

LGBTQ STUDENTS AND SCHOOL SPORTS PARTICIPATION

RESEARCH BRIEF

LGBTQ Student Participation in School Sports

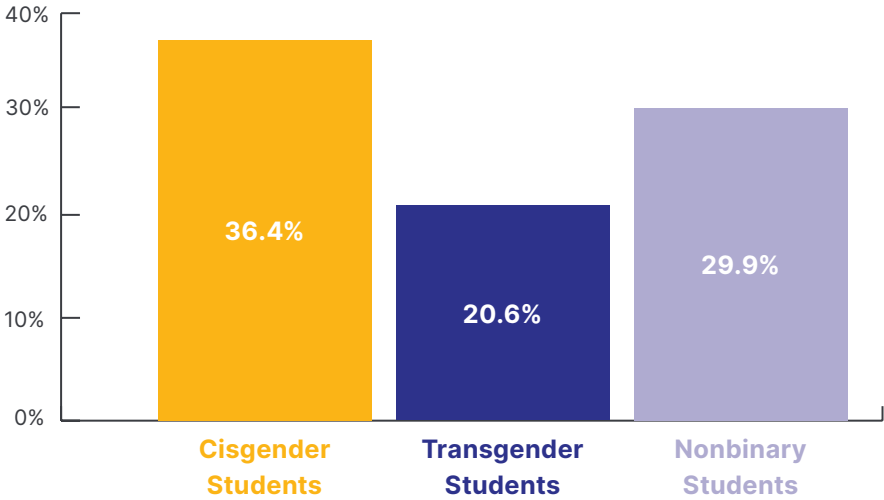
Sports participation has positive effects on youth development, improving physical health, social skills and psychological well-being.¹ Additionally, research has found that sports participation is related to greater feelings of school belonging and pro-school behaviors.² Despite these benefits, some research has found negative effects of sports participation among LGBTQ students, including social exclusion and feeling unsafe, associated with increased mental health challenges.³ Sports environments have been shown to reflect high levels of anti-LGBTQ harassment on playing fields and in locker rooms.⁴ Previous research from GLSEN and other scholars has found that LGBTQ youth regularly experience hostile school climates, which can inhibit their participation in school activities in general, and sports in particular.⁵ Enhancing the climate of sports in schools is necessary to allow LGBTQ students full access to school life and to improve the well-being of LGBTQ students who choose to participate in sports. Therefore, we are interested in the conditions that predict sports participation, benefits of sports participation for LGBTQ youth and how those benefits may differ across groups.

The purpose of this Research Brief is to illustrate the sports-related experiences of LGBTQ students in K-12 schools. This brief will 1) examine conditions that may predict sports participation 2) describe LGBTQ students' experiences of discrimination within sports, and 3) examine benefits to sports participation for LGBTQ students. Further, we discuss whether there are differences in both access to and benefits of sports participation for transgender and nonbinary students.

Our previous research has shown that LGBTQ students are half as likely as non-LGBTQ students to participate in both interscholastic (40.2% vs. 19.2%) and intramural sports (35.8% vs. 15.9%).⁶ Among LGBTQ students, we found that cisgender LGBTQ students were more likely to participate in school sports than their transgender and nonbinary peers, and nonbinary students were more likely to participate than transgender students (see Figure 1).⁷ Given that school sports teams are most often segregated by a gender binary, it may be that nonbinary students are more likely to participate in sports than their transgender peers because they are not being denied access to the team that aligns with their gender as there is none, and they may be more comfortable playing on the sports team of their sex assigned at birth. Transgender students, however, may be denied access to the team that does align with their gender, and then must choose whether to play on the team not consistent with their gender identity or not play sports at all.

LGBTQ youth may choose not to engage in sports if school environments, particularly sport-specific spaces, are unsafe and unwelcoming spaces due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Figure 1. Sports Participation by Gender Among LGBTQ Students



