

Community sports need provincial 'assist' to thrive: Brock research

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Whether it's a children's soccer league run by parent volunteers or an adult hockey team whose players spend as much time socializing as shooting pucks, amateur sports play a vital role in enhancing community engagement and public health.

A new report by Brock University researchers highlights the importance of community sport groups and what can be done at the provincial level to support them.

Published last month, [Provincial Sport Policy in Ontario: Trends, Issues, and Ways Forward](#) summarizes insights from three years of research involving

discussions with sport sector organizers and provincial sport organizations that govern amateur sport in the province. The report addresses community sport groups' need for leadership and support as more responsibilities are placed on them by the provincial and federal governments as well as sport governing bodies.

These groups continue to experience challenges with sport policy that hinders their organization's ability to carry out their mandates and reach their goals and objectives, says Associate Professor of Sport Management Kyle Rich, one of three authors of the report and lead researcher on the project.

"The sport club system in Ontario is in a precarious place that is disconnected and fragmented. We don't have direction, and support within the system hasn't increased with the amount of work and expectations that's being put on those organizations," he says.

Rich offers an example of community sport organizations being asked to prioritize "safe sport," which involves creating athletic environments that are respectful, equitable and free from harassment and abuse.

"Safe sport initiatives are obviously very important, and to implement them well, it takes extra time, work and understanding," he says. "It's a whole new way of thinking about how we structure policy and the expectations we put on sport organizations, coaches and managers. Some of these community organizations are led by parents or grandparents doing it because they want their kids to have somewhere to play; they don't necessarily have the resources, skills or capacity to navigate these new policies, rules and regulations."

Rich's research team has been examining the role of provincial policy related to sport in Ontario since 2021. Their work culminated with a series of discussions about policy development and implementation in the province. The recently published report summarizes insights from these discussions into four key findings and outlines three main recommendations with

detailed actions for both the provincial government and provincial sport organizations.

Recommendations include creating a provincial amateur sport plan or framework; building a collective voice for amateur sport; and leveraging provincial sport expertise, resources and capacity.

The publication of the report comes at an especially critical time, says Rich, as the Government of Ontario just established the Ministry of Sport, dedicated specifically to building a strong sport system in Ontario, this past June.

"There is an urgent need for sport policy reform in the province, and we now have the mechanisms and processes in place to enhance sport policy and development in Ontario," he says. "If we want community sports groups to operate as professional organizations, and to implement important policies around things like safe sport and equity in sport as well as continuing to be the development system for elite athletes, then we need to support them in making these changes."