

Universal Access or Targeted Support? Soccer, Social Cohesion, and Immigrant Integration in Two U.S. World Cup Host Regions

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Abstract

Cities and states increasingly fund community soccer initiatives to promote immigrant integration, yet sociological literature suggests sport builds cohesion only under specific structural constraints. This paper compares two 2026 FIFA World Cup host regions pursuing contrasting policy approaches: New York City and North Jersey's universal \$6 million NY Kicks fund targeting overall affordability, and Houston's targeted \$1.5 million Freekicks Soccer initiative concentrated in underserved neighborhoods. Framed through contact theory (Allport, 1954) and social capital theory (Putnam, 2000), a systematic assessment reveals that while both initiatives secure institutional support and lower financial entry barriers, key operational conditions—including cooperative interaction, contact repetition, and participant mixing—remain unverified empirical unknowns rather than established program features. Universal programs expand structural opportunities for cross-group contact but remain constrained by cost barriers, whereas targeted programs directly reach displaced populations but risk concentrating contact within isolated groups. Additionally, an original per-capita recalculation demonstrates that the apparent four-fold funding gap narrows to roughly 1.5 to 1 (\$1.30 vs. \$0.88 per foreign-born resident) once target population sizes are accounted for. This heuristic indicates that headline funding disparities primarily reflect administrative jurisdiction scale rather than comparative program intensity or relative policy commitment. Finally, the analysis evaluates a competing selection explanation—that pre-existing social capital enables initial infrastructure building—and proposes an empirical post-tournament research design to measure bridging and bonding outcomes separately once evaluation data becomes available.

Keywords

Social Cohesion, Immigrant Integration, Sport Sociology,
Contact Theory, Social Capital, Mega-Event Legacy,
FIFA World Cup

1. Introduction

Community soccer is increasingly leveraged as a policy tool to foster civic integration and social cohesion, yet empirical evaluations reveal highly mixed outcomes. While sport can enhance intergroup trust under structured conditions—such as during brief post-match periods in Latin American municipal leagues (Ronconi, 2022)—its capacity to build broader social bonds remains strictly bounded. For example, a randomized contact intervention in post-ISIS Iraq demonstrated that while playing on mixed teams increased interpersonal trust among direct teammates, these gains failed to generalize to the broader out-group (Mousa, 2020). Furthermore, critical reviews of sport and forced migration literature caution that programs framed around “integration” frequently default to one-way assimilation expectations, operating with limited power to resolve structural barriers such as legal status, unemployment, or systemic discrimination (Spaaij et al., 2019).

The buildup to the 2026 FIFA World Cup created a unique opportunity to observe these dynamics in real time, as both New York/New Jersey and Houston leveraged the tournament as a vehicle for civic investment. New York established NY Kicks, a \$6 million fund designed to expand soccer infrastructure and reduce participation costs in underserved communities across the state (Hochul & Empire State Development, 2026). At the same time, the Houston World Cup Host Committee announced Freekicks Soccer, a targeted \$1.5 million initiative delivered through five local youth clubs to provide facilities and over 1,200 annual scholarships (Houston World Cup 2026 Host Committee, 2026).

What has received little scholarly attention is that despite sharing the backdrop of the same mega-event, these two regions pursued fundamentally different policy goals. While New York focused on broad, universal access to soccer, Houston targeted underserved neighborhoods specifically. This institutional divide is not merely administrative. It corresponds directly to the sociological distinction between bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000), dictating the specific conditions and types of intergroup contact each program is likely to generate. To analyze these contrasting approaches, this paper addresses three central questions. First, which structural conditions identified in contact literature are present or absent in each region? Second, does the distinction between universal and targeted strategies predict different social cohesion outcomes? Third, can available empirical evidence distinguish a true causal contact mechanism from a pre-existing selection effect?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Cohesion and Belonging

While social cohesion and individual belonging are closely interconnected, research within the sport for development literature frequently conflates the two constructs. In a systematic review of thirty-five studies, [Moustakas and Robrade \(2023\)](#) observed that the field systematically lacks a consistent conceptualization of social cohesion, despite broadly converging around core dimensions such as trust, civic participation, and positive intergroup relations. To resolve this ambiguity, they urge researchers to explicitly operationalize their analytical terms.

Responding to this call, this study conceptualizes social cohesion as a macro- or meso-level property of a community, defined by the degree of mutual trust and reciprocity sustained between its constituent groups. Conversely, belonging is defined as a micro-level psychological phenomenon reflecting an individual's subjective sense of inclusion within a given social collective. Disentangling these two concepts is essential because policy interventions can successfully enhance an individual's sense of personal belonging without necessarily strengthening broader intergroup cohesion—a distinction that proves essential in evaluating the two host regions in Section 6.

