

# Sports Participation and Health of Black Transgender Youth

## Background

Black transgender youth face a variety of barriers to achieving healthy outcomes. Previous studies have found that bullying and harassment in locker rooms and during play lead some transgender youth to avoid sports and physical education class due to safety concerns.<sup>1,2</sup> Alternatively, some transgender youth choose to not disclose their identities to teammates and coaches, or choose not to participate altogether in order to avoid encountering issues in the locker room, or being bullied, harassed, and rejected by their team.<sup>1-3</sup>

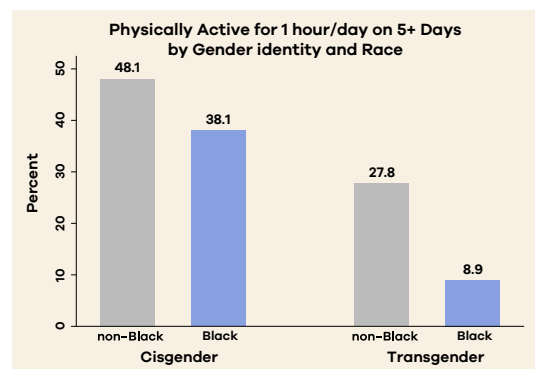
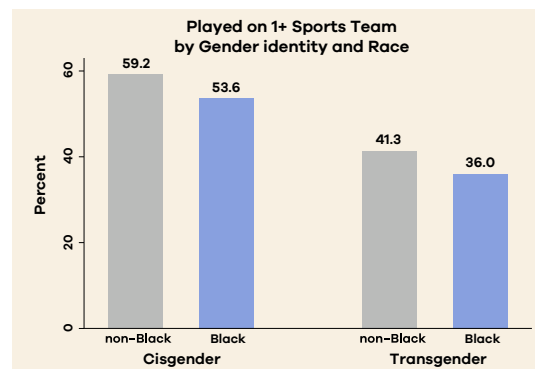
At the same time, many states have non-inclusive athletic policies which prevent transgender youth from competing on single-sex teams in accordance with their gender—blocking sports access to those transgender youth who want to participate.

In 2021 alone, over 20 state and federal bills were introduced that explicitly attempt to regulate or outright ban transgender youth from participating in sports, requiring that students only be allowed to play in accordance with the sex assigned on their birth certificate (or other legislatively defined sex and/or gender criteria), rather than their gender identity; to date, eight states have enacted these laws.<sup>4,5</sup> Even before legislative attempts to ban transgender youth from sports, almost 45% of transgender youth lived in states where state athletic guidance outright banned transgender athletes from participating in accordance with their gender identity, or only allowed participation with restrictions.<sup>6</sup> As a result, these legislative actions create a barrier for transgender youth to enjoy the same rights to participate in team sports as their non-transgender peers, forcing transgender athletes to choose between playing the sport they love, and being embraced as who they truly are.

Findings from the All Students Count Coalition’s report, [On All Sides](#),<sup>7</sup> not only confirm lower sports participation and physical activity for transgender youth, but further suggests this trend may be particularly pronounced for Black transgender youth. As reported among respondents on the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBSS), during the 2016-2017 school year, **Black transgender youth were significantly less likely to have played on a sports team than cisgender youth (both Black and non-Black), and non-Black transgender youth. In addition, less than 1 in 10 Black transgender youth met criteria for being considered ‘physically active,’ compared with over a quarter of non-Black transgender youth, and more than a third of Black cisgender youth.**

## Findings

- An estimated 9% of Black transgender youth met CDC<sup>8</sup>/ YRBS<sup>9</sup> criteria for being physically active, defined as engaging in physical activity for 60+ minutes a day, for at least 5 days/week.
- In comparison, more than a quarter (27.8%) of non-Black transgender youth, more than a third (38.1%) of Black cisgender youth, and almost half (48.1%) of non-Black cisgender youth are physically active.
- Put another way, Black transgender youth are about a quarter as likely as Black cisgender youth (RR=0.23; 95% CI=0.10, 0.37; p=0.001), and a third as likely as non-Black transgender youth (RR=0.32; 95% CI=0.12, 0.52; p=0.001), to be physically active.
- Black transgender youth are also significantly less likely to play on a sports team, reported by a third (36%) of Black transgender youth, compared with over 40% of non-Black transgender youth, and over half of both Black (53.6%) and non-Black (59.2%) cisgender youth.



These disparities in sports participation and physical activity found in the 2017 YRBS data are likely to only worsen as a result of recent legislative pushes to attack transgender student athletes. Worse still is the reality that these bills have been enacted despite zero evidence that transgender sports participation is harmful to cisgender teammates and competitors.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, evidence consistently suggests that the only people harmed by these bills are transgender youth themselves. Previous studies have found that transgender youth who encounter discriminatory school policies (such as sports participation bans) have an increased risk for depression, lower self-esteem, and school absenteeism.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, a study from The Trevor Project found that transgender youth who report their pronouns and identities are affirmed by those around them were approximately half as likely to have attempted suicide relative to those transgender youth whose identities are not affirmed.<sup>10</sup>

Sports participation has well-documented benefits, including better academic performance, increased self-esteem and social support, and decreased anxiety and depression.<sup>11,12</sup> These benefits could be particularly valuable to Black transgender youth, who are already vulnerable to numerous adverse health outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Previous studies have well-documented that Black transgender youth are already at increased risk for higher rates of substance use and HIV and STIs, poor mental health, and suicidal ideation, and increased risk of incarceration, discrimination, and harassment.<sup>6,14–17</sup> Thus the present findings further suggest that these bills run the risk of harm to the health and well-being of transgender youth as a whole, and further perpetuating increased vulnerabilities experienced by Black transgender youth in particular.

## Recommendations

Given the known benefits of sports participation and the vulnerability of Black transgender youth, the substantially lower rates of physical activity and sports participation among Black transgender youth is concerning. These lower rates may likely worsen in light of the rise of anti-transgender legislation. To address these concerns, key stakeholders should consider the following recommendations:

- **Advocates:** Include the leadership of **Black transgender youth and young adults** in campaigns to develop resources and community-based strategies to promote physical activity and address barriers to transgender inclusion in team sports.
- **Educators:** Develop **age-appropriate, transgender-inclusive sports policies** and provide **training** for coaches, Physical Education teachers, and all other athletics staff to promote **gender-affirming and inclusive athletics participation** for all students.

- **Policymakers:** Include the stories of Black transgender youth in coalition with advocacy organizations to defeat and overturn the **surge of anti-transgender legislation** banning transgender youth from participating in a team sport.
- **Researchers:** **Explore** the **drivers of resiliency** among **Black transgender youth** – and identify the existing barriers contributing to lower rates of physical activity and participation in team sports, and consider ways to address them.

To read the full All Students Count Coalition’s report, **On All Sides**, please visit:

<https://actionnetwork.org/forms/on-all-sides>.

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