Unsafe Athletic Spaces

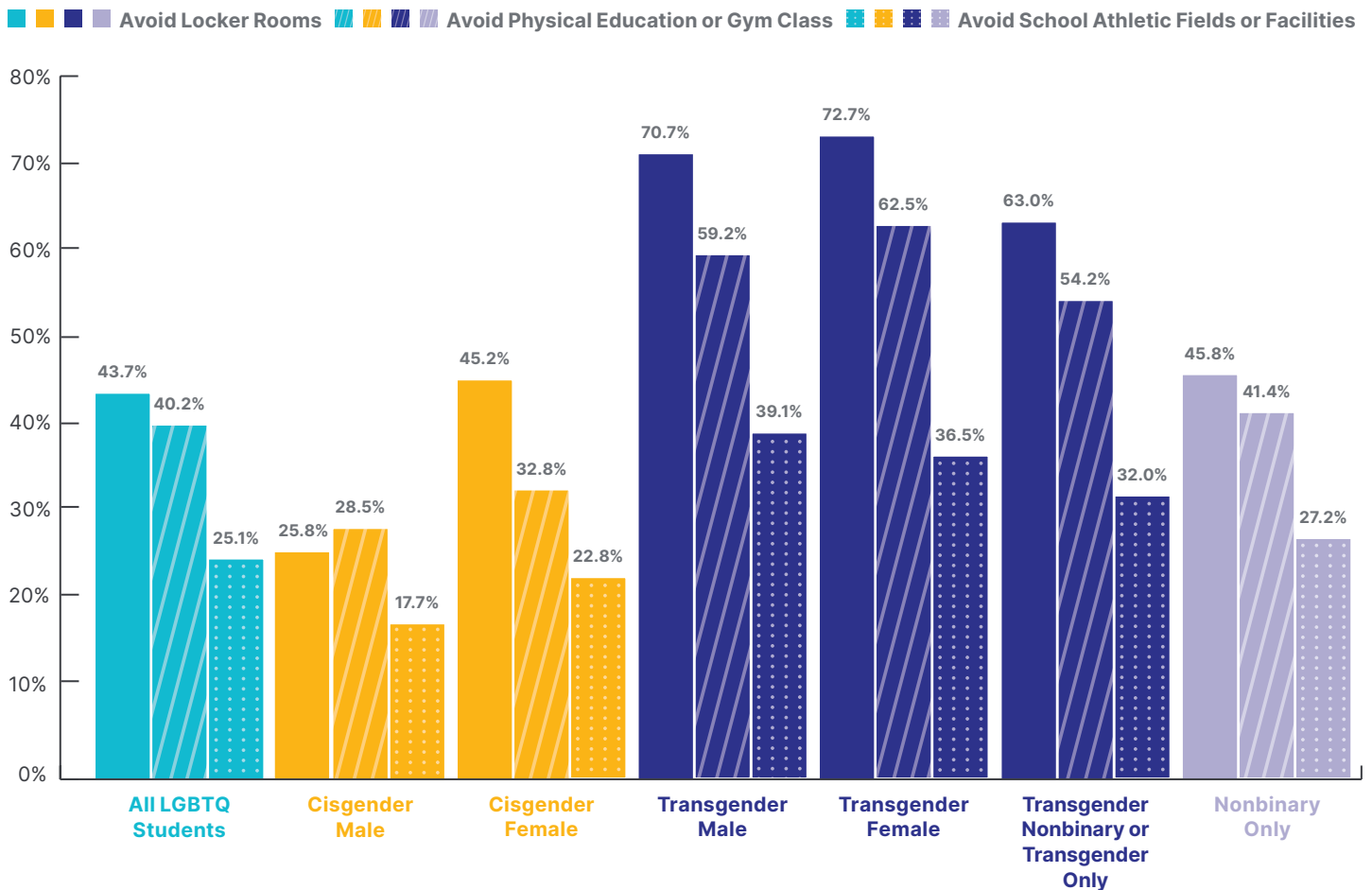
School spaces associated with sports, such as locker rooms, P.E./gym classes, and athletic fields/facilities, are some of the spaces most commonly avoided by LGBTQ students because of feeling unsafe. As shown in our 2019 National School Climate Survey:

- 43.7% of LGBTQ students avoided locker rooms
- 40.2% avoided physical education or gym class
- 25.1% avoided school athletic fields or facilities

Transgender and nonbinary students were more likely to avoid sports-related spaces at school than most of their LGBQ cisgender peers.⁸ As shown in Figure 2,

transgender students were most likely to avoid all three types of sports-related spaces than cisgender and nonbinary students. Nonbinary students were also more likely to avoid these spaces than cisgender students, with the exception that nonbinary students were more likely to avoid locker rooms than cisgender females but did not differ from cisgender males. Among transgender students, transgender males did not differ in avoiding spaces than transgender females, but they were more likely to avoid these sports-related spaces than other transgender students, i.e., those who only identified as transgender or identified as transgender and nonbinary. Among cisgender students, cisgender females were less likely to avoid sports-related spaces at school than cisgender males.

Figure 2. Avoiding Athletic Spaces at School by Gender



Discrimination Related to Sports & School Facilities

As also shown in our *2019 National School Climate Survey*, some schools discriminate against LGBTQ students and actively discourage or prevent LGBTQ students from participation in sports-related activities:

