PLAY TO WIN
IMPROVING THE LIVES OF LGBTQ YOUTH IN SPORTS
A SPECIAL LOOK INTO THE STATE OF LGBTQ INCLUSION IN YOUTH SPORTS
HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION
INTRODUCTION

For millions of Americans, sport embodies our ideals of equality, fairness, perseverance, discipline and integrity. On the field, court or track, in the ring, on the ice, or in the stands, we transcend our differences in the spirit of honest competition and perseverance.

But in too many places, sports are not always a safe or affirming space for aspiring LGBTQ athletes.
Despite the growing visibility of LGBTQ athletes, coaches and officials, and the incremental gains in professional and collegiate sports, youth sports continues to lag behind. Too many LGBTQ youth report that they have witnessed or been the targets of anti-LGBTQ treatment or exclusion. They fear discrimination from coaches or officials, which may force them to conceal their identities from their teams.¹

Transgender and gender expansive youth face even greater barriers to sports participation. Anti-transgender policies work to keep trans youth off the field. Even in jurisdictions with more inclusive policies, a lack of education, awareness and training among coaches and parents can make the experience actively hostile for trans youth.

84% OF AMERICANS SURVEYED HAVE WITNESSED OR EXPERIENCED ANTI-LGBTQ ATTITUDES IN SPORTS

Sport plays an enormous role in the lives and identities of young athletes across America. Though physical health benefits of participation are well known, sport can also instill life skills including accountability, leadership and dedication.
Participation in sport also goes hand in hand with achievement and positive outcomes. Youth who play sports tend to do better academically. They develop teamwork and problem solving skills. They make better health decisions, and are less likely to engage in various risk behaviors.²

When LGBTQ youth are excluded from sport, they miss out on these important character-building lessons and benefits. Moreover, so long as any young athlete is kept on the sidelines or excluded altogether simply for being who they are, all youth are being deprived of the true spirit of sport — and its ideals of fairness, competition and integrity.

This type of inclusion is particularly critical in team sports, where participation is linked with increased self-esteem and self-confidence, and lowered stress, anxiety and depression rates.³

Inclusion doesn’t just benefit individual athletes — it teaches all team members how to build camaraderie, foster community, emphasize diversity and teach discipline and responsibility to one another.

**UPHOLDING THE TRUE SPIRIT OF SPORT REQUIRES PROMOTING AND CELEBRATING THE INCLUSION OF ALL YOUTH IN SPORT.**

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LEFT ON THE SIDELINES

Sport plays an influential role in the lives of young Americans. A nationally representative study from the University of Michigan found that 68% of high school seniors play at least one sport.\(^4\)

Comparatively, just \textbf{24 percent} of LGBTQ youth, and only 21% of high school seniors, currently play on a sports team for their school, with 13 percent of reporting that they avoided playing sports altogether because they “\textit{do not feel [they] will be accepted on the team because [they are] LGBTQ.}”

\(^4\) Johnston LD, O’Malley PM, Miech RA, Bachman JG, Schulenberg JE. Monitoring the Future National Survey Results on Drug Use: 1975-2016: Overview, Key Findings on Adolescent Drug Use. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Institute for Social Research; 2017. Note: HRC Youth Survey asked specifically about school sports whereas Monitoring the Future asked about sport participation both in and out of school. However, only 4 percent of respondents to the HRC sample report that they did not participate in sports at their school due to already playing an outside-of-school sporting activity.
In the 33 states that still have anti-LGBTQ sport participation policies, only 20% of LGBTQ youth report that they participate in sport. 

Anti-LGBTQ sport participation policies include states with no policies, states that require transgender athletes to undergo unnecessary medical intervention, states that require birth certificate changes, and/or states that make judgements on a case-by-case basis. Information from TransAthlete.com.
WHAT KEEPS THEM AWAY FROM SPORTS PARTICIPATION?

Youth respondents said:

“I WOULD NEED TO PROVE MY MASCULINITY TO MY TEAMMATES – THAT ISN’T WORTH HOW MUCH I LOVED PLAYING SPORTS.”

“THE GUYS ON SPORTS TEAMS... CALL EVERYTHING THEY DON’T LIKE ‘GAY’.”
**Percentage of Youth Who Currently Play on a Sports Team**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Sample</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRC Sample of LGBTQ</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-binary Youth</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender Boys</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender Girls</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: HRC = Human Rights Campaign. Non-binary youth refers to individuals who do not identify solely as male or female. Transgender boys are males who identify as transgender. Transgender girls are females who identify as transgender.
Coaches set the tone both on and off the field. Their actions and attitudes shape the team environment and greatly impact a player’s experience.