Additionally, athletic participation is not assumed to generate either outcome automatically. As [Moustakas \(2024\)](#) emphasizes, sport functions as a vehicle for social cohesion only when it is intentionally structured to achieve that end through intentional coaching, genuinely mixed rosters, and sustained, consistent contact over time. Without these deliberate structural conditions, unstructured or highly competitive sport fails to reliably build intergroup trust and risks reinforcing pre-existing social divisions.

2.2. Contact Theory and Its Conditions

The underlying causal logic of this paper derives from Allport's contact hypothesis, which states that intergroup contact reduces prejudice only under four strict conditions: equal status between groups, common goals, cooperative interaction rather than competition, and explicit institutional support ([Allport, 1954](#)). When contact lacks these structural conditions, it risks leaving pre-existing prejudices unchanged or even worsening intergroup tension. Because these criteria are demanding, much of the subsequent literature evaluates the precise conditions under which contact successfully translates into broader social trust.

[Mousa \(2020\)](#) evaluated these conditions through a field experiment in post-ISIS northern Iraq, where displaced Christian soccer players were randomly assigned either to all-Christian teams or to integrated teams containing Muslim players across a two-month league. The intervention demonstrated significant and persistent behavioral gains. Christian players assigned to integrated teams were substantially more likely to sign up for mixed teams in subsequent seasons, vote for a Muslim teammate to receive a sportsmanship award, and continue training with Muslim peers six months after the intervention concluded.

Crucially, however, these positive effects were strictly bounded by the athletic context. While structured contact successfully fostered lasting interpersonal trust toward specific out-group teammates, it failed to generalize into broader shifts in social or political attitudes toward Muslims as a whole. This contextual boundary represents an important theoretical insight for this paper. The organizational composition and participant mix of a program determine the boundary of its reach. A program that places members of different groups on the same team can generate meaningful cross-group trust, whereas a program that serves a single group in isolation lacks a structural mechanism to generate cross-group contact gains.

2.3. Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

To evaluate how program structures shape intergroup outcomes, this paper draws on Putnam's conceptual distinction between bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bonding capital consists of intra-group ties among individuals who share an identity, providing security, mutual support, and a sense of internal belonging. On the other hand, bridging capital consists of inter-group ties across social divides, serving as the primary mechanism for generating broader social trust. While both forms are socially valuable, Putnam emphasizes that bonding capital is generally easier to generate because it does not require navigating cultural, linguistic, or social differences across group boundaries.

Applying this taxonomy to sport, Walseth (2008) examined how athletic participation shapes social capital among young women with immigrant backgrounds in Norwegian sport clubs. Although both forms of capital emerged, structural and cultural barriers frequently limited the conversion of demographic diversity into genuine bridging ties. Walseth's findings demonstrate that the mere physical presence of diverse participants within a sports facility does not automatically generate cross-group social capital.

Synthesizing Putnam's structural distinction with Mousa's empirical findings (Mousa, 2020) creates the primary analytical framework of this study. The inter-group trust gains, measured by Mousa, represent bridging outcomes as they developed through integrated teams and directly altered attitudes toward out-group teammates. Conversely, programs structured to serve a single demographic group intensively build bonding capital. While universal access programs lower financial barriers in regions that display demographic diversity, sociological theory indicates that bridging social capital is a conditional prediction rather than an automatic outcome. Lowering cost barriers increases the probability of cross-group contact, but bridging capital appears only if local league play fulfills Allport's conditions of equal status, shared goals, cooperative interaction, and continued repetition over time.

2.4. The Competing Selection Explanation

Any causal claim asserting that sport generates social cohesion must face a fundamental identification challenge: the potential for reverse causality. Rather than soc-

cer infrastructure driving civic integration, the relationship may operate in the opposite direction. Communities that already hold high levels of pre-existing social capital, institutional trust, and civic investment are precisely those with the organizational capacity required to establish and sustain structured leagues, secure public funding, and build community facilities. Under this selection mechanism, a well-funded soccer initiative functions as a symptom of pre-existing community cohesion rather than a generator of new social trust.

Figure 1 illustrates these two competing causal frameworks. Model A (the contact pathway) reflects the predominant assumption within the sport for development literature, showing a direct causal progression from structured athletic participation to cross-group trust. Model B (the selection pathway) formalizes the reverse mechanism. While rarely stated explicitly in policy rhetoric, [Spaaij et al. \(2019\)](#) identify this dynamic when noting that sports initiatives tend to be implemented in communities that already possess the civic infrastructure needed to sustain them, while severely under-resourced communities receive neither investment nor organizational support.

Because both models yield identical observational outcomes, distinguishing between a true contact effect and a selection artifact represents a central analytical task for this study, addressed directly in Sections 6 and 7.

