

### THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBT STUDENTS IN SCHOOL ATHLETICS

For students in general, participation in sports and physical activity at school has been shown to have positive effects on their physical health, self-esteem, and sense of connectedness to their schools. Involvement in extracurricular sports has also been shown to have academic benefits, both directly through school policies requiring athletes to maintain minimum GPA's and indirectly by strengthening students' identification with their school communities.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, some research suggests that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students may not have access to the benefits of participating in school athletics because they may be less likely than their non-LGBT peers to attend Physical Education (P.E.) classes or play on a sports team.<sup>2</sup> Using data from GLSEN's 2011 National School Climate Survey, this brief examines LGBT students' experiences in school athletics, including the benefits of their involvement and the barriers to their participation.

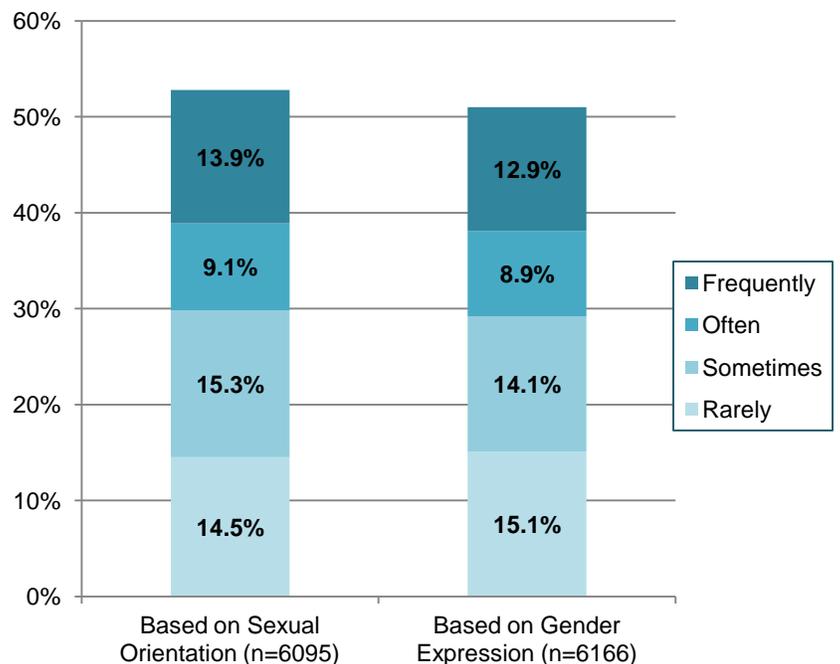
**FACT: Physical Education classes were unsafe environments for many LGBT students.**

As with most secondary students in the U.S.,<sup>3</sup> most (73.0%) LGBT students took a P.E. or gym class at school in the past year. Unfortunately, many LGBT students had been harassed or assaulted while attending these classes. More than half of LGBT students who took a P.E. class were bullied or harassed during P.E. because of their sexual orientation (52.8%) or gender expression (50.9%; see Figure 1).

Perhaps given these experiences of victimization, LGBT students commonly avoided athletics spaces at school because of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable.

- One third (32.5%) of LGBT students avoided attending P.E. classes, and students who experienced higher levels of victimization in P.E. classes were more likely to avoid attending these classes.<sup>4</sup>
- Four in ten (39.0%) avoided locker rooms.
- Almost a quarter (22.8%) avoided school athletics fields and facilities.

**Figure 1. LGBT Students' Experiences of Bullying and Harassment in P.E. Classes**



---

**FACT: LGBT students may be underrepresented on extracurricular sports teams.**

---

Many LGBT students participated in athletics activities at school beyond P.E. class, such as interscholastic sports (competition with teams from other schools), and intramural sports (competition among teams at the same school).

- About a quarter (23.2%) of LGBT students participated in interscholastic sports.
- 13.4% played on intramural sports teams.
- 8.2% played both interscholastic and intramural sports.
- 6.1% of all LGBT student athletes reported serving in a leadership or captain role on their team.

