Civil societies can broadly be characterized as a social infrastructure of dense networks that cross-cut existing social cleavages such as race, ethnicity, and gender (Edwards et al., 2001). Although the importance of promoting civil society has been magnified in recent years, most societies remain deeply divided along one or more of these social cleavages. In the United States, racial divisions remain especially salient, with racial disparities in areas such as private insurance and healthcare (Gould & Hertel-Fernandez, 2010), incarceration rates (Blumstein, 2015), and education (Troyna, 2012) still prevalent. In response to these concerns, numerous politicians, policymakers, and scholars have called for programs that facilitate positive cross-race relations. While promoting these relationships is germane at every age level, adolescence has been targeted as the most effective life stage to initiate such programs. For this particular demographic, school sport has been highlighted as one of the most effective strategies to promote cross-race relations (Clotfelter, 2002).

Ideally, sport teams provide active goal-oriented settings for teammates to work together towards common objectives (e.g. winning), which helps reduce prejudice and promote acceptance amongst players (Pettigrew, 1998). In addition, due to the high social status of sport within schools, positive outgroup perceptions formed by athletes are expected to diffuse across friendship networks faster and more efficiently than those formed in other activity types (e.g. performing arts, academic clubs) (Schaefer et al., 2011). Indeed, several studies have indicated positive cross-race relations among sport participants have contributed to improving school race relations. This process has received considerable support from school administrators, and is romanticized with great effect in various forms of sport media and movies (Leary, 2013).

However, empirical studies assessing the impact of sport participation on cross-race relations has been rather inconsistent, with some concerned sport may actually intensify racial segregation in schools. Indeed, while sport has facilitated positive cross-group interactions in certain instances, it has also been a context for racial and cultural dissonance (Hawkins, 2013). Unfortunately, with most studies focusing narrowly on individual interactions, there is little information on how key social and structural features of schools influence this process. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine how the social and structural arrangements of schools influence the efficacy of sport in promoting cross-race friendships.

Theoretical Framework

Allport’s (1954) theory is the predominant framework guiding initiatives that address issues of racism, prejudice, and discrimination through intergroup contact. According to Allport (1954), cross-group contact is positive and effective only when four conditions are met: (1) equal status of the groups in the situation, (2) common goals, (3) intergroup cooperation, and (4) support from the authorities, laws, and customs. Recently, scholars have highlighted the importance of a fifth condition, (5) friendship potential, which has been added to Allport’s initial model (Pettigrew et al., 2011). From this perspective, situations that provide close interactions between participants can facilitate friendships that enhance positive contact effects (Pettigrew et al., 2011). By promoting what Allport (1954) described as “intimate contact”, it is posited that friendship inherently evokes the four conditions that promote positive intergroup relations (Pettigrew et al., 2011).

To understand how sport contributes to friendship formation, Feld’s (1981) focus theory provides a useful framework. Focus theory posits that individuals participating in activities organized around similar foci are more likely to form interpersonal relationships. From this perspective, since sport initiates clustering around the purpose
of the activity, rather than the socio-demographic profiles of participants, it offers an ideal setting to promote cross-race friendships (Hansen et al., 2003). However, it is important to note that in addition to individual partialities, the social and structural arrangement of situations also influence these interactions, especially in institutional settings such as schools. For example, the size and racial heterogeneity of a student population can significantly influence the structure of school sports, and the nature of interactions within them. Understanding these influences is instrumental to developing school sport policies and practices that facilitate rather than constrain opportunities for cross-race friendship formation.

Method

The data for this study comes from a cross-sectional sample of the first wave (Wave I) of The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), which is a nationally representative sample of students from middle schools and high schools throughout the United States (grades 7-12). School level data came from interviews with representative administrators, and individual level data came from surveys administered to students in each of these schools. A hierarchical mixed-effects logit model was utilized for analysis. Structural (e.g., geographic location, public/private, racial busing/no racial busing) and social (e.g., school friendship network density, gender segregation, grade segregation, student heterogeneity, teacher heterogeneity) features of the schools were entered as fixed effects, and individual factors (e.g., in-degree centrality, socioeconomic status, gender, sport participation) were entered as random effects. Additional models were used to compare and contrast the effect of different sport types.

Results and Discussion

Our results suggest school and individual level factors have a significant impact on the likelihood of cross-race friendship selection. For example, students in public schools were less likely to have cross-race friends than students in private schools, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to have cross-race friends than students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Interestingly, after controlling for these factors, participation in sport activities did not significantly influence the likelihood of having a cross-race friend. However, there was considerable variance associated with this estimate, indicating the impact of sport on cross-race friendship selection ranges from a significant positive effect for some schools, to a significant negative effect for others. To determine whether this variance is attributable to differences between specific sports, we compared the relative influence of each sport type on cross-race friendship selection. Results indicate certain sports (i.e., soccer) had significant positive influences on cross-race friendships (i.e., soccer), while others did not (i.e., baseball).

School sports and sport activity clubs are some of the most popular extracurricular activities available to administrators to promote cross-race friendships, yet the salience of these activities appears very inconsistent. Understanding sport in relation to broader social and structural environments is critical to understanding how activities can be managed to facilitate positive cross-race relations among youth. Our discussion focuses specifically on the influence of school sport policy in shaping these environments, and the different options available to administrators.