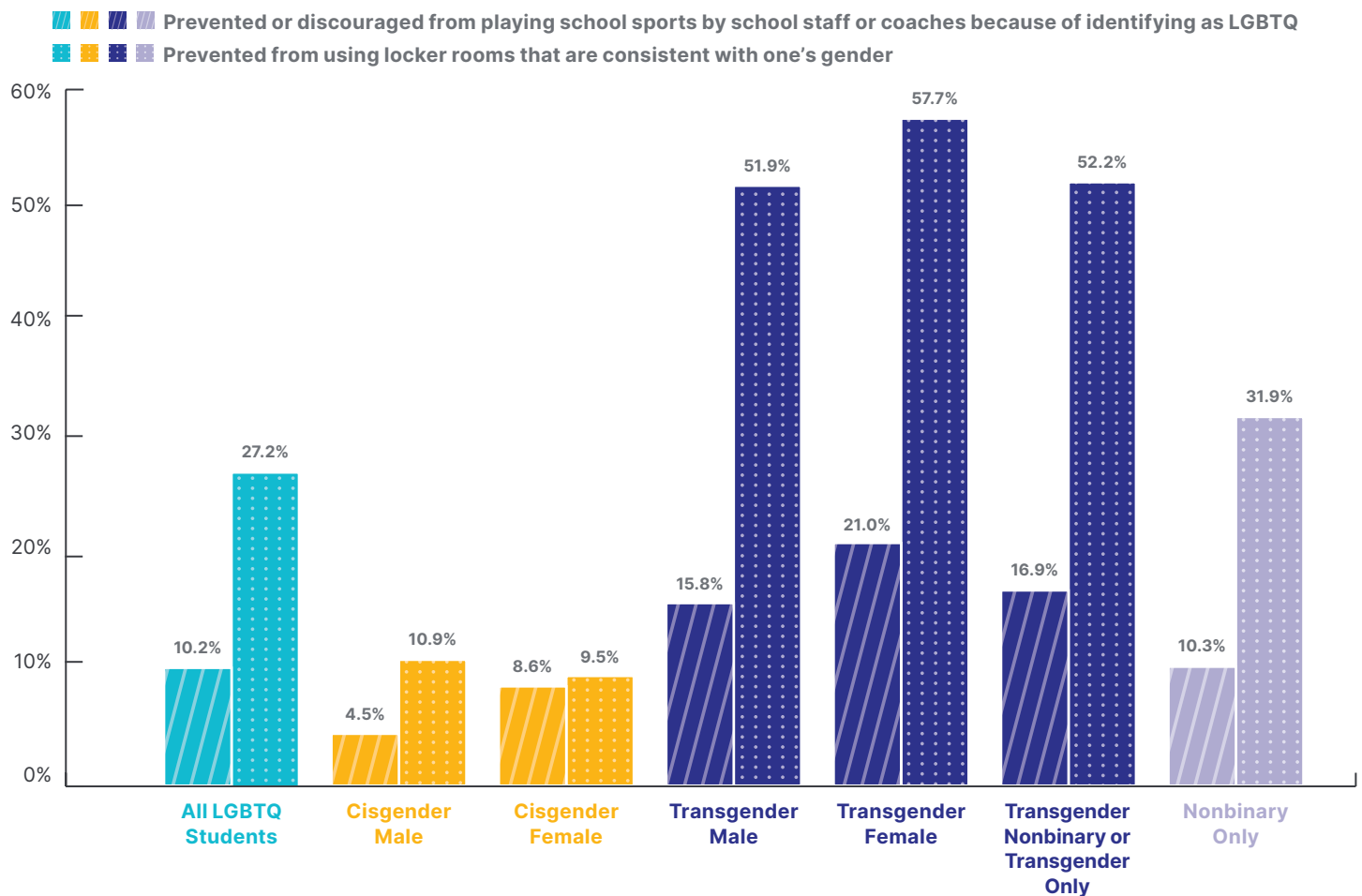
- 10.2% of LGBTQ students had been prevented or discouraged from playing school sports by school staff or coaches because of identifying as LGBTQ; and
- 27.2% had been prevented from using locker rooms that are consistent with one's gender.

Transgender and nonbinary students were more likely to have reported sports-related discrimination at school. As shown in Figure 3, over half of transgender students had been prevented from using locker rooms consistent with their gender compared to about one-tenth of cisgender students and less than a third of nonbinary students.⁹

Comfort with Coaches & Physical Education Teachers

When we examined how comfortable LGBTQ students would feel talking to various types of school personnel about LGBTQ issues, LGBTQ students were least likely to feel comfortable talking with an athletic coach/Physical Education (P.E.) teacher about LGBTQ issues. Whereas 15.8% of LGBTQ students felt somewhat or very comfortable talking to a PE teacher or coach at school, 51.8% felt somewhat or very comfortable talking to a school mental health professional and 41.8% to a teacher in general. Overall, transgender and nonbinary students were less comfortable speaking with these school staff than their cisgender LGBTQ peers.¹⁰

Figure 3. Experiences of Sports-Related Discrimination at School by Gender



School Climate Regarding Sports Participation

Previous research has shown that certain school characteristics are related to LGBTQ students' involvement in school sports, specifically the region and locale of the school.¹¹ Students in the Midwest were more likely to participate in sports than those in the Northeast, students in rural schools were more likely to participate in sports than those in suburban schools, and students in public school were less likely to participate in sports than those in religious and other private schools. These geographical differences may likely reflect sports involvement for the general population of youth. However, it is important to note that regarding Midwestern and rural schools, our research has previously shown that these are locations where LGBTQ students often experience greater victimization and have fewer positive LGBTQ supports in school. Thus, we thought it important to examine how certain school climate indicators specifically related to sports, avoiding sports-related spaces, sports-specific discrimination, comfort talking with one's P.E./gym teacher, and having a school policy about transgender student inclusion in sports, were associated with LGBTQ student sports involvement.