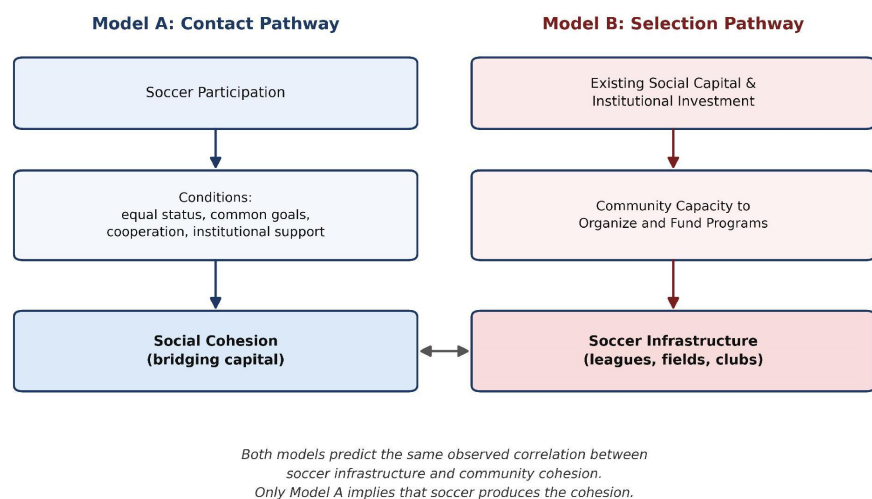


Figure 1. Two competing causal models linking soccer participation and social cohesion. Model A follows contact theory ([Allport, 1954](#); [Mousa, 2020](#)). Model B represents the selection alternative discussed in Section 2.4.

3. Data and Methods

This study uses a qualitative comparative case design relying on secondary empirical and administrative sources. Demographic baselines are drawn from reports by the Migration Policy Institute and USAFacts, youth participation data are taken from the Aspen Institute’s Project Play initiative, and program specifications are compiled from municipal press releases, host committee announcements, and organizational records. No primary surveys or interviews were conducted for this

study, and community cohesion is not directly measured in either region.

Source Selection and Coding Protocol

To evaluate NY Kicks and Freekicks Soccer against the theoretical criteria in Section 2, administrative and secondary evidence was collected and coded. Document selection followed a three-tier retrieval strategy:

1) Official Policy Announcements and Guidelines: Executive press releases, agency budget breakdowns (Empire State Development; Office of Children and Family Services), and World Cup Host Committee legacy announcements.

2) Organizational and Operational Records: Roster structures, scholarship guidelines, facility allocation plans, and league participation rules published by delivery partners (e.g., local youth clubs, Houston HFA League, Amaanah Refugee Services, Houston Dynamo FC/Dash).

3) Third-Party & Empirical Reports: Regional participation studies (Aspen Institute's State of Soccer), policy briefs (Migration Policy Institute), and independent news coverage evaluating program accessibility.

Evidence extracted from these sources was coded against the six structural contact conditions using a standardized qualitative matrix. Conditions were applied as follows:

- Equal Status: Program fee structures, equipment subsidies, and scholarship availability were evaluated to check whether financial entry barriers were removed for marginalized participants.
- Common Goals & Cooperative Interaction: Competitive league structures, team roster guidelines, and session formats were coded to differentiate collaborative play from high-stakes or exclusionary competition.
- Institutional Support: Direct municipal funding appropriations, host committee support, and official agency oversight were assessed as indicators of structural legitimacy.
- Contact Repetition over Time: Program duration, seasonal continuity, and multi-year facility guarantees were evaluated to determine whether intergroup contact was sustained or irregular.
- Participant Group Mixing: Program participant criteria and partner club roster demographics were coded to distinguish universal, open interventions from targeted, refugee-specific interventions.

To guard against institutional reporting bias, promotional claims were cross-referenced against third-party policy evaluations and local community studies (Spaaij et al., 2019).

To evaluate each initiative, the comparative analysis assesses the public program documents against the six structural criteria specified in Section 2. Those conditions are equal status, common goals, cooperative interaction, institutional support, contact repetition over time, and participant group mixing. In accordance with methodological standards in sports for development literature (Spaaij et al., 2019), each case study incorporates independent or critical evaluations along with

official promotional materials to guard against institutional reporting bias.

Additionally, Section 6 introduces an original per-capita recalculation to test whether headline funding disparities reflect genuine differences in policy commitment. This metric divides total announced funding by the foreign-born population of the relevant administrative jurisdiction. According to the recent baseline estimates, New York State contains approximately 4.6 million foreign-born residents, representing 23.3 percent of the state population (USAFacts, 2024), while the nine-county Houston metropolitan area holds a foreign-born population of approximately 1.7 million (Migration Policy Institute, 2023). Because official census and demographic reporting cycles differ across these administrative bodies, these baseline estimates reflect the most recent available figures prior to the programs' launch (2023-2024). This slight temporal variation is accounted for by treating the resulting per-capita figures as structural scale indicators rather than exact longitudinal ratios.

