

## SOCIAL CLASS BIAS AND BOYS' ATHLETICS

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Numerous studies have documented the existence of a social class system in the United States--a system which works to the advantage of the people holding the middle- and upper-class positions in the structure and to the disadvantage of those in its lower ranks. Among the advantages enjoyed by the more privileged groups is a qualitatively and quantitatively superior education--middle- and upper-class children simply survive in public education better and longer and do so in better schools than do the children from the lower classes. Although each of us is born into this social structure at the level occupied by his parents, part of our population manages to rise on the social scale by following one or several of a limited number of routes, and there is even some evidence to suggest that within public schooling at least one of its high-status student activities harbors no social bias at all. The Elmtown's Youth study by Hollingshead (1949) indicated a ninth through twelfth grade boys' interscholastic athletic program--football, basketball, and baseball--to be socially unbiased in that it attracted boys ". . .from all classes in about the same proportion." (Hollingshead, 1949, p. 194). The other clubs in the school were found to be ". . .biased in favor of some classes and against others." (p. 202).

### Reasons for the Study

This equalitarianism in boys' athletics was so contrary to the condition which generally exists in school-sponsored programs that a retest of the finding seemed in order--inspired by the skepticism with which one often views the exception. There was more cause for this skepticism, however, than a simple reflex doubting of the unusual. Our schools' present push toward academic excellence may now be making athletic eligibility more difficult to achieve and maintain than during the years when the Hollingshead data was gathered. Should this condition actually exist, it could be causing a disproportionately large number of middle- and upper-class males to be gaining membership on interscholastic athletic teams since it is from these classes that the academically successful student most often comes. In addition, many of our schools have expanded their interscholastic athletic programs well beyond the three-sports offering of the Elmtown high school. Such additional activities as golf, tennis, and swimming are now rather commonplace and

might well be examples of instances in which our schools are seeking from among their students those talents which usually are gained only as a result of a somewhat privileged socio-economic background. This situation could now be having sufficient impact on boys' interscholastic sports as to have introduced a social class bias into the program. Finally, the disproportionately heavy school drop-out rate reported to occur among lower-class students seems capable of creating a social bias among school-boy athletic teams even though it apparently failed to have such an effect in the Hollingshead study.

Thoughts such as these brought about the present attempt to re-examine the reported social equality in boys' interscholastic athletics.

### Procedures

It seemed essential to begin by trying to neutralize whatever effects a socially disproportionate school drop-out rate might have upon this study by determining the social class positions and interscholastic athletic histories of the subjects both before and after the local legal school-leaving age of 16. Specifically, it was decided to gather this information for all the male students (the subjects) who ever attended a selected four-year-old, seventh through ninth grade south Florida junior high school. Then, while holding the ninth grade social class positions constant in senior high school for all subjects matriculating locally, determine their senior high school sports histories as well.

The social classification method used involved two steps. First, an "Index of Status Characteristics" (Warner, 1960) was obtained for the family head of each subject. Briefly, this entailed the use of published scales to rate his house type, neighborhood, source of income, and occupation. The final result translates into a weighted, numerical score. Second, it was necessary to convert all such scores into social class equivalencies on a scale developed earlier by Warner and reprinted in his Social Class in America (1960). Each subject was then placed in the same social class as the head of his family. Through an extensive examination of the junior and senior high school records it was possible to divide the subjects into "athletes" and "non-athletes" by designating as "athletes" only those who had gained membership on at least one school-sponsored interscholastic athletic team. Chi square was used to discover any statistical significance that might be attached to the social composition of these junior and senior high school athletic teams.

## Findings

The social class analysis indicated that the subjects came from the upper- and lower-middle class and the upper- and lower-lower class. Further, it was found that both the junior high school's total athletic program--football, basketball, baseball, track, swimming, and golf--and just that part of its program which duplicated the three sports played in the Elmtown school were found to be significantly biased, at least at the .05 level of confidence, during three of the four school years studied. The bias strongly favored the gaining of interscholastic athletic team positions by middle-class males and opposed the winning of comparable positions by lower-lower-class males.

However, during the three school years in which former junior high school subjects were spread out through the local senior high school, they apparently encountered no social class bias in athletics whatsoever. This seemed at first glance to verify the Hollingshead finding of a social equality existing in senior high interscholastic athletics. But, with the present study's knowledge of the pre-senior high school sports histories of its subjects (an advantage apparently not enjoyed by Hollingshead), the failure of a statistical bias to appear in senior high school sports seemed explainable but not in terms of equalitarianism.

Rather, the failure of the social class bias encountered in junior high school athletics to follow the students into senior high school seemed caused 1. by a failure of the lower-lower-class students of the junior high school--who had contributed but few athletes there--to move on into senior high school in any great numbers; 2. by a general, although slight, decrease in athletic participation in senior high by former junior high school students from the middle class; and 3. by a statistical increase in senior high athletic participation by upper-lower-class students formerly from the junior high under study. However, this increase was not caused by the appearance of additional athletes within the social class. Instead, the original upper-lower class junior high school athletes--who almost unfailingly played senior high school sports--attended senior high school in disproportionately greater numbers than did the "non-athletes" from their social class.

## Conclusion

The school-boy interscholastic athletic program of the public junior high school under investigation was found

to be significantly biased during three of the four school years studied in that the participation of middle-class boys was disproportionately greater than the participation of lower-lower-class boys. No such bias was discovered in the senior high school of the study, but this seemed caused by a combination of the school holding power of boys' athletics upon upper-lower-class "athletes" and the disproportionately heavy school drop-out rate that occurred among upper-lower-class "non-athletes" and all members of the lower-lower class.

#### References

- Hollingshead, A. B. Elmtown's youth: Impact of social classes on adolescents. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1949.
- Warner, W. L. (with Marchia Meeker and Kenneth Eells), Social class in America. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960.