As shown in Figure 4, avoiding athletic facilities, P.E. class, and locker rooms for safety reasons were related to a lower likelihood of participation in school sports for LGBTQ students.¹² For example, 45.2% of LGBTQ students who were not involved in school sports avoided P.E. or gym class compared to 30.7% of those LGBTQ students who were involved in school sports. Additionally, greater comfort talking with one's P.E. teacher or coach was related to higher likelihood of sports participation.¹³ Only 1 in 10 LGBTQ students reported having been prevented from participation in sports by school officials because of being LGBTQ, and this form of discrimination was not significantly related to sports participation. It is important to note that this percentage may likely reflect only those students who had been actively discouraged or prevented from playing in sports at school, and not those who did not even attempt to join sports activities because of the school climate. Fewer than 5% of LGBTQ students reported that their school had a policy or guidance specifically protecting transgender and/or nonbinary students' ability to participate in school sports that matches their gender identity. We did not find a significant relationship between the availability of this policy/guidance and sports participation among LGBTQ

students, perhaps in part due to the small number of these policies being reported. Feeling unsafe in sports-related spaces at school, in addition to limiting actual participation in sports as discussed above, also indicates that many LGBTQ youth do not fully have access to their school life, and also may preemptively inhibit these students from even considering participation in school athletics as well as prevent them from involvement in health and fitness activities. For these reasons, we wanted to further examine what institutional factors may be contributing to feelings of lack of safety: 1) sports-related factors, including comfort with P.E. teacher, and specific school affirmative policies about sports and extracurricular inclusion, 2) indicators of a general negative school climate for LGBTQ students, and 3) general LGBTQ supports, specifically educators supportive of LGBTQ students, comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policy, positive LGBTQ curricular inclusion, and GSAs.

Negative school climate in general for LGBTQ students can lead to a greater avoidance of school athletic spaces. As shown in Figure 5, hearing more frequent homophobic remarks, and experiencing more frequent verbal harassment regarding one's sexual orientation or gender expression were significantly related to a greater likelihood of avoiding school athletic spaces.¹⁴ For example, 57.2% of LGBTQ students who experienced higher levels of verbal harassment regarding sexual orientation reported avoiding P.E. class compared to 35.5% of those who experienced lower levels of this type of harassment.

Positive school supports for LGBTQ students can promote a more inclusive school environment in general, and lead to less avoidance of school athletic spaces. We examined the relationship between avoiding school athletic spaces and four key LGBTQ supports in schools: 1) availability of educators who are supportive of LGBTQ students, 2) being taught positive representations of LGBTQ people, history, and events in the curriculum, 3) the presence of a GSA (Gender Sexuality Alliance or Gay-Straight Alliance), and 4) having an anti-bullying/harassment policy that includes protections based on sexual orientation and gender expression. All four supports were related to a lower likelihood of avoiding school athletics spaces.¹⁵ For example, as shown in Figure 6, 21.3% of LGBTQ students who reported having a larger number of supportive educators (6 or more) avoided school athletic facilities compared to 32.8%

of those with fewer supportive educators. Perhaps unsurprising, but nevertheless important to note, supportive P.E. teachers and coaches can influence whether LGBTQ students are connected to physical education at school. As also shown in Figure 6, 26.4%

who were somewhat or very comfortable speaking with their P.E. teacher or coach about LGBTQ issues avoided P.E. class compared to 44.0% of those who were somewhat or very uncomfortable.

Figure 4. School Climate Factors Related to Athletics by LGBTQ Student Participation in School Sports