Unfortunately, too often a coach’s attitudes, behaviors and biases – whether explicit or implicit – can prevent the creation of an environment where LGBTQ youth feel safe disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity.
“I was bullied by coaches and attacked by my teammates.”
LGBQ YOUTH ARE NOT OPEN TO THEIR COACHES ABOUT THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION

*Based on number of LGBQ youth who have a coach or coaches, n=7494.
“I WAS BULLIED FOR BEING TRANSGENDER.”
82% of transgender and gender expansive youth are not out to their coaches about their gender identity.*

*Based on number of transgender youth who have a coach or coaches, n=2393.
Without the support of coaches, teammates and/or governing bodies, LGBTQ youth drop out of sports at a rate almost twice that of their non-LGBTQ peers. Furthermore, youth who drop out deal with mental health outcomes worse than their peers who still play and those who never played at all.

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**BOXED OUT**

Exclusionary policies and environments in youth sports pose even greater barriers for young transgender and gender expansive athletes.
Too many are forced to play on teams that are inconsistent with their gender identity because of exclusive, inconsistent and arbitrarily enforced policies. These policies, coupled with hostile practices and compounded by a lack of awareness and understanding among coaches and teammates, keep transgender and gender expansive youth from fully participating in sport.

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1 Whether transgender athletes are allowed to compete in a sport or play on a team that is consistent with their gender identity varies widely across states, school boards, and sporting associations. Erin E. Buzuvis, (2016). As Who They Really Are: Expanding Opportunities for Transgender Athletes to Participate in Youth and Scholastic Sports. Law and Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice 34:2. https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/lawineq/vol34/iss2/2/
“I DON’T KNOW WHICH TEAM I’D BE PLACED INTO – THE GIRLS TEAM OR THE BOYS TEAM. IN ADDITION, MY PARENTS WOULD FIND OUT IF I WERE PLACED INTO A BOYS TEAM AND I’D BE FORCED TO COME OUT TO THEM.”
SPORT PARTICIPATION BY GENDER IDENTITY

- **Cisgender:** A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. [https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms](https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms)

- **68%** national sample of all youth
- **29%** cisgender LGBTQ girls
- **25%** cisgender LGBTQ boys
- **19%** genderqueer youth
- **19%** non-binary youth
- **14%** transgender boys
- **12%** transgender girls

**Boxed Out:**
- **29%** cisgender LGBQ girls
- **25%** cisgender LGBQ boys

20% of all youth participation is represented by transgender and genderqueer youth.
An alarming number of LGBTQ youth don’t feel safe participating in sports.

Practice and competition aren’t the only times when young LGBTQ student-athletes are fearful of discrimination.

11% of LGBTQ youth report that they never feel safe in the locker room.

Including:
- 41% of transgender boys
- 34% of transgender girls
- 31% of non-binary youth

51% of trans youth never use the school locker room aligned with their gender identity.

Out of these:
- 16% currently play a sport
- 32% used to play a sport, but stopped
- 52% have never played a sport
78% of American spectators and athletes believe that youth team sports aren’t safe for LGBTQ people.

“MY PARENTS TOLD ME I’D HOLD THE TEAM BACK BY NOT BEING [CISGENDER].”
When LGBTQ youth are given an opportunity to play, they thrive. These young athletes may also be better able to manage difficulties elsewhere in their lives than their non-athlete peers.
THE POSITIVE EFFECT OF SPORTS ON LGBTQ YOUTH

“IT ALWAYS FEEL SAFE IN MY CLASSROOM.”

“I HARDLY EVER FELT DEPRESSED OVER THE LAST WEEK.”

“I HARDLY EVER FELT WORTHLESS OVER THE LAST WEEK.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Currently plays a sport</th>
<th>Never played</th>
<th>Used to play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“IT ALWAYS FEEL SAFE IN MY CLASSROOM.”</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“IT HARDLY EVER FELT WORLTHLESS OVER THE LAST WEEK.”</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“IT HARDLY EVER FELT WORLTHLESS OVER THE LAST WEEK.”</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although there is still much work to do to support LGBTQ youth, sports participation can play a significant role in helping LGBTQ young people build their self-confidence and improve their overall well-being.
All coaches, parents, fans and officials have the opportunity to make youth sports a safe, affirming and welcoming place for all athletes. By championing LGBTQ inclusion, we uphold and promote the ideals of fairness and equality and level the playing field for LGBTQ youth in sport.
**CHAMPION FOR LGBTQ INCLUSION**

**CREATE** safe spaces for all athletes, coaches, and fans at all times — on the field, in the locker rooms, in the stands, at home, and in the community.