We also examined how LGBT students' sports participation compared to the general population of students. Using national estimates for interscholastic high school sports participation,<sup>5</sup> we found that LGBT high school students were about half as likely to play interscholastic sports as their peers (23.2% vs. 47.8%).<sup>6</sup>

---

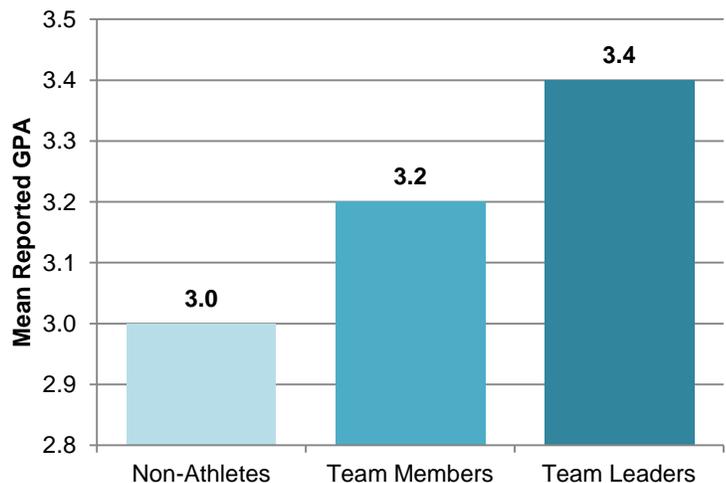
**FACT: LGBT student athletes reported better academic and mental health outcomes.**

---

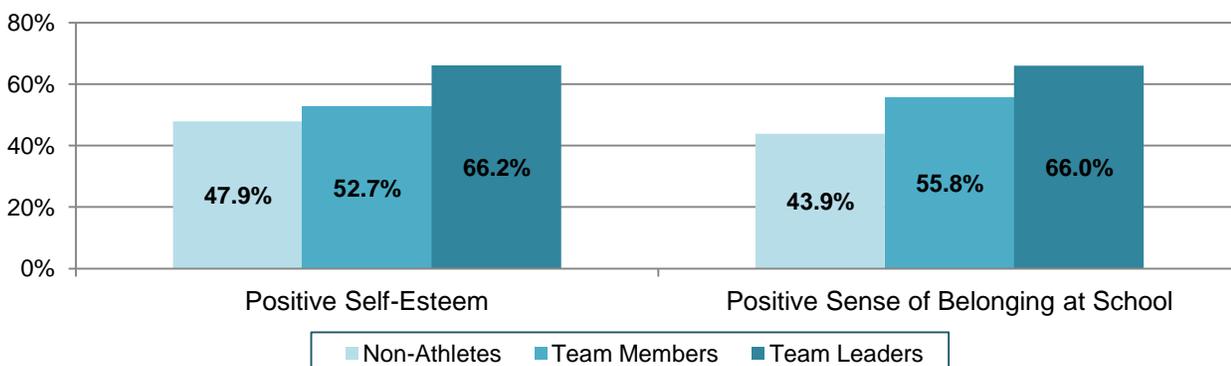
Consistent with findings from the general population of student athletes, LGBT students who played on school-based sports teams reported better academic and mental health outcomes compared to LGBT students who did not participate in sports, and team leaders reported additional benefits.<sup>7</sup>

- LGBT students on interscholastic or intramural sports teams reported higher GPA's than non-athletes (3.2 vs. 3.0; see Figure 2).
- LGBT students involved in sports reported higher self-esteem than their LGBT peers.<sup>8</sup> (see Figure 3).
- LGBT student athletes also reported a greater sense of belonging<sup>9</sup> to their school communities than non-athletes (see also Figure 3).
- Team leaders reported even higher GPA's, self-esteem, and feelings of belonging at school than non-leader athletes (see also Figures 2 and 3).

**Figure 2. LGBT Students' Participation on Sports Teams and GPA**



**Figure 3. LGBT Students' Self-Esteem and Sense of School Belonging by Sports Team Participation**



---

**FACT: Many LGBT students experienced discrimination and harassment in school sports.**

---

Although sports participation may provide numerous benefits, LGBT students may also be targeted for bias-based harassment and assault in these sports environments. Over a quarter of LGBT student athletes reported having ever been harassed or assaulted while playing on a school sports team because of their sexual orientation (27.8%) or gender expression (29.4%).