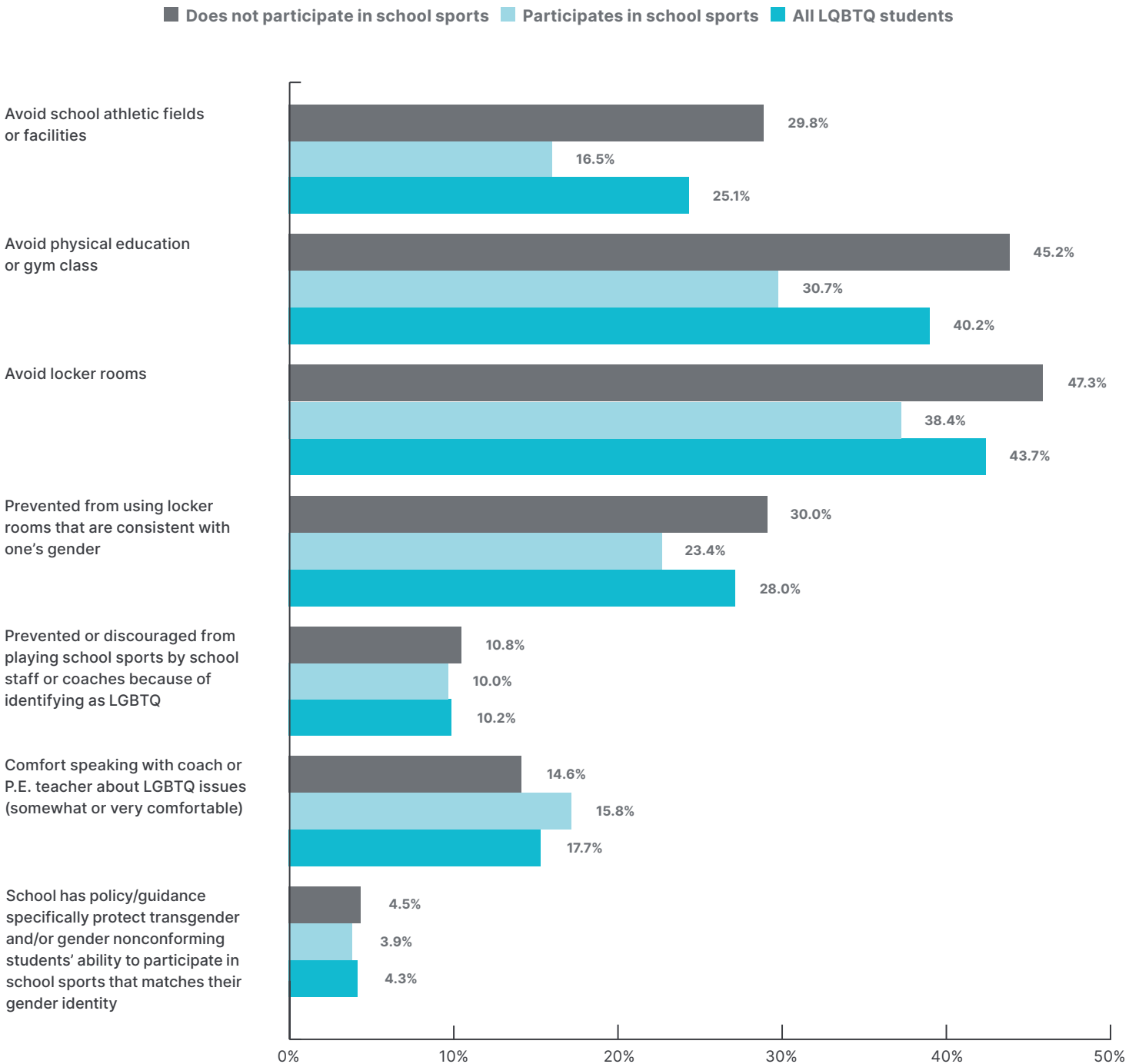


Figure 5. Avoiding School Athletic Spaces by Negative Indicators of School Climate