To compare these legacy initiatives, the analysis considers the distinct administrative jurisdictions through which funding is deployed. While the New York/New Jersey host region consists of a bi-state metropolitan area, public legacy funding for NY Kicks was appropriated at the state level by New York State, with primary capital grant priorities targeted toward urban and economically disadvantaged communities, including New York City. Conversely, Freekicks Soccer operates as a metropolitan committee initiative covering the greater Houston area. To maintain empirical consistency, per-capita recalculations use the foreign-born population of the full jurisdiction issuing or receiving the mandate (New York State for NY Kicks and the Houston metropolitan area for Freekicks Soccer), treating these figures as structural indicators of jurisdictional scope rather than localized metropolitan densities.

Finally, because both initiatives were launched shortly before this analysis was conducted, neither program has produced formal post-implementation participation or outcome evaluation data. Section 9 addresses the empirical constraints imposed by this observational timeline.

4. Case Study: New York City and North Jersey

In the New York/North Jersey metropolitan region, structural access to soccer serves as the primary barrier to intergroup social cohesion. Because the region maintains one of the oldest and most diverse immigrant soccer cultures in the United States, assembling mixed groups on the pitch presents little inherent difficulty; rather, the central constraint involves determining which populations can afford sustained access to fields and organized leagues.

The Aspen Institute's *State of Soccer* report for New York City and North Jersey surveyed nearly 700 youth players alongside local focus groups. They identified that team registration fees were the leading complaint for 32 percent of players. This financial burden rises to 41 percent among low-income families and 45 percent among high school players. Female participation also lags, with girls account-

ing for 38 percent of high school players in New York City and 42 percent in North Jersey, both below the 45 percent national average. As unstructured free play declines, youth soccer across the region is increasingly dominated by costly private club systems (Project Play, Aspen Institute, 2026).

Crucially, the Aspen Institute report reveals that youth participate primarily for social reasons, with playing alongside friends (48 percent), fun (46 percent), and skill development (45 percent) far outranking winning (23 percent) or securing athletic scholarships (13 percent). This motivational profile aligns closely with the non-competitive, social environments that Moustakas (2024) identifies as essential for creating social cohesion. While participant motivation and demographic diversity are both present, financial cost functions as a primary structural barrier, directly undermining Allport's equal status condition. A program that remains financially out of reach for lower-income immigrant families cannot facilitate intergroup contact on equal terms, regardless of regional participation rates.

In response to these barriers, New York launched NY Kicks in June 2026, aimed at leveraging World Cup momentum to expand soccer access. Of the \$6 million invested in this program, \$5 million is allocated for capital grants administered by Empire State Development to construct and upgrade community pitches, with priority assigned to economically distressed communities. The remaining \$1 million is directed through the Office of Children and Family Services to subsidize direct participation costs, including equipment, coaching, and league fees (Hochul & Empire State Development, 2026).

While NY Kicks directly addresses the cost barrier identified by the Aspen Institute data, sociological literature suggests a necessary caveat. Grassroots teams that are already demographically diverse tend to integrate newcomers more organically than top-down administrative initiatives (Migration Policy Institute, 2025). While public capital investment can build a physical pitch, it cannot independently manufacture the informal team culture that determines intergroup dynamics on that pitch. A brief contextual vignette illustrates how existing group dynamics facilitate contact theory's equal status condition in practice. On one long-standing New York youth club team featuring players from several national backgrounds, a newly arrived immigrant from Côte d'Ivoire integrated rapidly into the squad, aided in part by shared French language skills already present among existing players. While an isolated qualitative example cannot support a general causal claim, it illustrates how pre-existing linguistic and cultural diversity within a team lowers structural barriers to entry for newcomers, satisfying equal-status conditions from within the team dynamic rather than through administrative intervention.

5. Case Study: Houston

In Houston, demographic immigration patterns form the mandatory starting condition for any municipal civic integration strategy. The foreign-born population across the nine-county Houston metropolitan area has expanded rapidly over the past decade, currently approaching 1.7 million residents. Nearly half of all chil-

dren in Houston reside in a household with at least one foreign-born parent, and the region has served as the primary United States resettlement destination for Afghan refugees (Migration Policy Institute, 2023). However, policy evaluations emphasize that demographic diversity translates into civic participation only when accompanied by targeted investments in English language instruction, legal assistance, and community-level programming. This sets a realistic baseline for what athletic funding alone can accomplish (Migration Policy Institute, 2023).

