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Title: How resource disparities hinder young athletes from reaching elite sports

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INEQUALITY

How resource disparities hinder young athletes from reaching elite sports

SIPOKAZI FOKAZI

YOUNG people from disadvantaged communities continue to face significant and systemic barriers to participating in and progressing through organised sports, limiting the chances of many talented athletes reaching elite levels.

This is according to a new study, led by Dr Poppy Bhengu, who obtained her PhD from UWC, conducted in Ekurhuleni, Gauteng, and recently published in the European Journal for Sport and Society. It was co-authored by Prof Nicolette Roman from the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Children, Families and Society, and Dr Gérard Filles, a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences.

Through interviews with 19 experienced athletes, coaches, school coordinators and sport managers drawn from both township and affluent communities within the City of Ekurhuleni, the researchers examined how socioeconomic inequalities shape talent identification and sports development, and what this means for young athletes whose potential may never be recognised.

The study's central finding is the absolute disparity in how sporting resources are distributed across communities. Young people in wealthier areas were found to have access to quality sports facilities, modern equipment, structured development programmes and experienced coaches.

Their counterparts in under-resourced communities, by contrast, face inadequate infrastructure, limited equipment and significantly fewer opportunities to participate in organised sport.

Many lack basic necessities such as running shoes and appropriate sporting attire, barriers that restrict participation from the outset. Inadequate



LEAD researcher, Dr Poppy Bhengu, during her graduation in 2025. | SHELLEY CHRISTIANS UWC

nutrition emerged as an additional and often overlooked challenge, undermining athletic performance and reducing the likelihood that young people from poorer communities can reach their full potential.

Researchers found these resource gaps do more than limit participation; they distort the talent identification process itself.

Participants in the study noted that identifying promising athletes is considerably more difficult in underprivileged communities, where limited facilities and a lack of awareness among parents and community members

about sports development pathways leave many talented young people invisible to scouts and selectors.

Financial constraints compound the problem, with registration fees, transport costs, equipment purchases and travel to competitions placing organised sport out of reach for many families.

Meanwhile, athletes from affluent communities benefit from greater visibility, structured exposure and consistent development opportunities, advantages that position them more favourably for progression to elite levels, regardless of raw talent.

The researchers found that these inequalities are not incidental but are reinforced by broader social and institutional factors that entrench disadvantage across generations. Athletes from privileged backgrounds continue to benefit from compounding opportunities, while talented youth from poorer communities are systematically excluded. The barriers extend beyond finances to include limited parental support, weak community sports structures and exclusionary sporting environments.

Despite efforts since the end of apartheid to promote equity in sport,



A NEW UWC study has found that many athletes from disadvantaged communities lack even basic sporting necessities, such as running shoes, restricting their participation in organised sports. | RUN 4 FFWPU

the researchers noted that these challenges remain widespread. The result is that many young athletes fail to realise their potential, not because of a lack of talent, but because the systems meant to develop that talent were never designed with them in mind.

The study argues that talent identification systems must evolve beyond a narrow focus on physical ability and immediate performance.

"A more holistic approach, one that accounts for long-term development potential, coaching quality, psychological resilience and family support, is needed to surface talent that current systems routinely miss," said Dr Bhengu.

"The findings underscore the urgent need to confront these systemic inequalities and implement multifaceted strategies to promote genuine equity and inclusivity in sport," the researchers concluded.