Youth Development Programmes:** MLS should adopt revenue-sharing procedures to support youth development programmes across all clubs. Currently, media rights contribute for roughly 30% of MLS's annual earnings, which is allocated evenly among clubs. [cite]turn0search1 By providing a portion of pooled income specifically for youth development, MLS can offer continuous support for academies, guaranteeing that all clubs have the necessary resources to foster young potential.
- **Collaborate with Lower-Division Clubs and Community Organisations to Expand Talent Discovery and Development Networks:** MLS should cultivate collaborations with lower-division clubs and community organisations to extend the talent discovery and development pipeline. Initiatives like the MLS NEXT Development Grant programme highlight attempts to promote non-MLS academies that contribute to the professional player route. [cite]turn0search2 By working closely with grassroots organisations, MLS can tap into a bigger pool of young athletes, providing them with opportunity to develop through the soccer levels.



Implementing these tactics would not only boost the quality and diversity of players in MLS but also build a more inclusive and accessible soccer environment across the United States.

### 6.2.3. Local Soccer Organisations:

To boost financial accessibility and foster community engagement, local soccer organisations can employ the following strategies:

- **Seek Partnerships with Local Businesses and Community Groups:** Collaborate with local companies and community organisations to seek sponsorships and support operational expenditures. Hosting events such as investor evenings can attract potential sponsors by showcasing the club's activities and sponsorship opportunities. Additionally, working with local non-profits to oversee game-day activities, such as barbecues, can enhance community bonds and bring reciprocal advantages.
- **Implement Sliding Scale Pricing Structures Based on Family Income:** Adopt a sliding scale charge scheme to accommodate families with various financial capacity. This technique assures inclusivity by altering participation costs according to household income levels, making soccer activities accessible to a broader demographic. Offering discounts or price waivers to families exhibiting financial necessity can further eliminate obstacles to participation.
- **Promote Volunteerism to Reduce Expenses and Foster Community Engagement:** Encourage community members to volunteer in various areas within the organisation, such as coaching, event coordination, or administrative support. Implementing a structured volunteer programme can assist minimise operational costs and strengthen community involvement. Recognizing and recognising volunteers' contributions is vital for retaining motivation and long-term commitment.

By adopting these tactics, local soccer organisations can create a more inclusive atmosphere, ensuring that financial constraints do not hinder youth involvement in soccer.

### 6.3. Implications for Future Research and Practical Implementation

Further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of alternative funding models in diverse communities across the United States. Studies should examine the long-term impacts of reduced financial barriers on player development, diversity, and overall competitiveness in U.S. soccer. Additionally, practical implementation strategies must consider regional economic disparities, existing infrastructure, and the capacity of local organisations to adapt to new funding mechanisms. Pilot programmes and case studies can provide valuable insights into best practices and inform scalable solutions for nationwide application.

By adopting these recommendations, stakeholders can work collaboratively to dismantle the pay-to-play system, fostering a more inclusive and competitive environment for American youth soccer.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest.

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