Unlike New York's broad universal access approach, Houston's World Cup legacy response is built around targeted support for underserved communities, which include immigrants and refugees. Announced in March 2026, Freekicks Soccer allocated \$1.5 million toward building and refurbishing twenty-three soccer pitches across six public parks in historically under-resourced neighborhoods. This was done in partnership with five local youth soccer clubs that collectively promise over 1,200 annual participant scholarships (Houston World Cup 2026 Host Committee, 2026). However, an examination of official public program materials reveals important administrative restrictions regarding eligibility and allocation criteria. While public announcements explicitly advertise the initiative as serving refugee and immigrant youth, published host committee documents do not specify formal legal status requirements, income verification thresholds, or standardized demographic selection criteria for scholarship recipients. Instead, participant selection and scholarship allocation are assigned directly to the five partner youth clubs, operating under geographic targeting (park placement in low-income neighborhoods) rather than centralized demographic screening. Since public documents do not establish explicit beneficiary tracking mechanisms, the initiative's direct reach to underserved populations remains dependent on partner club outreach rather than verifiable municipal administrative mandates.

Operating alongside this legacy initiative is a pre-existing ecosystem of organizations dedicated directly to forced migrants. Most prominently, Amaanah Lions, founded in 2013, provides free athletic training and competitive play for refugees aged sixteen to twenty-five, competing continuously in the local Houston HFA League since 2014 and earning national recognition from USA for UNHCR as a model for refugee inclusion (Amaanah Refugee Services, n.d.; USA for UNHCR, 2026). Additionally, professional clubs such as Houston Dynamo FC and Houston Dash independently operate free youth programs designed to remove financial entry barriers (Houston Dynamo FC, n.d.).

Collectively, Houston displays a denser concentration of immigrant-focused soccer infrastructure assembled over a shorter timeline than New York, making it a critical case for evaluating the selection problem introduced in Section 2.4. While Freekicks Soccer can be interpreted as evidence that targeted athletic funding generates community cohesion (Model A), the same empirical facts support the selection hypothesis (Model B): the local host committee, youth clubs, and non-profit networks in Houston already possessed the institutional capacity required to mobilize a multi-club legacy framework within months, indicating that pre-existing organizational capacity enabled the initiative rather than vice versa.

Additionally, the participant composition of Houston's targeted programs presents a nuanced test of the social capital framework. While theoretical models predict that refugee-specific organizations primarily build intra-group bonding capital rather than cross-group bridging capital, empirical realities in Houston complicate this binary. Amaanah Lions explicitly states that while its primary mission is serving forced migrants, it maintains an open-door policy for all disadvantaged local youth and competes directly in mainstream, non-segregated municipal leagues (*Amaanah Refugee Services, n.d.*). Because published organizational materials do not report exact roster compositions or opponent demographics, the precise degree of cross-group contact cannot be empirically verified. Thus, the theoretical claim remains conditional—if targeted programs concentrate contact within isolated demographic groups, bridging outcomes will remain bounded.

Finally, aligned with critical reviews by *Spaaij et al. (2019)*, none of Houston's soccer initiatives claim to resolve underlying structural barriers such as legal status uncertainty, systemic unemployment, or housing discrimination. Athletic participation may offer vital localized support and belonging, but its capacity to drive broader socio-economic integration remains bounded by these macroeconomic and legal constraints.

6. Comparative Analysis

6.1. Two Strategies

While both host regions leveraged the 2026 FIFA World Cup to expand community soccer, they deployed their investments toward fundamentally distinct policy objectives. New York designed a universal access initiative (NY Kicks) focused on eliminating financial entry barriers for all youth within economically distressed geographic areas. Conversely, Houston established a targeted initiative (FreeKicks Soccer) designed explicitly to direct facilities, funding, and scholarships toward underserved neighborhoods.

Framed through the theoretical lens established in Section 2, these policy designs reflect different mechanisms for generating social capital. Because the New York/North Jersey metropolitan area already possesses a demographically diverse grassroots soccer culture, a universal program that lowers financial access barriers theoretically creates the structural opportunity for cross-group bridging capital by placing participants from varying backgrounds onto shared pitches. However, as *Walseth (2008)* warns, the simple presence of regional diversity and shared facilities does not necessarily demonstrate mixed, cooperative, or repeated cross-group participation. Universal access functions as a conditional mechanism as it removes the primary financial entry barrier. However, bridging capital will emerge only if local club rosters are actively integrated and structured around cooperative and consistent intergroup contact.

These strategies are not mutually exclusive, nor does either represent an inherently flawed policy choice. Rather, they address distinct dimensions of civic integration. New York benefits from existing demographic mixing on the pitch but strug-

gles with financial access, whereas Houston excels at removing access barriers for vulnerable populations but risks concentrating contact within isolated group settings. An optimal integration policy would synthesize both approaches by removing financial barriers as Houston does while also placing newcomers into mixed, integrated settings as New York's existing club ecosystem naturally accommodates.

