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**Federal Government Policy Initiatives (1961 - 2000):
Youth Elite Athletes as a Neglected Stakeholder
Group**

Competitive sport for youth has developed exponentially over the past fifty years in Canada. However, increasingly children/youth are involved in extremely high levels of competition. Elite level youth athletes, defined as “persons between the ages of seven and sixteen, who are engaged in sporting activities involving extensive time in formalized practice, limited to outstanding players involving selection of winners on regional, provincial, national or international basis,” have a unique set of characteristics worthy of state intervention. While almost every sport has elite levels of competition, several sports have fuelled the establishment of youth performance at very high levels. In particular, sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, diving, swimming, and tennis involve child elite athletes conforming to the standards of the adult must-win competitive attitudes. Increased self-efficacy, discipline, and enhanced self-confidence have been important benefits attached to the development of high performance youth sport. However, detrimental effects and

problems of child exploitation associated with elite levels of competition have been apparent from the earliest involvement of youth in high performance sport.

Donnelly argues that while Canada has been praised for its recognition of, and attempts to resolve, problems associated with youth sport, research has focussed mainly on programs aimed at mass participation and youth at risk rather than elite youth athletes. The federal government's role in sport has been to develop policies that are in line with social policy objectives. Thus it is important to contextualize our understanding of how the federal government has historically dealt with youth elite level athletes in terms of the social policy goals tied to sport involvement. Despite the historical review of federal government involvement in sport provided by a various authors, the greater social structure and cultural milieu in which sport functions has largely been secondary to historical accounts. Furthermore, those that have looked at the social significance of federal policy for sport have failed to look at the involvement of youth as an important stakeholder group, particularly in discussing high performance youth athletes as a significant group in need of certain levels of protection and attention. Descriptions and historical accounts of elite youth sports have been largely considered in isolation from their social context.

The purpose of this research was to analyse Federal Sport policy documents (1961-2000) in terms of their socio-historical context and emerging socio-political justifications for sport policy affecting youth in high performance sport. This analysis of sixteen federal sport policy documents allowed for a critical understanding of the historical developments of federal government intervention into high performance sport, and its ignorance to the issues of youth elite athletes. Furthermore, interviews with key players (politicians, coaches, athletes) in the development of sport policy helped to identify some concerns and underlying principles affecting the previous and future development of policy initiatives for youth in high performance sport. While the rights of high performance athletes in general, the rights of women in high performance sport, and policy concerns related to harassment have emerged as issues important in the development of federal government policy initiatives, youth have largely been ignored in these programs.