Additionally, many LGBT students reported that discrimination prevented them from participating in sports fully and safely. For example, some students reported that LGBT students were either officially or informally disallowed from participating in certain school activities, including sports teams, often because the presence of an LGBT person was perceived to be “disruptive.” Many also identified practices that particularly hindered transgender students’ participation, such as requiring students to use gender-segregated locker rooms based on a student’s sex assigned at birth.

*I can't join some sports because they say it's not appropriate for me. They also say that the other students on the team wouldn't want a gay student to play on the team and mess things up.  
(Male student, 9th grade, CA)*

---

**FACT: LGBT student athletes may not feel fully supported by athletics staff and policies.**

---

As educators, P.E. teachers and athletics coaches can be important resources for many LGBT student athletes. For example, LGBT students who felt comfortable talking to their P.E. teachers or coaches about LGBT issues were less likely to avoid athletics spaces at school and less likely to experience harassment and assault in P.E. class or while playing sports.<sup>10</sup> Yet, most students did not feel they could communicate about LGBT issues with staff in their school athletics department – (79.4%) of LGBT students said that they were uncomfortable talking to their P.E. teachers or coaches about LGBT issues.

Additionally, policies that explicitly protect LGBT students from victimization and discrimination are key resources for ensuring safe and respectful schools for LGBT students in general, and as such, may afford protections for LGBT students who participate in school athletics. We found that students at schools with an anti-bullying and harassment policy that explicitly protects students based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression were less likely than students without such a policy to experience victimization while participating in P.E. class and extracurricular sports.<sup>11</sup> Yet, only 7.4% of LGBT students reported that their schools have a comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policy.

---

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

---

Findings from this brief underscore the barriers to participation in school-based athletics faced by many LGBT students. School-wide efforts to reduce bias-based victimization can help create a safer school environment for LGBT youth, and support their participation in extracurricular activities such as athletics. Supportive resources are critical to ensure that LGBT youth may fully enjoy the benefits of participation in school-based physical education and sports. School athletics programs should incorporate policies and procedures for ensuring safe and affirming environments for LGBT athletes, such as prohibiting anti-LGBT name-calling or chants by spectators at games, providing professional development on LGBT issues for P.E. teachers and coaches, and allowing students to participate on teams consistent with their gender identity.<sup>12</sup>

Several resources are available for educators, parents, and student athletes interested in addressing LGBT issues in school-based sports communities. For example, *Changing the Game: The GLSEN Sports Project*, provides a variety of strategies and resources to assist K-12 schools in creating safe and respectful sports and physical education environments, especially for LGBT students. Visit [sports.glsen.org](https://sports.glsen.org) for further information.

---

**GLSEN** (The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) is the leading national organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

---

---

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

---

In 2011, GLSEN conducted the seventh National School Climate Survey (NSCS), a biennial survey of the experiences of LGBT youth in U.S. secondary schools. The sample consisted of 8,584 LGBT students from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. About two-thirds of the sample (67.9%) was White/European American, over half was gay or lesbian (61.3%), about half (49.6%) was female, and 8.3% identified as transgender. Students were in grades 6 to 12, with the largest numbers in grades 10 and 11. The survey was available online through the GLSEN website, and notices and announcements for the survey were disseminated by GLSEN chapters and networks; national, state, and community-based groups; online social networking communities; and targeted advertising on Facebook. For the full NSCS report or for other GLSEN research, visit [glsen.org/research](http://glsen.org/research). Follow [@GLSENResearch](https://twitter.com/GLSENResearch) on Twitter.