6.2. Adjusting for Population Served

Surface-level comparisons of headline funding announcements invite a straightforward interpretation that New York committed four times the resources of Houston (\$6 million versus \$1.5 million). However, this large disparity looks substantially different once relative target population sizes are described. Dividing each program's total announced allocation by the foreign-born population of its respective administrative jurisdiction yields a per-capita investment of \$1.30 per foreign-born resident in New York State compared to \$0.88 in the Houston metropolitan area. As illustrated in **Figure 2**, accounting for target population scale narrows the apparent funding disparity from 4 to 1 to a modest ratio of approximately 1.5 to 1. This per-capita recalculation functions strictly as an order-of-magnitude scale heuristic rather than a measure of comparative policy effort.

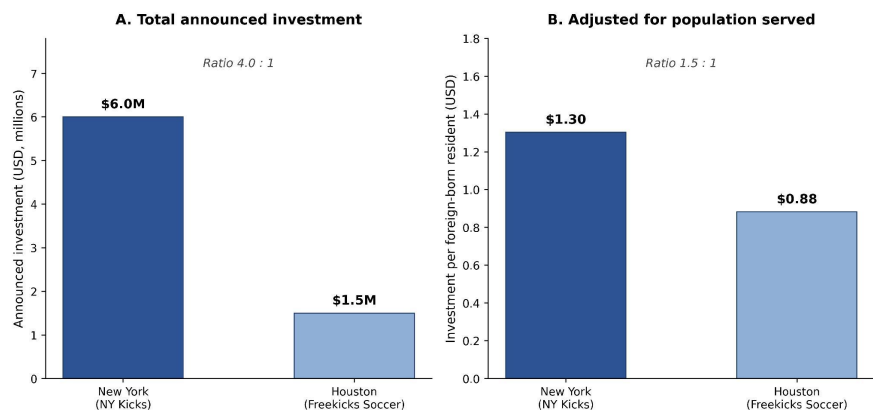


Figure 2. Legacy soccer investment before and after adjustment for population served. Panel A displays total announced funding (\$6 M vs. \$1.5 M). Panel B displays funding per foreign-born resident across respective administrative jurisdictions: New York State (4.6 million foreign-born residents; [USAFacts, 2024](#)) and the nine-county Houston metropolitan area (1.7 million foreign-born residents; [Migration Policy Institute, 2023](#)). Sources: [Hochul & Empire State Development \(2026\)](#); [Houston World Cup 2026 Host Committee \(2026\)](#).

Three methodological caveats must attach to this per-capita calculation. First, the underlying financial mechanisms differ: NY Kicks represents appropriated public state funding, whereas FreeKicks Soccer reflects projected private and club-level capital investment. Second, the administrative jurisdictions differ in geographic scope and governance tiers. NY Kicks represents statewide public funding across New York State (which includes the New York City portion of the host

region alongside upstate municipal areas), while Freekicks Soccer is concentrated within six specific parks across the Houston metropolitan area. Calculating NY Kicks across the full foreign-born population of New York State (4.6 million) captures the total administrative footprint of the funding body, even though it includes populations outside the immediate FIFA host region while also excluding North Jersey residents who fall under New Jersey's separate state jurisdiction. Rather than expressing exact local participant density, this measurement serves as the structural scale indicator that compares statewide public investment against metropolitan-level committee investment. Third, because neither initiative restricts participation exclusively to foreign-born residents, the foreign-born population serves as an indicator of target population scale rather than a precise count of program beneficiaries.

With these caveats acknowledged, this per-capita recalculation serves a specific descriptive purpose. It demonstrates that aggregate headline funding differences are largely a result of administrative jurisdiction size rather than program intensity. Because the two initiatives function across different governmental tiers, draw from different funding mechanisms, and serve broader beneficiary pools than foreign-born populations alone, this per-capita measurement cannot be interpreted as a measure of relative policy commitment. Instead, it provides a simple descriptive scale correction against depending completely on aggregate mega-event press announcements when comparing municipal legacy models.

6.3. Systematic Evaluation of Contact Conditions

To systematically analyze NY Kicks and Freekicks Soccer against Allport's contact theory framework (Allport, 1954), **Table 1** categorizes the status of each structural condition as *Supported* (explicitly established in public policy/operational documents), *Unsupported* (directly inhibited by structural barriers or rules), or *Unknown* (not verifiable due to an absence of post-implementation data).

Table 1. Systematic assessment of structural contact conditions across initiatives.

Contact Condition	NY Kicks	Freekicks Soccer	Primary Empirical/Administrative Basis
Equal Status	Supported (for Participation)	Supported (for Participation)	Direct financial subsidies (1,200+ scholarships in Houston; \$1M participation grants in NY) remove entry fee barriers.
Common Goals	Supported	Supported	Both structure activities around collaborative team play and non-monetary social motivations (Project Play, Aspen Institute, 2026).
Cooperative Interaction	Unknown	Unknown	Public administrative records specify facility access but do not document on-pitch coaching styles or session structures.
Institutional Support	Supported	Supported	High-level backing from state executive agencies (ESD/OCFS in NY) and municipal host committees (Houston World Cup 2026 Host Committee, 2026).
Repetition Over Time	Unknown	Unknown	Facility investments are multi-year, but individual participant retention and longitudinal attendance are unmonitored.
Participant Group Mixing	Supported (Conditional)	Unsupported/ Unknown	NY operates universal access in demographically diverse leagues; Houston targets forced migrants without public roster mixing metrics.