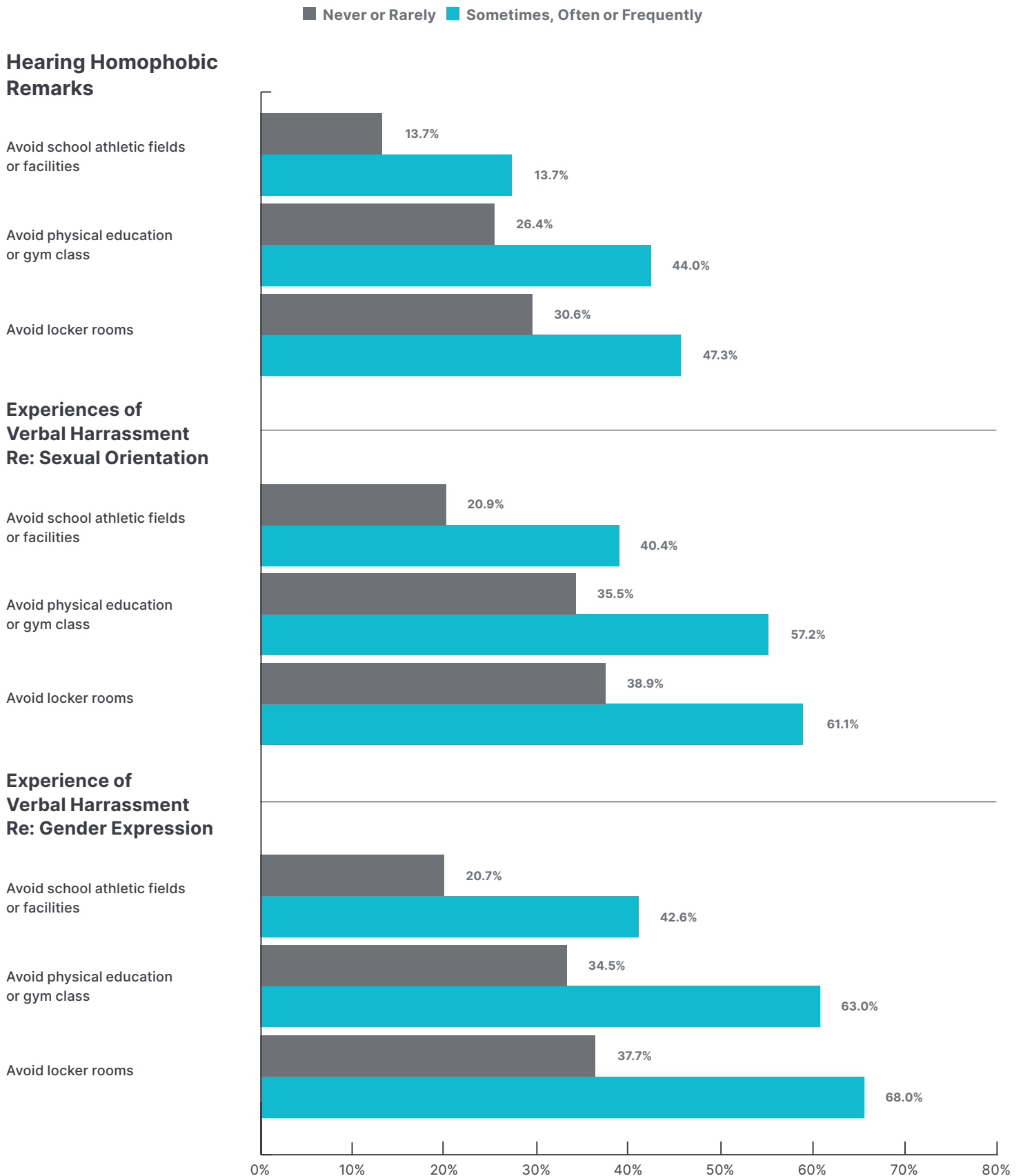
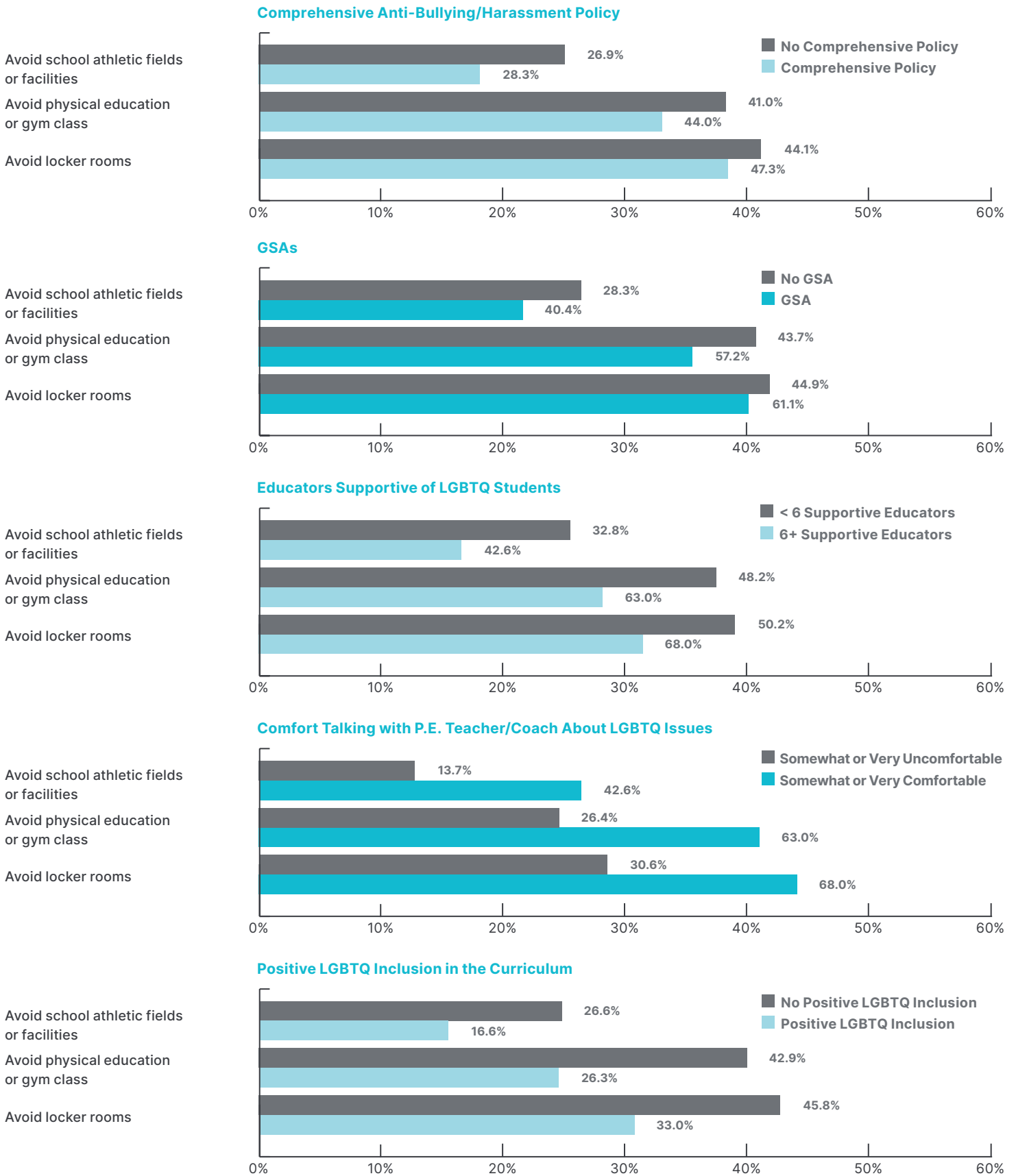