---

## NOTES

---

1. Marsh, H. W., & Kleitman, S. (2002). Extracurricular school activities: The good, the bad, and the nonlinear. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(4), 464–514.  
Marsh, H.W. & Kleitman, S. (2003). School athletic participation: Mostly gain with little pain. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 25(2), 205–228.  
Nelson, M. C. & Gordon-Larsen, P. (2006). Physical activity and sedentary behavior patterns are associated with selected adolescent health risk behaviors. *Pediatrics*, 117(4), 1281–1290.  
Ortega, F. B., Ruiz, J. R., Castillo, M. J., & Sj str m, M. (2008). Physical fitness in childhood and adolescence: A powerful marker of health. *International Journal of Obesity*, 32, 1–11.  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2008). *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). Sexual identity, sex of sexual contacts, and health-risk behaviors among students in grades 9–12: Youth risk behavior surveillance, selected sites, United States, 2001–2009. *MMWR* (Vol. 60). Atlanta, GA.
3. Lee, S. M., Burgeson, C. R., Fulton, J. E., & Spain, C. G. (2007). Physical education and physical activity: Results from the School Health Policies and Programs Study 2006. *Journal of School Health*, 77(8), 435-463.
4. To compare avoiding P.E. class by frequency of experiencing bullying and harassment in P.E., chi-square tests were performed. Differences in avoiding P.E. were significant for both frequency of bullying/harassment based on sexual orientation and based on gender expression. Sexual orientation:  $\chi^2=1106.07$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.43$ . Gender expression:  $\chi^2=1029.39$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.42$ .
5. National Federation of State High School Associations. (2011). *2010–11 High School Athletics Participation Survey Results*. Indianapolis, IN: NFHS.  
U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2011). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2010* (NCES 2011-015), Chapter 1.  
To determine the rate of sports participation in the general population of high school students, we used the total number of high school interscholastic athletes from the *High School Athletics Participation Survey* and National Center for Education Statistics projected estimates of the total public and private high school enrollment for fall 2010. Data for middle school athletics participation and intramural sports participation were not available.
6. We compared the general high school student population sports participation estimate (see Note 3) with interscholastic sports participation by LGBT high school students in our sample using a chi-square test. Results were significant:  $\chi^2 = 1799.77$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ .
7. To test differences in outcomes (mean reported grade point average, self-esteem, and school belonging) by sports participation/leadership, controlling for school victimization, a multivariate analysis of covariance was conducted. The results of this analysis were significant, Pillai's Trace=.04,  $F(6, 15376)=52.51$ ,  $p<.001$ . Univariate analyses were considered significant at a  $p<.01$  and effect sizes were also considered.
8. Self-esteem was measured using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989) assessing students' feelings about themselves. Students who scored above the mean on this scale were characterized as having "positive self-esteem."  
Rosenberg, M. (1989). *Society and the adolescent self-image* (Revised ed.). Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
9. School belonging was measured using an 18-item scale (Goodenow, 1993) assessing students' feelings of connectedness to their school. Students who scored above the mean on this scale were characterized as having a "positive sense of belonging at school."  
Goodenow, C. (1993). The Psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, 30(1), 79–90.
10. To compare avoiding athletics spaces and experiences of victimization by comfort talking to P.E. teachers/coaches, chi-square tests were performed. Differences were significant for avoiding spaces: P.E. class:  $\chi^2=264.00$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.18$ . Locker rooms:  $\chi^2=148.44$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.14$ . Athletics fields and facilities:  $\chi^2=145.84$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.13$ . Differences were also significant for both types of harassment and assault. Sexual orientation:  $\chi^2=24.06$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.10$ . Gender expression:  $\chi^2=24.71$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.10$ .
11. To compare experiences of harassment and assault based on sexual orientation and gender expression by frequency anti-bullying and harassment policy type, chi-square tests were performed. Differences were significant for victimization while playing sports: Sexual orientation:  $\chi^2=34.05$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.12$ . Gender expression:  $\chi^2=25.21$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.10$ . Differences were also significant for victimization in P.E. class: Sexual orientation:  $\chi^2=89.51$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.07$ . Gender expression:  $\chi^2=69.49$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.06$ .
12. Changing the Game: The GLSEN Sports Project. (2011). *School athletic climate checklist*. New York: GLSEN.  
Griffin, P., & Carroll, H. J. (2010). *On the team: Equal opportunity for transgender student athletes*. San Francisco, CA: National Center for Lesbian Rights and Women's Sports Foundation

---

**Suggested citation:** GLSEN (2013). *The Experiences of LGBT Students in School Athletics (Research Brief)*. New York: GLSEN.

---