As **Table 1** shows, while both programs secure strong *Institutional Support* and establish *Equal Status* by eliminating financial entry fees, neither program's administrative materials provide evidence to verify *Cooperative Interaction* or *Repetition over Time*. Additionally, *Participant Group Mixing* is unverifiable in Houston due to a lack of published demographic roster data. Thus, neither initiative can be characterized as fully satisfying Allport's conditions prior to post-tournament empirical evaluation.

7. Discussion: Contested Legacy and Reverse Causation

Research in sports economics demonstrates that the localized economic windfalls promised by professional sports franchises and mega-event organizers are systematically overstated relative to post hoc empirical evaluations (Bradbury, Coates, & Humphreys, 2023). A parallel analytical skepticism must apply by default to social legacy and intergroup cohesion claims. This caution is warranted not because these social benefits are inherently unattainable, but because legacy claims share an identical structural vulnerability in that they are invariably publicized at the peak of political enthusiasm, promoted by institutions with strong interests in demonstrating success, and announced prior to any empirical evaluation. Nothing in this comparative analysis indicates that NY Kicks or Freekicks Soccer will inevitably fail. Rather, the analytical claim is precise: as of mid-2026, no empirical evidence exists to confirm that either program will succeed, and the structural conditions necessary for sport to build cross-group social cohesion have not had sufficient time to operate.

Furthermore, the selection identification challenge stated in Section 2.4 carries important practical implications for policy replication. If Model B is correct, then the multi-club organizational network observed in Houston does not represent a portable policy blueprint that other municipalities can simply replicate. An institutionally fragmented or less organized community receiving identical funding might fail to achieve equivalent outcomes, not because athletic contact is ineffective in that setting, but because the foundational civic capacity upon which the model depends is absent.

The administrative design of NY Kicks offers a partial quasi-experimental hedge against this selection problem. By explicitly prioritizing capital grants for severely and moderately distressed communities, NY Kicks tests Model A more directly than an initiative operating through established, highly capable youth club networks. This institutional divergence provides a clear empirical framework for subsequent research. If communities receiving NY Kicks funding demonstrate measurable cross-group cohesion gains comparable to those in Houston despite lower baseline civic capacity, the evidence would favor Model A. Conversely, if cohesion gains materialize only in communities with dense pre-existing organizational networks, the evidence would confirm Model B.

Finally, aligned with critical critiques by Spaaij et al. (2019) and Moustakas and Robrade (2023), both legacy initiatives invoke integration as an overarching ob-

jective without operationally defining the term in a manner that permits empirical measurement. The sport sociology literature repeatedly cautions that vague integration rhetoric frequently reduces to a one-sided expectation that immigrant and refugee populations assimilate into an existing athletic culture, rather than fostering a reciprocal process of mutual adaptation ([Migration Policy Institute, 2025](#)). Neither program's public administrative materials address this conceptual distinction, which is an omission that should be addressed at the program design stage rather than retroactively during post-tournament evaluation.

8. Implications for Policy and Practice

Three key policy implications emerge from this comparative analysis, each addressing a specific structural challenge identified across the two host regions.

First, policy designers must separate capital infrastructure funding from direct participation subsidies during program evaluation. The Aspen Institute data demonstrate that financial registration fees represent the primary binding constraint for low-income and immigrant youth in New York. While NY Kicks addresses this by separating \$5 million in capital grants from \$1 million in programmatic subsidies, legacy initiatives frequently conflate facility construction with programmatic inclusion. Initiatives that fund pitch construction without subsidizing operational expenses risk building physical assets that lower-income target populations remain financially unable to access. Reporting and evaluating capital expenditures separately from participation support will allow policymakers to measure whether physical fields translate into actual inclusive access.

Second, program administrators should explicitly define which form of social capital an initiative is structured to generate. A refugee-targeted initiative designed to foster security, peer solidarity, and mutual assistance operates primarily to build intra-group bonding capital. Such initiatives should be evaluated on measures of localized stability and individual belonging rather than penalized for failing to produce broad cross-group trust gains they were never structurally organized to achieve. On the other hand, universal access programs operating in multi-ethnic settings pursue bridging capital and should be assessed using intergroup trust metrics. Aggregating both distinct social functions under the vague umbrella of integration obscures program mechanisms and perpetuates the ambiguity documented by [Moustakas and Robrade \(2023\)](#).