Figure 6. Avoiding School Athletic Spaces by LGBTQ School Supports



BENEFITS OF SPORTS PARTICIPATION

Even though LGBTQ students, and transgender and nonbinary students in particular, commonly feel unsafe in sports-related spaces and have been actively discouraged or denied access to sports teams and facilities, there are a sizable number of LGBTQ students who do participate in school sports. As mentioned previously, sports participation has benefits to well-being for youth in general, but it is important to discuss whether LGBTQ students gain the benefits from sports in the same manner. GLSEN's research has found that among LGBTQ students:¹⁶

- Sports participation is related to higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of depression, and greater school belonging.
- Cisgender males have the most positive outcomes compared to all other groups (i.e., higher self-esteem and school belonging, and lower depression). Cisgender females had more positive outcomes than all others except cisgender males.
- Among transgender students, however, transgender students who identify as nonbinary appear to have greater self-esteem from school sports participation than their transgender male and female peers.

CONCLUSION

Participation in school sports can have beneficial effects for students in general. However, LGBTQ students are much less likely to be involved in these activities given that sports-related spaces at school are often seen as unsafe and unwelcoming spaces by these students. Transgender and nonbinary students face harsher experiences, and many have been discouraged or denied access to sports-related spaces and activities. Supportive school resources can promote a more inclusive school environment and lead to less avoidance of school athletic spaces for LGBTQ students and greater sports participation. When LGBTQ

students are involved in school sports, our research shows that they experience greater well-being, as prior research has found with youth in general. However, among LGBTQ students, participation in sports was related to more positive well-being for cisgender students than for transgender and nonbinary students, perhaps because transgender and nonbinary students experience greater anti-LGBTQ victimization and discrimination in school than cisgender students.

Schools have a responsibility to provide an equitable school experience for all their students. Educators and administrators must assess whether LGBTQ students have the same access as other students to extracurricular activities, including sports, and whether schools employ discriminatory policies and practices that hinder access to these activities. Providing professional development for school athletic coaches and physical education teachers on how to create more welcoming sports environments for LGBTQ students may result in more LGBTQ students having access to the benefits of sports participation, as well as enhancing the beneficial effects for those students who already participate. In fact, our findings show that greater comfort with one's P.E. teacher or coach was related to less avoidance of sports-related spaces at school for LGBTQ students. Given the psychosocial benefits of sports inclusion for these youth, school mental health practitioners can play an important role as advocates with school administration, as a resource for their colleagues in working with this population of youth, and in helping LGBTQ students to navigate encounters with discrimination at school, whether it be inside or outside the classroom. Schools must ensure that sports environments are welcoming and safe for all students, including LGBTQ students, especially those who identify as transgender and nonbinary, and enact and implement policies and practices to ensure that transgender and nonbinary students have equal access to school sports and facilities.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Original analyses in this brief use data from the 2019 National School Climate Survey (NSCS). The 2019 NSCS was conducted online from April through August 2019. To obtain a representative national sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, we conducted outreach through national, regional, and local organizations that provide services to or advocate on behalf of LGBTQ youth, and advertised and promoted on social media sites, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat.

The final sample consisted of a total of 16,713 LGBTQ secondary school students between the ages of 13

and 21. Of this full sample, 7,203 students identified as transgender or nonbinary. Students were from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and Guam. Just over two-thirds of the full sample (69.2%) was White, two-fifths (41.6%) was cisgender female, and 40.4% identified as gay or lesbian. The average age of students in the sample was 15.5 years and they were in grades 6 to 12, with the largest numbers in grades 9, 10 and 11. For more information about the methods and sample, see the full [2019 NSCS report](#).

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Endnotes

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7. Using data from the *2019 National School Climate Survey*, excluding students who did not have sports at their schools, chi-square tests were performed examining any school sports participation by gender categories and indicated a significant difference across gender: χ^2 (5, N = 15306) = 308.23, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .14. Pairwise z-test analyses indicated no differences between cisgender male and female students, but both groups were more likely to participate in sports than students of all other gender identities. Nonbinary students were more likely to participate than all groups of transgender students. Among transgender students, transgender female students did not differ from the other two groups, but transgender males were less likely to participate than transgender students not identifying as male or female.
8. Using data from the *2019 National School Climate Survey*, excluding students who did not have sports at their schools, chi-square tests were performed examining avoiding the three sports-related spaces by gender and indicated significant differences between groups - avoiding locker rooms: χ^2 (5, N = 15209) = 2161.11, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .38; avoiding P.E./gym class: χ^2 (5, N = 15209) = 1172.53, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .28; avoiding athletic facilities: χ^2 (5, N = 15209) = 464.68, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .18. Pairwise z-test analyses indicated cisgender females were less likely to avoid sports-related spaces at school than all other LGBTQ students, and cisgender males were less likely than transgender and nonbinary students with the exception of avoiding locker rooms, where cisgender males and nonbinary students did not differ. Among transgender students, transgender males were more likely to avoid all three sports-related spaces than transgender students who were nonbinary or did not also identify as male or female.

