

Fact Sheet: The Importance of Sports Participation for Transgender Youth

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A view of the goal at a soccer field in San Jose, California, March 2017. (Getty/David Madison)

See also: [“Fair Play: The Importance of Sports Participation for Transgender Youth”](#)

In the wake of recent progress in both policy and public opinion on issues such as marriage equality and expanded protections against discrimination, opponents of LGBTQ equality have mobilized to stoke transphobia and legislate anti-trans policies by focusing on the participation of transgender youth in school athletic programs.¹ During a pandemic and economic crisis that should demand policymakers’ full attention and government response, many anti-LGBTQ legislators are instead using their time and resources to advocate for bills that would ban transgender students from playing sports.

Fifteen states and Washington, D.C., currently have trans-inclusive state athletic association guidance, and years of open participation by transgender students in those places have produced no evidence of purported harms to cisgender people. Meanwhile, sports provide opportunities to learn leadership, teamwork, self-esteem, discipline, and community—benefits that should be available to every young person, regardless of their gender identity. CAP’s research shows that denying transgender students these opportunities harms this already vulnerable population and does not demonstrably benefit cisgender youth.

Mental health and discrimination among transgender youth

Transgender youth already face high rates of family rejection, violence, discrimination, and suicidality. Transgender youth should have equal access to the benefits of sports participation. When denied these opportunities, they experience significant harms.

- Transgender youth regularly face violence and stigma. In 2015, 77 percent of transgender adults who were out or perceived as transgender while in grades K-12 reported negative experiences at school. These experiences included verbal or physical harassment, physical or sexual assault, or being prevented from dressing in accordance with their gender identity.²
- Suicidality is shockingly common among transgender youth. Almost 44 percent of transgender youth—versus 16 percent of cisgender youth—reported considering suicide in the previous year.³

Figure 1

Current U.S. policies on sports participation for transgender students

Sports participation is lower among transgender youth⁴ in part because of the patchwork of existing policies that limit access.

- The Biden administration recently interpreted the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision on *Bostock v. Clayton County* as prohibiting gender identity discrimination under Title IX. This interpretation will protect transgender students from discrimination, including in the context of school sports participation.⁵
- 15 states and Washington, D.C.⁶—together home to more than 6.8 million high school students⁷ and approximately 42 percent of transgender high school-age youth⁸—have policies allowing transgender students to participate in school sports without requirements of medical or legal transition.
- Other states either offer no guidance or have policies requiring transgender students to experience administrative scrutiny or undergo medical procedures in order to participate. Six states limit participation solely based on athletic institutions’ individual definitions of “biological sex” rather than scientific evidence or individual identity.
- The NCAA, the International Olympic Committee, and various professional and amateur leagues have allowed transgender athletes to participate in accordance with their gender identity since as early as 2004.⁹
- In 2020, 20 states introduced high school transgender sports bans,¹⁰ one of which passed in Idaho and has since been enjoined, with the court noting an “absence of any empirical evidence” justifying the law.¹¹ In 2021 so far, dozens of states have introduced similar bills, even where lawmakers cannot cite a single case of a transgender girl participating in sports.¹²

“Suppressing myself just to be able to play sports felt like a piece of me was dying, like I was killing myself at the same time—and that’s why I ultimately came out and transitioned.”

– Emet, field hockey player, coach and transgender man¹³

Trans-inclusive policies do no harm to cisgender youth

Despite opponents' frequent claims that transgender girls are a threat to women's sports, CAP's analysis shows that trans-inclusive policies have no negative effect on girls' sports participation.

- In states with inclusive policies, high school girls' participation in sports remained unchanged from 2011 to 2019. In states with exclusive policies, girls' participation has decreased.¹⁴
- In California and Connecticut, which have inclusive policies, girls' sports participation has increased, including by almost 14 percent in California from 2014 to 2020.¹⁵

Trans-exclusive policies substantially harm transgender youth

Transgender youth already experience unsafe and unwelcoming environments, and evidence shows that discriminatory school policies only harm them further.

- GLSEN's 2019 National School Climate Survey found that 1 in 10 LGBTQ youth have been discouraged from playing school sports due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.¹⁶
- More than half of transgender students reported being prevented from using bathrooms and locker rooms that align with their gender identity.
- LGBTQ youth who had experienced discriminatory policies reported lower self-esteem and school belonging than those who had not, as well as higher rates of depression and school absenteeism.
- Lack of acceptance and affirmation increases mental health risks. A 2020 survey found that 28 percent of transgender youth whose pronouns are not affirmed attempted suicide in the past year. That number decreased to 12 percent for those whose pronouns are affirmed by all or most people in their lives.¹⁷

"Horses saved my life when I was going through my transition, and I'm sure that numerous other trans athletes can say the same for themselves. I truly cannot imagine what it would have been like if I wasn't able to ride while I was going through all of that."

– Jay, equestrian athlete and transgender man

Figure 2

Trans-inclusive policies can substantially benefit transgender youth

Participation in athletics in general can be beneficial to youth, and policies allowing transgender youth to access athletics can mitigate the harms they face.

- Inclusive school policies are associated with lower suicide risk and greater feelings of safety at school for LGBTQ students.¹⁸
- Transgender and nonbinary students at schools with inclusive policies were less likely to skip school or experience victimization or harassment.¹⁹
- Transgender and nonbinary athletes had higher grades than those who did not participate in sports, and LGBTQ athletes reported 20 percent lower rates of depressive symptoms.²⁰
- Transgender students in states with fully inclusive athletic policies were 14 percentage points less likely to have considered suicide in the past year than students in states with no guidance.²¹

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Endnotes

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13. The athletes whose stories are included in this fact sheet were recruited through networks of advocacy organizations. All interviews were conducted remotely via Skype by the author in November and December 2020, transcribed using an online transcription service (Rev), and are presented here with minor edits for length and clarity. For more information and personal stories, see Appendix B in Shoshana K. Goldberg, “Fair Play: The Importance of Sports Participation for Transgender Youth” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2021), available at <https://americanprogress.org/issues/lgbtq-rights/reports/2021/02/08/495502/fair-play/>.
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