**HOLD** players, coaches, teammates, and fans accountable for non-inclusive language or actions. Creating an inclusive team environment is everyone’s responsibility.

**ARM** yourself with information and resources about the laws and policies that impact your LGBTQ players, staff, and their families.

**MODEL** inclusive behaviors by weaving respect, diversity, and inclusion into your team’s culture on day one.

**PROMOTE** allyship and respect on and off the field of play. Your team culture isn’t just formed at practice.

**IMPLEMENT** LGBTQ inclusion policies. Make sure you have an inclusive non-discrimination statement, trans inclusive participation policies, competent data collection policies, LGBTQ-inclusive travel and uniform policies, and a fan code of conduct.

**ORGANIZE** inclusion trainings for players, coaches, and parents. Like in sports, it’s hard to improve without practice and learning.

Never Assume someone’s sexual orientation, gender identity, pronouns, or experiences.

To learn more visit www.HRC.im/sports
ABOUT THE STUDY

In 2017, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation partnered with researchers at the University of Connecticut to deploy a comprehensive survey capturing the experiences of LGBTQ youth in their family settings, schools, social circles, and communities. Over 17,000⁹ youth aged 13-17 participated in the survey, with representation from all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

More information about the survey process, materials, and respondent profiles can be found in the methodology in HRC’s full Youth Survey report, which can be found here.

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⁹ Play to Win utilized answers from all respondents who completed 10% or more of the survey.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Human Rights Campaign Foundation
Public Education & Research

The HRC Foundation’s Public Education & Research Program spearheads a wide variety of LGBTQ advocacy and outreach campaigns, working to ensure that the HRC Foundation’s resources and programs are timely, impactful, and inclusive. In addition to publishing resource guides, informational materials, and reports, the team conducts original quantitative and qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of LGBTQ people. The program also collaborates with academic researchers and provides guidance to other HRC initiatives in support of efforts to advance LGBTQ equality and well-being.

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BIOS

Ashland Johnson, Esq., Director, Public Education & Research

Ashland is a former Division I athlete, a sports equality advocate, and seasoned LGBTQ rights advocate. She currently leads the Human Rights Campaign’s public education, research and sports inclusion efforts. As a civil rights advocate, she focuses on the intersection of law, policy and public education with an emphasis on engaging underserved communities. Several key issue areas include health equity, sports equality, economic justice, trans inclusion, reproductive justice and racial justice. Ashland is a graduate of Furman University where she was a member of the women’s basketball. She graduated with a J.D. from the University of Georgia School of Law as a National Point Scholar and a Bill and Anne Shepherd Equal Rights Scholar. In 2016, she was named as one of the best LGBTQ lawyers under 40 by the National LGBT Bar Association. Ashland currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Point Foundation.

Liam Miranda, Senior Research Manager, Public Education & Research

Liam Miranda conducts, synthesizes and collaborates on research and data analysis that helps shape and strengthen the HRC Foundation’s public education and programmatic work. Liam has worked on research initiatives and campaigns within a variety of intersecting issue areas: including sports equality, racial justice, trans inclusion, attitude formation, moral decision-making, youth well-being, workplace inclusion, and more. He is also involved in principal data analysis and/or collection for a variety of current projects – ranging from assessing LGBTQ public health campaigns to increasing diversity and equity in nonprofit leadership. Liam is a former student-athlete and holds a degree with distinction in psychology with minors in both neuroscience and philosophy from Duke University.

Mark Lee, Senior Writer, Public Education & Research

Mark Lee serves as project manager, content strategist and editor for a wide range of LGBTQ-focused public education campaigns and research studies within the HRC Foundation, including surveys, polls, op-eds, blogs, reports, guides and other resources. Prior to joining HRC, Mark was the Manager of Research & Strategic Insights at Government Executive Media Group, leading a team that studied policy implementation and federal agency management. He has authored governmentwide workforce studies on diversity & inclusion and telework initiatives, presenting at major conferences and for agency leaders within the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Department of Labor and General Services Administration. Mark holds a degree in business administration from the UC Berkeley Haas School of Business.

SPECIAL THANKS

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