9. Using data from the 2019 National School Climate Survey, excluding students who did not have sports at their schools, chi-square tests were performed examining the two forms of sports-related discrimination by gender – prevented/discouraged from sports: $\chi^2(5, N = 15209) = 2161.11$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .38$; avoiding P.E./gym class: $\chi^2(5, N = 15241) = 3089.81$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .45$. Pairwise z-test analyses indicated that for cisgender students were least likely to experience both of these forms of discrimination than transgender and nonbinary students, and nonbinary students were less likely than transgender students. Cisgender females were less likely than cisgender males to report these experiences, and transgender males were more likely than transgender students who were on the binary or did not also identify as male or female.
10. Using data from the 2019 National School Climate Survey, excluding students who did not have sports at their schools, differences in level of comfort speaking with P.E. teachers or coaches at school about LGBTQ issues was examined through a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA): $F(5, 15258) = 9.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .003$. Post-hoc comparisons were considered at $p < .01$. There were no differences between cisgender males and females, but both reported higher levels of comfort than all others except transgender females, and no differences among transgender and nonbinary students.
11. Clark, C. M., & Kosciw, J. G. (2021). Engaged or excluded: LGBTQ youth's participation in school sports and their relationship to psychological well-being. *Psychology in the Schools*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22500>
12. Using data from the 2019 National School Climate Survey, excluding students who did not have sports at their schools, the relationship between sports involvement and avoiding school locations and discrimination was examined through

correlation analysis – avoid athletic facilities: $r(14333) = -.14$, $p < .001$; avoid P.E. class: $r(14333) = -.14$, $p < .001$; avoid locker rooms: $r(14333) = -.08$, $p < .001$; prevented/discouraged from sports: $r(14370) = -.01$, NS; prevented from locker rooms: $r(14364) = -.07$, $p < .001$.

13. Using data from the 2019 National School Climate Survey, excluding students who did not have sports at their schools, the relationship between sports involvement and comfort with P.E. teacher or coach was examined through correlation analysis: $r(14412) = -.04$, $p < .001$.
14. Using data from the 2019 National School Climate Survey, excluding students who did not have sports at their schools, the relationship between avoiding sports-related spaces at school and negative indicators of school climate were examined through correlation analyses. All correlations were significant at $p < .001$:

	Hearing homophobic remarks	Verbal harassment re: sexual orientation	Verbal harassment re: gender expression
School athletic fields or facilities	$r(16547) = .19$	$r(16474) = .22$	$r(16350) = .20$
Physical Education (PE) or gym class	$r(16547) = .19$	$r(16474) = .23$	$r(16350) = .19$
Locker rooms	$r(16547) = .18$	$r(16474) = .23$	$r(16350) = .19$

15. Using data from the 2019 National School Climate Survey, excluding students who did not have sports at their schools, the relationship between avoiding sports-related spaces at school and negative indicators of school climate were examined through correlation analyses. Percentages shown for illustrative purposes. Unless otherwise indicated, correlations were significant at $p < .001$:

	Comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policy	GSA	Supportive educators	Comfort with P.E. teacher/coach	LGBTQ inclusive curriculum
School athletic fields or facilities	$r(16527) = -.05$	$r(16521) = -.06$	$r(16457) = -.14$	$r(16521) = -.12$	$r(16509) = -.08$
Physical Education (PE) or gym class	$r(16527) = -.04$	$r(16521) = -.05$	$r(16457) = -.14$	$r(16521) = -.12$	$r(16509) = -.09$
Locker rooms	$r(16527) = -.02^*$	$r(16521) = -.02^*$	$r(16457) = -.10$	$r(16521) = -.13$	$r(16509) = -.09$

* $p < .05$

16. Clark, C. M., & Kosciw, J. G. (2021). Engaged or excluded: LGBTQ youth's participation in school sports and their relationship to psychological well-being. *Psychology in the Schools*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22500>
17. Gender was assessed via two items: an item assessing sex assigned at birth (i.e., male or female) and an item assessing gender identity (i.e., cisgender, transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, male, female, and an additional write-in option). Based on responses to these two items, students' gender was categorized for these analyses as: Cisgender (including cisgender male, cisgender female, cisgender nonbinary/genderqueer, or unspecified male or female), Transgender (including transgender male, transgender female, transgender nonbinary/genderqueer, and transgender only), Nonbinary [including nonbinary, genderqueer, nonbinary/genderqueer male, nonbinary/genderqueer female, or another nonbinary identity (i.e., those who wrote in identities such as "genderfluid," "agender," or "demigender")], and Questioning. There are students who identified as both nonbinary and transgender in the Transgender group; students in the Nonbinary group *did not* also identify as "transgender." Questioning students are not included in the analysis for this brief, but findings about questioning students can be found in the School Climate and Gender Section of the full [2021 National School Climate Survey Report](#).

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