Third, legacy claims and headline funding announcements should be contextualized against population scale and geographic scope. As demonstrated in Section 6.2, raw comparisons of aggregate figures risk mistaking size for relative policy intensity, as a fourfold difference in headline funding narrows to a 1.5-to-1 ratio when adjusted for target population scale. Policy evaluations across mega-event host cities should report descriptive per-capita benchmarks alongside institutional context, and explicitly account for differences in funding mechanisms and legal jurisdictions rather than treat aggregate figures as direct measures of comparative policy effort.

9. Limitations

Because this study relies exclusively on secondary administrative, demographic, and policy data without primary empirical evaluations, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, because both NY Kicks and Freekicks Soccer were launched immediately prior to this analysis, no post-implementation participation, tracking, or outcome evaluation data yet exist. Consequently, the comparative framework in Sections 6 and 7 evaluates program design, institutional structure, and policy intent rather than empirical intergroup cohesion outcomes.

Second, the per-capita recalculation presented in Section 6.2 carries necessary methodological constraints. The denominators rely on demographic baselines drawn from slightly different reporting years (2023 for Houston; 2024 for New York) and compare distinct administrative tiers—an entire state jurisdiction versus a nine-county metropolitan area. Furthermore, the comparison contrasts NY Kicks' appropriated public state funding with Freekicks Soccer's projected private and club-level investment. Consequently, this per-capita metric should be interpreted strictly as an order-of-magnitude heuristic intended to correct for gross population disparities, rather than a precise financial parity ratio.

Third, the claim that targeted programs generate less bridging contact remains a conditional prediction taken from sociological theory rather than a proven outcome, and empirical realities, such as Amaanah Lions competing in mainstream municipal leagues, highlight nuances that complicate simple theoretical binaries.

Fourth, this study cannot separate World Cup legacy effects from civic infrastructure predating the tournament, given that key organizations like Amaanah Lions were established over a decade prior to Houston being designated as a host region. Finally, examining two metropolitan regions within a single national context during a single host year provides a narrow basis for broad spatial or cross-national generalization. Divergent municipal governance models, alternative athletic disciplines, or contrasting national integration policies could produce a different structural balance between the contact and selection pathways in **Figure 1**. Similarly, the qualitative contextual vignette described in Section 4 serves solely as an illustrative setting and should not be interpreted as a generalizable claim beyond its specific context.

10. Conclusion

Both host regions leveraged the 2026 FIFA World Cup as a catalyst to direct significant public and private funding into community soccer initiatives. However, a systematic evaluation of Allport's structural contact conditions reveals that key operational factors—specifically cooperative interaction, contact repetition over time, and participant group mixing—remain empirical unknowns rather than demonstrated program features. New York pursued a universal access model operating within an already demographically mixed soccer culture, targeting the financial cost barrier. Houston established a targeted model removing financial barriers for underserved communities that may build intra-group

bonding capital more readily than cross-group bridging capital. Adjusting for target population scale demonstrates that the two financial commitments are far closer in scale than aggregate headline figures suggest (\$1.30 versus \$0.88 per foreign-born resident).

Determining which strategy produces more social cohesion cannot be definitively resolved with the preliminary administrative data available. However, this empirical limitation does not render the core question unanswerable. To evaluate these initiatives rigorously post-tournament, future research should execute a multi-wave, quasi-experimental research design across five key methodological dimensions:

1) **Baseline Measurement:** Survey youth participants and families before major facilities open to establish initial benchmarks for trust, out-group attitudes, and local civic participation.

2) **Comparison Communities:** Implement a case-control framework to compare neighborhoods receiving NY Kicks or Freekicks Soccer funding against similar neighborhoods (matched by income, foreign-born population, and existing sports infrastructure) that received no legacy funding.

3) **Participant Sampling:** Utilize stratified random sampling across three distinct participant cohorts: a) youth in universal access programs (NY Kicks), b) youth in refugee-targeted programs (Freekicks Soccer/Amaanah Lions), and c) youth in non-funded municipal leagues.

4) **Outcome Measures for Bridging and Bonding Capital:** Track bridging and bonding capital separately using established survey scales. Measure bridging capital through generalized out-group trust, cross-group friendship networks, and out-group prosocial behaviors (adapted from Mousa, 2020). Bonding capital should be measured through intra-group belonging scales, localized emotional safety indices, and mutual support expectations.

5) **Accounting for Pre-Existing Civic Capacity:** Control for potential selection bias (Model B) by incorporating baseline civic indicators—such as pre-2026 non-profit density, voter turnout, and existing sports infrastructure—into multi-level regression and difference-in-differences models.

Executing this longitudinal evaluation framework would directly test the paper's theoretical models, moving beyond promotional mega-event claims to deliver empirical clarity for future host city policy design.

Author Contributions

Adam Sattar: Formal Analysis, Writing—Original Draft, and Writing—Review and Editing. **Tophy David:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing—Review and Editing, and Supervision. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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